

Quintana Roo



You'd think that as one of Mexico's most visited states, it'd be impossible to find a bit of solitude in Quintana Roo. But beyond the 'hit-me-baby-one-more-time' clubs of Cancún and 'McMaya' theme parks of the Riviera Maya, you just might find your own quiet piece of paradise.

There are talcum-powder beaches stretching all the way from Cancún to the Belizean border, unassuming Caribbean islands protected by the world's second-largest barrier reef, and impressive Maya sites throughout this long-arching sliver of limestone, salt and sea.

It's the peninsula's super state, highly developed, heavily touristed, easy to get around and chock-full of adventure opportunities – from exploring the depths of the region's numerous cenotes (limestone sinkholes filled with fresh water) and world-class dive sites to beating your own path to seldom-visited ruins such as Dzibanché and Kohunlich in the Maya heartland.

Most trips to Quintana Roo (kin-tah-nah *roh*) will begin and end in Cancún. Chicer-than-thou Playa del Carmen, Cozumel (truly a diver's delight) and Isla Mujeres round out the not-really-Mexico-but-still-a-pretty-damned-good-place-to-spend-your-vacation fairylands of Quintana Roo.

Several hurricanes (Wilma, Emily and Dean, just to name the biggies) have slammed into the region in recent years. And widespread tourism development along the coast has also taken its environmental toll on the fragile reefs and coastal lagoons of the area, but Quintana Roo is too big now to be knocked out by mere hurricane winds. It'll take at least a dozen greedy real-estate developers and a couple million more complacent visitors to signal the death knell.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Set out for a morning bird-watching mission from the remote Costa Maya beach town of **Xcalak** (p137), heading out a bit later for a dive at **Banco Chinchorro** (p137)
- Stay out till dawn in one of the happening beachfront clubs in **Playa del Carmen** (p107), taking the ferry across to **Isla Cozumel** (p108) the next day for a snorkel and a swim
- Take a whale shark excursion from **Isla Holbox** (see boxed text, p97)
- Go iguana-spotting among the mysterious, spectacularly situated ruins of **Tulum** (p124)
- Marvel at Jurassic-like jungles amid the mysterious ruins of **Kohunlich** (p146) and **Dzibanché** (p145)



■ POPULATION: 1.14 MILLION

■ AREA: 50,351 SQ KM

CANCÚN

☎ 998 / pop 526,700

Unlike many cities in the world, Cancún just isn't afraid. It's unabashed and unapologetic, and in that lies its high-gloss charm. So send in the Maya dancers, swashbuckling pirates and beer-chugging US spring breakers. Cancún can take it. But can you?

Like Las Vegas, Ibiza or Dubai, Cancún is a party city that just won't give up. Top that off with a pretty damned good beach and you have one of the western hemisphere's biggest tourist draws, bringing in as many as four million visitors (mostly from the US) annually. And with four million visitors each year you have crime and corruption, over-the-top, outrageously overhyped tourist traps, clamor and clutter. You also have a boomtown economic juggernaut, and an accidental metropolis with a growing culinary sophistication. There are a few hip nightspots in the old downtown area and even some relatively authentic market areas.

Cancún isn't for everyone, and this type of mass tourism certainly won't interest many Lonely Planet-style travelers. But as long as you're here, might as well dig into the kitsch and crap that make this city unique.

HISTORY

When you look around at the giant hotels and supermarkets it's hard to imagine that pre-1970s there was nothing here but sand and fishermen. In the 1970s Mexico's ambitious planners decided to outdo Acapulco with a brand-new, world-class resort located on the Yucatán Peninsula. The place they chose was a deserted sand spit located offshore from the little fishing village of Puerto Juárez, on the peninsula's eastern shore: Cancún. Vast sums were sunk into landscaping and infrastructure, yielding straight, well-paved roads, potable tap water and great swaths of sandy beach.

Hurricanes Wilma and Emily whipped into town in 2005, destroying area hotels, flooding much of the city and carrying off much of Cancún's precious beach sand. Nearly M\$200 million later, the beaches are back, the hotels are up and running, and Cancún is ready to get you drunk and get you tanned.

ORIENTATION

Cancún consists of two very distinct areas: Ciudad Cancún (downtown) and Isla Cancún (the Zona Hotelera).

The airport is about 8km south of the downtown. Puerto Juárez, the main port for passenger ferries to Isla Mujeres, is about 3km north of downtown. Punta Sam, the dock for the slower car ferries to Isla Mujeres, is about 7km north of downtown. Irregular services leave from the Zona Hotelera.

Ciudad Cancún

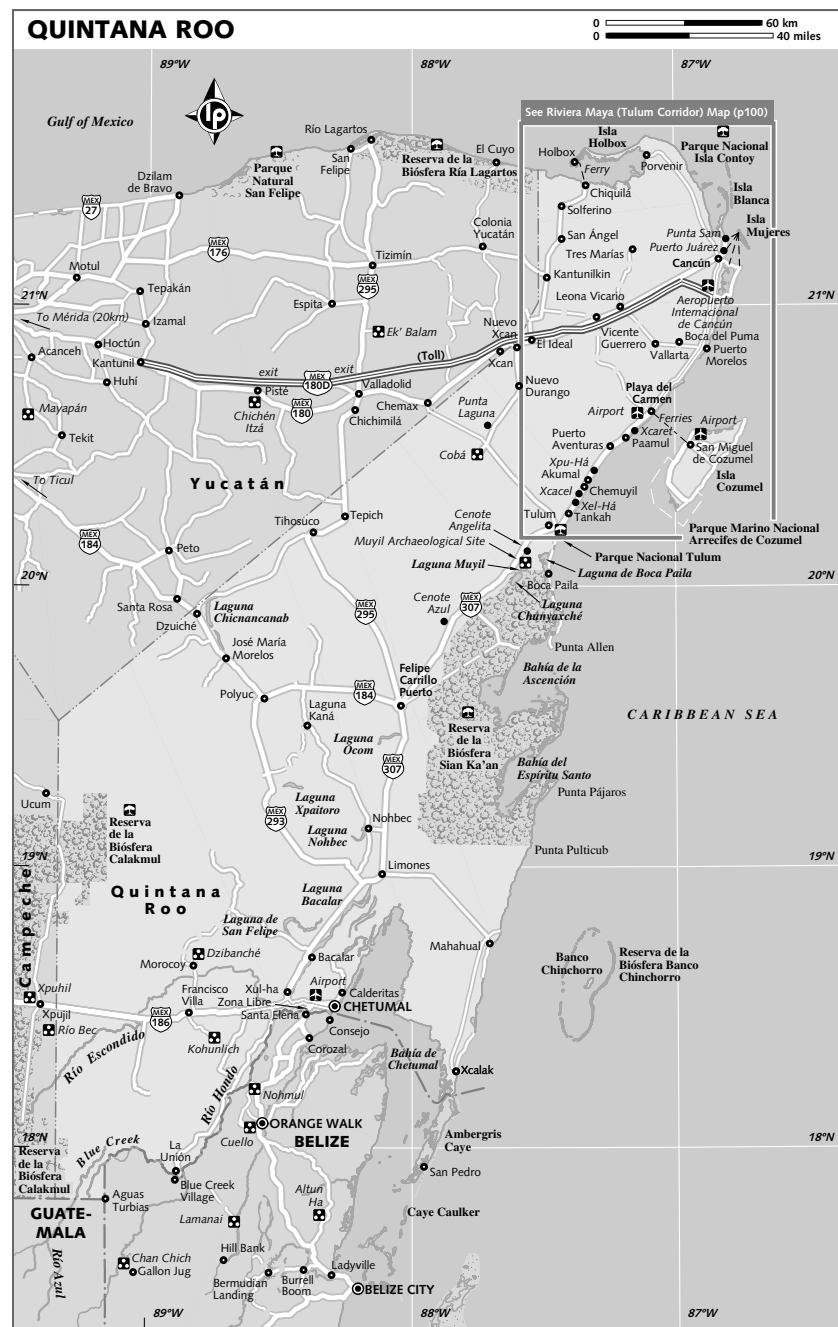
Ciudad Cancún is where you should stay if you're looking to save a bundle. Prices are reasonable (for Cancún, that is) and food is great: seafood and traditional Yucatecan fare. Beaches are about 20 minutes away via Route 1 city buses, but there's also plenty to do and see in the centro itself. The main north-south thoroughfare is Avenida Tulum, a wide boulevard lined with banks, shopping centers and restaurants. Park Las Palapas is quiet and safe, a great place for an afternoon picnic or an evening stroll. Shopaholics will enjoy the colorful markets, which offer jewelry, handicrafts and souvenirs, as well as a variety of inexpensive Mexican food.

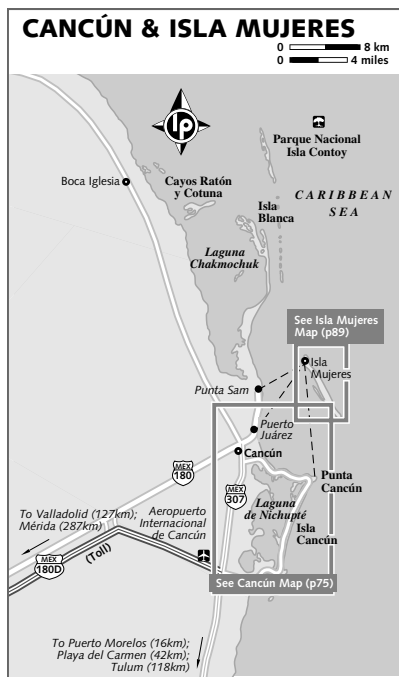
Plaza Las Américas, on Avenida Tulum at the south edge of the centro, is a vast modern shopping mall that includes the Liverpool and Chedraui department stores, a multiplex cinema, a food court and a salsa dance club. Don't confuse it with Plaza América, a small, aging arcade on Avenida Cobá with a few airline offices.

Zona Hotelera

The Zona Hotelera is what most people think of when they say 'Cancún': the sandy spit that encloses a scenic lagoon on one side and has the Caribbean's azure-greens on the other. Its main road, Blvd Kukulcán, is a four-lane divided avenue that leaves Ciudad Cancún and heads eastward for a few kilometers passing condominium developments, several hotels and shopping complexes, to Punta Cancún (Cancún Point) and the Centro de Convenciones (Convention Center).

