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# TRAVEL WEEKLY

THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY'S TRUSTED VOICE

## Glamping GOES BOOM

A luxurious camping concept created decades ago for high-end African safaris is now flourishing in North America, mostly fed by small startups that are finding it hard to keep up with demand for total comfort in the great outdoors.

BY CHRISTINA JELSKI

## Upstart hoteliers focus on activism, social consciousness, sustainability

By Christina Jelski

As many of the world's largest hoteliers scramble to bake new sustainability initiatives into their business models, a wave of upstarts has come out of the gate with ecofriendly activism and social consciousness at the core of their brand propositions.

The latest newcomer to thrust an environmentally friendly approach front and center is Accor's Greet brand, unveiled in mid-September. In a statement, Accor said the new economy flag was designed first and foremost to meet "new guest expectations in relation to sustainable

tourism."

Greet will be defined by what Accor calls a "nonstandardized" and ecofriendly design approach. Each hotel will be able to partner with local nonprofits, including groups like Emmaus and Valdelta, which will enable Greet hotels to source second-hand furniture, as well as new creations and designs made by reusing materials to create recycled decor.

The first Greet outpost, which opened with 52 rooms in Beune, France, last April, showcases unique, upcycled design elements like tin-can flowerpots, a wheelbarrow-turned-coffee table and mismatched

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Sky Princess: Innovations and more suites [www.travelweekly.com/sky-princess-debut](http://www.travelweekly.com/sky-princess-debut)

**TRIFECTA OF FAILURES: JG WORLDWIDE, THOMAS COOK, COX & KINGS**

## 3 global tour ops have collapsed: Coincidence or industry omen?

By Jeri Clausing

Unable to pay suppliers for trips already booked, Cox & Kings, the Americas recently became the third global tour operator in six months to collapse, a trifecta of failures that sparked questions last week about whether the shutdowns were coincidence or indicated underlying problems within the industry.

"I have to think it's coincidence," said Robert Joselyn, CEO of the travel business advisory firm the Joselyn Consulting Group. "What's baffling to me about what's going on is that it's happened after three or four of the most profitable, expansive years that I have seen in the travel industry."

Still, Joselyn said, short of a forensic accounting analysis of Cox & Kings and the other failed operators, Thomas Cook and JG Worldwide, it would be impossible to know if any underlying similarities existed.

Travelsavers chief marketing officer See **COLLAPSE** on Page 44

### MARK PESTRONK

When Thomas Cook failed, the U.K. repatriated travelers. Don't expect that from the U.S. **45**

### HAWAII LOVES TRAVEL AGENTS

A Q&A with advisor Paula Takamori, who offers insights on booking the Islands. **24**

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## MEXICO EXPANDS ITS

# upscale

## APPEAL

BY MARK CHESNUT

With an array of posh new hotels as well as new activities that provide exclusive access to immersive experiences around the country, Mexico is upping the ante like never before within the luxury vacation segment.

State and local governments, as well as the private sector, are moving quickly to identify opportunities for growth in Mexican destinations both large and small. And the strategy seems to be working, as numerous surveys continue to validate Mexico's allure with high-end globetrotters. According to the 2019 Virtuoso Luxe Report, for example, Mexico is the second most popular family travel destination. And respondents to the Travel Leaders 2018 travel trends survey indicated Mexico was expected to be the top international non-cruise destination in 2019.

Mexico's proximity to the United States, of course, is a built-in selling point that holds value for every type of traveler, including upscale clients—and this advantage may be even more pronounced now, given the increasing popularity of short getaways such as mini-vacations and micro-trips, a trend reported by media outlets including *Forbes* and *Travel + Leisure*. Beyond the convenience factor, Mexico continues to evolve to meet the ever-changing tastes of clients who expect the very best when they travel.

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## Flavorful escapes

Upscale travelers can savor Mexico's sophisticated culinary crafts in myriad ways—whether it's dining at a private chef's table at Zoetry Paraiso de la Bonita Riviera Maya, enrolling in wine-making classes at Grand Solmar properties in Los Cabos or enjoying a three-course gourmet lunch served by Grand Velas Riviera Maya alongside the cool waters of a cenote.

