

postcard.

# The new riviera

Sarah Lewis seeks out the sun, sand and seafood of Mexico's Riviera Maya, and discovers a punchy regional cuisine that mixes citrus, spices and seafood to great effect.



**WITH ITS SPARKLING** Caribbean coastline and chilli-laced Yucatan cuisine, Mexico's Riviera Maya has long been on my travel hit list. While the days of partying with the college kids in Cancun may have passed me by, the sleepy town of Tulum, two hours' drive south, promises the perfect beach break.

Here, thatched-roof cabanas line the sand, bikini-clad therapists dole out

dirt-cheap massages and salt-rimmed margaritas are the price of a can of cola back home. You get the impression that most of the staff rocked up for a holiday and decided not to leave...

One duo that fell for Tulum's charm is Eric Werner and Mya Henry. The New York escapees are behind eco-chic Hartwood ([hartwoodtulum.com](http://hartwoodtulum.com)), an open-air eatery that runs on solar power. Here we linger over tender, charry curls of octopus and fall-apart pork ribs from the woodfired oven, while sipping habanero-spiked margaritas from mason jars.

Beachfront cafe Ziggy's ([ziggybeachtulum.com](http://ziggybeachtulum.com)) becomes our go-to place for breakfast, as we kickstart the day with *huevos divorciados* (fried eggs splashed with green and red salsas). Following a dive in a nearby *cenote* (naturally occurring underground limestone pool), our guide Mauricio takes us to his favourite taco joint, Taqueria Honorio. At this low-key street stall, a woman hand-presses corn tortillas to order before grilling and filling them with *cochinita pibil*, a Yucatan classic of slow-roasted pork marinated in citrus and annatto seed.

We're treated to more Yucatan delights during our stay at Esencia ([hotelesencia.com](http://hotelesencia.com)), a boutique beach house in the town of Puerto Aventuras. Here, chef Bernando dishes up lobster taquitos and *tikin xic*, a whole snapper coated in achiote and sour orange, wrapped in a banana leaf and cooked on hot coals.

On our final day, we toss around the idea of joining Bernando's cooking class, but instead we settle into a cabana on the beach for ice-cold *cervezas* and prawn tacos with a tangy tamarind sauce. They're so good that we persuaded Bernando to share his recipe here.

## prawn tacos

Serves 2

- 2 vine-ripened tomatoes, seeds removed, finely chopped
- 1/2 red onion, finely chopped
- 2 tbs chopped coriander leaves, plus extra leaves to serve
- 100g tempura flour\*
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- Sunflower oil, to deep-fry
- 16 large green prawns, peeled, deveined
- 4 corn tortillas, warmed

## Taco sauce

- 2 1/2 tbs tamarind puree\*
- 1 canned chipotle chilli in adobo sauce\*, drained, finely chopped
- 1 tbs each orange juice, soy sauce, caster sugar and honey
- 2 tbs extra virgin olive oil

## Guacamole

- 2 ripe avocados, mashed
- 1 tbs finely chopped coriander leaves
- 2 tsp lime juice

For the taco sauce, whisk all the ingredients together in a small bowl, season, then set aside.

Combine tomato, onion and coriander in a bowl. Set aside.

For the guacamole, combine all the ingredients together in a bowl. Season and set aside.

Whisk flour, egg and 50ml iced water in a bowl. Half-fill a deep-fryer or large frypan with sunflower oil and heat to 190°C (a cube of bread will turn golden in 30 seconds when oil is hot enough). In batches, dip prawns in batter, allowing excess to drip off. Deep-fry for 1-2 minutes until golden. Drain on paper towel.

Serve each tortilla topped with guacamole, four prawns, tomato salsa, a drizzle of taco sauce and extra coriander leaves. **d.**

\* Tempura flour and tamarind puree are from supermarkets. Chipotle chillies in adobo are from gourmet food shops.



**WHERE** Riviera Maya, Mexico.  
**WHEN** Year-round, though you may want to avoid the madness of Spring Break in March and April, and the hurricane season from June to October.  
**WHY** For surf and sun salutations, plus zesty Yucatan fare and margaritas on tap.  
**MUST-DO** Splash out on a stay at Esencia, once the holiday home of an Italian duchess, now a barefoot-luxe boutique hotel. Take a cooking class with chef Bernando, or sign up for a stand-up paddleboard tour of the region's *cenotes* with Mexican Caribbean Kite Surf, visit: [mexicancaribbeankitesurf.com](http://mexicancaribbeankitesurf.com).  
**HOW** Fly to LAX from Australia, then on to Cancun Airport. From there, it's a two-hour drive to Tulum. Hire a car as the well-signposted highway makes driving a breeze.

Clockwise from top left: the white sandy beaches of Tulum; prawn tacos; eco-eatery Hartwood; the luxurious pool at boutique hotel Esencia.



RECIPE: BERNARDO GARCIA. WORDS: SARAH LEWIS. FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY: JEREMY SIMONS. STYLING: DAVID MORGAN.