



UNDERGROUND TOURIST

Rio Secreto is among the world's wonders open to travelers

BY KATE PARHAM FOR USA TODAY

JUST 3 MILES SOUTHWEST OF PLAYA DEL CARMEN—A MEXICAN RESORT CITY ON THE CARIBBEAN SEA—IS RIO SECRETO, or the Secret River. It's the longest semi-sunken cave in the Yucatan Peninsula and among the country's alluring nature reserves.

The wonder remained untouched until 2007, save for the man who first found it. Now, guided tours allow travelers to hike and swim through a 1,968-foot route, providing access to dramatic mineral formations below the surface.

Rio Secreto isn't the only natural wonder opening up to travelers. Sustainable travel destinations are cropping up around the world. Take Belize, which offers more than 87 distinct types of ecosystems, including Mayan temples and the world's second-longest barrier reef.

Rio Secreto is one of only 89 caves in the world that have a depth greater than 3,280 feet. Thousands of stalactites—calcium formations reminiscent of icicles—

dangle from the cave's ceiling, while stalagmites, or rounded calcium deposits, grow upward from the floor. When the two meet, they form columns. These gradually broaden and grow throughout the 7½-mile-long underground river system.

Gavin Greenwood, a native of Mexico, has turned Rio Secreto into one of the country's most sustainable tourism operations. Protecting the environment is the greatest challenge, he says, and the company works hard to do so.

For example, the size of tours is limited to eight people and two guides per group in order to reduce impact. Visitors are required to shower before entering the cave and may not touch, take, or destroy anything found inside.

The caution is worth it.

The cave is an incredible place to explore. The natural history spans back millions of years, and the silence and darkness surprise and move visitors. Some even claim to hear Mother Nature's heartbeat. ■

WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL?

"Eco- or sustainable travel supports environmental conservation and protects cultural heritage while promoting cross-cultural understanding and economic development."

— **Brian T. Mullis**, founder, Sustainable Travel International

HOW DO YOU DO IT?

► **Research** the current state of your destination and pick a place in which tourism will improve the socioeconomic situation.

► **Stay** in places that have been recognized for socially responsible qualities. Ask your hotel, tour company, or other service providers about

their social and environmental sustainability practices.

► **Respect** the local environment.

► **Take part** in your destination's culture and respect the native population.

► **Don't take** home protected plants or animals.