

Campeche State



Tucked into the southwestern corner of the Yucatán Peninsula like a forgotten stepdaughter, Campeche is home to vast stretches of tangled jungle, some of the region's least visited and most imposing Maya ruins, forgotten pastoral villages, bird-choked coastal lagoons and an inspiring colonial-era capital city. It's the least touristed of the Yucatán's states, and in that lies its provincial, lost-land charm.

In the northeastern Chenes region and other remote corners, women still don *huipiles* (colorfully embroidered tunics), and Yucatec is widely spoken. The backroads of this northern region bring you to forgotten underground wonderworlds, the massive restored Edzná archaeological site and a handful of smaller, less-traveled Maya ruins.

This is also the wildest corner of the Peninsula, and the Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul is Mexico's largest reserve. Here you can spot toucans, monkeys and even the occasional big jungle cat. And beyond the cacophonous roar of the howlers and hiccuping frogs rise massive Maya ruined cities such as Calakmul and Becán. Along the coast, the Laguna de Términos is great for birding, and beach bums revel in the solitude on forgotten beaches.

The southern coast of Campeche was affected by an oil spill in October 2007, and boom-towns such as Ciudad del Carmen are changing the spirit (and environment) of the region. Nevertheless, the age-old grace of the *campechanos* (residents of Campeche) abides. And the walled city of Campeche, without a doubt the best-preserved colonial capital on the peninsula, remains the cultural epicenter of the region, offering a great jumping-off point for your adventure into the offbeat hinterland.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Feel the burn as you haul yourself up the massive pyramid at **Calakmul** (p222), heavy-nosed toucans soaring past toward their treetop jungle hideaways
- Stroll through history as you cruise the colonial-era streets of **Campeche** (p204), with their pastel-hued edifices and arching ramparts
- Stop to test out your Yucatec in Maya strongholds along the old route to Mérida, visiting **Hochob** (p217) and the **Chenes sites** (p217) along the way
- Find your little patch of foggy-bottomed paradise on one of the region's lost beaches around **Playa Varadero** (p219)
- Head out for an afternoon birding mission on the **Laguna de Términos** (p219)



■ POPULATION: 754,730

■ AREA: 56,798 SQ KM

CAMPECHE

📍 981 / pop 211,671

Campeche is a colonial fairyland, its walled city center a tight enclave of perfectly restored pastel buildings, narrow cobblestone streets, fortified ramparts and well-preserved mansions. Added to Unesco's list of World Heritage sites in 1999, the state capital has been so painstakingly restored you wonder if it's a real city. Nearly 2000 structures have been renovated. But leave the city's walls and you'll find a real Mexican provincial capital complete with a frenetic market, a quiet *malecón* (waterfront boulevard) and old fishing docks.

Relatively few tourists visit the city, meaning the town retains its authenticity – it's not a tourist trap, at least not yet. And the big-hearted and proud *campechanos* are likely to show you an unobtrusive and reserved hospitality not seen in other regional capitals such as Chetumal or Mérida.

Besides the numerous mansions built by wealthy Spanish families during Campeche's heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries, two segments of the city's wall have also survived, as have no fewer than seven of the *baluartes* (bastions or bulwarks) that were built into it. Two perfectly preserved colonial forts guard the city's outskirts, one of them housing the Museo de la Arquitectura Maya, an archaeological museum with world-class pieces.

The city's central location on the Gulf of Mexico makes it the perfect jumping-off point for adventures to the Chenes sites, Edzná and neighboring beaches. Come back at night to enjoy the gauzy light of the illuminated church and other central landmarks.

HISTORY

Once a Maya trading village called Ah Kim Pech (Lord Sun Sheep-Tick), Campeche was first briefly approached by the Spaniards in 1517. Resistance by the Maya prevented the Spaniards from fully conquering the region for nearly a quarter-century. Colonial Campeche was founded in 1531, but later abandoned due to Maya hostility. By 1540, however, the conquistadors had gained sufficient control, under the leadership of Francisco de Montejo (the Younger), to found a permanent settlement. They named the settlement Villa de San Francisco de Campeche.

The settlement soon flourished as the major port of the Yucatán Peninsula, but this made it subject to pirate attacks (see boxed text, p207). After a particularly appalling attack in 1663 left the city in ruins, the king of Spain ordered construction of Campeche's famous bastions, putting an end to the periodic carnage.

Today the economy of the city is largely driven by fishing and, increasingly, tourism, which to some extent have funded the downtown area's renovation.

ORIENTATION

Though the bastions still stand, the walls have been mostly razed and replaced by Avenida Circuito Baluartes, which rings the city center (Centro Histórico) as the walls once did. In the classic colonial plan, the center is surrounded by barrios (neighborhoods), each with its own church and square. Particularly charming are San Román, Guadalupe and Santa Ana.

The streets in the central grid follow a numbered sequence: inland-oriented streets have odd numbers and perpendicular ones even.

A multilane boulevard with bicycle and pedestrian paths extends along Campeche's shoreline, from the Fuerte de San Miguel (San Miguel Fort) in the southwest to Fuerte de San José (San José Fort) in the northeast. Graced by a series of monuments, the boulevard is commonly referred to as La Costera or the *malecón*, though the stretch closest to the city center is officially named Avenida Adolfo Ruiz Cortínez.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

All of the hostels and quite a few hotels provide online services, and 'cibers' abound in the Centro Histórico.

Laundry

Same-day laundry service is available at the following locations.

Kler Lavandería (Calle 16 No 305; per kilogram M\$10;

☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat)

Lavandería Antigua (Calle 57; per kilogram M\$15;

☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat) Between Calles 12 and 14.

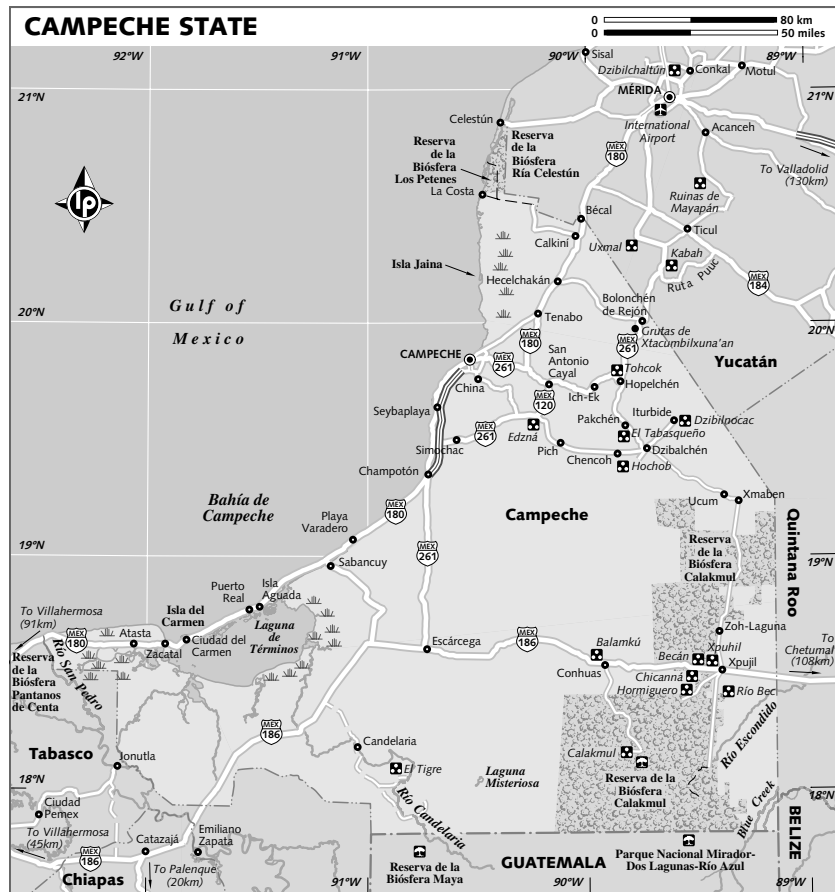
Medical Services

In an emergency, call one of the following.

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 815-2411; cnr Av Las Palmas & Ah Kim Pech) Some 3km northeast of downtown.

Emergency (☎ 066)

Hospital Dr Manuel Campos (☎ 811-1709; Av Circuito Baluartes Norte) Between Calles 14 and 16.



Money

Campeche has numerous banks with ATMs, open 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday, 9am to 2pm Saturday.

Post

Central post office (cnr Av 16 de Septiembre & Calle 53; ☎ 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist Information

Coordinación Municipal de Turismo (☎ 811-3989; www.ayuntamientodecampeche.gob.mx; Calle 55 No 3; ☎ 9am-9pm) Next to the cathedral, the municipal tourist office is the more useful of the two information centers.

Secretaría de Turismo (☎ 816-6767; Plaza Moch Couch; ☎ 9am-9pm) Service is inconsistent here though staff will gladly hand you some brochures.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Plaza Principal

Shaded by spreading carob trees, and ringed by tiled benches with broad footpaths radiating from a *belle époque* kiosk, Campeche's appealingly modest central square started life in 1531 as a military camp. Over the years it became the focus of the town's civic, political and religious activities and remains the core of public life. *Campechanos* come here to chat, smooch, have their shoes shined or cool off with a dish of ice cream after the heat of the day. The plaza is seen at its best on weekend evenings, when it's closed to traffic and concerts are staged (see p211).

The plaza is surrounded by suitably fine buildings. On the northern (seaward) side

stands a replica of the old government center, now housing the modern **Biblioteca de Campeche** (State Library; ☎ 9am-2:30pm & 3-8:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat). The impressive porticoed building on the opposite side housed an earlier version of the city hall; it is now occupied by shops and restaurants.

CATEDRAL DE NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LA PURÍSIMA CONCEPCIÓN

Dominating the Plaza Principal's east side is the two-towered **cathedral** (admission free; ☎ 7am-noon & 4-6pm). The limestone structure has stood on this spot for more than three centuries, and it still fills beyond capacity most Sundays. Statues of St Peter and St Paul occupy niches in the baroque façade; the sober, single-nave interior is lined with colonial-era paintings.

CENTRO CULTURAL CASA NÚMERO 6

During the pre-revolutionary era, when the mansion was occupied by an upper-class *campechano* family, **Número 6** (Calle 57 No 6; admission M\$5; ☎ 9am-9pm) was a prestigious plaza address. Wandering the premises, you'll get an idea of how the city's high society lived back then. The front sitting room is furnished with Cuban pieces of the period. Inside are exhibition spaces and a good bookstore.

Baluartes

After a particularly blistering pirate assault in 1663 (see p207), the remaining inhabitants of Campeche set about erecting protective walls around their city. Built largely by indigenous labor with limestone extracted from nearby caves, the barrier took more than 50 years to complete. Stretching more than 2.5km around the urban core and rising to a height of 8m, the hexagonal wall was linked by eight bulwarks. The seven that remain display a treasure trove of historical paraphernalia, artifacts and indigenous handicrafts. You can climb atop the bulwarks and stroll sections of the wall for sweeping views of the port.

Two main entrances connected the walled compound with the outside world. The **Puerta del Mar** (Sea Gate; cnr Calles 8 & 59) provided access from the sea, opening onto a wharf where small craft delivered goods from ships anchored further out. (The shallow waters were later reclaimed so the gate is now several blocks from the waterfront.) The **Puerta de Tierra** (Land Gate; Calle 18; admission free; ☎ 9am-9pm), on the opposite side, was opened in 1732

as the principal ingress from the suburbs. It is now the venue for a sound-and-light show (p211).

