

EXPLORING TRAVEL FAVORITES AND FRONTIERS

40 YEARS  
1969-2009

# TRAVEL AGE WEST

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Emirates chairman and CEO Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum

# Emirates Takes Off

The airline redefines luxury in the skies

**PLUS:** Eco-friendly fun in the Riviera Maya; A Waikiki resort revamps; Saporro's winter wonderland

# Romance in Mayakoba

Finding luxury among the mangroves

By Jimmy Im

**M**y lancha (covered boat) is snaking through a narrow, fresh-water canal bound by looming mangroves while the glimmering sun shines on the waterway, creating a romantic glow. The experience is vaguely reminiscent of waterways in European cities like Venice or Amsterdam, but here, at Mayakoba, located on Mexico's Riviera Maya, it's remarkably exotic. Needless to say, it's a rare treat to cruise in this manner while tropical fish — and even crocodiles — contribute to this unique micro-ecosystem thick in the jungle of the Yucatan Peninsula.

A distinctive resort enclave, Mayakoba is a destination within a destination and still fairly new to travelers. The area known as the "City on the Water" was an underground ecosystem that was "unroofed" about 10 years ago, revealing a lush tropical oasis and exposing a series of canals. Rivers still run underground, a unique feature of the Yucatan Peninsula, which has no flowing water source. There are many cenotes (underwater caves) and mangroves that serve as the pulse of the ecosystem. Incidentally, the Yucatan Peninsula is also home to the second-largest coral reef system in the world.

With a governmental limit of five properties, Banyan Tree Mayakoba will be the fourth property to join the roster of luxury-driven resorts sprawling Mayakoba's 600 acres. After a soft opening this month, the property will have a grand opening on March 9.

Rooted in Asia, this is the boutique-resort brand's first property in the Western Hemisphere and the 12th resort for the brand. Banyan Tree's signature "six senses" theme ensures the Mayakoba property is unique from other properties in the area. The six senses initiative is designed to touch and enhance all five senses during a guest's stay, including an additional "sixth sense of romance," reflecting the brand's strong influence in the couples market.

Guests can expect Asian-inspired architecture and furnishings like various clay pots, tapestries, ceramics with touches of Maya heritage and influence. For instance, the main lobby structure subtly resembles a Maya temple made from the natural rock of the local coral reef while giant lotus pools lead to its entryway. Traditional Mexican multicolored tiles comprise floor art while Asian furnishings complete the public spaces. The brand's trademark banyan tree is located in the open atrium



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lobby, but was grown in Mexico and rises almost 46 feet high.

Another unique Asian touch is Banyan Tree's brand-wide personal ambassador program in which an individual ambassador is assigned to look after the comfort of each guest. At present, Banyan Tree Mayakoba has approximately 12 ambassadors.

The resort's 132 villas arch in a semicircle around the property, and guests have the option of jungle or beachside accommodations. A water-on-water concept is embraced by the resort, and guestrooms are located on the water regardless of whether or not a room is on the beach. Clients have the option of either lagoon view or oceanview villas. The villas range in size from one to three bedrooms and offer a private pool, a rain shower, indoor and outdoor tubs, daily rotating signature bathroom amenities, a separate living area and an outdoor sundeck.

Guests also have access to Greg Norman's El Camaleon 18-hole golf course, which sprawls through three ecosystems: jungle, mangrove and beach. El Camaleon is one of the two golf courses the PGA plays outside the U.S.

The Banyan Tree's hydrotherapy spa encompasses 42,000 square feet and offers 16 pavilions, including overwater treatment rooms. The resort's signature spa treatment, the Rainforest, is a sequential circuit

of wellness treatments that incorporates hydro and thermal treatments, complemented with private cabins for a couple's enjoyment. Yoga is also offered through the spa, and two yogis from India are available for group and private classes, as well as a full-service fitness center.

The Beach Club features shaded private cabanas on a sprawling beach, pool and beach butlers, who offer menthol towels and misters, and a swim-up bar in the infinity pool.

Six dining options are available at the resort: Saffron, Banyan Tree's signature Thai restaurant; Tamarind, featuring spa entree options; Sands, the Beach Club restaurant offering a la carte breakfast and a seafood dinner menu; Water Court featuring continental and regional dishes in the main lobby; La Copa, a rooftop lounge; and in-villa, romantic dining, which offers meals served by chefs in the privacy of the villa. The resort's private wine room can also seat up to 20 guests.

Fifty of the 132 villa units are allotted for residential ownership, with optional rental programs. This will be the brand's first real estate offering in the Western Hemisphere. Owners have full access (and a percentage of savings) on all amenities and priority reservations, as well as the privilege of owning Banyan Tree property outside of Asia.