

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Maya Ha, Yucatan Peninsula

A remote outpost for eco-divers

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Website address is:
<http://www.undercurrent.org>

Subscription Office:

Ben Davison
Publisher and Editor
125 East Sir Francis Drake Blvd.
No. 200
Larkspur, CA 94939
BenDavison@aol.com

Dear Fellow Diver,

Seventeen miles off Mexico's Yucatan Coast, about halfway between Cozumel and the northern reefs of Belize, lie the Chinchorro Banks, an atoll six miles by thirty. With little population and virtually no tourist development on the coast, Chinchorro has seldom been dived. So, it carries an aura of virgin reefs, wrecks and unexplored territory.

A couple of years ago Maya Ha Resort opened, with an eye toward diving Chinchorro. Reviewing Maya Ha Resort is a test of Undercurrent's objectivity. You see, it's owned by John Shobe, who as John Q. Trigger edited *Undercurrent* for several years, after founding *In Depth* (a newsletter which we folded into *Undercurrent*). Last December, when I learned he would be at home in Austin, Texas, I visited Maya Ha, making reservations under a friend's name and charging in advance on his credit card.

Maya Ha is a great place. But I lost a day because of the trots (picked up elsewhere) and two more days because both dive boats were broken down. I didn't see enough underwater to write about, but what I saw was pretty, yet ordinary. I did learn that while the diving may be virgin, the banks have been fished forever, as has nearly all of the Caribbean. Fishermen live in stilt houses near small islands. How many, I'm unsure. However, I saw nearly 150 join a colorful Christmas religious flotilla.

To get a review, one of our anonymous *Undercurrent* correspondents, who's kicked across more Caribbean reefs than he can remember, traveled to Maya Ha in late March. He filed this report.

--Ben Davison

Nestled on a 60-mile strip of undeveloped coast lies the small -- 18 duplex units -- and modern resort of Maya Ha. A four-hour drive from Cancun -- it's not yet served by air -- the very isolation attracted me. Pepe, the knowledgeable and friendly driver who picked us up at the Cancun Airport, made the journey seem like a Sunday drive. The first half was on a double-lane highway, with small towns along the way. The adventure began the last 75 miles, when the road narrowed and we were waved through the first of two military check points. Along the way we passed through a few butterflies, then hundreds, then thousands, then millions! Wow, we were in the middle of a Pipevine swallowtail butterfly migration.



We turned east through the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, where giant Jabiru storks stood tall in mangrove swamps, birds of prey dived for *tesquintles* (a bushy-tailed rodent), and a grey fox, a coati-mundi, and even a small deer scampered across the road. At the last military checkpoint, we stepped out of the car so Federales, looking for drugs and guns, could conduct an unthreatening search through our luggage. Then onward to a severely pocked sand road leading through the jungle to Maya Ha -- and its high-arched brightly colored entrance.

A vacation ... with diving

The Yucatan Peninsula is a fine destination to combine diving and touring, which is why I rented a car to drive to Maya Ha. At the Cancun Airport, I picked up a car from Avis and headed a half hour south to the seaside village of Puerto Morelos, far from the commercialism of Cancun. With plenty of accommodations and a few good restaurants, it's the perfect first-night venue (for info, go to www.visitpuertomorelos.com). One may venture another half hour south to the commercialized Playa del Carmen to grab a ferry to Cozumel or sneak a peek at the topless sun worshipers or sip a cerveza in the beachside bar which provides a distinctive Riviera aura.

After Maya Ha, we drove a few hours to Chichen Itza, the most popular of Yucatan's prolific Mayan ruins. An overnight in the beautiful Hotel Hacienda Chichen Itza (\$100/night) inspires dreams of old Mexico, with its romantic courtyard and veranda restaurant. It's the perfect starting point for a guided tour (the hotel arranges a guide for \$40) of the ruins and a visit to the spectacular evening light show and ceremony.

On to Merida, a charming colonial town, where Sunday afternoons the town's center is closed to automobiles so well-dressed residents may dance to Afro-Cuban music, and the rest of us can shop at hundreds of stalls, and watch free performances by local actors and musicians. The Hotel Caribe and the Gran Hotel are excellent colonial hotels, centrally located at reasonable rates.

