



photos by Michael Cooney

## A Naturist Odyssey in Quintana Roo

Mark Storey

**C**ancún in the northeastern part of the Yucatán Peninsula is one of the most popular Mexican destinations for North Americans. More importantly for naturists, there are more safe, trouble-free opportunities for nude recreation along the Caribbean coast immediately to the south than anywhere in Latin America outside of Brazil. In September 2010, TNS photographer Michael Cooney, his wife Donna Janus, my wife Kathy Blanchard, and I braved sun, sea, and sand to discover just how easily we could expand our naturist horizons.

### The Maya

The Yucatán Peninsula—made up of Quintana Roo (pronounced with a long *o* and a trilled *r*) to the southeast, Campeche to the southwest, and Yucatán to the north—has not always been friendly to

clothes-freedom. The region boasted a Maya civilization rivaling in size and complexity the Aztecs in mainland México and the Incas in South America. Maya adults tended to live life clothed, with peasant men wearing a simple wrap-around loin cloth, deerskin moccasins, and—for chilly nights—a *pati*, or cloak. Women tended to wear both a slip and a rectangle of decorated cotton cloth called a *kub* with holes for head and arms.

Nudity among the Maya along the Caribbean was not unheard of. Chaplain and secretary to Hernán Cortés, Francisco López de Gómara reports in his biography of the Spanish explorer on the Maya they encountered in 1519 at Isla Cozumel southeast of Cancún. “The people are dark and go about naked, or, if they wear any clothing, which is of cotton, it is only to cover their private parts.”

Friar Diego de Landa (1524-1579), appointed Bishop of the Roman Catholic

Archdiocese of Yucatán in 1572, is famous for two things. First, in 1562 he singlehandedly destroyed for religious reasons dozens of painted Maya codices that would have given the world immeasurably more insight into the fascinating Maya culture. Second, his *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (1566) provides more information about Maya life than any single document now available. In it he tells of the limited acceptance of social nudity in the region’s Maya culture, for instance of Maya women raising their children: “They were brought up entirely naked, but at about four or five years of age they gave them a wrap for sleeping, and strips of cloth to cover themselves as their fathers did; the little girls also began to cover themselves from the giridle down.”

Inland Maya women apparently were more comfortable topfree than their coastal sisters. Landa says, “The Indian women of the coast, of the province of Bak-halal and of Campeche, are more modest in

their costume; besides the skirt which they wear from the waist down, they cover their breasts with a double mantle fastened below the armpits.”

Social demand for nudity was contextual, as public bathing was usually done clothes-free. Landa reports that the women “bathe constantly, like the men, in cold water, but with little reserve, going stripped into the places where they go for water.”

Missionaries in Yucatán pressured the Maya to cover what nudity the richly-civilized natives had allowed themselves. Auditor and Judge of the High Court of Guatemala and the Confines Tomás López issued an ordinance in 1552 to be enforced by all Franciscans working in the peninsula. In part it read, “I order that all women wear long skirts and over them their huipiles; and that all men wear shirts and go shod, at least with sandals.” It would be nearly 500 years before Yucatán residents and visitors had ready choice to live and relax free of clothes.

## Traveling in México

Canadian and U.S. naturists need to be more relaxed about traveling in México. Our North American neighbor to the south offers fabulous food, beautiful scenery, friendly people, and a public transit system that we can only dream about. I’ve traveled for days and weeks in various regions of México, and have *never* had a seriously bad experience. There are some concerns about travel in México that gringos may be aware of, but we need to place them in informed perspective. Quintana Roo has too many naturist options to ignore due to misunderstanding of Mexican culture.

Let’s say you’re thinking of flying down to Cancún, the most common destination for gringos wanting some Yucatán sun. The Cancún International Airport has seen amazing renovation in recent years. I recall arriving there in 1991, getting off the plane, and negotiating my way through what seemed like a mob of taxi drivers all yelling at me in Spanish. I didn’t know what to do or where to go. Today you can reserve a car rental easily via the Internet, working with rental agencies you use at home. Even if you step off the plane without reservations, English-speaking agents behind signed desks will help you rent a car at a fair price, and direct you to a shuttle to the car lot. It’s safe, easy, and they understand that you may be nervous visiting a new land.

I went years without renting a car in México, as the bus system and taxis are affordable and readily available, but if you arrive in Cancún and wish to head south to naturist destinations, you’d do best to rent a car. They are not particularly expensive, and the required auto insurance will be part of the standard deal. You can expect a clean, newish car that will run as well as what you’d rent back home.