From Punta Cancún, the boulevard heads south for about 13km, flanked on both sides for much of the way by huge hotels, shopping centers, dance clubs and many restaurants and bars, to Punta Nizuc (Nizuc Point). Here it turns westward and then rejoins the mainland,





cutting through light tropical forest for a few more kilometers to its southern terminus at Cancún's international airport.

Addresses in the Zona Hotelera are refreshingly simple: instead of a street name (usually Blvd Kukulcán anyway) a kilometer distance from the 'Km 0' roadside marker at the boulevard's northern terminus in Ciudad Cancún is given. Each kilometer is similarly marked. Most bus drivers will know the location you're heading but, if in doubt, you can just ask to be dropped off at the appropriate kilometer marker.

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Fama (Map p77; ☎ 884-6541; Av Tulum 105 SM 22 M4 Lotes 27 & 27A) Magazines, atlases and books in several languages. The store is downtown near the southern end of Tulipanes.

Emergency

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 884-1616)

Fire (☎ 060)

Police (Map p75; ☎ 060; Blvd Kukulcán)

Tourist Police (☎ 885-2277)

Immigration

Instituto Nacional de Migración (Immigration Office; Map p77; ☎ 881-3560; cnr Av Nader 1 & Av Uxmal; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri) For visa and tourist-card extensions. Enter the left-hand, southernmost of the two offices.

Internet Access

Hotels can charge as much as M\$50 per 15 minutes. Internet cafés in Cancún centro are plentiful, speedy and cheap, costing M\$15 per hour or less.

Laundry

Lava y Seca (Map p77; ☎ 892-4789; Crisantemos 20; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Downtown; charges M\$15 per kilogram.

Lavanderia Lagoon (Map p75; ☎ 044 999-883-1129; Paseo Pok-Ta-Pok; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat) All the resorts in the Zona offer laundry service, but Lavanderia Lagoon charges M\$15 per kilogram and takes two hours.

Left Luggage

Pay-in-advance lockers (per 24hr M\$70) are at the airport, just outside customs at the international arrivals area.

Medical Services

American Medical Care Center (Map p75; ☎ 884-6133; Plaza Quetzal, Blvd Kukulcán Km 8) Has bilingual (Spanish and English) doctors and 24-hour emergency care. Major US insurance plans are accepted.

Centro Medico Caribe Cancún (Map p77; ☎ 883-9257; Av Yaxilan 74A; ☎ 24hr) A small facility on the roundabout on Av Yaxilan with 24-hour assistance.

Hyperbaric Chamber (☎ 892-7680; Alcatraces 44; ☎ 24hr)

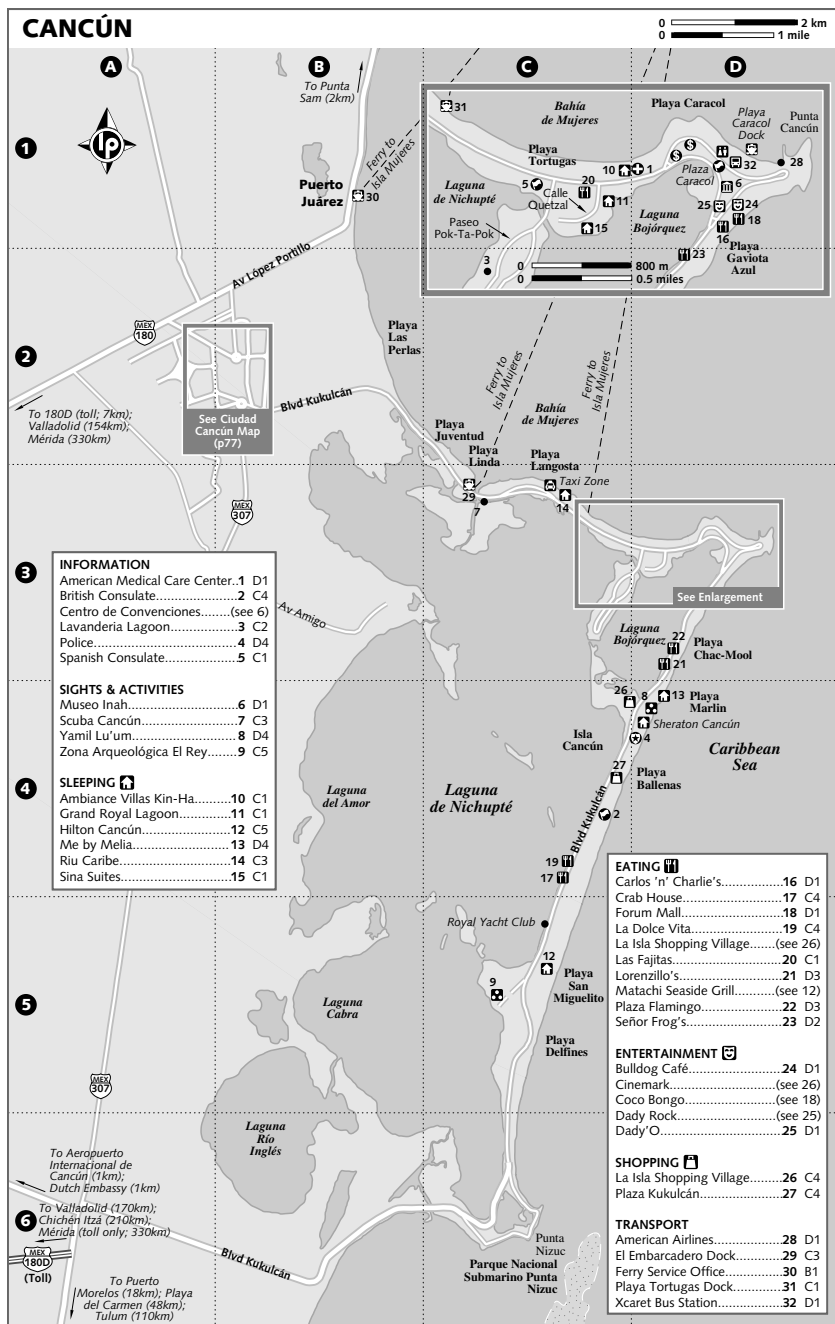
Money

There are several banks with ATMs on Avenida Tulum (including a Banamex and two Bancomers), between Avenidas Cobá and Uxmal. Cancún's international airport also has ATMs and money exchange; for more details see p86.

Post

There is no post office in the Zona Hotelera, but most hotels' reception desks sell stamps and will mail letters. There's a FedEx office in the bus terminal (Map p77).

Main post office (Map p77; ☎ 884-1418; cnr Avs Xel-Há & Sunyaxché; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Downtown at the edge of Mercado 28. You can also post mail in the red postal boxes sprinkled around town; collection frequency varies.



Telephone

Phoning by Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) can be done at most internet cafés.

Call Center (Map p77; Av Cobá 5) At Soberanis Hostel.

Offers good rates on international calls and calls to other parts of Mexico.

Toilets

Many internet cafés have a small bathroom in back, free for internet users. Cleanliness varies. Or strut your way into a hotel lobby restroom.

Tourist Information

Cancún Convention & Visitors Bureau (Map p77;

☎ 884-6531; Av Cobá; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri) This place near Avenida Tulum, Ciudad Cancún, has ample supplies of printed material and usually a fairly knowledgeable English-speaker in attendance.

State tourism office (Sedetur; Map p77; ☎ 884-8073; Pecari 23; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Fri) The Convention & Visitors Bureau's parent is mysteriously tucked away near Avenida Cobá, a fair walk south of the center, but its information is good and includes all of Quintana Roo.

Travel Agencies

In the Zona Hotelera, most big hotels have travel agencies.

Nómadas Travel (Map p77; ☎ 892-2320; www.

.nomadastravel.com; Av Cobá 5) Downtown, next to the Soberanis Hostel, Nómadas is a student-oriented agency that books and makes changes to air tickets, makes some reservations for accommodations on the Yucatán Peninsula and offers packages to Cuba, among other services.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The biggest safety danger in Cancún isn't street crime – it's the streets themselves. Traffic speeds by along narrow roads and pedestrians (often drunk) are frequently injured. A night spent clubbing is more likely to lead to a poked eye or twisted ankle than a mugging; however, if anyone *does* demands money, don't argue with them. Most violent incidents have involved fights where tourists or locals have actively put themselves in danger.

Theft of valuables left unattended is a possibility, but no more so than in other parts of the world. Use prudence, keeping vital items with you or leaving them in a hotel safe, and you'll avoid problems. Napping sunbathers may wake up to find cameras or wallets gone; don't leave anything unattended on the beach.

Hawkers can be quite irritating but are not dangerous. The best way to avoid them is

to just keep walking. As frustrating as this may be, remember that these vendors are just trying to make a living for themselves and their families.

See p78 for information on Cancún's water hazards.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Maya Ruins

There are two sets of Maya ruins in the Zona Hotelera and, though neither is particularly impressive, both are worth a look if time permits. In the **Zona Arqueológica El Rey** (Map p75; admission M\$34; ☎ 8am-5pm), on the west side of Blvd Kukulcán between Km 17 and Km 18, there's a small temple and several ceremonial platforms. The other, much smaller, site is **Yamil Lu'um** (Map p75; admission free), atop a beachside knoll in the parklike grounds near the Sheraton Cancún hotel. Only the outward-sloping remains of the weathered temple's walls still stand, but the ruin makes for a pleasant venture, as much for its lovely setting as anything else. To reach the site visitors must pass through either of the hotels flanking it or approach it from the beach – there is no direct access from the boulevard.

The tiny Maya structure and *chac-mool* (Maya sacrificial stone sculpture) in the beautifully kept grounds of the Sheraton hotel are authentic.

