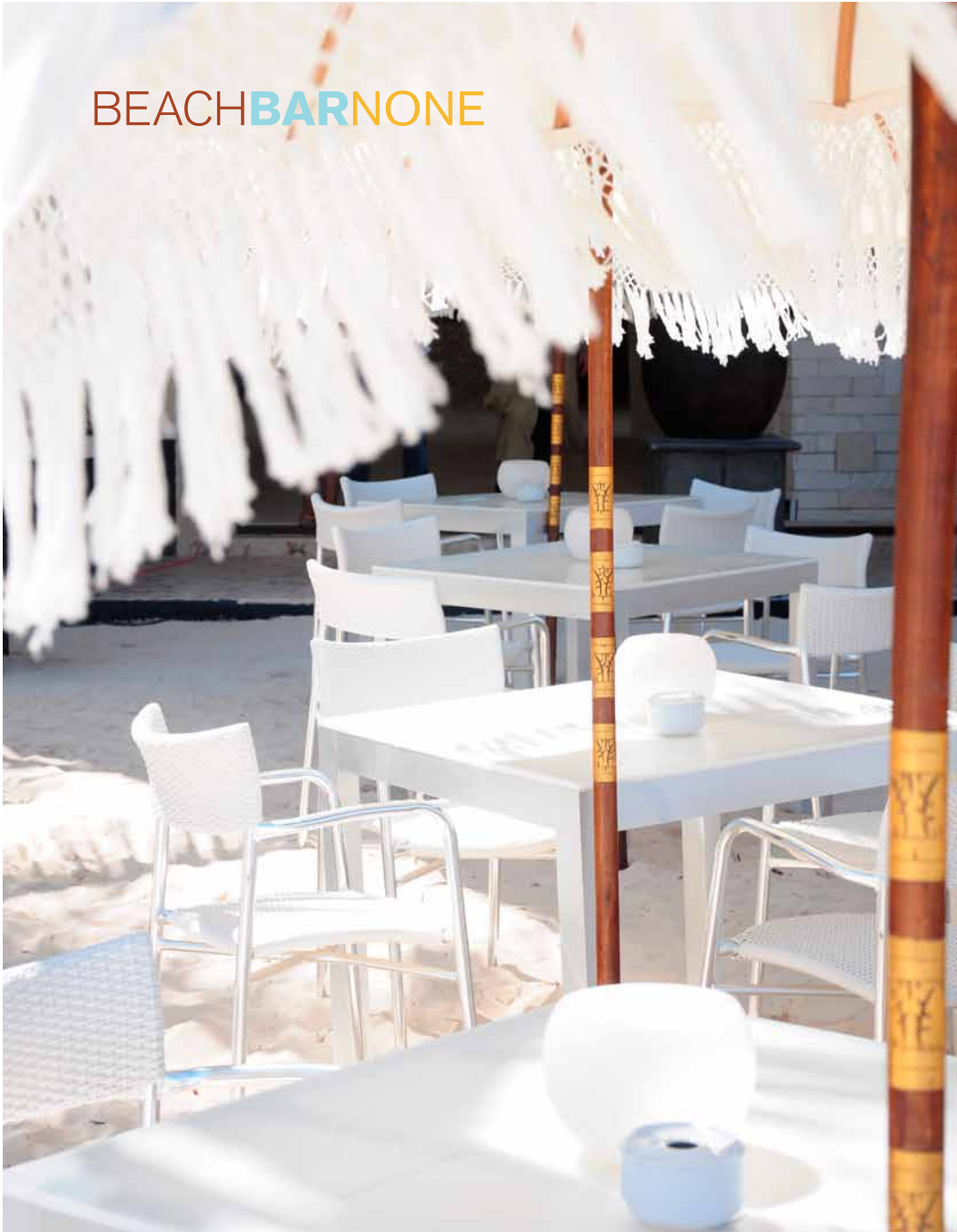


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A DIARY OF DECADENT DELIGHTS, DAY & NIGHT BY JORDAN SIMON

The final swell-egant touch to Condo Hotels' latest Playa del Carmen luxury venture, El Taj Oceanfront, arrived with the late April launch of Indigo, its hip hopping happening beach bar/restaurant. But before I could luxuriate on the sand, designer margarita in hand, I had to negotiate Cancún airport, where queues can resemble bread lines in the old Soviet Union. I assumed I was home-away-from-home free once the Taj black limo (bless them for the chilled towels and mineral water) revved its engine. But as often happens we hit the highway, an asphalt slash through the jungle slinking down the Riviera Maya coast, only to find bumper-to-bumper traffic