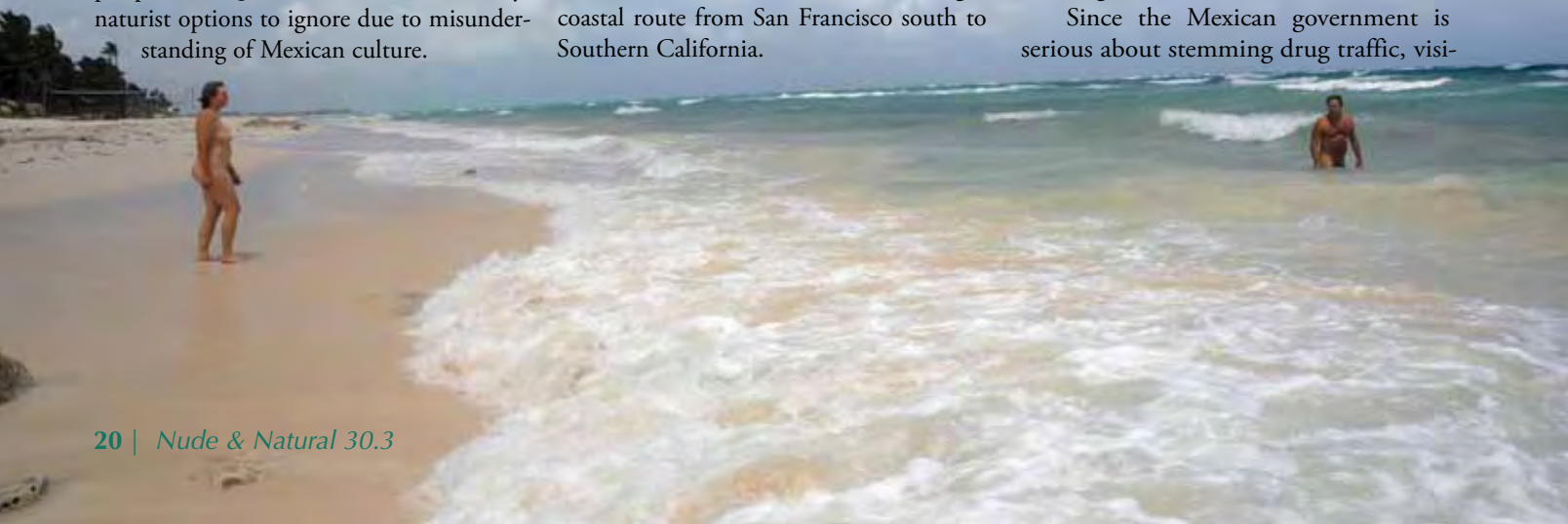
The roads? *Ningún problema*. The arrow-straight Highway 307 taking you from Cancún south to naturist opportunities is as safe and well-paved as any highway in the U.S. Since much of México is not well lit at night, the roads here can get pretty dark, so it’s best to plan your driving for the daytime. But don’t be afraid to drive the length of Quintana Roo; it’s safe and no more difficult than driving a coastal route from San Francisco south to Southern California.

You used to hear stories about gas station attendants cheating drivers. One should still pay attention, but these are generally honest people simply doing their job, as gas is not self-serve in México. Pemex gas stations are all along the highway, and most have the same credit card access we’re used to up north. ATMs are in practically every large town, so using cash is easier than ever.

Worried about the food? Most of that fear is way out of date. Uncooked fresh fruit and vegetables might still be best avoided outside of tourist-oriented restaurants (although I eat everything in sight and have never gotten sick), but the seafood is far too good in Quintana Roo to be overly nervous about trying new cuisine. Break away from the resort/hotel restaurants with their overpriced, boring menus geared for anxious gringos, and walk down the street to a local café and put something new and exciting into your mouth. Bottled water is available everywhere.

According to the people we spoke to while traveling, the three main concerns keeping U.S. and Canadian naturists from exploring México are the violence due to drug trafficking, swine flu, and the bad U.S. economy. The first can be a valid worry, of course, but the Mexican violence we hear about up north is overplayed dramatically in our news media. Far more people are murdered in the U.S. over drugs than in México. Moreover, the violence is localized to fairly specific areas, and Quintana Roo just doesn’t have this problem to any relevant extent. Passing through many U.S. cities is more dangerous than traveling here.

