

# Style/e

MARCH 2026 HK\$45



Scene  
STEALER

Chablé Yucatán, a wellness-focused retreat built around a former hacienda deep in the forest



# Spirit of RENEWAL

In Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, retreats are not so much developing wellness strategies as introducing age-old spiritual practices to guests

By Kee Foong

**On a windswept afternoon** on Mexico's Caribbean coast, I'm standing with arms outstretched on a stone platform beside the sea. A woman circles slowly, swirling a smoking chalice of fragrant copal resin as waves crash onto the shore just feet away from me. Incantations are offered to the four elements of air, water, earth and fire as we turn to face their cardinal directions. A drum beats. A conch shell sounds. Prayers are chanted to Father Sky, Mother Earth and the world in between.

This elaborate ceremony is a prelude to a *temazcal*, a purification and healing ritual practised by indigenous cultures in Mexico for centuries. Sometimes crudely described in English as a "sweat lodge", the *temazcal* is far more than a sauna. Traditionally built from stone, mud or cement, it is conceived as a womb: a dark, enclosed space where participants reconnect with the earth and emerge renewed.

As wellness tourism surges globally, Mexico stands apart for the depth and distinctiveness of its offerings. Many of the country's most sought-after experiences are grounded in ancient Mesoamerican traditions – practices shaped by close observation of nature, the seasons and cycles, and for many Mexicans, still woven into modern life.

Perhaps the best known of these is the *temazcal*, practised by cultures including the Maya and Mexica (often referred to as Aztec), and now offered at select luxury resorts across the country. This one takes place at Maroma, a Belmond Hotel, on the Riviera Maya, a stretch of coast on the northeast of the Yucatán Peninsula. After opening prayers, the ceremony moves inside. While most *temazcales* are dome or igloo-shaped, the one here is fashioned into a pyramid, echoing the region's ancient temples. Hot volcanic stones are shovelled by an *águila de fuego* or "fire eagle" – an attendant or guardian – into the centre, before the low door is closed and covered with a thick blanket, sealing out the light.

In the darkness, my spiritual guide pours waterinfused with medicinal herbs onto the sizzling stones, releasing waves of scented steam. Songs and prayers guide the ceremony through four stages, each one hotter than the last. >>





Hotel Esencia, on Mexico's Riviera Maya



*The temazcal is a dark, enclosed space where participants reconnect with the earth and emerge renewed*

Between phases, the door is briefly opened to let in air and light before more stones are added. The experience is intense, but carefully moderated. At Maroma, first-timers are eased in gently, because extreme heat and prolonged darkness can overwhelm even seasoned participants.

The ceremony ends with a dash into the sea, a shock of cool water that seals the ritual. The effect is cleansing and energising, grounding rather than euphoric, in a ceremony that prioritises balance over endurance.

A week earlier, I had planned to try a *temazcal* at Chablé Yucatán, a wellness-focused retreat built around a former hacienda deep in the jungle. But my timing coincided with Hanal Pixán (“Food for the Souls”), the Maya Day of the Dead. During the three-day festival honouring ancestors and deceased loved ones, *temazcales* are traditionally paused out of respect for the heightened spiritual presence.

Instead, an ancestral remedies ritual is performed beside Chablé’s private cenote, shaded by palms. Cenotes – freshwater sinkholes especially common on the Yucatán Peninsula – were sacred to the Maya, both as life-giving water sources and as spiritual sites. This one is not open for swimming, preserving its ritual significance.

A woven mat laid out like an altar holds offerings used to set intentions: corn, cacao pods, flowers, crystals, a drum, a conch shell and ceramic jaguars, considered by



Maroma, a Belmond Hotel, also on the Riviera Maya

# WHAT TO PACK

the Maya to be guardians of the underworld. After a copal cleansing – using smoke from the aromatic tree resin – cacao is shared in different forms: mixed simply with water, or blended with corn and achiote, red spice seeds symbolising blood and the life force. Songs and sounds follow, designed to encourage reflection and renewal, and to reinforce the bond between humans and nature.

Swimming in a cenote comes later, at Hotel Esencia, also on the Riviera Maya. Accessed by a short trek through a neighbouring abandoned resort that feels like a set from the Jurassic Park movies, the private cenote feels worlds away from the beach. Unlike the deep sinkholes often associated with cenotes, this one is a broad lagoon fringed by mangroves, where manatees are occasionally spotted.

The water's clarity is astonishing. In the morning stillness, clouds reflect on its glassy surface while fish vividly flash by below. Guided paddleboarding gives way quickly to swimming and snorkelling. Sunlight slices through the water like laser beams, illuminating roots and limestone formations beneath the surface.

Though not marketed as a wellness ritual, time spent here is magical and deeply restorative. The Maya believed cenotes were entrances to Xibalba, the underworld – not a place of punishment, but of transformation and wisdom. Immersed in cool, mineral-rich water, the effect is as calming as any spa treatment, though Hotel Esencia also offers a *temazcal* for those in search of heat.

Later, back at Maroma, another distinctly regional experience awaits: a visit to an in-house Melipona bee sanctuary, followed by a bee-inspired healing ritual at the resort's excellent Guerlain spa. In Mayan cosmology, stingless Melipona bees are associated with the bee god Ah Muzen Cab and were considered messengers between worlds. Endemic to the Yucatán, they are vital pollinators, including of vanilla orchids – one reason that Mexico once dominated global vanilla production.

A third-generation beekeeper introduces the endangered bees, housed in protected wooden hives. She lets me place my hand gently inside for the bees to crawl on. I taste fresh honey straight from the hive, and the queen bee reveals herself. Some guests opt for a sound-healing session accompanied by singing bowls and the bees' low hum. Others choose a bee-inspired spa ritual using Guerlain's Abeille Royale honey-based treatments and warm herbal pouches to leave the body soothed and restored.

What all these experiences share is a world view shaped by close observation of nature. Mayan and wider Mesoamerican traditions emphasise balance, cycles, and prevention rather than cure. Life is understood through duality – light and dark, heat and cool, life and death, which are not cast as moral absolutes, but viewed as necessary and complementary forces. Long before wellness became a global industry, harmony between body, spirit and environment was already central to life here. ☺



The pool at Chablé Yucatán



Roxanne Assoulin bracelet (HK\$660), at Net-a-Porter

Zimmermann tote (HK\$5,500)

Missoni romper (HK\$8,000), at Mytheresa

Aquazzura sandals (HK\$6,700)