Left: the Maroma Resort and Spa on the Riviera Maya, a region rich in protected wildlife and ancient culture. Right: the Mayan Temple of the Warriors, in Chichen Itza, Yucatan

The Mayan attraction

It was once a lost world, home only to wildlife and Mayan temples. Now this stunning area on Mexico's Yucatan coast has been reclaimed by the intrepid. By Christine Toomey

A little way to the east of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, there is a current called *maroma* – Spanish for somersault – where a cold undertow hits a deep marine wall and rushes to the surface, curling the blue-green waters of the Caribbean into constant rolling surf. Numerous ships have foundered here. Among them, according to local lore, was one of the earliest galleons of the Spanish conquistadors. Seduced by the beauty of the land where they washed ashore, survivors of this early shipwreck refused subsequent rescue. They chose to settle in this remote corner of Mexico and marry local women, and a mestizo culture was born. Ignore for a moment that they undoubtedly brought with them diseases that helped lay waste to the vibrant, advanced Mayan civilisation that at its height stretched as far south as modern-day Guatemala, Belize and Honduras. Allow the tale to be touched with magical realism. The sentiment behind it holds true.

After just a few days spent in a small and unusual hotel, set in the secluded cove that takes its name from the perilous sea passage offshore, it is easy to imagine wanting to be permanently marooned here. Not that such early adventurers could ease themselves under a *palapa* thatched hut on the beach and do nothing more strenuous than tip a colourful flag in the sand to signal a desire for an iced margarita. No luxuries like electricity, let alone ice, existed on this wild stretch of coastline until less than 10 years ago.

Until recently the vast Yucatan peninsula was still largely cut off from the rest of Mexico. As late as the 1950s, no direct road or rail connections existed between Mexico City and the regional capital, Merida. The few places that prospered under Spanish colonialism were left to forge closer links with Cuba, America and Europe than the rest of the country. The area acquired such a reputation as a remote backwater that Mexicans still have a popular expression: if the going gets tough, it's safe to seek refuge in sleepy Merida.

Then came the boom years. A small fishing village called Cancun, chosen by computer as the ideal site for an international tourist destination, was designated a special development zone, sparked by a promise by President John F Kennedy of US investment. From the 1970s ⟶

Top left: the Santa Rosa hacienda, renovated to reflect its former glory. Top right: a Puuc Mayan temple. Above: the bay at Maroma Resort and Spa

on, Cancun mushroomed into one of the fastest-growing cities in the world, spawning high-rise hotels, restaurants and rowdy bars. Most of the rest of the peninsula remained untouched by mass tourism. Maroma Bay, for instance, which lies just 20 miles south of Cancun, could be 2,000 miles away considering the difference in atmosphere.

When the Mexican architect Jose Luis Moreno spotted the sheltered bay, while flying south along the shoreline in a light aeroplane over 20 years ago, the area was fringed by a 500-acre coconut plantation. Moreno bought the plantation and for some years he and his American wife, Sally, lived what they call a Blue Lagoon adventure, visited only by close friends and family. In 1995, Moreno began to add small, white stucco and coconut-thatched buildings where a few paying guests could stay. For the first few years the hotel stayed a closely guarded secret among a circle of seasoned travellers and celebrities. There was no sign to it on the nearest main road over a mile away.

Slowly, the tranquil retreat expanded and acquired more modern amenities, and with them a wider, but still exclusive, reputation. Prince William stayed here after a stint in Belize with the Welsh Guards during his gap year. Two summers ago, Tony Blair brought his family here at the end of his tour of South America. Then, last year, Orient Express acquired a controlling share in the by-now 57-room, semi-rustic hotel. It has since been renamed the Maroma Resort and Spa. A number of luxury suites and villas have been added. A "wellness centre" – complete with fully equipped gym and flotation tanks – is to supplement the facilities, such as a range of spa treatments and a beach-side sweat lodge where guests are invited to take part in an ancient Mayan ceremony of rebirth and rejuvenation.

The stretch of coastline on which Maroma lies has recently been renamed the Riviera Maya, to distinguish it from its garish northern neighbour. The emphasis here is on the region's pre-colonial history and beautiful natural environment, much of which is now under government protection. It's still home to sea turtles, spider monkeys, exotic birds and a few remaining jaguars.

It is very tempting not to stray far beyond the confines of Maroma Bay. Little over 100 yards offshore lies part of a rich coral reef, second only in size to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, which offers snorkelling and scuba-diving. If that feels too strenuous, morning walks along the sand, and evenings spent indulging in the hotel restaurant's delicious Yucatecan specialities, tend to spoil the spirit of adventure. But the lure of the rest of the peninsula is, eventually, too strong.

The region's real treasures are to be found in its interior, in the elaborate temples and pyramids built by the Mayans before their empire dwindled through internecine wars and disease, many of which still lie hidden beneath subtropical vegetation. The great temples at Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Tulum and Coba, and at smaller sites at Oxkintok, Sayil, Kabah and Mayapan, celebrate the advanced astrology and mathematics that were developed when this civilisation was at its height.

Visits to these lost worlds used to involve either a long, hot drive from hotels on the coast or basic accommodation nearby. But in the past four years a number of old haciendas around Merida and Campeche have been opened as luxury hotels. The main buildings of these sprawling estates have been renovated to reflect their former glory. After driving through tiny, dirt-poor villages that have changed little over the centuries, to reach the heart of such estates, such grandeur is shocking. Four of these haciendas – San Jose, Temozon, Santa Rosa and Uayamon – have been bought by a wealthy Mexico City banker. The largest, Temozon, a 45-minute drive south of Merida, was built originally to impress rival owners of neighbouring estates. Great fortunes were accumulated here during the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century by descendants of the Spanish colonists, who became known as the *casta divina* – the divine class. Their opulence was the result of a single crop, henequen, which became known as sisal in the west. Locally it was referred to as *oro verde* – green gold. A virtual monopoly of the sisal trade by these wealthy landowners was eventually broken. Agrarian reforms introduced after the Mexican revolution parcelled out most of their land. The great haciendas slowly fell into disrepair.

Now, small single-roomed dwellings that once housed entire families working for the estate have been turned into grand guest rooms, many of them complete with individual plunge pools built outside among the dense foliage.

In this far-flung peninsula there is little sense of some of the darker shadows of modern Mexico – political assassinations, peasant uprisings, violence, corruption and devaluation – of which I had my fill during the six years I spent in the capital as a Latin America correspondent. This area possesses all that is beautiful in this country of wild extremes: its wealth of culture dating back more than two millenniums, its vibrant colours, smells, tastes and music, its gentle and gracious hospitality and frequent reminders of its passionate past.

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On my last night at the Santa Rosa hacienda, I was the only guest. As evening fell I watched the dragonflies swoop across a pool to the rear of my room, while a huddle of women in traditional dress lay frangipani flowers on my bed. A succession of staff trod gently through the grass to inquire if I wished anything more to eat or drink. No matter how often I assured them I didn't and urged them to go back to their village earlier than usual if they wished, they all stayed on in silent attendance. This, then, is what it must have felt like to be a pampered member of the divine class ■

Christine Toomey travelled with Cazenove & Loyd Expediciones, tel: 020 7384 2332. Prices start at £2,450 per person for a 10-day itinerary

PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT: ORIENT-EXPRESS HOTELS. ABOVE RIGHT: CORBIS. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: STARWOOD HOTELS & RESORTS; GETTY IMAGES; ORIENT-EXPRESS HOTELS