

Welcome to Cancún, Cozumel & the Yucatán

The Yucatán Peninsula captivates visitors with its endless offerings of natural wonders and an ancient culture that's still very much alive today.

Life's a Beach

Without a doubt, this corner of Mexico has some of the most beautiful stretches of coastline you'll ever see – which explains in large part why beaches get top billing on the peninsula. On the east coast you have the famous coral-crushed white sands and turquoise-blue waters of the Mexican Caribbean, while up north you'll find sleepy fishing villages with sandy streets and wildlife-rich surroundings. For the ultimate beach-bumming experience you can always hit one of several low-key islands off the Caribbean coast.

Maya Ruins Galore

You can't help but feel awestruck when standing before the pyramids, temples and ball courts of one of the most brilliant pre-Hispanic civilizations of all time. Yes, those Maya certainly knew a thing or two about architecture and they were no slouches when it came to astronomy, science and mathematics either. Witnessing their remarkable achievements firsthand leaves a lasting impression on even the most jaded traveler – and the peninsula is chock-full of these mind-blowing Maya archaeological sites.

Nature's Playground

The Yucatán is the real deal for nature enthusiasts. With colorful underwater scenery like none other, it offers some of the best diving and snorkeling sites in the world. Then you have the many biosphere reserves and national parks that are home to a remarkably diverse variety of animal and plant life. Just to give you an idea of what's in store: you can swim with whale sharks, spot crocodiles and flamingos, help liberate sea turtles and observe hundreds upon hundreds of bird species.

Culture & Fun

In case you need a little something more than pretty beaches, ancient ruins and outdoor adventures, you'll be glad to know that culture and fun-filled activities abound in the Yucatán. On any given day you may come across soulful dance performances, free concerts, interesting museums or art exhibits – particularly in Mérida, the peninsula's cultural capital. For all-out fun, the Yucatán is one big splashfest after another with thousands of underground natural pools, theme parks with subterranean rivers, and all kinds of thrilling boat tours.



Why I Love Cancún, Cozumel & the Yucatán

By John Hecht, Author

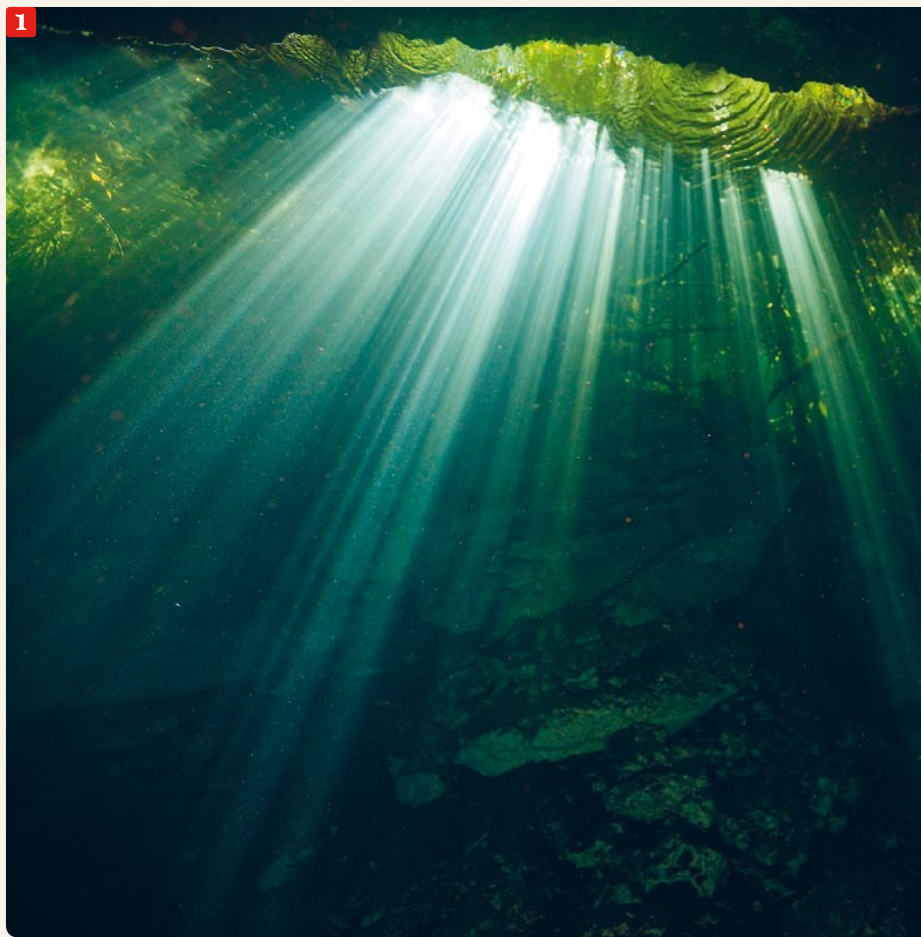
Above all, I love the colors. Maybe I've been living in smog-choked Mexico City waaay too long now but every time I visit the peninsula I find myself asking: can an ocean really have that many shades of intense blue, or can jungles and mangroves really be so chlorophyll green? I also love that there are so many things to do. Had your fill of Maya ruins? No problem - have a dip in a gorgeous cenote (limestone sinkhole) or explore amazing coral reefs. And don't even get me started about the Yucatán's wonderful regional cuisine.

For more about our authors, see page 320

**Cancún, Cozumel
& the Yucatán's**

Top 17

1



Swimming in Cenotes

1 The Maya considered them sacred gateways to the underworld. OK, so maybe they had a flair for the dramatic, but once you visit a cenote (a limestone sinkhole) you'll better understand where the Maya were coming from. An estimated 6000 cenotes dot the peninsula; some, like the spectacular pair of caverns at Cenote Dzitnup (p186), make for refreshing, fun-filled swimming holes, while others, such as the underground cave system at Dos Ojos (p111), draw divers from far and wide.

Savor the Flavors

2 If you've never tried regional *yucateco* cuisine, you're in for a real treat. Even by Mexican standards, with its strong culinary tradition, the Yucatán is a foodie's haven. *Yucatecos* (people of the Yucatán Peninsula) are famous for their marinated *pollo* (chicken) and *cochinila* (pork) *pibiles*. Often wrapped in banana leaves and cooked underground for what seems an eternity, this meaty traditional dish reigns supreme on the peninsula. And a visit wouldn't be complete without sampling a delicious homestyle *sopa de lima* (a brothy lime soup). *Buen provecho!*

Below: Tortilla soup



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2

PAM NICKLEN/GETTY IMAGES ©

Magical San Cristóbal

3 Wander through the cobblestone streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas (p223), the high-altitude colonial city in the heart of indigenous Chiapas. A heady mix of modern and Maya, with cosmopolitan cafes and traditional culture, it's also a jumping-off point for fascinating Tzotzil and Tzeltal villages. Spend sunny days exploring captivating churches and shopping at markets for amber or chocolate, then dine at one of many gourmet restaurants in town. Late nights are best whiled away by the fireplace of a cozy watering hole.

Calakmul, Jungle Ruins

4 The 'Kingdom of the Serpent's Head' was one of the most powerful Maya cities that ever existed. What has survived the ravages of time here is very impressive – some of the Maya's largest and tallest pyramids, with awesome views of expansive surrounding jungle alive with birds, monkeys and jaguars. And relatively recent excavations at Calakmul (p215) have unearthed an amazing rarity in the Maya world – incredibly well-preserved painted murals and a spectacular stucco frieze.



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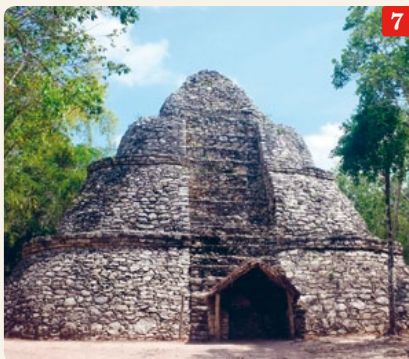
BALAN MOHAMMAD / GETTY IMAGES ©



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Diving in Cozumel

5 Don't miss the opportunity to plunge into the colorful waters surrounding Isla Cozumel, one of the world's best diving and snorkeling destinations. While the spectacular coral reefs are undeniably the main draw, the island's beautiful beaches and pleasant town square keep nondiver types sufficiently entertained. If you're planning on visiting in February, don't miss the annual Carnaval (p90), a street celebration infused with lively music, dancing and plenty of partying.

Cancún

6 Cancún may not appeal to everyone, but the resort city certainly has its charms. The Zona Hotelera, for instance, straddles some of the most precious Caribbean coastline in the Yucatán and it boasts the new Museo Maya de Cancún (p56), plus several small Maya ruins. For local flavor, stay in downtown Cancún, where the happening nightlife scene is within stumbling distance of most hotels and the Zona Hotelera's beaches are just a short bus ride away.

Top right: Playa Chac-Mool, Zona Hotelera, Cancún

Morning in Cobá

7 Everyone will tell you to get to the ruins of the Yucatán early to beat the crowds, but at the ruins of Cobá (p120) it really makes a difference. To be there as the jungle awakens – with bird calls and the morning light filtering through the canopy – is magical. The experience of climbing the massive Nohoch Mul pyramid and looking out over the surrounding jungle on your own is unbeatable. Make it even more memorable and explore the ruins on a rented bike.

Above right: Nohoch Mul Pyramid, Cobá



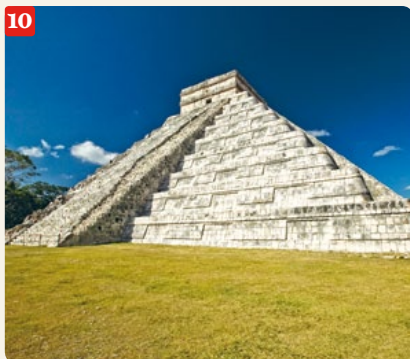
Playa del Carmen

8 European chic. Night-life extraordinary. Rivera Maya boomtown. Oh yeah, Playa del Carmen (p102) has some pretty nice beaches too. And if at any moment you grow tired of wining, dining and dancing under the moon at beachside discos, you'll be happy to know that Playa makes for a convenient base to explore nearby sinkholes, such as Cristalino cenote (p110), and it's also a prime spot for scuba diving and snorkeling.

Isla Mujeres

9 Isla Mujeres (p75) doesn't have the mega-resort mindset of nearby Cancún across the bay, and therein lies its appeal. Even though it's a fairly small island, you should have no problem finding things to do. Scuba diving and snorkeling are big, and it has some of the most swimmable beaches on the Yucatán, making it perfect for kids. The island is also home to the Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm (p77), which releases tens of thousands of turtles each year and has a nice little aquarium.

Top right: Sea turtle



Wonderful Chichén Itzá

10 Ever since Chichén Itzá (p177) was named one of the new seven wonders of the world, it started making its way onto many bucket lists. The massive El Castillo pyramid, Chichén Itzá's most iconic structure, will knock your socks off, especially at vernal and autumnal equinoxes, when morning and afternoon sunlight cast a shadow of a feathered serpent on the staircase.