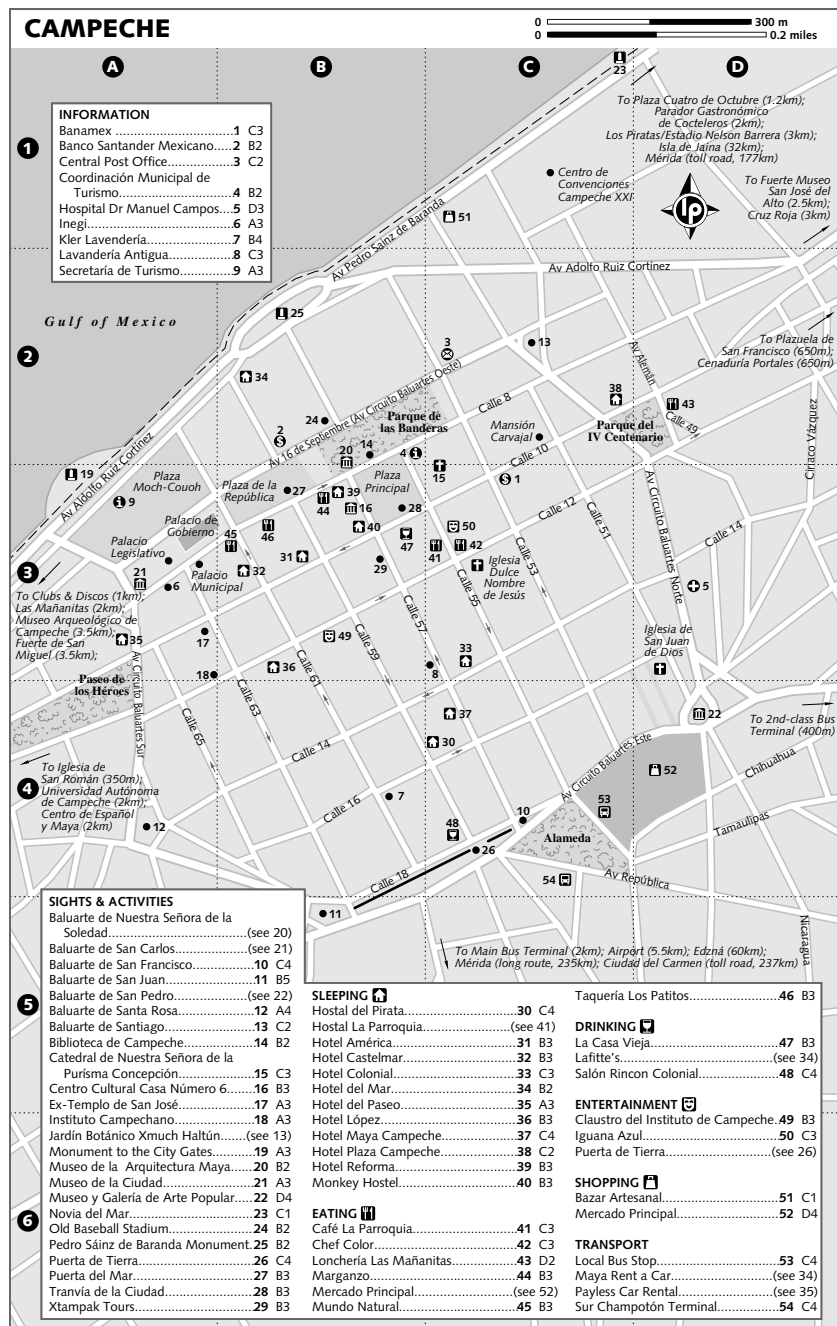
Designed to protect the Puerta del Mar, the **Baluarte de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad** was the largest of the bastions completed in the late 1600s. Appropriately, it was named for the patron saint of sailors. This bulwark contains the fascinating **Museo de la Arquitectura Maya** (Calle 8; admission M\$27, free Sun; ☎ 8am-7:30pm Tue-Sun), the one must-see museum in Campeche. It provides an excellent overview of the sites around Campeche state and the key architectural styles associated with them. Five halls display stelae taken from various sites, accompanied by graphic representations of their carved inscriptions with brief commentaries in flawless English.

Completed in 1704 – the last of the bulwarks to be built – the **Baluarte de Santiago** (cnr Calles 8 & 49; admission M\$10; ☎ 9am-9pm) houses the **Jardín Botánico Xmuch Haltún**, a botanical garden with numerous endemic plants. Unless you're really into plants, it's not worth the entrance fee.

Named after Spain's King Carlos II, the **Baluarte de San Carlos** houses the **Museo de la Ciudad** (Calle 8; admission M\$27; ☎ 8am-7:30pm Tue-Sun). This small but worthwhile museum chronologically illustrates the city's tempestuous history via well-displayed objects: specimens of dyewood, muskets, a figurehead from a ship's prow and the like. The dungeon downstairs alludes to the building's use as a military prison during the 1700s.

Directly behind Iglesia de San Juan de Dios, the **Baluarte de San Pedro** (cnr Avs Circuito Este & Circuito Baluartes Norte; admission free; ☎ 9am-9pm) served a postpiracy defensive function when it repelled a punitive raid from Mérida in 1824. Carved in stone above the entry is the symbol of San Pedro: two keys to heaven and the papal tiara. Climb the steep ramp to the roof and look between the battlements to see San Juan's cupola. Downstairs, the **Museo y Galería de Arte Popular** (Museum & Gallery of Folk Art; admission free; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) displays beautiful indigenous handicrafts.

Once the primary defensive bastion for the adjacent Puerta de la Tierra, the **Baluarte de San Francisco** (Calle 18; admission to both San Francisco & San Juan M\$20; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) houses a small arms museum. Down the street is the **Baluarte de San Juan** (Calle 18; admission with San Francisco ticket free; ☎ 8am-7:30pm Tue-Sun), the smallest of the



RIBALD TALES: THE MARAUDING PIRATES OF CAMPECHE

Where there's wealth, there are pirates. This was no less true in the 1500s as it is today. And Campeche, which was a thriving chicle, timber and dyewood port in the mid-16th century, was the wealthiest place around.

Such riches did not escape the notice of pirates, who first attacked Campeche only six years after the town's founding. For two centuries, they terrorized the growing city. Ships were attacked, the port was invaded, citizens robbed, women raped and buildings burned – typical pirate stuff. The buccaneers' hall of shame counted the infamous John Hawkins, Diego the Mulatto, Barbillas and the notorious 'Pegleg' (Pata de Palo) himself. In their most gruesome assault, in early 1663, the various pirate hordes set aside rivalries to converge as a single flotilla upon the city, massacring Campeche's citizens.

This tragedy finally spurred the Spanish monarchy to take preventive action, but it was another five years before work on the 3.5m-thick ramparts began. By 1686 a 2.5km hexagon incorporating eight strategically placed bastions surrounded the city. A segment of the ramparts extended out to sea so that ships literally had to sail into a fortress to gain access to the city.

With Campeche nearly impregnable, pirates turned to other ports and ships at sea. In 1717 the brilliant naval strategist Felipe de Aranda began a campaign against the buccaneers, and eventually made this area of the Gulf safe from piracy. Of course, all that wealth from chicle and timber was being created using indigenous slaves, leading one to question: who were the real pirates, anyway?

seven, containing a permanent exhibition on the history of the bulwarks. And the **Baluarte de Santa Rosa** (nr Calles 14 & Circuito Baluartes Sur; admission free; ☎ 10am-3pm & 6-9pm), a couple of blocks to the northwest, has Campeche's art gallery.

Ex-Templo de San José

Faced with flamboyant blue-and-yellow tiles, the **Ex-Templo de San José** (former San José church; nr Calles 10 & 63; admission M\$15; ☎ 9am-3pm & 3:45-8:30pm Tue-Sun) is a wonder to behold; note the lighthouse, complete with weather vane, atop the right spire. Built in the early 18th century by Jesuits who ran it as an institute of higher learning until they were booted out of Spanish domains in 1767, it now serves as an exhibition space. It belongs to the Instituto Campechano, the university to which it's attached.

Museo Arqueológico de Campeche & Fuerte de San Miguel

Campeche's largest colonial fort, facing the Gulf of Mexico some 4km southwest of the city center, is now home to the excellent **Museo Arqueológico de Campeche** (Campeche Archaeological Museum; admission M\$34; ☎ 9am-7:30pm Tue-Sun). Here you can admire findings from the sites of Calakmul and Edzná, and from Isla de Jaina, an island north of town once used as a burial site for Maya aristocracy.

Stunning jade jewelry and exquisite vases, masks and plates are thematically arranged

in 10 exhibit halls. The star attractions are the jade burial masks from Calakmul. Also displayed are stelae, seashell necklaces and clay figurines.

Equipped with a dry moat and working drawbridge, the fort itself is a thing of beauty. The roof deck, ringed by 20 cannons, affords wonderful harbor views.

Buses marked 'Lerma' or 'Playa' depart from the market and travel counterclockwise around the Circuito before heading down the *malecón*. The access road to the fort is 4km southwest of the Plaza Moch-Couoh. Hike 700m up the hill (bear left at the fork). Otherwise, take a taxi (M\$35) or the *tranvía* (trolley; see p208).

Fuerte Museo San José del Alto

San Miguel's northern counterpart, built in the late 18th century, sits atop the Cerro de Bellavista. From the parapets you can see where the town ends and the mangroves begin. Cross a drawbridge over a moat to enter the neatly restored fortress. Inside, a **museum** (Av Francisco Morazán; admission M\$27, Sun free; ☎ 8am-7pm Tue-Sun) illustrates the port's maritime history through ship models, weaponry and other paraphernalia, including a beautiful ebony rudder carved in the shape of a hound.

To get there, catch a local, green 'Josefa', 'Bellavista' or 'Morelos' bus from the side of the market.

CAMPECHE STATE

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Malecón

A popular path for joggers, cyclists, strolling friends and cooing sweethearts, the **malecón**, Campeche's waterfront promenade, makes a breezy sunrise ramble or sunset bike ride.

A series of monuments along the 2.5km stretch allude to various personages and events in the city's history. Southwest of the Plaza Moch-Couoh stands a statue of Campeche native **Justo Sierra Méndez**, a key player in the modernization of Mexico's educational system. Northeast up the *malecón* is a **sculpture** representing the city's two forts, San Miguel and San José. In front of the Plaza Moch-Couoh is a **monument** of the walled city's four gates. A block past the Hotel del Mar is a monumental sculpture of native son **Pedro Sáinz de Baranda**, who played a key role in defeating the Spanish at their last stronghold in Veracruz, thus ending the War of Independence. Just beyond the Centro de Convenciones Campeche, the girl gazing out to sea is the **Novia del Mar**. According to a poignant local legend, the *campechana* fell in love with a foreign pirate and awaits his return. About 1km further north, the **Plaza Cuatro de Octubre** (October 4 Plaza) commemorates the date of the city's 'founding,' depicting the fateful meeting of a Maya cacique (chief, who was evidently lost, since it took Montejo to found the city), the conquistador Francisco de Montejo and a priest. At the *malecón*'s northern end is the seafood restaurant complex known as the Parador Gastronómico de Cockteleros (p210).

While there are no real beaches to speak of in town, by the time you get down to Las Mañanitas (p210), just over 2km to the southwest, the water is clear enough for **swimming**.

COURSES

Universidad Autónoma de Campeche Centro de Español y Maya (CEM; etzna.uacam.mx/cecm/principal.htm; Av Agustín Melgar), one block east of the *malecón*, offers four- to eight-week summer language courses. Homestays can be arranged. Drop by to sit in on classes or check the notice board for Spanish teachers.

TOURS

Monkey Hostel, Hostal La Parroquia and Hostal del Pirata will all arrange tours and/or shuttle services to the Maya sites. Hostal del Pirata also offers kayaking tours of Isla de Jaina and the Reserva de la Biósfera

Los Petenes (M\$300 per person), as well as tarpon-fishing expeditions.

Tranvía de la Ciudad (adult M\$80, child under 10yr free; ☎ hourly 9am-1pm & 5-9pm) Three different tours by motorized *tranvía* depart from Calle 10 beside the Plaza Principal daily; all last about 45 minutes. On the same schedule, the trolley called 'El Guapo' goes to the Fuerte de San Miguel or its twin on the north side of town, the Fuerte de San José. (Note that the fort tours do not leave time to visit the museums within them.) Buy tram tickets and check schedules at the booth just inside the plaza from the trolley stop.

Xtampak Tours (☎ 811-6473; xtampak_7@yahoo.com.mx; Calle 57 No 14; ☎ 8am-4pm & 5:30-8:30pm) Offers comprehensive city tours at 9am and 4pm daily (M\$250 per person, four hours), as well as archaeological tours to Edzná (M\$180), the Chenes sites (M\$750) and eastern Campeche. You pay extra (M\$700) for a bilingual guide, who can lead groups of up to seven people. Overnight packages are available to Calakmul and Río Bec.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Carnaval Campeche pulls out all the stops for Carnaval in February, with at least a week of festivities leading up to 'Sábado de Bando' (Carnaval Saturday, date varies), when everyone dresses up in outrageous costumes and parades down the *malecón*. The official conclusion is a week later, when a pirate effigy is torched and hurled into the sea, followed by much revelry in front of the Concha Acústica (bandshell) in the Barrio de San Román.