We dropped our car at the Merida Airport, thanks to a good round-trip fair that had us arriving in Cancun and departing from Merida (or you can return to Cancun in less than three hours). It's easy enough to drive in the Yucatan. The residents are friendly, the roads good, and one can get by easily without speaking Spanish. All in all, a perfect setting for a ten-day trip -- half diving, half touring.

— Ben Davison

Inside, a spectacular white stucco four-story Mayan-style pyramid housed the restaurant and bar. The Mayan theme didn't carry to the beachfront cabanas, which were identical comfortable duplexes with porches facing the ocean. (The ocean view was blocked by thriving sea grape trees -- they'll save the beach come hurricane season.) My spotless and comfortable unit contained -- as they all do -- two firm double beds, a private bath with a roomy tiled shower, plenty of shelf space, and potable tap water, thanks to a reverse-osmosis purified water system. Outside our window several chachalacas (kinda like a Mayan wild turkey that makes sounds like its name) inhabited a tropical berry tree, which brilliant mango orioles occasionally visited. Once, even a toucan appeared. So, I had a great land-based nature tour. But, would nature underwater measure up?

Getting to Chinchorro Banks is no slam dunk. In the winter, winds can make the crossing impossible. [Note from Ben: When I visited in December, some guests had missed several days of diving.] They make it about 75 percent of the time, but some days the wind kicks up schmutz from the reef, reducing visibility. When

they can't make the crossing, they dive reefs off the hotel. Since I dove Chinchorro daily, I can only report what two Wyoming divers who dived the coast said: The visibility was better than Chinchorro and they saw more fish. They even swam with some dolphins while diving.

My Chinchorro dives varied from shallow ho-hum, low-visibility, "when-is-this-dive-going-to-end?" kinds of dives, to some gin-clear drifts on a pristine coral reef accompanied by schools of iridescent blue tangs, adult midnight parrots (the largest almost three feet with a bumphead silhouette) and turtles. A couple I'd rank among my best of the Caribbean. One day the boat had engine trouble, so we did an exploratory dive where we were. I was enjoying the swim, when suddenly Adolpho, our guide, furiously flapped his arms. I looked out to see a beautiful ray winging along. Then, 18 more came gliding by. As I hovered in awe, the lead ray slowly turned and swam toward me. He seemed to look me over, then banked like a hang glider to lead his squadron again. Soon, the cruisers made an encore and I felt like a teenager in love. If you want to try your luck here, ask for "Bad Engine Oil Reef," the name Adolpho christened it with.



I had one lousy dive. We wanted to see a wreck so Adolpho set out to show us the tip of a large old copper ship. We swam against a strong current, some divers pulling themselves along the 60-foot sandy bottom with their dive knives. Once at the site, I thought, "What, this? For a couple strips of metal debris?" We continued

against an even stronger current to a coral head. As we started back, the current had changed and I was swimming back into it. I even saw a small water-spout spinning in the sand. When we surfaced, Adolpho "jokingly" told us that we passed the test. Having sucked my tank to the bone, it occurred to me that I hadn't come here to pass tests.

DACOR survives - and offers big bucks off a Viper regulator until August 31

Undercurrent has received reports from divers who recently sought dealer service on DACOR regulators, only to be told it would soon be impossible to get service or replacement parts for models made before 1998 (when European-based mega-sporting goods group Head Tyrolia Mares (HTM) bought it out). Don't you believe it.

Mares America, a division of HTM, has been restructuring DACOR and has introduced the Viper series of regulators. Meanwhile, arrangements for the sourcing and acquisition of replacement parts and service kits for older regulators took a back seat, resulting in waits for repair as long as four months. However, Rob Cairns, VP of Sales and Marketing, told *Undercurrent* that DACOR will honor its responsibility to back up earlier models. He denied plans to discontinue service parts in the future, although he did say that eventually these would no longer be available.

To popularize the Viper line, authorized dealers are offering substantial trade-in value for older DACOR models tendered toward the purchase of a new Viper. And, you don't need to own an old DACOR regulator to take advantage of the offer. Turn in any old regulator — including an octopus — to a DACOR/Mares dealer and get a Viper for up to \$195 off the list price. The deal expires August 31. Details at http://www.divedacor.com/index_tradeup.html.

