

Harpers BAZAAR Lifestyle

& CULTURE

Edited by Margaret Merten



LUXE FOR LIFE

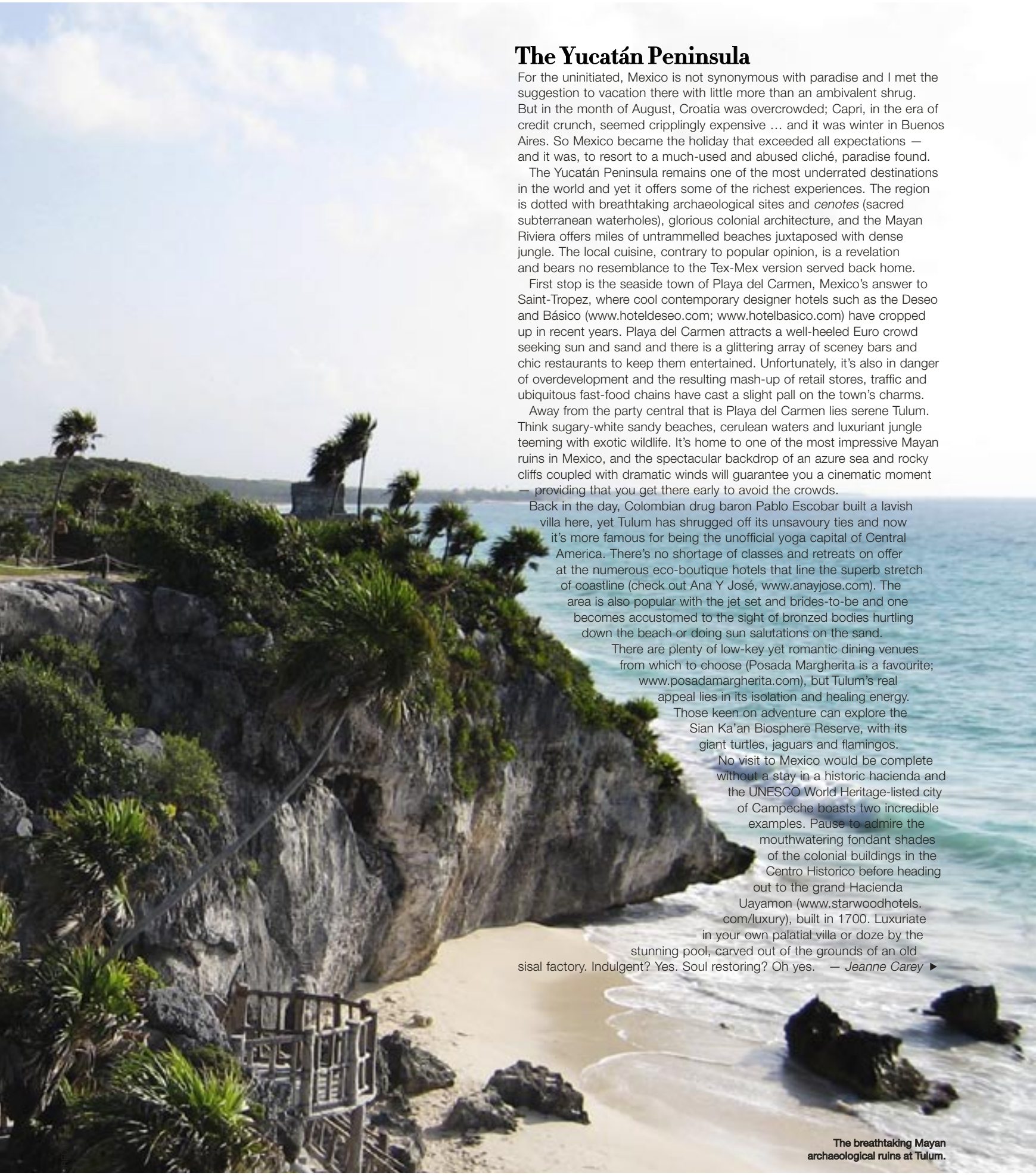
Getting ruined in Mexico; Kate Moss goes for gold; Tom Ford's style file; and the Oscar contenders to see now.