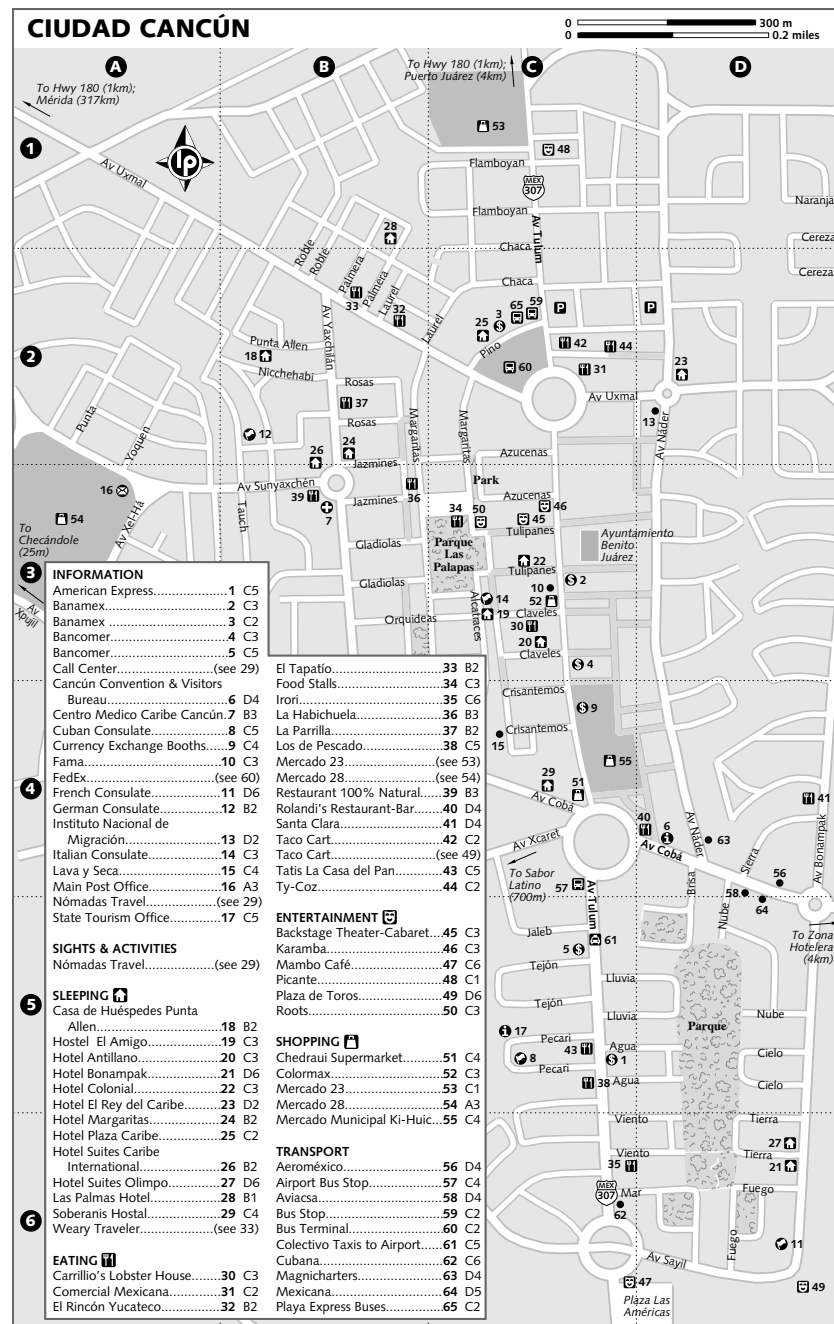
Museo Inah

Closed for the past two years from Hurricane Wilma damage (even the museum's director doesn't know when it'll be opening its doors), **Museo Inah** (Map p75; ☎ 883-0305; admission M\$35; ☎ 9am-8pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun) is on the south side of the Centro de Convenciones in the Zona Hotelera. Skulls exhibiting the deformities caused intentionally by Maya parents to beautify their children are a bit creepy but also on display are jewelry and artifacts.

Beaches

ACCESS

Under Mexican law you have the right to walk and swim on every beach in the country except those within military compounds. In practice, it is difficult to approach many stretches of beach without walking through the lobby of a hotel, particularly in the Zona Hotelera. However, as long as you look like a tourist (this shouldn't be hard, right?), you'll



usually be permitted to cross the lobby and proceed to the beach.

Starting from Ciudad Cancún in the northwest, all of Isla Cancún's beaches are on the left-hand side of the road (the lagoon is on your right). The first beaches are Playa Las Perlas, Playa Juventud, Playa Linda, Playa Langosta, Playa Tortugas and Playa Caracol; after you round Punta Cancún, the beaches to the south are Playa Gaviota Azul, Playa Chac-Mool, Playa Marlin, the long stretch of Playa Ballenas, Playa San Miguelito and finally, at Km 17, Playa Delfines. Delfines is about the only beach with a public parking lot big enough to be useful; unfortunately, its sand is coarser and darker than the exquisite fine, white sand of the more northerly beaches.

BEACH SAFETY

Cancún's ambulance services respond to as many as a dozen near-drownings per week. The most dangerous beaches seem to be Playa Delfines and Playa Chac-Mool. Though rare, accidents with kiteboards, paragliders or jet skis can happen; be aware of other beachgoers at all times.

Though the surf is usually gentle, undertow is a possibility, and sudden storms (called *nortes*) can blacken the sky and sweep in at any time without warning. A system of colored pennants warns beachgoers of potential dangers:

Blue Normal, safe conditions.

Red Unsafe conditions; use a swimming pool instead.

Yellow Use caution, changeable conditions.

Water Sports

For decent snorkeling, you need to travel to one of the nearby reefs. Resort hotels, travel agencies and various tour operators in the area can book you on day-cruise boats that take snorkelers to the barrier reef, as well as to other good sites in the region. To see the relatively sparse aquatic life off Cancún's beaches, you can rent equipment for about M\$100 a day from most luxury hotels. Most of the major resorts rent kayaks and the usual water toys; a few make them available to guests free of charge.

Scuba Cancún (Map p75; ☎ 849-5226; www.scubacancun.com.mx; Blvd Kukulcán Km 5.2), a family-owned and PADI-certified (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) dive operation with many years of experience, was the first dive shop in Cancún. It offers a Cancún

snorkeling tour for M\$290 and a variety of dive options (including cenote, night and nitrox dives), as well as fishing trips, at reasonable prices (one/two tank M\$594/740, equipment rental extra). The bilingual (English and Spanish) staff are safety oriented and environmentally aware; there are Japanese- and Korean-speaking instructors on call as well.

CENOTES

There are a handful of nice cenotes just outside of Puerto Morelos (see p100), along what tourist-brochure writers are calling the Ruta de Los Cenotes (that's right, that's the Route of the Cenotes). One of the newer cenote discoveries, **Taj Mahal**, is south of Playa del Carmen. It's a doable dive, snorkel, or even a chance to just go 'wow.'

CANCÚN FOR CHILDREN

With such easy access to sand, sea and swimming pools, most kids will have a blast in Cancún. Some hotels offer babysitting or day-care services – be sure to check in advance if these are needed. Remember that the sun, strong enough to scald even the thickest of tourist hides, can be even more damaging for kids or babies: make sure your children are properly protected.

If the beach gets boring or you want a change of scene, the theme parks of Xel-Há (p120) or Xcaret (p118) make a good day trip. Xcaret in particular has a highly suspect environmental record, hardly the 'ecoparadise' its brochure touts. For a bit more culture, head over to Chichén Itzá (p186) or Cobá (p130) for the day.

TOURS

Most hotels and travel agencies work with companies that offer tours to surrounding attractions. Popular day trips are Chichén Itzá, Cobá, Tulum, and the theme parks at Xel-Há and Xcaret. Often local touts at the hotels and agencies are paid only in commissions, so if you chat with someone and decide to take the tour later, be sure to take the time to find the same person who assisted you or they may not get paid.

Nómadas Travel (Map p77; ☎ 892-2320; www.nomadastravel.com; Av Cobá 5) is a popular agency that operates out of the lobby of Soberanis Hostel downtown. It offers a choice of reasonably priced packages to popular destinations.

DAY-TRIPPER: THREE GREAT EXCURSIONS FROM CANCÚN

Go ahead, leave the all-inclusive for a day to check out the world beyond the little yellow wristband. And a quick sustainable travel tip: skip the group tour, using that extra dough to hire a local guide and buy some crafts. Staying the night in your destination will bring even more money into the local community.

- Chichén Itzá (p186) – rent a car so you can take the old highway through Valladolid. Stop in the small Maya communities along the way for out-of-sight *panuchos* (tortillas stuffed with mashed beans, topped with shredded turkey or chicken and avocado).
- Isla Mujeres (p88) – take the ferry from Puerto Juárez to save money. Check out the turtle farm in the morning, then swing up north to a sweet little swimming spot near the Avalon Reef Club.
- Nuevo Durango and beyond – make your own way through the Maya hinterland as you explore small villages such as Nuevo Durango, and forgotten cenotes that don't even make it into the guidebooks. If you ask nicely, locals will often put you up in a *palapa* (thatched palm-leaf-roofed shelter). Bring your own hammock and a sense of adventure.

SLEEPING

Almost all hotels offer discounts in the 'low' season, but at many places there are up to five different rates: Christmas and New Year are at a premium you can count on, but there are high rates in March and April for US spring break, Easter, and even July and August (when locals have their holidays). Ask if there is a 'promotion,' too, as many places may be willing to deal. Many Zona Hotelera spots offer internet specials, so it's best to book ahead of time if you want to stay near the beach.

Wherever possible in the following listings, simple low- and high-season prices are detailed; more complex schemes are represented by a price range unless otherwise specified; and peak-season rates may be higher.

Ciudad Cancún

BUDGET

'Budget' is a relative term; prices in Cancún are higher for what you get than most anywhere else in Mexico. There are many cheap lodging options within a few blocks of the bus terminal northwest on Avenida Uxmal. The area around Parque Las Palapas has numerous hostels and budget digs as well. Hotel hawkers tend to way-lay anyone exiting the bus station, sometimes going so far as to insult people heading to other hotels. Just say 'No' and keep heading to the place you planned on.

Weary Traveler (Map p77; ☎ 887-0191; www.wearytravelerhostel.com; Palmera 30; dm fan/air-con M\$100/110; ☎ ☎ ☎) The cramped shared rooms could use a bit of work, but the Weary Traveler has all the basic ingredients to make a good hostel:

a cool rooftop terrace kitchen area for swilling beers and swapping tales, a big breakfast buffet, lots of guests from around the globe and a friendly owner. Ask about private rooms for rent down the street.

