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## Cancun/Riviera Maya Resort Report August 2008

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I had the opportunity in August 2008 to visit Cancun/Riviera Maya with a group of Travel Agents. Just as with every trip, this was a huge learning opportunity; I was able to see first hand many of the amazing resorts in this beautiful area of Mexico.

The weather was perfect for our 3 night visit – hot! Mexico does have a rainy season and my last visit to Mexico it was rainy, so I was grateful for the sunshine!

Here is the number one lesson that I want to share with you – You Get What You Pay For!

There are bargains to be found in Mexico but there are also beautiful resorts that offer gourmet food, amazing pools and beaches and fabulous amenities. In these cases it is worth spending a little more and really enjoy your vacation on the Caribbean side of Mexico.

### **Our Arrival:**

Be prepared to go through immigration and spend time standing in line. Every visit out of the country you will be required to pass through immigration upon entry into the country you are visiting and again on your return to the U.S. Unfortunately on this day the immigration line was very long and we spent close to 2 hours standing in line to turn in our immigration form and have our passports stamped. This length of wait is not the norm, but you never know how long this process will take, so take this into consideration when planning your trip.

**I highly recommend booking a package that includes transfers when you are arriving at the Cancun airport.** After you have collected your bags, you must walk through a gauntlet of salesmen and women who are ready to take you and your money on a side trip (most want you to take a time-share tour)! If you have a pre-arranged transfer you can walk past these high pressure sales people and your pre-paid transfer provider is right outside the doors to the airport –easily recognizable.

This trip was one of exploration and learning about resorts in Cancun and Riviera Maya – not relaxing or participating in any type of excursion or activities. My review will include information about the 15 resorts we visited (yes! 15 resorts in 3 days). I will highlight and compare important features of each resort, then share some of my impressions.

### **Our Home Away From Home:**

We were most fortunate to be able to spend our 3 nights at the **Royal Hideaway Playacar.**

The Royal Hideaway Playacar is one of the Leading Hotels of the World and a winner of AAA Five Diamond Award.

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** 13 year-old minimum age requirement

**Number of Restaurants:** 5 a la carte restaurants and 1 buffet

**Number of Pools:** Oversized cascading infinity pool and several relaxation pools

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 45 minutes south of Cancun Airport

This is an upscale boutique resort which I would recommend for couples, especially honeymooners. Even though the minimum age is 13, I wouldn't recommend it for teenagers. The atmosphere is certainly upscale and quiet and appeals mainly to couples wanting to be together in a romantic setting.

There were many special touches that were very impressive. Upon entering our room we discovered a bath with bubbles and rose petals had been drawn! Many in our group did indulge, very relaxing. I was surprised to see our names in gold letter embossed on the first square of the bath tissue. It certainly would impress a couple more than 2 female travel agents meeting for the first time (ha ha), but new guests will feel warmly welcomed.

On our first evening we were treated to an amazing gourmet dinner in Las Ventanas, the signature restaurant. We began in the piano bar with delicious appetizers and drinks. The dinner to follow was a 6-course dinner with white, red and dessert wines to match the Tasting Menu – absolutely delicious!

Each room offers a private villa concierge. Upon check-in you make your dinner reservations in advance with your personal concierge for your entire stay. If you prefer quiet, gourmet meals consider this resort. It is definitely not the standard buffet-type resort found at other all-inclusive resorts in Mexico.

There is a business center and wireless high-speed Internet access is available throughout the property. In addition to the beautiful swimming pool there are many recreational activities that include water sports, fitness center, biking, tennis courts, cooking classes, and live entertainment. The night before we checked out of the resort we spent time enjoying '70s night at the bar with live music and dancing.

Our room was large and comfortable. There are double sinks in the large bath area with separate tub and shower, plenty of closet space and a pillow menu!

We truly enjoyed our 3 nights at the Royal Hideaway Playacar, an Occidental Resort.

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**The other Cancun/Riviera Maya resorts in my trip review we visited for a site evaluation and/or a meal.**

### **Occidental Grand Xcaret**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** none

**Number of Restaurants:** 11 total – specialty; a la carte and buffet restaurants

**Number of Pools:** 5 swimming pools; 10 Jacuzzis

**Kids Club:** Yes from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm for ages 4- 12 years old

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 60 minutes from Cancun Airport

The Occidental Grand Xcaret is a family-friendly all-inclusive resort. The location of the resort is adjacent to the eco-archeological Xcaret Park. Guests of the resort receive one day pass per visit to Xcaret. In keeping with the natural wonders of Xcaret, the Occidental was built to emphasize and promote the nature of the area, including wildlife, and the local customs. There are many types of animals, fish and birds that make their home around the resorts massive grounds. Also, the local Mayans welcome the night each evening in their canoes with torches and a celebration to entertain guests.