Hacienda Uayamon's pool
in Campeche, Mexico.

Once upon a time IN MEXICO

Colour, culture and a heady dose of cool.
Welcome to the new Mexico.





The Yucatán Peninsula

For the uninitiated, Mexico is not synonymous with paradise and I met the suggestion to vacation there with little more than an ambivalent shrug. But in the month of August, Croatia was overcrowded; Capri, in the era of credit crunch, seemed crippling expensive ... and it was winter in Buenos Aires. So Mexico became the holiday that exceeded all expectations — and it was, to resort to a much-used and abused cliché, paradise found.

The Yucatán Peninsula remains one of the most underrated destinations in the world and yet it offers some of the richest experiences. The region is dotted with breathtaking archaeological sites and *cenotes* (sacred subterranean waterholes), glorious colonial architecture, and the Mayan Riviera offers miles of untrammelled beaches juxtaposed with dense jungle. The local cuisine, contrary to popular opinion, is a revelation and bears no resemblance to the Tex-Mex version served back home.

First stop is the seaside town of Playa del Carmen, Mexico's answer to Saint-Tropez, where cool contemporary designer hotels such as the Deseo and Básico (www.hoteldeseo.com; www.hotelbasico.com) have cropped up in recent years. Playa del Carmen attracts a well-heeled Euro crowd seeking sun and sand and there is a glittering array of sceney bars and chic restaurants to keep them entertained. Unfortunately, it's also in danger of overdevelopment and the resulting mash-up of retail stores, traffic and ubiquitous fast-food chains have cast a slight pall on the town's charms.

Away from the party central that is Playa del Carmen lies serene Tulum. Think sugary-white sandy beaches, cerulean waters and luxuriant jungle teeming with exotic wildlife. It's home to one of the most impressive Mayan ruins in Mexico, and the spectacular backdrop of an azure sea and rocky cliffs coupled with dramatic winds will guarantee you a cinematic moment — providing that you get there early to avoid the crowds.

Back in the day, Colombian drug baron Pablo Escobar built a lavish villa here, yet Tulum has shrugged off its unsavoury ties and now it's more famous for being the unofficial yoga capital of Central America. There's no shortage of classes and retreats on offer at the numerous eco-boutique hotels that line the superb stretch of coastline (check out Ana Y José, www.anayjose.com). The area is also popular with the jet set and brides-to-be and one becomes accustomed to the sight of bronzed bodies hurtling down the beach or doing sun salutations on the sand.

There are plenty of low-key yet romantic dining venues from which to choose (Posada Margherita is a favourite; www.posadamargherita.com), but Tulum's real appeal lies in its isolation and healing energy.

Those keen on adventure can explore the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, with its giant turtles, jaguars and flamingos.

No visit to Mexico would be complete without a stay in a historic hacienda and the UNESCO World Heritage-listed city of Campeche boasts two incredible examples. Pause to admire the mouthwatering fondant shades

of the colonial buildings in the Centro Histórico before heading out to the grand Hacienda Uayamon (www.starwoodhotels.com/luxury), built in 1700. Luxuriate in your own palatial villa or doze by the stunning pool, carved out of the grounds of an old sisal factory. Indulgent? Yes. Soul restoring? Oh yes. — *Jeanne Carey* ▶

The breathtaking Mayan archaeological ruins at Tulum.

Cliff hanger: Acapulco is experiencing a renaissance.



Puebla's stunning Iglesia de San Francisco cathedral.



Acapulco

Mexico's original Riviera hangout was once the ultimate expression of the good life, and the playground of Elizabeth Taylor, Rita Hayworth and Cary Grant. But as elite travellers fled to newer resorts such as Puerto Vallarta and Cabo San Lucas, the city surrendered to overdevelopment and tawdry mass tourism, with its accompanying pollution. Like the screen queens who once flocked there, Acapulco was soon in dire need of a facelift.

