

Audubon International's

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Maryakoba

A World of its Own





By Katie Hopkins

“Do people go swimming here?”

I look around at the contemporary white villas whose wooden docks sit lightly atop the glassy water. To me, it looks like an inviting place to swim.

It takes a moment for my companions to respond, their eyes fixated on a boat-billed heron partially concealed in the thick vegetation.

“No, no one goes swimming here,” Iván finally says. “Not unless they want to go swimming with the crocodiles.”

The statement is a reminder that I am in a place dominated by nature, and also that I am in an environment far different from my home in upstate New York.

James, my host for this tour, instructs the driver to turn the electric boat and head toward a marsh area. Along the way we wave to a couple on the deck of their villa starting their morning sipping coffee, wrapped in comfortable bath robes, and looking out over the water as the sun burns away the mist.

James and Iván turn their attention to the reeds. I sit silently, camera ready in my hands, not quite sure what we are looking for. Then James spots one, a least bittern, and the two photographers—one amateur, one professional—begin the rapid camera clicking. The elusive little bird, a type of small heron, perches in the reeds and makes photographing him difficult.

To see if he can coax him out of his hiding place, James uses his phone to produce a least bittern call.

Minutes pass and the little reed-dweller seems quite content in his location.

Suddenly, the boat driver is waving his hands to get my attention. I look to where he is pointing, and lo and behold, another least bittern comes strutting along the edge of the reeds. He is looking for breakfast and doesn't mind that he has an audience. I am fascinated as I watch this little guy use his legs to anchor himself in an acrobatic fashion, and after a moment of intense concentration, darts his beak into the water at lightning speed to catch a fish. Fully satisfied with the display we have witnessed, we continue on with our journey.

Mayakoba is a world of its own. Located just south of Cancun in the Riviera Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico, the resort property gives guests a secluded experience away from the hustle and bustle of the mega beach resorts. In the early 1990s, a construction company was so inspired by the unique, undeveloped property, that it set up an entirely new division of its business aimed to create a place that would simultaneously be financially successful and conserve the natural environment. A team of biologists, architects, and designers spent six years carefully planning before construction even took place.

The team's priority was to protect as much of the mangrove as possible. The mangrove, a unique coastal shrubland found in tropical areas, provides habitat for many species and also protects the coast from erosion and storm surges. Other resorts in the area bulldozed the mangrove in order to build right near the beach. The developers of Mayakoba



recognized the vital importance of the mangrove and decided to tuck the majority of the resort behind it.

Today Mayakoba contains three resorts: Banyan Tree, Fairmont, and Rosewood. Two more resorts are currently under construction. Though all of the resorts provide access to the beach, the beach is not the attraction at Mayakoba. Buildings here are integrated into the jungle, with copious amounts of tree and their accompanying calls from native birds. Guests transport themselves on winding paths by bike or on foot, or if you need a lift, a staff member will pick you up in an electric golf cart. The curving nature of the paths and the lush vegetation create a very intimate space, and as a result you are never quite sure how big the place is or how many people are staying there. Threaded through Mayakoba are six miles of fresh water canals, providing electric boats as another option for transportation and increasing the habitat for wading birds and water creatures.

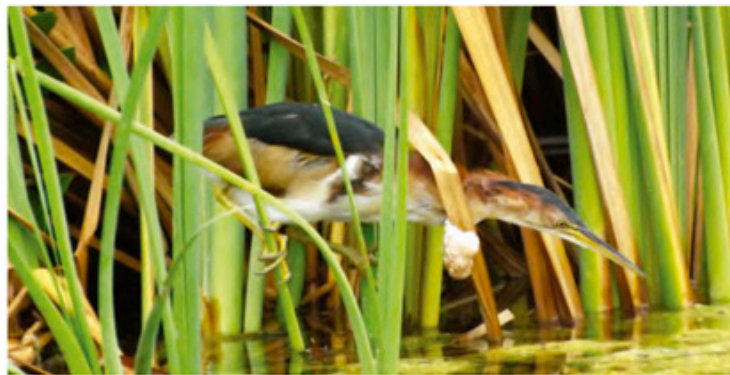
The property is also home to El Camaleón Golf Club, the only golf course in Mexico on the PGA tour. El Camaleón has been a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary since 2006. Superintendent Logan Spurlock uses few pesticides and herbicides.

He fertilizes the turf with chicken manure and hand pulls weeds whenever possible. Much like the rest of Mayakoba, the course is teeming with birds, iguanas, deer, coatis, and other wildlife. Logan passes on these good environmental practices by training other superintendents in the area.

Aside from golf, there are many other activities at Mayakoba where you can experience nature and wildlife. The property just finished constructing its two-mile nature trail which meanders through the jungle and past canals and cenotes, underground rivers that have been exposed to the surface. Guests can take kayaks through the aqua waters of the cenotes as well. And it is in these same waters that I experience the ultimate nature activity at Mayakoba: an early morning wildlife photography boat tour as part of the Wildlife Photo Masterclass.

I am accompanied on the 6:30am tour by James Batt, vice president of operations and marketing at Mayakoba, and Iván Gabaldón, a photographer based in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. The Wildlife Photo Masterclass often also includes a National Geographic wildlife photographer. The electric boat picked me up right outside the lobby of the

Left to right: A limpkin dines on apple snails [Photo by Katie Hopkins]; A boat glides past El Camaleón Golf Club as part of the Wildlife Photo Masterclass [Photo by Iván Gabaldón]; Masterclass participants snap photos [Photo by Iván Gabaldón]; A least bittern perches in the reeds spying his breakfast [Photo by Katie Hopkins]; A boat-billed heron shyly peers at the photographers [Photo by Katie Hopkins]



Banyan Tree Resort, and we headed out into the canal, passing the overwater dining area of Saffron Thai Restaurant where James and I had enjoyed a delicious meal the night before.

A combination of the lack of sun at this hour and the overnight rainfall have left the water crystal clear. I can see numerous fish, mostly the striped Mayan cichlid, and turtles swim close to the canal's sandy floor. Neotropical cormorants leave their perches to dive deep into the water, and I can see their streamlined bodies gliding toward unsuspecting fish.

The boat passes through narrow channels in the high rock walls, and again I am thankful for the crystal water as I watch the fish and turtles explore subsurface caves. Throughout the morning I see many species of birds and learn their names, including the green heron, the great kiskadee, the moorhen, the northern jacana, and of course, the least bittern. I also see a limpkin who is dining on apple snails, and I remember the pile of empty snail shells near the canal back at my villa.

And near the end of our boat ride I finally see the king of the Mayakoba wildlife, a crocodile. He

barely acknowledges our presence and keeps a distance, but he is the reminder that despite the comfortable accommodations, first-class dining, and championship-level golf course, Mayakoba is an authentic nature experience. ■

Wildlife Photo Masterclass at Mayakoba

Mayakoba is a birder's paradise, and you can join a National Geographic photographer for a Wildlife Photo Masterclass right on the property.

Learn more at:
<http://www.banyantreemayakoba.com/signature-offers/wildlife-photo-masterclass.htm>