CANCÚN & THE YUCATÁN
ENCOUNTER

GREG BENCHWICK
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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. While his present-day journeys will never compete with the rosy-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, including Lonely Planet’s Cancún, Cozumel & the Yucatán. To see videos and podcasts from Greg’s adventures, check out his website www.soundtraveler.com.

GREG’S THANKS

An enduring thanks goes out to the people of Mexico, who make every journey ‘down south’ a pleasure. Big props also go out to the people who helped with my local-voice interviews, including Juan de la Rosa, Deborah Felixson, Guadalupe Quintana and Iñaki Iturbe. And, of course, thanks and never-ending love to the two most beautiful women in the world: my wife and my mother.
At play on the beach at Playa Norte (p58), Isla Mujeres
CONTENTS

THE AUTHOR 03

THIS IS CANCÚN & THE YUCATÁN 07

HIGHLIGHTS 08

CANCÚN & THE YUCATÁN CALENDAR 23

ITINERARIES 27

BEACHES & TOWNS 32

>CANCÚN & AROUND 36

>ISLA MUJERES 56

>PLAYA DEL CARMEN 66

>COZUMEL 78

>TULUM & AROUND 90

>COSTA MAYA 100

EXPLORE THE YUCATÁN 109

SNAPSHOTs 120

> ACCOMMODATIONS 122

> DIVING & SNORKELING 124

> FOOD 126

> KIDS 128

> NATURE RESERVES 130

> RUINS 132

> NIGHTLIFE 134

> WATER SPORTS 135

> BEACHES 136

BACKGROUND 137

DIRECTORY 146

INDEX 155

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>THIS IS CANCÚN & THE YUCATÁN

An area of remarkable diversity and eye-popping natural beauty, the Yucatán Peninsula – and its crowning resort developments in Cancún and the Riviera Maya – offers something for just about everyone in your crew.

For bacchanalians and beach lovers, there are the devilish nightclubs and angelic white sands of Cancún and Playa del Carmen. Divers and adventurers will salivate at the sight of the translucent waters and massive coral arrays of the Mesoamerican reef – the second-largest barrier reef in the world. For everybody else, there are lost Maya ruins to explore, hammocks to test, Coronas to drink, and long-forgotten beaches to discover.

At the heart of it all is Cancún. As Mexico’s most-visited resort area (this little spit of sand and sun draws in well over four million visitors each year), Cancún is many things to many people. Some say it’s the best beach destination on the planet, while others find the over-the-top development to be crass and tacky. Truth be told, Cancún is all this and a whole lot more.

But there’s more on offer along this coast than just the resorts of Cancún and the Riviera Maya. Out in the waters of the Caribbean, you have spectacular beaches and world-class diving on Isla Mujeres and Cozumel.

Further south along the Quintana Roo (kin-tah-nah roh) coast, you have the Euro-chic lounges of Playa del Carmen, the laid-back rhythms and spectacular coastal ruin at Tulum, plus a handful of azure-blue cenotes (limestone sinkholes perfect for swimming or diving) and lost lagoons found near cozy beach towns like Akumal and Mahahual.

Around here, the past and present intermingle. You’ll see it in the towering temples at archaeological sites like Chichén Itzá and Cobá, in the cobblestone streets of the colonial centers of Mérida and Valladolid, and in the villages and culture of southern Mexico’s native people, the Maya.