Feria de San Román September 14. This festival honors the beloved Cristo Negro (Black Christ) of the Iglesia de San Román. Fireworks and Ferris wheels take over the zone, just southwest of the center, along with beauty contests, boxing matches and a music-and-dance competition that brings in traditional ensembles from around the peninsula. **Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe** December 12. Pilgrimages from throughout the peninsula travel to the Iglesia de Guadalupe, 1.5km east of the Plaza Principal and Mexico's second-most-visited shrine, next to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Festival del Centro Histórico Held throughout December with a jazz festival toward the end of the month. Coincides with Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe on December 12.

SLEEPING Budget

Campeche's three hostels all offer laundry services, free internet and complimentary breakfast, plus bicycle rentals and tours of archaeological sites.

our pick **Monkey Hostel** (☎ 811-6605; www.hostalcampeche.com; cnr Calles 10 & 57; dm M\$80, r without bathroom M\$200; 📍) You can't beat the view of the

plaza and cathedral from Campeche's longest-established and most popular hostel. The international social scene is enhanced by cozy common areas with bar, hammocks and well-worn sofas, and friendly bilingual staff. The beds are firm, but they don't have individual fans, which can make for a hot night.

Hostal del Pirata (☎ 811-1757; piratehostel@hotmail.com; Calle 59 No 47; dm M\$90, r with/without bathroom M\$230/210; 📍) A block from the Puerta de Tierra, this Hostelling International (HI) affiliate is ensconced in Campeche's historic center, and the building itself is a 17th-century relic. Though it hasn't attained the Monkey's popularity, the Pirata's neatly kept premises may appeal to more fastidious travelers. Occupying a modern annex, dorms and 'semiprivate' rooms share modest facilities with cramped showers. The beds border on mashed-potato firmness, but you get your own fan.

Hostal La Parroquia (☎ 816-2530; www.hostalparroquia.com; Calle 55; dm M\$90, d/q without bathroom M\$200/300; 📍) Half a block from the Plaza Principal, Campeche's newest hostel resides in a magnificent late-1500s mansion. Rooms with original stone walls and exposed wooden beams flank a grand hallway that opens onto a pleasant patio with small kitchen and adjacent lawn for sunbathing. Of the three hostels, it offers the best complimentary breakfast scheme: fresh fruit, toast and coffee at the café next door.

Hotel Reforma (☎ 816-4464; Calle 8 No 257; s M\$120-250, d M\$300; 📍) Just off the Plaza Principal, this ancient hotel in a 400-year-old building has all the potential in the world. As is, it's a rather bizarre place. Enormous upstairs rooms have modern tiled bathrooms, high ceilings and great balconies, if you can handle the traffic noise. The threadbare sheets leave something to be desired. Rates vary with inclusion of TV, hot water and/or air-con; the complex scheme is posted over the reception desk.

Hotel Colonial (☎ 816-2222; Calle 14 No 122; s M\$170, d M\$180-200; 📍) Time stands still within this stubbornly low-tech establishment, a budget traveler's haven for six decades. Indeed, little seems to have changed since it was occupied by king's lieutenant Miguel de Castro in the colonial era. Zealously maintained rooms surround a tranquil tiled courtyard with wicker-backed rockers and a central *aljibe* (rainwater cistern).

Hotel Maya Campeche (☎ 816-8053, 800-561-8730; www.mayacampechehotel.com.mx; Calle 57 No 40;

s/d M\$380/440; 📍 📍) This small, boutique-style hotel in the heart of the walled city has a romantic, pseudo-colonial atmosphere and at-times taciturn staff. Fifteen rooms and painted wall motifs face a narrow courtyard.

Midrange

Hotel América (☎ 816-4576; www.hotelamerica.com; Calle 10 No 252; s/d/tr M\$420/480/540; 📍) A large central hotel, the América has an impressive interior, with arched corridors surrounding a handsome courtyard where a complimentary breakfast is served. The 48 drab, all-business rooms clash with the charm and warmth of the common areas, but are clean and simply utilitarian.

our pick **Hotel López** (☎ /fax 816-3344; www.hotellopezcampeche.com; Calle 12 No 189; d/tr/q M\$490/540/590; 📍 📍) This elegant hotel is the best buy in the midrange category, though it lacks the charm of other colonial-styled digs. Comfortably appointed rooms open onto art-deco balconies around oval courtyards and exuberant gardens. There's a lovely new dip pool out back, where you can chill out while checking your emails with the wi-fi hookup.

Hotel del Paseo (☎ 811-0100; www.hoteldelpaseo.com; Calle 8 No 215; s/d/tr/q M\$500/570/680/770; 📍) Named for its proximity to the pleasant *paseo* (promenade) that connects the historic center with the Barrio San Román, this modern option has an interior promenade too, with street lamps, shops and a bar, all beneath your balcony.

Hotel Castellar (☎ 811-1204; www.castellarhotel.com; Calle 61 No 2; s/d/ste M\$750/850/1050; 📍) Once an army barracks, the Castellar has been operating as a hotel for 100 years now. A recent remodeling job upped the casual refinement of this small hotel. Oversized crucifixes and other colonial-era-inspired ornaments add to the charm, as do the amazingly thick walls. Just try to scream – nobody will hear you.

Top End

Hotel Plaza Campeche (☎ 811-9900; www.hotelplazacampeche.com; cnr Calle 10 & Circuito Baluartes; r M\$890, junior ste M\$2120; 📍 📍 📍) Just outside the historic center on the lovely Parque del IV Centenario, the Plaza caters to business travelers. It aims for Euro elegance with faux French furniture, a sumptuous dining room

and attentive bellhops. The spacious rooms have soothing color schemes.

Hotel del Mar (☎ 811-9191; www.delmarhotel.com.mx; Av Adolfo Ruiz Cortés 51; r with city/sea view M\$950/1320; 🏠 🚶 🚶) The Miami-style Hotel del Mar, on the *malecón*, exudes luxury and a beachy glow. Rooms with sea views have balconies. There's a popular downstairs bar.

EATING

Taquería Los Patitos (Calle 8 No 289; tortas & trancas M\$6-14; ☎ 7:30am-3pm) Chow down with the longshoremen at this friendly hole-in-the-wall, where overseer Doña Hilaria fills *tortas* (sandwiches in rolls) and *trancas* (baguettes stuffed with roast pork) with a variety of scrumptious fillings, such as shark-and-egg salad and *salpicón de res* (shredded beef salad). Don't miss the exotic fruit juices.

Lonchería Las Mañanitas (Calle 49B No 3; snacks & soups M\$9-25, mains M\$70-120; ☎ 6pm-midnight Thu-Tue) At the Portales de San Martín, a block north of Avenida Circuito Baluartes Norte, this place serving regional snacks under the arcades of the plaza is a popular gathering place for families and friends. The festive mood is buoyed by a steady stream of *panuchos* (tortillas filled with black beans), tamales and bowls of turkey soup.

Las Mañanitas (cnr Avenidas Resurgimiento & Lopez Mateos; panuchos M\$9, mains M\$70-120; ☎ noon-1am) With great ocean views some 2km southwest of downtown, this place is perfect for sunset cocktails or a casual lunch or dinner. It serves basically the same menu as the city-center location (Lonchería Las Mañanitas), but the atmosphere burns two degrees hotter.

Mundo Natural (cnr Calles 8 & 61; juices M\$18, salads M\$20; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat; 🍷) This open-air 'natural foods' bar opposite the Palacio de Gobierno prepares fresh juice combos, hefty salads and *sandwichónes* (very large double- or triple-decker sandwiches that are sliced into snack-sized sections).

Cenaduría Portales (☎ 811-1491; Calle 10, Portales de San Francisco 86; trancas M\$20, soups M\$25; ☎ 6pm-midnight) A relaxed place outside the walls, alongside the delightful Plazuela de San Francisco in the barrio of the same name. It specializes in regional dishes. On warm evenings, an ice-cold goblet of coconut *horchata* (a rice-based drink) really hits the spot.

Chef Color (☎ 811-4455; cnr Calles 55 & 12; full/half lunch platter M\$25-40; ☎ 10am-6pm) This Central American-style eatery serves up large platters of toothsome fare from a steam table. The list of *guisados* (main courses) might include potato croquettes and Cuban-inspired *ropa vieja*

SKIP THE TOURIST TRAPS & DIG INTO TRADITIONAL CAMPECHANO CUISINE

Travelers who take their eating seriously will find plenty of good options in Campeche, but steer clear of the numerous tourist-oriented restaurants, which generally serve dull, overpriced fare. Such places are recognizable as they're empty when not occupied by tour groups.

On Saturday and Sunday the best place to sample Campeche cuisine is the Plaza Principal. Before sundown, stalls set up around the plaza to offer an impressive variety of home-cooked fare at reasonable prices. You can sample regional specialties such as *pibipollo* (chicken tamales traditionally cooked underground), *brazo de reina* (tamales with chopped *chaya* greens mixed into the dough) and *pan de cazón* (layers of shark and tortillas laced with a tomato-based sauce), plus various desserts and cold teas.

Though startlingly rustic compared with Campeche's spruced-up center, the main market, **Mercado Principal** (Circuito de Baluartes Este; ☎ 7am-5pm), across the street from the Baluarte de San Pedro, offers some terrific snacks. At the Calle 53 entrance, regional-style tamales are dispensed from big pots in the morning. Inside, take a battered stool at Taquería El Amigo Carlos Ruelas and order a *tranca* – a baguette stuffed with *lechón* (roast pork) – and an ice-cold glass of *agua de lima* (sweet lemon drink). In the adjacent circular market building a number of *cocina economica* (basic eatery) stalls ring the interior rotunda.

our pick **Parador Gastronómico de Cockteleros** (Av Pedro Sainz de Baranda; shrimp cocktails M\$40-100, fish M\$50-90; ☎ 9am-6:30pm), on the north end of the *malecón*, 2.5km from the Plaza Principal, is the place to partake of the bountiful seafood netted daily from the Gulf. About 20 thatched-roof restaurants all serve pretty much the same thing: shellfish cocktails and fried fish. Ask to see the day's catch and make your selection; a medium-sized fish goes for about M\$50. Most places give you free starters such as fried shrimp or crab legs.

LA LOTERÍA

'Twenty-three, melons'... '47, volcano'... '41, rocking chair'... '78, rose'... 'two, dove.'

It's Saturday night in Campeche, and the tables in front of the cathedral are already full for the ritual game of *la lotería*, held every Saturday and Sunday evening from 6pm to 10pm. The litany of icons is chanted through a cheap microphone by a woman in a *huipil* (colorfully embroidered tunic), as she picks up numbered balls from the spinner cage and places them upon a panel of 90 pictures.

A bingo-like game of European origin that uses numbered images, *la lotería* has been played on the peninsula since the 19th century. John L Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* has a good description of the game as he observed it played at a fiesta in Mérida in 1841. The action now may not be as heated as he describes, but the old folks can get pretty excited when one of them finishes a row.

At a peso per card, most anyone can afford to play a card or four. Players usually mark the images on their cards with bottle caps from a plastic container on the table. A variation on bingo is that markers can be placed in a variety of patterns: in addition to the usual rows, players can arrange their five markers in the form of a 'V,' a pair of scissors, or several kinds of crosses. The first person to form one of these patterns takes the pot, which can get pretty hefty as the evening progresses.

('old clothes,' shredded beef in salsa) accompanied by fried plantains, beans and rice.

Café La Parroquia (☎ 816-2550; Calle 55 No 8; breakfast combos M\$30-40, lunch specials M\$35; ☎ 24hr) Any time of day – or night – your table awaits at this classic coffee house with a dozen ceiling fans, attentive waiters in white coats, and continuous Televisa broadcasts. Not just tourists but local geezers in guayaberas (short-sleeved sports shirts) hang out here for hours on end. In addition to the breakfast packages and daily lunch specials (served 10:30am to 6pm), there's a full list of regional faves such as *pollo en escabeche* (chicken marinated in vinaigrette-style sauce).

