

Editor's Choice From This Month's Issue

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UNCATEGORIZED

By David Gibb [May 2022](#)

Exploring Playa del Carmen's Lesser-Known Neighborhoods

Once a sleepy fishing village, Playa del Carmen's landscape and infrastructure are unrecognizable from just 20 years ago. Rapid and expansive development—including hotels, condos, and entertainment venues, continues at a mind-blowing pace. as does its population.

Beverley and I decided to investigate deeper, seeking some quiet beauty: a place where expats can push the noise to the background and enjoy the plethora of perks this tropical playground offers.

Here are a few of the quieter neighborhoods in Playa that we discovered, outside the Centro district, better suited for expats seeking some “R and R.” They’re all close enough to the action to jump in and get crazy when the mood strikes...but far enough from the madding crowd to still enjoy the peace and tranquility you’ve earned.

Ejidal

We first dropped our bags at a small hotel across from a modern shopping mall, Centro Maya, in the Ejidal district, an up-and-coming neighborhood just 10 minutes south of Playa’s hustle and bustle.

Ejidal has a very traditional feel to it. Its humble, unvarnished residential streets are lined with rows of traditional family homes. Ejidal’s residents seem happy and are quick to greet passersby. Glances are returned with welcoming smiles and waves. Colorful murals of toucans, jaguars, and Maya warriors and children adorn concrete walls lining the narrow streets, as old men sit curbside devouring messy tacos, their younger, shirtless counterparts sweating profusely as they wash their cars under the scorching midday sun.

But the landscape here is changing quickly. All around us, bulldozers and cranes busily erect high-rise condominiums and big-box stores. Starbucks is already here. So is Sam’s Club, Petco, DHL, OfficeMax, and Scotiabank. The modern Centro Maya Mall is home to a McDonald’s, a 24-hour fitness club, a huge supermarket, and a multi-screen Cineplex theater. A dozen luxury all-inclusive hotels, including Iberostar, Wyndham, and Riu line the Caribbean waterfront inside Playacar, a popular gated expat community.

Built amidst a natural jungle setting, Playacar is nestled amongst multi-million-dollar oceanfront estates. Yet it's possible to buy into this quiet, safe community for \$190,000 (one-bedroom, one-bath, 818-square-foot condo). Or, if you're looking for something more suitable for your pet elephant, you can grab a deluxe seven-bedroom, seven-bath executive home, with two pools and a rooftop terrace, for \$5,000,000. Design elements include high-end finishes like marble floors and granite countertops.

Playacar is divided into two phases. Phase 1 includes several oceanfront hotels and residences (many used as vacation rentals), while Phase 2 lines an 18-hole golf course. This upscale community also includes three shopping malls, restaurants, bars, spas, tennis courts, swimming pools, gym, bicycle paths, an aviary, and a small Maya archeological site along its namesake stretch of white sandy beach. Full rental management services are also available if you choose to rent out your unit when you're not there. All this, just a 15 to 20-minute

walk from 5th Avenue. "Everyone is friends here!" says happy resident and American expat, James Schrimshire.

Meanwhile, just a few steps from Playacar, a fully furnished, two-bedroom, two-bath, 1220-square-foot condo with 24-hour security, a semi-Olympic pool, with a balcony overlooking palm trees and an ecological park, is listed for \$140,000.

Ejidal is also home to the city's largest hospital, Hospiten Riviera Maya, which provides the most advanced care in Playa—including an ER, general surgery, pediatrics, gynecology, and a host of other medical and diagnostic services. It has many English-speaking staff who commonly treat tourists and expats. Modern dental clinics are also commonplace here—offering cleaning for as low as \$20, with some even providing transportation services.

While you're here, don't miss the chance to enjoy some Mexican haute cuisine

at Alux Restaurant, a unique eatery built within an enormous underground cavern. Multi-colored lights reflect off the cave walls as you dine at linen-covered wooden tables, seated on the shore of a cenote amongst sleeping and docile bats. Batmobile parking is available.

Zazil-Ha

We next shuffled over to Zazil-ha. This historic neighborhood, just north of Centro—and five blocks from the beach, is a safe and comfortable community with plenty of amenities. You'll find many newer buildings, with lots more being built in this quiet area, with prices considerably cheaper than downtown.

Stretching from 34th to 48th Streets, and from 10th Avenue to the ocean, Zazil-ha is far enough from tourist hot spots to insulate it from that loud,

pounding music. Yet it's close enough to the beach and party clubs that you can walk there in less than 30 minutes whenever the mood strikes.