Since the Mexican government is serious about stemming drug traffic, visi-





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tors will notice the occasional police or military checkpoint along main roads. It can be a bit unnerving seeing what appears to be a half dozen uniformed teenagers with machine guns waving at you to stop. We passed through two such checkpoints. At the first, Kathy—who took some Spanish decades ago—so butchered the language that the young police officer’s eyes began to glaze over and roll back. I could hear him thinking, “*Dios mio*, I can’t talk to this crazy *gringa* one second longer.” After her attempt at telling him where we were going, he just sighed and waved us on.

Returning a few days later, we were stopped at the same checkpoint. This time I cobbled together enough Spanish to tell a polite officer our nationality, where we had been in México, how long we’d been there, and where we were going. No problem. If you speak absolutely no Spanish, it would be easy for a friend or hotel clerk to write a note saying who you are and where you’re going. That would likely do the trick. Most often, though, they’ll just wave you past without even talking with you. Besides, they’re looking for drug traffickers, and really don’t want



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to hassle hyperventilating tourists bringing money to the local economy.

As for swine flu, that's pretty well over everywhere as a health concern. Besides, México did a stellar job in being upfront about the initial outbreak and took effective, specific actions to increase cleanliness in public areas. The result is that México can boast a cleaner, healthier environment than ever. The Mexican people deserve solid applause for responding so well to an unfortunate situation.

Our economy is still suffering, and many naturists are wondering if they can afford to travel internationally. While México is not the impossibly cheap vacation destination it was years ago, once you get down there, the prices for simple, clean lodging and quality food are quite reasonable, and if you are up for staying at more domestic hotels and dining at local cafes, your vacation can easily be less expensive than a comparable one in the U.S. or Canada.

## Hidden Beach Resort

The tourist miasma that is Cancún has no recognized nude beaches, although some resorts will allow a degree of topfreedom called for by their European customers. For anything approximating naturist liberty on the Yucatán mainland, head south on Highway 307. In approximately 80 kilometers find Hidden Beach Resort Au Naturel Club's sign posted prominently to the left. If you are looking for an all-inclusive, clothing-optional, upscale, beachside, gated atmosphere, you'll likely be happy here. Hidden Beach was closed this autumn for renovation, so we were not able to visit the site. Michael Cooney's report in *N* 26.3 will provide a TNS assessment, though.

One of Hidden Beach's media contacts, Jenn Myers, told *N* in October that the renovation includes "a redesign of 42 suites and resort facilities. The renovation is slated to be complete December 20, 2010," and "will ensure that the resort remains the ultimate destination for nudist vacationers."

Hidden Beach has also issued a press release saying that "Property renova-

tions and enhancements include renewed guest suites with new furnishings, chic décor, redesigned bathrooms complete with Jacuzzi tubs for two, and updated in-room amenities, including 42-inch flat screen televisions. The resort's La Vista restaurant will reopen this winter offering guests a contemporary, open-air setting to enjoy the resort's Gourmet Inclusive dining offerings while overlooking the pristine beach; while all public spaces including the resort's lobby will also be refreshed.

"Hidden Beach Resort, au Naturel Club, offers a Gourmet Inclusive adults-only nudist resort for both singles and couples that is designed to provide a luxuri-

ous nude vacation experience in a secluded setting. The resort's 42 suites are located within two oceanfront buildings and offer direct beach access, with the first floor swim-up suites offering private pools that conveniently connect to the main pool by a lazy river." Visit [hiddenbeachresort.com](http://hiddenbeachresort.com) or [karismahotels.com](http://karismahotels.com) for the resort's current status.

## Naked Near Tulum

A half hour's drive south of Hidden Beach and immediately north of Tulum are two naturist-friendly bed and breakfasts, Villa Dolce Vita and Casa Amor del



AZULIK AND CABAÑAS COPAL offer immediate access to the well-established Tulum nude beach.

Sol. Both are two-story private residences run by naturist couples who welcome guests who wish to enjoy their property clothes-free. Both are equally attractive, spacious, airy, and serve breakfast. Kathy and I would be delighted to spend time at either one.

Chris and Connie Wasyl have run Villa Dolce Vita B&B at Solomon Bay for years to naturist guests. Set in a gated community with private access to the small beach abutting their property, and with tolerant neighbors to either side, guests here can enjoy nude sunbathing on the sand or at the private beachfront swimming pool set amidst the B&B's casitas. See [villadolcevita.com](http://villadolcevita.com) for more information.