Las Palmas Hotel (Map p77; ☎ 884-2513; Palmera 43; dm/d M\$100/300; ☎ ☎) A family-run affair, the Palmas has a clean downstairs dorm room with much-appreciated air-con. There's a handful of bright, cheery and affordable rooms upstairs. Continental breakfast includes freshly squeezed orange juice. If you are looking to get away from the backpacker scene for a bit, then stay here. If not, head over to Weary Traveler-landia or the hostels near Parque Las Palapas.

Hostel El Amigo (Map p77; ☎ 892-7056; 29 Alcatrazes; dm fan/air-con; M\$120/140; ☎ ☎) Right on the corner of Parque Las Palapas, this small hostel has shiny new shared rooms, a quiet sitting area for postbeach cervezas and, of course, the requisite computers. The dorms have fewer beds than at other hostels, meaning you won't meet tons of travelers, but will probably get a better night's sleep.

Soberanis Hostel (Map p77; ☎ 884-4564, 800-101-0101; www.soberanis.com.mx; Av Cobá 5; dm/d M\$120/590; ☎) It's good value with a nice location, and is a fun place to meet friends. All rooms have very comfortable beds, tiled floors, cable TV and nicely appointed bathrooms. Though primarily a midrange hotel, the Soberanis also has four-bed 'hostel' rooms with the same amenities as the regular rooms, including a free continental breakfast. The cafeteria serves affordable lunches and dinners and the hotel

also has a bar, internet facilities (per hour M\$10), a phone center, a tour agency and also a student-oriented travel agency.

our pick Hotel Colonial (Map p77; ☎ 884-1535; Calle Tulipanes 22; d fan/air-con M\$350/450; 🏠) Perhaps the best buy in its price range, the Colonial has a central courtyard, superclean rooms with traditional textile bedspreads, and a pleasant central courtyard. Get a room toward the back as the street noise in this party district can be a bit much.

Casa de Huéspedes Punta Allen (Map p77; ☎ 884-0225; www.puntaallen.da.ru; Punta Allen 8; s/d M\$400/450) On a side street that's a bit dicey after dark, this friendly, family-run guesthouse has ample rooms, spotless tiles and nice bathrooms. From Avenida Uxmal, walk south along Avenida Yaxchilán and take the first right.

MIDRANGE

Midrange in Cancún is a two-tiered category; the Ciudad Cancún area is much cheaper than the Zona Hotelera and only a short R-1 bus ride away from the Zona's beaches.

Hotel Suites Olimpo (Map p77; ☎ 884-0875; www.hotelolimpco.com.mx; Av Bonampak 221 SM4; s/d M\$450/600; 🏠) Beds are a bit springy, but the rooms are clean and include phone and cable TV. Some have kitchenettes, and some are noisier than others. It's right across from Hotel Bonampak, and there's a rambling, rather scraggly green area around the corner.

Hotel Antillano (Map p77; ☎ 884-1132, 800-288-7000; www.hotelantillano.com; Claveles 1; d M\$500-700; 🏠) A large beige shoebox with a groovy-groupie-bebop feel just off Avenida Tulum, this is a very pleasant and quiet place with a relaxing lobby, nice pool, good central air-con and cable TV. Rooms on Avenida Tulum are noisier than those in the back. Rates include a welcome drink, continental breakfast and a Zona Hotelera beach pass.

our pick Hotel El Rey del Caribe (Map p77; ☎ 884-2028; www.reydelcaribe.com; cnr Avs Uxmal & Náder; d M\$630-820; 🏠) El Rey is a true eco-tel that composts, employs solar collectors and cisterns, uses gray water on the gardens and even has a few composting toilets. This is a beautiful spot with jungly courtyard, azure swimming pool and small Jacuzzi. Many of the 31 rooms have a fully equipped kitchenette; all have comfortable beds, hairdryers and safes (you can use your own lock). Two children under 11 can stay for free, and it offers good prices in low season.

Hotel Bonampak (Map p77; ☎ 884-0280; www.hotelbonampak.com; Av Bonampak 225 SM4; r M\$690; 🏠) Not a speck of character, but this motel is good value: the pool is sunny, the wide stairways are airy and fresh, the rooms are spotless and many have small balconies. Ask for a room overlooking the pool to avoid the road noise. There's wi-fi in the lobby.

Hotel Suites Caribe Internacional (Map p77; ☎ 884-3999; www.caribeinternacional.com; cnr Avs Sunyaxchén & Yaxchilán; d/tr M\$790/840; 🏠) This six-story hotel boasts 80 rooms with cable TV. The junior suites have two comfortable beds, a sofa and kitchenette. Amenities include secure parking, a small pool in an agreeable courtyard, and a restaurant and bar. Rates are often negotiable here; try asking for a discount.

Hotel Plaza Caribe (Map p77; ☎ 884-1377, in the USA 866-294-8514; www.hotelplazacaribe.com; Calle Pino; d M\$840-990; 🏠) Directly across from the bus terminal between Avenidas Tulum and Uxmal, this all-business hotel offers 166 comfortable rooms with full amenities, including a pool and restaurant. Rooms have white-tile floors and comfy beds; baths are clean but overchlorinated. The *palapa* (thatched, palm-leaf-covered shelter) bar is a nice place to sip a drink on a hot day.

TOP END

Hotel Margaritas (Map p77; ☎ 884-9333, 800-537-8483; www.margaritascancun.com; cnr Avs Yaxchilán & Jazmines; s & d M\$1300, tr M\$1500; 🏠) The curvaceous swimming pool is eye-catching. The 100 guestrooms are clean but musty, so check and see if one with a balcony is available. If so, they air out nicely. This place is across the street from the Suites Caribe and also sports six floors. There's a (pricey) restaurant, a decent bar, Jacuzzi and helpful staff.

Zona Hotelera

MIDRANGE

Hotels near Blvd Kukulcán in the Zona Hotelera are close to cheap, convenient transportation. Both the following hotels are on Laguna Nichupté rather than the sea.

Sina Suites (Map p75; ☎ 883-1017; www.cancun.sinasuites.com.mx; Quetzal 33; ste M\$800-2000; 🏠) Right on the lagoon, this is a great deal in low season, when prices drop by as much as 20%. The hotel was completely renovated after Hurricane Wilma, and its 36 spacious suites are still lookin' good: each with two double beds, a separate living room (with

a sofa bed) and satellite TV, a kitchen and 1½ bathrooms. Bring some friends to save money. This gleaming white hotel also has a pool and restaurant surrounded by Brady Bunch-inspired astroturf.

Grand Royal Lagoon (Map p75; ☎ 883-2749; www.grlagoon.com; Quetzal 8A; r & studio M\$900; 🏠) A breezy place with cable TV and safes; most rooms have two double beds, while some have kings. Some studios come with a kitchenette and balcony, and an outdoor ping-pong table makes for fun. The hotel has a small pool, and guests have use of the Fat Tuesday beach club. The hotel is 100m off Blvd Kukulcán Km 7.7.

TOP END

All of the resorts described below are in the Zona Hotelera and border the Caribbean. Guestrooms come equipped with air-con and satellite TV, and many have balconies with sea views. Many hotels offer all-inclusive packages, often at reasonable rates if you're willing to forgo eating or entertainment elsewhere. Often the best room rates are available through booking hotel-and-airfare packages: shop around.

Ambiance Villas Kin-Ha (Map p75; ☎ 891-5400; www.ambiancevillas.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 8; r M\$1460/1570; 🏠) A great family spot, Kin-Ha offers day care and babysitting, plus a 'kids' club' designed to let parents relax while the kids are occupied. You'll never need to leave the hotel's grounds (though we think you should), as there are 136 big rooms and suites in five buildings in this rolling complex. All rooms feature a balcony and two double beds or one king-sized bed...or you can just use the beachside mattresses. There are bars, markets, travel and car-rental agencies and more on the premises. Prices listed are for European plans, but you can arrange an all-inclusive stay.

Hilton Cancún (Map p75; ☎ 881-8000; www.hilton.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 17; d M\$1700; 🏠) This used to be one of the granddaddies of the strip, but lately it's being upstaged by young upstarts such as the Melia. Still, you get seven cascading pools, a beautiful Zen-inspired garden spa, and yoga on the beach. The blue-and-turquoise bed throws are attractive, matching the ocean view outside. And the price is right – even in high season.

Me by Melia (Map p75; ☎ 881-2500; www.mebymelia.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 12; d low/high season M\$1780/3200; 🏠) 'Enough about you, let's talk about mel!' That's the philosophy at this uber-

modern, expressionist-inspired hotel. It won't suit everyone, but if you prefer clean lines over your standard Cancún baroque, then Me is the place for you. Only half the rooms have ocean views, and it just ain't worth it to pay this much and not have a view of the Caribbean blue.

Riu Caribe (Map p75; ☎ 848-7850; www.riu.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 5.5; s low/high season M\$1900/2140, d M\$2690/3860; 🏠) Riu rules the Riviera Maya – they're everywhere. This particular Riu has 541 rooms (all with ocean views), including 60 junior suites, and a family-friendly atmosphere. All come with private terraces that overlook a dazzling swimming pool and 200m of beach. The lobby is gorgeous, with a nice view of the water, pretty tiled floors and stained-glass ceiling. Prices listed are all-inclusive; room-only rates are not available.

EATING

Ciudad Cancún

Restaurants in Ciudad Cancún range from ultra-Mexican taco joints to fairly expensive eateries.

BUDGET

Cancún's downtown area has lots of good budget eats. Mercados 23 and 28 have a number of tiny eateries, and Parque Las Palapas has some food stands. Few nonalcoholic options beat cantaloupe or watermelon juices; ask for *agua de melón* or *agua de sandía* and you'll feel like you're sipping chilled rainbow juice.

Los de Pescado (Map p77; Av Tulum 32; meals M\$16-75; ☎ 10am-5:30pm) It's easy to order at this restaurant as there are only two choices: ceviche or tacos. Knock either back with a beer or two, and you'll see why this is one of the best budget spots in Ciudad Cancún. With its thatched roof, you can tell the owners take a certain pride in their work – that's why this is always the most crowded restaurant on the block.

Santa Clara (Map p77; ☎ 884-9548; Av Bonampak 157; cones M\$30-40; ☎ 9am-10pm) There's a pleasant patio at this little café specializing in ice cream. It also serves coffee and various sweet dishes. There's milk and cheese as well, all locally produced.