The resort is divided up into sections including 4 separate lodging areas that include Deluxe Rooms; Junior Suites and the Club Royal rooms. It is very large, so be prepared to do a lot of exploring. We heard from our guide that often people come and enjoy the amenities near their rooms and don't even get to all of the areas and attractions of this massive resort. There is a shuttle that will transport you to various parts of the resort.

The first thing I noticed as we made our way around the grounds is the large free-form pools and winding river channels. There is no shortage of beach chairs around the pool. If you have stayed at a resort where you had to get up early to go down to the pool and place your towel and book on a chair to reserve it for the day, this is not the place. There are many pool chairs around the pool. The pool is not the only spectacular feature. Once you make your way through the resort you find a private beach/inlet that is very family friendly. Because it is set back from the ocean, with natural and artificial wave breaks in place, it is a good location for swimming and snorkeling.

We were fortunate to have breakfast in the buffet restaurant overlooking this spectacular beach area. There are beach chairs, palapa/thatch umbrellas and bed cabanas for guests to use for sunning and such.

There are almost too many activities at the resort to mention—something for everyone including: tennis courts; paddleball courts; archery court; mini golf; shuffle board; gym and spa; live entertainment and an evening disco for adults only.

There are 45 rooms set off in the Royal Club section of the resort. If you want to pamper yourself, upgrade to the Royal Club for spectacular special treatment. The Royal Club area is on the property but only guests staying at the Royal Club section are admitted to the area. Room Service, Internet access, private pool and dining room are just some of the upgrades included in the Royal Club level.

If you are not intimidated by the size of this resort, I would highly recommend it for families.

Our next stop on the day after our arrival is the Barcelo Maya Palace.

## **Barcelo Maya Palace**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** none

**Number of Restaurants:** 6 total – 2 buffet restaurants, 3 specialty restaurants, 1 Grill

**Number of Pools:** 3 swimming pools, including 1 adults only

**Kids Club:** Yes for ages 4- 12 years old and separate program for teens 13-17 years old

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 60 minutes from Cancun Airport

Barcelo Maya Palace is the premier hotel among the Barcelo Maya Beach Resort complex. In the complex there are a total of 5 hotels:

Barcelo Maya Beach/Barcelo Maya Caribe Beach – these two are the most economical

Barcelo Maya Colonial Beach/Barcelo Maya Tropical Beach – these two are the mid-level resorts

Barcelo Maya Palace is the nicest of the 5 with the most amenities included.

I will say right up front: the Beach along all 5 of the Barcelo offerings is one of the best in the Riviera Maya. If one of the most important factors in choosing your Mexico destination is the beach, you will not be disappointed in the beach at the Barcelo. All five of the Barcelo Hotels in the Complex are lined up and easily accessible to guests staying at any of the sister resorts. Be aware though that when you stay at the Barcelo Maya Palace, you have access to all aspects of the other 4 resorts. The same is not true from the other end up.

When staying at the Maya Beach or the Maya Caribe these two resorts share amenities and restaurants. You can go one level up and use the beach area, pool area, beach

restaurants and bars at the Maya Colonial and Maya Tropical Beach. But you do not have access to all parts of these two resorts (including the Buffet and Specialty Restaurants) and you do not have access to the Maya Palace.

The Maya Colonial and Maya Tropical Beach are sister resorts and they share amenities, pools and restaurants, you can go to the lower resorts, but guests cannot go up a level to the Maya Palace and use their restaurants or amenities.

Another big difference between the Maya Palace and the other 4 Barcelo resorts is access to the specialty restaurants. At all 5 resorts reservations are required as well as tickets. At the Maya Palace you have a ticket for every night of your stay. However, at the other 4 Barcelo resorts you have limited tickets depending upon the length of your stay:  
Maya Beach/Maya Caribe – 3 nts one ticket; 4-6 nts two tickets, 7 nts three tickets, 8-10 nts four tickets

Maya Colonial and Maya Tropical – 2 nts one ticket, 3 nts two tickets, 4-5 nts three tickets, 6 nts four tickets, 9 nts six tickets

If eating in a specialty restaurant versus a buffet is important to you, I recommend upgrading to the Maya Palace.

There is a special upgrade to Club Premium for guests who wish to receive VIP services and amenities including free internet and snacks in the Club Premium private lounge among other special privileges. Otherwise there are fees associated with internet and WiFi access.

The accommodations at Maya Palace include Junior Suites (with and without ocean view), Suites and Master Suite. The Maya Palace is the newest of the hotels in the complex, opened in December 2007. So everything in the rooms is still new and fresh.

