

## WONDERS OF THE WORLD

## LENCOIS MARANHENSES NATIONAL PARK

## These shimmering lagoons are no mirage

For a short time each year, rainwater forms pools amid the bleached-white sand dunes of Brazil

AUGUSTA DWYER

Seen from the air, the sweeping white dunes at Lencois Maranhenses National Park in Brazil resemble tousled bedsheets, giving this natural wonder its unusual name – the Bedsheets of Maranhão.

But unlike most deserts in the world, for a few months every year, seasonal rains transform this windswept terrain into a mysterious landscape of flat, shimmering pools curled against the contours of sun-bleached hills. (The precipitation means Lencois is not a true desert.)

As much as 150 centimetres of rainfall leave behind hundreds of these shallow, freshwater lagoons – all but a few of them will gradually disappear again – throughout a vast area extending for more than 1,500 square kilometres.

“I’ve travelled to a lot of amazing places, both in Brazil and abroad,” says Affonso Araujo, a university professor from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, who recently visited the site with his wife, Shirley Furtado. “But in terms of natural beauty, it is difficult to find anything else like this. It looks like a desert but in the middle of the dunes there are the lagoons. It is just remarkable.”

“Dazzling,” Ms. Furtado adds.

Wedged against the Atlantic coast of the state of Maranhão next to the Preguicas River, the Lencois Maranhenses National Park is an officially protected area where motor vehicles are not allowed. Cyclists and trekkers are welcome, however, and guided tours are, while not obligatory, a good idea. The area is so large, it is possible to get lost.

The best time to visit the park is between the months of May and September, when the rains have stopped and the lagoons are their fullest. From the ground, visitors will see sharp-edged sand dunes rearing like icebergs from the expanses of gently rippling water. Schools of fish swim in brilliant pools, born from eggs dropped by



The best time to visit the dunes is May through September, when the rains have stopped and the lagoons are at their fullest. ALAMY

passing seabirds, according to some locals.

For Araujo, however, swimming in a lake among the towering white dunes was the biggest highlight. “The water isn’t salty,” he points out. “It’s fresh water, crystal clear, full of little fish and, on the days that we were there, the temperature was perfect. It was unbelievable.”

As its fame starts to spread, the Lencois Maranhenses is attracting increasing numbers of visitors, and tour operators are beginning to include it among Brazil’s many other attractions in their travel packages. Yet it remains one of the world’s lesser-known natural wonders, a geographic anomaly that is constantly shifting.

Special to *The Globe and Mail*

## IF YOU GO

**What:** An amazing natural phenomenon in which pools of fresh water are left by seasonal rainfall in a vast area of coastal dunes. The stark contrast between dry white sand and crystalline lagoons makes for an incredible temporary landscape.

**Where:** It is situated in the north of Brazil, in the state of Maranhão.

**How to get there:** Travellers to Brazil can fly to large urban centres such as Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo, before picking up domestic flights to the Maranhão capital of São Luiz.

**How to see it:** Air-conditioned minivans, regular vans and buses make the 250-kilometre run regularly to the small town of Barreirinhas at the park’s main entrance. Air taxis can also be arranged.

**Where to stay:** While Barreirinhas has many rustic small hotels, more luxurious accommodation can be found at Encantes do Nordeste Inn ([encantesdonordeste.com.br](http://encantesdonordeste.com.br), 55 98 3349-0288, from \$80 a night) or at Porto Preguicas Resort ([portopreguicas.com.br](http://portopreguicas.com.br), 55 98 3349-6050)

Augusta Dwyer



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**GRAN CENOTE**

# Nature's most scenic sinkhole

In Mexico's Riviera Maya, a watery marvel awaits scuba divers and snorkelers



**KAT TANCOCK** TULUM, MEXICO

It's a hot day in Mexico's Riviera Maya and I'm sticky with sweat in our air conditioning-free car, en route from our beach house in Tulum to the Gran Cenote, a cave-like swimming hole our trusty Lonely Planet guidebook assures us is worth the effort and entry fee. It's my first time in the region, and I've already fallen head over heels: No mere seaside destination with nothing to do but sip sweet cocktails and lounge in the sun, Mexico's Caribbean coast has plenty to offer the restless traveller, with ruins, reefs, activities and wildlife to keep your attention – and yes, a pretty pale-gold beach, too.

We park, pay up and walk in, changing into swimsuits in the washrooms near the entrance before making our way to the staircase down to the water. As we descend, the air grows cooler, and we see it – clear blue water ringed with limestone walls and criss-crossed with a wooden dock. It's my first glimpse of a cenote, and I'm entranced.

Cenote (pronounced say-NO-tay) is a Mayan word, and the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico's southeastern tip is one of the finest places in the world to see and experience this exquisite geological formation.

