

On the Road



GREG BENCHWICK Author

One of the best parts of my job is discovering places that weren't included in the last edition of the book. This trip, chance led me to Xcacel-Xcacelito (p116), a turtle-nesting beach on the Quintana Roo coast. Aside from the top-notch volunteer program run here, the beach also has great snorkeling and a nearby cenote (limestone sinkhole).

MY FAVORITE TRIP

On every street corner and every beach I visit, I discover something new and enchanting about the Yucatán Peninsula. My favorite trip begins at dawn, when I head out in my rent-a-wreck through the harried colonial streets of Mérida (p145) to Celestún (p175) for a bird-watching expedition. If I have time, I can stop on the way

back to check out the ruined haciendas route (p177) and maybe even the ornate facades at Uxmal (p163). From there, it's on to the Ruta Puuc (p167) and into the Maya heartland for fleeting glimpses into the time-worn traditions of this proud corner of Mexico.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg first visited the Yucatán Peninsula in the early '80s, when his old man took him and his sister to the tiny coastal village of Akumal. They snorkeled with barracuda and parrot fish in the Laguna Yal-Kú, took a nauseating ferry over to Cozumel and even visited the remote ruins of Cobá. And while his present-day journeys will never compete with the rose-hued memories of the past, Greg's been coming back ever since... though he swears the Nohoch Mul pyramid in Cobá has shrunk. Greg's work has been featured in *Condé Nast Traveller*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Wild Blue Yonder* and in over a dozen guidebooks on Latin America. To see videos and podcasts from Greg's adventures, check out his website www.soundtraveler.com.



For contributing author biographies see p286.

Destination Yucatán

Despite development, the natural beauty of the chalkboard-flat Yucatán Peninsula abides. The ethereal coo of the motmot still reverberates overhead, while below continue to writhe the insects and creepy-crawlies that keep this scrub-jungle land renewed year after year. And deep below, in the realm of Ah Puch (god of the underworld), gurgle freshwater rivers that worm their way through massive limestone caverns all the way to the perfect waters of the Caribbean and the Gulf. It's an adventure-lovers paradise, with tremendous snorkeling and diving right outside your door, an amazing array of age-old Maya ruins, and enough sun, champagne-perfect sand and glimmering clear aquamarine waters to please even the most discerning of beach bums.

It is these crystal-clear waters – and the six-million plus visitors they draw each year – that drive the region's culture and economy. So when H1N1 (better known as swine flu) hit the region in 2009, well, they had the makings of a veritable economic meltdown: tourism figures across the peninsula dropped by as much as 30%. And while the over-hyped fear of swine flu seemed to wane in the closing part of that year, it appeared unlikely that the resorts of Cancún and the Riviera Maya would see much of a rebound in visitation quickly.

The global recession also affected the region's economy. Less money in worldwide coffers meant less manufacturing in the burgeoning *maquiladoras* (low-paying, export-only factories) sprouting up around Mérida, and fewer tourism dollars for the hotels, restaurants and tour operators scattered across the region.

With drug violence hitting an all-time high in Mexico's northern border states – and Mexican President Felipe Calderón mobilizing the military across the nation to bring the fight to the traffickers – some tourists have cancelled their Mexico travel plans all together. But while Cancún does see its fair share of drug trafficking, the region has largely managed to escape the violence associated with the drug trade in other parts of the nation. About the only signs you'll see that Cancún is a transshipment point for cocaine are occasional military checkpoints as you leave town. The good news is that there are no reports of tourists being affected by drug trafficking in the region, and if you take the same precautionary steps you would in any other big city, you will be safe wherever you go on the Yucatán Peninsula.

As always, immigration and poverty are hot-button topics being discussed across the peninsula. It's not just immigration to the US – which slowed dramatically on the heels of the recession – it's also about immigrants coming from Central America seeking work or a safe haven from the growing gang violence and rampant poverty plaguing the northern states of the isthmus.

While the peninsula saw very few large-scale hurricanes in 2008 and 2009, it continues to dig itself out after the massive damage inflicted by Dean in 2007 and Wilma in 2005. Cancún has even put forward plans to dredge coastal waters to rebuild its beaches, which are washing away having been rebuilt just a few years ago after Wilma carried off the resort's signature sands.