Acapulco has always had great bones, however, in its crescent-shaped bay of white sandy beaches set amid the spectacular palm-fringed Sierra Madre del Sur mountains. And it's proving that it can return from the brink. While the main attraction remains the sunshine (more than 340 days per year), the fabled resort is luring back travellers with slick new restaurants, increasingly fashionable nightlife and multimillion-dollar hotels.

Acapulco's metamorphosis is most evident in the beachfront Diamante zone. Banyan Tree, the spa-centric Asian chain, is pulling out all the stops on a luxury resort here (www.banyantree.com). Nearby, The Fairmont Pierre Marques (www.fairmont.com/pierremarques), once the hideaway of billionaire John Paul Getty, has been given a restorative nip and tuck. Perhaps the biggest bellwether development will be the arrival of the hip Grupo Habita chain (www.hotelhabita.com), which is building a dramatic 44-room bolthole on Las Brisas Marques.

Until these new abodes throw open their doors, Acapulco is probably not for the irony averse. Many hotels still look more or less as they did in their 1950s heydays: kidney-shaped swimming pools; hotel towels fashioned into swans; hibiscus flowers strewn about with abandon. Such is the case with Las Brisas (www.brisas.com.mx), a cloistered A-list retreat at the southern end of Acapulco Bay. It's a stylistic mix of old Hollywood, Spanish hacienda and glassy modernism, and has hosted everyone from Elizabeth Taylor to Brad Pitt. Each of the private *casitas* (small houses) is spaced along the hillside to give seclusion and spectacular views.

The action in Acapulco happens up here, away from the polluted city beaches. While that may sound antithetical to a beach holiday, Acapulco's elegantly informal culture is one of poolside languor, high above the bay.

The same goes for Acapulco nightlife. As the sunburnt hordes bump and grind along the bustling La Costera, the Louboutined beautiful people run for the hills (as they always did), dining at chic restaurants such as Becco Al Mare, a revamped minimalist fantasy, and the clifftop Baikal, Acapulco's attempt at Manhattan-style disco dining, both with magnificent views. With dinner usually ending after midnight, it's then on to Acapulco's famous

MEXICAN STANDOUTS



Serape (traditional Mexican woven rug), \$410, from Four Winds Gallery, (02) 9328 7951.

Nickel, silver and tin milagro charms (Mexican votive body part offerings), \$15 each, from Four Winds Gallery, (02) 9328 7951.



Kahlo, by Andrea Kettenmann (Taschen), \$34.99, from Ariel Booksellers, (02) 9332 4581.

nightspots such as the insomniac Palladium and Baby O, a 31-year-old jungle-themed veteran of the scene.

While it's going to take time before Acapulco starts siphoning the jet set back from Saint-Tropez and Ibiza, the billion-dollar rebranding is continuing apace. Until then, it's an alluring mix of kitsch and cool. — Aaron Peasley

Puebla

The Mexican city of Puebla, about an hour's drive from its rowdy neighbour, Mexico City, sits in a picturesque valley between snow-capped mountains and sky-grazing volcanoes.

Puebla has occupied a key place in both the history and the cultural heart of Mexico since it was founded in 1531 by Spanish conquistadors, more recently becoming a destination for pleasure-seekers the world over.

Wandering the lovely streets and labyrinthine laneways of the historic centre, it's clear why this city was named a UNESCO World Heritage site. Puebla is home to Mexico's finest collection of Spanish colonial architecture, a staggering range of baroque churches, soaring cathedrals, Moorish domes, convents and cloisters. ▶

BAZAAR *lifestyle & culture*

Glamour girl: the new St. Regis Punta Mita Resort.



While history echoes around every corner, the city has become increasingly cosmopolitan. Alongside the well-preserved facades of historic cathedrals, you'll find chic restaurants, wine bars and design stores. Puebla's historic core is also a haven for contemporary artists who have been priced out of Mexico City's art scene. This blend of history and modernism gives Puebla its energy.

That contrast is felt in the evening, as I take a seat at the rooftop bar of La Purificadora (www.lapurificadora.com), the Ricardo Legorreta-designed hotel that is drawing Mexico City evacuees each weekend. While French hip-hop filters through the outdoor sound system and local hipsters congregate around the open fireplaces (Puebla's elevation makes it chilly in the evening), the setting sun casts a pinkish glow over the impressive 16th-century baroque church, Iglesia de San Francisco.

