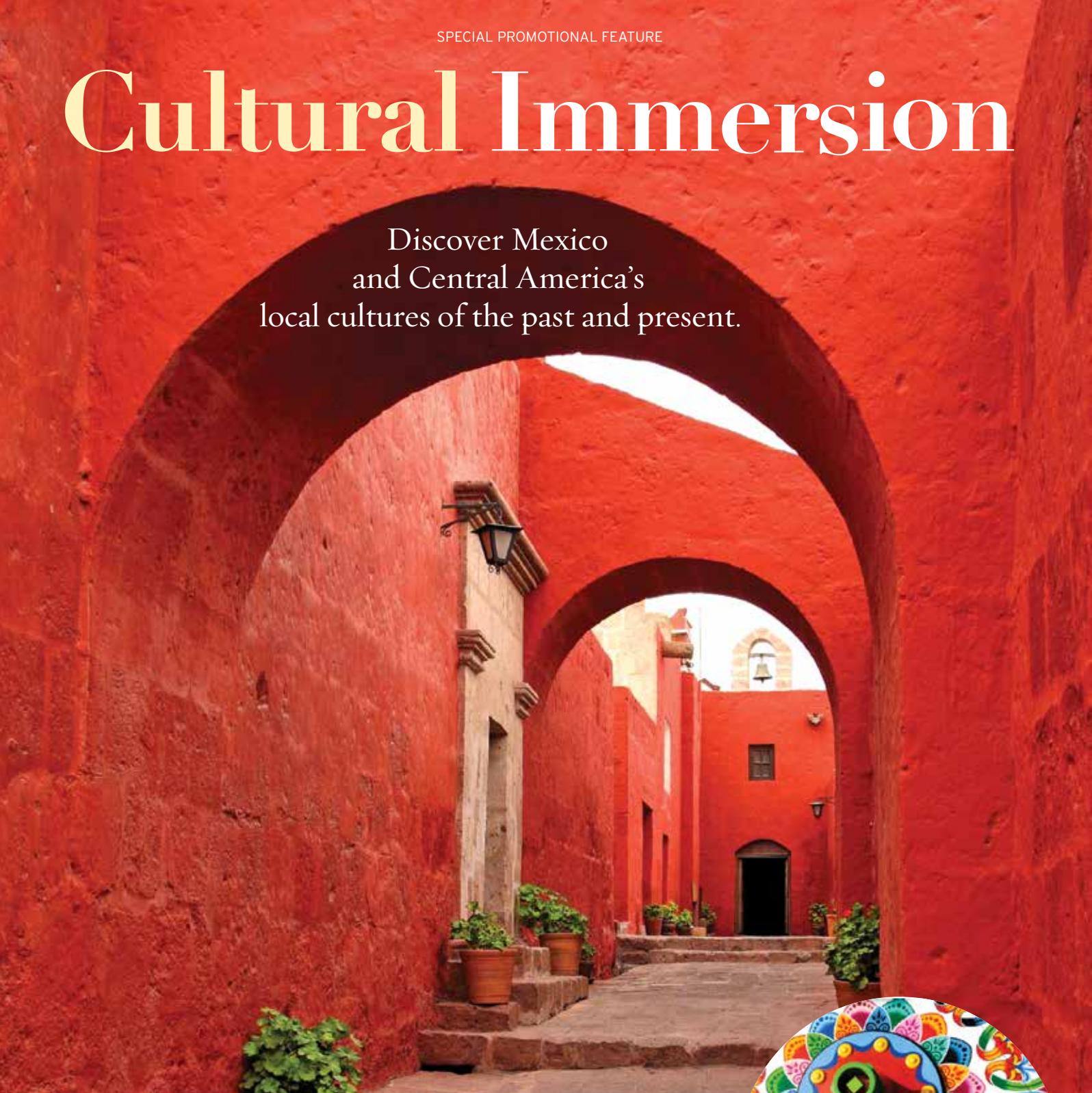


# Cultural Immersion

Discover Mexico  
and Central America's  
local cultures of the past and present.



