The Costa Maya: Evolution of a Touristic Landscape

Introduction

Only 50 years ago, Quintana Roo (then a territory, since 1974 a state) was described as “Mexico’s Empty Quarter” by geographer Clinton Edwards (1957). Except for the capital city of Chetumal (on the southern border), the population was sparse, including the indigenous Maya who were concentrated mostly in the neighboring state of Yucatán. Settlements at Isla Mujeres (site of a small naval base), Puerto Juárez (today part of Cancún), Puerto Morelos, Playa del Carmen, and Cozumel drew a few adventurous tourists (Schell and Schell 1956). Since 1970, this Caribbean-facing edge of the Yucatán Peninsula has become the home of the leading single tourist destination within Mexico—Cancún—largely in response to a government-commissioned study to develop an “east-coast” resort destination to both counterbalance the Mexican Riviera on the Pacific coast and also to compete with Caribbean island resort destinations (Collins 1979). The growth of Cancún has been phenomenal, and Cancún’s zona hotelera has become the quintessential “gringolandia”, as noted by Torres and Momsen (2005) in a seminal article on the resort destination. Quintana Roo’s population increased tenfold between 1970 and 2000, from 88,150 to 874,963 (Torres and Momsen 2005). Cancún proper has exploded from 120 residents in 1970 (117 in Pto. Juárez and 3 on Isla Cancún) to over 600,000 today (Wikipedia 2009), and unofficial estimates place the population closer to one million.

As mass tourism was developed at Cancún in the 1970s and 1980s, alternative forms of tourism (often tent-, cabaña-, or hammock-based) developed along the sparsely settled coast south of Cancún. The coconut-fringed beaches with excellent offshore reef snorkeling and diving opportunities created an image of Jimmy Buffett’s Margaritaville that appealed to small-scale tourism entrepreneurs and tourists seeking an alternative to Cancún, including backpackers. In time, however, the value of coastal property skyrocketed and megaresorts appeared and the stretch of coast from Cancún to Tulum evolved into the Mayan Riviera (in Spanish, la Riviera Maya). South of Tulum, a sand-poor but resource-rich mangrove-fringed wetland area dotted with isolated communities of fisher- and lobstermen was set aside in the 1980s as the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, thereby preserving it from the encroachment of tourism (Figure 1). By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the last undeveloped (and developable) stretch of coast along Mexico’s Caribbean Sea lay south of the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, and it is this area that has become known as the Costa Maya that is the focus of this article. Among the topics addressed herein are:

- the development plans that created a region known as the Costa Maya
- defining the Costa Maya
- tourism patterns along the Costa Maya
- impacts of Hurricane Dean
- recovery from Hurricane Dean, and future prospects.
Prior to 1980, settlement was quite sparse along this stretch of coastline. The only significant town was Xcalak, which was established as a border outpost in 1900. Flattened by Category-5 Hurricane Janet in 1955, Xcalak was rebuilt as a more substantial town. A modest hotel first opened in 1962 (Caballo 2001), and the first all-weather roads (lime and gravel) were extended to the coast from the interior (as well as north to Punta Herrero and south to Xcalak) in 1980. At the point of beach access from the interior, the tiny settlement of Majahual (also spelled Mahahual) soon became a minor domestic tourism destination (balneario). (For elaboration on resort typology, including balnearios, see Meyer-Arendt et al. 1992). A few summer homes, dive shops, and small hotels appeared up and down the coast in the 1980s.

In view of expanding coastal tourism and rumors of development projects, local communities in cooperation with NGOs worked hard to set aside for preservation the Sian Ka’an wetlands, which was established as a biosphere reserve by presidential decree in 1986 (CESIAK 2001,
Creel et al. 1998). This 530,000-hectare world heritage site, augmented in 1994 by the 80,000-hectare protected area of Uaymil, extended 120 km from just south of the Mayan ruins of Tulum to Punta Pulticub (and included the fishing villages of Punta Allen and Punta Herrero).

In the mid-1990s, the government of Quintana Roo announced plans for the “Costa Maya” (a newly coined promotional term) that included the construction of 12,500 hotel rooms (soon expanded to 30,000) along the entire coastal reach from Punta Pulticub to Xcalak (Chung 1999). Xcalak itself was to become a major center for this tourism development. Community leaders in Xcalak, who saw fishing and ecotourism as more proper sustainable activities, were upset that they were not consulted about these development plans (Chung 1999). They contacted the NGO Amigos de Sian Ka’an, who in turn asked the University of Rhode Island’s Coastal Resources Center to help develop a strategy for development of low-impact tourism (Chung 1999; see also Rivera-Arriaga and Villalobos 2001)).

