

**XEL-HÁ  
IN MEXICO'S RIVIERA MAYA**

# Xel-Há – Fun for the whole family!

By Merrilyn McDonald

Young or not so young, senior, or not so senior, Xel-Há offers excitement, education, adventure, relaxation, and sheer fascination for absolutely everyone in the family. From grandmas and grandpas to babies and kids, this family destination about an hour-and-a-half south of Cancun satisfies all.

Some tourist arenas are simply not designed for the very young—Xel-Há is the welcome exception. Kids under one meter in height enter free; and those who measure one meter to 140 centimeters are half price—and a very entertaining playground awaits them all. Kids three to ten years of age can entertain themselves for hours, with parental supervision, of course. The children's pool is fed by a characteristic small stream, as lounge chairs relax the observing adults. A Jungle Jim to beat all Jungle Jims provides climbing bars, bridges, slides and climbing ropes, while a maze entertains and challenges the older ones.

Strollers are available to assist Mom and Dad, but for a nominal additional charge.

The park is all-inclusive, so admission covers a majority of its activities. Four to five restaurants, three bars and several snack bars interspersed around the park provide endless food and drink from the opening of Xel-Há to its close. Breakfast is even served in the Chula Vista International Buffet and the "all-inclusive" includes alcoholic drinks. La Terraza, Chula Vista, Cocina del Pueblo, Corona Grill and the added El Jardín during high season, supply a delicious gamut of cuisines from Mexico's mole and cochinita pibil to the more casual hot dog, hamburger and barbecued ribs.

Xel-Há provides life jackets for all their water activities, even life vests for babies and kids. Single and double inner tubes entertain all ages for hours as they float the river or simply putz and play in Xel-Há's expan-



sive inlet. Unique photo opportunities are available as visitors line up to hold Spike, a huge, orange iguana from Chiapas. Spike is four years old and, unlike the local iguanas, doesn't bite. All varieties of this enchanting species are currently on Mexico's endangered list. Also available for photos are colorful macaws and toucans, which either perch on your shoulder or lie upside down in your cradled arms. Either way, they provide exciting memories.

Also thrilling are the rope swing into the cooling waters of a small cenote and a 17-foot jump off a designated cliff into the inlet waters below. While you're at it, check out the ancient fossils on the limestone wall of the rope swing and the chicozapote tree to the left as you exit the water. Nature has given the tree the sculpted appearance of a gigantic iguana descending the rock wall head first. This natural phenomenon is nearly 20 feet long from the head to the tip of its tail.

Male and female bicycles are available free of charge for the energetic and adventurous; while three hammock jungles are well placed for those less so, or those just needing a nap. Guided ecological and cultural tours, snorkel gear, lockers and towels are

also provided free of charge.

A wide variety of jungle massages tempts both parents and grandparents alike—those who need or want that special pampering touch while surrounded by Nature's magnificence. Your biggest decision of the day will be whether to have the Mayan Bath (body exfoliation, mud massage and jungle bath); the Stress Cure (muscles warmed by bags of Mexican aromatic seeds); a massage with cool river stones; a deep tissue massage; a half-body massage (back, neck and shoulders); or a full-body massage to improve circulation, ease aching and tense muscles and improve flexibility. A prenatal massage is also available for both mother and child.

Extra activities include various dolphin swims, a manatee encounter, guided snorkeling tours, a Snuba adventure exploring an underwater cave, and an award-winning Sea Trek adventure with stingrays that have taken up residency near the floating bridge that spans the Xel-Há inlet. But take heart—these stingrays don't sting! It's a fascinating experience, to say the least, and was, personally, my favorite activity. There is an extra charge for these activities, however, but they're worth every peso!

Children can swim with the dolphins if they're one meter or taller or accompanied by a parent. Kids eight years and older can enjoy the manatee and stingray encounters; and Snuba is free for those four to seven years of age. Xel-Há is equipped with special Snuba equipment for the young ones to accompany a paying adult.

Last, but not least, comfortable lounge chairs and shady palapas are placed throughout the park for snoozes, naps or just soaking up the rays; and a variety of stores tempt the shopper-at-heart or those wanting souvenirs to preserve their Xel-Há memories.

Whether you are inclined towards learning about Maya culture or local Maya history via free, guided tours; seeing species preservation in action; having personal, hands-on experiences with dolphins, stingrays or manatees; enjoy observing Nature's wildlife amidst the jungles of the Yucatan; jumping off a cliff or the end of a swinging rope; bicycling, snorkeling or exploring an underwater cave; or simply relaxing on an inner tube, massage table, hammock or reclined chair, Xel-Há has enough to fill your and your family's day with fun, relaxation and adventure!

**Jazz & Stuff**

## Time to get the music going

The end-of-year holiday season is over. However, we are entering into what is the high tourist season here in the Mexican Caribbean and that means that more and more places will be offering live entertainment during the coming months. That means we will be privy to some good music at least until late April or May.

In fact, the Oasis Group of hotels has embarked on a new entertainment policy where it will be offering some internationally renowned musical stars just about every week between now and May. It starts tomorrow with the presentation of Kool and the Gang, the celebrated group that has had a number of hits, including their monster recording of "Celebration." The live musical presentations are focused on providing an opportunity for their guests to enjoy top entertainment along with their beachfront facilities. However, at least 500 tickets will be made available to the public for each of those presentations that will include a number of very well-known groups and singers. The reason we mention that the live music will continue at least until May is the fact that Gloria Gaynor of "I Will Survive" fame will be in concert at the Oasis in May.