Ty-Coz (Map p77; ☎ 884-6060; Av Tulum; sandwiches M\$30-40; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat) A bakery-café just north of the Comercial Mexicana supermarket. It has granite tabletops and a pleasing

STRETCH YOUR BUDGET

For self-catering, try **Comercial Mexicana** (Map p77; cnr Avs Tulum & Uxmal), a centrally located supermarket close to the bus station. It has a good selection of produce, meats, cheeses and cookies.

The main market is set back from the street, west of the post office. Its official name is long; locals simply call it Mercado Veintiocho (Mercado 28; Map p77). Another market, Mercado 23 (Map p77), is a bit north of the bus station and offers inexpensive, nontouristy shopping. Most eateries are in the inner courtyard and open from about 7:30am to 6pm daily.

Inexpensive Mexican food can also be found at the food stalls in the northeast corner of Parque Las Palapas, and at two good taco carts operating in the evening – one at the north edge of the Comercial Mexicana parking lot (across Avenida Tulum from the bus terminal) and the other at the southeast edge of the Plaza de Toros (Bullring) parking lot, at Avenidas Sayil and Bonampak.

ambience, and serves good coffee, baguettes and croissants, as well as sandwiches made with a variety of meats and cheeses. There's also a spot near Km 7.5 on Blvd Kukulcán.

Tatis La Casa del Pan (Map p77; ☎ 892-3877; cnr Pecari & Av Tulum; breakfast M\$35-50, sandwiches & light dishes M\$30-60; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 7am-3pm Sat) Friendly and fun, with art on the walls and a great selection of wholesome fare. Come here for coffee and espresso that might be your last good cup of coffee before heading off into the rest of Yucatán. The crêpes are *delicioso*.

El Tapatio (Map p77; ☎ 887-8317; cnr Avs Uxmal & Palmera; dishes M\$40-90, set meals M\$35; ☎ 9am-11:30pm) Touristy but good – a popular choice for hostel-goers, who suck down the mammoth fruit and veggie juices, shakes and smoothies at any time of day.

El Rincón Yucateco (Map p77; Av Uxmal 24; dishes M\$40-100; ☎ noon-10pm Mon-Sat) A reasonably priced Yucatecan place that's across from Hotel Cotty, serving a nice variety of favorites along with very weak 'American'-style coffee. *Sopa de lima* ('lime soup'; chicken soup with lime) is light: a good option for anyone nursing a stomach problem (or a hangover).

MIDRANGE

As with budget restaurants, the Ciudad Cancún area has a wider variety of midpriced places than the Zona Hotelera.

Restaurant 100% Natural (Cien por Ciento Natural; Map p77; ☎ 884-0102; Av Sunyaxché; mains M\$40-150; ☎ 7am-11pm; ♻️) Vegetarians and health-food nuts delight at this health-food chain near Avenida Yaxchilán, which serves juice blends (try the 'Crazy Yog' or the 'Vampiro'), a wide selection of yogurt-fruit-vegetable combinations, and brown rice, pasta, fish

and chicken dishes. The on-site bakery turns out whole-wheat products, and the entire place is very nicely decorated and landscaped. Service is excellent – at times even too attentive.

our pick **Checándole** (Map p77; ☎ 884-7147; Av Xpujil 6 SM 27; mains M\$50-130; ☎ noon-8pm) If you can only eat at one restaurant in Cancún, then you should eat here. It's a bit away from the city center, but well worth the extra effort. Dressed up with a *palapa* roof, Checándole specializes in *chilango* (Mexico City) cuisine. The *menu del día* (fixed three-course meal) is just M\$45 – great value. If it's offering *pollo en mole poblano* (chicken smothered in a handmade chocolate and chili sauce), you should definitely go for it.

Rolandi's Restaurant-Bar (Map p77; ☎ 884-4040; Av Cobá 12; mains M\$70-140; ☎ 1pm-12:30am) A Swiss-Italian eatery with a wood-fired pizza oven, between Avenidas Tulum and Náder just off the southern roundabout. It serves elaborate pizzas, spaghetti plates and a range of northern Italian dishes.

La Parrilla (Map p77; ☎ 884-8193; Av Yaxchilán 51; mains M\$70-370; ☎ noon-2am) Any Cancún eatery founded before the saccharine 1980s gets to call itself venerable. And La Parrilla (founded in 1975) should get a capital 'V.' A traditional Mexican restaurant popular with locals and tourists alike, it serves a varied menu from all over Mexico, with Yucatecan specialties thrown in. Try the tasty *calamares al mojo de ajo* (squid in garlic sauce), steaks or sautéed grouper. *Mole* (a Spanish sauce) enchiladas and delicious piña coladas both run about M\$60. If you're lucky, a waiter will serve you beer, balancing it on his head from the bar to your table.

Irori (Map p77; ☎ 892-3072; Av Tulum 226; rolls M\$50-100, nigiri pair M\$30-70, teppanyaki meals M\$100-340; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Sat, 1-7pm Sun; ♻️) Enjoy the show as the chef slices and dices the night away at this Japanese-run restaurant serving sushi and many other Japanese favorites in an intimate and nicely decorated setting. There's even a kids' menu if you've got sushi-scoffing rugrats in tow.

TOP END

Restaurants in this category offer better value than those in the Zona Hotelera.

Carrillo's Lobster House (Map p77; ☎ 884-1227; Claveles 35; shrimp & fish dishes M\$120-200, lobster dishes M\$380) Try Carrillo's Plato Cozumel if you're looking for something a bit special. This somewhat formal restaurant has air-con indoors and is fan-cooled outdoors, and entertainment is provided by mariachis. Follow the good smells leading to the blue building and you'll be in the right place.

our pick **La Habichuela** (Map p77; ☎ 884-3158; Margaritas 25; mains M\$150-420) An elegant restaurant with a lovely courtyard dining area, just off Parque Las Palapas. The specialty is shrimp and lobster in curry sauce served inside a coconut with tropical fruit, but almost anything on the menu is delicious. The seafood ceviche and *tapa al ajillo* (potatoes in garlic) are mouthwatering. The gorgeous aquarium in the lobby makes for a very attractive wait (reservations are advised). Finish with lime sorbet splashed with Xtentún, a Yucatecan anise-flavored liqueur.

Zona Hotelera**BUDGET**

For budget eats in the Zona Hotelera, try the food courts at any large mall. La Isla Shopping

Village, Plaza Flamingo and the Forum Mall (all Map p75) hold other options to get a bite, including pizzas and burgers. There's a Checándole in Plaza Flamingo.

Las Fajitas (Map p75; Blvd Kukulcán Km 7.5; mains M\$12-75; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Sat, 7am-5pm Sun) It offers a complete breakfast for just M\$30, and you can get fresh *mahimahi* (a type of fish) fillets for M\$75 (they worked out a deal with a local diver to get fresh fish) – not a bad deal for the Zona Hotelera. But there's a catch: it's roadfront on Blvd Kukulcán, meaning you'll be sucking down more exhaust than cerveza. Still, it's the best budget spot on the strip!

MIDRANGE

The Zona Hotelera is a vast swath of mainly Tex Mex-style places catering to the just-flew-in crowd. Prices are higher and quality is generally lower than what you'll find in Ciudad Cancún. A number of places cater to a young crowd, with conga lines where waiters cheer and pour watery tequila down dancers' throats as they weave by. So you'll either want to head *for* or *away from* **Señor Frog's** (Map p75; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9.8; dishes M\$100-200) and **Carlos 'n Charlie's** (Map p75; Blvd Kukulcán Km 5.5; dishes M\$100-180) for that kind of dining experience.

TOP END

'Pay-per-view' takes on a whole different meaning in the Zona Hotelera. Though there are many establishments in this category, their prices sometimes reflect their location and what's outside the window more than the quality of food.

La Dolce Vita (Map p75; ☎ 885-0161; www.cancunitalianrestaurant.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 14.6; pizzas M\$125-150, mains M\$145-450; ☎ noon-11pm) One of Cancún's fanciest Italian restaurants, it

VANESSA'S PICKS

Despite all our 'authority and attitude,' Lonely Planet authors will never know the local dining scene as well as the locals themselves. That's why we got together with Cancún local Vanessa Trava and 10 of her closest friends to see where Cancún's young professionals choose to dine. Call ahead for reservations.

La Barbacoa de la Tulum If you love tacos, head to this cheap cantina in the Plaza de Toros.

La Favola (☎ 889-9180) Exquisite Italian dining.

La Troje (☎ 887-9556) It's *muy caro* (expensive), but the excellent international cuisine is worth it.

Manyee (☎ 881-5900) Go for the delicious wraps.

Marakame Café (☎ 887-1010) For international flavor with live music.

Mocambo (☎ 883-0398) For fresh seafood.

Salute (☎ 881-5556) An eclectic mix of Mediterranean and Mexican fare.

offers white wicker chairs and soft, romantic lighting, plus great lagoon views and attentive staff. Try the chicken with sun-dried tomatoes and finish with crêpes Suzette (for two). With a bottle of red, white or rosé this could be the start or the finish of a wonderful day.

Crab House (Map p75; ☎ 885-3936; Blvd Kukulcán Km 14.8; dishes M\$140-200; ☎ 1-11:30pm) Offers a lovely view of the lagoon that complements the seafood. The long menu includes many shrimp and fillet-of-fish dishes. Crab and lobster are priced by the pound.

Matachi Seaside Grill (Map p75; ☎ 881-8047; Blvd Kukulcán Km 17; mains M\$220-450) The Matachi is a stylish, intimate place inside the Hilton, right on the beach. It offers a variety of Mexican and Asian-inspired cuisine, seafood, sushi and other creative dishes. It also has one of the best views in town.

Lorenzillo's (Map p75; ☎ 883-1254; Blvd Kukulcán Km 10.5; mains M\$190-440; ☎ 1pm-12:30am) Reputed by locals to be Cancún's best seafood restaurant, Lorenzillo's gives you 19 separate choices for your lobster presentation, including a taste-bud-popping chipotle plum and tamarind sauce. Facing the lagoon, it's a good sunset joint.

ENTERTAINMENT

Many of the clubs and restaurants are open for drinks for much of the day.

Clubs

CIUDAD CANCÚN

Ciudad Cancún clubs are generally mellower than those in the rowdy Zona Hotelera. Stroll along Avenida Yaxchilán down to Parque Las Palapas and you are sure to run into something (or somebody) you like.