We toured the kids club and it seems well organized. The water park for kids was large and seemed to have everything kids want in a water park. There were amenities galore! On the beach and off, including tennis, mini golf, 4-hole Pitch & Putt, basketball, fitness center, beach volleyball, darts, archery, bocce, table tennis. In the water activities include sailing, windsurfing, snorkeling, kayaking, catamaran, aquatic bikes.

I would recommend these Barcelo hotels but especially the Colonial Beach/Tropical Beach hotels. If you are looking for one step above – go for the Maya Palace, remember you get what you pay for and it seems to be worth the extra cost.

Next we visited Aventura Spa Palace for our tour plus lunch.

## **Aventura Spa Palace**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** 18 years old

**Number of Restaurants:** 7 total – 1 buffet restaurant, 6 a la carte restaurants, 2 snack bars

**Number of Pools:** 5 swimming pools

**Kids Club:** no

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 50 minutes from Cancun Airport

This resort is one of the four Palace Resorts operated properties that we would visit on this trip (plus le blanc – also under the Palace umbrella).

Have you ever thought ‘I really want a Jacuzzi; a mini bar, and a liquor dispenser in my room’? Look no further than the Palace Resorts. These features are standard in the Palace Resorts properties. How would you like tours included in the price of your all-inclusive package? Palace Resorts currently offers the Palace Passport at all its Mexico resorts! With the Palace Passport guests staying at all Palace Resorts receive unlimited tours from a special tour selection (selection unique to each Palace Resort). The Palace Passport also includes a discount voucher for golf, spa services and on-site car rental. These are just a few of the reasons why a vacation at a Palace Resorts property is a good value for the money. (Important to note that if you book your room under any type of discount program, you may not qualify for the Palace Passport promotion)

The Aventura Spa Palace is a beautiful, adults-only resort. We arrived between 1:00 and 2:00 pm and this is Welcome Time! We were greeted from our vehicle with a cool towel, a flower, a cool drink and applause from the staff! What a welcome.

An important note about this resort is that it is a beachfront resort, but it doesn’t have the traditional sand beach. The resort is located in a naturally-carved inlet. If you like to spend time in the water but were unsure of the safety of the ocean, you are protected at this resort –the swimming and kayaking are in a small inlet separated from the ocean by rocks. You can even snorkel in the inlet.

We were very please with lunch. We ate at the buffet restaurant near the pool. This buffet restaurant is covered but outdoors. There was a good variety for lunch and the home-made guacamole was fabulous.

Most of the guests seemed to be around the pools – the options include 2 outdoor freestyle pools, 1 indoor liquid sound pool with 2 jacuzzis, 1 cross current and 1 lap pool, plus 2 swim up pool bars! Something for everyone!

It is a very large resort, so you may have to do some walking to get to the activities and services that interest you. There is a louder side and quiet side. If this loud music and activities isn’t for you, just ask at check-in for a room away from the party side of the resort. You will want to take advantage of the spa. There are many amazing spa services offered, however they are not included in the all-inclusive fee. Here is a tip – if you book a spa service you can enjoy the hydrotherapy room.

After lunch and our tour of Aventura Spa Palace we moved on to the next resort – Secrets Capri.

## **Secrets Capri**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** 18 years old

**Number of Restaurants:** 5 total – 1 buffet restaurant, 4 a la carte restaurants

**Number of Pools:** 1 large swimming pool

**Kids Club:** no

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 40 minutes from Cancun Airport

This resort is a very romantic, smaller all-inclusive resort for adults (220 rooms on 3 stories). I would recommend this property for honeymooners or couples celebrating an anniversary. I definitely did not see many single adults. The feel of the resort is intimate luxury with personalized service. The hotel is beautifully decorated with fountains, flowers and marble décor. Each floor of the resort has a concierge to help meet the guest's needs and desires.

There is one large pool. We saw guests having fun with a water volleyball game or just relaxing in and by the pool. There may be an issue with having enough pool-side lounge chairs – certainly the number by umbrellas seemed to be limited. The beach is beautiful and offers several shaded palapas and hammocks. There is a romantic pool-side restaurant.

The resort offers the usual non-motorized water sports and many other daytime activities. These activities include golf, pool aerobics, yoga, guided bicycle tours, fitness classes, tennis courts/clinics, beach volleyball, bocce ball, library and billiards area and dance lessons. There is a spa where additional fees apply for spa services. Don't forget the nighttime activities such as theme parties and dinner shows, star gazing and bonfire show and casino night. As a side note, the info about the hotel says they have a free shuttle to Playa Del Carmen, but it has been cancelled, so you'll have to take a taxi if you want to go into town.

