

Tabasco & Chiapas



Mismatched siblings, the neighboring states of Tabasco and Chiapas are almost a study in contrasts. Smaller Tabasco – between central Mexico and the Yucatán Peninsula – is less diverse than Chiapas, and prone to flooding, as demonstrated by a catastrophic flood in October 2007. A largely flat, steamy, well-watered lowland, it sees fewer visitors, but those who do drop in discover a place with fascinating pre-Hispanic heritage from the Olmec and Maya civilizations, a relaxed tropical lifestyle and a unique environment of enormous rivers, endless wetlands and inviting beaches heading out into the Gulf of Mexico. In Chiapas, pine-forest highlands, wildlife-rich rainforest and well-preserved colonial architecture highlight a region of incredible variety. Palenque and Yaxchilán are evocative vestiges of powerful Maya kingdoms, and the presence of modern Maya is a constant reminder of the region's rich and uninterrupted history. The colonial hubs of San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Chiapa de Corzo give way to fertile plots of coffee and cacao in the Soconusco, and for outdoor adventurers, excursions to Laguna Miramar and the Cañón del Sumidero are unmissable. Nature lovers willing to venture off the beaten track will swoon over the frothy cascades and exotic animals of the Lacandón Jungle.

Tabasco has mostly rebuilt and refortified since the 2007 flood submerged more than one-million homes and an estimated 80% of the state. Rains were unusually heavy that year, but the scale of the devastation underscored Tabasco's continued vulnerability to seasonal rains and the general precariousness of its infrastructure. Though some preventative measures have been put in place since then, the region remains prone due to its many waterways, as evidenced by the 2009 flooding of Cárdenas and Huimanguillo, which displaced about 35,000 residents.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Scale the jungly hills and soaring Maya temples of **Palenque** (p752)
- Stroll the high altitude cobblestone streets of **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p730)
- Cruise through the waterway and sheer high rock cliffs of the spectacular **Cañón del Sumidero** (p730)
- Spend a few splendid days hiking and relaxing at the mountain-ringed **Laguna Miramar** (p772)
- Admire the mysterious art of the ancient Olmecs at Villahermosa's **Parque-Museo La Venta** (p713)



■ BIGGEST CITY: VILLAHERMOSA
(POPULATION 673,000)

■ HIGHEST PEAK: VOLCÁN TACANÁ
(4110M)

History

Tabasco and Chiapas have hosted as rich a procession of cultures as anywhere in Mexico. It was at La Venta in western Tabasco that Mesoamerica's 'mother culture,' the Olmec, reached its greatest height between about 800 and 400 BC, after first emerging in San Lorenzo, Veracruz. Olmec religion, art, astronomy and architecture deeply influenced all of Mexico's later civilizations.

Low-lying, jungle-covered eastern Chiapas gave rise to some of the most splendid and powerful city-states of another great civilization, the Maya, during the Classic period (approximately AD 250–900), places such as Palenque, Yaxchilán and Toniná. Dozens of lesser Maya powers – including Bonampak,

Comalcalco and Chinkultic – prospered in eastern Chiapas and Tabasco during this time, as Maya culture reached its peak of artistic and intellectual achievement. The ancestors of many of the distinctive indigenous groups of highland Chiapas today appear to have migrated to that region from the lowlands after the Classic Maya collapse around AD 900.

Pre-Hispanic Tabasco was the prosperous nexus of a far-reaching trade network extending round the Yucatán coast to Honduras, up the rivers to the jungles and mountains of Guatemala, and westward to highland central Mexico. And it was near Frontera, Tabasco, in 1519 that Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors fought their first battle against native Mexicans, afterwards founding a set-