But the future looks bright. In Chiapas, the revolutionary Zapatistas have pacified in recent years, making travel to this remote highland region a possibility. Chichén Itzá, the massive Maya-Toltec site in eastern Yucatán state, was voted one of the seven modern wonders of the world, and archaeologists have uncovered temples that they believe may have been the portal to the Maya underworld (Xibalbá), in a series of caves in the region. And, of course, the region continues to offer the sensuous beaches, hip-hopping clubs and raucous resorts that make this Mexico's number one vacation destination.

FAST FACTS

Population: 3.7 million
(peninsular states only)

Annual population growth: 4.7% Quintana Roo, 1.6% Campeche & Yucatán (national 1.1%)

Area: 148,961 sq km

National territory: 7.1%

Length of coastline: 1764km

GDP per person:
M\$72,598 Yucatán,
M\$135,286 Quintana Roo,
M\$153,870 Campeche
(national M\$106,470)

Number of foreign tourists in 2008: 6.7 million (Quintana Roo 6.1 million)

Adult literacy: 91.6%

National oil production: 60%

Remittances from US: approx US\$300 million
(peninsular states only)

Getting Started

A journey to the Yucatán Peninsula, Tabasco or Chiapas doesn't necessarily require much advance planning. Apart from the peak periods mentioned below, just check flight times, grab your passport and you're on your way. Outside the limited peak seasons, there's little competition for accommodations, and transportation around the peninsula is cheap and frequent. Perhaps your best pre-trip preparation would be to learn some Spanish – every word you know will make your trip that little bit easier and more enjoyable. See p278 for some words and phrases.

For the most part, Yucatán is no more dangerous than any major Western city. Stay street savvy, don't wear expensive jewelry, and keep in mind that the locals (especially in Chiapas) are not on display (see the boxed text, p18).

WHEN TO GO

Any time is a good time to visit the Yucatán, though perhaps the best time is during November and early December, as there are fewer tourists and prices are relatively low. September and October can be equally low-key unless a hurricane decides to pass through (see below). May to September are the months with the highest rainfall and highest temperatures, with May and June being the hottest, most humid months. The highlands of Chiapas can get downright cold at night.

The occasional *norte* (storm bringing wind and rain from the north) can cool things off considerably for brief spells between November and February. This makes for more pleasant ruins exploration but may delay plans for snorkeling or beachcombing. Birding and wildlife-watching are good year-round, and mid-May through mid-September is the time to come to glimpse whale sharks (see boxed text, p92).

July and August are peak holiday months for both Mexicans and foreigners, as is mid-December to early January. A week either side of Easter is also a peak holiday period for Mexicans. At these times the coastal resorts attract big crowds, room prices go up in popular places, and rooms and public transportation can be heavily booked, so advance reservations are advisable. In addition, Cancún is swamped with reveling young US college students during spring break (late February to early March).

If a full-blown hurricane is predicted for the region you are in, go somewhere else – fast! At the very least go inland, far from the dangerous sea swell that invariably accompanies hurricanes. The **National Hurricane Center** (www.nhc.noaa.gov) has up-to-date info.

COSTS & MONEY

With the exception of the resort areas of the Caribbean coast (often referred to as the Riviera Maya), travel in Yucatán is still fairly inexpensive. Things get even cheaper in Chiapas, though Tabasco, with its fancy oil money, can be a bit pricey. Midrange travelers can live well in most parts of the peninsula for M\$600 to M\$1000 per person per day. Two people can usually find a clean, comfortable room with private bathroom and fan or air-conditioning for M\$400 to M\$600, and use the rest to pay for food (a full lunch or dinner in a typical decent restaurant costs around M\$100 to M\$150), admission fees, transportation and incidentals. Budget travelers should allocate M\$250 to M\$500 each per day for accommodations and two meals a day in cheap restaurants. Add in other costs (like contracting a guide or taking a snorkeling trip) and you'll spend more like M\$500 to M\$800.

