

MEXICO

From Mayan Gold to Eco-Tourism

Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula not only has the fortune to be one of the most beautiful parts of the world, it is also blessed with a fascinating Mayan history.

The region's most important state—Quintana Roo—is home to famous resorts such as Cancún, the islands of Cozumel and Isla Mujeres, and the towns of Bacalar, Playa del Carmen and Akumel. It also boasts the ancient Mayan ruins of Tulum, Xcaret, Xel-Há and the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. In addition to picture-postcard beaches lapped by the turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea, Quintana Roo has a rapidly expanding eco-tourism sector that shows no signs of abating. In fact, the beautiful state has some of the best economic indicators concerning growth in the entire country, contributing 1.5% of the national GDP with a relatively small population of 1.3 million people.

Much of this is thanks to the youthful population that drives the economy. Nearly 75% of the population is under 34 years old, and a large proportion is employed in tourism, the leading industry accounting for 80% of GDP.

Quintana Roo is increasingly becoming home to agribusinesses

and silviculture industries as well. These are being bolstered by more recent government initiatives to establish technological, communication, health, and software manufacturing industries, especially in the north of the region. The government's economic development plan will ensure all the industries are cultivated so that the state becomes as competitive as possible.

Although tourism is well established in Quintana Roo, there is plenty of room for expansion. In 2010, there were more than 82,000 hotel rooms accommodating 11.7 million tourists. The average amount spent per hotel room was around \$13,500, contributing a total of \$1.1 billion to the economy. The main tourist destinations are Cancún and the Riviera Maya, as well as the smaller destinations of Isla Mujeres, Cozumel and Costa Maya.

At 31, Quintana Roo Governor Roberto Borge Angulo was recently elected as the youngest-ever governor of a Mexican state. His task is to develop eco-tourism further, as well as expand other parts of the state's economy. "There is a very amicable relationship between international business and the government in Quintana Roo," he says. "We always welcome companies to come and invest in the state."

The Governor intends to take full advantage of the fact Quintana Roo's geographical location gives it an exclusivity that investors will not find elsewhere in Mexico. "We have a very strategic position between Latin America to the south, the Caribbean to the east, and the rest of Mexico to the west," says Borge. "Quintana Roo is therefore different from other places in the region because we are very diverse. Not only do you have beaches here, you also have eco-tourism, culture and history all in one place."

Cancún is Quintana Roo's most well known resort and the most popular tourist destination in Mexico. As Borge explains, this gives it heavy exposure to international travelers and business. "Although Mexico City currently has the most flights, Cancún is the airport with the most international flights," he says. Indeed, five million passengers pass through the city every day, not including those traveling by land transportation.

With Cancún firmly established, Borge has turned to focusing on developing lesser-known parts of Quintana Roo's eco-tourism industry, although he has to balance this with preserving the local environment. "Quintana Roo is going to become a green state that takes care of its natural resources and protects its environment," he says. "This state must take care of its green areas because that is what it is known for and that is what keeps the economy moving."

Riviera Maya and Isla Mujeres, two of the region's most under-exploited areas, have been singled out for particular attention. "Right now, we are developing Ciudad Mujeres, since it is where we are going to put the families of the workers in the region so they don't have to keep returning to the mainland," Borge says. "The aim is to create a sustainable city with at least 25,000 to 35,000 hotel rooms between Playa Mujeres and Isla Blanca. The hospitality sector is expanding rapidly here." To illustrate his point, Borge compares it to Las Vegas in terms of capacity.

That, however, is where comparisons with the U.S.'s most flamboyant city firmly end. The aim of creating a sustainable city is something Borge and development agencies have put a high premium on. Francisco Javier Díaz Carvajal, Secretary of Economic Development says, "In Quintana Roo, our economic development strategy is focused on putting all our force behind tourism. However, this cannot be done recklessly. We have to have sustainability if we are to promote the type of eco-tourism that we want to attract here."

Celebrations for the U.N.'s World Environment Day in 2009 took place in Quintana Roo when Mexico was the host country, and the city is trying to draw attention to the environmental issues of the day. Protected areas in the state make up one third of the region. Some are protected by the federal government; others by the state. In particular, the southern region is still relatively virgin, says Díaz, and has been given special protection by the government to prevent over-development. "It is also much less densely forested than other areas, providing huge potential for eco-tourism," he adds.

There are already world-renowned eco-friendly parks in the Riviera Maya, such as Xcaret, Xel-Há and Río Secreto, so Quintana Roo is well positioned to develop more. However, to achieve these aims, Díaz is embarking on an infrastructure improvement program to support development.

To support the tourism industry, the city is working to improve services in hotels, resorts, spas, marinas, restaurants and catering establishments to attract clients. At the same time, the government is aiming to provide better highways, more modern airports, and better port facilities for cruise liners. Quintana Roo's universities also offer top class courses in tourism, catering and even bar-tending.

An analysis and regulation framework is also being established. "We provide consultancy services and specialized training programs,"



Roberto Borge Angulo
Governor of Quintana Roo



Francisco Javier Díaz Carvajal
Secretary of Economic Development

Díaz adds. "An information system to provide trade and economic data is now available and we have established a local commission to analyze competitive issues and offer solutions to improve our business environment."

STATE WITH HIGH POTENTIAL

Aside from eco-tourism, there are plenty of other openings for the canny investor. Cruise liners are naturally attracted to the Quintana Roo region. It is the number one state for cruises in Mexico, with ports in Cozumel, Majagual and Calica, and also the largest recipient of transatlantic boats in the area, registering about 3.5 million visitors a year. In March, Quintana Roo's ultra-modern port in Cozumel handled 332 cruise ship arrivals—representing around 44% of the total for the entire country during this period.