Marganzo (☎ 813-8981; Calle 8 No 267; mains M\$40-150; ☎ 7am-11pm) OK, so we told you to avoid the tourist joints, but this touristy spot is worth its mustard. Very sweet waitresses start you off with complimentary shredded manta ray, octopus salad, salsa, garlic cream and chips. From there, dig through the extensive menu, which offers everything from international fare to a regional tasting menu (M\$140). There's live music and dances at night, and a pretty decent wine list (this being the provinces and all).

DRINKING

La Casa Vieja (☎ 811-8016; Calle 10 No 319A; ☎ 8:30am-12:30am) There's no better setting for an evening cocktail than La Casa Vieja's colonnaded balcony overlooking the Plaza Principal. Seek dinner elsewhere, however; the restaurant is aimed primarily at the tour-bus trade.

Salón Rincón Colonial (☎ 816-8376; Calle 59 No 60; ☎ noon-8pm) With ceiling fans high over an airy hall and a solid wood bar amply stocked with rum, this Cuban-style drinking establishment appropriately served as a location for *Original Sin*, a 2001 movie with Antonio Banderas that was set in Havana. Just across the way from the Puerta de Tierra, the classic bar was until recently a male-only enclave. The *botanas* (drinking snacks) are exceptionally fine; you get a different selection with each round.

Lafitte's (☎ 811-9191; www.delmarhotel.com.mx; Hotel del Mar, Av Ruiz Cortés 51; ☎ till 2am) Hotel del Mar's downstairs bar is one of Campeche's more popular nightspots. Waitstaff here dress like pirates.

ENTERTAINMENT

There's invariably someone performing on the Plaza Principal every Saturday and Sunday evening from around 6:30pm, be it a rock-and-roll band, pop-star impersonator, traditional dance troupe or a folk trio. On Sunday, the Banda del Estado (State Band) kicks off the program, performing Campeche classics, show music, marches and other rousing fare. Try to arrive early for a good seat.

Also on weekends, tables are set up from 6pm to 10pm in front of the cathedral and library for *la lotería* (a bingolike game; see above).

Puerta de Tierra (tickets M\$50; ☎ 8pm Tue, Fri & Sat) Incidents from Campeche's pirate past are

re-enacted several nights a week in the Land Gate. It's a Disneyesque extravaganza with lots of cannon blasts and flashing lights. The tale is told in four languages.

Universidad Autónoma de Campeche (Av Agustín Melgar) Has revolving art exhibits, plays and art-house movies (M\$25) at the Cine Teatro Universitario Joaquín Lanz.

Catch a free weekday concert, dance or folklore exhibit at the **Claustro del Instituto de Campeche** (Calle 12).

Nightclubs

For Campeche's hottest nightlife, head 1km south from the city center along the malecón past the Torres del Cristal. Here you'll find a bunch of great bars, cafés and discos. Locals recommend Margarita's House, popular with the older karaoke set; the hip lounge Rooms; Café Solé for an easy-going 'Friends' night; and Millennium disco if you want to get a little raucous.

Iguana Azul (☎ 816-3978; Calle 55 No 11; 🕒 6pm-2am Mon-Sat) Toward the weekend this casual restaurant across from Café La Parroquia hosts local cover bands and jazz combos in its colonial courtyard.

Sports

Los Piratas (☎ 816-6071; www.piratasdecampeche.com.mx; tickets M\$50-80) Campeche's Mexican Baseball League team plays every other week during the March-to-July season at the Estadio Nelson Barrera on the north end of town. Tickets can be purchased at the old baseball stadium on Calle 57, across from the Baluarte de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad.

SHOPPING

Bazar Artesanal (Plaza Ah Kim Pech; 🕒 10am-10pm) The state-run Folk Art Bazaar, down by the malecón near the Centro de Convenciones Campeche, offers one-stop shopping for regional crafts. One section of the market is reserved for demonstrations of traditional craft techniques. Prices are set – no bargaining.

Mercado Principal (Av Circuito Baluartes Este; 🕒 7am-5pm) Prowl around the main market and survey the spices and herbs, exotic fruit, honey and chilies. Bonetería Bazar Puebla has a good selection of *huipiles* and guayaberas.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The airport is 6km southeast of the center. **Aeroméxico** (☎ 823-4044, 800-021-4010) flies to Mexico City at least twice daily.

Bus

Campeche's **main bus terminal** (☎ 816-2802; Av Patricio Trueba 237), usually called the ADO or 1st-class terminal, is about 2.5km south of Plaza Principal via Avenida Central. Buses provide 1st-class and deluxe service to Mérida, Cancún, Chetumal (via Xpujil), Palenque, Veracruz and Mexico City, as well as 2nd-class service to Sabancuy (M\$75), Hecelchakán (M\$23), Candelaria (M\$114) and points in Tabasco.

The **2nd-class terminal** (☎ 816-2802; Av Gobernadores 289), often referred to as the 'old ADO' station, is 1.5km east of the Mercado Principal. Second-class buses to Hopelchén, Bolonchén, Xpujil and Bécál (M\$35) depart from here.

BUS SERVICES FROM CAMPECHE

Destination	Fare (M\$)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Bolonchén de Rejón	50	3	5 daily from 2nd-class terminal
Cancún	340	7	7 ADO direct daily
Chetumal via Xpujil	260	6	1 ADO at noon daily, buses from 2nd-class terminal at 8:15am & 10pm
Ciudad del Carmen	120-160	3	ADO roughly hourly, 1 deluxe ADO-GL at noon
Hopelchén	37	1½	hourly until 5pm from 2nd-class terminal
Mérida via Bécál	105-125	2½	ADO approx every 30min, 1 deluxe ADO-GL at 6:30pm
Mérida via Uxmal	90-140	4½	5 Sur from 2nd-class terminal
Mexico City	900-1060	17	6 ADO daily, 1 deluxe ADO GL
Palenque	220-270	6	3 ADO daily, 1 OCC, 1 deluxe ADO-GL at 11:30pm
San Cristóbal de Las Casas	360-410	9	1 OCC daily, 1 deluxe ADO-GL at 11:30pm
Villahermosa	230-330	6	multiple ADO daily, 1 deluxe ADO-GL at 4:30pm
Xpujil	130-170	5	1 ADO at noon daily, 5 Sur from 2nd-class terminal

To get to the new terminal, catch any 'Las Flores', 'Solidaridad' or 'Casa de Justicia' bus by the post office. To the 2nd-class terminal, catch a 'Terminal Sur' or 'Ex-ADO' bus from the same point.

The Sur Champotón terminal across from the Alameda has rural buses to Champotón and Edzná.

The destinations in the table (opposite) are from the 1st-class terminal unless otherwise noted.

Car & Motorcycle

If you're heading for either Edzná, the long route to Mérida or the fast toll road going south, take Calle 61 to Avenida Central and follow signs for the airport and either Edzná or the *cuota* (toll road). For the non-toll route south, just head down the malecón. For the short route to Mérida go north on the malecón.

Coming to Campeche from the south via the *cuota*, turn left at the roundabout signed for the *universidad*, and follow that road straight to the coast. Turn right up the malecón and you will arrive instantly oriented.

In addition to some outlets at the airport, several car-rental agencies can be found downtown. Rates are generally higher than in Mérida or Cancún.

Maya Rent A Car (☎ 811-9191; Hotel del Mar, Av Ruiz Cortés 51)

Payless Car Rental (☎ 816-4214; Hotel del Paseo, Calle 10 No 288, interior 3)

GETTING AROUND

Local buses originate at the market or across Avenida Circuito Baluartes from it and go at least partway around the Circuito before heading to their final destinations. The fare is M\$4.50.

Taxis charge a set rate of M\$25 (M\$35 after dark) for rides within the city; by the hour they're around M\$100. Tickets for authorized taxis from the airport to the center (M\$80) are sold from a booth in the terminal. To request a taxi, call ☎ 815-5555 or ☎ 816-6666.

Consider renting a bicycle for a ride along the malecón or through the streets of the Centro Histórico. All of Campeche's hostels rent bicycles at reasonable rates.

Drivers should note that even-numbered streets in the Centro Histórico take priority, as indicated by the red (stop) or black (go) arrows at every intersection.

CAMPECHE TO MÉRIDA VIA HIGHWAY 180

The *ruta corta* (short route) is the fastest way between the two cities, and it's the route more traveled by buses. Hwy 261, the longer alternative via Kabah and Uxmal, is covered by buses out of Campeche's 2nd-class terminal.

HECELCHAKÁN

☎ 996 / pop 9974

Bicycle taxis with canvas canopies noiselessly navigate the tranquil central plazas of Hecelchakán, a delightful village 60km northeast of Campeche that is known for its culinary pleasures and excellent small museum. Hecelchakán's inhabitants, which include a Mennonite community, are primarily devoted to agriculture, while a few are employed in the clothing *maquiladora* (low-paying, for-export factory).

A **tourist information office** (☎ 827-0071), inside the Casa de Cultura on the left side of the church, opens up occasionally.

Dating from the 16th century, the **Iglesia de San Francisco de Asís** on the main plaza seems massive for a town this size. The former Franciscan monastery is worth entering to admire the wood-beam ceiling and striking iconography of the altar, with flaming hearts flanking a crucifix.

The **Museo Arqueológico del Camino Real** (admission M\$27; 🕒 9:30am-5:30pm Wed-Mon, 9:30am-4pm Tue), on the north corner of the plaza, contains a small but compelling collection of ceramic art excavated from Isla de Jaina, a tiny island due west of Hecelchakán that flourished as a commercial center during the 7th century. Portraying ballplayers, weavers, warriors and priests, the extraordinary figurines on display here paint a vivid portrait of ancient Maya life. There's also a collection of stelae in the courtyard.

Residents of the capital customarily make the trip up just for Hecelchakán's famous snacks. In the mornings, outside the church, little **pavilions** serve up *cochinita pibil* (barbecued suckling pig wrapped in banana leaves) and *relleno negro* (turkey stuffed with chopped pork and laced with a rich, dark chili sauce) in tacos or baguettes, along with *horchata* (a rice-based drink) and *agua de cebada* (a barley beverage served with a spoon).

BÉCAL'S UNDERGROUND – DISCOVER THE ROOTS OF THE JIPIJAPA HAT

While on the surface Bécal may look like a somnolent Campeche town, underground are people laboring away at the traditional craft of hat making. Called *jipijapas* by the inhabitants of Bécal, the soft, pliable hats that constitute its principal industry have been woven by townsfolk from the fibers of the *huano* palm tree since the mid-19th century, when the plants were imported from Guatemala by a Catholic priest.

The stalk of the plant is cut into strands to make the fibers; the quality of the hat depends on the fineness of the cut. The work is done in humid limestone caves that provide just the right atmosphere for shaping the fibers, keeping them moist and pliable. There's at least one cave on every block, generally reached by a hole in the ground in someone's backyard. Though often no bigger than a bedroom, the caves may be occupied by a half-dozen Maya-speaking weavers at a time. Once exposed to the relatively dry air outside, the panama hat is surprisingly resilient and resistant to crushing. Prices for the hats range from around M\$200 for coarsely woven hats to more than M\$900 for very fine work.

Hotel Margarita (☎ 827-0472; Calle 20 No 80; s/d/tr with fan M\$120/140/160, with air-con M\$210/250/270; 🚻), on the main drag about 200m from the plaza, is a 'family' establishment – no booze or friends of guests allowed. There's an internet café next door.

ATS buses from Campeche's 2nd-class terminal stop here en route to Mérida every half-hour till around 10pm (M\$20, one hour). In addition, blue *colectivos* (shared vans) shuttle passengers between Campeche's Mercado Principal and Hecelchakán's plaza every 15 minutes for M\$22.

BÉCAL

Bécal, about 90km north of Campeche just before you enter the state of Yucatán, is a center of the Yucatán's panama-hat trade. About one-third of the adult population makes their living weaving *jipijapas*, as the soft, pliable hats are known locally. The finest hats are destined for export to connoisseurs in foreign cities. The tranquil town clearly identifies with its stock-in-trade, as is made obvious by the centerpiece of its plaza.

For more on *jipijapas*, see boxed text (above). To find out where *jipijapas* are crafted and sold in town, hail a bicycle taxi (M\$10) on Bécal's plaza and ask the rider for his recommendation. The workshop of Senor Valdemero, opposite the *secundaria* (high school) about 1km south from the plaza, is one of numerous recommendable options.

In early May the **Fiesta de Flor del Jipi** is celebrated with dancing and bullfights.

From Campeche's 2nd-class terminal, ATS buses bound for Mérida stop in Bécal's main plaza (M\$45, two hours).