Above: El Castillo (p180), Chichén Itzá

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Isla Contoy

11 Parque Nacional Isla Contoy (p70), an uninhabited island just a short distance from Cancún and Isla Mujeres, allows only 200 visitors a day in order to retain its mostly pristine environment. Home to more than 150 bird species and nesting sea turtles during summer months, the island will definitely appeal to nature lovers and those simply looking to get in a little hiking and snorkeling.

Peerless Palenque

12 Gather all your senses and dive headfirst into these amazing ruins (p234), one of the Maya world's finest. Here pyramids rise above jungle treetops and howler monkeys sound off like monsters in the dense canopy. Wander the mazelike Palace, gazing up at its iconic tower. Scale the stone staircases of the Templo de las Inscripciones, the lavish mausoleum of Pakal. Following the Otulum river and its pretty waterfalls, and end by visiting Palenque's excellent museum.

Bottom: Templo de la Cruz, Palenque



11

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Campeche's Walled City

13 This lovely colonial city (p196) is a pleasant antidote to the larger, more bustling tourist-filled destinations in other parts of the Yucatán. And since relatively few tourists make it here you'll get more of that real Mexican experience. Campeche's Unesco-listed historic center is like a pastel wonderland, surrounded by high stone walls and home to narrow cobbled streets with well-preserved buildings. Nearby, the *malecón* (beachside promenade) provides a fine place to stroll, people-watch and say goodnight to the setting sun.

Scenic Laguna Bacalar

14 Known as 'the lake of seven colors' for its intense shades of blue and aqua-green, it doesn't get any more scenic for an afternoon swim than sparkling Laguna Bacalar (p132). Resort hotel Rancho Encantado (p133) has quite possibly the best view on the shore, and at the lake's south end you can take a plunge into the 90m-deep Cenote Azul (p132).

Bottom: Cenote Azul



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17

Isla Holbox

15 You gotta love a place with no cars and no banks. Granted, you may see some golf carts humming up and down Holbox's sandy streets for the dinner-hour rush, but that's about as hectic as it gets on this low-key fisherfolks' island (p71). Snorkeling with 15-ton whale sharks is all the rage at Holbox these days. Even if you miss whale-shark season, boat tours go to a freshwater spring and nearby islands for some excellent bird-watching.

Above left: whale shark

Mérida, Cultural Capital

16 Everyone who goes to Cancún or Playa del Carmen should carve off a couple days to get to Mérida (p141), a town with awesome Spanish colonial architecture unlike anything you'll find by the sea. The weekends see great citywide parties: the city center closes to cars and you can munch on *yucateco* street eats as you watch all sorts of spirited song-and-dance around the main plaza, aka Plaza Grande. And living up to its fame as the peninsula's cultural capital, Mérida abounds with museums and art galleries.

Tulum, Scenic Ruins

17 Talk about your prime beachfront real estate! The dramatically situated Tulum ruins (p113) sit pretty, atop a high cliff overlooking a spectacular white-sand beach. After marveling at the sun-baked Maya ruins, and dodging iguanas and distracted tourists, you can cap off your history lesson with a refreshing dip in the azure waters of the Mexican Caribbean. Come nighttime, join in on soulful fiestas in bars along Tulum Pueblo's main strip or escape to the Zona Hotelera for a quiet oceanfront dinner.

Bottom right: El Castillo and ruins, Tulum

Need to Know

For more information, see *Survival Guide* (p277)

Currency

Mexican peso (M\$)

Language

Spanish, Maya

Visas

Tourist permit required; some nationalities also need visas

Money

ATMs widely available in big cities and most towns. Credit cards accepted in many midrange and top-end hotels and restaurants.

Cell Phones

Many US cell-phone companies offer Mexico roaming deals. Local SIM cards can only be used on phones that have been unlocked.

Time

Central Standard Time (GMC/UTC minus six hours)

When to Go

- Tropical climate, wet & dry seasons
- Tropical climate, rain year round
- Dry climate



High Season

(Dec-Apr)

- ➔ Remains dry for the most part, but so-called 'nortes' bring northerly winds and occasional showers.
- ➔ Hotel rates increase considerably, even more so during 'ultra' high-season periods around Christmas and Easter.

Shoulder Season

(Jul & Aug)

- ➔ Very hot and humid throughout the peninsula. Hurricane season begins.
- ➔ Vacating Mexicans flock to the beaches to beat the heat.

Low Season

(May, Jun, Sep-Nov)

- ➔ Weather cools down from September to November. Hurricane and rainy seasons end in October.
- ➔ Great deals on hotels. Crowds thin out at ruins, beaches and other popular attractions.

Websites

Yucatán Today (www.yucatan.today.com) Online version of free monthly magazine covering Yucatán and Campeche states.

Loco Gringo (www.locogringo.com) A good site to book homes and hotels on the Riviera Maya.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com/mexico) Lonely Planet's Mexico portal.

Yucatán Tierra de Maravillas (www.yucatan.travel) Yucatan state tourism site.

Riviera Maya (www.rivieramaya.com) Has info on the Riviera Maya's sights and activities.

Campeche Travel (www.campeche.travel) Campeche state tourism board site.

Important Numbers

Police	☎066
Fire	☎068
Tourist assistance	☎078
Country code	☎52
International access code	☎00

Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	M\$13.13
Canada	C\$1	M\$12.70
Euro zone	€1	M\$17.01
Japan	¥100	M\$13.74
New Zealand	NZ\$1	M\$10.63
UK	UK£1	M\$21.60
USA	US\$1	M\$12.73

Daily Costs

Budget: Less than M\$500

- ➔ Dorm bed: M\$130-200
- ➔ Double room in budget hotel: M\$350-400
- ➔ Street eats or economical set menu: M\$20-50
- ➔ City bus: M\$5-10

Midrange: M\$1000-1500

- ➔ Double room in comfortable hotel: M\$600-1200
- ➔ Lunch or dinner in decent restaurant: M\$150-250
- ➔ Short taxi trip: M\$20-50
- ➔ Sightseeing, activities: M\$200

Top End: More than M\$2000

- ➔ Double room in upscale hotel: from M\$1200
- ➔ Dining in fine restaurant: M\$250-500
- ➔ Car rental: from M\$600 per day
- ➔ Tours: M\$1000-2500

Opening Hours

Here we've provided high-season opening hours; hours at some places may decrease during shoulder and low seasons. Some shops, restaurants and hotels may close for several weeks – or several months – during low season.

Banks 9am-4pm Monday to Friday, 10am-2pm Saturday (some banks do not open Saturday and hours may vary)

Bars and clubs 10pm-3am

Stores & shops 9am-8pm Monday to Saturday

Archaeological sites 8am-5pm

Museums 9am-5pm Tuesday to Sunday

Arriving in Cancún, Cozumel & Yucatán

Aeropuerto Internacional de Cancún Yellow Transfers shuttles, with ticket offices inside the terminal, cost M\$160 per person to Ciudad Cancún or the Zona Hotelera. ADO buses (M\$52) go to the downtown bus station. Regular taxis and private vans charge M\$450 to M\$500.

Cozumel Airport Shared shuttle vans from the airport into town cost M\$60. For hotels on the island's north end, the shuttles charge M\$96 and to the south side expect to pay between M\$97 and M\$140.

Mérida airport Curbside Transporte Terrestre taxis charge M\$180 per carload to downtown. Buses (M\$8) do not enter the airport; catch one on the main road if you don't mind walking.

Getting Around

Shared Van *Colectivos* (shared vans) are quicker and cheaper than buses. Most have frequent departures.

Bus 1st- and 2nd-class buses go pretty much everywhere in the Yucatán.

Car Great option for traveling outside big cities. Expect to pay about M\$750 a day for rental and gas.

For much more on getting around, see



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First Time

Cancún, Cozumel & the Yucatán

For more information, see **Survival Guide (p277)**

Checklist

- ➔ Make sure you have a valid passport
- ➔ Check if your country requires a visa to enter Mexico (p287)
- ➔ Inform your debit/credit card company of your travels
- ➔ Get necessary vaccinations (p282)
- ➔ Book hotels in advance
- ➔ Look in to travel insurance options (p283)
- ➔ Check if you can use your cell phone (p286)
- ➔ Check your airline's baggage restrictions

What to Pack

- ➔ Passport
- ➔ Credit and/or debit card
- ➔ Driver's license (if driving)
- ➔ Scuba or snorkel gear
- ➔ Sunscreen
- ➔ Insect repellent
- ➔ Swim suit
- ➔ Phrasebook
- ➔ Camera
- ➔ Pocketknife
- ➔ Cell phone and charger

Top Tips for Your Trip

- ➔ For beaches and scuba diving, visit the peninsula's Caribbean side. For culture, Maya ruins and nature experiences, go west.
- ➔ Avoid staying in accommodations where mosquitoes may be a problem. If you're unfortunate enough to get pricked by one carrying the dengue virus, expect to spend several days in bed.
- ➔ Visiting Maya communities brings money into local economies and the experience leaves you with a lasting impression.
- ➔ Driving at night in Mexico can be very dangerous. If you must do it, toll highways have better lighting and fewer potholes than the *libre* (free) roads.

What to Wear

Keep in mind that the Yucatán, especially in Mérida, gets very hot in the months of April and May, so bring light and loose-fitting clothes to stay cool. If you're staying on the coast or in cool inland areas, bring a light sweater or jacket for evenings. Take long-sleeve shirts and long pants/skirts for protection against mosquitoes, especially if you plan to be near mangrove swamps or jungles; this attire is also good for formal restaurants and for visiting nonbeach towns, where you'll see fewer people wearing shorts and tank tops.

Sleeping

If you're planning on visiting during high season (mid-December to April), it's a good idea to book your accommodation in advance. See p278 for more information.

- ➔ **Hotels** Range from budget digs to all-inclusive resorts
- ➔ **Guesthouses** Family-run houses that usually provide good value and more personable service.
- ➔ **Hostels** The most affordable option and a great way to meet other travelers.
- ➔ **Bungalows** From cheap cabins to elegant, boutique setups.
- ➔ **B&Bs** A little more intimate and slightly more upscale than some guesthouses.

Money

ATMs can be found in all major and medium-size cities and most small towns. In towns with just one or two ATMs, the machines might run out of money, so bring extra cash just in case. For security, use ATMs during the day; also be aware that every time you pull out money you'll be charged 'service fees.' Most midrange and top-end hotels and restaurants accept major credit cards; Visa is the most commonly accepted. Plan on making all cash purchases with Mexican pesos. You can exchange cash at banks or money-exchange offices.

For more information, see p284.

Bargaining

Most stores and shops have set prices. You can do some friendly haggling in some arts and crafts markets, but don't get carried away – most of the artisans are just trying to make a living.

Tipping

- ➔ **Hotels** About 5% to 10% of room costs for staff
- ➔ **Restaurants** Leave 15% if service is not already included in the check
- ➔ **Supermarkets** Baggers usually get M\$3 to M\$5
- ➔ **Porters** Tip M\$20 per bag
- ➔ **Taxis** Drivers don't expect tips unless they provide an extra service
- ➔ **Bars** Bartenders usually don't get tipped, so anything is appreciated

Language

English is widely spoken in Cancún and the Riviera Maya. Elsewhere on the peninsula, you can get by with English in the main tourist centers, but outside of these Spanish is useful. Any effort to speak Spanish is appreciated. See Language for more information.

