



Flocking to the Yucatan

Flamingo Lakes resort is hoping to cash in on a popular Mexican destination rich in relaxation



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A mosquito-infested swamp in Mexico is not the best setting when trying to convince a group of overheated journalists of your vision to build a luxury resort of villas and condominiums complemented by a 27-hole championship golf course and its own private nature reserve.

As the team behind the Flamingo Lakes Golf Resort lay out site plans in a prefab somewhere in the Yucatan peninsula, the people they are hoping to impress are too busy swatting flies to pay attention.

It isn't until several hours later, in an air-conditioned and insect-free room of an old colonial house that our group — fed and watered — are finally ready to listen.

David Cross, the chief executive of Flamingo Lakes, tells us how the company identified the Yucatan region of Mexico as a "prime up-and-coming destination" one-hour's drive away from the international airport in Merida, the capital and largest city of the peninsula. That this area of Mexico has in the past featured as one of the top-five real-estate investments in the world according to Fortune magazine is a bonus the developers and agents are keen to push.

To the naked eye, however, the pro-

posed country club resort in Dzemul, which covers 2,200 acres of coastal land, has yet to take shape. Save for some distant flocks of flamingos, which look more like a mirage in the searing heat, and the aforementioned mosquitos, there is very little else to see among the scrub, and the bus ride to and from Merida feels much longer than the mooted 30 minutes.

The developers are not worried about first impressions of their blank canvas, however, and with good reason — Mexico has cleverly developed its own niche market aimed primarily at wealthy Americans and Canadians. More than 3m American citizens travel to Cancun and other Mexican beach resorts each year, including as many as 120,000 during "spring break" season, which normally begins in mid-February and runs for about two months. Tourism is Mexico's third-biggest earner, and hotels along the Yucatan coastline boast of occupancy rates of 90%. This is Mayan territory, so Chichen Itza, a Unesco world heritage site, is the second most-visited archeological site in Mexico, especially since El Castillo, the temple of the god Kukulcan, was last year voted one of the "new" seven wonders of the world.

Retirees are currently big business for the country and, in particular, the Yucatan region. These blue-rinse buyers and renters are prime material for developments such as Flamingo Lakes, which rely heavily on their American dollars to bankroll building and ensure completion (ironic, when US borders remain firmly shut to Mexicans).

But don't let this put you off. Although Cancun has been ruined to some extent by rowdy Americans hanging out of 24-hour clubs while tacky neon strips dominate the turquoise coastline, there is an alternative. Merida, a legacy of Spain's colonial reign, is quite the opposite. With a population of around 1m, and a relaxed approach to life — walking at my usual Dublin pace rouses some local men relaxing in the shade to shout, "Hey lady, why are you

running?" — this city feels more like a small town with its friendly locals, and is a welcome change to the noisy and crowded streets of Cancun. Even the street vendors are charming, and stop you only to practice their English — unlike Cancun or even Chichen Itza, where the marketeers sell their wares for "one Mayan dollar" (there is no such currency), which really means \$20 and you've been had.

The building of Flamingo Lakes gets under way this month, and will be built in four phases, the first of which is a scheme of villas and apartments around the golf course. The Right Move Abroad, a Dublin-based agency, has this month started to sell to Irish investors, on the promise that rental and capital appreciation is a given.

The first phase is due for completion at the end of next year, along with a marina, beach club, and golf course. The buying process is in dollars and villa are available on three different plot sizes: 600 sq m, 1,000 sq m and 2,000 sq m, with six different design styles, from two to five bedrooms. Prices start from \$113,000 (about €80,000) for a two-bedroom, one-bathroom detached house. Properties include a small pool, garage, patios and balconies.

Conscious of the mistakes made with Cancun — relaxed planning laws led to the hotel zone in the city, which consists of over 140 hotels with more than 24,000 rooms, 380 restaurants and some of the gaudiest architecture (think mock Taj Mahal next to a towering Hilton) — the developers of Flamingo Lakes are playing the environmental card by retaining 840 acres as a private nature reserve.

Flamingo Lakes is a 40- to 45-minute drive from the centre of Merida, but you will get more bang for your buck than Cancun when it comes to shopping and dining out.

Transportation around the Yucatan district is well developed, with motorways linking Merida and Cancun, though the journey spans several hours, or longer if you choose our driv-

er, who had a Mexican approach to life.

On our return journey to Cancun our coach broke down, and the conversation on the side of the road turned to the possible mechanical faults. Had the engine overheated? Did the bus blow a gasket? Was it a flat tyre? No, it was much, much more obvious. Our laid-back Mexican driver had simply forgotten the petrol.

✿ *Flamingo Lakes Golf Resort, www.flamingolakes.com;
The Right Move Abroad, 01 866 6168,
www.therightmoveabroad.com; Delta flies
from Dublin to Atlanta, Georgia (nine hours),
with a connecting two-hour flight to Cancun*



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