



HEALTH FIX

SACRED SALVE

A CLUTCH OF PIONEERING MEXICAN SPA STAYS ARE PUTTING ANCIENT INDIGENOUS HEALING PRACTICES BACK IN THE FRAME

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PHOTOGRAPH: MAUREEN M. EVANS

Loungers by the pool at Sha Mexico

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Clockwise from right: decorative lamps, the cooking school building and a sunny corner at Rancho La Puerta; Mexican foliage; Mayan shaman lifts herbs to the sky during a ritual; pool area at Chablé Yucatán



IN A DARK-WOOD CABANA in the deep green Yucatán jungle, Fabiola, a medicine woman, lays out oracle cards. I breathe a sigh of relief that she hasn't asked me that irritating question, "Do you feel stressed?" Instead, dressed in an embroidered Mayan tunic with a headband to protect her third eye, she tells me that my spiritual guide is the angel Gabriel, and that I need to be around water so I can step into the power of my divine feminine. My eyes drift to the pond outside the window. Fabiola explains it's a cenote, one of the thousands of deep-water pools in this part of Mexico that were considered portals to the underworld by the Maya, a living civilisation that dates back to about 2000 BC. These people, who left their mark on what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador, are known for achievements in mathematics, astronomy and writing, and a sophisticated medical system holding a belief that illnesses have a spiritual as well as a physical origin.

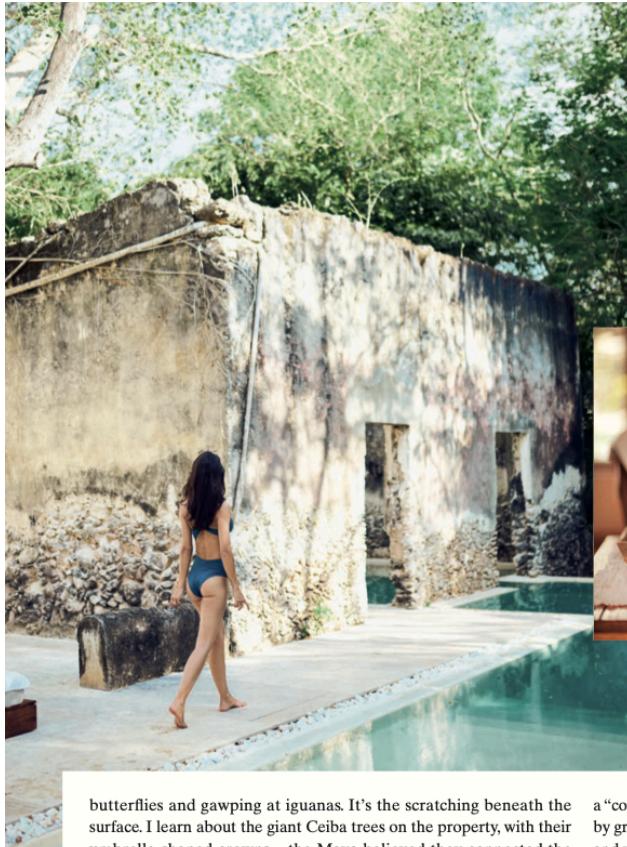
This session is billed as a spiritual consultation, and is one of a new raft of culturally immersive treatments offered by Chablé Yucatán, a

THE SWEAT LODGE CEREMONIES ARE SAID TO RELEASE PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL IMPURITIES

19th-century hacienda in 750 acres of manicured lawns and lush jungle a few miles from Mérida, the Yucatán capital. We've known for a while that we need to move on from mere pampering if we want to find long-term ways to combat our epidemic of anxiety, and guests are becoming more knowledgeable and curious about practices such as sound baths and Qigong, which even five years ago would have been deemed woo-woo. Wellbeing spaces are embracing many Indigenous practices – and their practitioners – with a greater respect. While Mexico, which has 68 Indigenous groups, is still embedded in the Catholicism of its conquerors, amid the global rush towards cynical, for-profit spirituality the country seems determined also to honour its roots. The inauguration of Mexico's president, Claudia Sheinbaum, last October included a limpieza: a cleansing ceremony performed by Indigenous women of Otomi and Nahua lineage, who used holy copal resin smoke and healing herbs, and invoked divine spirits. Sheinbaum grounded her political tenure in Indigenous tradition by embracing protection from the ancestors.

In the course of my stay, my stress starts to dissipate. It's not just my great villa with its private pool, hammock and alfresco shower, or the bike rides through the subtropical grounds, dodging oncoming

PHOTOGRAPHS: COFFELANDNLUK/GETTY IMAGES; MORGAN MAESSEN; KARTIN MILET; RANCHO LA PUERTA: ANDREW REINER; CARLEY RODD/KINTZING



Clockwise from left: Royal Villa at Chablé Yucatán; palm trees on a Mexican hillside; taking time for healing; cup of tea at Rancho La Puerta

butterflies and gawping at iguanas. It's the scratching beneath the surface. I learn about the giant Ceiba trees on the property, with their umbrella-shaped crowns – the Maya believed they connected the terrestrial world with the spirit world. I am given a tour of Chablé's beehive garden, whose gate is adorned with an engraving of the Mayan god of bees and honey, Ah Muzen Cab. These are sacred stingless bees called Melipona beecheii, and each of their hives produces up to three-and-a-half pints of honey per year – the Maya used it as medicine and for a ceremonial drink. Chablé's manager, Leonardo Morado, explains the spirit of the place to me. "This is something that goes deeper than the luxury you see everywhere today: luxury shoes, luxury cars."