Phrases to Learn Before You Go

- 1 **Where can I buy handicrafts?**
¿Dónde se puede comprar artesanías?
don-de se pwe-de kom-prar ar-te-sa-nee-as
Star buys in Mexico are the regional handicrafts produced all over the country, mainly by the indigenous people.
- 2 **Which antojitos do you have?**
¿Qué antojitos tiene? *ke an-to-khee-tos tye-ne*
'Little whimsies' (snacks) can encompass anything – have an entire meal of them, eat a few as appetisers, or get one on the street for a quick bite.
- 3 **Not too spicy, please.**
No muy picoso, por favor. *no mooy pee-ko-so por fa-vor*
Not all food in Mexico is spicy, but beware – many dishes can be fierce indeed, so it may be a good idea to play it safe.
- 4 **Where can I find a cantina nearby?**
¿Dónde hay una cantina cerca de aquí?
don-de ai oo-na kan-tee-na ser-ka de a-kee
Ask locals about the classical Mexican venue for endless snacks, and often dancing as well.
- 5 **How do you say ... in your language?**
¿Cómo se dice ... en su lengua?
ko-mo se dee-se ... en su len-gwa
Numerous indigenous languages are spoken around Mexico, primarily Mayan languages and Náhuatl. People will appreciate it if you try to use their local language.

Etiquette

- ➔ **Greetings** A handshake is standard when meeting people for the first time. Among friends, men usually exchange back-slapping hugs; for women it's usually an (air) kiss on the cheek.
- ➔ **Conversation** Yucatecos are generally warm and entertaining conversationalists. As a rule, they express disagreement more by nuance than by contradiction. The Maya can be more reserved.

Safety

Is it safe to go to the Yucatán, given all the news about Mexico's drug-related violence? The answer is yes. Yucatán has barely been touched by the violence, which is mostly in northern Mexico. Safety precautions are as they would be for anywhere else in the world (such as avoiding hitchhiking and not putting up resistance if mugged).

If You Like...

Maya Ruins

The peninsula boasts some of the best-preserved and most remarkable ruins in all of Mexico.

Chichén Itzá Recently named one of the 'new seven wonders of the world.' Enough said. (p177)

Tulum Maya ruins perched atop a cliff with jaw-dropping views of the Caribbean blue down below. (p113)

Cobá A sprawling site in a jungle setting that's best explored on a bicycle. (p121)

Calakmul High pyramids sit pretty in a huge Maya city tucked away in a rainforest. (p215)

Palenque Exquisite Maya temples backed by steamy, jungle-covered hills. (p234)

Uxmal Set in the hilly Puuc region, this site contains some of the most fascinating structures you'll ever see. (p159)

Yaxchilán Half the fun is getting there on a riverboat adventure deep in the Chiapas jungle. (p240)

Beach Resorts

There's more to the beach resort experience than white sands and turquoise waters. Each destination has its own unique vibe.

Cancún The mother of all megaresorts is part glitzy hotel zone, part downtown scene with local flavor. (p56)

Isla Cozumel A popular divers' destination with a pleasant town square and surprisingly quiet beaches. (p84)

Isla Mujeres Has some of the most gorgeous beaches around but is more low-key than Cancún and Cozumel. (p75)

Playa del Carmen The hippest beach town on the coast – European chic meets the Mexican Caribbean. (p102)

Tulum Idyllic beachside bungalows coupled with a buzzing, friendly inland town. (p113)

Puerto Morelos Calm, small-town feel, plus great diving and snorkeling. (p99)

Colonial Towns

The 300-year period of Spanish rule left behind awesome plazas and opulent mansions and haciendas.

Mérida Even if you're not big on architecture, the stately mansions in the peninsula's cultural capital never cease to amaze. (p141)

Campeche The protective walls once used to fend off pirate attacks still stand today. (p196)

Valladolid Think Mérida without the grandeur. Colonial flavor here comes on a smaller, more intimate scale. (p184)

San Cristóbal de las Casas The cobble streets of San Cristóbal lead to splendid colonial-era churches. (p223)

Izamal Smack in the middle of town rises the imposing Convento de San Antonio de Padua. (p175)

Diving & Snorkeling

Not only does this region have some of the best reef diving in the world it also offers fascinating dives in cave systems.

Isla Cozumel The famed reefs of this island draw diving

IF YOU LIKE... TURTLES

Check out the Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm, which liberates more than 100,000 of these little guys each year. (p77)



MONICA AND MICHAEL SWEET / GETTY IMAGES ©

aficionados from all over the world. (p84)

Banco Chichorro The largest coral atoll in the western hemisphere; known for its colorful underwater scenery and sunken ships. (p129)

Isla Holbox During summer months you can snorkel with whale sharks off the coast of this low-key island. (p71)

Isla Mujeres Offers excellent reef diving and there's a new underwater sculpture museum in the area. (p77)

Tulum Nearby cenotes (limestone sinkholes) provide wonderful opportunities to snorkel and dive in caverns and caves. (p115)

Puerto Morelos Get in some wreck diving here; the barrier reef is just 600m offshore. (p99)

Regional Cuisine

The Yucatán is unquestionably one of Mexico's most remarkable culinary destinations.

Kinich Exquisitely prepared traditional dishes – try the *papadzules* (egg enchiladas) and you'll understand why. (p176)

La Chaya Maya A trip to Mérida wouldn't be complete without a meal or three at the Chaya. (p152)

La Fuente Well-known in Ciudad del Carmen for its *pibipollo* (chicken tamales cooked underground). (p213)

Manjar Blanco Offers a contemporary take on classic *yucateco* dishes, such as *poc-chuc* (grilled pork). (p152)

La Cueva del Chango Uses fresh, natural ingredients accented with local flavors of the peninsula. (p107)



SHOW IMAGES / GETTY IMAGES ©

Top: Tulum (p113), Riviera Maya

Bottom: Cathedral, Campeche (p196)

Arts & Crafts

Hamacas El Aguacate Who doesn't like to catch a siesta on a quality hammock? Buy one here, then it's sweet dreams baby. (p155)

Artisans' Market A main attraction in Puerto Morelos, this market sells authentic Tixkokob hammocks and fine jewelry at fair prices. (p101)

Bazar Artesanal Campeche's Folk Art Bazaar is a one-stop shop for regional crafts. (p204)

Los Cinco Soles Pick up black ceramics from Oaxaca and Talavera pottery at this Isla Cozumel crafts store. (p94)

Mercado Municipal Ki-Huic A labyrinthine downtown Cancún market carrying a wide variety of handicrafts. (p67)

Centro Cultural y Artesanal Crafts purchases here help support rural indigenous families. (p176)

Nature Experiences

The peninsula spoils nature lovers silly with its wide array of wildlife in biosphere reserves and national parks.

Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún Head out to the mangroves here to spy flamingos and crocs. (p170)

Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Lagartos Experienced guides lead bird-watching and snor-

keling tours in this magnificent reserve. (p190)

Parque Nacional Isla Contoy An uninhabited island that's home to more than 150 bird species and provides nesting grounds for sea turtles as well. (p70)

Reserva de la Biosfera Pantanos de Centla This massive reserve in Tabasco has glorious lakes, marshes, rivers and, of course, abundant wildlife. (p228)

Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an A sprawling jungle – the dwelling of howler monkeys, jaguars, pumas and hundreds of bird species. (p124)

Nightlife & Dancing

Mambo Café Groove to live Cuban salsa music at this downtown Cancún nightclub. (p66)

Papaya Playa Project The Tribal Room at this hotel has been known to throw a fair number of wild beach parties. (p119)

La Fundación Mezcalería Sip some smoky *mezcal*s (alcoholic agave drink) at this happening Mérida retro bar. (p153)

Fusion The beach often becomes an impromptu stage for fire dancers at this cool Playa del Carmen bar. (p108)

Salón Rincón Colonial An atmospheric Cuban-style drinking establishment that served as a location for the Antonio Banderas flick *Original Sin*. (p204)

Swimming

Between cenotes, swimmable beaches and spectacular pools, you can enjoy a perfectly amphibious existence here.

Cenote Dzitnup A lovely cavern pool near Valladolid with *álamo* (poplar) roots stretching down many meters. (p186)

Playa Norte Swimming in the shallow, crystalline waters of this Isla Mujeres beach is heavenly. (p76)

Le Blanc This Cancún resort hotel boasts a gorgeous azure infinity pool overlooking the Caribbean Sea. (p64)

Cristalino Cenote A quiet spot with mangrove on one side and a large open section you can dive into. (p110)

Xcaret Kids love swimming and snorkeling in underground rivers and caves in this Riviera Maya fun park. (p102)

Getaway Destinations

Xcalak No cruise ships, no gas stations, no banks and a wonderful barrier reef – the Caribbean coast as it once was. (p131)

Río Lagartos Nature tours and whiling away the time in a sleepy fishing village on the northern coast. (p190)

Punta Allen The road to this remote beach community ain't pretty but the village sure is. (p124)

San Crisanto Palm groves; quiet, white-sand beaches; and a few rustic cabins: it's the ultimate escapist's retreat. (p175)

Corozal, Belize Not much happens in this small coastal

IF YOU LIKE... SPICY FOOD

The Yucatán is home to the four-alarm habanero chili, one of the hottest peppers on the planet. (p262)



Ceramic skulls, Chichén Itzá

community and that's what makes it so darn appealing. (p138)

Family-Friendly Trips

Riviera Maya The land of theme parks, swimming opportunities galore and excellent diving. (p97)

Cancún Plenty of water-related activities, hotels with kids' clubs and tours geared toward children. (p54)

Valladolid The nearby cenotes make a big splash with the little

ones and the town's pyramids are fun to climb. (p184)

Campeche Pirate-themed cruises and a walled city full of swashbuckler legends makes for good family entertainment. (p194)

Progreso A popular family beach destination, first and foremost because you can holiday on the cheap here. (p173)

Studying Spanish

Take classes in the Yucatán's cultural capital of Mérida at the non-profit **Instituto Benjamín Franklin**. (p148)

Head down to the lovely San Cristóbal de las Casas and brush up on your skills at **El Puente Spanish Language School**. (p227)

Between beach-bumming and scuba diving, squeeze in a few hours of class at the **Puerto Morelos Language Center**. (p100)

Ask about very affordable homestays at the **International House** in Playa del Carmen. (p103)

Once you've mastered Spanish, take a Maya language course at **Playa Lingua del Caribe** in the Riviera Maya. (p105)

Month by Month

TOP EVENTS

Vernal Equinox,
March

**Swimming with
Whale Sharks,** June

Carnaval, February

Día de Muertos,
November

Mérida Fest, January

January

The first week of January is one of the busiest times of the year, meaning hotel rates spike. Weather-wise, it's relatively cool.

Mérida Fest

This cultural event, running most of January across the city, celebrates the founding of Mérida with art exhibits, concerts, plays and book presentations.