No reservations are required for the 4 a la carte restaurants. There is an exception if you want to experience the hibachi restaurant (asian cuisine), reservations are required. 24 hour room service is also available.

The rooms are spacious with various categories available. It is to your advantage to upgrade to an ocean view room. Among the amenities in the room is a daily refreshed mini-bar, CD/DVD player, bathrobes and slippers and Jacuzzi baths. There is a high speed internet data port in the rooms, however, there is a daily fee to use internet in the room. Internet is free in the business center.

If you are looking for a small, intimate all-inclusive, Secrets just may be the perfect spot for you and your romantic partner.

We made our way next on our journey to the large Iberostar Resorts complex. Iberostar operates 5 resorts in the Riviera Maya area that together include more than 2000 total hotel rooms. Each of the 5 resorts is separate but does include some shared amenities and restaurants.

Iberostar Paraiso Beach

Iberostar Paraiso del Mar

These two are the most economical and share restaurants and amenities

Iberostar Paraiso Lindo

Iberostar Paraiso Maya

These two share restaurants and amenities.

The newest is the premier Iberostar Grand Hotel Paraiso for adults only.

We toured the Iberostar Lindo. When you are staying at the Lindo or the Maya you can go to the restaurants at the Beach/del Mar resorts, but the privileges go up in quality not down, so you would not be able to use the Lindo/Maya restaurants if you stay at the Beach or del Mar.

## **Iberostar Paraiso Lindo**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** none

**Number of Restaurants:** 7 total – 4 at the Lindo and 3 at the Maya

**Number of Pools:** 5 pools – including a wave pool, lazy river, activity pool and separate child's pool

**Kids Club:** yes for ages 4- 12 years old from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 30 minutes from Cancun Airport

There are many positive things to say about the Iberostar Paraiso Lindo. This is a family-friendly resort with an amazing pool and plenty of restaurants and bars to please everyone in your family.

We were getting tired by the time we arrived at the Iberostar since this was our 5<sup>th</sup> resort of the day, but I was thrilled to be able to tour this exciting resort. The first thing that grabs your attention right away is the size of the pool! It is very large. I took plenty of pictures but still don't think my pictures can do it justice.

The one thing to keep in mind about these Iberostar Resorts is that the buildings run vertical away from the beach and there is an untouched natural area between the last building and the beach. So there really are no ocean view rooms at the 4 Iberostar Resorts (except the adults-only Iberostar Grand Hotel Paraiso, which does offer ocean view rooms).

I found the walk from the front of the resort all the way back to the beach quite a hike. If this may be an issue for you or someone in your family, I would suggest requesting one of the buildings closer to the beach. The beach is very nice. There seem to be plenty of palapa huts for shade and lounge chairs to be able to lay back and enjoy the ocean.



Reservations are required at the restaurants. If you are staying at the Lindo or Maya you can make reservations at any of the restaurants, including the ones at the Paraiso Beach and Del Mar (not the restaurants at the Grand, though). Those guests staying at the Beach and Del Mar resorts have restrictions on how many reservations they can make and what bars and snack areas they can use.

As we walked along the pool, we were very close to the pool view rooms on the first floor. I was concerned about the amount of privacy the first floor pool view rooms offer. This is something else to keep in mind when requesting a room location.

I would recommend booking the Iberostar Lindo or Maya. These beautiful and fun resorts provide what families need to have an awesome vacation.

Finally, it was time to move on to our last resort of the day – Excellence Riviera.

## **Excellence Riviera Cancun**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** 18 years

**Number of Restaurants:** 8 total

**Number of Pools:** 6 pools

**Kids Club:** no

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 20 minutes from Cancun Airport

I was very impressed by the Excellence Riviera resort. This is an adults-only resort that is another amazing choice for a couple looking for a romantic all-inclusive property. This was one of the resorts that we toured that made a great first impression by greeting us with a cool towel and a Welcome Cocktail – this is standard treatment for all guests (not just Travel Agents)!

We took our tour around the property before dinner and there was so much about this resort that I liked. I will start with the accommodations: this is an all suite resort. We were able to look at a junior suite and observe all the standard amenities, such as a private Jacuzzi in the suite, bathrobes and slippers, mini bar, bottled alcohol (4 types), Free high-speed internet data port and much more. One feature that impressed us was a service box for Room Service. If you aren't dressed to answer the door, the room-service staff leaves your order in a box that is accessible from outside and inside the room. They leave it in the box from outside your room and you open it from inside and they never have to disturb your privacy!

The grounds were beautiful and the beach is very nice. We saw tables on the beach that are used for romantic beach side dining. Not only does the resort have 6 pools but 2 of them expand throughout the property like a lazy river. This lazy river goes throughout the property and means that all ground floor rooms have direct access to the pool. So if you ever thought "I want to walk out my door and get into the pool", this is the place.