See Climate Charts (p248) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking your foreign ministry's Mexico travel information (p249)
- All the necessary paperwork if you're driving into Mexico (p264)
- Clothes to cope with Yucatán's air-conditioned rooms (and buses) or the occasional cool, windy evening in *norte* (storm bringing wind and rain from the north) season (opposite)
- Any necessary immunizations or medications you require, including contraceptives (p270)
- A flashlight (torch) for some of those not-so-well-lit streets, stairways, caves or pyramid chambers – and for power outages
- An inconspicuous container for money and valuables, such as a small, slim wallet or an under-the-clothes pouch or money belt (p249)
- Your favorite sunglasses
- A small padlock
- A small Spanish dictionary and/or phrasebook
- Adequate travel insurance (p270)
- Mosquito repellent and a mosquito net if you plan to do any outdoor sleeping

Rates in the Riviera Maya can easily be twice as much as this. Cancún is the most expensive town in Mexico, and Playa del Carmen and Cozumel are not far behind. In those places, a pair of travelers can expect to pay M\$600 to M\$1000 for a decent room – and way more during high season.

Car-rental costs (including the mandatory third-party insurance) start around M\$300 to M\$600 per day, plus fuel; book ahead over the internet to save a bundle. Extra expenses, such as internal airfares, tours and shopping, will of course push your expenses up, but if there are two or more of you, overall costs per person drop considerably. Double rooms often cost only a few dollars more than singles, and triple or family rooms only a few dollars more than doubles. Children aged under 13 pay reduced prices on many buses and flights, and at some sights and attractions.

Top-end hotels and resorts run a wide spectrum of prices, often charging upwards of M\$2000 for a room. Restaurants in the same class can charge M\$250 to M\$500 per person, and are largely targeted at the tourist trade. In most cases you're better off eating at locals' joints.

HOW MUCH?

One-person hammock
M\$150
1kg freshly made tortillas
M\$12
Small rental car per day
M\$400-600
Internet per hour
M\$10
Major museum or
archaeological site
M\$41

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas & Yucatan and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, by John L. Stephens, are fascinating accounts of adventure and discovery by the enthusiastic 19th-century amateur archaeologist. They contain superb illustrations by architect Frederick Catherwood, who accompanied Stephens in 1839 and 1841 as he explored part of the Maya region.

Aldous Huxley traveled through Mexico, too; *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, first published in 1934, has interesting observations on the Maya. Also interesting is Graham Greene's *The Lawless Roads*, chronicling the writer's travels through Chiapas and Tabasco in 1938.

Time Among the Maya: Travels in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico, by Ronald Wright, is a thoughtful account of numerous journeys made among the descendants of the ancient Maya and will certainly help you to get a feel for Maya culture as you travel the region.

Most of the Maya codices were destroyed during the conquest (only four exist today), but the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, written by a Maya prophet during the late 18th century, chronicles many of the oral traditions and

legends of the Yucatec Maya. It's a rather obscure read, and you're probably better off checking out the Guatemalan Quiché Maya sacred text known as the *Popol Vuh* (see p41). Michael Coe's *The Maya* is the definitive history text of these people; while *The Caste War of Yucatán*, by Nelson A Reed, chronicles the fascinating history of the Caste War (see p32).

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Sustainable travel is all the rage these days. But how sustainable can you actually get? After all you'll probably fly here, putting a load of harmful carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and tourism creates all sorts of nasty side effects, like the homogenization of cultures, the loss of language and the degradation of the environment. But traveling can still be a good thing, right? Of course it can: it's a revenue generator, a valuable cultural interchange, an awareness builder that can often serve to protect the environment and, above all, it's fun! This book has a handy GreenDex (p1), which will lead you to some sustainable options. Also check out 'Small Footprints, Large Impact' on p59.

Getting There & Around

While carbon offsets for your flight will not save the world, they are a good first step. There are a ton of companies out there; Lonely Planet offsets its travel through www.climatecare.org. Consider targeting your trip to lower your environmental footprint – you don't have to see all of the peninsula in one visit.