GAY & LESBIAN CANCÚN

Cancún is well known for its lively gay and lesbian scene (though there's more for gay men than women), meaning there's plenty to do most nights. Here's but a pinch of what's out there.

Backstage Theater-Cabaret (Map p77; ☎ 887-9106; Tulipanes 30) Backstage features drag shows, strippers (male and female), fashion shows and musicals. Terrific ambience, joyful crowd.

Karamba (right) Popular with cross-dressers.

Picante (right) More for talkers than dancers.

Roots (Map p77; ☎ 884-2437; Tulipanes 26; admission Fri & Sat M\$50; ☎ 6pm-1am Mon-Sat) Pretty much the hippest bar in Ciudad Cancún, Roots features jazz, reggae or rock bands and the occasional flamenco guitarist. It's also a pretty decent restaurant, serving pasta, salads, seafood and meat dishes, with main dishes running M\$80 to M\$160. Thursday seems to be the best night for catching nice tunes with a crowd.

Mambo Café (Map p77; ☎ 887-7891; Plaza Las Américas; admission women/men M\$30/50; ☎ 10pm-6am Thu-Sun) Upstairs from the food court in the middle of the huge mall on the southern stretch of Avenida Tulum. It features live salsa, Cuban and other Caribbean music and is very popular with Cancún's young people. Thursday is ladies' night.

Sabor Latino (off Map p77; ☎ 892-1916; cnr Av Xcaret & Tankah; admission women/men M\$40/60, Wed free; ☎ 10:30pm-6am, closed Sun-Tue low season) On the 2nd floor of Chinatown Plaza, this is another happening club. Its live acts feature Dominican salsa and other tropical styles.

Karamba (Map p77; ☎ 884-0032; cnr Azucenas & Av Tulum; ☎ 10pm-6am Thu-Sun) A venerable standby above the Club Sandwich Café, it has frequent drink specials. Admission ranges from free to M\$70. Come here for a varied crowd of gays, lesbians and cross-dressers.

Picante (Map p77; Av Tulum 20; ☎ 9pm-6am) Set back from Avenida Tulum a few blocks north of Avenida Uxmal, this place isn't as 'spicy' as its name suggests, but it is a longtime neighborhood gay bar. It often features movies shown at high volume until about 1am, when the dance music comes on.

Built into the **Plaza de Toros** (Bullring; Map p77; cnr Avs Bonampak & Sayil) are several bars, some with music, that draw a largely local crowd.

ZONA HOTELERA

The club scene in the Zona Hotelera is young, loud and booze-oriented – the kind that often has an MC urging women to display body parts to hooting and hollering crowds. Carlos 'n Charlie's and Señor Frog's (both p83) have dancing in the evenings. Most of the dance clubs charge around M\$200 admission, which may include two or three drinks; admission with open-bar privileges (ie drink all you want) is M\$200 to M\$250, rising to M\$400 to M\$500 during spring break. Though some clubs open as early as 5:30pm, most don't get hopping much before midnight.

INSIDE THE SEEDY SEX-TOURISM TRADE

In recent years an alarming number of tourists are visiting Mexico not for the beaches and booze, but for the brothels.

As if this weren't bad enough, now Mexico is being used as a bridge to bring sex slaves, often underage, into the US, Japan and other developed countries, according to reports by Reuters.

Depending on what news source you look at, there are as many as 5000 child sex slaves in Mexico – calling them prostitutes just makes it sound too much on the up-and-up. The age of consent varies from region to region based on local laws, but is as low as 12 in some areas and under certain circumstances (people in the countryside get married young). On the whole, however, the general trend is toward creating a higher age of consent of 18 years. Prostitution is legal in most parts of the country (prostitutes must be 18 or older); however, this hasn't stopped pedophilia rings from profiteering in the trade of children.

Things may be changing. New laws in the US have made it possible to prosecute Americans who have had sex with children even if it occurred outside of its borders. And public awareness of and indignation about this issue has grown, even in Mexico.

If you're serious about your partying, consider a 'Party Hopper Package,' available at most of the lobby tour offices or at other travel agents downtown. Usually M\$400 to M\$500 will buy all you can drink at four or five of the popular clubs; some packages include van transportation.

The following four clubs are clustered along the northwest-bound side of Blvd Kukulcán, all within easy stumbling distance of each other. Be careful crossing the street.

Coco Bongo (Map p75; ☎ 883-5061; Forum Mall; ☎ 10:30pm-5am) This is often the venue for MTV's coverage of spring break, and tends to be a happening venue just about any day of the week. The club opens with celebrity impersonators, dancers and circus acts (clowns, acrobats and the like) for an hour or so, then the rock, pop and hip-hop start playing.

Dady'O (Map p75; ☎ 800-234-9797; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9; ☎ 10pm-4:30am) Opposite the Forum Mall, this is one of Cancún's more elaborate dance clubs. The setting is a five-level black-walled faux cave with a two-level dance floor and what seem like zillions of laser beams and strobes. The predominant beats are Latin, house, techno, trance and hip-hop, and the crowd is mainly 20-something.

Dady Rock (Map p75; ☎ 883-3333; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9; ☎ 5:30pm-3:30am) A steamy rock-and-roll club – it plays techno on occasion – next door to Dady'O and attracting a slightly older crowd than its neighbor. Admission is free until 10pm.

Bulldog Café (Map p75; ☎ 883-1133, ext 544; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9; ☎ 10pm-late) Bills itself as 'the home of rock and roll,' and features live bands and a

jumbo Jacuzzi that's made to look a bit like a cenote but is really just a showcase for bikini-clad staff to splash around. Look for the giant bulldog sign outside and you'll know you've found the right place.

Cinemas

Cinemark (Map p75; ☎ 883-5603; La Isla Shopping Village) In general, Hollywood movies are shown in English with Spanish subtitles; however, English-language children's movies are usually dubbed in Spanish. Ticket prices run about M\$40 for children and adults.

SHOPPING

Neither Ciudad Cancún nor the Zona Hotelera fits the bill as a bargain-hunter's paradise – still, Cancún can be a great place to shop for souvenirs and jewelry.

Plaza Kukulcán (Map p75; Blvd Kukulcán Km 13) The largest (and definitely among the stuffiest, attitude-wise) of the indoor malls is chichi Plaza Kukulcán. Of note here is the huge art gallery (taking up nearly half of the 2nd floor); the many stores selling silverwork; and La Ruta de las Indias, a shop featuring wooden models of Spanish galleons and replicas of conquistadors' weaponry and body armor. But all is not lost; the plaza has a bowling alley and a large food court.

La Isla Shopping Village (Map p75; Blvd Kukulcán Km 12) Unique among the island's malls, this is an indoor-outdoor place with canals, an aquarium, ultramodern parasol structures and enough other visual distractions to keep even the most inveterate hater of shopping amused. For tipplers on your list, consider

picking up a bottle of Xtabentún, a Yucatecan anise-flavored liqueur.

Mercado Municipal Ki-Huic (Map p77; Av Tulum) This warren of stalls and shops carries a wide variety of souvenirs and handicrafts.

Colormax (Map p77; ☎ 887-4625; Av Tulum 22; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) Colormax, just north of Calle Claveles, offers a wide assortment of film. It does developing as well.

Locals head to either Mercado 28 (Map p77) or Mercado 23 (Map p77) for clothes, shoes, inexpensive food stalls, hardware items and so on. Of the two, Mercado 23 is the least frequented by tourists. If you're looking for a place *without* corny T-shirts, this is the place to go.

Across Avenida Tulum from Colormax is the Chedraui supermarket (Map p77); the upstairs clothing department here sometimes has souvenir-grade items at very affordable prices.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Cancún's **Aeropuerto Internacional de Cancún** (off Map p77; ☎ 886-0047) is the busiest in southeastern Mexico. The airport has a few ATMs: the best place to change money is the Banamex bank along the back wall outside the domestic baggage-claim area (behind the coffee shop); it has an ATM and offers good exchange rates. Opposite the bank are (inconvenient) pay-in-advance baggage lockers costing M\$70 for 24 hours (a tip is appreciated, but optional). There's wi-fi access and a free, Spanish-only public internet terminal that has sticky, punch-button keys.

Cancún is served by many direct international flights; for more information see p266. Between Mexicana de Aviación and its subsidiary, Click Mexicana, there is at least one and up to eight daily flights to each of the following destinations: Mexico City (one way M\$1350, 2¼ hours), Oaxaca (\$1700, direct, four hours), Tuxtla Gutiérrez (M\$2168, one stop, six hours), Villahermosa (M\$1699, one stop, 2½ hours) and Mérida (M\$2698, direct, one hour). Click Mexicana offers flights daily to Mérida, and six to Cozumel. It also flies twice daily to Havana, Cuba (round-trip only, M\$3198), but you can get better package deals through local travel agents. US visitors heading to Cuba should pay particular attention to the recent US crackdown on agencies and visitors organizing trips to Cuba. Cubana,

the Cuban national airline, has daily flights as well.

Aviaca, a regional carrier based in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, has direct flights from Cancún to Mexico City (one way M\$887, two hours), with connections for Oaxaca, Tapachula (M\$1780, five hours), Tuxtla Gutiérrez (M\$1900, five hours) and Villahermosa (M\$1750, four hours), as well as points in central and northern Mexico.

Magnicharters flies direct to Monterrey, Mexico City, Guadalajara and León.

Taca Airlines flies from Cancún direct to Flores, Guatemala (round-trip M\$2540, two hours), connecting to points in Central America several times a week.

If you intend to fly from Cancún to other parts of Mexico, reserve your airline seat ahead of time to avoid any unpleasant surprises. The following airlines are represented in Cancún:

Aeroméxico (Map p77; ☎ 287-1868; Av Cobá 80) Just west of Avenida Bonampak.

American Airlines (Map p75; ☎ 800-904-6000; Hotel Fiesta Americana Coral Beach, Blvd Kukulcán Km 8.7) Has an airport counter as well.

Aviaca (Map p77; ☎ 887-4214; Av Cobá 39) Also has an airport counter.

Azteca (☎ 886-0831) Airport counter.

Click Mexicana (☎ 884-2000) Airport counter.

Continental Airlines (☎ 886-0006, 800-900-5000; www.continental.com) Airport counter.

Copa (☎ 886-0653) Airport counter.