If you want that extra VIP service, book into The Excellence Club for above and beyond amenities such as private check-in and check-out service; private concierge service; access to a private lounge; upgraded room-service menu; private beach area and access to an exclusive pool and whirlpool among other things.

We ate dinner at the Mexican restaurant – delicious! Every course was a treat. There was also a mariachi band roaming from table to table and they were even taking song requests. I would definitely recommend Excellence Riviera Cancun for a romantic vacation.

Finally our first full day was done and we drove back to our resort, the Royal Hideaway, to get some rest for another full day of touring.

For our second full day in Mexico we went to the Cancun area for our tour. The above resorts, that we toured yesterday, are located in the Riviera Maya area. These two areas – Cancun versus Riviera Maya -- are very different in many ways. Honestly, my first impression of Cancun as we drove into the Cancun Hotel Zone was that it gave me a Las Vegas strip (minus the neon lights) feeling. As you drive down the main highway in Riviera Maya you do not see the resorts; the resorts in this area are located back from the highway and therefore each resort area in Riviera Maya is more secluded. Not so in Cancun. The hotels/resorts are visible from the main thoroughfare and are accessible one right after the other as you drive through the Zone. There are less trees and foliage that line the highway, like in Riviera Maya. Also the hotels are massive with high rise hotels in Cancun that I didn't see in the Riviera Maya. I love Las Vegas, so I'm not being negative, just giving you information so you know what to expect and can make an informed decision that will meet your travel needs.

Another thing to keep in mind about Cancun Hotel Zone is that the beach areas for the resorts on the north end are much better than the beaches on the east side. Many hotels have very little if any beach area.

Our first stop in Cancun for a tour and breakfast was the Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach Hotel.

## **Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach**

**All Inclusive:** No

**Minimum Age Requirement:** none

**Number of Restaurants:** 3 restaurants and a bar/snack bar

**Number of Pools:** 1 pool

**Kids Club:** yes (for children ages 4 – 12 years old)

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 20 minutes from Cancun Airport

This is a beautiful hotel in the same league as Ritz Carlton and Four Seasons type of hotels. The Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach (FAGCB) has received the Five Diamond award from AAA for 13 years. We were very impressed with the décor and there are many things about this beautiful property that would attract you and your family.

The location is amazing; first because it has one of the better beaches in Cancun; and second because it is in the heart of the Hotel Zone. Since it is not all-inclusive -- guests will want to have a variety of restaurants to choose from and there are many opportunities for dining within walking distance or a short drive. The hotel is also convenient to malls, recreation and nightlife.

We ate a wonderful breakfast buffet at Vina del Mar – very fresh with good variety. There is also 24 hour room service, if you want to enjoy your breakfast, or any meal, out on the balcony of your ocean view suite. All of the rooms are ocean front with a private terrace with amenities such as minibar, high speed Internet – minibar and Internet are fee based.

As with other hotels, you can upgrade to the Grand Club for special VIP amenities. Your room will be on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor with an amazing view and you will receive continental breakfast, afternoon snacks, evening hors d'oeuvres, open premium bar from 5 to 8 pm and late night desserts.

Although there is just one pool, it is very large with cascading waterfalls throughout and pool bars for when you want to purchase a drink. There are also many spa treatments and therapies available at the FAGCB spa.

If you want a luxury experience this hotel is a good choice both for couples and for families.

## **Riu Caribe**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** none

**Number of Restaurants:** 3 specialty restaurants and the buffet restaurant

**Number of Pools:** 2 pools

**Kids Club:** yes (for children ages 4 – 12 years old)

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 20 minutes from Cancun Airport

This is one of the resorts where my advice – ‘You get what you pay for’ is important to keep in mind. The Riu Caribe is a very nice 3 star resort. It is not as luxurious as many of the other resorts I have described. If you are looking for a fun resort that is more economical, this may be the resort for you. I will describe the benefits but also let you know some of the less appealing features.

The first thing I noticed when I walked in to the lobby is that it is not air conditioned. It is a very large lobby, with many hanging plants and greens. Beautiful but warm, not uncomfortable, though. The lobby is a busy place and you will find several tour companies with staff on site to help you plan any off-site tours or excursions you may want to book while on your vacation.

We toured the grounds of the resort and saw many exciting features. The pool is very nice. The families at the pool seemed to be enjoying the music and activities. The beach is also very nice. This resort is located on the North end of Cancun and does have a good

beach with a number of beach chairs and palapa huts. There is no pool-side service nor is there a bar on the beach. It is not a far walk from the pool or the beach to the nearest bar, but this is one convenience available at some higher rated resorts that is not available at the Riu Caribe.