As a result of a combination of factors including the strengthening of Mexico’s federal environmental agency (now SEMARNAT, Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales), a detailed coastal management plan put together by URI’s Coastal Resources Center in cooperation with USAID, NGOs, and local governments and universities (especially the University of Quintana Roo, in Chetumal) altered the direction of tourism development along the so-called Costa Maya (Olsen 2003). The government of Quintana Roo endorsed a new development plan, which grew out of the seven-year (1996-2003) program Conserving Critical Coastal Ecosystems in Mexico (C’EM) (Olsen 2003). Among the outcomes of the management plan, enacted into law by the government of Quintana were 1) allowing FONATUR (the federal tourism development agency) to grant a concession to develop a cruise-ship port (Puerto Costa Maya), 7000+ hotel rooms, and support infrastructure (including an airport and small city for tourism workers) immediately north of Majahual, to be called Nuevo Majahual (not to be confused with Nuevo Majahual, the post-Hurricane Dean improved beachfront at the village of Majahual), 2) establishing the Xcalak Reefs National Park, to conserve fishing resources, and 3) establishing low-density zoning guidelines, including limiting structures to two stories in height in outlying areas, and 4) extending paved roads and electricity throughout the region.

Construction on Puerto Costa Maya commenced in the late 1990s (a concession having been granted to a wealthy Chetumal businessman), and by early 2001 the cruise-ship port commenced operations (FONATUR 2001), and soon two cruise ships per week were unloading 1500 tourists each. In 2004, 250 cruise ships docked, and in 2005, the number was 312. By early 2007, an average of 10-12 cruise ships per week were arriving, and Puerto Costa Maya has become Mexico’s second more important cruise ship destination. Non-cruise-ship tourists were estimated at 36,000/year (60% Mexican) in the early 2000s (FONATUR 2001).

Aside from the soon-to-open Hotel Costa Maya near the cruise-ship terminal in Puerto Costa Maya, there were 260 hotel rooms between Pulticub and Xcalak in mid-2006 (unpublished data courtesy of Instituto Tecnológico de Cancún), up from 75 hotel rooms in 1998 (Caballo 2001). But aside from the 29-room, 3-story cinderblock Hotel Mahahual, the average Costa Maya hotel had only 3-4 guest rooms.

Paving of the highways commenced in 1998, and paved highways now extend north to Punta Pulticub and south to Xcalak, slightly inland from the coast. The extension of electricity followed, and communities such as Majahual and Xcalak were able to abandon their power generators in the early 2000s. Electric lines do not extend along the coast, however, and many residences, dive centers, and small hotels depend upon diesel- and gas-powered generators, as well as wind and solar energy, for their power supply.
II. The Costa Maya Defined

Although the labeling of this region as the Costa Maya may be attributed to tourism promotion, the name has slowly come into use as a vernacular region. The evolution of many vernacular coastal regions is attributed to such a process (Lamme and Oldakowski 1982, 2007), and eventually the boundaries of such regions become better defined. The Costa Maya as a region is still quite new and sparsely populated, however, and hence there is still disagreement in the literature as to its limits. To literally define the “Mayan Coast” as the coast of the Maya civilization is misleading, as the Maya inhabited a vast region including all of the Yucatán Peninsula and Belize. The following definitions may be considered:

- **Costa Maya, the FONATUR-backed project.** This narrow definition refers to the cruise-ship dock and facilities, as well as the supporting infrastructure (airport, commercial and residential urban area reclaimed from the mangrove wetlands) at Nuevo Majahual.

- **Costa Maya, the broader tourism development district.** This zone is usually defined as extending from Punta Herrero south to the Belizian border. Since the establishment of the Sian Ka’an reserve (which precludes further tourism development), however, the northern border is now considered by many to be Punta Pulticub (where a small airstrip is located).

- **Costa Maya, defined geologically.** In terms of coastal geomorphology, this is a 200-km-long reef-fringed limestone headland with recurved sandspits in the north (Punta Herrero occupies such a spit) as well as in the south, just south of San Pedro, Belize. This was one unbroken landmass until the forerunner of the Boca Bacalar Chico canal was hand-dredged by the Maya centuries ago (and the Zaragoza Canal was first dredged in 1899).