Roots, our premier jazz club also will be presenting unique and excellent jazz combos during this period. For instance, tomorrow night it will offer Cuba Live, a group made up of talented Cuban musicians, Gianni Laredo, Oslei Gonzalez, Fidel Lopez and Carlos Sarria. This is an excellent chance to hear real Cuban-oriented Latin jazz.

Then, on Saturday night, Roots offers a repeat performance by The Acoustic Trio, piano, bass and drums. It is a group that harks back to the jazz era when many of the top performers of that genre of music involved trios made up of that same group of instruments. Just think of the names, The Errol Gardner Trio, the Oscar Peterson Trio, the Art Tatum Trio, the George Shearing Trio and the list goes on. The Acoustic Trio is well worth the trip to downtown Cancun to see and hear them.

Roots Jazz Club is located on

Andador Tulipanes, a commercial alley between Tulum Avenue and Palapas Park, roughly across from Cancun's City Hall. The cover charge for the Cuba Live presentation is \$60 Mexican pesos, roughly five-and-a-half bucks or so and the charge for The Acoustic Trio is \$80 Mexican pesos or seven-and-a-half American bucks or so.

Those of you who decide to sup at Fantino, the upscale AAA Five Diamond restaurant at the



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Ritz Carlton Cancun hotel and love standards and all manner of music might try this experiment. Send a request up to Paco Sanchez, the pianist who holds for there and dare him to play the tune. The chances are, unless it is something

like a folk song from Bulgaria, that he will be able to play it. He has a phenomenal memory for songs and if he has played the tune once, the likelihood is that he will remember it and play it for you.

Of course, Roots is not the only place in the Mexican Caribbean that offers jazz to its customers. Right downstairs at the Ritz, at the Club Grill, there is a group that plays live jazz every night. And, the Lobby Bar of the Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach Hotel in the heart of the Cancun hotel zone also offers live jazz, as it does as well at its AAA Five Diamond French restaurant, Le Basilic.

And, speaking of French restaurants, jazz and pop singer, Cynthia Davis, holds forth every Wednesday night at L'Escargot, a French restaurant in downtown Cancun that you reach by entering the street at the corner of Yaxchilan Avenue where the music store is located.

There are a number of other locations here in the Mexican Caribbean where live jazz is on the menu, either one or two nights a week, as well as places featuring music to suit all tastes. For instance, Jorge Oropeza and his group appear three nights a week in the lobby bar at the Gran Melia hotel in the Cancun h.z. and play a wide range of music, old standards, Motown favorites, Beatles songs and a number of Latino hits as well.

Take Five!



Thomas Meller has been selected to lead growing sustainable tourism initiative.

PLAYA DEL CARMEN – The Mesoamerican Reef Tourism Initiative (MARTI) is pleased to welcome Thomas Meller, an expert in environmental tourism operations, sustainable hotel management, and conservation planning, as its newly appointed director general.

Established in 2006, MARTI is a joint initiative of the Coral Reef Alliance, Amigos de Sian Ka'an, the

## Environment

# Mesoamerican Reef Tourism Initiative announces new director general

Riviera Maya Hotel Association, the Rainforest Alliance, Grupo Intersectorial, and Sustainable Travel International. MARTI works with private, public, and civil groups—throughout the Mexican Caribbean—to implement effective environmental best practices that reduce negative tourism impacts on the marine environment. In his new leadership role, Thomas is tasked with creating new opportunities to deepen the organization's engagement with marine recreation providers, cruise ships, hotels, and hotel developers throughout the region.

"In five years, MARTI has become the most important sustainable tourism initiative in the Mesoamerican Reef region," said Thomas Meller. "I am thrilled to serve as MARTI's first director gener-

al. I look forward to integrating the individual strengths and expertise of our six partners to build an even stronger initiative that will achieve our vision—transforming tourism into a force for biodiversity conservation and sustainable community development."

Thomas brings to this new role over eighteen years of experience managing and implementing environmental projects. While working with the United Nations Development Programme in Jamaica, he managed the UN's extensive environmental project portfolio, including the 2.3 million USD Typhoid Control and Prevention Program, which among other things improved wastewater treatment infrastructure in the Savanna la Mar area.

After completing his postgraduate studies in environmental manage-

ment at the University of Applied Economics in Berlin, he returned to Jamaica to put his skills to use improving environmental practices within the island's expanding hotel industry. In 2000, he relocated to the Mexican Caribbean where he provided environmental hotel management consulting services as part of USAID's Quintana Roo sustainable tourism project. During this time, he helped the first hotel in Mexico to achieve Green Globe certification, which at the time was considered the travel industry's prime international standard for sustainability.

Over the past five years, Thomas has served as MARTI's director of hotel development and operations within Amigos de Sian Ka'an, a Cancun-based nonprofit working for the conservation of the Mexican Caribbean's ecosystems. During this

time, Thomas developed MARTI's environmental best practices guidelines and concluded his assignment with the publication of the initiative's Sustainable Planning, Design, and Construction Guide for the Mexican Caribbean.

"Thomas holds an impressive depth of organizational knowledge and qualifications that make him the ideal candidate for this position," said Rick MacPherson, Conservation Programs Director of the Coral Reef Alliance, a founding partner of MARTI. "Thomas co-developed many of the tools we use in the field today to advance the initiative and has been instrumental in brokering key relationships within the tourism industry. He has his finger on the pulse of the Mesoamerican landscape and is well-positioned to take this group to the next level."



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