Properties like The Ritz-Carlton Cancun and Haven Riviera Cancun Resort & Spa have dedicated culinary centers where guests can take classes and also join chefs on shopping excursions. The JW Marriott Los Cabos Beach Resort & Spa, meanwhile, is inviting guests to Relish the Heritage, a foodie festival that takes place in January 2020. And at Rosewood Puebla, the Domes and Bubbles experience features Champagne, cocktails and tapas served on a rooftop, accompanied by a presentation about the city's history.

Travelers can also combine history with cuisine through tour operator Journey Mexico; the company's Casa Dragones Tequila Tasting and Exclusive Shopping Experience by Recreo, which takes place in San Miguel de Allende, includes a tour and tasting at La Casa Dragones, the 17th-century stables of the Queen of Spain's elite cavalry.

Mexico's evolution is a reflection of shifts in the overall perception of luxury, according to Dario Flota Ocampo, director of the Quintana Roo Tourism Board, which represents such popular East Coast beach destinations as Cancun, the Riviera Maya, Cozumel and Holbox.

"The concept of luxury is changing exponentially today, because our societal and cultural norms and expectations are changing more quickly than in the past," Ocampo explains. "Today, with the rise of social media, travel review websites and mobile apps, luxury travel means leaving the five-star, all-inclusive resorts in order to experience the heritage and diversity of a destination through unique, individually curated experiences."

As a result, tourism boards, tour operators and hoteliers around the nation are revising their approach to the market. In addition, Ocampo notes that the target audience for Quintana Roo destinations is evolving as part of the ongoing trend in luxury travel. "Millennial and Generation Z luxury travelers are on the rise and impacting the luxury market," he says. "By 2025, millennials and Generation Z will represent more than 40 percent of the overall luxury goods market, versus 30 percent in 2016. They are a unique generation who are all about the freedom to choose and construct their own lifestyles and attitudes. Also, they are three times more likely to be driven by shifting trends compared to older consumers, who are more defined by routine and brand loyalty. Travelers today seek more authentic experiences and a closer connection with local culture."

Rocio Lancaster, undersecretary of tourism promotions for the state of Jalisco—home to such high-profile luxury destinations as Puerto Vallarta and Guadalajara—agrees that the needs and desires of today's luxury traveler are changing. "The definition of luxury has broadened and is now dependent on the perspective of the traveler," she says. "They are looking for unique, authentic and emotional experiences, which many Mexican suppliers are adapting to and offering. Luxury travelers want to be the first to experience something with insider access and activities not open to the public."

Rodrigo Esponda, managing director of the Los Cabos Tourism Board, says that changing preferences are fostering a more multifaceted experience for all visitors throughout the country. "Over the years, Mexico has been evolving into a more sophisticated tourist destination," he says. He notes that in addition to the drive to develop ever more luxurious hotels, destinations and suppliers are helping to promote "the renaissance of local

cuisine, arts and crafts, and folk expressions; preserving the environment; and integrating the community in the regions. The result has been a blend that only Mexico can offer."

### POSITIVE RESULTS

Mexico's expanding luxury offerings are well received by travelers, opening up options throughout the country. "Mexico's luxury travel scene has been booming," says Sylvia Lebovitch, a New York City-based luxury travel advisor with Ovation Travel Group. "And it's not just in the expected beach resorts like Cabo."

As an example she cites the opening of Chable resorts, both in the Yucatan and in Maroma. "The Yucatan property offers an immersive wellness experience and excursions that allow guests to really connect with the Mayan culture, especially local artisans," says Lebovitch. "And the Maroma property complements it well, by offering one of the most beautiful stretches of beach in Mexico." By the same token, Banyan Tree, which already owns the popular luxury resorts Banyan Tree Mayakoba in Riviera Maya and Banyan Tree Cabo Marques in Acapulco, plans to expand its presence into Mexico's Yucatan state through a new alliance with the 18-room Hacienda Xcanatun, adding 32 additional rooms by 2021 and a new spa, restaurant and residences within the next five years.

In addition, Lebovitch says that today's upscale travelers are looking for a more profound experience than in the past. "In this increasingly burnt-out society, Mexican resorts are offering traditional ways to connect to your spiritual self while experiencing Mexican culture," she says. Noting the popularity of experiences like the *temazcal* steam bath at Rosewood San Miguel de Allende and the shaman's blessing ceremony at the Viceroy Riviera Maya, she adds: "Guests are looking to explore further and have a deeper cultural experience."

