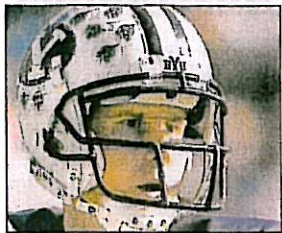


SPORTS SCORES



By Douglas C. Pizac, AP

Max Hall: No. 16 BYU plays Arizona.

Let the bowls begin

- Five games this weekend kick off season, 1, 6C
- All 34 bowls at sports.usatoday.com

USA TODAY

NO. 1 IN THE USA



By Mario Perez, ABC

Lost: Evangeline Lilly, Naveen Andrews.

Can the second season save TV?

- Networks hold breath as *Lost*, 24 and *Idol* return, 1-2E

10D • FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2008 • USA TODAY

Life on Vacation

A weekly look at the second-home market

Mayan Riviera, Mexico

80 miles of coastline, culture and condos

By Larry Olmsted
Special for USA TODAY

A handful of international destinations such as Dubai, Macao and Mexico's Mayan Riviera stand out as the hottest of the hot spots for recent tourism and development. Only the latter is an easy flight from most of the USA, offers reasonable prices, and boasts attractions found nowhere else.

The Mayan Riviera is generally defined as an 80-mile stretch of coastline on the Yucatán Peninsula, beginning just below Cancun, near Puerto Morelos, and extending south to Tulum. Visitors will encounter new hotels and resorts, from bargain-priced all-inclusives to global luxury brands such as Mandarin Oriental, Rosewood and Fairmont.

A major attraction is 70 miles of nearly continuous beaches, all protected by the world's second-longest barrier reef. It's a world-class destination for divers, and not just offshore; the limestone peninsula is laced with more than 100 cenotes, large holes filled with fresh water, connected by underground caves.

Inland, adventure offerings include canopy zip-line tours, jungle expeditions and six eco-culture theme parks. Golf, too, has boomed in the past few years with new courses by big-name designers.

But the attraction that sets the region apart from other beach destinations is its namesake Mayan culture, with more than a dozen ruin sites, including ancient cities boasting pyramids. The best-known are Cobá, Chichén Itza and Tulum.

The largest town is Playa del Carmen (population: about 100,000), halfway down the coast. Pedestrian-only Fifth Avenue is lined with shops and restaurants, a major draw for some home buyers. Hundreds of condos in developments are along the entire length of the coast.

"The starting price is about \$180,000 for a condo," says Laura Zapata, owner of Seaview Properties in Playa del Carmen and president of the region's real estate board. "Most properties are three-story condo buildings, and it has become very popular for the top floor to have a rooftop deck with a grill or hot tub."



USA TODAY

Best for:

Beach fans with a sense of adventure.

Claim to fame:

The epicenter of Mayan culture with many jungle ruins.

Don't miss:

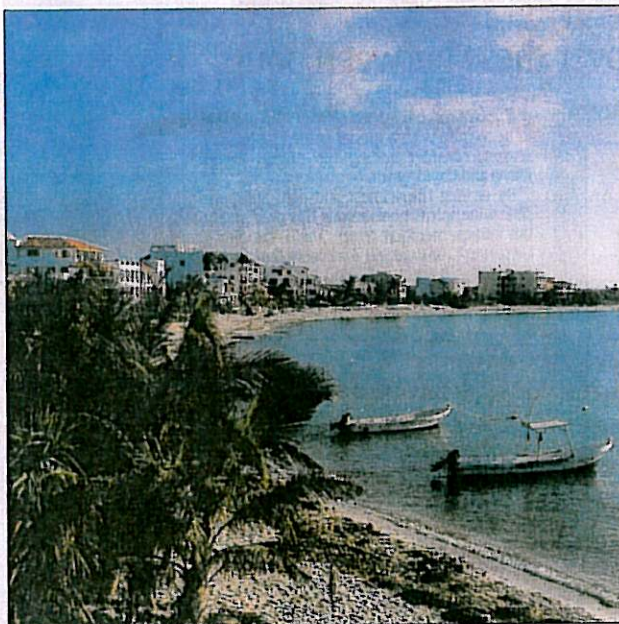
The world's second-longest barrier reef with boat trips, snorkeling and scuba diving.

Getting there:

Cancun International Airport is 30 miles from Playa del Carmen.

Tourism information:

rivieramayacom



Riviera Maya Destination Marketing Office

Swaying palms, blue waters, tourism and development: Akumal is one of many towns along the Mayan Riviera offering an array of condominiums right on the beach.

A look at three Mayan Riviera neighborhoods:

- ▶ **Playa del Carmen.** Playacar, a residential community in Playa del Carmen, is the region's largest and among its oldest developments. "You can be in a gated community and still walk to town, and that has made it very popular," real estate agent Laura Zapata says. The original community was mostly houses near the beach, commanding \$850,000 to \$2 million with a few condos around \$500,000. A second phase is underway farther inland, consisting of mostly new condos from \$250,000 to \$700,000 and a few houses from \$500,000 to \$1.3 million. In downtown, the upscale end of Fifth Avenue has condos from \$350,000.
- ▶ **Mayakoba.** This 600-acre development (mayakoba.com) aspires to be the "Venice of Mexico." Canals carved from limestone link luxury hotels, spas, restaurants and beach clubs. Car-free, guests use boats and golf carts to get around. It's the most expensive and luxurious choice. Offerings including condos, houses and fractional residence clubs are sold by the hotels and begin at about \$1.5 million.
- ▶ **Tulum/Akumal.** With myriad condos, Akumal has long been the most developed town on the southern end of the coast. Nearby Tulum's ruins are the top tourist attraction. "Tulum was always a backpacker's town, but now there are a few new projects, including Aldea Zama, the first major residential development down there, with lots from \$85,000," Zapata says. In Akumal, Sirenis is a development with condos starting just under \$300,000.



Banyan Tree Mayakoba

On the market: Sunrise Lagoon Pool Villa is a private residence being sold by the luxury Banyan Tree hotel in Mayakoba.

High price

\$1.4 million

- ▶ **Bedrooms:** 2
- ▶ **Bathrooms:** 3
- ▶ **Size:** 1,653 square feet
- ▶ **Features:** Designed as a walled compound, the house features multiple buildings linked by 4,253 square feet of outdoor living space, including a pool, garden and hot tub. Boat dock at back door. Owners receive discounts on resort dining, sports and spa.



Seaview Properties

On the market: This new top-floor condo is in the Akoya complex in Phase II of Playacar in Playa del Carmen.

Midrange price

\$336,000

- ▶ **Bedrooms:** 2
- ▶ **Bathrooms:** 2½
- ▶ **Size:** 1,400 square feet
- ▶ **Features:** Kitchen with granite counters, balcony and large rooftop terrace. Outdoor parking spot in gated community. Common amenities include pool, gym and preferred access to Playacar golf course.

Next week: Ski hotel ownership



Dreaming of a vacation home? Find past stories at travel.usatoday.com.