Typically, however, I dropped to 60 feet where the mini-wall started, drifted along at 60 to 90 feet for about 40 minutes, then eventually surfaced and signaled the boat to come get me (once a diver got separated from the group during bad visibility and a strong current, and it took nearly an hour to retrieve him). Visibility ran anywhere from 25 to 90 feet (and the water 78-80°). The mini-wall gently sloped down to about 110 feet, with cuts and overhangs. You could fit your dive gear in the large barrel sponges. Beautiful orange elephant ear sponges were bigger than real elephant ears and there was plenty of black coral, mounds of star and brain coral, and healthy deep maroon and purple sea fans. I saw pristine honeycombed plate coral and

ivory tree coral at one spot. Yellow and purple sponges were longer than my arm. And watch out for the blade fire coral. One of the three daily dives would be in 20 to 50 feet of sandy patch, with coral heads mixed with mustard hill mounds, boulder star and brain coral, and often healthy elkhorn coral and stag horn coral in deeper waters.

Fish? Sure I saw great barracuda, schools of southern sennets, giant puffer fish, morays, stingrays, nurse sharks, angels, spotted drums and plenty of others. But, just like the rest of the Caribbean -- and before long, the rest of the world -- fish that have market value, conch included, are farmed and loaded on the boats from the mainland that periodically come to collect them. It's not a very fishy place. But, there were millions of thimble jellies. Their sting was mild, but when surfacing through a swarm, they can ruin your afternoon. One diver without a wetsuit, was stung repeatedly and was not a happy camper.

Between dives one day, we visited a small key where eleven small wooden stilt houses harbor local fisherman. We piled into one shanty for a prearranged lunch of barracuda and tacos, pickled onions and peppers. A saltwater crocodile popped his head up when he heard the ruckus, then swam over for scraps. (Watcho, the schmoozer diveguide told me that thousands of salt water crocodiles once roamed these waters, but have succumbed to "fishermen," who shoot them for meat and skins.)

Don Higbie, who spent several years at Cayos Cochinos in Honduras, runs the dive operation. The crew of local dive masters served us well. They don't volunteer to help with gear, but just ask if you want help. The 48-foot Pro 48 jet drive *Kai-Ha* (the other boat is a Pro 42 jet drive) is a beautiful 1320 hp twin-engine equipped with GPS. It can hold 60 tanks comfortably for 20 divers. The boat is equipped with a sun deck, shade area, camera table, rinse



Thumbs Down:

Does an owner have a right to pull rank and downgrade guests at whim?

We think not, so when reader Deborah Harkleroad, (Collierville, Tenn.) told us about her experience, we decided to put all resort and live-aboard owners on notice: If you're not going to keep a deal, don't expect to get away with it.

After visiting Turneffe Island Lodge in April, she wrote, "The lodge is under new ownership. Although we had a confirmed reservation for a new cabana, we were kicked out of that room because the owner and his family were coming! This happened to two other couples as well. It didn't matter to him that we had a confirmed reservation - he wanted what he wanted! We were pleased with the accommodations they gave us and had a wonderful time and will definitely go back."

While Deborah is more tolerant than we would have been, the owners of Turneffe Lodge and every other place that commandeers quarters from guests get our Thumbs Down Award.

P.S. to the owner: And if Deborah is to go back, don't you think it ought to be at a very reduced (or even complimentary) rate?

Just as maddening are owners who insist that no matter how lousy the accommodations, the customer is always wrong. We've written that certain rooms at the Sitting Pretty Hotel on Grand Turk are run down and unliveable, enough to spoil anyone's vacation. Now that it has been renamed the Osprey Beach Hotel doesn't mean there's been a reincarnation. Says Brian Snell, there with his wife, Gayla, in April, "What a disappointment. When the taxi stopped in front of this hovel in desperate need of repair, I thought this is not good. As I trudged up the stairs to the room, the overpowering smell of mold and mildew flooded my nostrils, but I thought it has got to get better.