Tour operators are also stepping up their immersive activities. Journey Mexico, for example, has added VIP experiences like off-hours, private visits to Mexico City's National Anthropology Museum and the Templo Mayor archeological site at Tenochtitlan. The company also makes getting around more of an immersive luxury experience, with options like a private "air expedition" that provides a fast and comfortable transfer between Puerto Vallarta and Guadalajara, and a helicopter ride to the town of Tequila for private tasting sessions.

### LUXURIOUS LOS CABOS

Baja California's most prominent tourism destination continues to expand its portfolio of decidedly elegant hotel brands, further cementing its identity as an upscale getaway for celebrities and other sophisticated travelers.

This year, for example, Solmar Hotels & Resorts debuted a new luxury villa rental division in Los Cabos, as has Puerta Cortes, a resort development near the city of La Paz. Both developments



## Artistic bent

Mexico's artistic creativity is showcased in a variety of upscale experiences around the nation. Grand Velas Los Cabos, for example, recently debuted an "art-to-table" dinner series that takes place every Monday, during which a gallery curator provides explanations of various works of art, as guests sample dishes inspired by those very works.

In San Miguel de Allende, Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada offers painting workshops taught by Jose Luis Arias, a graduate of a local visual arts school called the Allende Institute. Guests at Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit, meanwhile, can travel back in time during an excursion called the *Wixaritani Journey*. The private tour is led by an indigenous Huichol guide to an ancient holy site called *Altavista*, where participants can view and learn about a series of 15 petroglyphs engraved in volcanic stones by the Aztec people.

Guests can become their own work of photographic art at Belmond Maroma Resort & Spa, where the new Family Portraits program provides the services of a personal photographer who documents experiences like visiting archeological sites, cooking classes and even quality time on the beach.

are designed to attract travelers looking for accommodations on a grand scale, as well as travel advisors looking for attractive commissions.

Also on a grand scale is the recently debuted 18,428-square-foot Royal Residence at Le Blanc Spa Resort Los Cabos, complete with a private fitness center, eight-person movie theater and home office. "Today's affluent guests are experiential and are willing to pay more in order to have a more luxury-defined experience," says Frank Corzo, vice president of inside sales for Palace Resorts, which includes Le Blanc Resorts in Los Cabos and Cancun, as well as Palace Resorts in Cancun, Cozumel, Isla Mujeres and Playacar. "There is something for everyone at our properties—and luxury travelers are looking for just that: activities that cater to everyone's desires."

Esponda says that the region's safety and stability, as well as high RevPAR (revenue per available room), has made Los Cabos exceptionally attractive for hotel investment. New high-end properties include Solaz, a Luxury Collection Resort, which opened last fall; Zadun, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, and Four Seasons Resort Los Cabos, both of which are opening this fall; and the Waldorf Astoria Los Cabos Pedregal, which is the new name of the former Resort at Pedregal. Also new this year are the Nobu Hotel Los Cabos, part of a portfolio developed by Chef Nobu Matsuhisa and actor Robert De Niro, and Vista Encantada Spa Resort & Residences, which belongs to the Mexico Grand Hotels collection.

"As a new property in Los Cabos, it's a great risk to position ourselves in this luxury market as more name-brand properties are also opening," says Gabriel Ibarra, sales and marketing director at Mexico Grand Hotels. "However, we're betting on bringing our essence to the market, valuing our authentic brand. The necessities and expectations of 'luxury' have undergone an interesting evolution, in that it's not necessarily luxe amenities and service that travelers are looking for...they now seek one-of-a-kind cultural experiences that attract them to engage with a brand."

### QUINTESSENTIAL QUINTANA ROO

Considering that Quintana Roo is home to multiple tourism hotspots—including Cancun, Cozumel, the Riviera Maya, Isla Mujeres, Holbox and Chetumal, to name a few—it's no surprise that this coastal state offers an especially diverse variety of upscale vacation experiences.

Getting the word out is crucial, according to Ocampo. "Quintana Roo's tourism board has been very active communicating all of their luxury offerings to travelers, using traditional and digital media, as well as participating in tourism and luxury trade shows around the globe," he says. "We also participate in trade shows, including the recent *Virtuoso Travel Week* in Las Vegas, and we'll be hosting a new luxury trade show." In addition, the state will soon launch a new website, [MexicanCaribbean.travel](http://MexicanCaribbean.travel), designed

to showcase the best of the state's various tourism destinations under the "Mexican Caribbean" umbrella moniker.

