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# Riviera Maya: Best of both worlds

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Looking for an all-inclusive luxury resort with a penchant for local culture?

STORY BY:  
**BARBARA WEIBEL**

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I stepped across the threshold of my suite at **Iberostar Grand Hotel Paraíso** and nearly wept. After months in \$10 per night hostels, the marble appointed room, with its exquisite ocean view, seemed like heaven!

I dropped my pack and fell backward onto the downy bed, reveling in the silky linens and plump pillows. Reluctantly, I climbed out of bed and into my enormous tub, letting the whirlpool jets soak off layers of road dirt. Except for a dinner appointment with my fellow travel writers, I might have never left my room.

Iberostar on Mexico's Riviera Maya is actually a complex of five all-inclusive resorts in one: the Paraíso Beach, Paraíso del Mar, Paraíso Lindo, Paraíso Maya and the crown, the five-star adults only Grand Hotel Paraíso, which offers four à la carte restaurants, an international buffet and three bars stocked with top-shelf liquors. Having been subject to barely edible food at other all-inclusive resorts, I was skeptical about the dining options but Iberostar made a believer out of me, especially after gorging on the gourmet buffet at La Brisa and enjoying a Japanese feast at Geisha Restaurant, complete with hatchet-juggling chefs.



Perhaps most surprising of all was the resort's near insistence that guests leave the property to experience a bit of Mexican culture. While most all-inclusive resorts attempt to sequester guests within the walls of the property, Iberostar arranged for our group to visit the magnificent Mayan ruin of Tulum, the cultural theme park of Xcaret, and the discos of Playa del Carmen, a popular beach town just 20 minutes from the resort.

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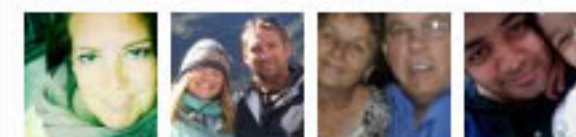
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During my whirlwind five-day stay, I took full advantage of the amenities, spending one whole afternoon getting a massage and soaking in the spa's salt-water pool, where I let overhead jets pummel my neck and shoulders. I snorkeled at the offshore reef and ordered every possible type of virgin frozen drink from the swim-up bar at the Grand Hotel's mammoth pool, but I spent far too little time floating in the crystal clear turquoise waters and wriggling my toes in the powdery white sands of Paraíso Beach. I had no time to check out the other 21 pools or 19 à la carte restaurants on the property. I guess that just means I'll have to go back. Soon, I hope.

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## BARBARA WEIBEL



After years of working 70-80 hours per week at jobs that paid the bills but brought no joy, a serious illness made Barbara Weibel realize she felt like the proverbial "hole in the donut" - solid on the outside but empty on the inside. After recovering her health, she walked away from her successful but unfulfilling career, sold or gave away most of her material possessions, strapped on a backpack and began traveling around the world in pursuit of her true passions: travel, photography and writing. Stories about her adventures are published on her blog, Hole In The Donut Cultural Travel (<http://holeinthedonut.com>).

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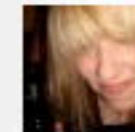
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