**W**alk among the extraordinary ruins of cities that made up the fascinating ancient Maya civilization. Indulge at the spa with treatments using indigenous ingredients, such as local honey and chaya — a leafy vegetable known for its medicinal purposes, or visit a *Temazcal*, a Maya sweat lodge. Watch Maya marimba players perform on this wooden instrument that resembles a xylophone, or take in a show by the Garifuna, who are descendants of Carib, West African and Arawak peoples, as they dance and drum in traditional costumes. Delight in the dishes of your visiting region, such as the Yucatan treat of *relleno negro* with its black color created by toasted chiles, or Belizean rice and beans with stewed chicken or beef.

A trip to Mexico, Belize and Honduras can include all this on- or off-site while staying in resorts set along beautiful beaches and turquoise waters.

## MEXICO

Optional excursions offered at all-inclusive resorts in Cancun and nearby Riviera Maya can take you throughout the Yucatan Peninsula to discover the historical gems of the ancient Maya. Some 117 miles west of Cancun is the UNESCO World Heritage Site Chichen Itza, which is also one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. Highlights include the stepped pyramids of Temple of Kukulcan, also known as El Castillo, and the Temple of the Warriors.

Other fascinating Maya sights in the region include the walled fortress city of Tulum, with its own El Castillo standing almost 25 feet tall. It's approximately 80 miles south of Cancun on the edge of the Caribbean Sea. The ancient Maya city of Coba set in the tropical jungle is only a half-hour drive inland from Tulum. Not to be missed is also Xcaret, which combines archaeological sites with eco-touring and adventure.

### Mexico/Cancun

The all-inclusive [Moon Palace Golf & Spa Resort](#) on Cancun's south shore makes it easy and cost-effective to explore the cultural treasures of Cancun and surrounding areas. If you stay five nights or longer, you receive a \$1,500 resort credit, which can be used toward off-site excursions to explore Maya treasures or natural wonders of the region, including the incomparable Chichen Itza.

Moon Palace is set on 123 beachfront acres with more than 2,400 guest rooms throughout three sections. The Moon Grand section is for those seeking quiet and seclusion, while the recently renovated Sunrise section is ideal for families, offering several pools and fun activities for the kids. The Nizuc section features exclusive concierge-level service.

The resort credit can also be used to enjoy the AAA Four Diamond property's on-site amenities, including room upgrades, spa treatments and even a swim with dolphins at the resort's new Dolphinarium, which features a 37,000-square-foot saltwater aquarium. It is just one part of the recent \$55 million enhancement project, which also includes a new FlowRider Double Wave Simulator that lets kids (and adults too!) learn to surf like the pros, and a new Wired Teens Lounge and Connection Zone Kids Club. More fun, but for adults only, can be enjoyed at Noir, an upscale nightclub. Five of the resort's 14 restaurants and 11 bars and lounges also received refurbishments. 800-635-1836; [moonpalacecancun.com](#)

The all-inclusive beachfront [Oasis Sens](#) or the "Pleasure Resort" in Cancun is adults-only and lesbian- and gay-friendly. Book a room in the Oasis Sian Ka'an Club and you get a complimentary smart car for exploring the region (the rental is free, but mandatory insurance is required.) These accommodations also offer Jacuzzis or private pools and access to exclusive areas and restaurants. The resort itself is a foodie's paradise with nine restaurants, including a 20-course gourmet molecular dining experience where you'll feast on innovative dishes that surprise and reinvent Mexican cuisine. Oasis Sens boasts three pools, a blissful full-service spa, and a long list of included activities and entertainment.

New this year to Oasis Sens, in addition to



Hamanas Adventure & Dive Resort

its existing destination-wedding packages, is a complimentary LGBT wedding package (symbolic only). A dedicated wedding coordinator helps plan all inclusions, such as a decorated ceremony location and tropical flowers. Enjoy a petite wedding cake, sparkling wine toast and dinner reservations in a specialty restaurant for a maximum of 10 following the big event. Beyond the ceremony, you can get such delights as a bottle of sparkling wine and deluxe amenities en-suite on the wedding day, breakfast in bed and a 15 percent discount at Oasis Spa on select services. Celebrate again on your first anniversary with a complimentary one-night stay if you book five nights or more. 800-44-OASIS; [oasishotels.com](#)