A bit further south, and approximately 13 kilometers north of Tulum in the peaceful pueblo of Tan-Kah, Diane and Phil Buchanan's Casa del Amor B&B sits across the street from quiet but developed beachfront. Phil says that there are so seldom people around that portions of the beach are often usable for nude sunbathing. The two suites in the two-story house are decorated beautifully, without being ostentatious to the point of guests fearing they might break something whenever they turn around. A Jacuzzi always suitable for nude use sits on the roof-deck overlooking the Caribbean. The swimming pool with its own waterfall waits

quietly and privately in the botanically lush back yard. See [casaamordelsol.com](http://casaamordelsol.com) for more information.

An upcoming option for naturists is a new resort rising from the jungle south of the Tulum ruins and east of town, in a new development project called Heart of Tulum. Mike and Chrissy Hopson's Mak Nuk Village is poised to be a radically upscale resort and condo complex, and promises to be a stellar setting for nude relaxation. Construction of the main building is partially completed, and will contain large penthouses with kitchens and upper-story step-in splash-pools. Mike told us, "We are on track to finish the first building of nine units in late December 2010; our models will be finished mid-November."

In front of the main building will be a large pool with flowing contours and swim-up access to other rooms. The buildings and landscaping are planned to ensure adequate privacy for a clothes-free stay. Although not located on the beach, the resort will be within walking distance of the nude beach at Copal. Mike says that Mak Nuk Village will also have its "own private beach club." If half of what Hopson plans comes to fruition, it will still set the bar for naturist luxury in Mexico. See [maknuk.com](http://maknuk.com) for a ton of information and computer generated glimpses into the



VILLA DOLCE VITA is a very private quiet B & B with its own nude beach and pool.

future.

Through their side business, Caribbean Excursions, Mike and Chrissy also organize clothing-optional charter boats for vacationers to explore the Riviera Maya naked. Whether your group is large or small, Mike is an option to contact for nude sailing in the area. He can be reached at [mike@hotinplaya.com](mailto:mike@hotinplaya.com).

## *Azulik and Cabañas Copal*

At present, the most established clothing-optional choices near Tulum are the neighboring Azulik and Cabañas Copal. Set along the shoreline south of the ruins, and lined up amidst multiple textile hotels and B&Bs, Azulik and Copal are owned by the same non-naturist company. Still, their atmosphere is rooted firmly in the days when the beaches were quiet, tourists were rare, hammocks swayed between palm trees, young people could camp on the sand for free, and one just might smell the sweet aroma of an herb wafting by.

Times have changed, of course, but there's still a counter-culture vibe to the beachside bungalows of these two seamlessly blended establishments. Azulik is for



THE CLIFFSIDE AZULIK CABAÑAS offer dramatic views of the rocky shoreline and opportunity to experience the wind and waves first hand. The nude beach is a short walk away.

the most part clothing-optional, adults-only, and very, very quiet. A half a dozen or so palapa-style cabañas constructed out of local hardwood sit atop the low rocky cliff overlooking the Caribbean. “Fancy thatched huts” does not quite tell the whole story, as each has a large, hollowed-out log carved for a bath tub, a canopy-covered bed, and private bath. A ceiling fan works during the day, but there is no electricity for anything else. Azulik provides plenty of candles for soft evening lighting. Out on the deck sits a round plaster tub that you can fill with hot water. If you really like who you’re with, the two of you can sit quietly in still warm water as stars dot the Caribbean night sky.

By placing an orange flag outside your door you tell passing attendants that you wish room service for meals or snacks. If you do not want to dress to walk to the resort’s restaurant, you can eat all your meals in the room. You can even walk naked along a sand path 50 meters or so

to the adjoining Cabañas Copal and its clothing-optional beach. The rooms at Azulik are pricey, but you could, without effort, remain naked for weeks at a time, if you used the room service or the beachside bar to eat.

Cabañas Copal is lower in price, as the huts are approximately one third the size, feature much simpler amenities, and offer only shared bathroom and shower facilities. Since Copal allows children, and naturists staying at Azulik will want to go to Copal for the nude beach, it’s not clear in what sense Azulik is adults-only anyway.