Cubana (Map p77; ☎ 887-7210; Av Tulum)

Delta Airlines (☎ 800-123-4710, 886-0668) Airport counter.

Magnicharters (Map p77; ☎ 884-0600; Av Náder 93)

Mexicana de Aviación (Map p77; ☎ 881-9090, 800-801-2010; Av Cobá 39) 800-801-2010

Northwest (☎ 800-907-4700) Airport counter.

Taca Airlines (☎ 886-0008; www.taca.com) Airport counter.

United Airlines (☎ 800-003-0777; www.united.com) Airport counter.

US Airways (☎ 800-007-8800; www.usairways.com) Airport counter.

Boat

There are several points of embarkation to reach Isla Mujeres from Cancún by boat. From Punta Sam (off Map p77) costs M\$15, Puerto Juárez (Map p75) costs M\$35, and leaving from the Zona Hotelera (Map p75) costs about M\$70. You'll need to head to Chiquilá to get to Isla Holbox. While there

BUS SERVICES FROM CANCÚN

Destination	Cost (M\$)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Chetumal	210	5½-6½	many buses
Chichén Itzá	140	3-4	hourly 2nd-class Oriente buses 5am-5pm
Chiquilá (for Isla Holbox)	70	3½	Mayab buses at 7:50am & 12:40pm, Noreste buses at 1:45pm
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	130	3½-4	8 1st-class ADO buses & hourly 2nd-class Mayab buses
Mérida	200-270	4-6	15 UNO & ADO GL buses, hourly 2nd-class Oriente buses (5am-5pm) ADO buses
Mexico City 1060 (Terminal Norte)	24	2	ADO buses
Mexico City (TAPO)	1100	22-24	1 ADO & 4 ADO GL buses
Palenque	490	12-13	4 buses
Playa del Carmen	34	1-1¼	Riviera every 15min 5am-midnight, many Playa Express & Mayab buses; see also buses to the airport, p88
Puerto Morelos	12-17		Use Playa del Carmen buses
Ticul	190-220	6	6 Mayab buses
Tizimín	85	3-4	9 2nd-class Noreste & Mayab buses
Tulum	62	2¼-3	many Riviera, Playa Express & other buses
Valladolid	110	2-3	many buses
Villahermosa	540	12	11 buses
Xcaret	30	1½	many buses; uses Playa Express or Mayab buses (bus will leave you 1km from Xcaret's main gate)

are ferries to Cozumel from Cancún, you are better off getting there from Playa del Carmen's dock.

See p95 for details of boats to Isla Mujeres and p98 for boats to Isla Holbox.

Bus

Cancún's modern bus terminal occupies the wedge formed where Avenidas Uxmal and Tulum meet. Upon leaving you'll be asked by every taxi driver if you want a ride; you'll also be approached by hotel hawkers pushing 'deals.' Despite this, it's a safe area and you'll be fine walking around. Across Pino from the bus terminal, a few doors from Avenida Tulum, is the ticket office and miniterminal of Playa Express, which runs air-conditioned buses down the coast to Tulum approximately every half-hour until early evening, stopping at major towns and points of interest along the way. Riviera covers the same ground with its 1st-class (though not necessarily better) service.

ADO (☎ 884-5542) sets the 1st-class standard, while UNO, ADO GL and Super Expreso provide luxury services. Mayab provides good 'intermediate class' (modern, air-con buses, tending to make more stops than 1st class) to many points. Oriente's 2nd-class air-con buses often depart and arrive late.

Noreste buses vary in quality; some are pretty shabby indeed.

The staff at the ADO/Riviera information counter in the bus terminal provide good information on many of the bus services and are available 24 hours. The table (above) shows some of the major routes serviced daily.

Car

Rental-car agencies with facilities at the airport include: **Alamo** (☎ 886-0179), **Avis** (☎ 886-0222), **Budget** (☎ 884-6955), **Dollar** (☎ 886-0179) and **Hertz** (☎ 884-1326). You can receive better rates if you reserve ahead of time, but it doesn't hurt to do comparison shopping after arriving and before signing your original agreement.

You're better off leaving the rental car parked inside Cancún and walking or catching a bus to most places in town till you're ready to get out of town. Be warned also that Hwy 180D, the 238km *cuota* (toll road) running much of the way between Cancún and Mérida, costs M\$329 for the distance and has only two exits before the end. The first, at Valladolid, costs M\$194 to reach from Cancún and the second, at Pisté (for Chichén Itzá), is an additional M\$48.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

White TTC buses to Ciudad Cancún (M\$80) leave the airport about every 20 minutes between 5:30am and 11:30pm, stopping in both the domestic and international terminals. A straight line drawn from the exit of the international arrivals terminal (past all the vans) reaches the small lot and its ticket booth decorated with a Coca-Cola sign. Once in town, the buses travel up Avenida Tulum and will stop most anywhere you ask. One central stop is across from the Chedraui supermarket on Avenida Cobá (not to be confused with the Chedraui further south in Plaza Las Américas).

Going to the airport from Ciudad Cancún, the same TTC airport buses (Aeropuerto Centro) head south on Avenida Tulum. You can flag them down anywhere it's feasible, from well north of the bus terminal to well south of Avenida Cobá.

Comfortable *colectivos* (shared vans) depart from the curb in front of the international terminal about every 15 minutes for the Zona Hotelera and Ciudad Cancún; they charge M\$110 per person. If volume allows, they will separate passengers into Ciudad Cancún and Zona groups. Otherwise, depending who's going exactly where, they may head downtown first and then to the Zona. Going the opposite way, via Punta Nizuc, can take up to 45 minutes from the airport to Ciudad Cancún.

Cheaper ADO shuttles leave from the domestic terminal side, charging M\$35 to go downtown or M\$65 direct to Playa del Carmen. Riviera also runs nine express 1st-class buses from the airport to Playa del Carmen between 7am and 7:30pm (M\$80, 45 minutes to one hour). The service is direct and tickets are sold at a counter that is located in the international section of the airport.

Regular taxis into town or to the Zona Hotelera cost up to M\$450 (up to four people) if you catch them right outside the airport. If you follow the access road out of the airport, however, and past the traffic-monitoring booth (a total of about 300m), you can often flag down an empty taxi leaving the airport that will take you for much less (you can try for M\$50) because the driver is no longer subject to the expensive regulated airport fares.

Colectivo taxis head to the airport from a stand in front of the Hotel Cancún Handall on Avenida Tulum about a block south of Avenida Cobá. These operate from 6am to

9pm (but check beforehand), charge M\$20 per person and leave when full. The official rate for private taxis from town is M\$200.

Bus

To reach the Zona Hotelera from Ciudad Cancún, catch any bus with 'R1,' 'Hoteles' or 'Zona Hotelera' displayed on the windshield as it travels along Avenida Tulum toward Avenida Cobá, then eastward on Avenida Cobá. The one-way fare is M\$6.50, but since change is often unavailable this varies between M\$6 and M\$7. Having correct change in advance makes things easier.

To reach Puerto Juárez and the Isla Mujeres ferries, catch a Ruta 13 ('Pto Juárez' or 'Punta Sam'; M\$4) bus heading north on Avenida Tulum. Some R1 buses make this trip as well; tickets cost M\$6.50.

Taxi

Cancún's taxis do not have meters. Fares are set, but you should always agree on a price before getting in; otherwise you could end up paying for a 'misunderstanding.' From Ciudad Cancún to Punta Cancún is M\$80, to Puerto Juárez M\$30. Hourly and daily rates should run about M\$150 to M\$120 and M\$700 to M\$800 respectively.

NORTH OF CANCÚN

Except for the roads feeding Cancún's megapolopolis, the rest of north and northwestern Yucatán is a tangle of roadless jungle, uninhabited except in small pockets. Islands – Isla Mujeres, Isla Contoy and Isla Holbox – are the main tourist draws. Isla Mujeres has good beaches and is more laid-back than Cancún; Contoy is a bird sanctuary; and Holbox has diverse wildlife (it's a great place to swim with whale sharks) and a friendly community of fisherfolk and hammock-weavers. All three are worth a peek if you have the time, and both Isla Mujeres and the slightly more distant Isla Contoy are doable as day trips even if you're based in Cancún.

ISLA MUJERES

☎ 998 / pop 14,000

If you are going to visit just one of Quintana Roo's islands, then Isla Mujeres (Island of Women) is probably the place for you. It's not as crowded as Cozumel, yet offers more

to do and see than in chiller-than-thou Holbox. Sure, there's quite a few ticky-tack tourist shops, but folks still get around by golf cart and the crushed-coral beaches are better than those of Cozumel or Holbox.

The little island lies just north of Cancún and is an ideal day trip or a destination in its own right. There's not much here and that's the whole point: come to bask in quiet shallows or stretch out on the sand, to snorkel or scuba dive, or just to put the sunglasses on and open that book you've been dying to finish. Come sunset, there's plenty of tasty options for your dinner, and the nightlife scene moves at a good clip.

The Pintando Isla Mujeres program has invited 400 artists from all around the world to paint many of the town's buildings, brightening up the streets and making for fun walks.

History

A glimpse at the sunbathers on the beach will have you thinking the moniker 'Island of Women' comes from the bikini-clad tourists; however, the name Isla Mujeres goes at least as far back as Spanish buccaneers, who (legend has it) kept their lovers in safe seclusion here while they plundered galleons and pillaged ports on the mainland. An alternate theory suggests that in 1517, when Francisco Hernández de Córdoba sailed from Cuba and arrived here to procure slaves, the expedition discovered a stone temple containing clay figurines of Maya goddesses; it is thought Córdoba named the island after the icons.

Today some archaeologists believe that the island was a stopover for the Maya en route to worship their goddess of fertility, Ixchel, on Isla Cozumel. The clay idols are thought to have represented the goddess. The island may also have figured in the extensive Maya salt trade, which extended for hundreds of kilometers along the coastline.

Orientation

The island is 8km long, 150m to 800m wide and 13km from Cancún's Zona Hotelera. You'll find most of the restaurants and hotels in the town of Isla Mujeres, with the pedestrian mall on Hidalgo serving as the focal point. The ferry arrives in the town proper on the island's northern tip. On the southern tip are the lighthouse and vestiges of the Maya temple. The two are linked by Avenida Rueda Medina, a loop road that more or less



follows the coast. Between them are a handful of small fishing villages, several saltwater lakes, a string of westward-facing beaches, a large lagoon and a small airstrip.