The rest of the route between here and Mérida is covered in the Yucatán State chapter (see p166).

CAMPECHE TO MÉRIDA VIA HIGHWAY 261

A perfect day trip from Campeche, or a nice backroad drive on your way to Mérida, this route takes you past traditional Maya villages to many of the state's best archaeological sites. It's often referred to as the Ruta Chenes (Chenes Route), for the *chenes* (wells) that give the region its name. All of Campeche's archaeological sites are open daily from 8am to 5pm.

EDZNÁ

If you only have the time or inclination to visit just one archaeological site in northern Campeche, **Edzná** (☎ 555-150-2591; admission M\$37) should be your top pick. Get there early to avoid the crowds, and remember that Sunday is free for Mexican nationals, so the site gets overcrowded.

Edzná's massive complexes were built by a highly stratified society that flourished from approximately 600 BC to the dawn of the colonial era. During that period the people of Edzná built more than 20 complexes in a mélange of architectural styles, installing an ingenious network of water collection and irrigation systems. After its demise in the 15th century, the site remained unknown until its rediscovery by *campesinos* (agricultural workers) in 1906.

Edzná means 'House of the Itzáes,' in reference to a predominant governing clan of Chontal Maya origin. Edzná's rulers recorded significant events on stone stelae. Around 30 stelae have been discovered adorning the site's principal temples, a handful are on display underneath a *palapa* (thatched palm-leaf-roofed structure) just beyond the ticket office.

A path from the *palapa* leads about 400m through vegetation and then through the Anexo de los Cuchillos beside the **Plataforma de los Cuchillos** (Platform of the Knives), a residential complex highlighted by Puuc architectural features. The name is derived from an offering of silica knives found within.

Crossing a *saché* (stone-paved avenue), you arrive at the main attraction, the **Plaza Principal**. Measuring 160m long and 100m wide, the Plaza Principal is surrounded by temples. On your right as you enter from the north is the **Nohochná** (Big House), a massive, elongated structure topped by four long halls likely used for administrative tasks, such as the collection of tributes and the dispensation of justice.

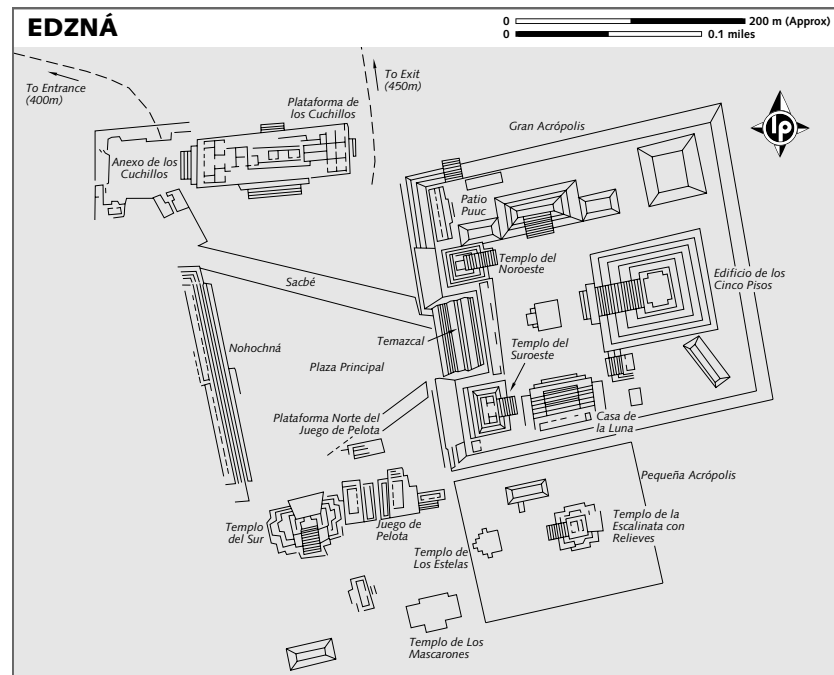
Across the plaza is the Gran Acrópolis, a raised platform holding several structures,

including Edzná's major temple, the 31m-high **Edificio de los Cinco Pisos** (Five-Story Building). The current structure is the last of four remodels and was done primarily in the Puuc style. It rises five levels from its base to the roofcomb and contains many vaulted rooms. A great central staircase of 65 steps, some with well-preserved glyphs along their bases, goes right to the top. Climbers are rewarded with sweeping views of the whole complex and surrounding jungle canopy.

Southeast of Plaza Principal is the **Templo de Los Mascarones** (Temple of the Masks), with a pair of reddish stucco masks underneath a protective *palapa*. Personifying the gods of the rising and setting sun, these extraordinarily well-preserved faces display dental mutilation, crossed eyes and huge earrings, features associated with the Maya aristocracy.

There's a fairly tasteful **sound-and-light show** (M\$110) Friday and Saturday nights beginning at 8pm.

Cabañas Ecoturísticas Usahasil (☎ 981-829-4842; cabañas M\$150), 1km north of the Edzná turnoff on Hwy 120 in Poblado No-Yaxche, is the only place to stay near the ruins. A public-relations



schlock would call it rustic... We call it the only place to stay in the area. There are a few roadside stands serving food directly opposite the Cabañas' entrance.

Getting There & Away

From Campeche, dilapidated buses leave from outside the Sur Champotón terminal at 7am and 11:15am, returning from the site at 1pm and 4pm (M\$20, one hour). Most drop you 200m from the site entrance; ask before boarding. Schedules vary, so check the day before you travel.

Xtampak Tours (☎ 981-811-6473; xtampak_7@yahoo.com.mx; Calle 57 No 14, Campeche; 🕒 8am-4pm & 5:30-8:30pm) provides an hourly shuttle service from Campeche to Edzná (M\$180, minimum two passengers) as well as guided tours of the site.

Leaving the site by car, you can either go north on Hwy 120 to pick up Hwy 261 east to Hopolchén, or alternatively head toward Dzibachén and the Chenes site of Hochob by going south to Pich, then east to Chencoh, 54km from Edzná over a decent but little-used road.

HOPELCHÉN

☎ 996 / pop 6100

The municipal center for the Chenes region, Hopolchén (Maya for 'Place of the Five Wells')

makes a pleasant base for visiting the various archaeological sites in the vicinity while also providing a glimpse of everyday life in a small Campeche town.

A **tourist information office** (☎ 822-0089; Calle 20; 🕒 8am-3pm) in the Casa de Cultura, two blocks north of the main plaza, is staffed by English speakers. To get online, visit **Cyber 23** (Calle 23), a block west of the bus station.

On a typical morning here, Maya *campesinos* and Mennonites congregate under box-shaped laurels as bicycle taxis glide past. Opposite the central plaza, the **Parroquia de San Antonio de Padua**, dating from the 16th century, features an intricate *retablo* (altarpiece), with a gallery of saints and angels amid lavishly carved pillars. Herbalists, midwives and shamans practice traditional Maya medicine at the **Consejo Local de Médicos Indígenas** (Colmich, Calle 8), five blocks east of the plaza.

Hotel Arcos (☎ 100-8782; Calle 23 s/n; s/d/tr M\$130/190/260; 🚻), next door to the bus terminal, is a convenient no-frills option. The rooms are immaculately clean, and you can add air-con and TV for M\$100. You can also sling your hammock from the hooks on the wall.

For a good *caldo de pollo* (chicken soup), try the stalls on Plaza Chica, open mornings from 7am and evenings till 1am.

Getting There & Away

The terminal is served by 2nd-class Sur buses, with daily departures to/arrivals from Campeche (M\$37, 1½ hours, hourly), Mérida via Bolonchén (M\$70, 1½ hours, five services), and Xpujil (M\$90, three hours, one at 8pm). In addition, blue *colectivos* run continuously between Campeche's 2nd-class terminal (M\$35) and Hopolchén, stopping at villages along the way.

Drivers can strike southward to Dzibachén and Xpujil, stopping along the way to check out the Maya ruins at El Tabasqueño, Dzibilnocac and Hochob. Travelers heading for bankless Xpujil: there's a Bancomer with ATM next to the Palacio Municipal on the smaller plaza. Xpujil-bound drivers should fill up in town.

AROUND HOPELCHÉN

Hocok is a walkable 3km northwest of Hopolchén. Of the 40-odd structures found at this **site** (admission free), the only one that has been significantly excavated displays features of the Puuc and Chenes styles. The custodian can point out a *chultún* (Maya underground cistern), one of around 45 in the zone.

Some of the most significant caves in the peninsula are found 31km north of Hopolchén, shortly before you reach the town of Bolonchén de Rejón. The local Maya have long known of the existence of the **Grutas de Xtacumbilxuna'an** (admission M\$50; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun; 🚻), a series of underground cenotes in this water-scarce region. In 1844 the caves were 'discovered' by the intrepid John L Stephens and Frederick Catherwood, who depicted the Maya descending an incredibly high rope-and-log staircase to replenish their water supply. Today the cenote is dry but Xtacumbilxuna'an (*shtaa-koom-beel-shoo-nahn*) is open for exploration and admiration of the vast caverns and incredible limestone formations within. A light-and-sound extravaganza accompanies the tour; skip the headphones and verbal commentary in six languages (something about the legend of the hidden lady for whom the caves are named). While the lighting helpfully picks out some of the more spectacular stalactites and stalagmites, the soundtrack only detracts from the experience. Instead, listen to the sounds of mot-mots echoing off the walls as you descend.

Sur buses traveling between Hopolchén and Mérida will drop you at the cave entrance before Bolonchén (M\$15, 25 minutes). In addition,

colectivos depart for Bolonchén from the north side of Hopolchén's plaza, passing nearby the caves. Check with the driver for return times.

Hwy 261 continues north into Yucatán state to Uxmal, with a side road leading to the ruins along the Ruta Puuc.

CHENES SITES

Northeastern Campeche state is dotted with more than 30 sites in the distinct Chenes style, recognizable by the monster motifs around doorways in the center of long, low buildings of three sections, and temples atop pyramidal bases. Most of the year you'll have these sites to yourself. The three small sites described below make for an interesting single-day trip if you have your own vehicle or you can take a tour from Campeche with **Xtampak Tours** (☎ 981-811-6473; xtampak_7@yahoo.com.mx; Calle 57 No 14, Campeche; 🕒 8am-4pm & 5:30-8:30pm).

Supposedly named after a local landowner from Tabasco, **El Tabasqueño** (admission free; 🕒 8am-5pm) boasts a temple-palace (Estructura 1) with a striking monster-mouth doorway, flanked by stacks of eight Chac masks with hooked snouts. Estructura 2 is a solid freestanding tower, an oddity in Maya architecture. To reach El Tabasqueño, go 30km south from Hopolchén. Just beyond the village of Pakchén, there's an easy-to-miss sign at a turnoff on the right; follow this rock-and-gravel road 2km to the site.

Approximately 60km south of Hopolchén near the village of Chencoh, **Hochob** (admission M\$27; 🕒 8am-5pm), 'the place where corn is harvested,' is among the most beautiful and terrifying of Chenes-style sites. Considered a classic example of the Chenes style, the Palacio Principal (Estructura 2, though signposted as 'Estructura 1') is on the north side of the main plaza. It's faced with an elaborate doorway representing Itzamná, lord creator of the ancient Maya, as an open-jawed rattlesnake. Facing Estructura 2 across the plaza, Estructura 5 has a pair of raised temples on either end of a long series of rooms; the better-preserved temple on the east side retains part of its perforated roofcomb.

To reach Hochob, turn right (south) about 500m west of Dzibachén and drive the 10km to Chencoh, then the remaining 4km over a paved, though much deteriorated, road to the site. The small complex stands on a platform at the top of a snaking trail of circular steps.

Though it only has one significant structure, **Dzibilnocac** (admission free; 🕒 8am-5pm) possesses an

THE MENNONITES OF CAMPECHE

Campeche is in the midst of a quiet invasion by an unlikely community – the Mennonites. Seeing them waiting in bus stations, hanging about the main plazas of villages, crowding pickup trucks or sharing a *caguama* of Sol (liter bottle of Mexican beer) in front of a store, you may wonder if you've somehow stumbled onto the set of *Little House on the Prairie*. Clad in black coveralls and long-sleeved flannel shirts in the midday heat, the men tower over their Maya neighbors. The women wear dark floral-print dresses and straw hats with broad ribbons.