Accommodations & Food

One of the quickest ways to create a more sustainable future for tourism is by avoiding the big chain hotels and restaurants from where most of the profit gets siphoned out of the country. Also consider staying in the smaller towns that you normally would have visited on a day trip. The added revenue serves as an incentive for folks to stay in their native village, maintain their language and customs, and skip out on that job in the big city. The Maya culture has long been an insular one, but folks living in the countryside are now realizing that tourism may be key to maintaining their traditions. With this in mind, many small communities are now welcoming tourists. It's a great way to create a positive impact, and it also puts you on the edge of experiential travel.

Respect til the End

According to leading Mayanologist Michael Coe, the single largest threat to the Maya culture and language is tourism. So how can travelers help protect cultures and environments at risk of extinction? It's all about respect. Respect the locals, try to learn some of their language, and respect the environment and its sanctity.

Internet Resources

- **Blue Flag** (www.blueflag.org) An ecocreditation program that focuses its energies on marinas and beaches.
- **Coral Reef Alliance** (www.coral.org) Has reef-protection guidelines.
- **Green Globe** (www.greenglobe.org) For general information.
- **International Ecotourism Society** (www.ecotourism.org) Lists ecofriendly businesses that have jumped through the hoops to gain accreditation.
- **Mexican Adventure & Ecotourism Association** (www.amtave.org) Lists some of the region's ecotourism operators.
- **Mexiconservacion** (www.mexiconservacion.org) Has a green guide to the Yucatán.
- **Puerto Verde** (www.puertaverde.com.mx, in Spanish) Developing agro-tourism within Quintana Roo state.
- **Responsibletravel.com** (www.responsibletravel.com) For general information.

TOP 10



MAYA RUINS

- 1 Chichén Itzá (p181) Modern 'Wonder of the World,' with amazing architecture and perhaps the world's largest calendar.
- 2 Uxmal (p163) The Puuc region's crown jewel.
- 3 Palenque (p238) Showcase of Maya art and architecture in wonderful jungle setting.
- 4 Cobá (p124) Explore a largely unexcavated Maya city.
- 5 Calakmul (p217) Tikal's archrival, deep in the tropical forest.
- 6 Tulum (p118) Majestic temple overlooking the Caribbean.
- 7 Becán (p219) Moated military compound with beautiful examples of Río Bec architecture.
- 8 Dzibilchaltún (p177) Comes to fiery life during the equinox.
- 9 Edzná (p210) Totally as cool as Uxmal with about half the visitors.
- 10 Ek' Balam (p191) Restored and unrestored ruins with well-preserved stucco paintings.

FIESTAS

Consider planning your itinerary around one or more of these colorful fiestas.

- 1 Día de los Reyes Magos (Three Kings' Day; p250), best experienced in Tizimín. First week of January.
- 2 Carnaval (Carnival), celebrated most wildly in Mérida (p153), Campeche (p203), Chetumal (p136) and Ciudad del Carmen (p215). Late February or early March.
- 3 Vernal Equinox, Chichén Itzá (p181) and Dzibilchaltún (p177). March 20 to 21.
- 4 Semana Santa (Holy Week), particularly colorful in Mérida (p153) and San Cristóbal de Las Casas (p232). Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday.
- 5 Feria de Santiago, Río Lagartos (see boxed text, p195). Second Saturday in July.
- 6 Festival de Nuestra Señora de Carmen, Ciudad del Carmen (p215). July 16.
- 7 Feria de San Román, Campeche (p203). September 14.
- 8 Festival Cervantino Barroco, San Cristóbal de Las Casas (p232). Late October to early November.
- 9 Toh Festival de Aves de Yucatán (Birds Festival), Mérida and other points on the peninsula (p55). Last week of November.
- 10 Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe), Campeche (p203). December 12.

WILDLIFE-WATCHING SPOTS

- 1 Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún (p175) Prime destination for birders.
- 2 Laguna de Términos (p214) Huge fresh-water lagoon where birds flock and marine turtles nest.
- 3 Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul (p217) Jaguars, eagles and simians roam the tropical forest and archaeological zone.
- 4 Cozumel (p104) Jumping-off point for the Great Maya Barrier Reef, with astoundingly varied marine life.
- 5 Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an (p129) Vast wildlife habitat encompassing tropical forest and coral reefs.
- 6 Punta Laguna (p128) Secluded lake frequented by spider and howler monkeys.
- 7 Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Lagartos (p193) Wetlands haven for thousands of flamingos and a few crocodiles.
- 8 Parque Nacional Isla Contoy (p91) Island seabird sanctuary.
- 9 Chiapas' Selva Lacandón (boxed text, p241) Megadiverse, though endangered, section of jungle.
- 10 Reserva de la Biosfera Pantanos de Centla (p228) Manatees, monkeys and mangroves.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Campeche Travel (www.campeche.travel, in Spanish) Campeche State Tourism Board site.