At the center of Copal is the Maya Spa and Wellness Center, where a variety of massage, beauty treatments, and sweat lodge experiences are available. At this central location is a path with smooth inlaid rocks. I asked the management on hand to what extent Azulik and Copal were clothing-optional. The manager fully understood the desires of the naturist guests, and was quite clear that all areas seaward from the

rocky path were totally open to nude use. Fortunately, that includes nearly all the lodging accommodations of both resorts, the sandy path that connects them, the beach at Copal, and the beachside bar that serves drinks and the restaurant’s full menu. The casual restaurant itself requires at least a light wrap, as do the showers and restroom facilities. Still, one could be pleasantly naked throughout a weeklong vacation here.

The guests are most often from Europe, so—according to the management—there is no conflict between the naked and the clothed. The only nude people we saw during our three days here, however, were on the beach, and among the even mix of men and women most of the men were nude and most of the women were merely top-free. The four of us did not feel at all out of place enjoying the beach in true TNS style.

The spring before our September trip, Azulik and Copal had removed all reference from their websites to their clothing-

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LAZING IN A HAMMOCK, enjoying a gulf breeze.



WELL PRESERVED AND EASIER TO ACCESS than many of the larger and more popular area ruins, Muyil could be the place to experience your own “Nude Indiana Jones” fantasy.

optional character. Apparently a police officer cited a Copal guest for being nude in public on a beach nearby. I asked the manager about the citation, and he said that it occurred before he had been hired, but that he believed it was due to the man’s walking beyond the accepted nude area for Copal.

The manager believes that there is a local ordinance prohibiting public nudity. This would include beaches, which are open to the public up to 20 feet above the high tide line. As I understand it, any public nudity law and local enforcement policy work differently in México than in the U.S. or Canada. Private enterprises like hotels and resorts can obtain concession rights to stretches of beach, and can use those rights to monopolize food and drink service, umbrella rentals, or what have you. Within areas acquired by concession, the local governments tacitly allow some hotels to let their guests sunbathe nude. Anyone can walk up and down the beach to enjoy it, but having a concession may give private businesses who own the landward access to the beach some leeway for nude use. With this system, along with customary nude use and local acceptance, unofficial nude beaches can form on a variety of shorelines, such as the public beach at Playa Zipolite in Oaxaca and the beach whose sole access is through the private property of the otherwise textile Puerta Serena Villas and Spa in Jalisco.

Naturists may confidently enjoy the beach areas of Azulik and Cabañas Copal nude for the foreseeable future, and it looks like the management wants to keep it that way. Good for them! For more information on each, see [azulik.com](http://azulik.com) and [cabanascopal.com](http://cabanascopal.com).

We failed to verify a public lands site as used nude south of Tulum. Michael had received word from multiple sources that if we drove the incredibly rough road south through the northern coastal portion of the Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka’an down toward Punta Allen that we’d find isolated beaches quite often enjoyed nude. We paid the 20 pesos each to drive into the reserve, and slowly bumped over and into more

potholes than I'd ever seen before. After a half hour of finding no public access to the coastline we gave up. A few days later we spoke with some naturist expats living in the area, and they said we just needed to continue a bit further. After "crossing a bridge," one said, we'd find more beach than we could hope to nudy. Verification of that tip will have to come from someone else, and someone whose car has a reliable suspension. [see the following article.]

The Tulum area is thus a great place to stay for a night or two as you make your way from Cancun south. With pricey but romantic Azulik, less spendy and more rugged Copal, and the straightforwardly clean, cheery choices of two comfortable B&Bs, naturists have a variety of accommodations to choose from, and all with magnificent access to the Mexican Caribbean.

## Maya Ruins

It's inconceivable that anyone from outside Mexico could vacation in this region and not visit at least one Maya ruin. The exquisitely gorgeous marine setting of the Tulum archeological zone is world famous, and even though it has in recent years turned into a tourist-frenzied circus, it's still the single-most important must-see in the area. Moreover, people will laugh at you if you say you were nearby and didn't stop to take at least one picture.

Less frenetic is Cobá nearby to the northwest, and if explored in the morning before busloads of tourists from Cancun arrive, you'll acquire a sense of what motivates the Indiana Joneses of the world. The place oozes with jungle adventure and historical mystery.

Michael suggested we stop at the ruins of Muyil, sometimes known as Chunyaxche, just 25 kilometers south of Tulum on Highway 307. Michael and I believe that virtually any public lands site can—with some forethought and fancy footwork—be suitable for a naked photo op. Why? Because we can, and others should.

