

EMERIL LAGASSE FROM THE KITCHEN TO THE ISLAND

# CARIBBEAN

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# CARIBBEAN LIFE

From city to countryside to coast, contemporary Yucatán dwellings share many common design characteristics: open-air living spaces, water features, and a prominence of stone and natural materials. The Maya's masterful trademarks — carved stone and stucco, ceremonial homage to color and water — are everywhere in evidence. Sun-drenched burnt ochre, colonial red and Maya blue ignite walls and bring subtle, stone-chinked surface patterns to light. Interiors glisten with wall fountains, reflecting ponds and plunge pools that flow into outdoor pools. Handcrafted techniques in stone, stucco, wood, tile, paint, clay and fiber add distinctive textures that lend depth and time-honored character to walls, floors and other surfaces.

Traditional earthen pigments and *cal* (lime-based paint) continue to be favored for their natural finish and ability to breathe and wear well on limestone buildings. *Kancab*, a deep red earth obtained in the southern Yucatán, and *sascab*, a white limestone pigment, are surfacing with captivating results in many new home building projects.

Plant-based resins, including *chukum*, are also being reintroduced for use in pools and hot tubs. Originally created by the Maya to seal water cisterns, the natural-hued *chukum* creates a smooth, beautifully translucent finish that is impermeable to water.

The age-old use of tropical hardwoods to construct massive roof beams and lintels



## CONTEMPORARY YUCATÁN DWELLINGS SHARE MANY COMMON DESIGN CHARACTERISTICS: OPEN-AIR LIVING SPACES, WATER FEATURES AND A PROMINENCE OF NATURAL MATERIALS.

also continues. A variety of indigenous woods such as *zapote* and *machiche* are crafted into doors and ceilings, and serve as columns for outdoor *palapas*.

In many coastal homes and *hacienda casitas*, the Maya thatched-roof vernacular has been reincarnated as a blend of traditional forms and modern-day comfort. Dramatic roofs of *guano* (palm fronds) and *zacate* (natural grass) are hand-tied with *bejuco*, a strong local vine, resulting in an intricate overhead tapestry. Local woods outline cool floors of polished white

cement, while, outside, bamboo pergolas shade refreshing plunge pools.

Tucked amid fishing villages and salt marshes on the Yucatán's northern coast, beautifully designed new homes have appeared in the peaceful towns of Progreso, Chicxulub, Telchac Puerto and Dzilam de Bravo. It was along this sandy stretch that the ancient Maya settled to harvest and collect valuable salt, which was traded throughout the peninsula.

Yucatán architect Alvaro Ponce is noted for his coastal homes that combine indoor

A colonial hacienda's arcaded *portal* (covered porch) features the centuries-old techniques of using wood-beamed ceilings and stenciled friezes.

and outdoor living in elegantly simple and comfortable designs. Nature's gifts of water, air and light are complemented by his use of natural materials and intriguing textures: pebbles and seashells for elaborate floor mosaics, outdoor dining pavilions with grass-thatched roofs and tropical hardwood columns, natural-fiber furnishings, and interior gardens with carved-stone water



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NOT SURPRISINGLY, HOMEOWNERS ALONG THE MEXICAN CARIBBEAN EMBRACE THE SEA.

features. Ponce employs the region's deep orange *Ticul* stone and white limestone for tiles and chinked walls. *Conchuela*, a coastal stone featuring a fossilized shell surface, is also a favorite as it yields rich textures, especially when lit.

Not surprisingly, homeowners along the Mexican Caribbean embrace the sea views. Large windows, open stairwells and skylights bring sparkling light inside every room. Open floor plans and ceiling fans encourage ventilation, while built-in sofas and benches (*bancos*) simplify and maximize space. Not least, the essential Maya-influenced hammock remains, as always, strung across breezy porches inviting relaxation and the all-important *siesta*.

— Karen Witynski

*The Yucatán's emerging design style is celebrated in Casa Yucatán (Gibbs Smith Publisher, \$39.95), one of a series of Mexican design books by Karen Witynski & Joe P. Carr. Contact the authors/designers through their gallery, Joe P. Carr Design, in Austin, Texas, at 512-327-8284, or visit [www.mexicanstyle.com](http://www.mexicanstyle.com). Casa Yucatán can be ordered at [www.gibbs-smith.com](http://www.gibbs-smith.com).*



Perfect perches: Cushioned *bancos* (top) line the perimeter of a beach-house rooftop in Chicxulub; a hammock beckons from the porch at Casa La Madriguera, designed by Alvaro Ponce.