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Down in MEXICO

► Kathryn Knight discovers there's a lot more to Mexico than hurricanes, all-inclusive hotels and those notorious American Spring Breaks, on a trip that shows her crowd-free culture, spectacular solitude and eerie cenotes...

PHOTOS BY CORBIS/GETTY/SHUTTERSTOCK

I am floating on my back, staring up at a cavernous ceiling from which hang dozens of mesmerising vines. Below me lies metres of the purest water I have ever had the pleasure of swimming in. It feels beautiful and eerie at the same time - a feeling exacerbated by the fact that I'm aware it's a venue that may once have been used for ancient sacrificial rituals.

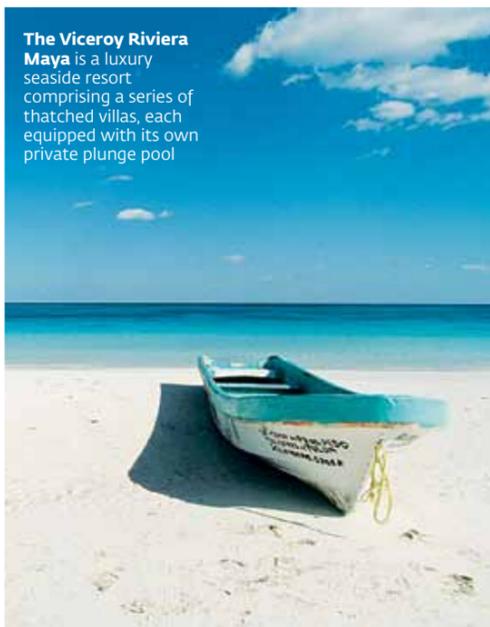
It's certainly a one-off experience, but then I am in something of an interesting place: a cenote.

Underground sinkholes with pools that connect to a series of river systems, most of the world's cenotes are found in Mexico, which boasts more than 6,000 of them. They provided the water for Mexico's ancient inhabitants, the Mayans, who also believed these mystical

places represented the entrance to the underworld and sometimes used them for spiritual ceremonies.

Fast-forward to the present day and I've got more humdrum concerns in mind. With rumoured healing properties, I'm hoping that a dip in the cenote's clear water will do wonders for my skin.

Still, hanging out underground in Mexico came as something of a



The Viceroy Riviera Maya is a luxury seaside resort comprising a series of thatched villas, each equipped with its own private plunge pool



'Head out of Cancún and you can be sipping a cool drink on an uncrowded beach within a couple of hours'

Tulum's clifftop location makes it one of the most spectacular Mayan sites on the coast. Playa del Carmen, below, is just a 45-minute drive away from Cancún airport

surprise, I must confess. When I first headed to the Yucatán Peninsula, I had little more in mind than sunbathing on a nice square of the 138km stretch of white sandy beach that lies south of Cancún, known as the Riviera Maya.

But doing only that would, I quickly discovered, be doing this beautiful part of the world a great disservice. The Yucatán Peninsula offers sun, sand and gorgeously turquoise sea, sure - but it also offers a great deal more: ancient ruins, jungles and lagoon, not to mention those cenotes. Then there's the golf, scuba-diving, delicious food... you get the picture.

Of course, not everybody is aware of the country's wonders. For many

people, the word 'Mexico' brings other images to mind. Like hurricane crises and ferocious gang wars. MTV hasn't done it many favours either, with its Spring Break coverage, featuring hoards of overexcited American teens behaving badly at the crowded beach resorts of its neon de facto capital Cancún.

Safe to say all this feels a million miles away if you head out of Cancún to the many other splendours of the peaceful Yucatán Peninsula, where honeymooners mingle happily with families, backpackers and culture-vultures (when I say mingle, I mean not closely - one of the blessings of the Mayan Riviera is that it never feels crowded). While you do have to fly into Cancún - it's an

inter-continental hub that handles arrivals from all over Europe and the Americas - you can be sipping a cool drink overlooking the warm waters of the Caribbean within a couple of hours of touching down.

A seaside refuge

I stayed at the Viceroy Riviera Maya, just outside Playa del Carmen, which is a 45-minute drive from the airport. A seaside refuge that extends deep into the primitive Maya tropical forest, the luxurious resort comprises a series of thatched villas, each equipped with its own private plunge pool set into an oversized patio area.

