

By Niece Regis
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

VALLADOLID, Mexico — The temperature was peaking at a steamy 95 degrees in the Mexican town of Valladolid last winter, but I was unconcerned. Floating in a chilled cenote — a wide and open-to-the-sky freshwater sinkhole — I gazed at stalactites and hanging vines, imagining prehistoric creatures and early Mayan civilization. My reverie was broken by a giant splash and ebullient cheers, shouted in Spanish, as local teenagers arrived from school and leapt from ledges 30 feet above the water's surface.

The charms of Yucatan's towns of Cancun, Tulum, and Merida are well documented. The inland colonial town of Valladolid, mainly known as a convenient stopover spot when making a pilgrimage to the nearby pyramids of Chichen Itza, is less discovered, less dominated by tourism, and coming into its own as a destination-worthy area to visit.

Before arriving, I knew little of the town other than from a college pal who had moved there in 2010, and whose social media photos had sparked my curiosity. Expecting to find a sleepy little village, what surprised me was its size. As the third-largest community in the Yucatan, Valladolid has a verdant and lively central public square rimmed with hotels, restaurants, shops and a multi-towered 18th-century church. From here, a grid of wide numbered streets emanates from east to west, and north to south. The vibe is both busy and laid back, meaning there's plenty to see and do, but no reason to rush.

The best way to experience Valladolid is to walk. The distinctive colonial architecture is minimal, with two-story walls rising straight and flat from the edge of the sidewalk, their stark facades tempered by sweet and jaunty pastel colors and wide-framed windows and doors. A number of buildings with curved arches and carved stone harken back to when 16th-century Spanish settlers first built the town on a Mayan settlement. Though the indigenous population launched several attempts to reclaim their land — and lost — their culture infuses the town through handiwork and crafts, deeply flavorful cuisine, and traditional clothing — embroidered white cotton dresses and blouses that are still worn today in the Mayan community.

Speaking of traditional clothing, it turns out that my college pal, Tey Mariana Stiteler, is not spending her days sipping margaritas in the Yucatecan sun. After retiring from a career at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, the bilingual Stiteler decided to put her life experiences to good use. This year, she debuted *The Museo de Ropa Etnica de Mexico*, a museum of ethnic clothing designed to reflect the country's varied cultures. Stiteler has col-



PHOTOS BY NEECE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Onetime Yucatan stopover is becoming a destination



lected the items herself, driving throughout Mexico — sometimes with her 90-year-old mother in tow — purchasing clothing directly from artisans in their homes or workshops, and collecting their histories and stories.

A visit to MUREM is complemented by a tour of the nearby Casa de los Venados, an 18,000-square-foot private home-turned-museum, filled with more than 3,000 pieces of Mexican folk and contemporary art. If you're looking to start your own collection, a number of shops and markets, including the Mercado Artesanal Zací, sell locally made items such as exquisitely-crafted embroidery, needlepoint, leather goods, handbags, and more. Chocoholics won't want to skip the



Clockwise from top: The central town square of Valladolid; the ruins of Chichen Itza; The Museo de Ropa Etnica de Mexico; Cenote Xcanche, located adjacent to Ek Balam's archeological site, offers a cooling respite from the Yucatan heat.

Choco-Story Museo del Chocolate, exploring the history of chocolate from early Mayan times to the present in 12 interactive rooms, and an accompanying shop with tempting floor-to-ceiling chocolate offerings.

It's a bit of a hike (or quick, inexpensive taxi ride) to the church and former Convent of Saint Bernardine of Siena, circa 1560, a Franciscan edifice that served as both a church and fortress. As one of the oldest colonial complexes in the Yucatan, including a church, chapel, convent, atrium, and garden, it is a must-see for fans of the period. Inside the simple interiors, I found carved wood and ceramic statues of saints, fragments of frescoes, a painted image of the Virgin of Guadal-

upe, and a spectacular main altarpiece of carved, painted, and gilded wood.

A day of walking made me ravenous. I was lucky to be guided to El Atrio, a restaurant on the main square serving distinctive regional cuisine. (I liked it so much, I returned the following day, because it's the kind of place you dream about long after the vacation is over.) Walk through the dark interior to a bright courtyard with tree-shaded tables, a central fountain, and a woman whose sole job is to grill fresh tortillas for such Yucatecan appetizers as panuchos with cochinita (tortillas topped with shredded braised pork). Don't miss the simply titled, Broth the Atrio, a tasty and traditional chicken soup with vegetables, rice, and avocado. The highlight of the meal was a locally-made pork sausage, longaniza, a dense, smoky taste explosion that led me to find the town where it's produced, Temozon, on the road north of town heading to the Ek Balam archaeological site.

Ek Balam (meaning dark or black jaguar) is a spectacular series of ruins located 11 miles north of Valladolid. The site's imposing central pyramid is taller than El Castillo in Chichen Itza, with the added bonus that visitors can climb to the top for jaw-dropping vistas. Halfway up the main stairway, you can catch your breath and admire winged warrior figures in a ceremonial doorway that leads to an inner (closed to the public) chamber.

It's recommended to visit both Ek Balam and Chichen Itza in the early morning, to avoid both the heat of the day and throngs of visitors. Though the better-known Chichen Itza was significantly more crowded than Ek Balam (hello, tour buses!), the area is so immense that it felt less crowded overall.

