Discovering the Magic of Mexico: A Backpacker's Adventure on the Yucatan Peninsula

Last summer in 2022, my partner and I made the spontaneous decision to pack our bags, buy a one-way ticket to Mexico, and embark on a new adventure. considering that checked baggage would have cost twice as much as the flight itself, we decided to take only one backpack. This seemed scary at first, that I'm moving almost 10,000 kilometres away for an indefinite period of time and have just a backpack. Plus, my backpack was a smaller kind of backpack so what was in it was: laptop, chargers, 1 swimsuit, 1 pair of pants, 3 pairs of underwear, travel-sized toiletries, and I think a pair of slippers. We planned to buy clothes at H&M there because it still would be cheaper than the language, but believe it or not, we ended up buying almost nothing.

Our journey took us to the Yucatan Peninsula, where we stayed for almost two months in a small community called Puerto Aventuras. This charming coastal town, located just south of Cancun, offered the perfect blend of relaxation and adventure. From its pristine beaches to its vibrant culture, Puerto Aventuras quickly won us over and became our home away from home.  
One thing must be said about this trip before any questions arise. My travels have always been on a small budget, given that I was a student when I started travelling, I never had an endless budget. This trip would have been the most expensive, and we would not have been able to finance the accommodation on our own.  
We were in the fortunate position that my partner's aunt had relocated from the US to Puerto Aventuras, and we were able to stay with her for free while we explored the peninsula. Now that we've cleared that up, here's a little taster.

As far as accommodation is concerned, you can also find budget accommodation on Airbnb, but you will have to accept the fact that you will be staying in a more modest area and not necessarily in a luxury suite. But at least there will be 3 padlocks on the inside of the door. (Like on our door during our last week in Cancun...more on that later).

We arrived in Puerto Aventuras in August and stayed until almost the end of October, which happened to be off-season. While this meant that we didn't have the opportunity to meet as many travellers as we would have during peak season, we actually enjoyed the peacefulness and quiet that came with it. During our time there, we did have the chance to meet a few other travellers, as well as some retirees from the US who had chosen to make Puerto Aventuras their home.

We had the opportunity to visit several stunning beaches and soak up the sun. One thing that I can say for sure is that the Mexican beaches are just as beautiful as you can see in the pictures. From the turquoise blue water to the white sandy beaches, it was truly a sight to behold.

However, there was one thing that was not as aesthetically pleasing and that was the sea grass or "sargassum" as they call it. This type of seaweed washed up on the shore and accumulated in certain areas, which was not a pretty sight.

As we visited the famous destinations like Cancun and Tulum, the beaches were just as beautiful as we expected. Everywhere we went, there was a burst of colours and vibrant energy. However, it quickly became clear that we were targets for scammers. The phrase "there's no such thing as a free lunch" certainly applies to Mexico, where we found that things were often more expensive than they appeared. From the "free" tequila that came with hidden costs, to the constant distractions and inflated prices in shops, it felt like everything was a trap. It was frustrating to find that even something as simple as buying a single item could end up costing twice as much on different days, and the lack of receipts made it difficult to dispute the charges. We must have spent an extra $100 a week because of the scams.

What I love most about travelling, apart from seeing the world, is the unexpected situations life throws you into.  
As part of our journey through Mexico, we made our way to the island of Cozumel. This beautiful island is located in the Caribbean Sea and is known for its stunning beaches and crystal-clear waters. It's a popular destination for tourists, especially for those looking to enjoy the best of Mexico's natural beauty.

One interesting fact about Cozumel is that it is home to the second largest coral reef system in the world, after the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. This makes it a popular destination for snorkeling and diving, as visitors can explore the vibrant underwater world and witness a diverse array of marine life.

Our time on the island was truly a highlight of our trip. The atmosphere was relaxed and calm, and the beaches were serene and peaceful. We spent our days exploring the island, enjoying the beautiful scenery and soaking up the sun. The island's lush vegetation, turquoise waters, and stunning sunsets made for a truly unforgettable experience.