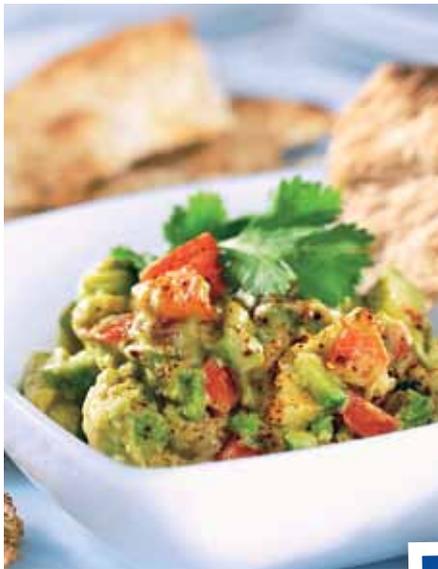
Hanging out in the villa felt like a spa break in itself, but once I'd wrenched myself away from my



outdoor shower - yes, it had one of those too - there was plenty to captivate my attention.

First was a yoga lesson on the tip of the hotel's private pier - ocean and sky all around - and a treatment or two at the spa. With all the mod cons, it has all the fabulous facials and massages you might expect, some of them using honey from its own hive of native Melipona bees (if you ask nicely, spa director Cinthya will take you to meet them).

Then there's the fabulous temazcal experience - an ancient native purification ritual performed using hot stones and native herbs in a stone domed lodge on the shore. Think full-on spiritual steam. Of course, none of this comes cheap - but it's more



With stunning wildlife, delicious food and many historical sites, there's something for everyone on the Yucatán Peninsula



than worth it if you want to splash out.

In fact, Mexico has much to offer whatever your budget. And loathe as I was to tear myself away from my private idyll, I realised I couldn't in all conscience go home without seeing what was beyond the palm trees fringing my villa.

For a start there's the cenotes; there are more than 40 of them on the Riviera Maya, each unique in its own way. Dipping your toe – or preferably immersing yourself fully – in one is a good way to prepare for exploring the ancient ruins in the area.

You won't find crumbling old colonial towns or the remains of grand old haciendas here, but there are far more ancient attractions to

go on. The Mayans reached their peak between around CE600-900, and towards the end of this period the Yucatán Peninsula was the epicentre of its civilisation – a fact that makes their modern-day descendants hugely proud.

It was during this period that vast cities such as Chichen Itza, Uxmal and Coba were constructed. My favourite was Coba, formerly a vast metropolis of more than 6,500 structures still surrounded by deep jungle. Only a part of it has been excavated fully, but it's still enormous. Today it is perhaps best known for its temple pyramids, most notably Nohoch Mul, which stands some 42m high, and whose peak you can scale via its 120 rather uneven and very steep steps (I defy you not to be out of puff at the top).

No visit to this area is complete without a trip to Tulum – a walled city with a dramatic clifftop setting that makes it the most spectacular



Mayan site on the coast. I'd seen photos, but nothing could prepare me for the beauty of standing amidst these ruins, my hair whipping in the breeze and staring down to the white sandy inlets and turquoise sea below.

I normally prefer to navigate sites like these under my own steam, but I took my hotel's advice and hired a guide to help bring the history of the ancient site alive, and was glad of it.

There's something for everyone

There's no shelter at Tulum, and an afternoon walking through the scorching heat left me grateful for

a couple of hours back on the white sandy beach of the Riviera Maya, although not before a quick diversion to the small and charming coastal town of Akumal, whose name means "place of the turtles"; its beach is a nesting ground for two endangered turtle species.

You could spend a month on the Peninsula and not run out of things to do. Golfers have their pick of top-class courses; foodies can savour the Riviera's fine cuisine; while keen scuba-divers are spoilt for choice.

If you're coming with your children, then head to Xel-Ha, one of the largest natural theme parks in the world, centred on a large inlet and lagoon that serves as a huge aquarium. You can don a snorkel, mask and fins and enjoy a close encounter with the hundreds of colourful marine species.

And if it's even closer wild encounters you're after, then you could, of course, head to Cancún, although I avoided it. After all that culture, the pull of my private plunge pool was too great. **12**

i INSIDE INFO

Rates at the Viceroy Riviera start at \$720 (Dh2,645) per villa per night (Jan – May), see www.viceroyrivieramaya.com. Delta flies from Dubai to Cancún via Atlanta for around Dh7,000 in January, see www.delta.com. The hurricane season in Mexico normally runs from June to November and prices are a lot cheaper during these times. See www.nhc.noaa.gov for weather updates.