There is an outdoor theatre with a bar. There is nightly entertainment including live music and Riu theme shows. We did view the sports bar that is open 24 hours and offers snacks, games and internet is available from this bar for a fee.

The building is a high rise with over 500 rooms. All of the rooms include an ocean view. In addition to the sports bar there is the buffet available for breakfast, lunch and dinner and 3 specialty restaurants. An important piece of information to keep in mind is that reservations are required for the 3 specialty restaurants and the reservations are available from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. each day. So if getting up early to stand in line to make a reservation doesn't appeal to you, keep this in mind in choosing your vacation resort.

There is a sister resort the Riu Cancun and you can share amenities and restaurants at this alternate Riu resort. Transportation from the Riu Caribe to the Riu Cancun is on your own. Although the Riu Caribe is not central to the Hotel Zone, you can catch a bus or a taxi and it is a short trip to shopping and bars and malls.

This resort is a good value for the money; just keep in mind some of the amenities that are not included in the package.

### **ME by Melia**

**All Inclusive:** No

**Minimum Age Requirement:** none

**Number of Restaurants:** 4

**Number of Pools:** 4 pools

**Kids Club:** no

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 20 minutes from Cancun Airport

This hotel is unique and the words I would use to describe it are hip and modern. This is not an all-inclusive resort. The hotel is beautiful and very appealing to a younger crowd. Even though this is not an adults-only hotel, I didn't see many, if any, children. We were only there for a brief visit, but it is not the most kid friendly hotel.

The hotel wants to appeal to your senses from the minute you arrive, with its soothing, appealing fragrance in the air to the refreshing drink and cool towel you receive upon arrival, you will start to relax immediately.

There are 2 types of views from the rooms Lagoon View and Ocean View. Lagoon view isn't bad because the rooms face the west and there are beautiful sunsets to watch from these rooms. A unique feature in the rooms is the 'rain' shower. A larger than typical shower head that gives you the sensation of showering in the rain! Again the rooms are consistent with the overall hip, young, modern theme of the hotel. There are special corner suites that include a larger balcony and Jacuzzi. To upgrade to an even higher level

of service, book a room on 'The Level'. The extra amenities include priority reservations at the Spa and restaurants, The Level lounge access, turn down service, 24 hour room service; The Level concierge service and Bali bed reservation.

The pools are beautiful and include a private pool in the spa, the infinity pool, and adults only pool and the main pool with Water Ritual. This resort has a beach but it is not very wide and even less accessible during high tide. So I wouldn't choose this hotel for the beach, but the view of the ocean from the pool and from the ocean view rooms is spectacular.

If you are not looking for an all-inclusive and want a modern hotel, check out the Me by Melia.

## **Beach Palace**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** none

**Number of Restaurants:** 4

**Number of Pools:** 3 pools

**Kids Club:** yes (for ages 4 to 12 years)

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 20 minutes from Cancun Airport

We next made a visit to two different Palace Resorts – Beach Palace and Cancun Palace. If you read my comments earlier in this report about the Aventura Spa Palace, you will remember that all of the Palace Resorts have standard amenities such as private jazzuzi, liquor dispenser and minibar in each room. Also, if you qualify for the Palace Passport Promotion some of your tours are included in the price. Another nice feature of the Palace Resorts is that you have sharing privileges. You can visit the restaurants and use the facilities of any of the other Palace Resorts as a guest of one of the resorts.

This hotel is in the middle of the Cancun Hotel Zone. It is convenient to malls and other activities in Cancun. One of many resorts that was renovated following Hurricane Wilma. It's new look is sleek and modern. It is not extremely large, with only 287 rooms. It offers a few unique amenities, one of which is a sky pool. At the top of the 12 story high rise is a nice pool and bar. The main pool is not only fun for its size but there is a large movie screen that is lowered in the evening and movies are shown on the screen pool-side. Near the pool is the kids club. The kids club is housed in a separate building. When we entered the club for our tour we saw many happy kids watching a cartoon, playing video games or just playing with toys.

An important thing to know is that there is very little beach at this resort. At low tide, there may be some beach available, but when we were visiting the waves were crashing right up to the wall of the resort. So if being on a beach is an important part of your vacation, keep this in mind. You can visit other Palace Resorts in Mexico and the Moon Palace or the Sun Palace (adults only) have good beach options.

The rooms are beautiful and your view options include the ocean or the lagoon view, which provides the scenic view in the afternoon/evening of the sunset. Wireless internet is included throughout the resort at no charge. Also, no reservations are required to eat at the restaurants. There is also a spa available for an additional fee.

As soon as we were done touring the Beach Palace we went to its sister resort, Cancun Palace, for a tour and lunch.

