



What does a luxury escape look like after the pandemic?

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Rio Secreto – or Secret River – is one of thousands of cenotes found in Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula.

GERALDINE PETROVIC/BEYOND LIMITS AT FAIRMONT MAYAKOBA

Deep within the Mexican jungle lies Rio Secreto: a 2.5-million-year-old cenote filled with thousands of rock formations resembling melted wax on a candlestick. Reaching this hidden destination entails a seven kilometre drive off Quintana Roo’s main highway, near Playa del Carmen, which is where I find myself one stifling hot evening in early November. The sun has long set as we speed along a desolate dirt road, whizzing by towering trees and heading deeper into darkness.

Rio Secreto – or Secret River – is one of thousands of cenotes found in Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula: Freshwater sinkholes connected to an underground river system through limestone caves and passageways. This one was discovered in 2004 by a local farmer who stumbled across its entrance while chasing an iguana. The Instagram-worthy spot has since attracted a steady stream of visitors for daytime tours, but I’m part of a small group witnessing this natural wonder by night.

The full moon guides us even farther into the jungle, where a shaman burns incense and chants a blessing (cenotes were considered sacred to ancient Mayans as a source of fresh water and spiritual space). Finally, we begin our descent 70 feet underground, where we find an eight-mile maze-like

structure with stalagmites, stalactites and bright turquoise waters that seem otherworldly.

We enter a large, open-area space lit with hundreds of candles emitting a warm glow as classical music plays softly in the background. On stage, dressed in black and white, are eight members of the Symphony Orchestra of Quintana Roo. Cocktails in hand, we take our seats. It's all so cliché, but I'm falling for every well-orchestrated detail of Beyond Limits, a new experience that Fairmont Hotels & Resorts has strategized for postpandemic travellers seeking escapism and something different.





The cenote is 70 feet underground.

GERALDINE PETROVIC/BEYOND LIMITS AT FAIRMONT MAYAKOBA

The hotel brand's North and Central America VP of communications, Nicole Lierheimer, explains that the goal is to put meaning back into high-end travel. "This is the heart of luxury," she says. "We want you to leave feeling moved." Jeff Doane, chief commercial officer of North and Central America at Accor, Fairmount's parent company, concurs: "Consumer demands are continuing to evolve. We are seeing luxury travellers becoming social culturists who are looking for one one-of-a-kind experiences that are, by nature, highly exclusive and deeply meaningful."

The string ensemble performs orchestral adaptations of popular hits from Lady Gaga, Ed Sheeran, Daft Punk and Queen. *Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You*, by Frankie Valli, moves me to tears. I think it's the combination of rich acoustics and sublime setting – the Champagne doesn't hurt, either – that

has me entranced. When it comes to being in the moment, a symphony in a cenote beats the popular meditative app Headspace any day.

I'm still on a high from last night's symphony and ready for another adventure the following morning: a leisurely bike ride to another cenote, El Burrodromo, where a massive banyan tree greets me at the opening, its roots dangling deep into the cave. El Burrodromo feels cool and cathedral-like, and far removed from the modern-day world above. Our guide shines a flashlight on hundreds, if not thousands, of bats hanging from limestone ceilings above the crystal blue waters (that's my cue to bolt).

Above ground, I spot a pack of raccoon-like coatis on the Greg Norman-designed golf course. At every turn, there's a reptile, mammal or bird that catches my attention (not surprising, given that the Fairmont Mayakoba property, where I am staying, is home to more than 200 species of wildlife). The resort also cultivates rare, stingless *Melipona* bees, which produce medicinal honey, used in the hotel's recipes, as well as services at its spa. "Honey in the Heart" is a treatment involving a nourishing honey body mask.

Back at the beach club, I willingly indulge in the sting of a Scream Margarita – Mezcal, pineapple juice, lime juice, Cointreau, jalapeño – and take in the sunset. I'm surrounded by the must-haves that every luxury beach traveller expects, such as private cabanas, an adults-only rooftop terrace and bar, infinity pool, sunken fire pits and a wood-fire grill menu.

And that's precisely the beauty of this visit: One minute I'm surveying a cenote like a geological explorer, the next I'm sipping a Mexican cocktail overlooking the Caribbean Sea.

If you go

Fairmont Hotels & Resorts is kicking off a new collection of experiences

called Beyond Limits across North and Central America. The program, running through March, 2023, offers limited-time, immersive events, such as an underwater ballet in Hawaii and an intimate, fireside dinner at the edge of frozen Lake Louise (prices for individual experiences start at \$150).

Symphony in a Cenote is in Mexico's Riviera Maya (around 65 kilometres south of Cancun), nearby the newly renovated Fairmont Mayakoba. Symphony in a Cenote runs on Nov. 21 and 28, 2022, and Jan. 5, 2023.

The writer was a guest of Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, which did not review or approve this article.

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