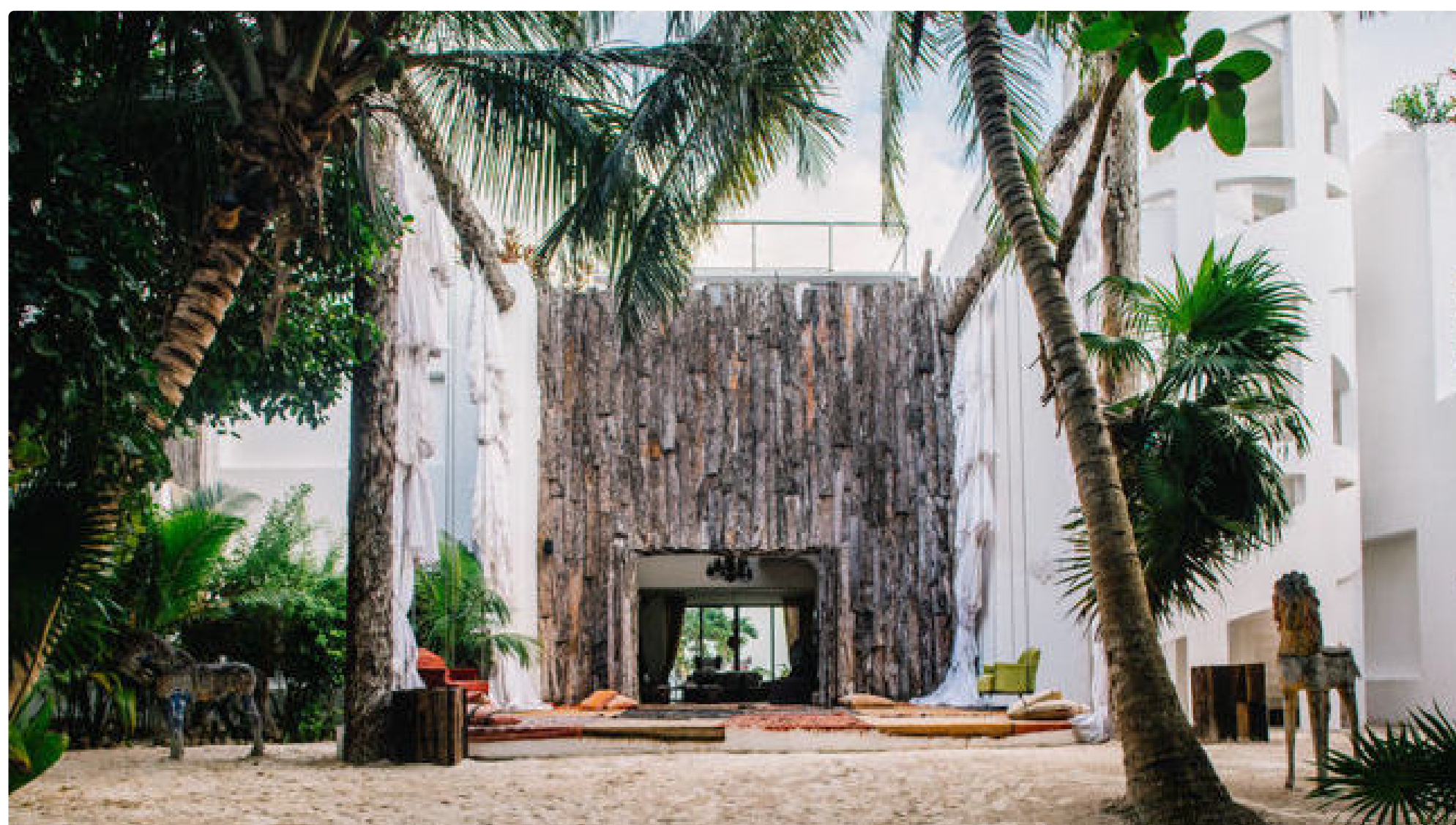


## A Visit to Casa Malca in Tulum, Mexico

December 16, 2017 Graeme Green



Brad Pitt, Leonardo DiCaprio, Drew Barrymore, Al Pacino and Miranda Kerr are among the many actors, models, designers and artists said to have visited Tulum to get away from it all or live it up in recent years, spoiled for choice with places to stay.

Locals, though, remember a time, just a few decades ago, when there was little in the way of luxury here, and little of much else, just 1-2 hotels and a beachfront house with an infamous owner. Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar, whose Medellín cartel once supplied 80 per cent of the cocaine that was smuggled into the US, reaping around \$22 billion per year in profits, is reported to have owned a house here, a compound that served as a discreet Caribbean getaway. Having apparently been abandoned since Escobar's death in 1993 and seized by the Mexican government, that house now forms the basis of Casa Malca, a luxurious, new boutique hotel from Colombian art dealer Lio Malca, who's best known for his New York City galleries.