- **Costa Maya, the vernacular region.** This region is essentially the same as the geologically defined region. Although the northern reach (Punta Herrero to Punta Pulticub) is technically within the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve boundaries, it is accessible by road from the south. Tourists visit Punta Herrero as part of their Costa Maya visit, and hence it is considered part of the greater Costa Maya. In the south, there has been a historic connection with the town of San Pedro on Ambergris Cay since well before the establishment of Xcalak, with evidence of extensive cross-border settlement. There is cross-border tourism to a limited degree (mostly dive-related), and in recent years, as part of the annual Costa Maya Festival in San Pedro, a beauty pageant has been open to—and won by—aspiring beauty queens from both sides of the border (see various back issues of the online *Costa Maya News*). (On Cay Caulker, south of Ambergris Cay, the opening of a Hotel Costa Maya provides evidence of efforts to extend the vernacular region even further south.)

In addition to the four definitions presented, various others are sometimes used, and usually incorrectly. Aside from the offshore island tourism centers of Isla Mujeres and Cozumel, the recognized mainland zones of tourism along Quintana Roo’s Caribbean Coast include: 1) Cancún (essentially the *zona hotelera*), 2) the Riviera Maya, the zone of mega-complexes and mass tourism destinations extending from Cancún to the Mayan ruins at Tulum, 3) Tulum, a toponym that now refers to an 8-km stretch of coast between the Mayan ruins and the entrance to Sian Ka’an (in addition to its namesake town located 2 km inland), and 4) the Costa Maya (see Figure 1). The Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, between Tulum and the Costa Maya, caters mostly to day-use ecotourists but is not considered a zone of coastal tourism development.

III. Tourism Patterns

With the exception of the economic growth pole at Puerto Costa Maya, tourism development is fairly sparse and generally limited to “eco”tourism (Caballo 2001, Lopez et al. 1998). At Xcalak, for example, the largest facility is the dive resort Costa de Cocos with 16 units, mostly rustic thatch-covered bungalows. There is only one stand-alone restaurant in the village, where electricity arrived only in 2005.
Majahual and its surrounding experiences a slightly greater level of tourism because of two reasons: one, it is the first beach reached when arriving from the interior, and two, it is proximate to the cruise ship dock at Puerto Costa Maya (Photo 1). Majahual is an important balneario for domestic tourists, who arrive in the hundreds (more during Holy Week and Christmas holidays), mostly from Chetumal in private vehicles. All other days (except Sundays), cruise ships arrive, usually two per day (until 2007).

On cruise ship internet sites, passengers are given various choices as to what to do while their ship is in port all day long. Dozens of buses, taxis, and four-wheel-drive vehicles are ready to collect the thousands of disembarking passengers and distribute them to their various destinations. While many opt to visit Mayan ruins, rainforests, or urban areas in the interior, most stay closer to the point of disembarkation. Several of the nicer dive centers and small resort hotels within a 20-km radius of Puerto Costa Maya generate a significant amount of their revenues by appealing to cruise ship passengers who want experience diving the reef or just relaxing comfortably under the coconut palms.

The greatest beneficiary of the cruise ship trade has been Majahual itself (Photo 2). Although still quite small, and with few hotels, until 2007 the village transformed itself into a microcosm of Mexico as numerous vendors set up shop along the sandy beach road (off-limits to vehicles when cruise ships were in port), and entertainment was provided regularly by mariachi or reggae bands. Hair-braiding and massage outlets were numerous, and tourists were encouraged to drink and relax on the coconut-lined beach. The high levels of activity subsided as the tourists returned to their ships in late afternoon.
Along the beaches outside of Majahual are isolated clusters of vacation homes and small lodging facilities, most with only 3-6 units (Caballo 2001). Many of the homes and most of the hotels/cabañas/bungalows are owned by expatriate Americans or Europeans, and the level of tourism is relatively “low key”. Tourists that come here are a combination of adventure backpackers, specialized diving/fishing enthusiasts, and cruise passengers transported in for a day of leisure at the beach or reef.

IV. Hurricane Dean

Early in the morning of Aug. 21, 2007, Hurricane Dean slammed into the Costa Maya as a Category-5 hurricane with sustained winds of 264 kph (165 mph) and a barometric pressure of 206 mb (NWS 2007). The eye of the storm came ashore between the cruise ship dock and about 3 km north. Practically all residents were evacuated, and no deaths were recorded. However, damage to coastal structures was quite high, especially in the right-quadrant zone extending north from Puerto Costa Maya about 20 km. One strip of small hotels and summer homes, near Punta Placer, was virtually flattened (Photo 3). Washover sheets of sand and coral rubble buried the coastal road and vegetation, and cars and generators were washed away. Majahual had extensive damage as well, although cinderblock shells of structures survived. All of the wood and thatched buildings, including most of the tourist facilities, were destroyed. But the greatest impact of all was destruction of two-thirds of the cruise ship pier, which at the time was estimated to require 6-8 months to be fully functional again. At Xcalak, 60 km south but in the “left quadrant” of the storm, damage from Dean was minimal. Power to the Costa Maya had been knocked out, but the Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE) worked amazingly fast to restore power to the region. In interviews conducted only days after impact, none of the interviewees expressed any desire to give up and move away. All were committed to rebuilding.