Quintana Roo's largest city, Cancun, is now home to a robust array of luxury options, according to Palacés Corzo, including the Le Blanc Spa Resort Cancun, which recently completed a \$30 million renovation. "When people used to think of Cancun, they would usually think of it as a spring break destination," he says. "However, currently, with hotels such as Le Blanc Spa Resort and The Grand at Moon Palace Cancun, the perceptions have been changing."

Noteworthy examples of the state's sumptuous hotels dot the coastline, including Haven Riviera Cancun Resort & Spa, which is home to a 2,400-square-foot Serenity Club presidential suite with a billiards table and exercise equipment, and the handsomely upgraded TRS Yucatan Hotel, an adults-only oasis within Palladium Hotel Group's Riviera Maya resort complex. In addition, both the Grand Palladium Costa Mujeres Resort & Spa and the Grand Palladium White Sand Resort & Spa recently earned AAA Four Diamond Ratings.

Among the newest options in the region is the Hilton Playa del Carmen, which marks Hilton's first foray into the upscale, adults-only market in the state, and the all-inclusive Margaritaville Island Reserve by Karisma, which is set to open this winter as the result of a partnership between Karisma Hotels & Resorts and Margaritaville Holdings.

In addition, Grupo Experiencias Xcaret, the company behind popular attractions including Xcaret and Xel-Ha as well as Hotel Xcaret, has two luxury hotels in the works: La Casa de la Playa, a 63-room, adults-only property that's slated to open in 2020, and Hotel Xcaret Arte, a boutique property scheduled to debut in 2021, with art and cultural workshops among its unique programs.

Visitors to the Mexican Caribbean can also upgrade their transportation experience, whether it's renting a Ferrari or Porsche from Exotic Rides Mexico or signing up for a new VIP service introduced in October by the tour operator Aventuras Mayas. The company's new fleet of Mercedes-Benz V-Class vehicles is available for customized private excursions for up to eight passengers.

### THE RISE OF VALLARTA-NAYARIT

Several high-end resort enclaves on Mexico's central western coast continue to attract attention from both investors and travelers. In Puerto Vallarta, for example, the local tourism board is touting a number of hotel upgrades, including an \$18 million renovation at the Marriott Puerto Vallarta Resort & Spa and a brand-new accommodation category at the Hilton Puerto Vallarta Resort called the Hacienda, a 192-room, adults-only section (set in a complex that once belonged to the adjacent Krystal Puerto Vallarta hotel) with two restaurants and lush landscaped swimming pool areas.



## the Sporting life

Travelers looking to stay active on vacation may be surprised by the imaginative possibilities that await in Mexico. This year, Chable Yucatan opened what is billed as the "world's first wellness golf course," which allows guests to play without shoes, encourages them to start anywhere on the course and supports pondering the spiritual aspects of the game.

Tennis players will find a recognizable name to inspire their swings at the Rafa Nadal Tennis Centre, located at the new TRS Coral Hotel and Grand Palladium Costa Mujeres Resort and Spa. The facility, which has eight clay tennis courts and also a museum filled with Nadal's trophies and equipment, offers tennis classes for adults and children of every experience level.

Guests at Fairmont Mayakoba can indulge in an especially lavish way to take to the sea. The hotel's *Van Dutch* yacht, which is furnished with a master bedroom and guest cabin, is available for private outings ranging from a two-hour jaunt to a full-day sail complete with chef-prepared meals, open bar and a variety of water activities.

Meanwhile, Riviera Nayarit is bound for an increasingly higher profile with high-end travelers, thanks to a surge of investment in new luxury hotels. At the growing resort complex of Mandarin, new properties slated to open in 2020 include the Rosewood Mandarin and the One&Only Mandarin, as well as the new Mandarin Polo and Equestrian Club. Also scheduled to open in 2020 are two properties from AMResorts: Dreams Punta de Mita Resort & Spa and Secrets Punta de Mita Resort & Spa. The following year, Riviera Nayarit will witness the debut of Susurros del Corazon, an Auberge Resorts Collection property, as well as Costa Canuva, a development that will be home to the Fairmont Costa Canuva and, in 2022, the Ritz-Carlton Reserve Riviera Nayarit.