Día de los Reyes Magos

(Three Kings' Day) On January 6, this is the day when Mexican children traditionally receive gifts, rather than at Christmas. A good place to be at this time is Tizimín.

February

Temperatures rise slightly and it stays fairly dry. It's still considered high season but most destinations have quietened down significantly.

Día de la Candelaria

Held on February 2, Candelmas commemorates the presentation of Jesus in the temple 40 days after his birth; celebrated in many towns with processions, bullfights and dancing.

Carnaval

A big street bash preceding the 40-day penance of Lent, Carnaval is usually in February or March. It's festively celebrated in Mérida, Campeche and Isla Cozumel with parades, music, dancing and fun.

March

The thermometer rises a few notches in more ways than one as US spring breakers flock to the peninsula for tequila-fueled revelry.

Spring Break

Bust out that beer bong. Most university students get midterm break in March and Cancún is the preferred destination – so either join the party or head for the hills.

Vernal Equinox

On the day of the spring equinox (March 20) and about a week thereafter, thousands head to Chichén Itzá to witness the shadow formation of a serpent appear on the staircase of the El Castillo pyramid. (p177)

April

One of the hottest and driest months of the year on the peninsula. Semana Santa brings out Mexican tourists in droves as they look to cool off at the beach.

Semana Santa

Held throughout Holy Week (starting on Palm Sunday, in March or April), solemn processions move through the streets. On Good Friday (Viernes Santo) there are dramatic re-enactments of the Passion Play.

Feria de San Cristóbal

Starting on Easter Sunday, the week-long Feria de la Primavera y de la Paz in San Cristóbal de las Casas features art shows, song and dance, amusement rides, bullfights, fireworks and, of course, lots of food.

May

A scorcher of a month, especially in Mérida where the daily high averages around 35°C. Not surprisingly, great hotel deals can be found.

Feria del Cedral

On Isla Cozumel, the entertaining Feria del Cedral honors a group of Caste War refugees who settled on the island in 1848. The fairgrounds have rides, rodeo events and you can see the time-honored 'Dance of the Pigs' Heads.' (p90)

June

It's still very hot and it's the beginning of hurricane season, which runs to November. Tourism slows down considerably.

Swimming with Whale Sharks

A good time to swim with these gentle giants off the coasts of Isla Holbox and Isla Mujeres.

July

Expect warm, wet and humid weather. This is a summer holiday month

for both Mexicans and foreigners so don't be surprised to find a lot of activity in tourist centers.

Fiesta de la Virgen del Carmen

For the last two weeks of July, the patron saint of Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche, is taken on a journey over land and across the harbor. The fiesta features artistic and cultural events and craft shows.

August

Summer holiday season continues, as do the rains. Inland spots tend to be sticky this time of year.

Festival Jats'a Já

Held the third weekend of August in Mahahual, this festival is a prayer offering of sorts to the hurricane gods. Traditional Maya dancing, art exhibits and culinary events.

September

The height of the hurricane season, though it shouldn't present a problem if you keep an eye out for alerts. It's also Mexico's most patriotic month of the year.

Día de la Independencia

(Independence Day; September 16) The anniversary of the start of Mexico's War of Independence in 1810. On the evening of the 15th, the famous call to rebellion is repeated from the balcony of every town hall in the land.

October

Cooler climes and slightly less rainfall. If you visit during the last days of October and the first days of November it's interesting to compare Halloween to Day of the Dead celebrations.

Halloween

Playa del Carmen is the scene of a wild, all-night costume party that draws more than its fair share of inebriated zombies.

November

The rainy season has passed and temperatures are subsiding. Some accommodations drop prices by as much as 50%.

Día de Muertos

(Day of the Dead; November 2) Families build altars in their homes and visit graveyards to commune with their dead, taking garlands and gifts. Theme park Xcaret in the Riviera Maya arranges beautiful altars. (p102)

December

Nortes (northerly winds that bring showers) are prevalent along the coast from November to January. The first two weeks of December are quiet on the peninsula ahead of the big Christmas rush.

Plan Your Trip

Itineraries



1
WEEK

Cancún & the Riviera Maya

The road from Cancún to Cobá is chock full of coast-hugging surprises. Along the way you'll find fun-filled cenotes (limestone sinkholes), astonishing Maya ruins and happening little beach towns with sugar-white sands.

Get things started with a dip in the sapphire waters along the Zona Hotelera (hotel zone) of **Cancún** (p56), then hit downtown and see the other side of the city over dinner and dancing.

Make your way south about 30km and stop in **Puerto Morelos** (p99) to duck out

to the beach, then browse for handmade crafts in the small town's artisans market. Spend a day or so beach-bumming and dining in uberchic **Playa del Carmen** (p102). Playa, as it's called, is a good jumping-off point for **Isla Cozumel** (p84), where you'll enjoy amazing diving and snorkeling, quiet beaches on the island's windswept side and a pleasant town plaza. If you've brought kids, head back to the mainland and visit one of the theme parks just south of Playa, such as **Xplor** (p102) with its underground river-raft rides.

You'll definitely want to visit Maya ruins and it's hard to imagine a more



El Castillo, Tulum

spectacular location than **Tulum** (p113), where structures are perched atop a cliff overlooking the Mexican Caribbean. While at the site, take the stairs down to the beach and have a refreshing swim to cool off. Tulum's town and its coastal Zona Hotelera are destinations in their own right. Stay in a bungalow on the sand and at night paint the town red along the buzzing main strip.

With an early start, head for the Maya ruins of **Cobá** (p120; find the road to Cobá

at Tulum's north end). Once inside this archaeological site, rent a bicycle and marvel at jungle ruins connected by ancient paths. Before heading back to Tulum, have lunch at one of Cobá's lakeside restaurants. On the return, drop by the **Gran Cenote** (p120) for a little swimming and snorkeling action.

This easy 170km trip stays close to Cancún and there's frequent bus service to all of these destinations, or just rent a car.



10
DAYS

Maya Country



PHILIPPE COLONINI / GETTY IMAGES ©

The architectural and artistic achievements of the Maya are prominently dotted across the peninsula. Though the ancient cities are long abandoned, the Maya people and their traditions are still very much present. One can spend weeks, even months, visiting all of the ruins, archaeological museums and small Maya towns – this itinerary assumes you have a life to get back to.

For background, visit the shiny new **Museo Maya de Cancún** (p56) in the heart of the resort city's Zona Hotelera. The price of admission includes access to the adjoining **San Miguelito** (p56) archaeological site, which features Maya ruins that were just recently unveiled. Hit the road the next day and spend a day or two in the colonial town of **Valladolid** (p184), a former Maya ceremonial center. For some respite from your Maya itinerary, drop by the **Cenote Dzitnup** (p186) on your way out of town and take a plunge into a spectacular limestone sinkhole. Next up is must-see **Chichén Itzá** (p177), Maya ruins that were recently named one of the 'new seven wonders of the world.' Get an early start to beat the tour bus crowds.

A route then leads to **Oxkutzcab** and **Tekax**, offering glimpses of traditional Maya life. While in Oxkutzcab, be sure to check out the nearby **Grutas de Loltún** (p164), the largest cave system on the peninsula. Move on to **Santa Elena**, a fine base for exploring the impressive ruins of **Uxmal** (p159) and other archaeological sites tucked away in the rolling Puuc hills.

After crossing the Yucatán-Campeche border, stop at **Hopelchén** (p207), where you can witness the ancient arts of beekeeping and herbal medicine. Make your way to the walled city of **Campeche** (p196), a good base for visiting **Edzná** (p209), a formidable Maya site with a five-story temple. The peninsula's south harbors fascinating but scarcely visited remnants of classic Maya civilization in the vast **Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul** (p215). Serious Maya buffs should visit the ruins of **Palenque** (p234) and the contemporary Maya domain of **San Cristóbal de las Casas** (p223), both in Chiapas.

Most destinations here are accessible by bus or shared transport vehicles, but for some, such as the Ruta Puuc ruins, you'll need to hire a rental car or taxi, or go with a tour operator.



COSMO GORDINA / GETTY IMAGES ©

Top: Ruins, Palenque
Bottom: Folkloric dancers

Off the Beaten Track: Cancún, Cozumel & the Yucatán

SAN CRISANTO

Palm groves; quiet, white-sand beaches; a few rustic cabins; and a pace so slow that *mañana* never comes – the ultimate escapist's retreat. (p175)

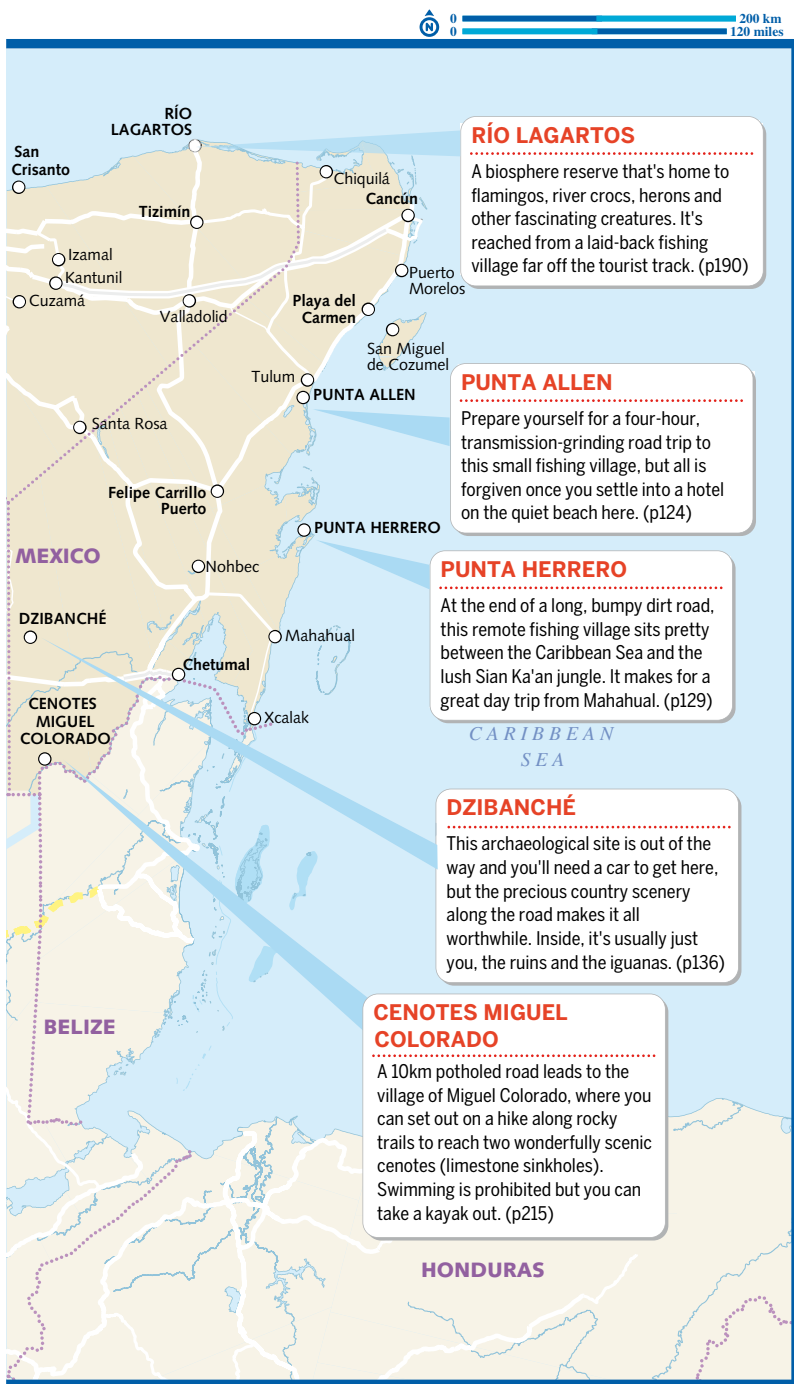
OXKUTZCAB

Most people are usually just passing through here before visiting the Grutas de Loltún, a sprawling nearby cave system. But checking out the town's sights and regional cooking certainly has its rewards if you're craving local flavor. (p168)



EL TIGRE

These recently uncovered Maya ruins set in wetlands see few visitors. It's believed to be none other than the place where conquistador Hernan Cortés executed Cuahtémoc, the last Aztec ruler of Tenochtitlán. (p215)





Colorful fish, Cancún (p56)

Plan Your Trip

Diving & Snorkeling

The Mexican Caribbean is world famous for its wonderful coral reefs and translucent waters full of tropical fish, and without a doubt diving and snorkeling are the area's top activity draw. Add cenote (limestone sinkhole) dives to the mix and you truly have one of the most intriguing dive destinations on the planet.