that redefined the term Mexican standoff. The 100 Km/h speed limit signs, and frequent indications of the distance to deluxe hotels and such glittering beaches as Maroma and Azul, taunted me unmercifully.

Finally we pulled up to the boutique property, where more chilled towels and warm smiles awaited, along with an invitation to join fellow foodies at Indigo. The semi-alfresco club sits right on the newly restored, widened beach (the playa in Playa del Carmen is really a series of strands stretching contented as a cat in the sun, unraveling like a plush eggshell carpet for three miles along a Caribbean rippling from turquoise to tourmaline).



Condo Hotels developer, Jack Perlman (a New York refugee who in his past life did sports marketing, including PR for the Yankees) regaled us with Playa anecdotes, including how he'd been accidentally stranded there nearly two decades ago. "When I first visited Cancún in the early 80s, it was still sleepy, not so prefab. I returned six years later and found McDonald's and Radio Shacks all over." Asking if any place nearby remained unspoiled, he was told to take the ferry from Playa to Cozumel. Jack literally missed the boat, strolled the two streets that then comprised the village, slept that night in a palapa on the beach. Seventeen years later El Taj and Indigo occupy that very spot.

Innovative Mexican architect Sergio Segura organically blends the lush luscious tropical landscape, natural materials, soothing water features, Balinese-inspired motifs (each Condo Hotel compound shares common design elements while expressing its own individual theme and style), and his signature soft sinuous sensual curves.

Indigo's look combines the contemporary and exotic: Petrified recycled wood tables and benches, mosaic work, river stone, bamboo accents, track lighting, tall elaborate urns fashioned from 30-foot Balinese coconut palms painted white or teak, a recessed ceiling in flowing water patterns that plays off the curved translucent plates and blue and green stemware, echoing the waves just outside.

The exterior features the requisite palm trees garlanded with Christmas lights (wiring carefully concealed underground), tiki torches, and thatching, with such distinctive decorative touches as white Victorian-style fringed umbrellas with stylish stripped bark stands. Teak and wicker chaises and beds with plush taupe cushions lounge luxuriantly like dusky models on the beach.

Two Italians (Andrea Bastogi and Francesco Rossi) and two Mexicans (Alberto May Alva and Oscar Burillo González) leased the space from Jack, who consulted on the development. Francesco and Andrea opened and/or operated several Playa hotspots such as Negrosal and Mosquito Blue, in addition to restaurants in Tuscany. Oscar, their lawyer, moved here from Mexico City six years ago, deeming it "the best thing I've ever done, the quality of life is amazing, and there's also lots of money moving around." Admiring his clients' verve, he asked to participate in their next (ad)venture.

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Chef Gianpaolo Ferrera was born and bred in the Sicilian village of Ragusa; his grandmamma inculcated a love of rustic regional cuisine, and his family sent him at 14 to Palermo to study gastronomy. "Paolo" participated in exchanges and internships in Greece, France, and Switzerland; after graduation peripatetic postings ranged from Melbourne to Madrid. He derives his biggest satisfaction "from the opportunity to combine ingredients from various continents," while integrating his native land's culinary traditions. "Cuisine for me is much more than just cooking. It's almost a musical improvisation, where you have to watch timing and rhythm, to create and to listen to your heart."

