

VOGUE

TRAVEL

Inside Casa Chablé, a New Mexican Retreat in the Heart of a Biosphere Reserve

BY MICHAELA TRIMBLE
February 10, 2023



Photo: Edgardo Contreras

Salty sea water splashes my face as we speed past the mangroves and marshes of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Aboard a small fishing boat, with a captain named Luis as our guide, a friend and I are marveling at the deserted white-sand beaches en route to the newly-opened Casa Chablé. As we draw closer, it appears as if we are surrounded by land on all sides. But this glittering blue body of water is situated on the less-traversed lagoon side of the reserve, deep within the some 300 miles of marine area the reserve protects.



Photo: Isabel Borberg

When Luis asks if we would like to take a slight detour to see an island populated by magnificent frigatebirds, we, of course, say yes. As we maneuver closer to the island, I learn the birds congregate here due to its lack of predators. Navigating its treacherous edges, Luis pauses in front of a patch of mangroves, having spotted a roseate spoonbill, a close relative of the flamingo. After studying the endless maze of lime-green leaves, I finally lock in on the bird and its bright pink plumage, completely undisturbed by our presence. It may take slightly longer to arrive at Casa Chablé by boat, but it's clearly worth the detour.



Photo: Isabel Borberg

Pulling up to the property itself, a hidden sanctuary slowly reveals itself—located on an otherwise untouched stretch of Quintana Roo’s Caribbean coast, about 22 miles south of Tulum. Walking down the sandy path and stepping through an imposing turquoise door, we enter the property’s main villa, which plays host to five rooms, each with private balconies. Beyond a plunge pool shaded by palms, we arrive at our oceanfront private bungalow, one of five standalone suites with indoor-outdoor showers and terraces.



Photo: Edgardo Contreras

After settling in, I’m introduced to the general manager Ronald Cruz, who explains just how complex the project was to realize. The main building began as a private house in 1998, originally built by a Mexican family who grew palm trees to harvest coconuts. In 2016, Blue Equity, a U.S. investment fund, bought the property and added five bungalows to open it as a nature retreat. When the property went up for auction a few years later, Chablé Hotels, a hotel group with properties in Yucatán’s interior and Riviera Maya, won the bid. Today, no new construction is permitted in the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, meaning the entire property was a renovation project that had to closely adhere to the laws of the reserve, including being completely powered by renewable solar and wind energy. While the designer Paulina Moran set about adding more luxurious touches to the interiors, only local materials were used to spruce up the foundations, from tropical parota wood and palapa-style roofing to stones and marble from the region.



Photo: Edgardo Contreras

After our first night's rest, we steal out of bed before sunrise to meet the property's wellness curator Alejandra by the beach. She already has two yoga mats prepared for us, before instructing us to close our eyes and select a stone that will symbolize what we are currently experiencing in our life. Each color represents a chakra, she says. I go first, picking up a red stone; she explains this symbolizes the sacral chakra, which represents sexuality and creativity. My friend chooses a green stone, a symbol of the heart chakra that is a pathway for physical and emotional healing. If there's any place to do just that, it's here in the heart of nature—and after a chakra-balancing meditation, we head straight for the plush beach loungers to read and soak up the sun.

By the time sunset rolls around, we've already eaten multiple meals at the property's thatched-roof restaurant, with a menu created by chef Jorge Vallejo of Quintonil in Mexico City. When we arrive at the lagoon side of the property, a group of guests is already there for the same reason we are: to enjoy a rare Yucatán sunset. (In most of the region, it's usually shaded by jungle.) We cheers over chilled sauvignon blanc as the sky fades into swirls of rose and tangerine.



Photo: Edgardo Contreras

The next few days' events begin to blur together as I settle into the tropical pace of life. We enjoy a beachfront sound healing ceremony, massages by the sea, and bike rides to roadside Mayan ruins. But above all, I mostly sit in stillness, in reverence for such a secluded, natural place. Although I've lived in Mexico for over five years, and have been to the Yucatán Peninsula dozens of times, I have never been this far into this protected area, and for this long. I had long stopped visiting Tulum (which sits less than an hour north) because of its rapid overdevelopment, meaning Sian Ka'an—which translates to "origin of the sky" in Mayan—was something of an unknown to me before this trip. What I discovered at the end of the town's beach road, beyond the reserve's gated entrance, is a world at odds with what Tulum has become.



Photo: Edgardo Contreras

Call me nostalgic, but as we meet our driver at the boat dock and he takes us through the last thick patch of trees before the biosphere ends and Tulum's beach road begins, I can't help but think how Tulum used to look just like this: a peaceful maze of tropical forests, mangroves, and marshes. If anything, this area—and Casa Chablé's small-scale operation with little-to-no footprint—is here to remind us of what happens when we leave nature undisturbed and sustainable tourism is prized over profit. And with the area's protected status making further development out of the question, it's a relief to know it will stay that way.

<https://www.vogue.com/article/casa-chable-sian-kaan-biosphere-first-look>