Tracing their origins to 16th-century Reformist Germany, the Mennonites have inhabited some northern Mexican states since the 1920s. Drawn by cheap land, they first migrated down to Hopolchén, Campeche, in 1983 and since then have established agricultural communities around Dzibachén, Hecelchakán and Edzná. Once they've settled in, the Mennonites work relentlessly, growing corn, melons and other crops, raising cattle and producing cheese for the domestic market. They live in *campos* (self-contained communities with their own schools and churches), and speak among themselves in a form of Low German.

Mennonite men customarily fraternize and conduct business with the Mexicans and many converse fluently in colloquial Spanish (the women only speak with their own). Though they are generally accepted by the local community, some *campechanos* (residents of Campeche) have expressed resentment at the Mennonite invasion, complaining that the 'Menonas' buy *ejido* (communal) lands for less than they're worth and have the capital to purchase expensive farm machinery while *campechanos* have to scrape by with lesser means.

The film *Luz Silenciosa* (Silent Light) by Mexican director Carlos Reygadas looks at life in Mexico's Mennonite communities. It won the coveted Jury Prize at Cannes in 2007.

TRADITIONAL HARVEST: THE SWEET HISTORY OF MAYA HONEY

The Yucatán's flowers yield a sweet, mellifluous harvest, and bees have held an exalted place throughout its honeyed history. At the time of the conquest, records show that the Maya produced vast amounts of honey and Yucatecan villages paid tribute to the Spanish in honey, which was valued more for its curative properties than as a sweetener. Bees were important in the Maya pantheon: bee motifs appear in the surviving Maya codices, and the image of Ah Mucenkab, god of bees, is carved into the friezes of Chichén Itzá, Tulum and Sayil.

Mexico remains the world's No 4 producer of honey, and the nectar of the Yucatán is especially coveted for its blend of flavors and aromas, a result of the diversity of the region's flowers. Many *campesinos* (agricultural workers) keep bees to supplement their agricultural output. However, the stingless variety known to the ancient Maya has long since been supplanted by European bees, which in turn are being pushed aside by the more aggressive African bees, notorious among handlers for their nasty sting.

One Maya women's cooperative in the village of Ich-Ek, near Hopolchén, wants to preserve the ancient heritage. **Koolel Kab** (Women Who Work with Bees; ☎ 996-822-0073) produces honey with indigenous *melipona* bees, which take up residence in hollow trees. Using techniques much like those of their ancestors, the women place sections of tree trunk under a shelter, capping each end of the trunk with mud. An average trunk yields 12L of honey, which is marketed chiefly for its medicinal properties as throat lozenges, eye drops, soaps and skin creams.

erie grandeur that merits a visit. Unlike the many hilltop sites chosen for Chenes structures, Dzibilnocac ('big painted turtle' is one translation) is on a flat plain, like a large open park. As Stephens and Catherwood observed back in 1842, the many scattered hillocks in the zone, still unexcavated today, attest to the presence of a large city. The single clearly discernible structure is A1, a palatial complex upon a 76m platform with a trio of raised temples atop rounded pyramidal bases. The best preserved of the three, on the east end, has fantastically elaborate monster-mask reliefs on each of its four sides and the typically piled-up Chac masks on three of the four corners.

Dzibilnocac is located beside the village of Iturbide (also called Vicente Guerrero), 20km northeast of Dzibilchén. From Campeche's 2nd-class terminal, there are nine buses daily to Iturbide via Hopolchén (M\$60, three hours), but there's no place to stay here so you'll need to make it back to Hopolchén by nightfall.

The rest of the route between here and Mérida is covered in the Yucatán State chapter (see p167).

SOUTHWESTERN COAST

This lonely coast gets very little tourism. Heading down from Campeche city you pass small fishing villages and deserted white-sand beaches, finally hitting the Laguna de

Términos, a vast mangrove-fringed lagoon home to riots of migratory birds and a prime sea-turtle nesting spot.

First-class ADO buses cover the three-hour journey between Campeche city and Ciudad del Carmen, while both ADO and 2nd-class ATS buses service points in-between.

CHAMPOTÓN

pop 27,325

Champotón, at the mouth of the river of the same name, has great historical significance as the landing place of the first Spanish exploratory expedition from Cuba, led by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, in 1517. Probably seeking a source of water along the river, the Spaniards were assailed by warriors under the command of the cacique Moch Couoh, forcing them to retreat. Hernández de Córdoba died shortly after his return to Cuba from wounds he received at Champotón, which from then on was known as the 'Bahía de la Mala Pelea' (Bay of the Bad Fight).

Now considered a truck stop between Ciudad del Carmen and Campeche, Champotón sustains itself mainly on fishing, and perhaps the best reason to stop is to sample its abundant seafood. Try **Cocktelaria Las Brisas del Boxito** (Av Colosio; ☎ 8am-6pm & 8pm-1am), an open-air tent south of the town center serving an outstanding *sopa de mariscos* (seafood soup) packed with octopus, shrimp and

conch. Another good bet is the string of *coctelerías* (seafood shacks, specializing in shellfish cocktails) under thatched roofs about 2km north of town.

Two roads head south from Campeche to Champotón: a meandering coastal route (free) and a direct toll road (M\$53).

From Champotón, Hwy 261 leads 84km south to Escárcega.

CHAMPOTÓN TO SABANCUY

From Champotón, Hwy 180 continues southwest along the coast. This sparsely developed stretch of seafront is fringed with usually deserted **beaches** that are ideal for shell-searching expeditions, pelican watching and an occasional dip in the shallow aquamarine waters. There are a few rest stops along the way, including at **Playa Varadero**, about 60km south of Champotón, with cold beer and a few thatched shelters suitable for hanging hammocks, a privilege that will cost around M\$5.

LAGUNA DE TÉRMINOS

The largest lagoon in the Gulf of Mexico area, the Laguna de Términos comprises a network of estuaries, dunes, swamps and ponds that together form a uniquely important coastal habitat.

Red, white and black mangroves fringe the lagoon, and the area is an important nesting ground for six species of marine turtle and numerous migratory birds. Encompassing not only wildlife habitat but also the state's second-largest city and Mexico's principal oil-production center, the lagoon's ecosystem remains threatened by various environmental dangers, and in 1994 it was designated a Flora and Fauna Protection Area. The area's fragile ecosystem was dealt a heavy blow when oil from a damaged rig in the Gulf of Mexico came ashore in October 2007, arriving at several beaches in Campeche and Tabasco. The extent of environmental damage from the 11,700-barrel spill was not known at press time.

Hemmed in by a narrow strip of land that is traversed by Hwy 180, the lagoon can be explored from various points along the way.

Sabancuy

pop 6290

One base for exploring the lagoon is Sabancuy, a truly picturesque fishing village on the lower side of an estuary that branches off the

lagoon's northeastern end. Sabancuy is 2km from the coast, across the estuary via two bridges. You enter onto the village's cute little waterfront plaza, the focus of activity.

Facing the estuary, 15km from town by motorboat, are the extensive ruins of the old **Hacienda de Tixchel**, a cattle ranch and sugar plantation from the late colonial period. The ruins are maintained by Sabancuy's fishermen, who provide transport there. To hire a boat to the hacienda (M\$400), it's best to reserve in advance: phone **Dr José de Jesús Ambrosio Reyes** (☎ 982-825-0128), or go to the Farmacia de Jesús, one block up from the plaza on the right side of the church.

About six blocks from the waterfront, the minimally managed **Hotel Aguilar Salas** (☎ 982-731-5258; cnr Aldama & Manuel López; r with/without air-con M\$230/190; ♿ ♿ ♿) has a faded façade but modern rooms inside with pretty tiled floors and wood shutters. Rooms in back, overlooking the pool, are the best.

A pair of good seafood eateries can be found at Sabancuy's beach, right across the highway from the bridge. **El Crucero** (meals M\$30-70; ☎ 8am-5pm), the humbler of the two, whips up an exceptional *caldo de pescado* (fresh fish in a cilantro broth), as well as fried snapper in garlic or chili sauce.

Sabancuy is easily reached by bus from Campeche (M\$75, two hours, five daily 1st-class ADO) or Ciudad del Carmen (M\$50, 1½ hours, five daily ADO).

Sabancuy to Ciudad del Carmen

Another 39km down Hwy 180, at the threshold of the Canal Grande where the Laguna de Términos drains into the sea, you reach **Isla Aguada**, a primitive fishing community with a gas station and an old lighthouse. Tiny mangrove islands dot the lagoon here, and birders can arrange an excursion to the **Isla de Pájaros**, where thousands of herons, gulls and magnificent frigate birds converge at sunset. Inquire at the **Comisaría** (☎ 938-109-3983), near Parque Benito Juárez, to hire a motorboat out to the island; a two-hour excursion for up to eight people costs M\$800. **Hotel Playa Punta Perla** (☎ 938-382-1063; r M\$320; ♿ ♿ ♿) faces a stretch of deserted white-sand beach on Isla Aguada's Gulf side. With cheerfully painted two-level blocks amid palm-lined grounds, and fresh shrimp and oysters from the lagoon served under the shade of *palapas*, it's the sort of place that fills up at Easter and stays empty the rest of the year.

From Isla Aguada, the 3.2km Puente La Unidad (M\$47) spans the strait for access to Isla del Carmen and Ciudad del Carmen, a 46km drive further west.

CIUDAD DEL CARMEN

☎ 938 / pop 154,200

Campeche state's second-biggest city occupies the western end of a narrow island between the Gulf of Mexico and the Laguna de Términos. Though its self-proclaimed title, 'Pearl of the Gulf,' is open to dispute, Ciudad del Carmen is very much a bustling, prosperous seaside town, with freighters anchored in the harbor and salty breezes caressing the *malecón*.

With the discovery of oil in the 1980s, investment poured in, the population swelled, and the 3.8km-long Puente Zacatal (Zacatal Causeway) was completed in 1994, linking the city with the rest of Mexico.

Though Ciudad del Carmen rarely sees foreign tourists, it does have a renowned and colorful **Carnaval** celebration, which makes for a fabulous experience. Another exciting event is the **Festival de Nuestra Señora de Carmen**, which kicks off July 16 when the port's patron saint is taken on a cruise around the harbor, and continues till the end of the month.

Orientation & Information

Ciudad del Carmen takes up the western part of Isla del Carmen, with the center of town at its western extremity and the main plaza and *malecón* facing the channel that connects the lagoon to the Gulf. Near the southwestern corner of the island, the Puente Zacatal extends westward 3.8km across the strait toward Tabasco.

Cyber Café Inbox (Calle 33 No 10; internet per hr M\$10; ☎ 8am-9:30pm) Check email and make inexpensive long-distance phone calls here.

Municipal Tourism Office (☎ 384-2413; Calle 20 s/n, cnr Calle 31; ☎ 8am-4pm) Small module inside the city hall with a few brochures.

Sights & Activities

Parque Zaragoza, the central plaza, has a handsome 19th-century kiosk. On its north side is the c 1856 **Santuario de la Virgen del Carmen**, which pays homage to the patron saint of sailors. Vestiges of Carmen's earlier prosperity remain in the **19th-century mansions** of chicle barons along Calles 22 and 24, going south from the plaza.

Playa Norte on the Gulf of Mexico has shallow green waters rolling in lazily to a flat, expansive beach with coarse sand. After the heat of the day, join the crowds promenading through the plaza, buy a bag of *enamoradas* (cream-filled pastries) and enjoy the sunset serenade as grackles settle into the huge laurels on the plaza.

Sleeping

Rates tend to be higher here than elsewhere on the pPeninsula.

Hotel Zacarias (☎ 382-0121; Calle 24 No 58; s/d M\$210/270) It's right across from the cathedral on the main square, which means it's a cinch to find this joint. The rooms are bare-bones but clean, and many have balconies overlooking the plaza, a nice way to pass a few hours of people-watching.

Hotel Playa Dorado (☎ 382-4450; Av Paseo del Mar 8; r M\$310; ☎ ☎) At Playa del Norte, this older lodging has a homey, well-kept feel and a large swimming pool out back. Unfortunately, since Pemex erected offices between the property and the beachfront, the balconies have lost their appeal.

