

INSIDER'S GUIDE TO SPAS



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SPA NEWS

STYLE

TREATMENTS

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7 Leading Spas of Mexico

Celebrate spa culture at one of these seven spectacular spas

BECCA HENSLEY

The Spa, One&Only Palmilla, Los Cabos

One&Only Palmilla is as glam as it gets. And no wonder—this sanctum of white stucco, beachside suites, began as a hideaway for Hollywood glitterati in the 1950s, when it grew from a seductive mansion to today's more sprawling enclave. Occupying one of Baja California's most majestic parcels of land, it hovers above indigo-blue water, its shoreline marked by chunks of lava rock that look like a handful of immense Brazil nuts cast carelessly into the sea. From my suite's plunge pool, I gaze out transfixed by the light, hammocks in my purview beckoning. With butlers that deliver sewing kits handpicked to match the wardrobe they have helped me hang in my commodious closet, the resort revels in the sort of service that can't be taught. I swoon over One&Only's signature gesture: a hand sweetly placed upon the heart, followed by a benevolent look into the eyes and an offer of assistance—whether you need help or not. Sincere and intimate, the greeting underscores the open hearts of the local populace and emphasizes One&Only Palmilla's general mission to ignite the light of humanity in each of us. That ethos only builds in the enchanted spa, set in a Garden of Eden of palm trees, where I tuck into one of the stand-alone, thatched-roof spa huts, surrounded by undulating trails and pool-dotted cubbyholes. Built on ESPA's holistic philosophy, using its products, The Spa, nevertheless, also incorporates many indigenous aspects of mysticism and local herbs into its menu. I relish the Baja Deep Tissue Pandalas Ritual, a prodigious massage, rife with gentle stretches and abundant dabbing with herb-filled, warm poultices, all amid an aura of aromatherapy. The finale? A hibiscus margarita by the sea.

Good To Know: Men can tinkle tequila while enjoying a fully loaded shave at the spa's Barber & Blade, an old-school barbershop. PALMILLA.ONEANDONLYRESORTS.COM/

Viceroy Riviera Maya, Yucatan

Arriving to Viceroy Riviera Maya, I leap from the car to rush to my jungle-ensconced suite, replete with private pool. Above me, monkeys cavort in the trees. The sea, unseen, whispers and hums its invitation. But, before I reach my room, the staff lead me to the spa, where a shaman awaits. Taking part in the resort's welcoming ritual, I stand at attention before an altar, a canopy of fronds above me like an emerald sky. The shaman has lit a pile of coba (an amber-colored resin, sacred to the Maya people) as a show of hospitality, as the ancients did before him. He mutters a prayer in the lisp-clicking sounds of his mother tongue. "A yum hunab ku evam maya ema ho," he says—which means "the peace and nature of the cosmos will be in all of us." Meant to dispel negativity and begin my vacation with clarity, the ritual works. It entitles all my senses—and roots me instantly to the destination, a crescent of beach, located an hour south of Cancun, on the home turf of the Maya people. Exemplifying how much the Viceroy cares about their surrounding culture and their guests, the shaman not only blesses arriving people—but the pets they've brought along, as well. While yoga classes, beach hammocks, and a tequila tasting provide much pleasure at this boutique-like property, I reap the highlight of my visit in the tiny, immaculate spa. There, I melt to the locally derived Hunan Kab (honey and rain) ritual, a body treatment that utilizes herbal teas and bouquets to unravel the knots.