As part of our travel to Cozumel we visited an ancient Mayan ruins on the Island. While it was fascinating to see this historical place, it also ended up being one of the biggest scams we encountered during our trip. Upon arriving, we were required to buy an entrance ticket just to reach the second entrance, where we then had to pay again for the actual entry into the site. This double-charging system left us feeling frustrated and angry, especially when I asked if it was possible to take drone footage. They said no. I accepted of course. Then they ran after us and told us to give them our drone for safekeeping. I speak Italian, not Spanish, but at that point my hidden Spanish came out and I made it clear that I would certainly not give them my drone, not even for safekeeping, but rest assured, I would not take it out. The interesting thing was that they didn't resist. So they were just trying to see if I would give it to them, but by then we had fallen victim so many times that we had learned our lesson.

Despite the disappointment of this experience, the natural beauty of the area was still impressive and we were able to appreciate the history and significance of the ancient Mayan civilization.

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We have been warned that mosquitoes bite very badly and if we don't have mosquito repellent, they will spray us. One spray cost a dollar per body part. By then I was totally freaked out, so I didn't even ask for it. A friend sprayed himself for $10. They were right about one thing that day: the mosquitoes were really biting! As we didn't have our own mosquito killer, I was eaten by mosquitoes, there was practically not a square millimetre of my skin that wasn't bitten. Take a mosquito repellent with you anyway! The funniest thing is that my partner wasn't stung at all.

Visiting Mexico and trying out their famous spicy tacos was a must-do for us. However, we soon realized that Mexican cuisine can be deceiving even for those who are used to spicy food. Despite our confidence in our tolerance for hot stuff, after a week of indulging in spicy tacos, our stomachs were in ruins and we suffered for several days. It’s important to heed the warning and pace yourself when it comes to Mexican food, as it can be tough on even the strongest of stomachs. Don’t let the delicious flavours fool you, it’s always better to be safe than sorry when it comes to your health.

The last couple days of staying in Mexico was a total disaster. As we had to leave the ”auntie-hotel” sooner than expected, we booked the cheapest flight we found back to Europe, but we still had to spend 4 days in Cancun. We quickly booked a "studio apartment" on Airbnb. It was in the middle of the ghetto in Cancun. This was totally our fault, because in hurry we did not checked the surroundings. But the place was not looking like as they promised in photos. Actually there was a hole in the roof was covered by a lattice that could easily fit a medium-sized animal. And here come the padlocks! “Fortunately” there were 3 huge padlocks on the inside of the door. I freaked out, why do we need this? So we left immediately. We wrote a letter of complaint to Airbnb, who immediately refunded half of the booking fee. Then we didn't want to take any chances, so we booked a hotel room. I thought the hotel category was more reliable and less likely to disappoint. I was wrong. This disappointment was the same as the last one, only worse, because by then we were completely exhausted. We spent four awful days in Hotel Caribe International Cancun in a room where the AC was broken, there was no refrigerator, not to mention the bugs and the pervasive smell. We complained but seemed no one cares, they said we could leave if we are not satisfied, but refund in not available and given that we had already spent a lot of money on the previous accommodation and only got half of it back, we couldn't afford to lose this too. So 4 terrible days followed, after which we finally returned to our home.

Even though we experienced a lot of scams and negative things, I still fell in love with this place. Our trip was a mixture of good and bad experiences, but it taught me a lot and I am grateful for that. I now know to be more cautious and aware of my surroundings. I won't fall into the same traps again. I also learned to appreciate the small things in life, like the feeling of being relaxed and calm on the island of Cozumel. Despite all the negative experiences, I would still return to Mexico in a heartbeat. The country has a special place in my heart and I can't wait to go back and explore more of its beauty. I am wiser now and I know what to expect, but that won't stop me from enjoying the vibrant culture and delicious food of this amazing country.