

Mayakoba

★ Cenote Entrances

— Cave Passages

.... Former Cave Passages



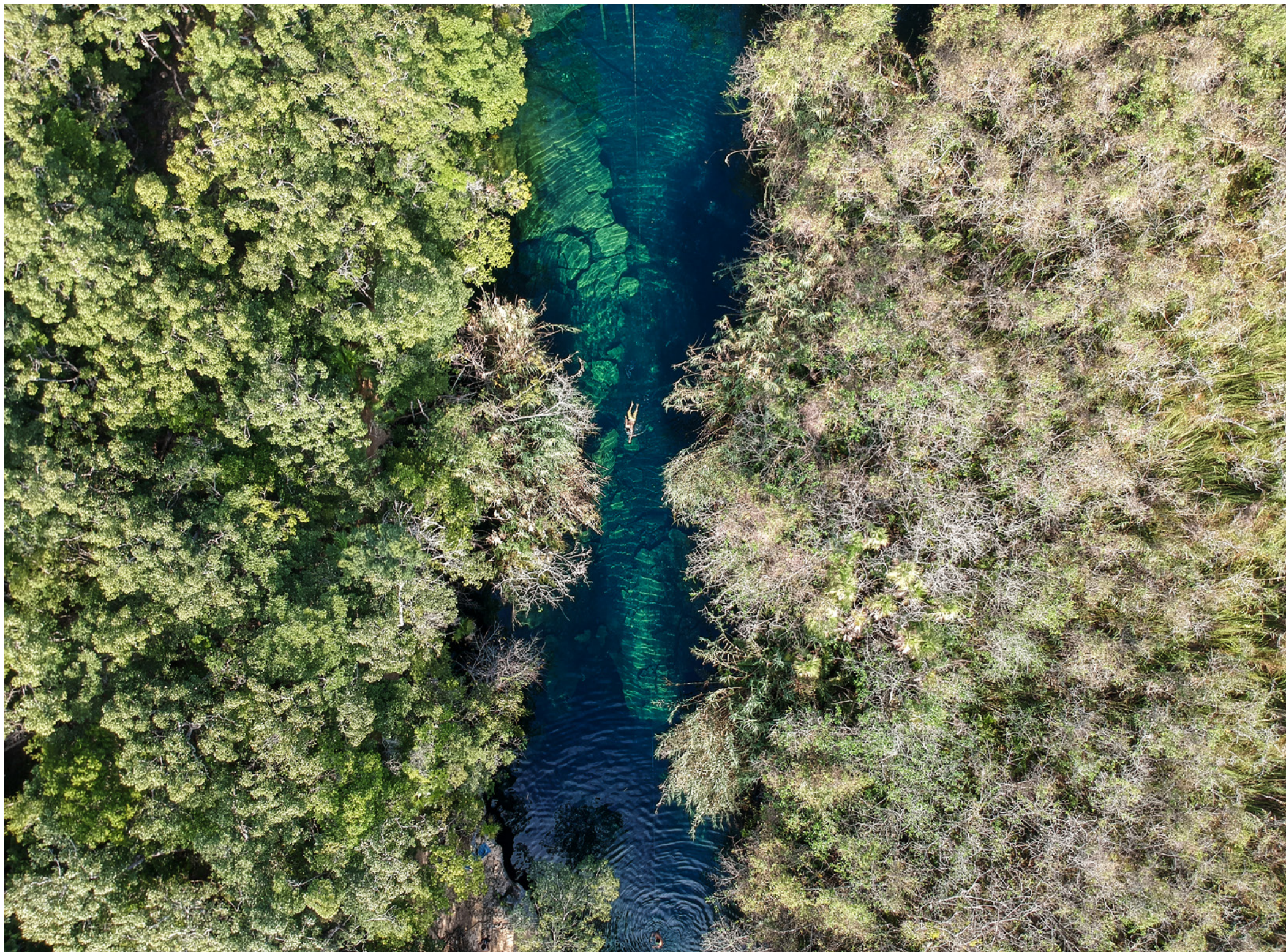


Page 13: In some sense, the caves in this area are all connected. We captured aerial map imagery with a drone to add greater context to the maps we made of the Mayakoba caves. Cave passages are indicated with solid lines, whereas dotted lines indicate the former cave passages that have collapsed into the canal system.

Left: The dock at Matt's house was a familiar launchpad for our explorations.

Center: Drone image of a rugged beach just south of the Tulum ruins.

Right: A swimmer at Mayan Blue, part of Sistema Ox Bel Ha, the second-longest submerged cave system in the world. Located south of Tulum.







Left: Drone image of Rosewood's lagoon villas near the beach at Mayakoba.