The Ritz-Carlton, in fact, is emblematic of parent company Marriott International's ambitious growth plans in Nayarit; by 2025, four new properties will fly various Marriott brand flags, including a 400-room Westin, 300-room Autograph Collection and 500-room Marriott.

The destination is especially well prepared to attract younger upscale travelers, according to Richard Zarkin, public relations manager for the Riviera Nayarit Convention and Visitors Bureau. "What we see is that yes, the millennials with high salaries will look for a luxury brand like One&Only, but they don't want just a luxury brand, they want a unique experience," he says. "They want to see a well-kept destination, with nature and the environment well preserved, where you're working for sustainability and the local people are being supported."

Travelers can connect with local culture and nature in a variety of ways in Riviera Nayarit, including indigenous Huichol ceremonies at Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit and *temazcal* rituals at Imanta Resorts Punta de Mita, which is a member of Relais & Chateaux. The Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita, meanwhile, has opened a new restaurant called Dos Catrinas that celebrates Mexican cuisine and culture, while the St. Regis Punta Mita has a children's club that offers traditional Mexican activities including pinata making and other handicrafts.

As with any market segment, industry observers like to make predictions about what the next big thing will be. In Jalisco, the newest destination for luxury travel is Costalegre, a development set on the coastline between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo. It's currently home to Careyes, a resort estate with 35 private villas that start at \$350 a night and ocean "castles" that go for \$5,000 and up. Hotels slated to open within the next two years there include the Four Seasons Tamarindo and the Zoëtry Chamela Costalegre Mexico resort.

In addition, a new highway set to open next year will reduce travel time from Puerto Vallarta from two hours to about 25 minutes, while a small airport designed for private planes and charters is also expected to open next year.

## EXTRAVAGANCE IN THE INTERIOR

Mexico's luxe offerings aren't limited to its sun-soaked coasts. Interior cities both large and small are also well versed at satisfying the most demanding travelers. As the nation's capital and a hub for culture and business, Mexico City is an ideal destination for urban sophistication and upscale experiences, including dining at an impressive six AAA Four Diamond restaurants. The newest example of the city's burgeoning luxury hotel scene is the Sofitel Mexico City Reforma, a 275-room, 40-floor property opening in October with views of the iconic Angel of Independence statue on the broad Paseo de la Reforma boulevard.

Additional options include internationally branded properties like the St. Regis Mexico City, where guests can indulge in an exclusive, eight-course dinner in a private dining room called La Table Krug, and W Mexico City, where the Extreme WOW penthouse suite's living room has a projection screen with a Bose surround-sound system. Those looking for pampering on a more intimate scale will find an extensive selection of boutique hotels, including the five-room Ignacia Guest House, which is set in a 1913 mansion, and various properties that belong to the stylish Grupo Habita portfolio.

San Miguel de Allende, the colonial city in the state of Guanajuato, is another can't-miss destination for upscale travelers. Being named the best city in the world for two years in a row by *Travel + Leisure* has helped to further publicize the destination's unique hotels, dining, shopping and cultural activities.

San Miguel de Allende's luxury hotel options recently expanded with the 2018 opening of Live Aqua San Miguel de Allende Urban Resort, a 153-room property with four gourmet dining venues and a sizable spa. International hoteliers are well represented with properties like the Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada, which last year wrapped up a renovation, and the Rosewood San Miguel de Allende, which offers art and culinary classes. Noteworthy independent boutique hotels include Casa Delphine, a five-room property set on a cobblestone street, and Hotel Matilda, which recently introduced an app that guests can use to order room service, book spa appointments and reserve activities.

Jalisco's capital city, Guadalajara, is in growth mode as well. Recent hotel openings including the 225-room Hilton Guadalajara Midtown and 117-room Baruk Hotel de Autor; still in the works is a new boutique hotel, Casa Rebor, which will open next year. Guadalajara also excels at offering memorably upscale ways to visit the nearby town of Tequila, birthplace of the eponymous spirit. Guests can make the trip aboard the Sauza distillery's Tequilicopter or hop aboard the Jose Cuervo express or Tequila Herradura Express, both of which offer VIP options with extra amenities.