We find the hotel near to the quiet end of Tulum's beachfront road, not far from the junction to the protected Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. There's no sign by the entrance, just the red lights of a railway junction signal, so as not to attract unwanted attention. "A lot of people want to come in because they're curious to see the art or because of the Pablo Escobar 'rumor'," we're told by a member of staff. "But we don't want that. We want that feeling of exclusivity and being alone here."

Casa Malca officially downplay the house's infamous past, instead preferring to highlight the hotel as an intimate, private getaway, remarkable now for the artworks from Malca's collection and a unique style that makes the hotel stand out on the Riviera Maya. At the entrance of the main house, there are billowing big white curtains hanging on either side of the door, with sparkling sequins. Distressed armchairs and sofas hang from chains, swinging gently, while wooden statues of horses with human faces standing nearby. Just inside the doorway, holding his head in his hands, is a Mickey Mouse-type character, an artwork called Companion (Passing Through) by pop artist KAWS.

Check-in takes place in a small room with a table filled with chunky art books. The lobby looks out onto the beach and the Caribbean ocean, while an upstairs room contains old dentist's chairs and a table with four legs (complete with human feet). On the way to our room, we pass through a small bar area with black and white printed wallpaper by Keith Haring, apparently discovered after the artist's death.



There are 30 private villas around the grounds, each with an industrial-chic look, smart spacious blocks with exposed concrete walls. Each one also contains unique artworks or local crafts and furnishings collected by Malca on his visits to Mexico.

We stay in one of the beachfront suites in the main house, though, one of 11 rooms in the original building. It's a big room, with plenty of space. A living room area with ornate salmon-pink furniture and a weathered pink wooden table are positioned at the front to look out, through the one-way glass, onto the trees, sand and the ocean, just 30 meters away. On a raised level inside the room, there's a big white bed with a swirl of color hanging above it, the Naked Pour Number One artwork from artist Holton Rower. There's also a sturdy wooden cabinet and a big chest of drawers. "Mr Malca decorated everything," we're told by Jorge, the friendly concierge, who shows us around the hotel.

The bathroom is almost as long as the bedroom, with a central sink, a large mirror and L'Occitane products, plus two showers at either end of the suite.



There's plenty more art across the property, including doll sculptures hidden among the bushes on the beachfront, while some of the trees have been planted inside giant, chest-high flower pots. The main pool has colorful Colombian-style hammocks hanging among the trees nearby, with a second pool below ground, inside a quiet, echoey cavern. We spend more time, though, down on the beach, where there's fine white sand and crashing waves. Pelicans and frigate birds glide along the shallow water, while, further out, kite surfers make the most of the blustery weather.

There's always something new happening in Tulum. In the evening, we go out to Xaman, a newly opened cocktail bar and restaurant from Anthony Zamora, who also created Xaman in Mexico City. His new venture is located on the beachfront strip, close to New York chef Eric Werner's popular Hartwood restaurant. Surrounded by jungle and with orange candles on tables, the bar has a laid back clubby feel, with food and drink that celebrates Mayan civilization. "Every cocktail or plate of food has at least one pre-Hispanic ingredient," says Anthony, who comes over to say 'hello'. I start with a refreshing cocktail, Viaje Astral, with bourbon, absinthe and smouldering herb Mejorana all served inside a bowl-like jicara shell. We tuck into small plates, including tangy fish tostadas with pineapple, finishing the meal with shots of glasses of Pox and Mezcal Cenizo from Tamaulipas in north Mexico. Every flavor, from the cocktails to the food to the mezcal, is unique and surprising.



There are more surprises next morning back at the hotel. We eat breakfast in Casa Malca's restaurant Philosophy, which has arrangements of baby dolls high up on the walls, religious statues on the bar, and a small room filled with mirrors at the end of a corridor, alongside a graffiti-filled wall painted by Kenny Scharf. A pleasant breeze comes in through the restaurant's open front. Tea and coffee are served, along with juices and plates of fresh fruit. A waiter brings a tray of croissants, pastries and cakes to choose from. The menu has plenty of Mexican dishes, too: I order Divorciados, a dish of two eggs, refried beans and two warming salsas dividing the plate, one red, one green.

After another lazy day enjoying the beach, we make our way in the evening to the top of the house, past a large rooftop space used for parties, and up a white tower, which has a panoramic view not only of the beach and ocean but the blue and green of Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve and the thick Yucatan jungle that stretches to the horizon.



Back in dimly lit Philosophy at night, surrounded by baby dolls, we enjoy a dinner menu that's heavy on seafood, including a trio of ceviches flavored with tequila and mezcal. While my girlfriend goes for a beetroot risotto, I work my way through a tasty pizza, each slice loaded with a plump shrimp. We sample some of the menu's cocktails, too, including a Sweet & Smoky, which contains Disaronno and Ardbeg whisky, and a fruity Sangria. To finish, there's a small elegant dessert, a sweet taco with popcorn, avocado, red pepper, coconut, chocolate and honey. It's arty and original, a surprising mix of ingredients put together with good taste, just like the rest of the hotel.



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