Cancún Tips (www.cancuntips.com.mx) A good resource for mainstream entertainment in Cancún.

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

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

Maya Yucatán (www.mayayucatan.com.mx) Yucatán State Tourism Board site.

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

There's also a handy calendar on the home page.

Taco List (www.tacolist.com.mx) Mexico's answer to craigslist.

Ticket Bus (www.ticketbus.com.mx) Check bus schedules and book tickets at this one-stop shop.

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

Itineraries

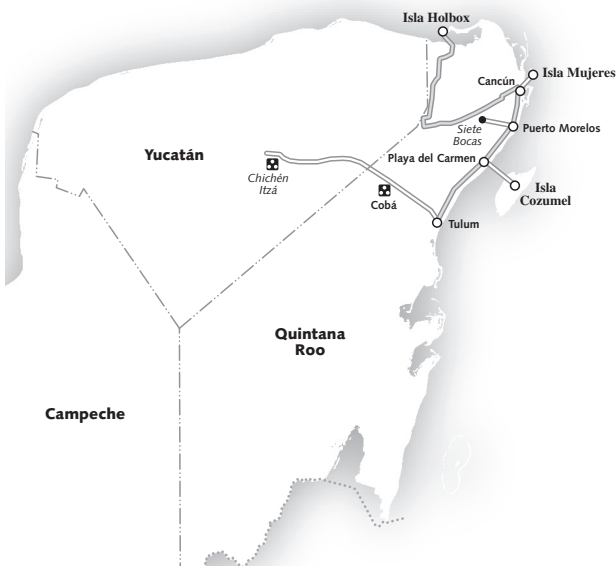
CLASSIC ROUTES

CANCÚN & THE RIVIERA MAYA

Five to 12 Days / Cancún to Tulum

With just a few days in **Cancún** (p68), start off at the suicide-blond beaches of the **Zona Hotelera** (p72). Take a trip to **Isla Mujeres** (p83) for some fine snorkeling or diving. Then try something different: a cenote (limestone sinkhole), such as **Siete Bocas** (p95) near Puerto Morelos. You'll definitely want to visit a Maya ruin; **Cobá** (p124) or **Chichén Itzá** (p181) make easy day trips. Then slip over to **Isla Holbox** (p91), where you can lie back in a hammock or snorkel with whale sharks.

With another week you can cover a lot of ground or take it slow. Either way, head south to **Puerto Morelos** (p95) for a peek at its artisans market, then to uberchic **Playa del Carmen** (p98), which makes a great base camp for a day trip to **Isla Cozumel** (p104), where you'll enjoy amazing diving and snorkeling. Then head south to **Tulum** (p118), where you can recharge on the near-perfect beaches and visit the Maya ruins.



This easy 150km to 300km trip stays close to Cancún and the Riviera Maya coastline, letting you duck out to beaches, go shopping, visit cenotes and Maya ruins, and simply relax.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE YUCATÁN

Two to Three Weeks /

Cancún to San Cristóbal de Las Casas

This trip is a mix of Caribbean coast, natural wonders, antique Maya artistry and culturally vibrant cities. **Cancún** (p68) is the region's gateway, but those in search of less glitzy pleasures should push on. Get in some snorkeling at the beach-fringed island of **Isla Mujeres** (p83). Then hug the coast to the more low-key resort of **Playa del Carmen** (p98), which provides easy access to **Isla Cozumel** (p104) and the adjacent Great Maya Barrier Reef. Further south you reach **Tulum** (p118), with its stunning Maya temple facing the Caribbean.