His menu includes imaginative salads and pub grub elevated to an art form like fried calamari, gussied up with cilantro mayo and serrano chile, the national staple parilla (leviathan platters of grilled seafood or meats for two), an international smorgasbord from Thai chicken satay to beef carpaccio with Dijon dressing, even kid-friendly fare from fish fingers to French fries. But his specialties take the confusion out of fusion cuisine, an upscale yet down-home blend of Asian-Mexican-Mediterranean ingredients and traditions, saturated in those climes' sunny colors and flavors. Paolo sows his wild "hautes" in such signature dishes as seafood ceviche marinated with citrus and passion fruit, served with crispy beet chips and black caviar (the salty anchors the tart in an odd, beguiling way) or tuna sashimi with Asiatic vinaigrette and Veracruz coffee emulsion, served with julienned local red onion and jicama, capers, and hint of chile and cilantro. It's a deft juxtaposition of tastes and textures, as is his hazelnut-crusted shrimp with mango and watercress salad in apple vinaigrette.





Haute Mexican dishes include lobster tacos, served with salsa de jamaica (not the island, but dried hibiscus petals) and xcatic chile in aromatic lime sauce. But Paolo is Italian and patriotic, so pastas and pizzas loom large. Alongside the classics (carbonara, arrabiatta, alfredo), you might savor homemade ricotta and spinach ravioli in cherry tomato sauce with basil or black taglioloni with calamari, goat cheese mousse, and pistachios. A perfectly thin, crisp pizza crust might be adorned with octopus, potatoes, and roast garlic or pesto, shrimp, and cherry tomatoes, showcasing Paolo's playfully Puck-ish sensibility toward comfort food. Indigo's already considered the "in" spot for breakfast, one of Playa's few places offering a real buffet, as well as scrumptious booze-absorbing specials (to-die chilaquiles in salsa verde or rojo).

Vanilla crême brûlée with strawberries, cheesecake with tangerine sauce, or passion fruit mousse with molten chocolate fondant — all liberally dusted with confectioner's sugar and local cocoa, decorated with drops and drizzles of strawberry and mango purées, garnished with mint and blackberries.



Of course it's also the place to go if you have a sweet tooth for eye candy, in abundance at the splashy opening party where Cuervo Gold margaritas flowed in luminescent lime green, pink, and orange plastic cups. Cool factor aside from ponytails on both sexes, and fashion Fascists parading in everything from white linen to neoprene things? I don't smoke and I crave a cigarette (despite several signs admonishing "La playa no es cenicero" — the beach is not an ashtray, the scent of Gauloises commingles with garlic and Goutal Eau d'Hadrien on the sea breeze).

Watching the see-and-be-scene, Oscar says they hope to emulate the style and exclusivity if not craziness of the Nikki Beach brand: "high-end but relaxing, classy yet comfortable for a fun, slightly older crowd." That's why the food quality is crucial, "attracting a more discriminating clientele." But the Indigo team also wants the club to be family-friendly. Francesco adds, "We'll have live jazz, piano and saxophone one or two nights, and weekend DJs, but a soft lounge ambience, no boom boom disco." "We need to hear the kids crying

over the music," Oscar smiles. "And our special events will be more baby showers than bachelor parties." Still, they plan to introduce such amenities as Thai beds with iPod docks, as well as extras ranging from massages to mezcal tastings, to enhance Indigo's in-with-the-sin-crowd appeal.

Fittingly, Jack likens Playa to a Latin St. Tropez with its series of hedonistic beach clubs, catering to different clientele. Indigo sits toward the quieter, upmarket end of the sands. Yet it's mere steps from the almost pagan party-hearty madness along Calles 6th and 8th, where shills in outlandish getups (one dwarf wears ghoulish black-and-white pancake makeup and a 1940s zoot suit) vie for potential patrons, and dives alliteratively titled Beer Bucket and Tequila Tommy's alternate with swankier cigar lounges smoking with 'tinis and 'tude. One bar's neon sign, missing the "P" in passport, sums up the wild wackiness.

It's enough to stop traffic---in more entertaining fashion than construction along the Carretera Cancún.



HOUSE SPECIAL: Indigo Blue

1/2 ounce Absolut mango vodka
 1/2 ounce Curaçao
 2 ounces Champagne or sparkling wine

Francesco explains, "We decided to create this drink because we thought its color would match the turquoise of the Caribbean Sea, a splash of vodka would give it an energizing kick, and bubbly champagne will create just the right mood while enjoying the beautiful tropical atmosphere of the Beach Club." Amen.