### Mexico/Riviera Maya

Just south of Cancun, Palladium Hotels & Resorts Riviera Maya complex has five all-inclusive separate hotels that offer guests staying at any of the four family resorts the use of amenities from each. These include [Grand Palladium Colonial Resort & Spa](#), [Grand Palladium Kantenah Resort & Spa](#), [Grand Palladium White Sand Resort & Spa](#) and [Grand Palladium Riviera Resort & Spa](#). The [Royal Suites Yucatan by Palladium](#) is an adults-only resort that has its own private beach, pool, restaurant and bar, but guests here can also enjoy the amenities and restaurants at the other properties.

Boasting a top beach location, the complex is convenient to many of the cultural sights of the Yucatan Peninsula. It also has its own Crafts Plaza where local artisans sell handmade items. The complex is eco-friendly with protected sea-turtle and crocodile habitats, flamingos and orchid greenhouses. Eco-tours take you around the complex, pointing out the palm trees, jungle areas, mangroves and gardens.

The new Zentropia Palladium's Spa & Wellness is available to all guests when they want some extra pampering. Built in the style of a Maya temple, the spa has close to 20 treatment rooms, plus eco palapas located throughout the resort for outdoor massages. Most activities and entertainment are included in the hotel rate, as is dining at any of the 14 restaurants. 800-961-7661; [palladiumhotelgroup.com](#)

As part of its all-inclusive offerings, [Sandos Caracol Eco Resort & Spa](#) in Riviera Maya has created the authentic Maya "Xcalacoco Experience," designed to immerse guests in Maya culture and tradition with eco bike tours that pass the temples of the Xcalacoco archeological site, just steps from the property. Local Maya community members re-enact a progressive four-day performance of the Sacred Maya Journey, including interactive segments with the guests, dancing, music and fire integration. A Maya market includes food stands with authentic Maya food and traditional dishes from the region cooked in an open-air setting. You can also watch Maya coffee being made using the Maya liquor, Xtabentun. This is offered at night – the Xtabentun is lit on fire and poured from one container to another.

Even your pampering can be culturally significant at Sandos Caracol. Opt for a Maya spa treatment in the 16-room, full-service spa that uses indigenous ingredients, such as chaya and honey extracted from on-site Mayan honeybees. A new Temazcal, a reconstruction of the ancient Maya sweatlodge, uses different levels of heat and steam generated by volcanic rocks and medicinal Maya herbs. Sister property [Sandos Playacar Beach Resort & Spa](#) in Playa del Carmen also has a new Temazcal. Both feature new eco-clubs for kids.

Other inclusions as part of a stay at Sandos Caracol are dining at a choice of seven restaurants and an exclusive adults-only area. 866-336-4083; [sandos.com](#)

The all-inclusive [Occidental Grand Xcaret](#) – surrounded by authentic Maya ruins – is within walking distance of Xcaret Park. Book three nights or longer in an "Unlimited Xcaret Xperience" room category and you'll receive unlimited all-day access at the more than 40 exhibits and attractions at Xcaret Park, plus exclusive park and resort benefits.

As part of the package, enjoy a private eco-cultural park tour by an Xcaret expert guide, reserved area seating during the "Xcaret Mexico Spectacular" show and 10 percent off on meals and beverages in the park. You even get free delivery to your resort room if you make purchases at any Xcaret Park store. You also receive voucher



money toward select dolphin experiences, stingray encounters, snorkeling, wine tasting and time in the Temazcal. Visit Xel Ha, located 30 minutes from the property, and the resort provides vouchers for dolphin, Snuba, manatee and stingray activities, as well as discounts on tour tickets.

Your benefits continue on-property with VIP hotel check-in, complimentary mini-bar (with daily refill), and 30 percent off a 90-minute "WAYAK" Maya massage at the spa. The property offers plenty to do when you're not out exploring the cultural sites, with 11 restaurants, nine bars, a beach club, five swimming pools, nightly entertainment, tennis, mini-golf, kids club and activities, archery and a fitness room. 800-858-2258; [occidentalhotels.com](http://occidentalhotels.com)

## CENTRAL AMERICA/BELIZE

If diving or the desire to unplug is your main goal for vacation, then Belize offers numerous intimate resorts just a short flight from Belize City. You not only get to explore the waters of the magnificent barrier reef, but also experience the local culture. Day trips get you to Belize's top Maya sites, such as Altun Ha, a 25-square-mile ceremonial center that was later a trading center, located one hour north of Belize City. Another choice are the temples at Lamanai in the Orange Walk district, surrounded by jungle.

