

Women help save Mexico's *cenotes*

Housewives now earn tourist cash after cleaning up one of the region's famous freshwater pools.

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Yokdzonot, Mexico - The name of this town in the Mayan language means "above the *cenote*," but for years the *cenote*, or freshwater pool, in the middle of this tiny community of 500 operated as the neighborhood garbage dump.

And then a group of middle-aged women here, looking for more work in a town where most families merely subsist on crops they grow on small pots of land, decided to capitalize on the growing craze for swimming, snorkeling, and scuba diving among the sinkholes that dot the [tourist circuit](#) throughout Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula.

The men called them foolish, and as the group of 25 cut through the jungle with machetes, the other women shook their heads. They hiked 20 meters down to the water's edge, dragging out glass bottles and plastic bags, one by one. They hiked up into the mountains to bring back flat stones to create foot paths, and cut down wood to create rails. The whole effort took more than a year.

"We are all housewives," says Mirna Yolanda Mendez, a mother of four, standing at the Yokdzonot Ecological Park and Cenote, which opened this winter. It is fringed by lush vines. The water is crystal clear, revealing brightly-hued fish below. On a recent day a family splashed around a dock anchored in the middle. "No one believed we could do it," says Ms. Mendez.

How Mexico's cenotes formed

Cenotes formed thousands of years ago, as ocean levels rose and fell over the Yucatán Peninsula. The region sits on one of the largest limestone platforms in the world, which has dissolved over time into flooded caves and underground rivers, whose openings are the *cenotes* spread across the region today.

Today, there are 3,000 *cenotes* registered throughout the Yucatán Peninsula, but an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 are believed to exist.

Sam Meacham, who runs the Center for Research of Aquifer Systems of Quintana Roo and has been exploring *cenotes* for the past decade, says they are to the Yucatán Peninsula what the "Alps are to Switzerland."

The sinkholes were integral to the lives of the ancient [Mayan people](#). They not only provided their water source but were revered as entrances to the "underworld," and the

ancients threw gold, jade, and even sacrificed bodies into them. Their Mayan derivation, *dzonot*, also means "sacred well."

While they were virtually unheard of 10 years ago, tourists are increasingly visiting the pools, which range from deep swimming holes like the one in Yokdzonot to vaulted caverns where stalactites hang from the walls.

Some are full-blown tourist operations; others draw only locals looking for a picnic and a swim. "Each year the number of visitors goes up," says Mr. Meacham.

Locals once used the town's *cenote* as a water source, but over time trash began to accumulate in it.

No one considered swimming there – except the young boys who would play anywhere.

Tourists and local residents certainly had very little interest in the town's *cenote*, even though they have whizzed by the tiny town for years on the way to see the ancient Mayan pyramids at Chichén Itzá.

Tourists are now stopping by

One visitor was Belisa Barbachano, who runs the landmark hotel Hacienda Chichen at the nearby ruins and has driven past Yokdzonot for 14 years. But taking a shortcut one day last year, she passed the town, and a group of women working into the night.

She immediately assumed some high-end tourist operator had moved in, she says. But when she stopped to talk she says she realized it was a grass-roots effort by the community to boost tourism and generate revenue.

"There were these little women," Ms. Barbachano says, whose staff now helps them plan their menus and follow a budget. "I was so impressed with them. They had put down each stone. Everyone thought they were crazy. They told [us]: 'Now that we have it, everyone wants it.'"

Today homemade signs on the highway invite visitors to take a swim. The *cenote* is still a work in progress. The group takes shifts managing the new tourist attraction: cleaning, handling the \$2 entrance fees, or cooking in a small palm-covered restaurant that they built adjacent to the *cenote*. For now, the group invests most of the money they earn into maintaining the small park and *cenote*.

It's been hard, says Mendez, who used to sew in her spare time for extra cash. While they were building the pool, some men complained that the women were gone all day and night. Some men helped, but others have not accepted that they must sometimes help out.

That, she says, has not stopped their efforts.

"As a woman, all you want to do is help your family," Mendez says. "That is why we did this."