We opened the door to the room, and the first thing I saw was a painted sub-floor. I couldn't believe they would rent out an unfinished room. As my wife and I were unpacking, the sweat ran faster down our faces, and as the air conditioner was not getting any colder, I decided I'd be damned if I was going to pay this much money for a piece of crap room in a dump little hotel. So we called downstairs and the next room we were led to was better. No bad smell, tile on the floor, and the air conditioner worked.

After the third day of morning dives, the owner informed us that we had to get out of that room because it was booked by other divers coming in the next day. I asked her where we were going to be moved, and she told us back into our original room. I then asked her if someone fixed the air conditioner, and she told me rather curtly, that it was new and worked fine. I told her I didn't want that room, I wanted a room with tile on the floor, and she said, 'you paid for a standard room, the room you are staying in now is a deluxe room.' She then informed me that our original hell hole was an upgraded room. So I used Texas tact and told her 'if your upgraded room is a painted sub-floor with bad smells and no air conditioning, I'd hate to see your standard room.' She then invited me to leave her hotel."

Another hotel, another owner, another story, but the same old Thumbs Down Award!

Maya Ha Resort

Diving for Experienced	★★★1/2
Diving for Beginners	★★★1/2
Accommodations	★★★★1/2
Food	★★★★1/2
Beach Snorkeling	★★★1/2
Activities	★★★★
Money's Worth for Gorilla Divers	★★★
Money's Worth for Eco Divers	★★★★1/2

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
(Caribbean scale)

tank and a working head. On a good day, the closest part of the reef is an hour, but in rough seas more distant points can take up to two-and-a-half hours of real rock 'n' roll.

The boat lunch included Dagwood sandwiches, potato salad, hot peppers, ice-cold mangoes, lots of cookies, and cold juice or water. During dive intervals there was plenty of time for snorkeling, where in the shallows I saw frisbee-sized starfish, barracuda, stingrays and psychedelic reef fish. (The guides engaged in a little spearfishing.) After a third dive, we headed back to the hotel and arrived around 4:30 p.m. [Note from Ben: In the

winter they may rush the third dive or cut it short so that the boat can get back before the early sunset.]

After sunset, divers gathered in the upstairs bar and pool table room over a cold cerveza or a fresh and potent margarita made by Daniel, the chef, bartender and resident shaman. Unlike most dive resort bars, this isn't a particularly appealing room, with barren white walls, small windows, and no deck off the bar. But the air conditioning is welcome. When dinner is announced, guests amble downstairs, usually joining others at one big table. Daniel and his kitchen staff prepared delicious meals with a different native flair nightly. He uses whatever is fresh to invent dishes from the ingredients at hand. The meal started with either a fresh salad with homemade dressing or a delicious soup, usually a light cream of veggie of-the-day with exotic spices to intrigue your taste buds. The main course was fresh kingfish, sea bass, or dolphin, grilled to a moist and tender texture with a light sauce, ranging from a mango salsa to a veggie chili. Grilled local lobster was a real treat. It was topped off with superb desserts ranging from fresh flan to mango shortcake. Not your average dive resort meals, definitely a cut above. (Amazingly, the service was actually too fast. When I put my fork down there was someone from the staff asking if I was finished.) They can also satisfy special requirements, such as a delicious peanut stirfry and pasta primavera for vegetarians. The breakfasts consisted of fresh pineapple, watermelon, cantaloupe, then fantastic French toast, scrambled eggs, fresh squeezed juices, coffee or tea, or a full Mayan breakfast at the buffet.

The staff ate at adjacent tables, coming and going at will. In fact, one nice feature of Maya Ha is a genuine family feeling, with friendly kids about, different people helping everywhere, even Todd, the manager, clearing tables. Pony-tailed Daniel, whose father was from Spain, is a special guy. One night the sound of ancient drums drew us to the pyramid's observation deck, where he was saluting the jungle sunset on his congo drums. Another time he prepared a full Mayan sweat lodge ceremony, heating ceremonial rocks till they glowed red. With a pitchfork, he carried them into the sweat lodge and dropped them into the center pit. Then, he invited us in, and began the two-hour ancient sacred Mayan ceremony. Steam filled the air as the water was splashed on the hot rocks. Herbal potions splashed over our bodies and chanting and dancing prepared us for the next adventure dive. The magic continued when we finished and headed to the dining room for a late dinner. Todd came into the dining room, his face full of surprise. He had just seen two adult Jaguars run across the road, he said, and by the size of his eyes, he was spinning no shaman's tall tale.