Hotel Las Villas (☎ 384-1154; Calle 28 No 116; s/d M\$410/470; ☎ ☎) There are 10 rooms in this cute little hotel right off the west side of the plaza. The spacious rooms have large beds with brand-new comforters and spick-and-span bathrooms, perfect for your inner Don Limpio (Mr Clean). Go for an upstairs room to avoid the noise. There's a cozy café upstairs.

Eating

At the foot of the Puente Zacatal, the zone called La Puntilla has a string of fine seafood restaurants.

La Fuente (☎ 382-0666; Calle 20 No 203; tamales M\$13, snacks M\$25; ☎) Almost meriting a visit to Carmen in itself, this classic waterfront café is a busy gathering place for families and domino players. It's an excellent spot to sample regional snacks such as *tamales torteados* (tamales dyed orange by achiote seeds, served with red sauce and a bowl of red onions) or huge *pibipollo* (chicken tamales traditionally cooked underground).

El Último Recurso (☎ 384-1275; Calle 28 No 118; set lunch M\$40; ☎ 6am-9pm) Near the central plaza, this workingman's lunch hall has daily stick-to-your-ribs specials, such as lentil potage (Monday) and *pollo en pipian* (chicken in squash-seed sauce, Saturday). Fire things up

with the house *salsa habanera* (habanero chili salsa), served in covered jars.

Restaurante El Marino (☎ 384-1583; Calle 20 No 2; fish M\$100-150; ☎ 10am-7pm) This large open-air hall affords terrific views of the bridge as a backdrop for fresh snapper fillets or crab, served in empanadas or whole with garlic sauce.

Getting There & Away

Interjet (☎ 01 800-011-2345; www.interjet.com.mx) has flights to/from Toluca daily (except Saturday) for under M\$500 one way.

Both 1st-class ADO and 2nd-class Sur buses use Ciudad del Carmen's modern **terminal** (☎ 382-0680; Av Periférica s/n), a 15-minute taxi ride (M\$25, after dark M\$30) east of the main plaza. Some key destinations:

Campeche (M\$130 to M\$160, three hours, hourly 1st-class ADO buses, one deluxe ADO-GL bus)

Mérida (M\$250 to M\$290, five hours, 11 ADO buses, two ADO-GL buses)

Mexico City (M\$680 to M\$820, 1½ hours, six ADO buses, two ADO-GL buses)

Villahermosa (M\$110 to M\$170, three hours, an ADO bus every 45 minutes until 11pm, four ADO-GL buses)

ATASTA PENINSULA

West of Ciudad del Carmen across the Puente Zacatal is this lushly tropical peninsula. A scarcely visited ecological wonderland, it stretches along a thin strip between the Gulf and a network of small mangrove-fringed lagoons that feed into the Laguna de Términos. Various waterfront seafood shacks prepare crab and shrimp pulled out of the lagoon. **Atasta Mangle Tours** (☎ 938-286-7026), about 1km east of the village of Atasta, offers two-hour boat excursions for up to eight people for around M\$700. Howler monkeys, manatees and river turtles may be spotted along the journey through the estuarine waterway. If you have your own kayak, Atasta Mangle Tours may take you to areas that make great exploring. You'll need one of its guides to prevent you from getting lost.

ESCÁRCEGA TO XPUJIL

Hwy 186 heads nearly due east across south-central Campeche state, climbing gradually from east of the ugly truck-stop town of Escárcega to a broad, jungly plateau and descending again to finally reach Chetumal,

DETOUR: EL TIGRE

Off Hwy 186 heading southwest from Escárcega is one of Campeche's most recently uncovered Maya sites, **El Tigre** (☎ 555-150-1722; admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-5pm). Archaeologists are almost certain it is none other than Itzamkanac, legendary capital of the Itzáes (see p32 for more on the Itzáes), though much remains to be explored. Unlike other Campeche sites, El Tigre occupies a wetlands environment crisscrossed by rivers, with two well-excavated pyramids amid swaying palms and diverse birdlife. From Candelaria take the road east to Monclova; a short distance beyond the village of Estado de México is the turnoff to the site. Buses will only take you to Candelaria.

in Quintana Roo. The highway passes near several fascinating Maya sites including historically significant Calakmul and through the ecologically diverse and archaeologically rich Reserva de la Biósfera Calakmul. The largest settlement on the road between Escárcega and Chetumal is Xpujil. The only gas station in the same stretch is about 5km east of Xpujil.

Calakmul and most of the other sites in this section can be visited by taxis hired in Xpujil or tours booked either in Xpujil (p225) or with companies in Campeche city (see p208).

Among the region's archaeological sites, the Río Bec architectural style predominates. It is actually a hybrid of styles fusing elements from the Chenes region to the north and Petén to the south. Río Bec structures are characterized by long, low buildings divided into three sections, with a huge 'monster' mouth glaring from a central doorway. The façades are decorated with smaller masks and geometric designs. At each end are tall, smoothly rounded towers with banded tiers supporting small false temples flanked by extremely steep, nonfunctional steps.

BALAMKÚ

'Discovered' only in 1990, **Balamkú** (☎ 555-150-2081; admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-5pm) boasts a remarkably ornate, stuccoed frieze that bears little resemblance to any of the known decorative elements in the Chenes or Río Bec styles.

Well-preserved with traces of its original red paint, the frieze is a richly symbolic tableau that has been interpreted as showing the complementary relationship between our world and the underworld. Along the base of the scene, stylized seated jaguars (referred to in the temple's Maya name) represent the earth's abundance. These figures alternate with several grotesque fanged masks, upon which stand amphibian-like creatures (toads or crocodiles?) that in turn support some royal personages with fantastically elaborate headdresses. Readers of Spanish can find more details in the explanatory diagrams that front the frieze.

The solid stone that hid the frieze for centuries has been replaced with a protective canopy with slit windows that let in a little light. The door is kept locked, but the site custodian will usually appear to open it and give you a tour (no flash photography allowed).

Balamkú is 60km west of Xpujil (2km past the Calakmul turnoff), then 3km north of the highway along a fissured road.

CALAKMUL

A major city during Maya times, **Calakmul** (☎ 555-150-2073; admission M\$37, road maintenance fee per car M\$40, local tax per person M\$20; ☎ 8am-5pm) was 'discovered' in 1931 by American botanist Cyrus Lundell. The site bears comparison in size and historical significance to Tikal in Guatemala, its chief rival for hegemony over the southern lowlands during the Classic era.

A central chunk of its 72-sq-km expanse has been consolidated and partially restored but, owing to ecological considerations, clearing has been kept to a minimum. Most of the city's approximately 7200 remnants lie covered in jungle; exploration and restoration are ongoing. You can get a Calakmul map online at mayaruins.com/calakmul/calakmul_map.html.

Visiting Calakmul is as much an ecological as an historical experience. Lying at the heart of the vast, untrammelled **Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul** (which covers close to 15% of the state's total territory), the ruins are surrounded by rainforest, with cedar, mahogany, sapodilla and rubber trees dotting a seemingly endless canopy of vegetation. While wandering amid the ruins, you may glimpse wild turkeys, parrots and toucans among the 230 bird species that reside or fly through here. You may also come across peccaries, agoutis

or howler monkeys, as well as numerous lizards and snakes. Five of the six wildcats found in Mexico inhabit the reserve, including the sacred jaguar. The earlier in the day you come, the more wildlife you're likely to spot.

History

From about AD 250 to 695, Calakmul was the leading city in a vast region known as the Kingdom of the Serpent's Head. Its decline began with the power struggles and internal conflicts that followed the defeat by Tikal of Calakmul's King Garra de Jaguar (Jaguar Claw). Calakmul flourished again in the Late Classic period by forming alliances with the Río Bec powers to the north.

As at Tikal, there are indications that construction occurred over a period of more than a millennium. Beneath Edificio VII, archaeologists discovered a burial crypt with some 2000 pieces of jade, and tombs continue to yield spectacular jade burial masks; many of these objects are on display in Campeche city's Fuerte de San Miguel. The cleared area of Calakmul holds at least 120 carved stelae, the oldest dating from 435 BC, registering key events such as the ascent to power of kings and the outcome of conflicts with rival states.

Sights

From the ticket booth at the end of the road to the ruins is about a 1km walk through the woods. Arrows point out three suggested walks, a long, medium and short route. The short route leads straight to the Gran Plaza; the long route directs you through the Gran Acrópolis before sending you to the main attractions.

The **Gran Plaza**, with loads of stelae in front of its buildings (Estructura V has the best ones), makes a good first stop, and climbing the enormous **Estructura II**, at the south side of the plaza, is a must. Each of this pyramid's sides is 140m long, giving it a footprint of just under 2 hectares – one of the largest known Maya structures. After a good climb you'll reach a temple occupying what appears to be the top of the building, but you have to go around it to the left to reach the real apex. From here, more than 50m above the forest floor, you'll enjoy magnificent views over the jungle canopy to the photographable Estructura I to the southeast and north across the plaza to Estructura VII. Facing south-west, you'll be looking toward the Maya city El

Mirador, in neighboring Guatemala, and with the aid of binoculars you may be able to spot that site's towering El Tigre pyramid. Work was under way to create a tunnel to a frieze in an inner chamber of the pyramid. The tunnel was slated for completion in 2008.

A path on the left (east) side of Estructura II leads past the palatial **Estructura III**, with a dozen rooms atop a raised platform. Archaeologists found a tomb inside the 5th-century structure that contained the body of a male ruler of Calakmul surrounded by offerings of jade, ceramics and shell beads, and wearing not one but three jade mosaic masks (one each on his face, chest and belt). Walking south you come to **Estructura I**, Calakmul's second great pyramid, which is about as tall as Estructura II. (Lundell named the site Calakmul, Maya for 'two adjacent mounds,' in reference to the pair of then-unexcavated pyramids that dominated the site.) The steep climb pays off handsomely with more top-of-the-world views.

A trail leading west from Estructura I around the back of Estructura II takes you to the **Gran Acrópolis**, a labyrinthine residential zone with a ceremonial sector containing a ball court. From the northern perimeter of this zone, you head east and follow the path back to the entrance.

Sleeping & Eating

Rangers allow camping at the Semarnat post, open from 6am, 20km down the road from the Conhuas; they appreciate a donation if you use the shower and toilets. Bear in mind that it can get chilly on this plateau in winter months – up to three blankets' worth.

Campamento Yaax'che (☎ 983-871-6064; dirtcalakmul@prodigy.net.mx; site per person M\$50, with tent from M\$100) More than just a campground, Yaax'che, 7km along the access road, is the base for tours by **Servidores Turísticos Calakmul** (p225), a training center for local guides and an experiment in sustainable ecotourism. You can rent a prepitched tent or set up your own under a thatched shelter. There's no electricity and facilities are primitive – douse-yourself showers and lime decomposition latrines. Regional fare is prepared over wood fires with variable results.

Villas Puerta Calakmul (☎ 988-884-3278, 001-786-206-9492; www.puertacalakmul.com.mx; cabanas low/high season M\$950/1200; ☎) This jungle lodge 700m from the highway turnoff is designed for those who want to get into nature without roughing it too

much. Fifteen spacious bungalows with jungle décor and overhead fans spread out from the main cabin, where you can dine on a forest-view terrace until 8pm. A small, kidney-shaped pool at the far end keeps filling up with leaves, a sore point with the beleaguered staff.

Getting There & Away

Xtampak Tours (p208) in Campeche and Río Bec Dreams (p224) near Chicanná run tours to Calakmul.

By car, the turnoff to Calakmul is 56km west of Xpujil, and the site is 60km south of the highway at the end of a decent paved road. A toll of M\$40 per car (more for heavier vehicles) and M\$20 per person is levied by the *municipio* (township) of Calakmul at the turnoff from Hwy 186. You'll need to register at the Semarnat post.

CHICANNÁ

Aptly named 'House of the Snake's Jaws,' this Maya site (☎ 555-150-2071; admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-5pm) is best known for one remarkably well-preserved doorway with a hideous fanged visage. Located 11km west of Xpujil and 400m south of the highway, Chicanná is a mixture of Chenes and Río Bec architectural styles buried in the jungle. The city attained its peak during the Late Classic period, from AD 550 to 700, as a sort of elite suburb of Becán.

Beyond the admission pavilion, follow the rock paths through the jungle to **Estructura XX** (AD 830), which boasts not one but two monster-mouth doorways, one above the other. The top structure is impressively flanked by rounded stacks of crook-nosed Chac masks.

