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NOCHES AZULES: BLUE NIGHTS IN QUINTANA ROO

JOY HUI LIN finds a hedonistic cultural playground...

Treading on the white sands of Playacar during golden hour, I thought to myself, 'Well, I don't hate this,' before I plunged into the sea for a sunset swim. It was the understatement of the season. Framed by wind-blown palms with violet and rose light painting over the daytime Caribbean blues, I had no idea that within a week I'd etch Quintana Roo on my heart and always plan to return. It was a fellow Californian writer who first put Quintana Roo on my subconscious map: Joan Didion, who named her daughter after this culturally rich, jungled-festooned area along the eastern coast of Mexico. North Americans have long been clued in on this coastal spot since the beach of Playa Carmen wins 'one of the best beaches in the world' frequently.

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The balmy air combined with on-point mixology creates a hypnotic kind of happiness. I shamelessly swilled three glasses of fresh pineapple and Chaya cocktails scented with local floral and anise-seed liqueur and asked myself, 'What is this paradise and how do I stay here forever?' It's entirely possible that all the tropical fruits here taste like the physical form of sunlight.

The Wine & Food Festival (actually a series of festivals thrown throughout the year in different parts of Mexico) hosts a Quintana Roo series on and around Día de Los Muertos (the Day of the Dead), which has become a much more popular spectacle thanks to a certain Englishman named James Bond. Indeed,

the riotous parade opening scene in Skyfall, released in 2015, changed the sentiment around the tradition and its rituals, and Mexico is embracing this opportunity to introduce its wonders to a global audience.

The line-up of the Wine & Food festival week features sought-after Mexican chefs and mixologists demonstrating their playful mastery with marvellous dishes and inventive drinks every night – and, some days – on yachts. Each event throughout the year includes foreign guest chefs, making the festival week cosmopolitan in the best way.

At Mexico Lindo Cooking School, the secrets of the Mexican kitchen were laid bare by chef Alejandra Kauachi, and after a not-too-arduous session with liberal amounts of a brioche-like pan de muerto and cups of Mexican hot-chocolate, I became aware that improving my own cooking techniques for Mexican cuisine could be a dazzling dinner-party game-changer.

At the opulent Star Chefs of Quintana Roo dinner, a constellation of lights framed each nighttime view, the paradoxically careless and studied elegance of the Rosewood Mayakoba. While nearby Tulum is known for its bohemian luxury scene, Mayakoba is quickly becoming the destination for the set who prefers their stay to be a little less bohemian and a lot more high-end.

The Rosewood Mayakoba, one of the festival's event hosts, boasts of an entire bouquet of suite types, with offerings from private residences to oceanview penthouses. Its global-luxury design stays relatively minimalist and understated, but the distinctive flora and animal life reminds you you're in the

Yucatán Peninsula. Passing by squat coatimundi with their black masks and curious eyes on your way to a morning swim is a peculiar and unforgettable sight.

My other days were full envy-inducing escapades, from dipping into cinematic turquoise waters in 'cenotes' (underground lakes) to dancing along with a parade for Día de Los Muertos. With so much fun to be had, I didn't even get to investigate the ruins of Tulum, but I thought to myself, 'next time,' with a gleam in my eye, too stuffed with voluptuous delights, both literally and figuratively, for any more indulging, but promising myself I would return for more adventures.

After the last evening's 10-course festivities, paired with a stellar showing of Mexican wines from Casa Madero – the oldest winery on the North American continent – I asked my friend who regularly travels here if Mexico has a saying like la dolce vita or pura vida as Italians and Costa Ricans say. She paused, thought for a moment, and said, 'Mexico, lindo y querido': Mexico, beautiful and beloved.

Wine & Food Festival: www.facebook.com/pg/WineFoodMX/events
(Events can be purchased separately or as multi-day passes)
Rosewood Mayakoba: Carretera, Federal Cancún-Playa del Carmen, KM 298 Solidaridad, Q. Roo, CP 77710 Mexico
Mexico Lindo Cooking: Carretera Ruta de los Cenotes, KM 6.2, 77580 Puerto Morelos, Q.R., Mexico
And, for a great cultural display of Day of the Dead: Xcaret Park, Carretera Chetúmal-Puerto Juárez, KM 282, Solidaridad, 77710 Playa del Carmen, Q.R., Mexico