My companion at Chablé Yucatán is Antonio Romero, the 32-year-old cofounder of a new US-based organisation honouring Native American traditions called Red Road Journey. Its motto is: "The future has an ancestral heart." I initially met Romero at the Mexican wellness estate Rancho La Puerta in 2024, where he was giving a talk with Red Road Journey's other founder, Tony Skrelunas, head of commerce for the Navajo Nation, about his "conscious tourism" project, which aims to put travel hospitality back in the hands of native peoples. "Given the current ecological crisis, building bridges between natives and non-natives is crucial right now," he told me, adding, "Native peoples have lived in balance with Mother Earth for centuries."

Romero and I visit Chablé's temazcal sweat lodge. These domed structures date back to pre-Hispanic times. Participants sit in a circle around hot stones steaming with local herbs for ceremonies said to release physical, emotional and spiritual impurities. We sign up for

a "corn transformation". Under a thatched palapa structure surrounded by greenery, two women stir an old clay pot of maize over an open fire, and we're invited to grind the cooked grain and make tortillas. Corn is one of the most sacred ingredients in Mayan culture, central to mythology, cosmology and daily life. It feels deeply restful and satisfying to cook, chat, eat and learn with these abuelas.

Romero's heritage is part North American and part Mexican Rarámuri (a tribe known for its long-distance running) and we share a mutual respect for Rancho La Puerta, the spa that was the birthplace of body-mind-spirit health. Located in Tecate, close to the US border, the 4,000-acre ranch at the foot of the sacred mountain of Kuchumaa was founded in 1940 by a Romanian Jewish intellectual called Edmond Szekely and his American wife, Deborah. Szekely's specialist subject was a mystical sect from 200 BC called the Essenes, thought to be the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The group's reverence for nature and healthy diet inspired Rancho La Puerta's vibe: *Fantasy Island* meets high-end commune with a Carlos Castaneda twist.

In the beginning, rooms were made from wooden crates. Adventurous guests were charged about £14 a week to sleep in a tent. As money started to roll in and life became less austere, guests included Hollywood stars such as Burt Lancaster and Kim Novak. Later, more questing souls arrived including Indra Devi, who played a key role in introducing yoga to the US, and Aldous Huxley, who wrote *The Doors of Perception*, his cult 1954 classic about psychedelics, at the ranch. I enjoyed Rancho La Puerta's oddball approach to human vitality. In today's corporate spa world of data-led wellness, it's proudly lo-fi and open-minded. Dream ➤



Clockwise from above: flowers at Rancho La Puerta; Sha Mexico terrace; immersed in relaxation; interiors at Sha Mexico; Mayan shaman holding a conch shell



interpretation, anyone? Workshops on Indigenous wisdom? The latter was the session run by Romero and his group of Red Road Journey “knowledge keepers”, including a Mexican medicine man of Aztec lineage who led morning rituals on the lawn to a demographic of mainly white American women older than 50. I was won over.

Rancho La Puerta is now run by Deborah (in her 103rd year) and her and Szekely’s daughter, Sarah Livia. Deborah, a pragmatic entrepreneur, regales guests with secrets of youth: (1) Don’t stew about things you can’t change. (2) Stay curious. (3) Eat food grown in good soil. Sarah Livia’s interests include goddess culture and shamanism. The sense of being lulled by nature is central to the ranch. Guests walk through meadows filled with wild flowers and discover jasmine-scented bowers

GUESTS WALK THROUGH WILD FLOWERS AND BOWERS DOTTED WITH REPRESENTATIONS OF MESOAMERICAN DEITIES

dotted with representations of Mesoamerican deities. Turtles sunbathe by the koi pond and a friendly raccoon appears as diners eat hibiscus quesadillas on the restaurant terrace. Food is pescatarian and includes dairy, and much of the produce is freshly picked from the organic garden.

After the nature-drenched, spiritually inflected experiences of Rancho La Puerta and Chablé Yucatán, my final destination, Sha Mexico, is a bit of a shock. It’s a stunning white, sci-fi-esque building near Cancún built on the cusp of the Caribbean. The original Sha on Spain’s Costa Blanca is famous for its scientific approach to wellness – Barbra Streisand and Naomi Campbell are fans.

On my first day I am called in for an Advanced Preventative Diagnosis, which involves being strapped to machines and includes a 3D body scan, body composition analysis and cognitive test. Alcohol and coffee are absent and, while the food overseen by chef Lixi Lineas is stellar (everyone starts the day with miso soup, and the avocado gazpacho sets my taste buds zinging), Sha feels spartan after the bountiful dining at Chablé. Yet there is yoga, breathwork and meditation – and the tranquillising effect of turquoise waters and a white beach.

Even Sha’s world of science is embracing the ancient as truly modern. “Mexico has a healing culture that is very different from Spain’s,” says wellness manager Julian Chapa. “We want to respect that.” He tells me that he’s excited to introduce Mayan practices to the treatment menu, and shows me the site where a temazcal will be built. On my last day I pay a visit to Dr Martínez Conde. He closes the screen detailing my health and shrugs. “People need to manage their emotions or they will become ill,” he says. “Let your feelings out of your body. Walk on grass, have sex, listen to music, spend time with dogs, horses. Connect to a water source.” I think of Romero’s “bridge” between old and new. Suddenly I’m back in the jungle with a medicine woman and a sacred pool. ♀

Healing Holidays offers a seven-night stay at Chablé Yucatán from £2,199; a seven-night stay at Rancho La Puerta from £4,899, and a seven-night Recover & Energise programme at Sha Mexico from £5,799, full board. All prices are per person and include transfers. healingholidays.com; chablehotels.com; rancholapuerta.com; shawellness.com

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