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THE RIVIERA MAYA EDITION AT KANAI – MEXICO • YOSHIHARU HOSHINO • MANDARIN ORIENTAL MAYFAIR – LONDON

Maroma, A Belmond Hotel

RIVIERA MAYA

Tara Bernerd & Partners build on the legendary magic of Maroma to produce a showcase of Mexican art and craft.

Words: Catherine Martin • Photography: Courtesy of Belmond

There's something quite magical about a stroll through the tropical gardens of Maroma; swallowtail butterflies flutter from flower to flower, coatis play carefree in the shaded undergrowth and a spiny-tailed iguana basks poolside in the midday sun. Meandering pathways lead to secluded villas and hidden pools, before the jungle gives way to the white sands and turquoise waters of the Caribbean. This is the 'beating heart of the Riviera Maya', so called for its first-comer status to this picturesque stretch of coastline that has since become a hotspot for new hotel development.

The site was originally home to a coconut plantation and a family of masons, who built their hacienda from local materials such as palm, bamboo and stone. In the 1980s, it was acquired by Jose Luis Moreno, a Mexico City-based architect with a passion for hospitality. Enlisting the skills of the masons, he added to the property year by year, officially opening it as a hotel in 1995. As legend has it, the rooms were built without any architectural blueprints – Moreno is said to have drawn his concepts in the sand – meaning the recent refurbishment was subject to a few surprises, not least the rudimentary materials within the walls.

Indeed, this is a resort that is deeply entrenched in legend. The dwellings have been built according to sacred Mayan geometry for harmony with nature, while a blessing ritual defines the arrival experience. And before a single tool was lifted in the refurbishment, a spiritual ceremony guided by a Shaman sought permission from the aluxes – the mythical sprites known as guardians of the land; their miniature houses still dot the site, with offerings regularly left in return for their protection.

Culture and tradition have gone on to shape the entire transformation of Maroma, which took place during a two-year closure from 2021. Having been acquired by James Sherwood in 2002, the resort became part of Belmond (formerly Orient-Express Hotels) and has since seen additions and small-scale enhancements. But with increased competition on the Riviera, it was decided a full upgrade was required, with the aim being to honour the magic of Maroma and enhance its sense of place.

"Maroma has a great story," says Tara Bernerd of the rich heritage. "Our approach was to retain the beauty of the original character, whilst simultaneously incorporating a contemporary elegance and a warmth that has the feeling of home." Tasked with leading the redesign, Bernerd and her eponymous studio delved into Mayan culture and the Mexican way of life, drawing inspiration from the traditional haciendas from across the country. One of the greatest challenges was to marry old and new in a way that is respectful of the past, yet meets the demands of a luxury product. "We embraced the history and legacy of the existing structures whilst giving them a new lease of life," Bernerd explains. "The buildings of Maroma are immediately eye-

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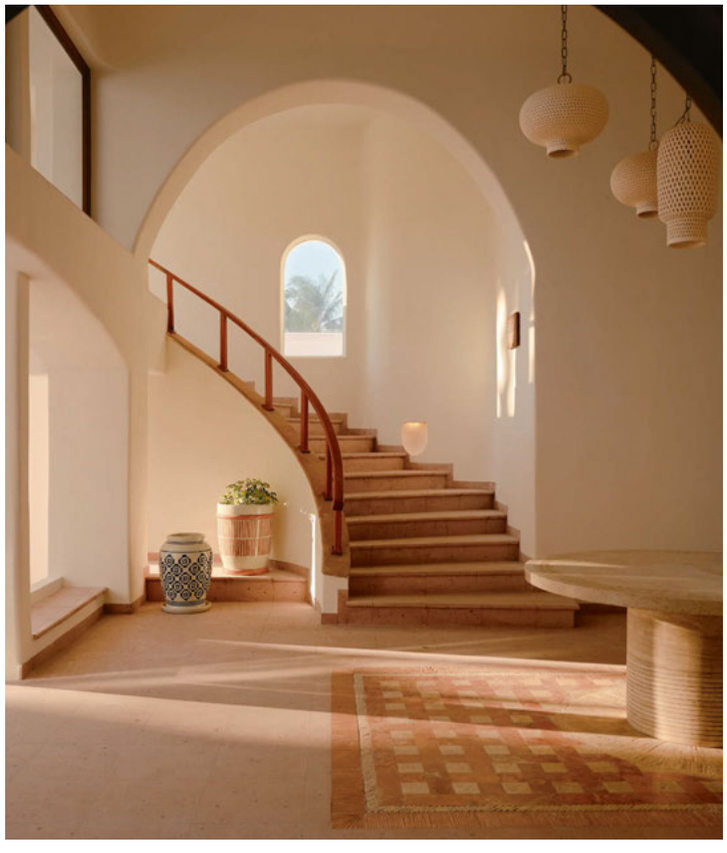
catching for their white stucco façades and palapa roofs, so in response to this, we sought to keep the interior architecture quite neutral, allowing the statement elements to shine."

As with any renovation project of this ilk, retain-or-replace decisions have a notable impact on the outcome. As such, the layout of the resort is largely unchanged, with the 72 guestrooms and suites spread across multiple low-rise buildings, some overlooking the gardens and others offering direct access to the beach. The restaurants, Casa Mayor and Woodend by Curtis Stone, occupy the original main house, where an under-utilised back-of-house space has been reimagined as an atmospheric mezcal bar, while Freddy's Bar – a beachfront hangout that marks the beginnings of Maroma as a resort – still stands in its original spot, much to the relief of loyal regulars.