To connect to Puebla's colonial past, I check into Mesón Sacristía de la Compañía (www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com/mesonsacristia) — considered one of Mexico's finest boutique hotels — whose frothy rococo decor is a perfect counterpoint to La Purificadora's urbane gloss.

Hotels and bars aside, Puebla is deemed Mexico's culinary capital, and is rich in cooking schools, restaurants, cafes, street vendors and food markets. Pinning down the essence of *cocina poblana* is no easy feat; it's an intriguing mix of pre-Hispanic, Spanish, French and Asian cultures, the cornerstone of which is *mole*, a spicy sauce comprising more than 30 ingredients, including chocolate, chillies, almonds, cloves and sesame seeds.

Yet each restaurant window I pass is not advertising mole but the seasonal specialty, *chiles en nogada*. The local dish resembles the tricolour Mexican flag, with its mix of stuffed green poblano chilli peppers covered in white walnut sauce and sprinkled with red pomegranate seeds. The dish is said to have been created by nuns in 1821 to celebrate the treaty granting Mexican independence. Like Puebla itself, it's a creation that's traditional, somehow modern and totally irresistible.

— Aaron Peasley

Punta de Mita

To the side of the dusty road, a newly erected sign reading "Welcome to the Riviera Nayarit" trumpets the adopted name of the region through which we are travelling.

This stretch of Pacific coastline runs 160 kilometres or so from the town of San Blas in the north to the city of Puerto Vallarta, and has almost overnight earned cachet as Mexico's new hot spot.

Our destination is Punta de Mita, a gated wonderland of rental villas, condos and luxury hotels located on a boot-shaped peninsula, about 45 minutes from Puerto Vallarta airport. The developers have taken care to maintain a level of fabulousness, even handpicking the hotels. I'm here to experience the newest of them, The St. Regis Punta Mita Resort (www.stregis.com/puntamita), the luxury brand's Latin American debut.

STYLE FILE: MEXICO

Mexican sterling silver tribal necklace, \$1389, from The Family Jewels, (02) 9231 0009.

Tin milagros (traditional Mexican votive offerings for the home), \$295 and \$350, from Four Winds Gallery, (02) 9328 7951.

Boss Orange bag, \$1349, (03) 9474 6310.

Turquoise and amethyst necklace, \$1550, from The Family Jewels, (02) 9231 0009. Serape rug, \$1770, from Four Winds Gallery, (02) 9328 7951.



But first I have a date with Four Seasons, the first property built on the peninsula in 1999 (www.fourseasons.com). Time has not wearied her. A series of low-rise buildings are scattered over the landscaped grounds, with each villa boasting ocean views. Inducements such as private poolside cabanas and yoga sessions on a rocky bluff keep the place feeling of-the-minute.

The St. Regis is all that and more, located between the 18th holes of Punta de Mita's two world-class golf courses. The hotel makes a big first impression: the driveway is lined with fire pits, while the entranceway frames a view of cascading water terraces stretching from the lobby to the ocean. Red-roofed *casitas* are dotted along paths which wind through the subtropical landscape. The suites fuse European elegance with Latin simplicity, while bathing is an embarrassment of riches: every room has both indoor and outdoor showers and deep soaking tubs.

Perhaps most beautiful is the fine-dining restaurant, Carolina. From the white roses at the entrance to the light fixtures crafted from white mother-of-pearl, the room is a work of art.

Of course, dining in such style isn't for every day, and I find equal pleasure at casual beachfront restaurant Las Marietas — named after a trio of islands visible from the shore of Banderas Bay. On my last day I take a boat trip out to those islands, a protected wildlife haven beloved of snorkellers, thanks to waters teeming with parrotfish and clownfish.

At one point I look back to Punta de Mita, a small comma scrawled on the water, with the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range wreathed in mist in the distance. It looks exclusive, even from here.

— Emma Soley ■

DEAN WILMOT