Good to Know: The Liliputian spa is small, so book your treatments in advance. VICEROYHOTELSANDRESORTS.COM/EN/RIVIERAMAYA

The Spa, Grand Velas, Riviera Maya

I swim in a cenote amid a mangrove forest. In truth, I'm not splashing around in an authentic sacred Mayan waterhole. In fact, I paddle around in one of Grand Vela's Spa's various subterranean, hydrotherapy pools, part of a curative water circuit that makes this spa one of the best on the Yucatan Peninsula. After a pre-treatment ritual that involves frigid dips, clay masks, saunas, and scrubs, I transcend time in the last moments before my Bacal Massage beneath a large fountain that pours water over my head and shoulders. All the while, from a window I can see the pea-green forest and the rock rim of the actual cenote, located nearby. Redefining all-inclusive with opulent options all around, the 250-acre resort comprises what amounts to three separate hotels, a bevy of pools, and a glittering beach. Still, the property's attention to detail, and layout—abundant with nooks and crannies—provides a sense of intimacy ideal for recharging. Celebrating the earth, as the Maya people have done for centuries, green-centric Grand Velas also embraces a reforestation program, assiduously works to build artificial (healthy) reefs off shore, and treats water on site—among other initiatives. But, it's during my Bacal Massage, a treatment which uses Mayan corncobs to unravel muscles and other tenets of Mexican folk remedy to detoxify and impart relaxation, that I completely fall in love. I'll be back for the corncobs in the spa, as well as for the guacamole room-service midnight snack.

Good to Know: The spa has a bridal party dressing/treatment room that may stand out as Mexico's best place to put on your veil. GRANDVELAS.COM

One Spa, The Finest, Playa Mujeres

Less than half an hour from the buzz of downtown Cancun, The Finest occupies a further flung portion of the Yucatan's touristic zone. I find it beside a wildlife preserve, down a dusty road, lined with adobe houses and enlivened by children kicking cans amid a smattering of strutting roosters and a gleeful gang of mixed breed dogs. From the Caribbean Sea, a salty brine wafts invitingly through the window of my taxi with the promise of a beach I've yet undiscovered. Suddenly, like a consummate mirage, The Finest appears. It wows instantly, its bouquet of low-rise, white-as-snow architecture, bringing to mind the diaphanous nature of clouds, a symbol for that floating, amorphous state of relaxation that I seek. At first sight, I know I will find a healing otherworldiness here. Setting a mood, contemporary statues salute me like fanciful greeters. One, lipstick red, spells out the word love, as if to herald the kisses I might receive here, my beloved at my side. A dreamlike hotel, with an open lobby and myriad beachfront suites, The Finest proves that all-inclusive can be classy, upscale, eclipsing, and still an extension of the locale. With stunning beaches and abundant pools, a superior kid's club, and restaurants that make the mark, The Finest earns its name especially at its One Spa, where rejuvenation, purification, and transformation take inspiration from rescued, global, indigenous traditions. A hydra pool incorporates Roman themes, Ayurvedic treatments tempt, but I yield to Tonalli, a 100-minute ritual drawn from Aztec wisdom. Based on the concept that breath defines the key to life, this illuminating ritual uses warm herbal body wraps and obsidian stones to rebalance energy flow, re-focus breathing, and re-ignite my fading, interior light. It works—and I return to my suite brighter than the sun, which I'll soon watch as it falls into the sea at day's end, holding hands and waiting (not for too long) for those kisses yet to come.

Good To Know: The resort's first-rate fitness room offers a multitude of complimentary classes day and night, from yoga to aerobics. FINESTRESORTS.COM

