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Getting In Over Our Heads In Ancient Waters

A tour of a few of the Yucatan's cenotes -- natural sinkhole entrances to the world's longest underwater cave systems -- gives a glimpse of Mayan history.

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Swimming by a stalagmite 30 feet below the surface, Carlos shined his flashlight on a mutilated Barbie in a rubber crocodile's jaws. Given that we were in a cenote, a Mayan sacred well, this could be an ominous sign. While cenotes were a source of fresh water for the Mayans, they were also reportedly sites of ritual sacrifice. Human remains -- the old and the young -- have been found in cenotes.

Fortunately, Barbie and the croc were a whimsical marker placed by guides at the halfway point in our Dos Ojos cavern dive, the final cenote we visited on our cenote tour of the Yucatan.

Cenotes are unique to Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, one of the world's largest limestone platforms. Millions of years of ocean level changes, combined with rain and carbon dioxide, dissolved the limestone. The result? An estimated 7,000 cenotes -- natural sinkhole entrances to the world's longest underwater cave systems.

To locals and visitors alike, the cenotes are not only beautiful. They're great swimming holes too.

My husband Mark and I worked eight cenotes into the itinerary, swimming in five of them.

Some, like at Discovery Jungle Park outside Playa del Carmen, are early in their formation, meaning they are almost completely covered with a limestone ceiling, while the mature cenotes are open, exposed wells.

Cenote Dzitnup, near the colonial city of Valladolid, drips dramatically with stalactites, while Ik Kil, near the Mayan ruins of Chichén Itzá, drips instead with tree roots and idyllic waterfalls.

JUST LIKE `SURVIVOR'

We started at Discovery Jungle Park, an adventure experience worthy of Survivor contestants. We drove buggies and ATVs over a 10-mile muddy, potholed road outside Playa del Carmen. Over the next two hours, we climbed 18- to 40-foot ladders into the trees, and crossed various shaky wooden plank, cable and rope bridges, before riding a zip line back down.

Hurricane Wilma wiped out half a dozen of the park's tree-strung "challenges" but our reward for successful completion was a dip in the park's cenote. The dark climb down the 45-foot ladder yields a breathtaking sight. The cavern is wired with just enough lights to see the dramatic formations hanging from the ceiling.

The cool clear water could not have been more refreshing.

We headed next to Valladolid - a cenote gold mine. We chose this inland colonial town for its proximity to Chichén Itzá, but it's also close to several fantastic cenotes.

The most accessible was Cenote Zaci, a short walk from the town center. The partially open cenote is a stunning turquoise hue. We watched two elders swim, while University of Valladolid tourism students strung rope from the cenote's roof to a tree near the water, preparing to rappel.

While our guidebook listed a handful of cenotes, we didn't realize how prevalent they are in the Yucatan. We came across another outside the Ek Balam ruins 20 kilometers away. With excavations starting in 1997, Ek Balam is not well known compared to Chichén Itzá, and gets few tourists. From the top of the restored Acropolis we saw cisterns used by the royal families for water. The rest of the residents got water from the cenote.

That afternoon, we took a taxi to Cenotes Dzitnup and Samula, five miles out of town. With ticket booths, changing rooms, parking lots and vendors selling dresses and knickknacks, we feared the cenotes would be spoiled. Fortunately Dzitnup, the more dramatic of the two, was practically empty.

INTO THE ABYSS

We held a rope while descending the limestone steps. Virtually enclosed, the cave's huge stalactite shield reaches the water. The domed roof, 120 feet up, has a small natural skylight letting in bats and sun. We met tourists who earlier watched a local boy jump through the hole into the water -- after collecting tips.

Feeling cool, clean and relaxed, we headed across the road to Samula. While there were at least a hundred gawkers over a half hour, only a handful of us actually swam.

Samula's main feature is a group of alamo roots hanging 75 feet down from the cave's opening. The roots reach the water at a rock formation where swimmers congregate.

The next day we got to Chichén Itzá by 8 a.m., giving us two hours before the tour groups and heat piled in.

Chichén Itzá was inhabited intermittently from 800 to 1300 C.E., and is best known for its complex Mayan calendar development. Itz'ás are a Mayan tribe; in Mayan, Chichén Itzá means "Mouth of the Well of the Itz'ás."

Given the lack of lakes and above-ground rivers, the Mayans relied heavily on rain and cenotes. Chac, the principal god of water, is well represented on Mayan structures.

A few minutes walk from El Castillo, the ruins' largest pyramid, is the Sacred Cenote. We felt part of Mayan trading society, walking past vendors lining the path. Trudging through the ceremonial area each day with crates of wares on their backs, the vendors sell tablecloths, statues, bowls and jewelry.

The Sacred Cenote is large, but less attractive than the others. Dredging and scuba diving in the 1900s uncovered bones from 50 humans, pottery, figurines, incense, and jewelry.

The common belief is that Mayans sacrificed humans, throwing them into cenotes. Some dispute this, arguing that if ritual sacrifice was common, more bodies should have been found. Others contend that Mayans wouldn't knowingly contaminate their water source. The water is now green and murky from algae, it's hard to imagine drinking from the cenote.

Cenote Ik Kil was next on our agenda. We raced to arrive before the tour buses, which reportedly come at lunchtime. While the taxi ride from Chichén Itzá was short, crowds already stood with cameras poised, and again, few swimming.