While eco-tourism is set to be one of the biggest driving forces in the economy, there are other niche sectors ripe for investment. "In the last few years, we have established some very important hospitals in the region for tourists," Díaz explains. "Our aim is to establish seven medical centers in Quintana Roo that provide first-class treatment: four in this region and three in the center and south of the state. These are going to be focused solely on health tourism."

In the meantime, the government is looking to improve upon five other areas, namely: agribusiness industry, forestry, fishing and aquaculture, manufacturing, and information communications technology. New centers of education are being developed to train locals to support a more advanced and diversified economy. "It is important to develop educational institutions in the region—we already have 11 universities, but we plan to open more," Díaz adds.

The government is also offering strong support to small and medium sized businesses, and has a fund set up specifically dedicated to these companies. It is working to achieve the goal of creating 400 new companies per year through a program called "Emprende" in order to help develop key industries in the future. Small start-ups will be afforded special protection by the government to help them grow. "In fact, the Quintana Roo government has sponsored nine facilities to protect these start-ups until they are able to compete on a larger level," Díaz says. While these may appear to be lofty ambitions for a relatively small region, Díaz is confident that the challenges that lie ahead can be met by Quintana Roo's resourceful inhabitants, who have successfully overcome serious obstacles in recent years.

"Our people are what differentiate us from other countries," he says proudly. "We Mexicans have been affected by a lot of issues over the last few years, but the issue that most negatively affected us was the H1N1 virus. That hit us harder than security, tropical storms, or hurricanes. And if there was a state that was affected more than most it was Quintana Roo. It has taken to until this year to get back to where we were before the virus and this triumph over adversity will set us in good stead for the challenges ahead." ●

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Governor of Quintana Roo



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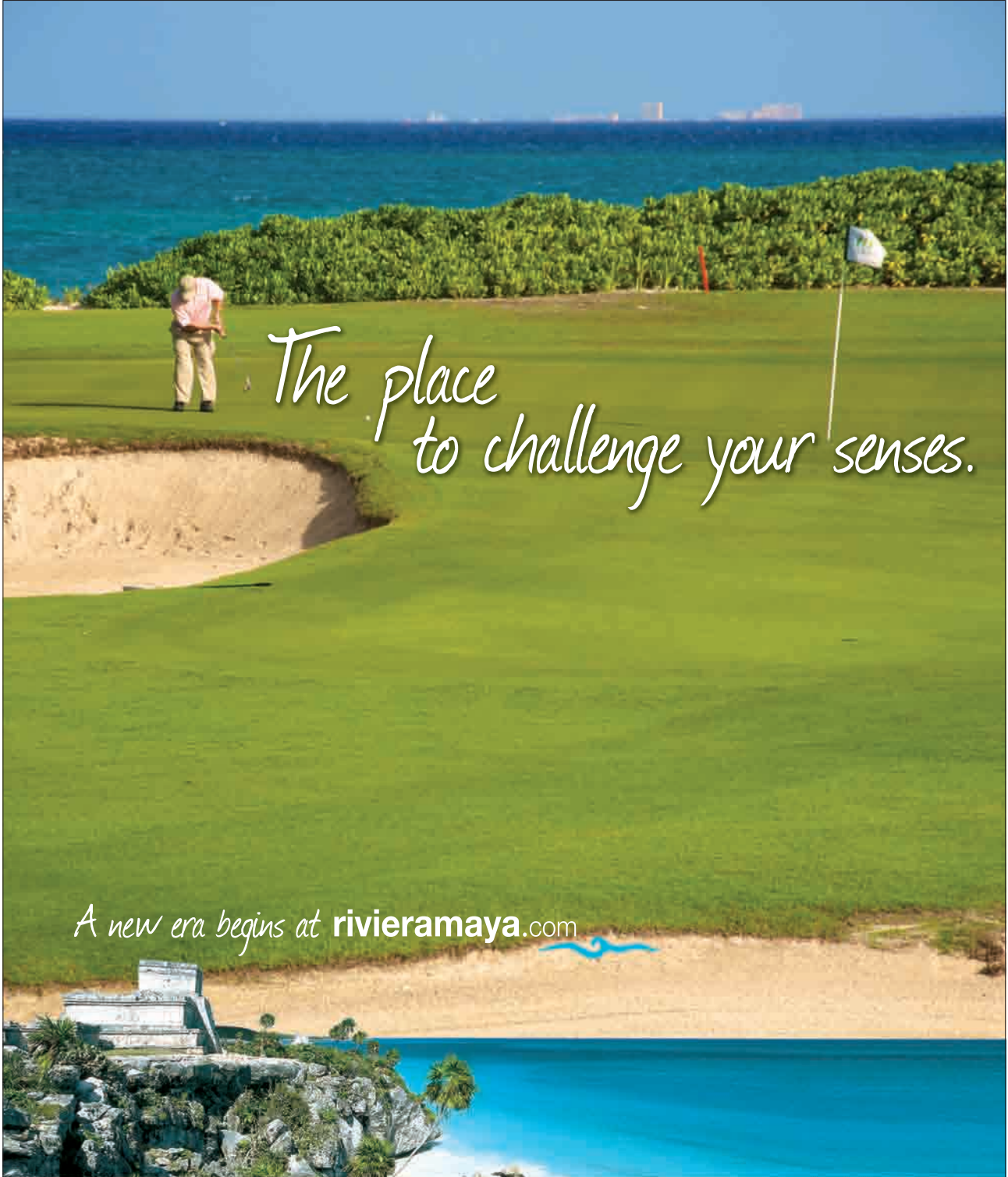
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