Gem Spa, Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach, Cancun

No lie. Fiesta Coral Beach towers massively above one of Cancun's best crescents of sand, a spectacle in the frenetic hotel district. Sleek, spacious suites with inviting, ample balconies and staff ubiquitously polishing mirrors, elevator panels, and marble floors forge a feeling of grandeur. Throngs of tourists, mostly Mexican nationals and Europeans, hum happily at the resort's pools, in its lobby, and along its beach. Still, when I descend to the jaw-dropping Gem Spa, a 43,000-square-foot extravaganza, occupying much of the hotel's fourth floor, I reach spa nirvana. Setting the standard for spas in the Yucatan, Gem Spa, looking as good as new with marble and wood elements and a curvy, celestial-like ceiling, has been coaxing tourists from Cancun's party scene and water activities for nearly a decade. No wonder. Ingeniously envisioned and superlatively executed, Gem Spa goes beyond gimmick to draw its curative powers from the known capabilities of precious and semi-precious stones. Therapists here, chosen for their energy, emit a warm, healing vibe. Their belief in stones and their potentials, and their knowledge of global healing history, rivals that of many spas I have visited around the world. All treatments begin with a complimentary 10-stop guided, hydrotherapy circuit, which includes stations, such as a chilly ice room and a steam room that holds clay to rub all over your body. Organizing their treatments by three distinct world regions (Mayan Riviera, Baltic, and South Pacific Asia), Gem Spa offers some of the world's most effective rituals, incorporating stones into most therapies. I reach another dimension via my Seventh Wonder Luxury Massage, an 80-minute treatment which uses seven colors of quartz, aromatic oils, and candies to open energy channels and balance my chakras. And, I'd gladly check in for weeks just to experience some of the other offerings, from the Jade Experience Four Hand Massage (in Mayan lore jade is the commander of harmony), a Mayan Tiger Stone Body Treatment, or an Amber and Gold Regenerating Facial. So many gems; so little time. GEMSPACANCUN.COM

Good to Know: Fiesta Coral Beach offers guests the choice of a club floor, which provides complimentary drinks and snacks all day long. Book that for best value, especially if traveling with family.

Haramara Retreat, Sayulita, Mexico

Who needs a heated yoga room, when you can unplug beneath the Mexican sun at Haramara Retreat along the Riviera Nayarit? A noted yoga outpost before yoga was trendy, this thatched roof yoga village in the surfing-hamlet-cum-hippie-haven of Sayulita intones a 1960s vibe. Bedecked with hammocks, framing vistas of turquoise waters and verdant jungle from every viewpoint, Haramara utilizes its open air studios to ensure a soulful melding into the landscape. Ideal for honing your *drishti*, this cliff-top place of zen has been named a top ten yoga getaway by such luminaries as *Yoga Journal*. When I stand solidly in tree pose here, I lookout at the crashing, turquoise waves and breathe into their rhythm. Behind me, also worth my focused gaze, jungle terrain opens my heart. It's amazing how deeply one can journey quickly without the lure of electricity, so I am pleased that the rooms are free from such modernities. With vegetarian-based, locally derived meals, myriad hammocks for supine meditation, and stellar instructors, Haramara has customized private sessions and group classes. HARAMARARETREAT.COM

Good to Know: Packages here include yoga practice, two meals, and a daily massage.

Nizuc Resort and Spa, Cancun

I come to Nizuc to spend the night on a new yacht they've acquired for guests. Offering a four-night package that coddles visitors in oceanfront suites for three nights, then takes them out to sleep atop the sea for a fourth, Nizuc has come up with something few resorts offer. The yacht, a catamaran, holds just a handful of guests and comes complete with a chef, a captain, and other staff. Accommodating up to six, that makes it ideal for a girlfriends' ramble, and I look forward to catching up with some pals at this Mayan culture-enveloped resort, just 15 minutes from the airport and edging the MesoAmerican Barrier Reef. Aboard the boat, we'll cruise where we like, stopping to snorkel and swim, then nosh as we desire on the chef's multi-course ministrations. But, something unexpected happens when I arrive to my capacious, elegant suite, drop my suitcase, and commit to the 30,000 square-foot ESPA, the first ESPA branded spa in the Mexican Caribbean. I don't want to ever leave the spa. I revel in its sleek, open-air wooden interiors and its abundant windows that capture vistas of the sea. Its well-executed thermal experience pays homage to the healing power of water, evoking the power of the sea outdoors, while its Mayan-inspired signature therapies, such as the luscious Mayan Cacao (which uses the mood-enhancing magic of cacao, the food of the gods, for a massage and for a shirodara-like pour to the forehead) never stray far from sense of place. NIZUC.COM

Good to Know: Though ensconced amid mangroves, Nizuc lies very close to other attractions in the Riviera Maya, such as the world's first Underwater Art Museum.