Jetting the Blues Away

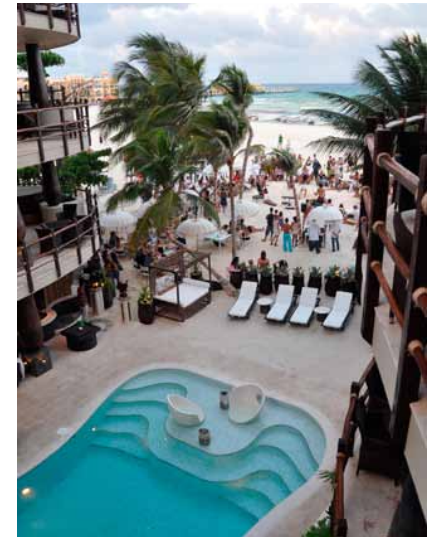
Speaking of blue, it was appropriate that I fly JetBlue to Cancun for my Indigo immersion. Aside from the lack of margaritas and mariachis, the festive ambience, friendly cabin crew, and cushy leather seats presaged the extravagant beach beds and personalized service. And despite fares trending up industry-wide, JetBlue remains a "value" carrier. Now if only they could arrange heli-service into Playa ...

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The Taj Raja Lifestyle

Perlman's five intimate luxury, low-key but high-tech condo compounds respect local architectural traditions and environment, using natural materials like wattle and bamboo, blending unobtrusively with the lush surroundings wherever possible. Perlman consulted aerodynamic engineers, who suggested open external stairwells that optimize air circulation throughout the structure, while shielding it from environmental extremes. El Taj Oceanfront's exterior is a virtual feng shui lesson of Gaudi-esque curves, eschewing flat walls and pointed corners. The onyx pool slinks toward the beach, with built-in spa chairs. The courtyard features stone Buddhas holding barrels streaming water into fountain basins, chairs crafted from one tree as decorative elements, shaped vaguely like turtles and lizards, and delicate Balinese birdhouses.

Jack and his wife travel constantly to Bali, visiting artists' communes, filling two containers with handpicked bibelots and objets d'art. Each condo boasts high-end appointments and the latest gadgetry; owners can individualize controls, but must decorate within accepted categories, selecting from the elegant "garage sale" Jack provides. Hence, the marble-clad baths could feature a rose onyx, black, or porcelain raised basin. Vivid aqua and maroon or earthier pumpkin, chocolate, and maize throw pillows accent L-shaped taupe sofas. Other cool elements might include fertility pieces, rescued teak distressed to resemble antiques, carved Hindu wood elephants, Buddha stone tableaux, abstract Indonesian artworks reminiscent of Rothko and DeKooning, bamboo-fiberglass lamps, and local limestone walls (with fossils embedded). Double-laminated glass doors six millimeters thick ensure sound-proofing (Jack takes a swing with a baseball bat for prospective owners to show how solid and wind-resistant they are; "it scares the shit outta them," he laughs). Choices vary from 1-bedroom apartments to 3-bedroom penthouses with extravagant landscaped sun lounges "not a rooftop but an outdoor living room." Higher-end units have private outdoor Jacuzzi and stainless steel Viking or Lynx grills.



The development sits a block away from a scuba shop; New York-style gourmet deli; just-opened Maya Spa (in Condo Hotel Maya Villa); and The Gym. The latter (built into another sister development, Porto Playa, by Vito Errico, founder of Equinox sports clubs), pumps House and Techno while you pump iron and sports an urban, almost industrial warehouse look with exposed piping; split levels; bar splashed in energetic colors like mango and chartreuse; floating floor for Pilates, yoga, and belly dancing. Only steps away, the pedestrian 5th Avenue buzzes and bustles with restaurants (including personal faves Negrosal and Yaxche), nightlife, and shopping.

www.condohotelsplayadelcarmen.com

● JORDAN SIMON