A five-minute walk along the jungle path brings you to Grupo C, with what remains of some of the earliest buildings. Continue along the main path about 120m northeast to reach the main plaza. Standing on the east side is Chicanná's famous **Estructura II**, with its gigantic Chenes-style monster-mouth doorway, believed to depict the jaws of the god Itzamná, lord of the heavens, creator of all things. Also worth examining here are the painted glyphs to the right of the mask. When you're done snapping photos, take the path leading from the right corner of Estructura II to reach nearby **Estructura VI** with some beautiful profile masks upon the façade and a well-preserved roofcomb. Circle around back, noting the red-painted blocks of the west wing, then turn right to hike back to the main entrance.

our pick **Río Bec Dreams** (☎ 983-124-0501; www.riobedreams.com; Hwy 186 Km 142; cabanas with/without bathroom M\$800/420) provides unquestionably the best accommodations in the area. This Canadian-run jungle lodge has thatched-roofed 'jungalows' sharing a bathhouse and cabanas with private bathrooms in the woods. Environmentally sound facilities include composting toilets, rainwater collection devices and solar electricity. There's a delightful open-air restaurant serving Euro-Canadian cuisine and a low-key bar with an excellent library, all set amid lovingly designed gardens. Enthusiastic and knowledgeable promoters of the zone, owners Rick and Diane also conduct highly recommended tours of Calakmul, Río Bec and other sites in the area. Look for the flags on the north side of the highway 2km west of Chicanná.

BECÁN

Located 8km west of Xpujil and 500m north of the highway, this must-visit **site** (☎ 555-150-2069; admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-5pm) contains three separate architectural complexes. You should set aside at least two hours to explore it properly. The Maya word for 'canyon' or 'moat' is *becán*, and indeed a 2km moat snakes its way around this major site, with seven causeways providing access to the 12-hectare complex. The elaborate defense suggests the militaristic nature of the city which, from around AD 600 to 1000, was a regional capital encompassing Xpujil and Chicanná. A strategic crossroads between the Petenes civilization to the south and Chenes to the north, Becán displays architectural elements of both, with the resulting composite known as the Río Bec style.

You enter the complex via the western causeway, skirting Plaza del Este on your left – more about that later. Proceed through a 66m-long arched passageway and you will emerge onto the Plaza Central, ringed by three monumental structures. The formidable **Estructura IX**, on the plaza's north side, is Becán's tallest building at 32m. Though its steeply ascending southern staircase may be tempting, you are not supposed to climb it. You may, however, scale **Estructura VIII**, the huge temple on your right with a pair of towers flanking a colonnaded façade at the top. It's a great vantage point for photos of Estructura IX and views of the Xpujil ruins to the east. Across the plaza from VIII is **Estructura X**, with fragments of an Earth

Monster mask still visible around the central doorway. The other side of X opens onto the west plaza, with a ritual ball court. As you loop around Estructura X to the south, check out the encased stucco mask on display.

From this point you are routed through woods to still another massive edifice, **Estructura I**, which takes up one side of the eastern plaza. Its splendid south wall is flanked by a pair of amazing Río Bec towers rising 15m. Ascend the structure on the right side and follow the terrace alongside a series of vaulted rooms back to the other end, where a passage leads you into the Plaza del Este. The most significant structure here is **Estructura IV**, on the opposite side of the plaza; experts surmise it was a residence for Becán's aristocrats. A stairway leads to an upstairs courtyard ringed by seven rooms with cross motifs on either side of the doorways. Finally, you descend the north façade of Estructura IV, with more intricately decorated panels, completing the circle.

XPUIJL

☎ 983 / pop 3222

The truck-stop hamlet of Xpujil (*shpu-heel*) lies at the intersection of east-west Hwy 186 and the road north to Hopelchén (and eventually Mérida). From this junction westward are the ruins of Xpuhil (less than 1km), Becán (8km), Chicanná (11.5km) and Balamkú (60km); to the south are the remote sites of Río Bec and Hormiguero. While hardly an attractive base for visiting these sites, Xpujil does offer an internet café, a guide service, a handful of hotels, some unexceptional eateries and a taxi stand, all within 1km of the bus depot. The only gas station between Escárcega and Chetumal is 5km east of town. What Xpujil does not have is a bank or ATM.

A far more appealing base is the village of **Zoh-Laguna**, 10km north along the Hopelchén road. Though easily accessible from Xpujil by taxi (M\$30), it is sufficiently removed from the highway for a peaceful night's sleep. During the 1940s the now-somnolent village boomed as a logging center. Zoh-Laguna's interesting history is illustrated photographically in its small **museum** (admission free; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri), opposite Hotel Bosque Modelo.

Xpuhil (Xpujil) Ruins

Within walking distance of the town of a similar name, **Xpuhil** (admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-5pm) boasts a surreal skyscraper that is a striking

example of the Río Bec style. The three towers (rather than the usual two) of Estructura I rise above a dozen vaulted rooms. The central tower, soaring 53m, is the best preserved. With its banded tiers and impractically steep stairways leading up to a temple that displays traces of a zoomorphic mask, it gives a good idea of what the other two must have looked like back in Xpuhil's 8th-century heyday. Go around back to see a fierce jaguar mask embedded in the wall below the temple.

The site's entrance is on the west edge of town on the north side of Hwy 186, at the turnoff for the airport.

Tours

Rick and Diane at Río Bec Dreams (opposite), near Chicanná, provide 4WD tours with well-informed commentary to Calakmul, Río Bec and some lesser-known sites such as Oxpemul and Manos Rojas. They charge M\$800 to M\$1000 for an eight- to 10-hour day, depending on driving time and accessibility of the site. You don't need to be staying at Río Bec Dreams to join the tour.

Servidores Turísticos Calakmul (☎ 871-6064; citcalakmul@prodigy.net.mx; Carretera Escárcega-Chetumal Km 153; ☎ 9am-2pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat), around 200m east of the Xpujil junction, provides ecotours led by trained guides from nearby communities. In addition to tours of Maya sites in the area, it also offers nature walks, plant identification, bird-watching and horse tours, photo safaris and rural tourism experiences such as visits to beekeepers and organic farms. On one popular excursion you can observe millions of bats emerging from a cenote. One-day tours to Calakmul for up to 10 people cost M\$550. It also runs extended camping tours for around M\$310 per day. Reservations for the latter should be made a month in advance. Look for head honchos Fernando and Leticia at the office or the Yaax'che campground (p223) along the road to Calakmul.

Sleeping & Eating

The nicest and most reasonably priced accommodations are in Zoh-Laguna, 10km north of Xpujil. They are all contactable by dialing ☎ 200-125-6587, the village's central phone booth; say what hotel you want and wait a few minutes. All of the Xpujil options are along the main highway; have earplugs handy at bedtime.

ZOH-LAGUNA

Hotel Bosque Modelo (bosquemodelocalakmul@hotmail.com; r M\$120) This small wooden structure is a typical leftover from the mid-20th-century logging boom. There are six simple rooms with single beds and hammock hooks. This is where the French archaeologists have stayed when working on the Río Bec site.

Cabañas El Viajero (cabanas M\$140, r M\$250; ☎) Travelers can choose from neat little cabins or more luxurious air-conditioned rooms across the street. All meals are prepared in the sparkling kitchen.

Cabañas Mercedes (s/d M\$150/250) The best value place in the area has 13 thoughtfully designed bungalows with ceiling fans and large, tiled bathrooms. Good home-cooked meals are served in the thatched-roof dining hall. Don Antonio is both a gracious and well-informed host, who can take you to the major Maya sites in the area.

XPUIJL

Cabañas de Don Jorge (☎ 871-6128; cabanas M\$100) Don Jorge's rustic but perfectly acceptable clapboard cabins sit up on a hill behind his store-eatery, Cocina Económica Xpujil, which can be found opposite the entrance to the Xpuhil ruins.

Hotel Calakmul (☎ 871-6029; 2-person cabanas without bathroom M\$200, d with air-con M\$450; ☎) About 350m west of the junction, this sterile roadside motel has standard tiled units plus a handful of cramped bungalows out the back. The restaurant, though, comes highly recommended.

THE ROAD TO RUINS

Maya sites around Xpujil are most conveniently reached by organized tour (see left) or taxi. The following taxi fares are for the round trip from Xpujil; add M\$60 per hour for waiting while you're visiting the site. You can usually negotiate a fare to several sites on the same route for little more than the fare to one.

- Balamkú: M\$600
- Becán: M\$75
- Calakmul: M\$600
- Chicanná: M\$75
- Hormiguero: M\$180

EXPLORE THE RÍO BEC ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Río Bec (🚗 8am-5pm) is the designation for an agglomeration of small sites, 70 at last count, in a 100-sq-km area southeast of Xpujil. The very remoteness of the site and ongoing excavations give it a certain buzz and mystique that's lacking in the established sites. Couple this with the fact that it's nearly impossible to get here during the rainy season and you have the makings for a real adventure.

Grupo B has some of the best-restored buildings, particularly the magnificent **Estructura I**, dating from around AD 700. Discovered in 1907 by French archaeologist Maurice de Périgny, who named the site after a nearby water source, this palatial structure features a pair of typical tiered towers crowned by matching temples with cross motifs on their sides. Much of the current restoration work is being done at Grupo A, to the north of Grupo B. Its main structure is a 15m-long **palace** with intact towers and unusual bas-relief glyphs on the lower panels.

Access to the sites is from the collective farm of Ejido 20 de Noviembre. To get there, turn south off Hwy 186, about 10km east of the Xpujil junction, and follow a potholed road 5km to the community and its U'Iu'um Chac Yuk Nature Reserve. From there, a very rough road leads 13km further south to the site. It's only passable when dry and even then you need a high-clearance vehicle. Furthermore, the way is unsigned with many twists and turns. You're best off hiring a guide with a 4WD truck. It's possible to arrange this in Xpujil or at the *ejido*; the going rate is M\$600 to M\$700. A taxi from Xpujil's main junction to the *ejido* will charge M\$60 for drop-off service; negotiate waiting time. Alternatively, check with Río Bec Dreams (p224) near Chicanná.

Aside from the hotel restaurants, there are various greasy spoons clustered around the bus station and roadside *taquerías* (taco places) toward the Xpuhil ruins. Try Antojitos Mimi, opposite Hotel Calakmul, for some pretty fine *salbutes* (tortilla topped with shredded turkey or chicken, onion and slices of avocado) and an ice-cold *agua de jamaica* (a cold tangy tea made from hibiscus flowers).

Getting There & Around

No buses originate in Xpujil, so you must hope to luck into a vacant seat on one passing through. The **bus terminal** (☎ 871-6027) is just east of the Xpujil junction, on the north side of the highway.

Campeche (M\$78 to M\$160, 5½ hours, via Escárcega one 1st-class ADO bus at 1:45pm and two 2nd-class Sur buses, via Hopelchén one Sur bus)

Cancún (M\$280, 6½ hours, two ADO buses)

Chetumal (M\$70, 1½ hours, three ADO buses and one Sur bus)

Escárcega (M\$90, two hours, seven ADO buses)

Hopelchén (M\$90, three hours, one Sur bus at 4am)

Palenque (M\$220, six hours, one 1st-class OCC bus at 9:40pm or change at Escárcega for a 1pm ADO bus to Palenque)

For Becán, Hormiguero, Calakmul or other sites you will need to book a tour or hire a cab.

See boxed text, p225, for taxi rates. The taxi stand is on the north side of the junction.

AROUND XPUJIL Hormiguero

Though not easy to reach, **Hormiguero** (☎ 555-150-2075; admission M\$30; 🚗 8am-5pm) has many mind-blowing buildings that will impress even the most jaded explorer. An old site, with buildings dating as far back as AD 50, the city (whose name is Spanish for 'anthill') flourished during the late Classic period.

As you enter you'll see the 50m-long **Estructura II**. The facade's chief feature is a very menacing Chenes-style monster-mouth doorway, jaws open wide, set back between a pair of classic Río Bec tiered towers. Walking around the back of the building you can see solid intact Maya stonework and the remains of several columns. Follow the arrows 60m to the north to reach **Estructura V**, with a much smaller but equally ornate open-jawed temple atop a pyramidal base. Climb the right side for a closer look at the incredibly detailed stonework, especially along the corner columns that flank the doorway.

This site is reached by heading 14km south from Xpujil junction, then turning right and going 8km west on what was once a paved road, still passable except following heavy rains.

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