

TRAVEL

BY MICHAEL SHULMAN

WHAT'S MAYAN IS YOURS

The Tides Spoils With Old-World Pampering in a New-World Setting

The Tides Riviera Maya is the archetypal model of how, when properly executed, an intimate 30-suite resort is able to lavish its guests with a stellar level of custom-tailored service that larger hotels can never quite achieve, no matter how plush or grand (or expensive) they might be. A mere two-hour trip from Miami will land you smack-dab in the middle of a resort that has seemingly been cut out of a swath of lush coastal rain forest. The Los Angeles-based Kor Hotel Group acquired the sprawling yet secluded property a little more than a year ago, making it the third hotel in its new Tides brand, which also includes beachfront resorts in South Beach and Zihuatanejo, Mexico.

As you are shown to one of the property's 30 secluded villas, you will quickly notice how much The Tides resembles a Mayan village, replete with towering vegetation and curving pathways, the sounds of its waterfalls and chirping birds filling the air. You are led up a path that gently curves into the front yard of your private villa, where you find the deep plunge pool and hand-crocheted hammock beckoning as you are led inside. Your air-conditioned palapa-style villa features a canopied mahogany bed with goose-down pillows, Egyptian-cotton linens and a complimentary platter of exotic fruits on the dining-room table. The bathroom boasts Molton Brown toiletries and a marble shower, and you will find a half-dozen oversized towels, comfy robes and snorkeling gear in the bedroom closet. Then you notice it—a door at the back of your bathroom, which leads to a secret alcove surrounded by a 10-foot-high wall of foliage. In the middle of it is the moon shower, an outdoor rain shower about 10 feet high that is akin to having your own private waterfall.

I was lucky enough to have stayed in one of The Tides' half-dozen Royal Villas, which are upgraded versions of the resort's 23 Luxury Villas. It included such swanky accoutrements as a 32-inch LCD television, an iPod docking station with speakers (into which I immediately plugged my Nano), a wireless



One of The Tides' Luxury Villas and its private swimming pool.



The outdoor La Marea restaurant.

The Tides resembles a Mayan village, replete with towering vegetation and curving pathways.

phone, and an aromatherapy setup (with the Maya Spa's signature Coco Copal scent). My soap concierge arrived to cut some homemade soap for me (I'm not kidding. I chose chocolate, mango and coffee. Take that, Ivory!). Later, after dinner, I returned to my villa and found flower petals and floating candles in my pool, as well as a cool arrangement of flower petals on my bed. What you're really paying for, I found, is The Tides' signature *mayordomo* (butler) service—

and it's worth every peso. These folks really put the "serve" in service. My *mayordomo*, Jorge, was a virtual Juanito-on-the-spot, and yet I never saw him when I wasn't looking for him. He was incredible. I'd have a sniffle and there was Jorge handing me a box of Kleenex as he turned down my air conditioner. When I couldn't find anything good on television, there was Jorge to adjust my satellite receiver. I'd wake up every morning to miraculously find a carafe of piping-hot coffee, some freshly sliced fruit and a basket of warm and flaky *pain au chocolat*, as well as that day's newspaper waiting for me on my private veranda, next to my pool.

And, as I was to find within the hour, Jorge was the rule, not the exception. By the time my friends and I sat for lunch that first afternoon, everyone at the resort was already addressing us by name. By dinner that evening, everyone from the busboys to the general manager (a debonair Argentine by the name of Julián Smaldoni) could tell you that I liked unsweetened iced tea with Sweet'N Low, still Ty Nant water and Clase Azul tequila. I'd bet that were I to show up tomorrow, they'd still remember. There are staff members at restaurants that I've frequented for 20 years who still don't know my name—let alone how I take my tea. It was mind-blowing.

But as I said at the beginning, this is one of the benefits of staying at such an intimate resort. The housekeeping staff, meanwhile, was so covert with the execution of all its endeavors that it might well have received instruction from Navy

SEALs (and not Robert Watson, founder/president of The Guild of Professional English Butlers, who actually *did* train the *mayordomo* team). As for GM Smaldoni, he doesn't miss anything. If he notices a guest folding down the corner on the page of her book, he'll have a bookmark delivered to her room. Express an interest in Mexican fire opals, and he'll arrange for a private viewing by a local dealer in your villa (with security, of course).

THE TIDES RIVIERA MAYA



The waters of The Tides' infinity pool are a stone's throw from warm ocean waves.

A door leads to a secret alcove surrounded by a 10-foot-high wall of foliage. In the middle of it is the moon shower.

La Marea restaurant features executive chef Cupertino Ortiz's skillful melding of the finer points of Mexican and Mayan cuisine with contemporary international flavors, resulting in a menu that is rife with personality and zest but won't intimidate those with less adventurous palates. And while the cuisine is certainly gourmet, the attire at its most formal is perhaps best described as casual-fabulous (think linen slacks and an Hermès scarf tied as a halter, or nice shorts and a golf shirt, or even a good old-fashioned caftan-and-turban combo); during the day people wear bathing suits and cover-ups.

Dining is not confined to La Marea, though. My friends and I, along with an adorable couple from Alabama we had met (who came to the resort on their honeymoon and have returned every year since—what does that tell you?), took part in the Maya Jungle Culinary Experience. Chef Ortiz took our little group into the middle of the rain forest, where a very deep pit had been dug and turned into an oven, into which he placed fresh fish wrapped in banana leaves, covering it with more fronds and leaves. The result was a mighty-fine piece of fish. He also prepared an incredible soup that I'm still kvelling over. This jungle experience is part of a larger policy at The Tides that encourages guests to dine wherever and whenever they choose—be it on the beach at sundown or by the pool at midnight.

The grounds are lovely and include a beachfront swimming pool and seven miles of manicured, palapa-filled white-sand beach, 350 feet of which is just steps



A private back garden area boasts your own outdoor rain shower.



Private beachfront dining is available at your request.

from the pool and Azul. The Maya Spa, featuring a plethora of holistic massages and treatments, boasts a menu that was overseen by a real shaman.

But what truly sets The Tides Riviera Maya apart from the rest is the overall friendliness of the entire staff. For instance, I happen to have a rather shabby sense of direction. Add the curvy pathways and the fact that the foliage is twice as high as I am and you have me trying to get to the beach and ending up at the spa. So I took to stopping whomever was walking by at that moment (and there was always someone) and asking this person for directions. Apparently, The Tides is running a courtesy boot camp, because these truly are among the most gracious and helpful people I've ever met—anywhere. And I'm not talking about someone who would stop and point me in the right direction. I'm talking about people who would stop whatever they were doing and lead me in person to the beach (or the spa or the lobby or wherever), without a single exception, from a spa attendant to the guy pushing a hand truck stacked high with cases of bottled water.

Even after I had departed, The Tides still wasn't through with me. Upon arriving home I was greeted with an e-mail from GM Smaldoni inquiring about my trip, and another from chef Ortiz with recipes for two of his dishes that I'd particularly enjoyed. Suffice it to say that I'd go back quicker than you could holler, "Adios, mi amigo!" Because when all is said and done, I cannot recall ever having a better time doing absolutely nothing. 📍