We pulled our SUV into the dirt parking area to find two mini-buses from

a tourist group already getting out and heading to the somewhat dilapidated ticket booth. Donna opted to stay near the car to relax, while I paid the moderate entrance fee and followed Kathy and Michael past the 20 or so Mexican tourists.

Michael had been here four years earlier and knew which of the six main excavated structures he wanted to photograph. He bee-lined it to Temple 8 with Kathy and me following and sweating in the humid jungle air, and we soon left the less focused tourists far behind.

No one was around, so off came the clothes to briefly explore the eerie ruin. I've been told that the short, steep steps of such temples forced people to ascend with respect, as one would be unable to run straight to the top. We then moved on—clothed now—to the 17-meter high *Castillo* ("Castle," aka Temple 6), the tallest Maya structure along this coast. Nearby was a trail and boardwalk leading toward Laguna Muyil (with an additional 40 peso entrance fee). Michael said the walk was worth it since there was a lookout tower 15 minutes away. We arrived at the rickety structure, could not imagine appreciating the scenery clothed, so doffed the togs

again to enjoy naked the 360 degree view of the watery jungle from high above the treetops.

Wanting to get to our next and primary stop, we returned to the car and headed south toward the coast to the miniscule and remote fishing village of Xcalak and Playa Sonrisa seven kilometers north of town.

## Playa Sonrisa

The four of us had heard good things about the quiet, out-of-the-way, clothing-optional resort of Playa Sonrisa (see Terry McNinch's outstanding article in *N* 21.4), putting it at the top of our list of naked places to visit in the Caribbean. It was not what I expected, though. It was better. Playa Sonrisa is now my first choice for a naturist vacation in Mexico. Different people want different things; I want this.

Playa Sonrisa ("Smile Beach") is an easy 5.5 hour drive from Cancun. With a night or two spent at any of the clothing-optional establishments along the way, and a visit to a ruin or two, Playa Sonrisa can be the cornerstone of an awesome naturist trip.



THE LOOKOUT TOWERS AT THE SIAN KA'AN VISITORS CENTER near Muyil, offer views of the jungle canopy.



ACCESSED VIA A BOARDWALK THROUGH THE JUNGLE, the lookout tower near Muyl is a climbing adventure, but is rewarded by a breathtaking view of the lagoon and ocean.

Cindy and Donn “Murph” Murphy had good paying jobs as an accountant and engineer, but wanted to do something more adventuresome. That something ended up being opening a small naturist resort at the southern tip of tropical Quintana Roo, just a few kilometers from the Belize border.

With nearly 90 meters of clean, white sand as your secluded front yard, palm trees waving in the light breeze, warm Caribbean waves lapping at ankle height along the shore, and the coral reef protecting the coast a quarter mile away, Playa Sonrisa gives a sense of being cast away in paradise—with drinks and fabulous food.

Playa Sonrisa is no party club; you and yours may have the place to yourselves with the ever-friendly Murph and Cindy as welcome companions for dinner, happy hour, and conversation. A pier extends out into the water, giving even more quiet seclusion. The water is good for swimming and whets your appetite for snorkeling. However, it’s out near the Mesoamerican Reef (second in size only to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia) that you’ll find the area’s best scuba and free diving.

We stayed four days, and as quiet as it was, each day seemed full. Swimming with schools of fish near the dock, sitting under palm trees reading a book, exploring the region by car and looking for small Maya ruins, or photographing the many crabs wandering about kept us pleasantly busy.

Early in our stay Murph, Michael, and I were walking along the shore, and Michael picked up a bit of rust-colored material. It looked to me like sandstone. Murph said that it was just another Maya pottery shard, and that they were common up and down the beach. We looked down and immediately found three or four more at our feet. I said, “Uh huh, pottery shards, eh,” thinking Murph was yanking our chains.

The next day I was telling Kathy what Murph said and she looked down to find even more pieces the size of a fingertip or the palm of her hand. This time I looked at them more closely, saw what appeared to



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be charcoal marks and patterned incisions. They *were* pottery shards, and you couldn't help walking on them.

Murph and a naturist neighbor who came over to play bocce told me later that just to the north of Playa Sonrisa, the Maya had for centuries set up kilns to make cheap, disposable pots to collect sea salt. Buyers from far away would come for the salt, but would break and empty each pot to carry the salt back in a bag. The broken pots were then tossed into the water. There was no point for the Maya to bake the pots at high temperatures (making the pots more durable) because the pots were just “throwaways.” I was walking naked in centuries of Maya garbage. If that isn't cool, I don't know what is.