Best Dives

Isla Cozumel

Hands down Mexico's most popular scuba-diving location, Cozumel gets high praise for its excellent visibility and wide variety of marine life. The amazing sights are sure to keep even the most experienced diver in a constant state of awe.

Banco Chinchorro

The largest coral atoll in the northern hemisphere, Banco Chinchorro boasts a glorious underwater fantasy world of wrecked ships and colorful reefs. Best of all, rarely will you find crowded dive sites at Chinchorro.

Isla Mujeres

With snorkeler-friendly shallow reefs, shark caves and an underwater sculpture museum, Isla Mujeres' sites appeal to both novice and advanced divers. From June to September you can snorkel with 15-ton whale sharks.

So what can you see? Imposing drop-off wall reefs, sea turtles, moray eels, black grouper, barracuda, rainbow parrotfish, large coral and giant Caribbean anemones.

Although Cozumel was hammered by two hurricanes (Emily and Wilma) in 2005, most of the island's diveable reefs, and all of the deeper ones, remained unharmed. Unsurprisingly, it was the snorkeling sites that were hardest hit; but thanks to the tireless efforts of the local diving community (whose livelihood depends on the health of the reefs) and to the resilience of this amazing ecosystem, things have returned to normal.

If you're a diver heading to this area, Cozumel's Santa Rosa Wall, Punta Sur Reef and Palancar Gardens are well worth visiting. Snorkelers will want to check out Dzul-Há, near the town of San Miguel de Cozumel, and Colombia Shallows on the island's south side.

For more on what Cozumel has to offer, check out Lonely Planet's *Cozumel: Diving & Snorkeling* guide.

Other Diving Spots

Serious divers will be happy to know that there are great dives to be enjoyed all along the eastern coast of the Yucatán Peninsula. Cancún, Isla Mujeres, Puerto Morelos, Playa del Carmen, Mahahual and Xcalak are all prime places to plan a diving vacation.

The Banco Chinchorro (p129), a sprawling coral atoll off the southern Quintana Roo coast, was pounded by Hurricane Dean in 2007, but the government has designated new dive sites so that the hardest-hit areas can recover. Home to more than 90 coral species, the biosphere reserve of Chinchorro gets fewer visitors than the reefs of Cozumel and Isla Mujeres, making it a much more attractive option for serious divers. Here you can see rays, eels, conch and giant sponges.

In the national marine park of Cancún there's an interesting new snorkeling and diving attraction known as the MUSA (p57), an underwater sculpture museum created by British artist and diving aficionado Jason deCaires Taylor. Built to divert divers away from deteriorating coral reefs, this one-of-a-kind aquatic museum features 403 life-size sculptures in the waters of Cancún and Isla Mujeres. The artificial reefs are submerged at a depth of 28ft,

Diving

Isla Cozumel

If you can visit only one dive destination in Mexico, the wonderful underwater world of Isla Cozumel is your best bet. Once a pilgrimage site of the Maya and little more than a small fishing community up until the late 1950s, today Cozumel and its astoundingly rich reefs draw divers from far and wide.

Drift diving is the norm in Cozumel – local divers say there's nothing like the sensation of gliding through the water as you're carried by the strong currents.



making them ideal for snorkelers and first-time divers.

Cenote Dives

When you find yourself yawning at the green morays, eagle rays, dolphins, sea turtles, nurse sharks and multitudinous tropical fish, you're ready to dive a cenote (a deep limestone sinkhole containing water). Hook up with a reputable dive shop and prepare for (in the immortal words of Monty Python) 'something completely different.' The Maya saw cenotes as gateways to the underworld.

You'll be lucky if you see four fish on a typical cenote dive. Trade brilliance for darkness, blue for black, check that your regulator is working flawlessly and enter a world unlike anything you've ever dived before. Soar around stalactites and stalagmites, hover above cake-frosting-like formations and glide around tunnels that will make you think you're in outer space.

Keep in mind that these are fragile environments. Avoid applying sunscreen or insect repellent right before entering. Use care when approaching, entering or exiting, as the rocks are often slippery. Loud noises, such as yelling, disturb bats and other creatures – though most people find themselves subdued by the presence in these caverns. In rare cases, tourists have been seriously injured or killed by climbing on the roots or stalactites.

WHEN TO GO

Generally, you can dive year-round in the Yucatán, but when planning your trip you should take into account a few weather considerations:

- From November through January, the peninsula gets northerly winds and showers known as *nortes*. In Cozumel they can blow so strongly that the harbormaster closes ports – sometimes for days. While this won't affect the ferry between Cozumel and Playa del Carmen, it can wreck diving plans.
- From June to November, keep a watchful eye out for hurricane alerts.



Coral reef, Isla Cozumel (p84)

Be very careful when cenote diving: it can be an extremely dangerous activity, especially when done in caves. A good rule of thumb is to go with a professional local diver who has knowledge of the cave system. And above all, do not attempt cave diving without proper training.

Snorkeling

Many spots on the Yucatán's Caribbean side make for fine snorkeling. The best sites are generally reached by boat, but the areas near Akumal, Isla Mujeres and Cozumel all offer pretty decent beach-accessed spots. In Cozumel, you'll find some of the most popular snorkeling sites along the western shore.

Inland you can snorkel in some of the Yucatán's famed cenotes. Some places rent gear, but when in doubt take your own.

Snorkeling with whale sharks has become very popular in recent years. Just about all of the dive shops in Isla Mujeres and Isla Holbox offer whale-shark tours. Just make sure before signing up that



Green sea turtle

the tour operator abides by responsible practices recommended by the World Wildlife Fund. Only three swimmers (including your guide) are allowed in the water at a time. Also, you are not allowed to touch these gentle giants, and you must wear either a life jacket or wetsuit to ensure you do not dive below the shark.

Responsible Diving & Snorkeling

Remember that coral reefs and other marine ecosystems are particularly fragile environments. Consider the following tips when diving and help preserve the ecology and beauty of the reefs:

- ➔ Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- ➔ Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- ➔ Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother them.
- ➔ Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control and avoid over-weighting. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- ➔ Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time in them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- ➔ Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- ➔ Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- ➔ Do not feed the fish. In doing so you may be encouraging aggressive behavior or giving them food that may be harmful to their health.
- ➔ Minimize your disturbance of marine animals. Never ride on the backs of turtles.



Diver, Yucatán cenote

KAREN DOODY / STOCKREXIMAGES / GETTY IMAGES ©

- If scuba diving, carry a current diving-certification card from a recognized instruction agency.
- Regardless of skill level, you should be in good condition and know your physical limitations.
- If you don't have your own equipment, ask to see the dive shop's before you commit. Also, make sure you feel comfortable with your dive master.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site from a reputable local dive operation, and ask how locally trained divers deal with these considerations.
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your level of experience: if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Avoid decompression sickness by diving no less than 18 hours prior to a high-altitude flight.
- Know the locations of the nearest decompression chambers and emergency phone numbers.
- Find out if your dive shop has up-to-date certification from **PADI** (www.padi.com), **NAUI** (www.naii.org) or the internationally recognized Mexican diving organization **FMAS** (www.fmas.com.mx).
- Always put safety above cost considerations – in the spirit of competition, some dive shops offer great deals but as the wise old saying goes, sometimes you get what you pay for.

Safety

Most dive shops expect that you have your own equipment. If you do rent diving gear, check that it's up to standard. Before embarking on a scuba-diving or snorkeling trip, consider the following tips to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:



Casa del Adivino (p159), Uxmal

Plan Your Trip

Exploring Maya Ruins

When you think about it, the Maya accomplished absolutely remarkable feats. Not only did they pull off some pretty sophisticated architecture, but they also made mind-blowing contributions to mathematics, astronomy and art. The cities they left behind remind us of their brilliance and are most certainly a top highlight of the Yucatán.

Planning Your Trip

When to Go

The best time of year to visit archaeological sites is from November to April, when the peninsula has cooler climes and is generally dry. Keep in mind, though, that this is also high season, meaning you'll be dealing with large crowds unless you arrive early in the morning.

Where to Stay

Tulum makes a great base for visiting both the Tulum archaeological site and Cobá. For the ruins of Chichén Itzá and Ek' Balam, consider staying in colonial Valladolid. Many folks who go to Palenque use San Cristóbal de las Casas as a jumping-off point. An overnight in Campeche is convenient for getting an early start at Edzná, and the tranquil town of Santa Elena works as a nice little hub for exploring the Ruta Puuc, Kabah and Uxmal.

What to See

So many interesting sites, so little time. Definite must-sees include Chichén Itzá, Palenque, Tulum, Uxmal and Calakmul.

What to Take

Ensure you have comfortable walking shoes, a hat, sunscreen and plenty of water. Oh, and don't forget that camera.

Amazing Maya

Classic Maya (AD 250–900), seen by many experts as the most glorious civilization of pre-Hispanic America, flourished in three areas:

North The low-lying Yucatán Peninsula.

Central The Petén forest of Guatemala and the adjacent lowlands in Chiapas and Tabasco in Mexico (to the west) and Belize (to the east).

South Highland Guatemala and a small section of Honduras.

It was in the northern and central areas that the Maya blossomed most brilliantly, attaining groundbreaking heights of artistic and architectural expression.

Among the Maya's many accomplishments was the development of a complex writing system, partly pictorial, partly phonetic, with 300 to 500 symbols. They also refined a calendar used by other pre-Hispanic peoples into a tool for the exact recording and forecasting of earthly and heavenly events. Temples were aligned to enhance observation of the heavens, helping the Maya predict solar eclipses and movements of the moon and Venus.

