

The Complete Guide to Tulum: Where to Stay, Eat, and Wander

Tulum is holding true to its origins as a cross roads: between the intensive development to the north and pristine nature to the south.

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Tulum, a once “off the beaten path” destination on Mexico’s dazzling Caribbean Coast, is known for its picturesque Mayan archaeological site perched on a cliff overlooking the turquoise blue Mexican-Caribbean sea. Today, as the region has grown into a world-class tourism destination, it is one of the most visited Mayan sites. As increased visitation and development pushes down the coast from Cancun, Tulum has retained its bohemian, wild feel and is home to some of the most spectacular beaches in the world. It has evolved from a cross-roads trading post

of the Mayan Civilization to a truck stop village into the type of “travelers place” that reminds us why we travel in the first place!

In the beginning Tulum was placed firmly on the backpackers map and had relatively little to no infrastructure for travelers. The intrepid hung their hammocks between the swaying palm trees, pitched their tents, and quietly enjoyed the white sand beaches, crystalline waters, virgin *cenotes* with a few others and with nesting sea turtles and other abundant wildlife. As the word spread of spectacular, secluded beaches and solitude, Tulum became a haven for nature lovers, yoga practitioners, divers, and those looking to escape the mass tourism that enveloped Cancun and then spread down the Riviera Maya. Today Tulum continues its evolution and now welcomes trendy travelers with a **full array of boutique hotels**, unique restaurants, and even an organic and tranquil nightlife scene (except for Saturday nights when Papaya Playa pulses and brings in internationally renowned DJs!). Still off the grid and with only sporadic cell phone coverage (at least on the beach), change has come quickly to Tulum which now even has its very own chain supermarket; allegedly Wall Mart and Costco have their sites picked out for future development.

The strip of beach where the sought after hotels are located is still off the grid with no hard line power; while this has limited its growth until now, it has also made it vulnerable to environmental degradation as development continues. Set on a strip of beach in front of the Caribbean and surrounded by the jungle to the east, Tulum archaeological site to the north, and Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve to the South, Tulum really is a finite resource. While Tulum has gotten a name for

itself as a sustainable or green destination, most hotels employ part or full time generators and few are taking sustainability seriously; hopefully that will change or it will begin to impact the very attributes that have lured travelers here from the outset. One place in particular that is walking the environmentally conscious walk is [Casa de las Olas](#), an innovative, completely sustainable guest house/villa owned and operated by the inimitable James Greenfield. An array of new niche hotels has entered the area, and although there are a few all-inclusive resorts ([Dreams Tulum](#) being excellent for families), most people come for the smaller, boutique hotels.

Travelers who come to Tulum are generally looking for an off the beaten path, secluded, intimate experience with nature and a strong sense of place and community; the contrast from Cancun couldn't be more stark! The new wave of boutique hotels, restaurants and shops that have cropped up along the beach in and around Tulum embody the ethos of the destination with a small scale, authentic, down to earth look and feel that is more and more difficult to find. Price points range from \$20 (for a place to pitch your tent) to \$1,000 dollars a night offering options for every traveler's budget. Tulum and its unique community of backpackers, yoga enthusiasts, spiritual travelers, 'green' tourists, bo-ho hippes, [A-List celebrities and fashion industry execs](#), would all agree that Tulum is the hot place to be. In fact, [Ralph Lauren Magazine](#) says "Tulum has emerged as a destination for the fashionable to decompress and spiritually recharge"

The most innovative new additions to the hotel scene include [Coqui Coqui](#), [Jashita](#), the newly remodeled [Las Ranitas](#), [Villa Casa de Las Olas](#), and [Be Tulum](#). [Papaya Playa](#) is also making a stir with the consolidation of the former bungalows Prival, Papaya, and Copal. Travelers looking for a unique Mexican beach vacation will find some of the best experiences at these hotels.

The beach is also dotted with some delicious and memorable culinary experiences; so much so that it's difficult to even know where to begin; that said, be sure not to miss: [Puro Corazón](#) is an artisanal restaurant fusing traditional regional Mexican food with contemporary and modern cuisine; [el Tábano](#) is a family run restaurant using local ingredients and knowhow; [The Hartwood](#) by signature Chef Eric Werner is truly extraordinary, again with the theme of using locally grown ingredients, solar powered, and artisanally crafted plates; a 3 star Michelin quality and creativity nestled deep in the beachside jungle of Tulum Eric is also putting together multi-day culinary workshops that are a must for foodies!

Parallel to the development on the beach, Tulum pueblo's growth has been astounding; a sleepy little stop for gas, beer, ice, and some other essentials now boasts more than 30,000 inhabitants who work in and around the dynamically growing tourism industry. Tulum Pueblo straddles either side of the Mexico highway 307 and is teeming with the real deal in terms of restaurants, bars, and fun places to hang out. Interestingly, some of the best restaurants in the area are found of the beach in Tulum Pueblo including the best whole Red Snapper, towering portions of ceviche, and the Coconut Shrimp in town at El Camello Jr., unique mole and central Mexican dishes at [Cetli](#), Rincon Italian with fresh pastas homemade sauces hidden

local's place, El Chiapaneco for tacos al pastor and a dizzying array of homemade salsas only open after 6 pm and many more! For a cool locals late night hang out don't miss [La Gran Mosca Verde](#) for cool cocktails, open air foreign film nights on Wednesday and Sundays, and the best Mojitos in town.

So what else is in Tulum beside *eco-chic* hotels and beautiful beaches? Tulum is also famous for its *cenotes* (fresh water sink holes that allow access to the amazing subterranean river system and caverns that criss-cross the Yucatan Peninsula). Cenotes are a big draw because in addition to offering the opportunity to refresh in their fresh and cool waters in the middle of a hot day, they harbor mysterious clues and vestiges of Mayan rituals and history. Exploring by foot, swimming, snorkeling and even SCUBA expeditions for the truly intrepid (and certified!) are all options to literally scratch beneath the surface of this dynamic region. Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve to the south offers one of the largest and most important protected areas in the Americas and offers the nature inclined traveler first class opportunities for bird watching, along with hundreds of other species, many of them unique to the region. Don't miss the sunset from the top of the Cesiak Eco lodge! You can also visit the small but interesting Muyil archaeological site within the reserve and explore its labyrinth of channels and canals amongst the mangrove and wetland estuaries with local Mayan community members who are making good on the promise of ecotourism. Nearby you have the impressive Cobá archeological site (only :40 minutes from Tulum) and if you're inclined to explore further you can head to Valladolid, a 500 year old colonial village in the center of the Yucatan Peninsula and its first capital city!

With so many options for natural, cultural, culinary, and adventure experiences it's no wonder that Tulum is the hot place to be these days. Tulum is holding true to its origins as a cross roads: between the intensive development to the north and pristine nature to the south; designer hotels and thatched roof bungalows; fashionistas and hippy backpackers, living the experience and being seen in the scene. The contrasts all point to an almost metaphysical magnetism that Tulum has cast on the creative, the adventurous, and the spiritual, bringing it to the cutting edge of contemporary travel today!

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