

Mexico's Yucatán & Chiapas

Caught between the relentless beat of progress and the echoing shouts of tradition, the Yucatán Peninsula, plus its highlands neighbor of Chiapas, stand at the crossroads. On one side you have the brawny megaresorts with their oft-preposterous pomp and circumstance, on the other are the proud, steadfast traditions of the Maya, the mystery of the ceremonial centers created by their ancestors, and the Old World allure of colonial masterpieces like Mérida, Campeche and San Cristóbal de Las Casas. And in between, on every peroxide-blond beach and every patch of jungle still echoing with the roars of howler monkeys, beats the heart of Ixchel, the earth goddess, marveling at her remarkable creation.

Despite overzealous development, the natural beauty of this region abides with verdant jungle hideaways, freshwater limestone sinkholes (known locally as cenotes), and the giant Mesoamerican Reef. Found just offshore from Quintana Roo, this is the world's second-largest barrier reef, making the Caribbean coast a snorkeling and beach destination par excellence.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** Yucatán state 39,340 sq km; Quintana Roo 50,351 sq km; Campeche 56,798 sq km; Chiapas 74,211 sq km; 220,700 sq km in total
- **Budget** US\$40 to US\$50 per day
- **Capital** Mexico City
- **Costs** Budget room US\$15 to US\$40, three-hour bus ride US\$10, set lunch US\$4
- **Country Code** ☎ 52
- **Languages** Spanish and two dozen Maya languages
- **Money** US\$1 = M\$13 (Mexican pesos)
- **Population** eight million (Yucatán, Quintana Roo, Campeche and Chiapas states)
- **Seasons** high (July and August, December to March), low (rest of the year)
- **Time** GMT minus six hours; GMT minus five hours during daylight-saving time



TRAVEL HINTS

It's easy to take day trips to big-time archaeological sites like Uxmal and Chichén Itzá, but by staying in local communities near these sites, you are more likely to have a positive impact on the local economy – plus, you'll gain a unique perspective.

OVERLAND ROUTES

From Mexico you can loop into Guatemala – from San Cristóbal de Las Casas to Quetzaltenango, or to Tikal via Palenque – and into Corozal, Belize, from Chetumal, south of Tulum.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Chichén Itzá** (p56) Explore the age-old ruins and find out why they named this 'the seventh modern wonder of the world.'
- **Tulum** (p68) Stroll along long stretches of white-sand beach and the nearby Maya ruin; though it's no longer a quiet backpacker hub, there are still cheap sleeps and plenty of space.
- **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p37) Pull on a sweater and sip fresh espresso in the cool, mountainous 'Zapatista capital,' one of the Americas' finest colonial-era towns.
- **Mérida** (p53) Put your best salsa foot forward during the more-than-lively, street-spilling weekend fair in this Spanish-colonial wonder near Maya ruins and seldom explored estuaries.
- **Off the beaten track** (p71) Adventure out to the untouched and out-of-the-way fishing village Punta Allen, which lies within a protected reserve and offers snorkel trips to dolphin hangouts.

CURRENT EVENTS

In the 2006 national election, PAN's (Partido de Acción Nacional) Felipe Calderón narrowly defeated the left-leaning López Obrador of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). Obrador's supporters alleged fraud, kicking off massive national protests, which have since quieted. And then came Calderón's mobilization of the military to counteract Mexico's drug-trafficking problem, which triggered more backlash (especially in Mexico's northern states). The perception of violence – coupled with the 2009 outbreak of the H1N1 'swine flu' virus – drastically affected visitation to the Yucatán's resort areas. And while the real risk of the virus is far more mild than the media hype would have had us believe, the resorts continue to struggle. Combine that with the worldwide economic crisis that rocketed into full force that year, and you have the makings of a real disaster.

HISTORY

The Maya set up many city-states across the broad south of Mexico, though the population and activity had declined before the Spanish arrived. (For more on Maya history, see p32.) A couple of Spaniards – Diego de Mazariegos in present-day Chiapas, and Francisco de Montejo in the Yucatán – had the area under Spanish control by the mid-16th century. Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821, and pulled in Chiapas from the United Provinces of Central America in 1824.

Long oppressed by Spaniards and *criollos* (Latin Americans of Spanish lineage), the Maya rose in the War of the Castes in 1847, leading to destroyed churches and many massacres. The brimming sense of unequal-

ity didn't settle with peace in 1901. As Nafta (North American Free Trade Agreement) kicked into effect in 1994, the mainly Maya Zapatistas stormed San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Their struggle has quieted down in recent years, now that they run seven autonomous zones (called *caracoles*, literally 'snails') outside San Cristóbal. But it's not over.

THE CULTURE

Travelers often comment on the open, gentle and gregarious nature of the people of the Yucatán, especially the Yucatecan Maya. Here, more than elsewhere in Mexico, it seems you find a willingness to converse, a genuine interest in outsiders, while the obsequious attitude often encountered elsewhere in the country is absent. This openness is all the more remarkable when you consider that the people of the Yucatán Peninsula have fended off domination by outsiders for so long – a situation that persists today.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Most visitors to the Yucatán arrive by air. Air routes are structured so that virtually all international flights into the region pass through a handful of 'hub' cities: Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Miami or New York. The majority of flights into the peninsula arrive at busy **Aeropuerto Internacional de Cancún** (CUN; ☎ 998-886-0047; www.cancun-airport.com). The region's other gateways are **Cozumel** (CZM; ☎ 987-872-2081; www.asur.com.mx), **Chetumal** (CTM; ☎ 983-832-0898), **Mérida** (MID; ☎ 999-946-1530; www.asur.com.mx) and Campeche (CPE).