Another welcome feature of Playa Sonrisa is that the Murphys do not wish to gouge their guests. This was one of the most reasonably priced naturist resorts I've visited in the past decade. Where a cold beer will cost up to \$5 in a U.S. resort, and up to \$4 in a comparable one in México, Playa Sonrisa asks \$2. And where most resorts will rent you a kayak at up to \$20 per hour, Playa Sonrisa asks \$5 for a week. Murph says that's to cover replacing a strap if it breaks. This I can afford.

Playa Sonrisa is nearly off the grid, so electricity is not something to be wasted. There's all that you need, but leave your power-hungry hair driers home. Rooms are simple, spacious, clean, and safe. We never

saw the need to use the room's private safe or to lock the door. Crime is just not a problem in this area.

Nights are generally comfortable, and the ceiling fan kept things as cool as we wanted. In the morning we woke to a continental breakfast (included in the price) of hardboiled eggs, fresh tropical fruit, hot muffins and bread, and coffee. Lunches were available, but often we ate enough in the morning to carry us through until Cindy and her assistant prepared a luscious dinner. The fixed menu changes nightly, but we enjoyed items like homemade soups, coconut shrimp, chiles rellenos, grilled fish, and fresh desserts. Dining in nearby Xcalak is limited, but available for those wanting to extend their options.

The one thing that I found odd—and there may be nothing that Playa Sonrisa can do about this—is the need for me to bring cash to pay for everything except the pre-paid lodging reservations. The immediate area does not have the capacity to use credit cards, and Xcalak has no ATMs or banks. It's not a huge problem as it turns out, as there are plenty of ATMs in the towns on the way to Xcalak, and here it's not like walking the streets of New York City at night with cash in your pocket. The cash is useful for buying drinks, lunches, dinners, and for any excursions you may wish to arrange. Also, Playa Sonrisa takes pesos or U.S. dollars.

Murph helped us out, for instance, by phoning a dive shop in Xcalak to arrange with the owner to have us picked up naked at the Playa Sonrisa dock, and take us for a



LOCAL BOAT CAPTAINS provide trips to the island area near the Belize border. Bird life is abundant and there is always the possibility of a manatee sighting.

four-hour tour of the coastline, a secluded island bird sanctuary, and two sites along the reef for especially good skinny-diving. For a moderate price (and with Murph taking no commission), the four of us bounced along the water for half a day, as naked as each of us wanted to be, and with the smiling boat operator nonplussed by our nudity.

He took us through a labyrinth of mangroves south of Xcalak and into the Bahía de Chetumal to see birds and intricate waterways separating México and Belize. Returning, we stopped at two dive sites along the reef, one shallow, one deep, the second of which allowed us to swim among a school of tarpon. The water was so warm that any thought of clothing seemed ludicrous.

With the trip nearly over, Kathy and I decided that Michael had planned this vacation perfectly. We had enjoyed more than one naturist-friendly site in our leisurely drive to Playa Sonrisa, stayed four nights there, and would stay one night elsewhere on our way back to Cancún and our flight home. Flying in Saturday and flying home the next weekend was a perfect length for a relaxing week of Mexican nude recreation. No day had too much driving, and the naturist options seemed legion. Still, we were looking for one more mini adventure.

For more information on Playa Sonrisa, see [playasonrisa.com](http://playasonrisa.com).

## A Cenote Skinny-dip

Cenotes—as much as anything else—give the Yucatán Peninsula its character. Flat throughout most of the region, the landscape is covered in limestone. Scientists have recently determined that a huge meteorite crashed into the peninsula some 65 million years ago, fracturing the limestone cap, and causing numerous cave-ins. The sinkholes that resulted are the cenotes the Maya relied on for fresh water and revered as sacred portals to the underworld, and that today are often playgrounds for swimmers and scuba divers.

Underneath the surface of the Yucatán is a maze of rivers and pools, many connecting one cenote to another, and occasionally connecting a freshwater system to the ocean. On our way back on Highway 307 north, through Tulúm, Michael said that he had seen signs for cenotes up the highway northwest to Cobá. In 1.5 kilometers we found on the right a small dirt parking lot for Cenote Calavera (“Cenote Temple of Doom”). Even though my Spanish is well shy of meager, I was voted to go ask about a swim, and to see if skinny-dipping was an option.