A cenote is a natural pit or sinkhole, formed when the region's limestone bedrock collapses into the fresh groundwater below. As such, they're the tip of the iceberg: What you see on the surface is just a fraction of what goes on underneath, where complex cave systems covering up to hundreds of kilometres (some of the longest in the world) twist and turn beneath the ground, filled with chilly fresh water that's beautifully clear, thanks to having been filtered through the rock above.

The combination of deep caves and clear water makes these formations a bucket list destination



Some of the Yucatan's cenotes can be found along the main roads while others are hidden away, with nothing but a ladder to get you to the water.



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for divers, but even swimmers and snorkelers on the surface will find plenty to explore, with each cenote offering its own particular version of underground magic: Pick from overhanging ceilings, stalactites and stalagmites, underwater columns, turtles and colourful fish, varying shades of blue and green water with sunlight streaming through, and bats and swallows flying overhead. There are so many to be discovered, both on the main roads and off the beaten path, some easily accessible with parking lot, staircase and dock, others hidden away with nothing but a ladder to get you to the water.

Back at Gran Cenote, I slide on my mask and snorkel and slip into the water. The fresh, cool water is a shock, but refreshing. I gently paddle face down around the pool, gazing at what lies beneath – until at one point, what lies beneath is a group of divers surfacing from the caves below, an otherworldly scene that fits this place. On the other side of the cave, there's an overhanging roof with just enough space to snorkel under, and we pop up on the other side at a secondary entrance with a tiny shore and ladder to the top. I'm shivering, but I head back in for some fun with the waterproof camera before we head back to the beach. This clear pool with its natural light makes for some pretty scenes, and there's so much more to see.

Special to The Globe and Mail

**IF YOU GO**

**What:** The Yucatan is dotted with cenotes of all sizes, from tiny crevices to local swimming holes to massive cave systems. The most well known and visited include Gran Cenote and Dos Ojos near Tulum, X'keken Cenote near Valladolid, and Ik-kil near Chichen Itza.

**Where:** Across Mexico's Yucatan peninsula.

**How to get there:** Fly direct to Cancun from major Canadian cities. Gran Cenote is near Tulum, on the highway toward Coba, about two hours south of Cancun. Alternatively, visit cenotes via the city of Merida.

**How to see it:** Many bus tours from major resorts stop at cenotes as part of a Coba or Chichen Itza tour, or you can book a private guide. Divers will want to sign up for an organized tour with a company that has expertise in cave diving.

**Good to know:** Arrive early – think 8 a.m. – for the most peaceful experience at these busy attractions. Help protect the fragile ecosystem by skipping sunscreen and wearing a shirt instead – or go bare, as most cenotes are deep enough to be out of the harsh sun.

Kat Tancock

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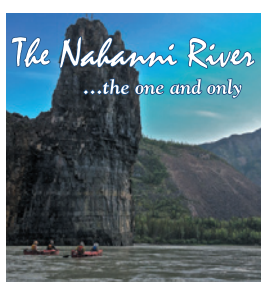
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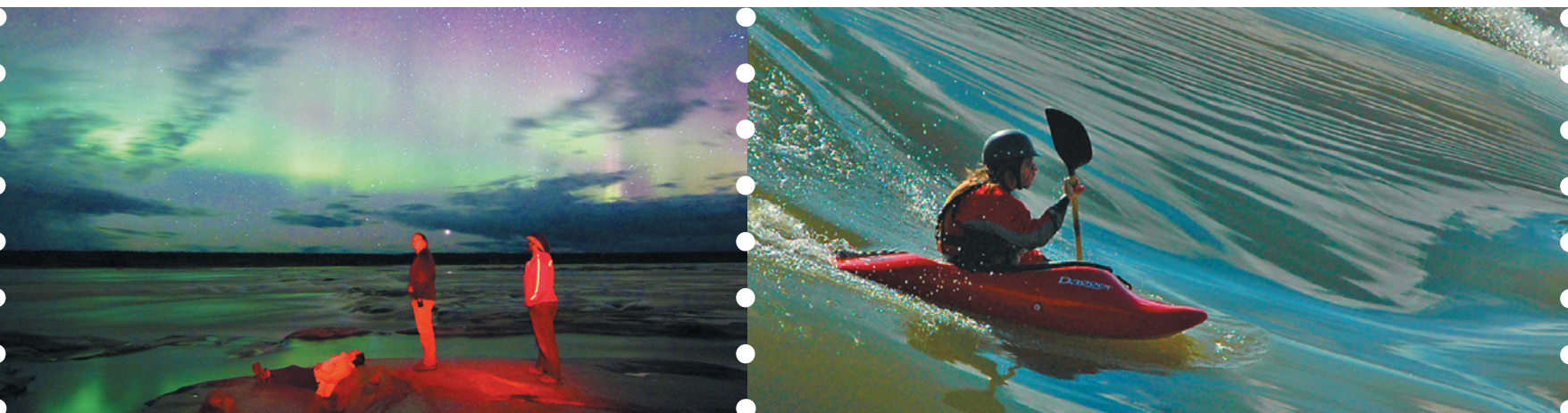


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