Right: The central area of Rosewood at Mayakoba.







The Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico is an incredible place. Its vibrant culture, Maya ruins, great food, and beautiful beaches make it one of the greatest destinations in the world. From the massive resorts of Cancun to the more peaceful city of Playa del Carmen to the yoga retreats and jungle parties of Tulum, it has something for everyone.

Our project was born on a piece of the Yucatán Peninsula called Mayakoba. Located just north of Playa del Carmen, Mayakoba is a luxurious collection of resorts that encompass 2.5 million square meters (620 acres) of thick jungle, dense mangroves, and white-sand beaches, all surrounded by water. Amongst the natural beauty are four different resorts, a collection of private residences, a golf course, and other amenities.

We also had a vast expanse to explore at Ciudad Mayakoba, a new mixed-use property developed by RLH properties, the same company that operates Mayakoba. Ciudad Mayakoba focuses on green space and a natural environment.

A distinctive part of Mayakoba is the lagoon and canal system that forms a lattice across the entire resort. We suspected that the canals would form an extension of the cave systems since their natural formation was likely caused in part by ancient cave collapses and erosion from water emerging from the caves below ground.

Prior to our exploration, Mayakoba had three known cenote entrances: the well-known sand trap on hole 7 of the golf course, the cenote Guadalupe at the Rosewood spa, and the cave called Burrodromo near the entrance to the nature trail.

Top left: Calakmul is a Maya archaeological site on the south end of the Yucatán Peninsula, near the border with Guatemala. Nestled deep in the jungle, Calakmul was one of the largest and most powerful ancient cities ever uncovered in the Maya lowlands.

Bottom left: A whale shark in Puerto Morelos, a bit north of our project site. These amazing animals are the largest extant fish species. While they are sharks, these filter-feeders aren't dangerous to people, allowing us to capture this shot up close.

Right: Drone image looking down the coast near Tulum.

Right: A carefully lit shot allowed us to capture the detail of the stairs at the nature trail entrance of Burrodromo.

Burrodromo is the most well-known cenote on the property. It's an example of a closed cenote in which there is a dry section at the front of the submerged part of the cave. A set of stairs had been installed to allow visitors to walk down into the dry chamber to see the large underground cavern with bats, stalactites, and other formations. A visit to Burrodromo is a worthwhile excursion for guests of Mayakoba.

Famous National Geographic cave explorer Wes Skiles, alongside notable pioneers Jim Coke, Tom Morris and Pete Butt, explored at least some parts of Burrodromo in 1988 or 1989 at the request of the then-landowner, making it one of the earlier cave dives in the peninsula. But Wes Skiles died in a diving incident a few years before our project started, and the survey data and maps from the original work went missing. This left us mostly guessing about what we'd actually find in Burrodromo, and while we suspected the cave might connect to Guadalupe at the Rosewood spa thousands of feet to the east, we couldn't be sure until we were able to see the connection ourselves.

Of course, we knew we'd locate more cenotes and cave passages on the property. We planned to explore both the east (resort) side of Mayakoba and the west (Ciudad Mayakoba) side of the property, giving us a massive area in which to find new caves. We'd expose these new caves through several strategies:

- By navigating from the known cave entrances to discover new cenotes that connected underground.
- By using aerial drone and satellite imagery.
- By underwater exploration of the many kilometers of canals, looking for cenote entrances that existed below the water.

All these tactics were successful. By the publication of this book, we'd explored six distinct cave systems, finding three completely new and unexpected caves.

This was a big project, and despite our extensive explorations, we still have much more to discover, particularly in the Ma' Áayin cave system and at Ciudad Mayakoba, which you'll read more about in this book. As we find more, we'll continue to extend the maps we published here.

We've been in hundreds of caves around the world, and the Mayakoba project revealed some of our absolute favorites.

Burrodromo is a true jewel. A shallow cave, it is decorated with extensive stalactites and stalagmites and white and yellow walls, existing entirely in fresh water. In some places, the water level is a bit below the roof of the cave, creating huge air domes that permeate a large area around the system itself. The most distinctive parts of this system are the huge flat ceilings atop a remarkable forest of stalagmites like nothing we've seen before.

Contrasting with Burrodromo, Ma' Áayin is a deeper coastal cave with exceptionally dark walls, almost no decoration, and both fresh water and salt water-filled passages. Clouds of wispy hydrogen sulfide separate the levels in the cave, creating a spooky atmosphere that makes this one of our favorite caves anywhere. A totally unexpected discovery, Ma' Áayin still has ongoing exploration potential and we suspect the map in this book will continue to grow.

The caves we found at Mayakoba represent most of the forms found in the Yucatán, making the property a stunning showcase of the diversity of caves in the region. ♦