### Hopkins

An excursion at [Hamanasi Adventure & Dive Resort](#) on Belize's southern coast pairs Xunantunich, a major Maya ceremonial site offering a panoramic

view of the Cayo District, and Cahel Pech, with some 34 structures. Hamanasi is located a short flight from and drive south of Belize City and one mile from Hopkins, one of the most traditional Garifuna villages – the Garifuna language is still spoken here, and you can witness traditional drumming, dancing and singing as well. The resort's Hopkins Cultural Tour with local guides takes you through the village via bicycle, with stops that include a lesson at the Lebeha Drumming Center.

Being at the resort itself is a cultural experience. Performances each week can include Maya marimba playing and Garifuna drumming and dancing. Hamanasi's restaurant serves a wide variety of Belizean dishes, using many of the fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs from its own organic garden. Guests can stay in spacious beachfront rooms and honeymoon suites or private treehouses nestled into the resort's coastal forest.

The PADI Five Star beachfront property is a good choice if you want to combine a cultural experience with daily trips to the Southern Barrier Reef for snorkeling and diving. 877-552-3483; [hamanasi.com](http://hamanasi.com)

### Ambergris Caye

The largest of Belize's nearly 200 offshore cayes, Ambergris Caye is a 25-minute flight or 75-minute boat ride from Belize City. Only 25 miles long and a half-mile wide, Ambergris Caye is best known for running parallel to Belize's barrier reef. The main town of San Pedro has a Caribbean feel to it with restaurants, night clubs, dive stores and boutiques.

Just a stroll from San Pedro, but away from

## hamanasi

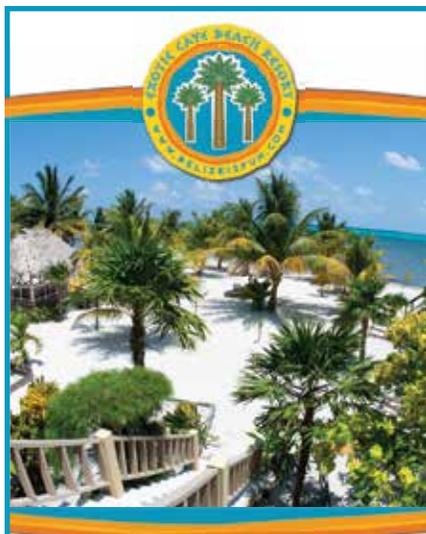
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the hustle and bustle of town, is the intimate [SunBreeze Hotel](#). Its 43 guest rooms set within a U-shaped building with a Spanish architectural design all face the Caribbean Sea. A freshwater pool and massage studio make for relaxing days, while local dives, snorkel and atoll trips can be booked through the on-site dive shop. Staff can also help set up other activities, including exploring Maya ruins. The art gallery at the hotel offers a glimpse at local works.

At the Black and White Restaurant and Cultural Center, 15 minutes from the SunBreeze Hotel, discover more on Garifuna history and culture, and then dine on a buffet of Garifuna dishes, with drumming and dancing a part of the experience as well. Another nearby choice for local cuisine is El Fagon, with home-style cooking of Belizean Creole and Mestizo food prepared in a fogon, an open-fire hearth. The atmosphere here is typical of what you would have found in a San Pedro Village kitchen 25 years ago. If staying on-site, the resort has its

*Day trips get you to Belize's top Maya sites, such as Altun Ha, a 25-square-mile ceremonial center that was later a trading center, located one hour north of Belize City.*

own restaurant, Blue Water Grill, where you can dine alfresco on seafood while enjoying breathtaking views. 011-501-226-2191; [sunbreeze.net](#)

Only a half-mile walk along the beach from San Pedro is a Maya-style beachfront property with thatch roofs and the friendly, welcoming staff at [Exotic Caye Beach Resort](#). Relaxation is key here with a freshwater swimming pool and kiddie pool, a private dock with an adventure and tour center, an open-air beach bar offering live music three times per week, a beachfront cafe, yoga studio, fitness center and tennis courts. One-, two- and three-bedroom condos feature private ocean-facing balconies, fully equipped kitchenettes, and living and dining areas.