Completely open and round, Ik Kil has roots dropping 85 feet from the land surface; small waterfalls add to the tropical ambience.

The more macho among us (i.e. Mark) jumped in from a 15-foot wall. It was high enough for an adrenaline rush and body slap on entering, but the cenote is deep enough to avoid spinal injuries. I preferred to leap from the base -- a less macho 18 inches. My greatest worry was my bathing suit top.

UNDERWORLD SWIM

To Mayans, cenotes are associated with the underworld -- Chac's dwelling place. What better way to learn about the underworld than to swim in it?

With Open Water scuba certification, and a dozen dives under our weight belts, we were allowed to cavern dive, as long as we went with a certified cave diver and stayed within 150 feet of an air hole.

We chose Dos Ojos outside Tulum. By several accounts, it is the world's second best cave dive (the first being Dreamgate, a more advanced dive nearby).

At a maximum 40 feet underwater, we controlled our buoyancy, flashlights and scuba gear to avoid breaking the formations.

During the dive, we saw countless stalactites, stalagmites and thick columns. The formations' silhouettes, with emerald green sunlight coming through the water in the distance, was heavenly. The mutilated Barbie, on the other hand, reminded me that had I lived here 800 years ago, I could have been Chac's next sacrifice.

A CENOTE TOUR OF THE YUCATAN

- **Best for:** Adventurous adults and children who want to take a dip in history; less adventurous travelers who want to see these geographic oddities.
- **Getting there:** Chichén Itzá is two to three hours from both Cancun and Mérida, both of which have airports.
- **Cost of a weekend getaway:** Round-trip airfare from Miami to Cancun starts at \$270 per person; at \$350 from Fort Lauderdale. Online travel agencies offer flight-hotel-car rental packages from \$425 person, double occupancy, for three nights. Or see hotels below.
- **Getting around:** If you don't rent a car, you'll do fine with the bus system, which offers first class service. Renting a taxi can be the equivalent of hiring a car and driver, since there they have no meters. Negotiate the price before you get in. You can also use a *Colectivo*, a shared van service which goes to popular destinations.

CENOTES

Bring a towel and wear a swimsuit if you're going to any cenotes.

- **Cenote Zaci:** Calle 36 (between Calle 37 & 39), Valladolid. Open 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Cost 25 pesos, or free if eating at the restaurant. No changing facilities on site.
- **Cenote Dzitnup and Samulá:** About 7 km west of the plaza, Valladolid. A taxi to Dzitnup and Samulá costs about 80 pesos round-trip, and the driver will wait for you about an hour. The cenotes are across the street from each other. Entrance to each cenote is 25 pesos. Each has a changing room and restrooms.
- **Chichén Itzá:** (011-52-985) 851-0124. Open 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. in winter, until 6 p.m. in summer. Admission 100 pesos (\$10.00). You cannot swim in Cenote Sagrado or Xoltec Cenote.
- **Ik Kil Archaeological Park:** (011-52-985) 858-1525. Open daily 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is 50 pesos (\$4.55). Towels and life jacket rentals available. A round-trip taxi from Chichén Itzá will cost about 100 pesos with an hour visit.
- **Dos Ojos/Hidden Worlds:** (011-52-984) 877-8535; www.hiddenworlds.com. Diving and snorkeling packages available. Just north of Tulum. Free pick up at Tulum hotels.

Most dive shops in Playa del Carmen and Tulum offer cenote dives and snorkeling tours, and some have tours to Dos Ojos, using a separate entrance.

WHERE TO STAY

- **Maria de la Luz: Calle** 42, No 193, Valladolid; (011-52-985) 856-1181; www.mariadelaluzhotel.com. Low on ambience, but the rooms are clean, and the price is fine. The friendly staff speaks little English. Rooms from \$40.

- **El Hotel Meson del Marques:** Calle 39, No. 203, Valladolid; (011-52-985) 856-2073; www.mesondelmarques.com. This colonial architectural style hotel is lovely. Rooms from \$53, breakfast included.

- **Cabanas Copal:** Located on Tulum Road, half a kilometer south of the fork, Tulum; 877-532-6737; www.cabanas-copal.com. With no electricity in the individual beach cabanas, this eco-resort is a great place to stay if you like a rustic but beautiful candlelit setting. Cabanas from \$30.

WHERE TO EAT

- **Cenote Zaci:** Calle 36 (between Calle 37 & 39), Valladolid, overlooking the Valladolid cenote. Decent food; the chicken, Mexican style was delicious, as were the complimentary starters. Entrees \$4-\$6; meals include free admission to the cenote.

- **Meson del Marques:** Calle 39, No. 203, Valladolid. www.mesondelmarques.com. The hotel restaurant serves good food in a beautiful setting, around a scenic courtyard with fountain. Entrees \$6-\$12.

- **Zamas/Que Fresco!** Located on Tulum Road, one kilometer south of the fork, Tulum. 415-387-9806, www.zamas.com. This restaurant on the beach offers live music and delicious fish and drinks. Entrees \$7-\$13.

INFORMATION

- Cancun Convention and Visitor Bureau, www.gocancun.com; 800-GO-CANCUN.

- Mexico Tourism Board, www.visitmexico.com; 800-44-MEXICO.