The Maya also believed in predestination and developed a complex astrology. To win the gods' favor they carried out elaborate rituals involving dances, feasts, sacrifices, consumption of the alcoholic drink *balché*, and bloodletting.

They believed the current world to be just one of a succession of worlds, and the cyclical nature of their calendrical system enabled them to predict the future by looking at the past.

Top Museums

The following museums provide interesting background that's often missing from some of the archaeological sites.

➔ **Museo Maya de Cancún** This new museum houses one of Mexico's most important Maya collections. The adjoining San Miguelito archaeological site contains more than a dozen restored Maya structures and an 8m-high pyramid. The entrance fee for the museum includes access to San Miguelito. (p56)

➔ **Gran Museo del Mundo Maya** Adding to Mérida's rich cultural tradition, this shiny new museum showcases more than 500 Maya artifacts. Permanent and temporary exhibits focus on all things Maya, from culture and art to science and Maya cosmology. There's a free nightly light-and-sound show here too. (p148)

➔ **Museo Arqueológico de Campeche** Set in an old fortress, this museum exhibits pieces from the Maya sites of Calakmul and Edzná. Stunning jade jewelry and exquisite vases, masks and plates are thematically arranged in 10 halls; the star attractions are the jade burial masks from Calakmul. (p200)

➔ **Museo de la Cultura Maya** Chetumal's pride and joy illustrates the Maya's calendrical system, among other intriguing exhibits. It's organized into three levels, mirroring Maya cosmology. The main floor represents this world; the upper

floor the heavens; the lower floor Xibalbá, the underworld. Try to visit here before seeing the nearby sites of Kohunlich and Dzibanché. (p134)

Practicalities

- ➔ Admission to the Yucatán's archaeological sites ranges from free to M\$182; children under 13 often cost a fraction of the adult entrance fee. Nightly light-and-sound shows at Chichén Itzá and Uxmal are included in the cost of admission if you retain your ticket stub.
- ➔ Opening hours at most major sites are 8am to 5pm.
- ➔ Drink lots of water and bring protection against the sun. Insect repellent keeps the mosquitoes away when visiting jungle sites.
- ➔ Explanatory signs may be in Spanish only, or both Spanish and English. Audio translators are available at Chichén Itzá and Uxmal (M\$39).
- ➔ Multilingual guides offer one- to two-hour tours (from M\$400 to M\$600). Official tour-guide rates are posted at the entrances of some sites; legit guides carry government-issued badges.
- ➔ Seldom-visited sites have no food or water available; pack a lunch or stop off for a meal or supplies along the way.
- ➔ Avoid midday visits when the sun is beating down and tourists are out in full force.



Nohoch Mul (p120), Cobá

Resources

The following books and organizations provide a wealth of information on Maya history and culture.

SITES AT A GLANCE

SITE	PERIOD	HIGHLIGHTS
Chichén Itzá	approx AD 100-1400	El Castillo pyramid, Mexico's biggest ball court, El Caracol observatory, Cenote Sagrado
Uxmal	AD 600-900	pyramids, palaces, riotous sculpture featuring masks of rain god Chac
Tulum	AD 1200-1550	temples and towers overlooking the Caribbean Sea
Calakmul	approx AD 1-900	high pyramids with views over rainforest
Cobá	AD 600-1100	towering pyramids in jungle setting
Kabah	AD 750-950	Palace of the Masks with nearly 300 Chac masks
Ruta Puuc	AD 750-950	three sites (Sayil, Xlapak, Labná), palaces with elaborate columns & sculpture, including Chac masks
Edzná	600 BC-AD 1500	five-story pyramid-palace, Temple of the Masks
Becán	550 BC-AD 1000	towered temples
Xpujil	flourished AD 700-800	three-towered ancient 'skyscraper'
Ek' Balam	approx AD 600-800	huge Acrópolis & high pyramid with unusual carving
Dzibanché	approx 200 BC-AD 1200	semiwild site with palaces & pyramids
Kohunlich	AD 100-600	Temple of the Masks



El Castillo (p177), Chichén Itzá

➔ **Incidents of Travel in Yucatán** A travelogue written by American explorer John Lloyd Stephens documenting the Maya sites he visited with English artist Frederick Catherwood in the mid-19th century.

➔ **Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia** (INAH; www.inah.gob.mx) The website of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History offers virtual tours of its sites and museums, practical information for visiting the ruins, and details of the historical significance of each site. Most of it is in Spanish.

➔ **Mesoweb** (www.mesoweb.com) A great, diverse resource that focuses on the ancient cultures of Mexico; specializes in the Maya.

➔ **An Archaeological Guide to Central and Southern Mexico** Joyce Kelly's book was published in 2001 and is still the best of its kind, covering 70 sites.

➔ **Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: An Encyclopedia** An excellent reference book by Susan Toby Evans and David L Webster incorporating recent discoveries and scholarship.

➔ **Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens** Looks at the dynasties and rulers of the most

important ancient Maya kingdoms, by Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube.

➔ **Maya Exploration Center** (www.mayaexploration.org) A Maya-specific nonprofit organization offering education programs, tours and study abroad courses.

Behind the Names

➔ **Chichén Itzá** (mouth of the well of the Itzaes) The ancient Maya city was built around a well known today as the 'sacred cenote.'

➔ **Tulum** (wall) Refers to the stone walls that once protected the city. The original Maya name, Zamá, has been translated as 'dawn' or 'sunrise.'

➔ **Calakmul** (adjacent mounds) Dubbed as such by US botanist Cyrus Lundell when he first came across the hidden jungle ruins in the 1930s.

➔ **Palenque** (palisade) The Spanish name has no relation to the city's ancient name, Lakamha, which means 'big water' and probably refers to the area's springs, streams and waterfalls.

➔ **Uxmal** (thrice built) Alludes to how many times the city was built, though it was actually constructed five times.



Stone carving, Palenque (p234)

LIFE AFTER THE APOCALYPSE

We're happy to report all is well in Maya country. As you may have heard, some folks were predicting the end of the world on December 21, 2012, when the Maya long-count calendrical cycle came to an end, yet the date actually signaled the beginning of a new *bak'tun* (about a 400-year period).

Despite all the media hype focusing on doomsday scenarios, some good came out of all the attention: in the year leading up to that December day, federal and state governments were spending some serious pesos on new Maya-themed museums and sites. The 2012 Mundo Maya program, for instance, was a campaign devoted exclusively to promoting all things Maya. Now that the so-called apocalypse event has come and gone, archaeologists can only keep their fingers crossed that all the renewed interest in ancient and modern Maya culture will lead to more funding for ongoing research and excavations.

Tours

If you don't have a car, tours are especially convenient when you're pressed for time or find that a site is difficult to reach by bus. Youth hostels in the Yucatán often provide the most affordable tour services and they usually welcome non-guests. Here are some excellent tour operators:

- ➔ **Nomadas Hostel** Does day trips from Mérida to Uxmal, Chichén Itzá and Kabah. Tours include transportation and guide, but you'll have to cover entrance fees. (p148)
- ➔ **Mundo Joven** This Cancún hostel/agency runs day trips to Chichén Itzá and Tulum. Both tours offer guide, transportation, entry and one meal; the Chichén Itzá excursion stops at a cenote (limestone sinkhole) to take a dip. (p58)
- ➔ **Turitramérida** This Mérida-based tour operator goes to Ruta Puuc, Dzibilchaltún, Chichén Itzá, Kabah and Uxmal. Tours include transportation, a meal and guide. For Ruta Puuc, a four-person minimum is required. (p149)
- ➔ **Community Tours Sian Ka'an** This Maya-run ecotourism outfit will take you on a guided walk of the interpretive trail at the Muyil archaeological site, south of Tulum. (p115)
- ➔ **Ecoturismo Yucatán** One-day excursions to Chichén Itzá and Uxmal include entrance fees, guide and lunch. The owners of this tour operator are passionate about both sharing and protecting the state's natural treasures. (p149)

Plan Your Trip

Travel with Children

Snorkeling in caves, playing on the beach, hiking in the jungle... kids will find plenty of ways to keep busy in the Yucatán. And, as with elsewhere in Mexico, children take center stage – with few exceptions, children are welcome at all kinds of hotels and in virtually every cafe and restaurant.

Best Regions for Kids

Riviera Maya

If you're planning on visiting the Yucatán's famed theme parks, *this* is the region; the parks can burn a hole in your pocket and some have a very Disneyesque quality, but even grown-ups can have a blast at these places.

Cancún

Cancún was made with children in mind. From pirate-ship cruises and hotels with kids' clubs to a wide offering of water-related activities and tours, boredom is not an option (especially if mom and dad are willing spenders).

Isla Mujeres

With its shallow and swimmable beaches, several marine amusement parks and snorkeling opportunities galore, Isla Mujeres is a big hit with kids. Oh yeah, Isla Contoy is nearby, which means yet another fun-filled boating and snorkeling op.

The Yucatán for Kids Getting Around

Watching scenery go by doesn't go over too well with most kids, so try to do your traveling between towns in smallish chunks of a few hours. Most Mexican buses show nonstop movies on video screens, which diverts kids above toddler age, and most of the movies are pretty family-friendly. Children under 13 pay half-price on many long-distances buses, and if they're small enough to sit on your lap, they usually go for free. If you're traveling with a baby or a toddler, consider investing in deluxe buses for the extra space and comfort.

Car rental is a practical alternative to buses. If you need a child-safety seat, the major international car-rental firms are the most reliable providers. You will probably have to pay a few dollars extra per day. Car seats are compulsory for children under five.

Of course, some forms of traveling are fun – there are boat trips of many kinds to be had, bicycles, ATVs (all terrain vehicles) and horses to be rented for outings.

Health & Safety

Children are more easily affected than adults by heat, disrupted sleeping patterns

PLANNING

- Cots for hotel rooms and high chairs for restaurants are available mainly in midrange and top-end establishments.
- It's usually not hard to find an inexpensive babysitter – ask at your hotel. Some top-end hotels provide the service at an additional cost.
- Diapers (nappies) are widely available, but if you depend on some particular cream, lotion, baby food or medicine, bring it with you.
- It's a good idea to book some accommodations for at least the first couple of nights, even if you plan to be flexible once you've arrived.
- When booking a room, make sure that the establishment accepts children – some are adults-only.
- Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* has lots of practical advice on the subject, drawn from firsthand experience.

and strange food. Be particularly careful that they don't drink tap water or consume any questionable food or beverage. Take care to avoid sunburn, cover them up against insect bites, and ensure you replace fluids if a child gets diarrhea.

See a doctor about vaccinations at least one month – preferably two – before your trip. Once there, don't hesitate to go to a doctor if you think it may be necessary. In general, privately run hospitals and clinics offer better facilities and care than the public ones. Make sure you have adequate travel insurance that will cover the cost of private medical care.

Child safety provisions in Mexico may be less strict than what you're accustomed to. Check out things like toddler pools, cribs, guardrails and even toys so that you're aware of any potential hazards.

Breast-feeding in public is not common in the Yucatán.