There was a ramshackle building that seemed to serve as someone’s house at the gate. A friendly young man came out, and asked if we wanted to go swimming. I asked if I could first go look at the cenote. He said okay, but only one from our group could go.

I walked the 50 meters along a rough path through sparse jungle, and found a beautiful limestone cenote, with the water level a good four meters below ground level. Unfortunately, there was a clothed young local man jumping in and out, having a grand time. I went back thinking that we couldn’t nudify this cenote this day. The attendant seemed disappointed in losing a sale to four gringo swimmers.

We got back in the car and drove further west, finding next a well-developed cenote with a robust set of signs advertising the fun families could have swimming here. It was way too busy for skinny-dipping. Figuring swimming naked in a cenote was just not to be, we headed back to Tulúm. Within moments though, Michael and I agreed that *real* naturist adventurers (and *N* writers and photographers surely must top that list) would not give up so easily.

We pulled back into the parking area for Cenote Calavera. I noted only one truck in the lot, and figured it might likely be the attendant’s. The four of us agreed that if I asked to go skinny-dipping, the worst thing that could happen is that the attendant would be shocked and demand we leave. More likely, he’d initially look puzzled, and then politely say something like, “*No, esta no es una playa nudista.*”

I walked through the gate and up to the building. The young man appeared and seemed happy to see us again. I said, in what was surely a faltering Spanish that would cause an international incident in any other context, that we decided we wanted to swim here. What I said was, “*No tenemos nos trajes de baños. ¿Podemos nadar sin ropas?*” I hoped that meant, “We do not have our bathing suits. Can we swim without clothes?”

My plan was that four middle-aged gringos traveling around without bathing suits might make sense and that he’d happily—perhaps by charging us a bit more than usual—cut us some slack. Just walking up and saying that we wanted to get naked on his property didn’t seem like the most effective approach.

Again, no problem! He smiled and said “*¡Está bien!*” I repeated my request to make sure he knew what I was asking to do, and he nodded happily waving us to the path leading to the cenote. I paid about \$5 for each of us (which may have been slightly higher than usual, but it was well below what I was willing to pay to skinny-dip here). When the four of us got to the cenote, the young swimmer from before (and apparently aligned with the attendant) leapt about the rocks, jumping in the water from various places, and told us in Spanish where it was safe and not safe to enter the water. I again asked him about our swimming *sin ropas*, and he waved, smiled, and made it look like skinny-dipping was no big deal.

The young man soon left, seemingly to give us some privacy, and as Michael readied his camera, I jumped in the perfectly clear water. Wow! Miniature fish swimming all around me, stalactites hanging from the cavern ceiling, tropical foliage clinging to the cavern’s upper lip, utter darkness at the underwater corners below (that I later learned led to underwater tunnels explored by experienced scuba divers), bats clinging to the ceiling and flitting by, and mystical light reaching down from both the main opening and a smaller one nearby. This was the most magical naturist experience I have ever had.

All four of us eventually jumped in, each thinking initially that the leap was scary. Once made, though, it all seemed so perfect. The water temperature could not have been better. The inquisitive fish seemed to nibble at our body hairs, but they were too small to do anything but entertain us. A rope hung down from the cavern's upper lip, giving us something to hang on to if we wished. A solid wooden

no one here—or at the many other small, isolated cenotes across the peninsula, you might ask with a smile if you can swim without the suits you forgot in your hotel. A smattering of Spanish may be necessary for this, though.

We were quite pleased with ourselves as naturists. I thought that this was a prime example of what TNS members and longtime readers of *N* should be able and



CENOTE CALAVERA is known to divers as the Temple of Doom, but for naturists this is an experience you have only dreamed about.

## References:

Francisco López de Gómara, Cortés: *The Life of the Conqueror*, Lesley Byrd Simpson, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 34.

Friar Diego de Landa, *Yucatan Before and After the Conquest*, William Gates, trans. (Mérida: Producción Editorial Dante, 1990), 55, 74-76, 181.

ladder allowed us back to the more earthly world of light and rock.

Cenote Calavera is in no way a naturist site, although as I was leaving I asked the attendant if other people ever swam naked there. He shrugged and said, “Sí, no problem.” There are cenotes nearby more popular with families, so if there was

willing to do: find a public site calling for nude use, and figure out how to make it work. The whole experience was satisfying on many levels. It was the perfect cap to a wonderful week. **N**