When you've had your fill of sun and sea, strike inland. Visit the major Maya ceremonial center of **Cobá** (p124) on the way to **Valladolid** (p188), a relaxed colonial town in an area speckled with azure cenotes. From there, it's a brief hop to the world-renowned **Chichén Itzá** (p181), where the plumed serpent of the Toltec civilization reigns supreme. Stop in the small Maya villages along the way as you head to **Mérida** (p145), where you'll enjoy traditional music and dance in the plazas, shop for embroidered clothing and dine on classic cuisine. Mérida makes a good base for trips to magnificent **Uxmal** (p163) and other Maya sites along the **Ruta Puuc** (p167); the colonial city of **Izamal** (p180) to the east; and the laid-back Gulf resort of **Progreso** (p178). From Mérida, many travelers also head to the walled colonial city of **Campeche** (p198) on their way to the jungles of Chiapas to admire the ruins of **Palenque** (p238), ending their trip in the contemporary Maya enclave of **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p228).

The 940km grand tour follows the Caribbean coast, then traverses the temple-studded heartland to Mérida, the peninsula capital, before heading off into the jungles of Chiapas and the extraordinary ruins at Palenque.



ROADS LESS TRAVELED

INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL IN CAMPECHE

Two Weeks /

Chetumal to Atasta Peninsula

While tourists crowd the coastal resorts of Quintana Roo, Campeche state remains wide open to exploration. From **Chetumal** (p136) follow the highway into Campeche, a green corridor passing some of the peninsula's most fascinating, remote ruins. Base yourself in **Xpujil** (p220) – or better, **Zoh-Laguna** (p221), a lagoon community north of the highway – to survey these marvels, much as travelers Stephens and Catherwood did in the mid-19th century. Take a day to visit **Calakmul** (p217), a sprawling site ensconced within the Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul, and another day for the secluded ruins of **Río Bec** (see boxed text, p221), whose secrets are still being uncovered.

The road north from Xpujil traverses a landscape of corn and beehives with a string of tranquil villages alongside Maya ruins, such as **Dzibilnocac** (p213) and **Hochob** (p213). Stay in **Hopelchén** (p211) to better appreciate these eerie marvels as well as some extensive caves, the **Grutas de Xtacumbilxunaan** (p212). Travel westward to **Campeche** (p198), the historically rich state capital, then follow the Gulf Coast southwest. Spend some time in **Sabancuy** (p214), a delightful fishing village with easy access to deserted Gulf beaches. Proceed along the protected wetlands and bird sanctuary that make up **Laguna de Términos** (p214) to **Ciudad del Carmen** (p215), known for its seafood and midsummer festival. To the west stretches the **Atasta Peninsula** (p216), a lush tropical strip that's a jumping-off point for boat trips around the wildlife-rich mangrove islets.



Phantasmagoric Maya monuments, pristine tropical forest, birder-friendly coastal wetlands and the magnificently restored colonial state capital highlight this fascinating 600km journey through 'the other Yucatán.'

TAILORED TRIPS

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ROAM

Off the peninsula's beaten path, you'll find amazing wildlife-watching opportunities and pass through Maya towns along the way.

Take a day trip from Cancún to the bird sanctuary of **Isla Contoy** (p91). From here it's off to the wilds. Swing up to the Gulf fishing towns of **Río Lagartos** (p193) and **San Felipe** (p195), a staging point to visit the **Reserva de la Biosfera Río Lagartos** (p193), where you'll spot thousands of pink flamingos, crocs, herons and more. Bolder travellers can consider DIY camping on the coast.

Skip the major highways as you travel the backroads across Yucatán state to the **Reserva de la Biosfera Río Celestún** (p175), staying in the super-chill town of **Celestún** (p175). After recharging your batteries for a day or two, taking the time to visit the mangrove swamps that are easily reachable from town, head down toward Campeche state through the **ruined haciendas route** (p177).

With a few more weeks, you can head down through the **Chenes Ruins** (p212) to Mexico's largest wildlife preserve, **Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul** (p217). Spend a few days camping, visiting the ruins and exploring the wild, dreadlocked jungle, before you spin eastward toward Quintana Roo.

