

Travel

# Exploring caves and shopping in Riviera Maya

By **MELODY WREN**  
Special to *The CJN*

The Riviera Maya in Mexico is known for its white sand beaches, natural caves and craters. The Google Earth image of the Yucatan Peninsula shows it has more than 8,000 craters, which makes it look like a large chunk of Swiss cheese.

I spent a few days in the Yucatan Peninsula recently. Exploring the caves, with their underground rivers, was one of the highlights of my trip, along with shopping for silver jewelry.

The *cenotes*, or sinkholes, found in the Yucatan Peninsula are sunken caves, the rarest of all types of caves and one of the great natural treasures of Mexico. The extensive network of caves and subterranean rivers are among the longest and largest in the world.

The group I was travelling with explored Rio Secreto, the longest continuous chain of underground rivers, caves and *cenotes* in the Riviera Maya. Rio Secreto was discovered only four years ago, when a man was digging in his garden and found an opening to 15 kilometres of underground caves, with 12 different natural *cenotes* spread over 45 hectares. After some excavation, Rio Secreto opened to the public, only 1-1/2 years ago.

To get to Rio Secreto, we hiked through the jungle to the man-made opening of the caves and ventured into the darkness. With only our headlamps to guide us in such ink-black darkness, it was tricky to avoid grabbing the odd stalagmite to stay balanced, but I knew if I broke one off, there would be trouble, as the hundreds of thousands of sparkling stalagmites and stalactites are tens of thousands of years old.

Stalactites the length of extension cords hung from the

cave ceilings, almost touching the bottom. I expected the caves to smell damp or of mildew, but they didn't smell of anything at all. There was no distraction from the spectacular and surreal scene of stalactites dripping from the high ceilings and walls, and stalagmites standing at attention on the floors of the caves.

Hiking led to wading through the first shallow *cenote*. Again, I had to watch my footing over paths littered with limestone ledges, chunks and boulders. Then we approached an incredibly narrow opening, made smaller and tighter by a low ceiling. We swam through the opening, heads hung down to avoid the low ceiling, paddling as efficiently as possible, as it was approximately 14 metres deep.

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[Melody Wren photos]



A cigar shop in Playa Del Carmen

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## Lifestyle

*'I lost all sense of space and time'*

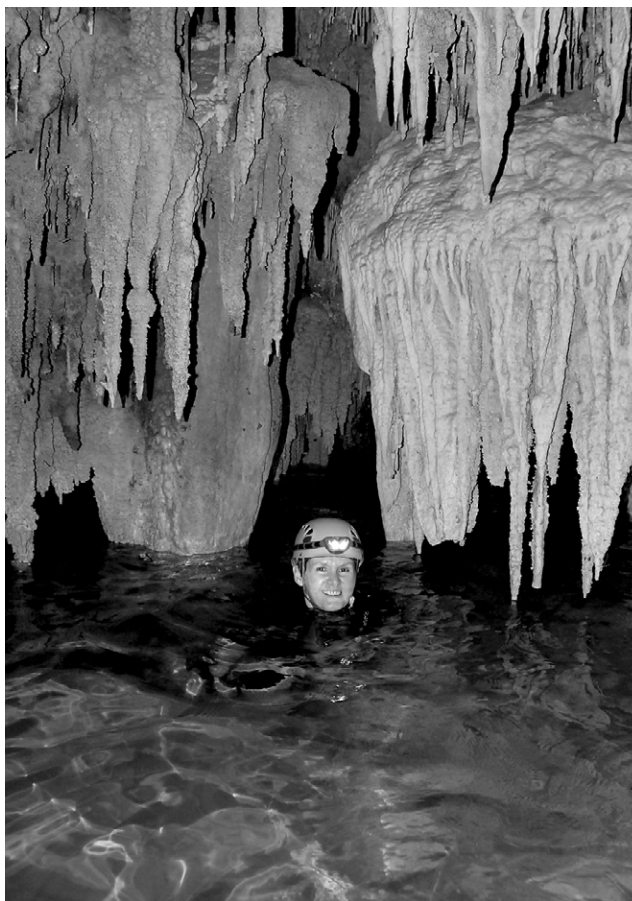
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At about the halfway point, our guide, Moses, told each of us to have a seat on a limestone ledge and instructed us to turn our headlamps off, plummeting us into the darkest silence I have ever experienced. Without a glimmer of light, it was darker than fresh tar. We continued to sit on the ledge, our feet dangling in the chilly water. I moved my feet slightly, as I lost all sense of space and time, and started to think I might actually be asleep, dreaming that I was in a womb-like cave.

The Rio Secreto tour, which is approximately 1-1/2 hours long, cost \$49. It's for small groups and it's led by knowledgeable guides. I have claustrophobic tendencies and had to persuade myself to participate. This was definitely one of the most exciting adventures I have ever been on.

As a complete contrast to the wonderful caves, why not go shopping for silver? There is nowhere like Fifth Avenue in nearby Playa Del Carmen. The entire street is brimming with jewelry – especially silver jewelry – cigar shops and cafés. Make sure to shop around to compare jewelry prices before you buy, as prices and quality differ enormously. Don't be afraid to haggle with the store owners. They expect it!

The number of resorts in the Riviera Maya area is overwhelming, but many tourists choose the Eco Sandos Caracol Resort, near Playa Del Carmen, for its green ini-



Stalactites are over ten thousand years old

tiatives. It's the first certified "eco" resort in the area. The resort has been built to fit in with the jungle surroundings.

Located directly off the resort's beach is the world's second-largest living coral reef, the Meso-American Barrier Reef, a fascinating underwater environment ideal for snorkelling and scuba diving.

If you go: Rio Secreto nature reserve: [www.riosecretotours.com](http://www.riosecretotours.com), +52-998-881-7121.

Eco Sandos Caracol Resort, Playa Del Carmen, [www.sandoshotels.com](http://www.sandoshotels.com), +52-984-873-4444.

Visit [www.playadelcarmen.com](http://www.playadelcarmen.com) for information on other resorts, activities in the area.

Temperature: Playa del Carmen has a subtropical climate, which means it's almost always warm, or hot, with an average temperature of about 27 C, and high humidity all year.

Air Canada offers direct flights to Cancun. A brief taxi ride from the airport will take you to the Playa Del Carmen area.

## Drake CD finally released

By RITA POLIAKOV  
Staff Reporter

It's finally happened.

Drake, born Aubrey Graham, released his debut album, *Thank Me Later*, on June 15.

Born in Toronto, the 23-year-old hip hop artist is Jewish and attended Toronto's Forest Hill Collegiate Institute. He started off playing Jimmy Brooks on the CTV teen show *Degrassi: The Next Generation* and signed with Lil Wayne's production company, Young Money Entertainment, in June 2009, several months after releasing his mixed tape, *So Far Gone*. And fans have been waiting for an album ever since.

According to *Billboard* and one-day sales figures, the album, which is expected to go multi-platinum, was projected to sell almost 500,000 copies in the United States during its first week, even after the album was leaked on the Internet before its release date.

While *Thank Me Later*, a 14-track album released by Young Money Entertainment/Cash Money Records, was supposed to come out in late 2009, it was postponed until this summer.

The album's songs have been compared to Kanye West's style and reflect the struggles of fame, from fake friends to love problems.

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