In addition to the direct damage, the greatest fear was the potential economic loss resulting from damage to the cruise ship pier. This author was in Majahual four days after hurricane landfall when the governor of Quintana Roo arrived to speak to the community about restoring
the dock, rebuilding the town, and reestablishing the economic engine that sustained the region. Few knew what lay ahead.

V. Recovery from Hurricane Dean

As of Fall 2009, the Mexican Costa Maya had not yet fully recovered. Physically, the region was perhaps 90% back to normal. A field visit in October 2008 showed that Puerto Costa Maya port infrastructure was nearly ready to receive thousands of cruise tourists. The support town of Nuevo Majahual was adding residences and businesses. At Majahual itself, the beachfront had been cleaned up, vendors were banned from the beach (although concessions were allowed for things such as beach chairs, beach umbrellas, and restaurant service), and FONATUR paid for a pedestrian-only malecón to replace the sand beach road (Photo 4). Beachfront businesses were largely back in action, and several new hotels and tourist complexes had been completed (Photo 5)
But economically, the recovery figure is perhaps 35%. In August 2007, it was estimated that the cruise ship dock would be completed in 6-8 months, and that cruise ships would be arriving by Spring 2008. However, pier reconstruction was still underway during this author’s October 2008 field visit, and not until October 31, 2008 did the first cruise ship return.
By then, the global recession was kicking into high gear, and demand for cruise travel fell off sharply. In good weeks during early 2009, two or perhaps three cruise ships would dock at Puerto Costa Maya, down from 10-12 in pre-Dean years. Compounding the problem in early 2009 was negative publicity associated with drug gang violence. Although concentrated in the federal capital, northern states, and northern border cities, the U.S. State Department issued travel advisories for Mexico, and overall tourism declined. When a swine flu epidemic (later pandemic) broke out in Veracruz state in early 2009 and quickly spread throughout Mexico, tourism numbers dropped further still. (To offset low tourism travel to Mexico, most airlines dropped fares, but tourism numbers did not rebound.) For several months (April, May), no cruise ships docked at Puerto Costa Maya because of the perceived swine flu threat (Costa Maya Newsletter 2009)

**VI. Future Prospects**

In the future, we can expect two forms of tourism to develop along the Costa Maya. According to the FONATUR website, “priority attention will be given to sun and sand tourism and golf (71%), diving and water sports (14%), ecotourism and cultural tourism (12%) and business tourism (3%). It further envisions “a supply of 7,800 tourist class and low density hotel rooms, in hotels and ‘Mayan Village’ type cabins, which will meet the demands of almost one million tourists” (FONATUR 2001). The Mexican federal government has broached the idea of extending the Xcalak highway south and building a bridge to Ambergris Cay, which is experiencing a similar real estate boom. So far, Belizean officials are cool to the idea, but the integration of the entire Costa Maya may not be far off.

While FONATUR’s vision for the future may be overly optimistic, there is no doubt that Puerto Costa Maya will be the dominant growth pole for the region. And although there are plans to develop marinas and housing along the Zaragoza Canal south of Xcalak, it is anticipated that at distal locations more sustainable forms of tourism development (diving, ecotourism) will continue to prevail, at least in the immediate future.

It is somewhat ironic that the overall low-density, low-key form of tourism desired by most local and expatriate residents of the Mexican Costa Maya has become somewhat dependent upon the arrival of thousands of cruise ship passengers every week. To many tourists, the term Costa Maya has come to symbolize an unspoiled corner of the Caribbean, sort of an anti-Cancún. Even those that arrive via cruise ship appreciate arriving in a less developed section of the American tropics (as evidenced by the activities they sign up for once the ship docks).

However, to many in the tourist-supply business in Majahual and other points proximate to Puerto Costa Maya, the region is seen as the “next Playa del Carmen”. In fact, the comparison of Majahual with a Playa del Carmen 30 years ago is made so often that this author suspects many merchants feel they are getting in on the ground floor of the next big touristic boom. So far, this boom has been held back by the aforementioned events (hurricane, global recession, drug violence, and swine flu scare). And enough land-use restrictions exist to ever allow the Costa Maya to become another Riveria Maya. But the growth-pole concept will permit a mini-Playa del Carmen to evolve at Majahual/Puerto Costa Maya/Nuevo Majahual.