In the Yucatan, a day without visiting a cenote is a wasted day. Though there are said to be thousands of cenotes, I only managed to visit three. My watery sojourns were informed by the other destinations on my itinerary: Cenote Zací, in Valladolid city center; Cenote Xcanche, located adjacent to Ek Balam; and Cenote Yokdzonot, located in an eco-park cared for by Mayan woman, about a 20-minute drive beyond Chichen Itza. Each has its unique amenities and charms — zip line, life jackets, changing rooms, dining, showers, waterfalls — yet all offer a cooling respite from the heat in awe-inspiring landscapes.

Back in Valladolid, there's no better way to end a day of exploring than a stop at Wabi Gelato, a tiny shop combining traditional Italian ice cream-making methods and flavors (chocolate, hazelnut) with local fruits for interesting taste combinations. Pineapple with cilantro? Dragonfruit? Tangerine? Another visit to Valladolid? Yes, please!

Niece Regis can be reached at neceeregis@gmail.com.

A good time was had by all (by the pool, by the bar, by the sea)

By Brent Crane
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The grounds of the Baha Mar, Nassau's newest resort, are sprawling and grand, the finely manicured landscape of evenly sized green-leafed palms cut with dollops of azure — the 11 pools. From above, in your plane landing at the nearby Lynden Pindling International Airport or on a high floor of any of the three hotel complexes surrounding the 1,000-acre grounds, the resort shines like a brochure-ready paradise. This is the Bahamas that Americans expect, a bright dream of sunshine and clean water, where a white towel and a pina colada are always on hand, the whole place easily and conveniently categorized: the kids pool, the touch tank, the party pool with bumping techno, the golf course, the beach, and, in a location that is almost impossible to avoid when going anywhere else, the casino.

At the Baha Mar, as long as you are not expecting a truly luxurious experience, there are few serious complaints. It is a place to drink copiously in your swimsuit, to gamble, to eat good, overpriced food, to drink some more, and flail at the club or in the casino, even when the jankanoo, a boisterous Mardi Gras-esque procession of drummers, brass players, and flamboyant dancers, materializes in the hallway. (Not including the local artwork on the walls, that's about all of Bahamian culture you will glimpse at the Baha Mar.) Just remember that it pays not to think too much or ask too many questions, inquiries such as: Why is my water bottle so much? Should I really be betting another \$100? Is it annoying that breakfast is not included with the suite? Is it ironic

that the cafe uses paper straws alongside plastic-wrapped plastic utensils? Try to silence your mind, if you can: You are here, you are spending too much, you are enjoying yourself.

In October, I spent three nights at the Baha Mar SLS, one of the three hotels that make up the mega-resort, for my brother's bachelor party (the Grand Hyatt and the Rosewood are the others on-site). There were more than a dozen of us divided among three rooms. It was the premier venue for such an event, a self-contained party universe: nowhere to get lost or run into trouble, a strong drink always on hand, 24-hour room service for 3 a.m. chicken sandwich orders and, of course, the casino. Heading in, we figured no one was going to ask us to quiet down at the Baha Mar, and no one did.

For the first day, we had planned on renting a private cabana in the party pool, which is sectioned off with a wall of vegetation. But when we arrived, there was hardly anyone around. Skipping the three-grand cabana, we instead opted for the \$500 regular access fee (drinks not included). There were minor inconveniences: a lethargic waitstaff, a strangely hostile bouncer, a poorly planned building on-site that blocked out the sun by three o'clock. But the basic necessities were well provided for: a clean pool, ample lounging space, loud music, palm trees, and warm sea air. That night we ate at the Katsuya Japanese restaurant in the casino, which was exquisite, especially the crispy-rice spicy tuna starters and the wagyu gyoza. And the Bond Club was visited each night, a deafening, modestly sized venue with flashy lights and



SLS BAHAMA MAR

drunken adolescents mixed alongside tipsy locals.

For our party, the ocean served more as a tool for hangover recovery than a site of real recreation. No snorkeling or jet skiing or parasailing was attempted, though all is on offer at the Baha Mar. There was only a queasy walk through the casino and out toward the beach, a stop by Daq's cabana bar for a hair-of-the-dog daiquiri, then a plop into the waves with a warm, friendly sun renewing our spirits and preparing us for more — the ocean as a charging outlet.

We lodged in the "superior two bedroom suite" for about \$800 a night. Nearly everything in it was cloud-white. There was a spacious kitchen meagerly stocked with supplies, two bathrooms equipped with soft robes, and three beds with plenty

A pool at the Baha Mar resort in Nassau, in the Bahamas.

of space for four men, (I slept on a cot in the living room). The mini bar went well used, with the running joke, "There goes \$20" quipped with every opened nip. Still, we were happy to be adding money into the local economy: Though Nassau was spared Hurricane Dorian's wrath, much of the Bahamas was devastated. Baha Mar says that it has donated over \$2 million to the relief efforts.

We were occupying one of the higher floors, the view never got old. I liked gazing down and taking in the workings of the resort. The guests were a mix of young families, couples, and wedding parties like our own. The sea breeze was constant, and in the dis-

tance, almost like a threat, loomed Atlantis, the veteran mega-resort in these parts.

I did not gamble a cent but among the other guys, the casino went well used. The largest casino in the Caribbean, it was not overcrowded and seemed well-managed, staffed with jovial Bahamians. Still, one could sense they were a bit green. When a Chinese high-roller dropped chips equating to \$50,000 or so on our craps table, they had to pause the game for a long while to make the correct calculations. But we had become used to such minor inconveniences, the expected hiccup of a young resort targeting the masses. One couldn't expect perfection at the Baha Mar, only a good time.

Brent Crane can be reached at bcamcrane@gmail.com.