



Rich in culture, graced with a landscape of jungles, mountains, rainforest and beach, and abundant in flora and fauna, Mexico is one of today's greatest holiday destinations. Fortunately it is also taking its responsibilities to sustainability and the environment seriously

In recent years, tourism in Mexico has boomed and it is not hard to understand why. This is a country with great transport links and infrastructure, a great climate and great food. More importantly than all of these, however, is the depth and breadth of the country's natural world, for Mexico, quite literally, is a showcase of the world's ecosystems.

While impressive in terms of GDP and employment statistics, this boom has brought to the fore a dichotomy that is reflected globally in terms of rapid tourist expansion. Which is more important, the tourist dollar or the fragile natural world we live in? Can the two co-exist? Is it too late to stem the tide of environmental damage caused by tourism?

Mexico, to its credit, has fully embraced these issues, and times and attitudes, it seems, are changing. The last decade has witnessed a growing awareness of the need to protect the world we live in and has forced people – both the tourists themselves and those in the industry – to re-evaluate their priorities when it comes to travel.

Yes, says Mexico, tourism can and must continue to develop – it is after all an important cornerstone in many of the world's economies – but it must do so in a more responsible way. While the Tourism Secretariat announced at the end of 2008 that it would double its budget for nature-based travel and ecotourism, committing 500 million pesos to the sector, numerous organisations have also come together to tackle Mexico's environmental issues and deliver a range of sustainable tourism initiatives. Strict regulations are now in place for all tourist developments and the results are impressive.

Take **Mayakoba**, for example, a luxury development of residences and world class hotels and resorts on a pristine stretch of coastline south of Cancún on the Riviera Maya. Several years back a group of biologists were sent to live in the area to identify its characteristics and vulnerabilities. Areas were earmarked where it would be safest to build and schemes established to protect and nurture the mangrove swamps and the barrier reef. Unlike Cancún where most of the mangrove was destroyed by the building of high rise hotels causing both the reef to die and the shore to erode, Mayakoba is a huge eco-haven success story. Ancient forest management techniques have been employed in the jungle while beaches, golf courses and mangrove swamps have been linked by a complex aquamarine chain of lagoons and canals using natural subterranean water. Flora and fauna is flourishing and tourists are happy too. **The Fairmont** has 401 rooms and suites with an 18-hole championship golf course, **The Rosewood** has 128

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suites and the Asian-style **Banyan Tree** has 132 pool villas – all at the height of luxury. In 2010, **The Viceroy** – a combination of resort and residences – is due to open, too.

Not far from here, one of Mexico's most exciting projects is due to open later this year. **Nizuc** (pictured) will be perhaps the most sought-after address on the Riviera Maya with its collection of private residences plus an exquisite hotel and resort. Adrian Zecha, the brain and the talent behind Amanresorts, is crucially involved in the design of Nizuc where a care and concern for local ecology has played a huge part in the site's development. In fact a 22-acre ecological reserve sits alongside the property.

There was a time when terms such as 'eco' and 'conservation', were considered unappealing but, as attitudes change and environmental awareness takes hold, adventure-style, nature tourism is becoming increasingly fashionable. Just as efforts are being directed to preserve the culture and native identity of Mexico's indigenous people, so too are tourists searching for 'real' experiences, to explore and appreciate the country from the inside. **Hotelito Desconocido**, on the Pacific coast south of Puerto Vallarta and the **Explorean Kohunlich** on the southern Riviera Maya share a similar interpretation of eco luxury offering guests experiences designed to work in close contact with nature. Both are rustic retreats built in a local style with simple but delicious food and an emphasis on activity. Kayaking, walking, biking, horse riding and bird watching are some of the activities on offer.

Meanwhile, inland at **Los Pueblos Mancomunados** in the Sierra Norte – the mountain range north of Oaxaca – an interesting eco-tourism project has come to fruition where local communities are working at one with tourism. The eight remote Zapotec villages which make up Los Pueblos have, for centuries, pooled their natural resources and shared the profits. Now they have combined forces to open a network of walking and biking trails plus a series of lodgings so visitors can explore the high altitude canyons, caves, crags, waterfalls and panoramic lookouts on treks of varying lengths.

As it stands, Mexico is the number one destination for tourists to Latin America and with the progressive, mature outlook the country is showing to sustainable tourism and the protection of its fragile ecosystems, it looks set to stay that way for some years to come. **[F]**

By Pamela Goodman

Tour operators offering holidays to Mexico include: Journey Latin America (tel: 020 8747 8315; www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk); Exsus (tel: 020 7292 5060; www.exsus.com); and Cazenove + Loyd (tel: 020 7384 2332; www.cazenoveandloyd.com). For more information on the places mentioned above, visit the relevant websites: www.mayakoba.com; www.nizuc.com; www.theexplorean.com; www.hotelito.com; www.sierranorte.org. For further details about Mexico go to www.visitmexico.com.



Photograph courtesy of Nizuc