As you head north through Quintana Roo, stop at the massive inland **Laguna Bacalar** (p135), a great off-track spot for camping and kayaking. Then it's up to **Punta Allen** (p129) for a few days of kayaking, fishing or mangrove trips through the remote **Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an** (p129). Once again, skip the major roads as you head back to Cancún, opting instead to visit **Punta Laguna** (p128) and the other **forgotten Maya villages** (p94) of the region.

DIVER'S & SNORKELER'S DREAM

Diving and snorkeling along the Yucatán Peninsula is probably as addictive as some of the substances you get offered from shifty guys lurking in Cancún alleyways. Snorkelers can tag along to many of the following spots. Divers must – yes, *must* – head to **Isla Cozumel** (p104) for a peek at one of the

wonders Jacques Cousteau brought to the world's attention. The **Santa Rosa Wall** (p109) is Cozumel's most famous dive – you'll see just one-third of the wall's amazing sights with one tank. Snorkelers and novice divers should head to the **Colombia shallows** (p109) for great visibility and some of the area's most spectacular coral formations. If you tire of diving the reefs and walls there (you won't), cross to the mainland for a cenote dive at **Angelita** (p120) or **Dos Ojos** (p116) – an other-worldly experience. A good place to organize a trip to the cenotes (and do some snorkeling) is **Tulum** (p119). Then head south to **Mahahual** (p132) or the remoter **Xcalak** (p133) for trips out to **Banco Chinchorro** (p132).



MOSTLY MAYA

The architectural and artistic achievements of the Classic Maya period are dotted across the peninsula. Though the ancient cities are long abandoned, the Maya people and their traditions are still very much present.

For background, visit the **Museo de la Arquitectura Maya** (p202) in Campeche or the **Museo de la Cultura Maya** (p138) in Chetumal. Near Campeche is **Edzná** (p210), a formidable Maya site with a five-story temple. Further east are the Chenes sites of **Dzibilnocac** (p213) and **Hochob** (p213), which have temples displaying macabre masks. Maya is widely spoken here, and you can witness the ancient arts of beekeeping and herbal medicine in **Hopelchén** (p211). To the north, the Puuc hills lend their name to an architectural style, magnificently represented by **Uxmal** (p163). A route then leads through the villages of **Ticul** (p170), **Oxkutzcab** (p173) and **Tekax** (p174), offering glimpses of traditional Maya life. Toward Valladolid is the must-see Unesco World Heritage site of **Chichén Itzá** (p181). In **Tihosuco** (p174), a museum outlines the Yucatán's definitive conflict, the War of the Castes (p32). On the Caribbean coast, the Maya city of **Tulum** (p118) provides a mysterious backdrop for modern sun devotees.

The peninsula's south harbors numerous fascinating but scarcely visited remnants of Classic Maya civilization ensconced in the vast **Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul** (p217). Serious Maya buffs will want to extend their explorations to the ruins of **Palenque** (p238) and the contemporary Maya domain of **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p228).



SUN WORSHIPPERS

Soak up rays in **Cancún** (p68), be it poolside or on a sandy, white, wave-washed beach, or take a ferry to **Isla Mujeres** (p83). Head south to **Puerto Morelos** (p95) if you like quiet, or to **Playa del Carmen** (p98) if you don't. At **Tulum** (p118) you get the best of both sun-worshipping worlds: coral-sand beaches, azure water and Maya ruins overlooking it all. When you're happy with your tan, leave the coast and check out **Cobá** (p124) and **Ek' Balam** (p191). Plan your trip for an equinox to really do full justice to **Chichén Itzá** (p181) and **Dzibilchaltún** (p177), both of which have curious solar displays. **Celestún** (p175) brings you back to the beach. From there, hit **Uxmal** (p163) and the **Ruta Puuc** (p167) for awe-inspiring insights into the Maya mind, then 'sunspire' yourself again at **Isla Aguada** (p215) and **Puerto Ceiba** (see boxed text, p228). Take a few days to visit **Palenque** (p236) and its spectacular tower, El Palacio, where Maya royals watched the sun fall onto the Templo de las Inscripciones, or head back east through **Becán** (p219), **Calakmul** (p217), **Kohunlich** (p142) and **Dzibanché** (p141).



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