It's the interiors that have seen the greatest overhaul, bringing a fresher, brighter palette that above all, celebrates the traditions and crafts of the Mexican culture. In developing the scheme, Bernerd sought to combine authenticity with luxury, all the while being sure to uphold the key principles of Belmond. Fortunately, the brand has long been built on a promise to honour the past, describing itself as 'proud custodians of storied properties' with a commitment to creating 'the heritage of the future'. At Maroma, this equates to a veritable journey through Mexico's art and design heritage, with the works of skilled artisans contributing to the memorable sense of place. "We have introduced a number of locally sourced materials and worked with artisans from the Riviera Maya," Bernerd explains. "We also looked further afield to surrounding areas, such as Chiapas and Oaxaca for their handwoven textiles, Puebla for its clay pottery, and Guadalajara for its handpainted terracotta tiles; it was a joy working with the local artisans who brought our designs to life."

The sheer volume of handicrafts on show is impressive, particularly for a hotel of this size, resulting in an added layer to the already



An under-utilised back-of-house space has been reimagined as an atmospheric mezcal bar

storied property; so meaningful are these pieces, that Belmond commissioned a video on the crafting of Maroma, available to all on its website. There's the custom-blown glassware by Max Kublailan, as seen in wall lamps and framing mirrors; rugs by Henequén Textiles, woven from the hemp-like fibres of the agave plant; hand-carved furniture by Alberto Alfaro Joffroy; and the staff uniforms by Collectiva Concepción, a sustainable slow fashion brand that empowers indigenous artisans. Further details see chandeliers crafted from shells, chairs made from cane and glazed mosaics in rich jewel tones. Perhaps one of the most impressive undertakings is courtesy of José Noé Suro, who sourced clay from Jalisco to make over 700,000 floor tiles, each screen-printed in a different colour and pattern.

The artworks also have a tale to tell, having been commissioned for the property by Sweeney Co Art Advisors. Working in collaboration with Tara Bernerd & Partners, the studio curated a vast collection of art and accessories that showcase a cross-section of Mexican culture, from woven tapestries by Rrres to shadow boxes by Eduardo Rincón, made from flora collected from the gardens.

Throughout the resort, there's a selection of FF&E from elsewhere, such as guestroom lighting by Chelsom, and the sumptuous Chi bathtubs from Apaiser, which align with the approach having been handcrafted in sustainable marble. However, the majority of furnishings are made in Mexico. "Around 80% is sourced from across the country, even the OS&E," confirms Anne Lefferson, who joined Belmond as Director of Interior Design mid-way through the project. "Some of it is hand-crafted, some is machine-made, but all is bespoke. We really wanted to bring that authenticity and stay true to the experience of travel, so that guests are not just visiting a hotel, they're on a journey."

The authenticity extends to every touchpoint, even the trays used to deliver fresh pastries to the table at breakfast. "We went through rounds and rounds of prototypes; it's the first thing

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Tara Bernerd & Partners
Interior Architecture and Design

Artist, Adrián Guerrero

Photographer, William Jess Laird

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guests see in the morning, so we wanted to get it right," says Lefferson of the niche task. She further reveals the challenges of such a project, stating the importance of mutual trust. "It was a big undertaking to find the right artisans, and as an outsider, it took time for us to gain their trust that we would highlight their product in the best way. And because of the handcrafted nature, designs don't always come out first time, so it takes patience."

But the patience has paid off. From the open-air lobby to the guestrooms, restaurants and bar, Maroma serves as a showcase for Mexican design. The latest addition to the resort is no different. Opened earlier this year, Maroma Spa by Guerlain is housed in a temple-like building that brings a spiritual quality to the space. The venture marks the cosmetics brand's debut in Latin America, with the partnership a smart move by parent company LVMH, which incidentally also owns Belmond. Despite Guerlain's French heritage, there's a distinctly Mexican flavour to the spa, once again enriched with local design elements such as handpainted tiles, onyx stone basins and millwork carved in traditional Mayan patterns. At its heart is an ancient tree and water fountain, setting the tone for the nature-inspired experience that incorporates hot and cold plunge pools beneath the shade of a palapa canopy. There's an apothecary for harvesting herbs and learning about their healing effects, and treatments based on the sacred Melipona bee, a spiritual symbol revered by the Mayans for centuries.

Mayan civilisation touches every aspect of a stay at Maroma, not only in the design, but the cuisine and programming too. Bookable experiences include stargazing with a focus on Mayan constellations, learning the artisanal process of making corn tortillas – a Mexican staple – and discovering the origins of tequila and mezcal through guided tastings. Each is an immersion in the culture and traditions that symbolise this part of the world, playing a role in a memorable experience that has affectionately become known as the magic of Maroma.

EXPRESS CHECK-OUT
Owner: LVMH
Operator: Belmond
Architecture: Enrique Cabrera Arquitecto
Interior Design: Tara Bernerd & Partners
Art Consultant: Sweeney Co Art Advisors
Lighting Design: GMLD
Landscaping: Meza & Briceno Arquitectos
Main Contractor: Alpha Hardin
Project Manager: BCQS International
www.belmond.com