## **Cancun Palace**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** none

**Number of Restaurants:** 5

**Number of Pools:** 1 pool

**Kids Club:** yes (for ages 4 to 17 years)

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 15 minutes from Cancun Airport

These two Palace Resorts – Cancun Palace and Beach Palace – are not adjacent. There are about 10 resorts in between. Cancun Palace is larger, with 12 floors and 600 rooms. In addition to all of the standard amenities that you receive when booking at a Palace Resort there are many appealing features about the Cancun Palace.

Following the renovations in 2006, Cancun Palace has a décor that is modern and stylish. There is just the one large pool but there are two large Jacuzzi pools on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor that look over the pool and the ocean. The beach at Cancun Palace is larger than the beach at Beach Palace, but it is still a fairly narrow strip. On our tour around the property we looked in on the fitness center. It is large with several types of machines to give you some variety for your workout. Near the fitness center there is an outdoor theatre. It is very large and offers live entertainment on a regular basis.

I was most impressed with the kids club. It is in a separate building a short distance from the main hotel. It is large with many options for kids of all ages. These include trampoline, ping-pong table, foosball table, pool table, air hockey, X-box, movies and an area for arts and crafts. The other feature that is part of the kids club is a small water park with fountains to splash around in and slides and stairs and animal figures to climb on.

We enjoyed a nice lunch at the buffet restaurant at the Cancun Palace. At the grill there were several entrees to choose from that the chef made fresh right in front of you on the grill. I would say the buffet was good, but not the best I have visited. There are no limits as to the number of visits that you can make to the specialty restaurants. The only required reservations are for the Teppanyaki tables in the Asian restaurant.

All in all the Palace Resorts are very nice and I would recommend any of them. We have one more Palace Resort hotel to visit – the Moon Palace Golf and Spa Resort tomorrow on our last day.

## **le blanc**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** 18 years old

**Number of Restaurants:** 4

**Number of Pools:** 3 pool

**Kids Club:** No

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 20 minutes from Cancun Airport

Our schedule actually called for some free time, but as diligent travel agents, we decided to use some of our free time to see another property that was not on our original schedule.

Le blanc is a resort that is also under the Palace Resorts umbrella of properties. This property is amazing. It is an upscale all-inclusive resort that can boast that it offers service standards above most other all-inclusive properties. There is a butler concierge for each floor of the resort. They really will try to meet all of your requests. It has the double Jacuzzi in the room and the other Palace standard amenities. There is 24 hour room service, minibar and snacks in your room and wireless internet is available at the resort. The one thing to note is that the rooms have a French balcony (a wrought iron railing at the edge of a narrow balcony). The view from the ocean view rooms is spectacular.

This resort does have a nice beach (for this area of Cancun – since many resorts have less). There are 3 outdoor pools with 2 of them being infinity pools. If you have spent time in an infinity pool, you know how relaxing they are, both to enjoy as you lay around the pool and being in an infinity pool.

The other thing that makes this resort stand above other all-inclusive resorts is their gourmet cuisine. It is above and beyond the usual buffet menu.

I would recommend this resort for honeymoons and couples celebrating a special occasion (anniversary/birthday).

We were fortunate that the next resort on our schedule, invited us to spend our precious free time at the pool or spa!

## **Aqua Cancun**

**All Inclusive:** No

**Minimum Age Requirement:** none

**Number of Restaurants:** 3

**Number of Pools:** 8 pools

**Kids Club:** Yes, Children's activity program and play area

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 20 minutes from Cancun Airport

When we arrived at (Fiesta Americana) Aqua Cancun, we went straight to the spa. The spa is very large with state-of-the-art equipment and advanced therapies available. I

changed into my swimsuit and headed for the pool. There were pool attendants ready and willing to help us find beach chairs. They even moved three umbrellas to our area for shade for our large group. The pool area is beautiful and peaceful. There were children around, several playing in the pool near us, but there were not a lot of children and they weren't loud or obnoxious. When we first entered the hotel I didn't realize that it wasn't adults only because the atmosphere is very sedate and the architecture very contemporary.

We enjoyed being able to put our feet up and relax in the pool. The infinity pool is very large and awesome to stand near the edge as you look out and enjoy the cool ocean breeze. There are 8 pools throughout the hotel grounds so guests should be able to find a noise level and water temperature to meet their needs.

Some of the ladies in our group did enjoy a drink while we relaxed. It was expensive, as they told me about \$15.00 or \$16.00 for a daiquiri or a mojito. Others in our group chose to have a spa experience. Once we came back together to continue our tour the ladies who enjoyed a spa treatment raved about the experience.