Named after an affluent Maya princess, this traditional-styled neighborhood is also rich in many ways. There's an abundance of supermarkets, fruiteras, dine-in and take-out restaurants, retail stores, internet cafes, taco stands (loaded beefsteak tacos for 90 cents!), and barber shops. My haircut, including a beard trim and straight-edge touch-up, cost just \$2.50.

You'll find piles of restaurants and cafes along Calle 38 and 30 Avenida Nte, with great food at fantastic value. Most are packed with locals (always a great sign!).

Don't miss Birria and El Fogon del May, both on 30 Avenida Nte, for some tasty (and cheap!) tacos and Mexican dishes. If, like us, you'd prefer a quality cup of coffee and a croissant for breakfast rather than a Coke and taco, head over to

the Italian café and bakery, Dulcis in Fundo, on Avenida CTM, or Café Orange on Calle 30 Nte.

We stayed at an Airbnb at Condominio Palmeiras 38, a gated and cozy condo complex with three, three-storey buildings encircling a courtyard garden with tall palms and a swimming pool. Insulated from outside noise by a neighboring jungle lot, we felt as though we were in a Mexican “Melrose Place” as we sat on our balcony listening to the gentle rustling of the palm leaves.

A one-bedroom, one-bath unit, with air-conditioning, floor to ceiling windows, and a balcony overlooking the pool, is currently listed here at \$97,000. The larger two-bedroom, two-bath units on the top floor typically sell for \$150,000 to \$175,000.

Puerto Aventuras

A short 20-minute drive south of Playa, along the Caribbean coast, Puerto Aventuras is a lavish, 300-hectare, resort-style community of hotels and condominiums. Built amidst a forest of palms and tropical jungle in the 1980s, this gated, and security patrolled, neighborhood has become a haven for international expats seeking a slower and more relaxed pace of life.

Pelicans sit poised on deck posts as fishing boats, sailboats, yachts and catamarans bob and sway in the glimmering turquoise waters of the community’s two marinas, the Caribbean Sea beckoning to the horizon. Along the boardwalk, Beverley and I spotted stingrays and crabs drifting in the shallow ocean waters, and watched manatees briefly surface for air every five minutes. We also passed an onsite dolphinarium, where visitors swim and play with dolphins and seals.

Many boat tours and excursions depart from the property, enabling residents and visitors to dance or fish the day away aboard luxury vessels—many

offering open bars.

Water is the name of the game here. You'll find yourself surrounded by enormous pools (with plenty of deck chairs and lounges), canals, and open ocean waters. While the sand is white and powdery, many people complain about the narrow, rocky shoreline. However, Beverley and I discovered a stretch of the two-mile beach that's a real hidden gem.

Cut through the Omni Hotel next to the town square, head down the steps to the beach, and turn right. Here you'll find a lesser-known, postcard-perfect beach, its beauty aided by the installation of a faux reef just meters from the sandy shoreline. The barrier's created a section of calm, thigh-high, crystal-clear waters that attract a myriad of tropical fish in a kaleidoscope of colors. You'll feel as though you're standing inside a Ripley's aquarium.

Meanwhile, the real reef, an underground playground popular with snorkellers and divers, is just 100 feet from shore.

For landlubbers like me, the community's picturesque 18-hole golf course is groomed with Bermuda grass and surrounded by palms and tropical jungle foliage. Golf carts and bicycles are available for rent here.

Other activities include tennis, kayaking, surfing (lessons available), and exploring the many nearby cenotes, making this community ideal for mature retirees who want to keep active and healthy. Most residents are between 50 and 70 – with some well into their 90s. However, there's also a school for young families with children.

"It's like a self-contained mini-city," explains American expat, Gloria Turski.

Very true, since Puerto Aventuras also has onsite ATMs, medical and vet clinics, a pharmacy, churches, cafes, restaurants (some with live music and

clinics, a pharmacy, churches, cafes, restaurants (some with live music and “you hook it, we cook it” service), bars, shops, and a beach club. Plans are even underway for a Formula One racetrack!

So how much does it cost to buy into this dream community?

There’s currently a 1,200-square-foot, one-bedroom, one-bath condo with a large terrace listed for \$175,000. Larger apartments and homes are also available, at correspondingly higher prices.

So, if you’ve ruled Playa out because of its reputation as a tourist destination you may want to take another look. There is peace and beauty, along with some great deals, hiding amongst the pulsating madness here.

But while we understand Playa’s appeal to many expats—retirees and digital nomads alike—Beverley and I have decided to continue our journey, hoping to

find something a bit more secluded and less touristy than America’s Mexican playground.

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