Sleeping

The peninsula has an exciting variety of different places to stay that should please most kids – anything beachside is usually a good start, and rustic *cabañas* (cabins) provide a sense of adventure (but choose one with good mosquito nets).

Many hotels have a rambling layout and a good amount of open-air space – courtyards, pool areas, gardens – allowing for some light exploring by kids. The most family-oriented hotels, with expansive grounds and facilities such as shallow pools, playgrounds and kids clubs, tend to be found in the big resorts.

Family rooms are widely available, and many hotels will put an extra bed or two in a room at little or no extra cost. However, baby cots may not be available in budget accommodations. You can find a room with air-conditioning nearly everywhere, and most midrange and top-end hotels have wi-fi access and child-friendly channels on the TV and/or DVD players for when your kids just need to flop down in front of something entertaining.

Eating

The Yucatán has plenty of eateries serving up international comfort food should Mexican fare not sit well with your children. Along the Riviera Maya you'll find many Italian-owned establishments preparing pizzas and pastas, while in gringo-friendly Cancún, there are so many restaurants doing burgers and the like that it'll seem like you never left home. *Yucateco antojitos* (snacks) such as *sopa de lima* (which tastes like chicken soup with a twist of lime) and *salbutes* (lightly fried tortillas topped with shredded poultry and other fixings) are fairly neutral options for trying local flavors.

The closer you are to tourist centers, the better chance you have of finding more diverse and child-friendly menus. When all else fails, most large cities have familiar fast-food joints. If your child doesn't take to experimenting, consider packing a lunch when visiting small towns where the eating options may be somewhat limited.

The spacious open-air character of many Yucatán eateries conveniently means that children aren't compelled to sit nicely at

UNDER-18 AIR TRAVELERS

To conform with regulations to prevent international child abduction, minors (people aged under 18) traveling to Mexico without one or both of their parents may need to carry a notarized consent form signed by the absent parent or parents, giving permission for the young traveler to make the international journey. Though Mexico does not specifically require this documentation, airlines flying to Mexico may refuse to board passengers without it. In the case of divorced parents, a custody document may be required. If one or both parents are dead, or the traveler has only one legal parent, a death certificate or notarized statement of the situation may be required.

These rules are aimed primarily at visitors from the US and Canada but may also apply to people from elsewhere. Procedures vary from country to country; contact your country's foreign affairs department and/or a Mexican consulate to find out exactly what you need to do. Forms for the purposes required are usually available from these authorities.

the table all the time. Some restaurants even have play areas or small pools to keep kids busy.

Children's Highlights

Apart from the ruins, beaches and swimming pools, you'll find excellent special attractions such as amusement and water parks, zoos, aquariums and other fun places on the peninsula. Kids can also enjoy activities such as snorkeling, riding bicycles and boats, and watching wildlife. Archaeological sites can be fun if your kids are into climbing pyramids and exploring tunnels.

Water Worlds

- ➔ **Spot crocodiles and whale sharks** Boat tours at Isla Holbox (p73) and Rio Lagartos (p190).
- ➔ **Sail on a pirate ship** A replica Spanish galleon stages nightly swashbuckler battles off the waters of Cancún (p60) and pirate ships sail in Campeche, too (p199).
- ➔ **Snorkel in the Caribbean** Many beaches on the Yucatán's Caribbean coast provide calm waters and colorful marine life for beginners.
- ➔ **Swim and explore** Visitors make their way through underground rivers and caves at theme park Xcaret in the Riviera Maya (p102).
- ➔ **Cruise the jungle** Reach the ancient cities of Yaxchilán by an adventurous river boat trip (p240).

Inland Fun

- ➔ **Selvática** Award-winning zip-line circuit through jungle near Cancún, with its own cenote (limestone sinkhole) for swimming. (p102)
- ➔ **Cobá** This jungle-surrounded ancient Maya site near Tulum has pyramids, a zip line and bicycles for pedaling around the network of dirt trails. (p121)
- ➔ **Aktun Chen** Near Akumal, this park features a 60m-long cave, a 12m-deep cenote, 10 zip lines and a small zoo. (p102)
- ➔ **Boca del Puma** Zip-lining, horseback riding, wall climbing and a cenote to dip into, near Puerto Morelos. (p99)
- ➔ **Hidden Worlds** Four-hour adventure tours that combine up to six activities, including snorkeling in a cenote, rappelling into a cave and soaring above the jungle on a zip line. (p112)

Animal Encounters

- ➔ **Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm** Has hundreds of sea turtles, both big and small, plus an aquarium. The staff is very friendly and will take the time to explain how and why the farm protects the turtles (p77).
- ➔ **Parque Zoológico del Centenario** Park in Mérida with lions, bears, an aviary, playground, bumper boats and much more. (p147)
- ➔ **Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún** A boat tour through the mangroves of Ría Celestún, home to flamingos and harpy eagles. (p170)
- ➔ **Crococun Zoo** Visitors can interact with the animals, such as spider monkeys, at this petting zoo near Puerto Morelos. You can also get an up-close look at the crocs. (p60)



Conchinita pibil (suckling pig)

Plan Your Trip

Eat & Drink Like a Local

The Yucatán is an endless feast of traditional flavors, fresh fish and seafood, and an eclectic mix of international cuisine. The wonderfully unique tastes you'll encounter on the peninsula leave absolutely no doubt: folks in this corner of Mexico are passionate about food.

The Year in Food

March

The Cancún-Riviera Maya Wine & Food Festival (www.crmfest.com) draws celebrity chefs from Mexico and abroad; a good chance to sample Mexican wines and gourmet dishes.

July to March

You can get lobster year-round on the coast but this is the time of year when fisherfolk are bringing in fresh catches daily.

August

The Jats'a Já festival in Mahahual celebrates the town's fishing tradition with culinary exhibits and Maya ceremonies right on the beach.

October to November

Pibipollo (chicken tamales) are cooked underground for Day of the Dead festivities in many cities throughout the peninsula.

November

The Taste of Playa International Food Festival (www.tasteofplaya.com) is held on Playa del Carmen's main plaza on the last Saturday of November with Riviera Maya chefs offering samples of their latest creations.

Food Experiences

Meals of a Lifetime

- ➔ **La Chaya Maya, Mérida** Extraordinary *yucateco* fare in a precious downtown colonial building. (p152)
- ➔ **Cetli, Tulum** Sophisticated take on Mexican classics in a homey backstreet restaurant. (p118)
- ➔ **La Cueva del Chango, Playa del Carmen** Superb and surprisingly affordable Mexican dishes in a jungly setting. (p107)
- ➔ **El Merkadito, Puerto Morelos** Fish and seafood done right, plus ocean views. (p101)
- ➔ **La Fuente, Campeche** Waterfront cafe does local faves like *pibipollo* (chicken tamales) cooked underground. (p213)

Cheap Treats

You'll find the best cheap eats at market stalls, street stands, cafes and *cocinas económicas* (affordable eateries). Keep in mind that some budget options have sketchy hygiene standards, so it can be a bit of a crapshoot (no pun intended).

- ➔ **El Paisano del 23, Cancún** The famous *pierna tortas* (pork sandwiches) have been a local fave for more than 40 years; get there early. (p61)
- ➔ **La Socorrito, Mérida** This hole-in-the-wall market eatery has been perfecting *cochinita* (slow-cooked pork) for six decades. (p152)
- ➔ **Los Aguachiles, Playa del Carmen** Artfully prepared *tostadas* (fried tortillas) with fresh fish and seafood in a *cantina*-like setting. (p107)
- ➔ **Tierradentro, San Cristóbal de las Casas** Run by Zapatista supporters, this cafe keeps it real with affordable and delicious set meals. (p231)

Dare to Try

- ➔ Pickled pigs feet, snout and ears in Mérida's sprawling Mercado Municipal Lucas de Gálvez (p151).
- ➔ The four-alarm habanero chili salsas at Tacos de Cochinita Chepe's (p133) in Laguna Bacalar.
- ➔ Lionfish at Sulumar (p130) in the southern Quintana Roo beach town of Mahahual – hold the venom please!

Local Specialties

Food is a tremendous source of pride on the peninsula and the origins of some of the most popular dishes can easily become a topic of hot debate. We've broken down what's on offer in each state, but you'll definitely find variations of the following dishes across state lines.

Yucatán State

- ➔ **Cochinita/pollo pibil** Suckling pig or chicken marinated in citrus juices and *achiote* (a spice made from annatto seed). When done properly, *cochinita* is slow-cooked in an underground pit.
- ➔ **Sopa de lima** Soup with shredded turkey or chicken, lime and tortilla strips.

- ➔ **Papadzules** Diced hard-boiled eggs wrapped in corn tortilla and topped with pumpkin seed and tomato sauces.
- ➔ **Queso relleno** A hollowed-out ball of Edam cheese stuffed with ground pork and smothered in tomato sauce and gravy.
- ➔ **Panuchos** Fried tortilla filled with beans and topped with chicken, lettuce, tomato and pickled red onion.

Quintana Roo

- ➔ **Lobster** A popular menu item in Cancún and other coastal towns. Some restaurants prepare it in *guajillo* (a type of chili pepper) and tamarind sauces, giving it a very distinct Mexican taste.
- ➔ **Fish and shrimp tacos** Beer-battered fish and shrimp are topped with shredded cabbage and the salsas of your choice. They're fast, cheap and highly addictive.
- ➔ **Ceviche** Raw fish or seafood marinated in lime juice and spices and served with *tostadas*. *Ceviche* and *cerveza* (beer) are a winner on a warm day.
- ➔ **Fusion** With so many Americans, Italians and other transplants living in these parts, you get some interesting blends of international and Mexican cuisine.

Campeche

- ➔ **Pibipollo** Chicken and pork tamales cooked underground and usually wrapped in banana leaves; a popular Day of the Dead dish.

DABBLE IN THE CULINARY ARTS

Take a cooking course to find out about the ingredients and techniques that go into Mexican cooking. Some recommended schools:

- ➔ **Los Dos** In Mérida, focuses strictly on *yucateco* cuisine. Take a cooking course with a market tour, attend a tasting class, or go for a multiday, all-inclusive culinary workshop. (p148)
- ➔ **Little Mexican Cooking School** In Puerto Morelos, gives a general overview of regional Mexican cuisine. You'll learn how to prepare seven to eight dishes, plus some background on the culture and traditions behind the food. (p99)



Maya dish of shrimp, peppers and goat cheese

- ➔ **Chocolomo** A hearty stew made of beef, kidneys, brain, tongue, liver etc. You get the point – nothing goes to waste.

Chiapas

- ➔ **Coffee** Optimal growing conditions (high altitude, good climate, rich soil) produce some of the finest coffee in the country.
- ➔ **Tamales** If you haven't tried a tamale with the aromatic *hoja santa* herb, wrapped in a banana leaf, you're missing something truly special.

How to Eat & Drink When to Eat

- ➔ **Desayuno** (breakfast) Usually consists of fresh fruit, *pan dulce* (sweet bread) or egg dishes; served between 8am and 11am in restaurants and cafes.
- ➔ **Almuerzo** (light lunch) Locals tend to take a light lunch when they've missed breakfast or are just looking for something to hold them over until *la comida*, the big meal of the day.