Several recent developments may stimulate tourism to the Costa Maya in the near future.

For one, the letting of bids for construction of a closer international airport—near Tulum—is proceeding. Already assigned an airport code (TUY), plans for this airport were halted twice because of economic concerns. In 2009, plans were on again, and the travel time from TUY to the Costa Maya will be about three hours, a reduction from the current five. Also, there are serious plans for causeway due east from just north of Chetumal across the Bay of Chetumal. At the point where this new road will hit the beach, a new town of Xahuayxol will be built. Already some resort development has gone up at this site in anticipation of an increase in domestic tourism (mostly weekends and vacation periods). These developments,
coupled with improvements in the world economy, disappearance of the swine flu, improved perception of the lack of drug violence in Quintana Roo, will set the Costa Maya back onto a touristic upswing.

In spite of concerns of a new Playa del Carmen evolving on a still semi-pristine Costa Maya, such development will be much smaller-scale and much more localized. Tourism development is bound to change the ambience of this forgotten corner of the Mexican Caribbean (Mexico’s Empty Quarter only two generations ago). But because of foresight and planning, and the efforts of many local and expatriate stakeholders, safeguards are in place to preclude another Mexican Riviera or Mayan Riviera to be developed. Similar safeguards are in place on Ambergris Cay, on the Belizean portion of the Costa Maya, where high-density tourism growth has been slowly spreading northward from the San Pedro core. Much of northern Ambergris Cay is within the Bacalar Chico National Park and Marine Reserve, a World Heritage site. When the Belizean government floated the idea of ‘de-reserving’ 1050 hectares (2600 acres) to sell to a developer, public outcry put the idea to rest.

No doubt the Costa Maya will change over the next few years. Most tropical beach resort destinations do. But it is expected to remain a more subdued type of touristic coastal destination, less subject to the cyclic evolution—and touristic saturation--characteristic of many (if not most) tourist resort areas.

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La Costa Maya : évolution d'un paysage touristique

La Costa Maya est une région côtière du sud du Quintana Roo (Mexique), proche de l'îlet Ambergris au Bélize. Contrairement à la côte caribéenne du Mexique qui a souffert du développement du tourisme de masse à Cancun et le long de la Riviera Maya, la Costa Maya s'est orientée vers un développement durable avec notamment une faible densité de construction et le développement de l'écotourisme.

Le développement s'est concentré autour de Puerto Costa Maya où un terminal de croisière a été construit en 2001. La station balnéaire (balneario) de Majahual est devenue dépendante des 10-12 bateaux de touristes qui débarquaient chaque semaine. En dépit d'importants plans de développement, les plages reculées de la Costa Maya accueillaient tout au plus des écotouristes aisés et du tourisme lié à la plongée sous-marine.

Le cyclone Dean, de catégorie 5, a dévasté le paysage en août 2007 et le rétablissement économique n'a pu être entamé que fin 2008, après la réouverture du terminal de croisière et la reconstruction de Majahual. Fin 2009, le trafic de croisière n'a pas retrouvé son niveau
The Costa Maya is a vernacular coastal region of southeastern Quintana Roo (Mexico) and adjacent Ambergris Cay, Belize. As Mexico’s Caribbean coast suffered many growth pains associated with mass tourism development in Cancun and along the Riviera Maya, the Costa Maya by contrast was projected for more sustainable development including low-density housing and ecotourism. Development so far has been concentrated in Puerto Costa Maya, where a cruise ship pier and terminal were built in 2001. The nearby beach resort (balneario) of Majahual became dependent upon the 10-12 shiploads of tourists that descended upon it every week. In spite of big development plans, the more remote beaches of the Costa Maya cater to fewer, but well-heeled ecotourists and dive tourists. Hurricane Dean made landfall in August 2007 as a category-5 storm, and economic recovery only began in late 2008 when the cruise ship pier re-opened and Majahual rebuilt. As of late 2009, the cruise-ship traffic had still not recovered to pre-Dean levels, and a global recession coupled with swine-flu and drug violence scares has lowered U.S. tourism to Mexico. To what degree new tourism infrastructure such as an international airport at Tulum, a proposed causeway from Chetumal to the beach, and a new resort complex at Xahuayxel will stimulate tourism on the Mexican Costa Maya and eventually lead to a coastal highway link with San Pedro, Belize is still unknown.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Mexico, Costa Maya, Mass tourism, Hurricane Dean, Tourism development, Cancun