Some in the group did spend time shopping. There is a large mall, La Isla, within walking distance of the Aqua.

After our free time came to an end it was time to start the tour. This hotel is all about the experience of the senses. You are greeted upon arrival with a tranquil aroma therapy, soothing music, cold mint towel and refreshing drink; a perfect start to a relaxing vacation in beautiful modern facility. The hotel was built in 2004 but renovated in 2007. The rooms are modern with high end amenities. If you want an oceanfront room there will be no terrace, and if you want a terrace the view will not be as good. So it is best to decide which is more important to you. There are aromatherapy candles in the room to maintain the relaxing atmosphere of the hotel. Internet terminals are available but there is a daily charge for internet service.

We witnessed an 'end of the day' ceremony in the lobby. We were told they have daily Mayan rituals; it was an interesting experience.

Our dinner was excellent and if this meal was any indication of the quality of the restaurants at Aqua we were all very impressed.

This is a spa hotel and even though children are accepted I think the majority of guests are couples or single adults. If you are looking for a relaxing vacation, check out Aqua, but keep in mind that it is pricey.

It has been a long day and we happily headed back to the Royal Hideaway for our last night in Mexico. We had one more resort to visit before heading to the airport.

## **Moon Palace Golf and Spa Resort**

**All Inclusive:** Yes

**Minimum Age Requirement:** none



**Number of Restaurants:** 12

**Number of Pools:** 3 pools

**Kids Club:** Yes, for ages 4 - 12

**Distance from Cancun Airport:** 15 minutes from Cancun Airport

Another Palace Resort! The Moon Palace is an excellent family resort. Of course, one of the first things that impressed me was the size. It is a very large resort. There are three areas with resort rooms – Sunrise, which is where most Americans stay, Nazuc, tends to have more Europeans and a new area open but still under construction is called Grand Moon. Our tour was mostly conducted in the Sunrise section of the resort.

The rooms have all of the standard Palace Resorts amenities, including the double Jacuzzi in the room. An extra feature for the rooms in the Sunrise section is a hammock on the balcony. Otherwise the rooms in the Nazuc and the Sunrise sections are basically the same. I have heard that the rooms in the new Grand Moon section may be slightly more upscale (I will have to go back and check them out!).

Don't be intimidated by the size. There are shuttles throughout the resort to take you around. The pools are very large and at one end of the pool is a water park area for kids with slides and fountains and other fun attractions. There were many pool chairs, so one shouldn't have to get up early to reserve a chair for the day. The beach was nice. It does get a lot of seaweed, which the staff sweeps up everyday, but that is typical for beaches in certain parts of Mexico. Again there were plenty of beach chairs and palapa huts on the beach.

We ate breakfast in the buffet restaurant in the Sunrise Lobby. The food and selection were very good. They even had a tortilla stand, with a friendly staff person making fresh tortillas with different meats and other fillings. There are many restaurants to choose from and reservations are not required.

There were so many services and activities and amenities that I may not remember everything I saw, they include:

~Tour and activity desks: for the tours included in your Palace Passport Program and tours they are not included that you can book. They even have a desk just for honeymooners.

~Fitness center near each lobby – the larger one is off the Sunrise lobby.

~Lessons – including dance lessons, salsa lessons

~mini golf

~Adults only disco and a teen disco for ages 13 – 17

~Casino with slot machines that is open from 10:00 am to 2:00 am

~medical service – these are not included in the price but it is comforting to know the services are available if needed.

We were shuttled over to the Golf Club area. It would be a long walk, so you would want to take the shuttle or be driven in a cart. This is where the 18 hole Jack Nicklaus course is located and a very large, very state-of-the-art Spa is located. There is a smaller pool and

restaurant located in this area. We toured the spa, which was lovely and I would highly recommend pampering yourself while on vacation.

There is free shuttle bus that takes you from Moon Palace to the other Palace resort in the Hotel Zone. Moon Palace is located away from the hotel zone and it is just a short trip to the shopping and nightlife that the hotel zone offers.

Moon Palace would be ideal for anyone, including families, couples, honeymooners, because it offers so much in such a beautiful setting.

It was finally time for us to leave beautiful Mexico and we headed for the Cancun airport. The airport check-in seemed fairly organized on this day and in a matter of minutes we were through security and waiting for our flight. Just a heads up about the Cancun airport there are many restaurants in the terminal, both fast food and table-service, but the prices are high. Just be prepared to save some money if you want to eat before getting on the plane.

I learned so much having seen all of these beautiful Cancun/Riviera Maya resorts in person. I would love to help you plan your next (or first trip) to Mexico. Contact me for a no-obligation price quote – [anne@familytravelgurus.com](mailto:anne@familytravelgurus.com).

Anne Larison

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