There's even more adventure here. One day, after a 45-minute drive, we kayaked

Touched to Death

A barrel sponge more than 8 feet across, located at 60 feet at San Juan in Curacao, was once visited weekly by ten divers from Coral Cliff Diving. After 1993 however, it was pictured in dive magazines with more dive operations opening — e.g., Captain Don's — it was visited almost daily, greatly increasing its touch rate. In January 1997, a brown spot appeared on the inside. Soon, the tissue turned white, became brittle and started to disintegrate, creating a funnel-shaped hole, around which fish feed. In mid-April, a new hole more than a foot in diameter appeared. No other barrel sponges in the vicinity were afflicted. By mid-May, the sponge was dead and brittle, and fell to pieces when touched. Parrotfish, wrasse and goatfish fed on the dead tissue. A few days later the sponge was gone. Scientists concluded that frequent touching by divers apparently caused lesions facilitating infection of the sponge tissue.

Nagelkerken, I., Laboratory of Aquatic Ecology, University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands, *Reef News*, Fall 2000.
e-mail: I.Nagelkerken@sci.kun.nl.

a mile to Ibis Island, a bird sanctuary in the Bay of Chetumal. I saw thousands of birds, including frigates, pelicans, sensational roseate spoonbills, and young ibis in their nests. [Ben's note: I toured the small ruins at Kohunlich, where few tourists roam. With much of the area still covered by jungle, these nearly deserted ruins appear more mystical than larger, well-known ruins in the Yucatan. On the way back, we had an excellent lunch at Cenote Azul, then made a dive down to 150 feet in the fresh water cenote where a few small fish swam in green, murky water. Nothing special, but it gives one an opportunity to brag about being a cenote diver.]

Some people who come to dive three-a-day every day, will be disappointed in the absence of big fish, wrecks to penetrate, and walls to cruise. I think the Belize outer islands have a notch better diving. But, folks, this is the only true "divers eco-resort" in the Caribbean. Dominica has great hikes. You can split three days diving and spend three days in the jungle in Belize. But, Maya Ha sits among nature. It's a fine venue for people who want variety (see sidebar). However, I'll be damned if they're not building a cruise terminal in the middle of nowhere a few miles away and expect to transport guests to Maya Ha to dive. You've still got a while to enjoy the area. But see it soon. Remember what Joni Mitchell wrote and sang: "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot."

--Sid Hartha



Diver's Compass: The best time to dive Chinchorro is June, July, and August, when seas are flat and the waters are calm and clear. September and October can be excellent -- as long as there's not a hurricane. In the winter, it's subject to the same northers that blow into Cozumel, Belize and the rest of the Caribbean, and because of the long journey to the Banks, you may not get there for 2-3 days at a time ... You can contact the Maya Ha Resort

through Karen Farley, U.S. Office, 2206 Forest Bend, Austin, Texas 78704 or call 877-443-1600 or 512-443-2977; fax 512-443-2977. E-mail: mayaharesort@aol.com. Karen was extremely helpful -- ask if there is any availability due to cancellations and you might save a few dollars. Visit their website: www.mayaharesort.com. If you want to use a full-fledged travel agency, contact Island Dreams (800) 346-6116, 713-973-9300, www.islandream.com ... Pay the few extra bucks for the oceanfront rooms ... Good ScubaPro and Oceanic rental gear, but let them know ahead if you want to rent -- a diver's computer battery died and Don volunteered to get him one while he was in Cancun ... While the little store has souvenirs and a few drugstore items, bring everything you need ... Photographers Burt and Maurine Shimlock (*Secret Sea*) own a house on the beach nearby ... No E6 developing; 110v for recharging, available 24 hours/day ... A passport may help you through the checkpoints more easily -- they're more serious about checking your stuff, since drugs head north, not south ... The snorkeling in front of the Resort was fun; the reefs are storm damaged but there were schools of southern sennets, lots of stingrays, barracuda and angels, turtles and more.