Street food Cancún-style

➤ **La comida** (heavy lunch) From 2pm to 5pm. Many establishments offer gut-busting four-course meals. Shops can close between these hours, especially in smaller towns.

➤ **La cena** (supper) Some people like to grab a light dinner, between 8pm and 11pm, before hitting the bars and clubs; it's also a popular hour for munching tacos or *pan dulce*.

Where to Eat

➤ **Restaurante** Restaurants offer the widest variety in terms of menu items, price ranges and hours; most are family-friendly establishments and they're usually your best shot at finding vegetarian options.

EATING PRICE INDICATORS

In this guide we define a main dish in a restaurant as:

Budget (\$)	less than M\$80
Midrange (\$\$)	M\$80-150
Top End (\$\$\$)	above M\$150.

➤ **Cocina Económica** These affordable eateries specialize in home-style cooking, plus they're great spots to mingle with locals.

➤ **Taquería** Taco shops are the perfect late-night option and the food is always cheap if you're looking to pinch some pesos.

➤ **Mercado** Many markets have a cluster of food stalls preparing decent and reasonably priced local dishes.

➤ **Cafe** Coffee shops are a good breakfast option when you have an early start.

➤ **Puesto** Street stalls whip up everything from tacos to *ceviche* cocktails. Opening hours vary considerably; some work mornings, others keep night hours.

Menu Decoder

➤ **Menú del día/comida corrida** Affordable set menu with three or four courses.

➤ **Menú degustación** A menu that normally consists of six to eight tasting-size courses.

➤ **Entradas/antojitos** Appetizers or snacks; common in the Yucatán, especially in bars.



Sopa de lima (lime soup)

- ➔ **Plato fuerte** Main course or main dish.
- ➔ **Postre** Dessert.

For an explanation of the dishes you'll find on *yucateco* menus, see p259.

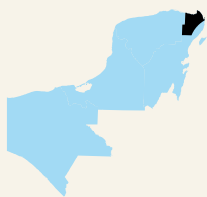
Where to Drink

➔ **Cantinas** All *cantinas* sell *cerveza* and some, but not all, have licenses to pour tequila and other spirits. Some may even have *xtabentún*, a regional anise-flavored liqueur made from fermented honey. *Cantinas* usually open at noon and close around 11pm or midnight at the latest. The *cantina* experience varies considerably from one watering hole to the next. Some are festive, family-friendly establishments offering live music and complimentary snacks, others have a down-and-dirty barfly vibe that's best avoided, especially for women traveling alone.

A FEW TIPS

- ➔ When sharing a table or dining in close quarters with Mexicans, it's customary to wish them '*buen provecho*' (enjoy your meal) before you eat or leave the table.
- ➔ Waiters will not bring you the check until you ask for it. In Mexico it is considered rude to leave a check on a table before the customers have finished their meal.
- ➔ The standard tip in Mexico is 10% of the bill. If you liked the service, you can bump it up to 15% or 20%.
- ➔ **Nightclubs** Some nightclubs in the region charge hefty covers (that means you, Cancún) with open bar included in the price of admission. So of course you're gonna try to get your money's worth – just don't say we didn't warn you about the nasty hangover. The booze fest usually gets started around 11pm and thumps well into the wee hours of the morning.
- ➔ **Mezcalerías** Essentially small bars that specialize in *mezcal*, a distilled alcoholic drink made from the agave plant. Though *mezcal* is not actually made in the Yucatán, *mezcalerías* have grown very popular in recent years, especially in larger cities such as Cancún, Mérida and Playa del Carmen. *Mezcal* has a higher alcohol content than tequila, so expect the unexpected in these watering holes.
- ➔ **Juice Bars** Usually found in markets, *juguerías* sell fresh-squeezed juices, *liquados* (fruits blended with milk) and *aguas frescas* (water flavored with local treats like *chia* seed and *chaya* greens). The water used to prepare drinks in juice bars is purified.
- ➔ **Cafes** There's no shortage of cafes in the Yucatán serving quality organic coffee from Chiapas, Oaxaca and Veracruz, Mexico's top coffee-producing regions. Most cafes open early and close at around 10pm.

Regions at a Glance



Cancún & Around

Beaches
Nature
Water Sports

Beach-Bumming

Millions of people each year head to Cancún and its surrounding areas with just one simple objective: lazing around on sugary white-sand beaches and swimming in the turquoise-blue waters of the Mexican Caribbean. OK, some may also be going to revel in spring-break debauchery.

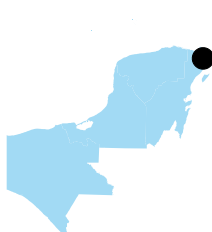
Wildlife Watching

Swim with the whale sharks at Isla Holbox or bird-watch at national park Isla Contoy. Both islands north of Cancún will appeal to those looking for unique outdoor experiences. Just don't miss the boat back from Isla Contoy or you'll be sleeping under a coconut tree.

Water Sports

Name your water sport and you'll find it here: snorkeling, kayaking, wakeboarding, fishing – there's even a unique underwater sculpture museum for beginner divers. And if you have kids, they'll be splashing themselves silly with all the water-related activities on offer.

p54



Isla Mujeres

Wildlife Conservation
Beaches
Outdoor Activities

Wildlife Conservation

Check out the Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm, where more than 120,000 of these little guys are liberated each year. Watch while eggs are gathered and secured in safe sands during peak nesting season from June to August.

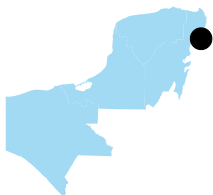
Calm Beaches

Not only does Isla Mujeres have postcard-perfect, bleach-white beaches, the waters on the north shore are shallow, calm and a joy to swim in. At nearby Playa Secreto you'll find a great little swimming and snorkeling spot that's ideal for children.

Great Outdoors

Snorkel with whale sharks, hook big game fish on a sportfishing excursion, or go diving and spot manta rays, barracuda and sea turtles. You also have the option of driving around in a golf cart and visiting various beach clubs on the island's south side.

p75



Isla Cozumel

Diving & Snorkeling
Scenery
Food

Divine Diving

Isla Cozumel is widely considered Mexico's top diving destination and some might even say one of the world's best. Why all the fuss? It's all about the year-round visibility, spectacular walls and impressive variety of colorful marine life.

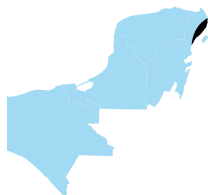
Island Escape

A road trip on a scooter or convertible VW to the island's less-visited sides is a moving picture of uninhabited, windswept beaches and small Maya ruins – plus it's a nice escape from the cruise-ship crowds back in town.

Wining & Dining

Cozumel certainly has no shortage of quality restaurants doing fine local and international cuisine. They dot the oceanfront avenue and surround the pleasant town plaza, so the scenery is pretty much a given.

p84



Riviera Maya

Beaches
Nightlife
Diving

Beach Life

The Riviera Maya has stretches of sublime beach that make advertisers very happy. In Tulum, Maya ruins perched atop a cliff rise high above the beach in dramatic fashion. On a quiet day on the shore of Paamul, it's just you and the sea urchins.

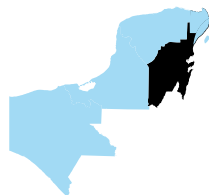
Party Central

Get your fiesta on in Playa del Carmen, where sandy beaches become impromptu stages for fire dancers and beachside clubs rage into the wee hours of the morning. South of Playa, happening Tulum is fast approaching *pueblo*-that-never-sleeps status.

Cenote Diving

Take a plunge into a cenote (limestone sinkhole) and explore amazing caverns and caves. Cenotes also make for great swimming holes for nondivers. The Maya referred to these fascinating underground river systems as gateways to the underworld.

p97



Costa Maya & the Southern Caribbean Coast

Scenery
Diving
Beaches

Shades of Blue

The unparalleled scenery of Laguna Bacalar is something to behold. Called the 'lake of seven colors,' the crystalline water has blues you never even knew existed. While in town, check out the imposing 18th-century colonial fortress.

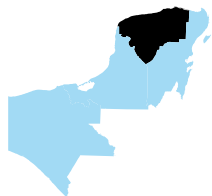
Take the Plunge

Divers won't want to miss out on the opportunity to explore Banco Chinchorro, the largest coral atoll in the northern hemisphere and a ship graveyard. There's good snorkeling here as well.

Sleepy Beach Towns

Once tiny fishing villages, Mahahual and Xcalak are seeing more and more tourism these days but have managed to retain a tranquil vibe. They're about as far south as you can remove yourself from the mega-resort madness of Cancún.

p126



Yucatán State & the Maya Heartland

Ruins
Nature
Food

Ruins Hopping

Yucatán has so many Maya ruins that you'd probably need a leave of absence to visit them all. The most famous of them all, Chichén Itzá, draws a million visitors a year thanks to its recently acquired status as one of the new seven wonders of the world.

Birdies & Crocs

Nature buffs just can't get enough of Yucatán's two largest biosphere reserves in Celestún and Río Lagartos. Tour boats take you out to watch flamingos, which flock to the wetlands in the winter, and to spot crocodiles at night.

Food, Glorious Food

Ask any foodie and they'll tell you that Yucatán state is one of Mexico's most exciting culinary destinations. Sure, you can try classic *yucateco* fare like *cochinita pibil* (slow-cooked pork) or *poc-chuc* (grilled pork) elsewhere in Mexico, but it won't taste the same.

p140



Campeche & Around

History
Wildlife
Ruins

Pirates Ahoy

Not many cities like Campeche exist, with a pretty historical center surrounded by stone walls to ward off fierce pirate attacks. Today it's a serene destination with few tourists, and a beachside boardwalk creates an atmosphere more romantic than ravaged.

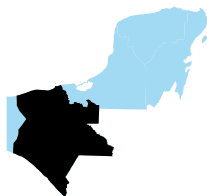
Fins & Flippers

Laguna de Terminos' collection of estuaries and mangroves makes up a rich coastal habitat for many critters. Go on a lookout for migratory birds or spot playful dolphins from a boat.

Lofty Pyramids

Deep in a jungle full of toucans and monkeys lies Calakmul, a significant Maya site. Originally a huge city, it covered 72 sq km and supported over 50,000 people – and it boasts one of the tallest Maya pyramids in Mexico.

p194



Chiapas

Architecture
Ruins
Nature

Colonial Grace

San Cristóbal's cobbled streets and colonial architecture are charming enough, but add a dash of Zapatista history and colorful indigenous people, and you've hit something special. Visit the church in nearby San Juan Chamula – it's almost magical.

Exquisite Temples

Unique in the Maya world is Palenque's four-story stone tower – perhaps an old observatory? And the Templo de las Inscripciones once held the skeleton of Pakal the Great, draped with jewels and a priceless jade mask.

Riverside Adventure

It takes a long bus trip, plus a half-hour boat ride, but a visit to the Maya city of Yaxchilán is unforgettable. Note the hieroglyphics and interesting facades on buildings, and listen for howler monkeys in the jungle. And did we mention the croc-infested waters?

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