More than a resort, the family-owned property offers a way to make Belize a more permanent part of your life and culture. It is geared toward helping people relocate, retire or invest in Belize. The property is within walking distance of Grand Baymen & Baymen Gardens, a six-acre development offering investment opportunities. 011-501-226-2870; [belizeisfun.com](#)

[Tranquility Bay Resort](#) is a private retreat for seasoned travelers seeking a bit of adventure and relaxation. It is the closest Ambergris Caye resort to the Belize Barrier Reef and the only one actually located inside Bacalar Chico National Park and Marine Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. That means you can swim or kayak to the magnificent Belize Barrier Reef, with world-class diving, snorkeling and fishing just steps from your guest room. Boat excursions are offered to Altun Ha and Lamanai.

You may feel a bit like James Bond or Indiana Jones, with great food, a comfy bed and a well-stocked bar to complement your adventures. The 12-acre setting is picture-perfect, with 11 brightly painted one- or two-bedroom cabanas on a beautiful white sandy beach, plus the overwater Tackle Box Sea Bar. The laid-back intimacy of the resort means you will truly get to know and become friends with the warm-hearted Belizean

staff. 888-THE-CAYE; [tranquilitybayresort.com](#)

Barefoot elegance is the tone of the 42-room [Victoria House](#) on Ambergris Caye, located on eight acres two miles from San Pedro Town. With white-sand beaches, it overlooks the Belize Barrier Reef and offers two pools, a private pier and dive shop, and a fine-dining restaurant. While on-site, relaxation is key, and the attentive staff wants to pamper you – whether it's a massage on the beach or a candlelit dinner for two with your feet in the sand and the stars overhead.

Stay in thatch-roof casitas, plantation-style rooms and suites, or one of six private luxury villas, including two with private pools. The resort offers an extensive list of tours including fishing, snorkeling and day excursions to various Maya ruins, such as Xunantunich, where a local guide, who is of Maya descent and a native of the nearby village San Jose Succotz, gives a fully guided tour. Complimentary bicycles are available. 800-247-5159; [victoria-house.com](#)

## CENTRAL AMERICA/HONDURAS

### Roatan, Bay Islands

The island of Roatan, some 30 miles north of Central America's mainland, is a unique blend of Caribbean and Latin cultures, with Caribe English and Spanish spoken throughout the island and the sounds of reggae intermingling with Latin rhythms. At [Barefoot Cay](#), a luxury boutique resort, experience some of the local culture by joining the property's weekly pig-roast lunch and sampling other traditional island favorites at its "Typico" dinner night. Use Barefoot Cay as your base and explore the island, which is only 35 miles long and four miles wide. The Garifuna village of Punta Gorda is about a 40-minute drive to the east, and the Yubu Cultural Center presents Garifuna dance performances.

Your time at Barefoot Cay can include taking in all the private four-acre cay has to offer. The resort's PADI Five Star dive center can set up dives at Roatan's top sites; you'll explore canyons, crevices and 1,000-foot walls. Indulge at the on-site spa and pool and with gourmet meals made to order. They can be enjoyed en-suite or anywhere in the resort, including poolside, at the second-story Lookout Lounge with a view of the cay and Caribbean Sea, or to-go. With only nine lodging choices, including beachfront bungalows, two-bedroom villas, ocean-view studio lofts and two-bedroom loft suites, you will receive exceptional service and privacy. 866-246-3706; [barefootcay.com](#)

Discover additional details on the people past and present of Mexico and Central America by contacting the local tourism boards. To find out more about Mexico, call 800-44-MEXICO or access [VisitMexico.com](#). Call 800-624-0686 or visit [TravelBelize.org](#) for information on Belize. Contact the Honduras Institute of Tourism at 800-410-9608 or [LetsGoHonduras.com](#). 🌀



  
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