

Favorite Find: Puerto Morelos

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Puerto Morelos offers sophistication and charm on the Caribbean Coast

By: Maribeth Mellin

Hotels

Mexico



Visitors can stay at beachfront luxury resorts outside of the main town. // © 2014 Grand Residences

Feature image (above): Puerto Morelos' leaning lighthouse is it's most memorable landmark. // © 2014 Thinkstock

Confidence and pride are essential qualities for any town using a broken, leaning lighthouse as its most memorable landmark. Puerto Morelos fits the bill, holding onto its endearing small-town personality despite major changes north and south of the main plaza. It's been one of my favorite hideouts along Mexico's Caribbean Coast for decades, always satisfying my craving for simplicity. Cancun's airport may be just 11 miles north, but Puerto Morelos stubbornly shuns glitz and flash.

During a recent visit, I devoured ceviche and tacos made with the morning's catch at El Merkadito while watching fishermen tend to their blue and white pangas (fishing boats) on the sand. At Alma Libre, by far the best bookstore from Cancun to Tulum, I was thrilled to find rare and out of print copies of travel books amid piles of tempting mysteries. Wandering the sandy streets, I stopped at Posada Amor, one of my all-time favorite budget hotels. Though my requirements for a comfy hotel room have evolved over the decades, I always enjoy visiting the friendly family who has owned the property for decades.

My latest digs were far more elegant, yet as friendly and accommodating as the modest hostels from my backpacker days. My one-bedroom suite at the Grand Residences Riviera Cancun, located south of town, included so many amenities that I had to call the front desk to find the iron and ironing board.

"It's by the kitchen," a patient clerk said. "Behind the door."

Four doors later, I discovered a laundry room just off the full kitchen equipped with appliances beyond my limited experience. It took another day to discover the two hidden Murphy beds and multiple attempts to decipher the intricate lighting system. I had no trouble dining, however. I couldn't resist the Waygu carpaccio, crab mille-feuille, duck magret, berry trifle and breads that were to die for.

General manager Carlo Bicaci — who has launched more than 15 gourmet restaurants and led more than 20 prestigious international hotels in his 35-year career — has a passion for fine food and wine. Executive chef Yann Cozic shares his expertise and has created exceptional menus that rival any on the coast. Bicaci and the resort's owners also paid close attention to the area's fragile ecosystems, designing sophisticated recycling, water purification and energy systems that protect the environment and allow the hotel to be totally self-sufficient.

Since the road to the resort runs past protected mangrove lagoons right through Puerto Morelos, I was able to jump between old and new with ease. I sailed up the coast onboard the resort's yacht one evening, gliding past fancy vacation homes and sprawling resorts, waving to the anglers and amblers on the town pier. Minutes later, I joined the toddlers and grandparents watching jugglers and acrobats at a small circus in the plaza.

The following day, I checked out the souvenir selection in the town's shops before indulging in a hot stone massage at the resort's spa. Sleeping in a cushy bed with the sounds of the sea beat the flat mattresses and street noises of the old days, but I would have felt lost without a taste of traditional Mexico. As always, Puerto Morelos fulfilled all expectations.