

THE GREENING OF MAYAKOBA

OHL had a guiding principle about Mayakoba from the start: to make a luxury project that would also be a luxury for the environment. Like most luxuries, the preservation of Mayakoba's fragile, precious ecology was costly. It also required considerable optimism and luck, as OHL had invested six years of research and work into saving Mayakoba's natural resources before the Mexican government gave them final approval.

In the late 1980s, back when the coastline south of Cancun was undeveloped, OHL acquired its first piece of land on the Riviera Maya. During the 90s, OHL began diversifying its operations just as Playa del Carmen and the area around it came alive as a tourist destination. OHL realized that their land on the Riviera Maya was the beginning of a wonderful opportunity, and began buying adjacent lots. It now owns 590 acres on the Caribbean side of the road, and 990 acres on the opposite side.

At the same time, it was becoming clear that the headlong development of Cancun had caused serious problems. The mangrove tree is one of nature's most efficient "factories," stabilizing sand and mud with its roots to maintain the coast, and harboring creatures that clean the water, thus protecting the coral reefs. Destroying Cancun's mangrove forest to build high-rise hotels along the beach had killed the barrier reef in front of the resort and caused the shore to erode. Too late for Cancun but not for the Riviera Maya, Mexico's government, in common with many mangrove-growing areas around the world, put regulations in place to protect these essential plants.

The land OHL had acquired was a varied landscape of mangrove swamp, jungle, beach, dunes and barrier reefs, dotted with *cenotes* (naturally occurring sinkholes) and alive with a tropical bestiary that included monkeys, turtles, pelicans and flamingoes. One of OHL's first steps, early in the 1990s, was to send a group of biologists to live on the land and identify its characteristics, its inhabitants and – most important – its major vulnerabilities. They earmarked the areas away from the beach where it would be safest to build, and began the awesome task of preserving the mangrove swamp.

Mayakoba's architects had crafted a complex plan in which the natural and man-made would intertwine, complementing and enhancing each other. Beach, golf course,

mangrove swamp and jungle were to be linked by an aquamarine chain of lagoons and canals, man-made but using natural, subterranean water.

To protect the delicate eco-system, OHL spent between five and six million US dollars in research alone, and worked for six years before the Mexican environmental authorities gave them the go-ahead in 1999. They had charged OHL with saving 50 per cent of all vegetation, including 80 per cent of the jungle and 65 per cent of the existing mangroves.

Saving the hard-working mangroves while lagoons were excavated, a golf course carved out, and hotels built was a key concern. Studying a Mayan technique for managing the forest called “socoleo”, the biologists learned about the natural balance of the forest, which plants were expendable, which were not, and how to cut each tree differently. They planted 47,000 mangroves, recovering seeds and utilizing a special planting technique using micro-channels taught to them by the reigning Mexican expert. Ninety-eight per cent survived. In all, some 228,000 plants from 40 families and 108 species were saved. Their nursery now has about 306,000 indigenous plants, from smoky purple-and-green agaves to giant palm trees, which are used to beautify Mayakoba’s unique landscape.

Mayakoba is a blessed land for fauna as well as flora, and the mangrove forest in particular is known for its bio-diversity. Many species left during Mayakoba’s years of intense upheaval, but now deer, boar and many others are returning. “Animals are intelligent,” Hector Alafita, the young biologist who is the project manager for Mayakoba’s Environmental Advisory, says. “If they know they won’t be hunted, they will return to a place that treated them well.”

Let the last word go to Alafita. He began his career as an activist, and then worked for the state of Veracruz on environmental issues. Now, almost to his own surprise, he works for a large corporation, creating a resort. “My friends ask me how I can bear the fact that I’ve ‘sold out,’” he says with a wry smile. “I tell them I’m able to accomplish so much more for the environment on this project than I ever did in the past.”

ABOUT MAYAKOBA

Under the vast blue skies of Mexico’s Riviera Maya stands Mayakoba, as beautiful as the nature that surrounds it. Once just a dream of a resort community of luxury hotels standing along crystal clear waterways and white sand beaches, Mayakoba has grown from a vision to provide one of the most captivating resorts in the Caribbean coastline. Mayakoba holds the immaculate greens of Greg Norman’s 18-hole El Camaleón golf course, the luxurious casitas of Fairmont Mayakoba, the high-end Rosewood Mayakoba

suites, the unique all-pool villas of Banyan Tree Mayakoba, the Jim McLean Golf School and the latest addition to the family will be the Andaz Mayakoba. The signature course is home to the OHL Classic at Mayakoba – the only PGA TOUR event in Mexico. Developed in complete harmony with the tropical forest and mangrove, Mayakoba is connected with a series of lagoons enabling guests to be transported through the resort using the “lanchas” (covered boats) as well as every beach restaurant of the resorts through the Mayakoba Connection ferry service. Mayakoba: a luxury destination like no other, where you are immersed in unspoiled natural beauty near the mysteries of an ancient civilization and pampered by the outstanding service of its hotels.

For more information visit www.mayakoba.com

Media Requests:

Pieter Ruig

Castillo & Ruig Communications

(310) 882-5441 x102

pruig@discovercrc.com