The eastern shore is washed by the open sea, and the surf there is dangerous. The most popular sand beach (Playa Norte) is at the northern tip of the island.

Information

The following places are all in Isla Mujeres Town.

BOOKSTORES

Mañana (☎ 044 998-866-4347; cnr Matamoros & Guerrero; ☎ 10am-7pm) This café has some nice offerings, and swaps or sells, depending on your needs.

EMERGENCY**Police** (☎ 877-0082)**INTERNET ACCESS****Internet café** (cnr Matamoros & Guerrero; per hr M\$15; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat) As yet unnamed.**LAUNDRY****Tim Pho** (☎ 877-0529; cnr Juárez & Abasolo; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) Friendly and cheap: up to 4kg takes two hours and costs M\$50.**MEDICAL SERVICES****Medical center** (Guerrero) Between Madero and Morelos.**MONEY**

Several banks are directly across from the Zona Hotelera ferry dock. Most exchange currency, have ATMs and are open 8:30am to 5pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 2pm Saturday.

HSBC (Av Rueda Medina)**POST & TELEPHONE**

The island has an abundance of Telmex card phones.

Post office (☎ 877-0085; cnr Guerrero & López Mateos; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)**TOURIST INFORMATION****Immigration office** (☎ 877-0189; Av Rueda Medina; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun) Next door to the tourist information office, but frequently has a sign up that reads 'Sorry, gone to Cancún.'**Tourist information office** (☎ 877-0767; Av Rueda Medina; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & Sun) There's no sign, but the office is located between Madero and Morelos next to the Migraciones office. It offers a number of brochures, and one member of its friendly staff speaks English; the rest speak Spanish only.**Sights & Activities****BEACHES & SWIMMING**Once you reach **Playa Norte**, the island's main beach, you won't want to leave. Its warm shallow waters are the color of blue-raspberry syrup and the beach is crushed coral. Unlike the outer beach, Playa Norte is safe and the water is only chest-deep even far from shore. If you tire of sunbathing, cool off with something frosty at one of the many bars.Five kilometers south of town is **Playa Lancheros**, the southernmost point served by local buses. The beach is less attractive than

Playa Norte, but it sometimes has free musical festivities on Sunday. A taxi ride to Lancheros is M\$20.

Another 1.5km south of Lancheros is **Playa Garrafón**, with translucent waters, colorful fish and no sand. Unfortunately the reef here has been heavily damaged by hurricanes and careless visitors. The water can be very choppy, sweeping you into jagged areas, so it's best to stay near shore. Avoid the overhyped and overpriced Parque Natural (which has constructed a horrendous eyesore of an observation tower that has you praying for a hurricane) and visit instead **Hotel Garrafón de Castilla** (☎ 877-0107; Carretera Punta Sur Km 6; admission M\$20; ☎ 9am-5pm), which provides chairs, umbrellas, showers and baths for the entrance fee. Snorkeling gear is M\$60 extra. It has a roped-off swimming area as well as a restaurant and snack bar. The hotel rents lockers and towels, and offers snorkeling tours to the offshore reef for M\$200. Taxis from town cost M\$50.**HACIENDA MUNDACA**This **hacienda** (Av Rueda Medina; admission M\$10; ☎ 9am-5pm) is at the large bend in Avenida Rueda Medina, about 4km south of the town. Its story is perhaps more intriguing than the ruins that remain. A 19th-century slave trader and reputed pirate, Fermin Antonio Mundaca de Marechaja, fell in love with a local woman known as La Trigueña (Brunette). To win her, Mundaca built a two-story mansion complete with gardens and graceful archways, as well as a small fortification.

But while Mundaca was building the house, La Trigueña married another islander. Brokenhearted, Mundaca died and his house, fortress and garden fell into disrepair. Some documents indicate that Mundaca died during a visit to Mérida and was buried there. Others say he died on the island, and indeed there's a grave in the town cemetery that supposedly contains his remains. Despite the skull and crossbones on his headstone (a common memento mori) there's no evidence in history books that Mundaca was ever a pirate. Instead, it is said he accumulated his wealth by transporting slaves from Africa to Cuba, where they were forced to work in mines and sugarcane fields.

Today the mostly ruined complex has some walls and foundations, a large central pond, some rusting cannons and a partially rebuilt

house. At the southern end stand a gateway and a small garden. You can still make out the words *Entrada de La Trigueña* (La Trigueña's Entrance) etched into the impressive stone arch of the gate.

The shady grounds make for pleasant strolling (bring insect repellent), and a small zoo is scattered across them, holding local fauna. Kids may find it fun; adults may want to unlock the cages.

Hacienda Mundaca is easily reached by bus or bike; a taxi from town will cost M\$30.

PUNTA SUR

At the south end of the island you'll find a romantic lighthouse, modern sculpture garden and the severely worn remains of a

temple dedicated to Ixchel, Maya goddess of the moon and fertility. The lightkeeper will sometimes let you climb to the top for amazing views – remember to tip. In 1988 Hurricane Gilbert nearly finished the ruins off; what was left was pummeled by Emily and Wilma in 2005, and there's now little to see other than the sculpture garden, the sea and, in the distance, Cancún. Unless you're desperate to pay the steep entry fee (M\$50), head left before the lighthouse and enjoy the view from the small dirt parking lot. From Isla Mujeres Town, a taxi costs M\$50.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Many of the diving and snorkeling sites in the Cancún/Isla Mujeres area were affected by

DREAM GREEN BY VISITING ISLA MUJERES TURTLE FARM

Although they are endangered, sea turtles are still killed throughout Latin America for their eggs and meat, which is considered a delicacy. Three species of sea turtle lay eggs in the sand along Isla Mujeres' calm western shore, and they are now being protected – one *tortugita* (little turtle) at a time.

In the 1980s, efforts by a local fisherman led to the founding of the **Isla Mujeres Tortugranja** (Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm; ☎ 877-0595; Carretera Sac Bajo Km 5; admission M\$30; ☎ 9am-5pm; 🗺️), 5km south of town, which protects the turtles' breeding grounds and places wire cages around their eggs to protect against predators.

Hatchlings live in three large pools for up to a year, then are tagged for monitoring and released. Because most turtles in the wild die within their first few months, the practice of guarding them through their first year greatly increases their chances of survival. Moreover, the turtles that leave this protected beach return each year, which means their offspring receive the same protection.

There are several hundred sea turtles, ranging in weight from 150g to more than 300kg. The farm also has a small but good-quality aquarium, displays on marine life and a gift shop. Tours are conducted in Spanish and English.

If you're driving, cycling or walking from the bus stop, bear right at the 'Y' just beyond Hacienda Mundaca's parking lot (the turn is marked by a tiny sign). The facility is easily reached from town by taxi (M\$30).

Hurricanes Emily and Wilma in 2005. That said, hurricane damage is part of natural reef ecology, and the reefs are now growing anew. Within a short boat ride of the island there's a handful of lovely dives, such as **Barracuda**, **La Bandera**, **El Jigüeo** and **Manchones**. You can expect to see sea turtles, rays and barracuda, along with a wide array of hard and soft corals. A popular nonreef dive is **Ultrafreeze** (or El Frío), where you'll see the intact hull of a 60m-long cargo ship – thought to have been deliberately sunk in 30m of water. It's 90 minutes by boat northeast of Isla Mujeres. The name of the site is due to the unusually cool water found there. A rental 3mm shorty wetsuit will barely keep you warm; consider asking for a hood if you tend to get chilled while diving.

Snorkeling with whale sharks (M\$1250) is the latest craze on the island. The season runs from July through September. It can get a bit crazy with several boats circling one whale shark, but they try to limit the number of swimmers in the water to three people (including one guide). Sea Hawk Divers, Coral Scuba Dive Center and the Fisherman's Cooperative Booth (see right) all offer whale shark trips. (For more information on whale sharks, see boxed text, p97.)

To protect and preserve the reefs, a M\$20 fee is charged for all diving and swimming. Please pay it, as this money is used to preserve

natural patrimony. At all of the reputable dive centers you need to show your certification card, and you will be expected to have your own gear. Equipment rental adds M\$100 to the prices listed here; you'll pay another M\$100 if you need a wetsuit.

Sea Hawk Divers (☎/fax 877-0296; www.isla-mujeres.net/seahawkdivers; Carlos Lazo) offers dives for M\$450 (one tank) to M\$600 (two tanks), a resort course for M\$850, PADI Open Water certification (M\$3200) and snorkeling tours from M\$250.

Coral Scuba Dive Center (☎ 877-0763; www.coral-scubadivecenter.com; Hidalgo), between Abasolo and Madero, offers dives for M\$290 to M\$590, snorkel trips for M\$220 and a variety of courses.

The fisherfolk of Isla Mujeres have formed a cooperative to offer snorkeling tours of various sites from M\$200, including the reef off Playa Garrafón, and day trips to Isla Contoy for M\$500. You can book through the **Fisherman's Cooperative Booth** (☎ 877-1363; Av Rueda Medina) in a *palapa* steps away from the dock. Booking here ensures your money goes to locals.

DEEP-SEA FISHING

The fishing cooperative (see above) offers trips to fish for marlin, swordfish and dorado from M\$500/1500 per hour/half-day, including bait and tackle, soft drinks, snacks and beer.

Sleeping

The 'high season' rates cover roughly mid-December through March. During this period you can expect many places to be booked solid by noon (even earlier during Easter week). US spring break (March to early April) is another peak time.

All the sleeping options given here are in Isla Mujeres Town.

BUDGET

Ourpick Poc-Na Hostel (☎/fax 877-0090; www.pocna.com; cnr Matamoros & Carlos Lazo; sites per person M\$65, dm with/without card M\$90/110, d M\$240-350; 🗺️ 🗺️) Only moments away from one of the island's nicest beaches and decorated with shells and hibiscus flowers, Mexico's oldest youth hostel ranks among the country's best. It has fan-cooled six-, eight- and 10-bed co-ed dorms as well as women's dorms and a few air-con doubles. The large main common area has hammocks to chill in and an excellent sound system putting out tunes till the wee hours. The property extends through 100m of sand and coconut palms to the edge of the Caribbean and the hostel's own beach bar. Though there are no cooking facilities for guests, the kitchen serves good, inexpensive food (and beer and wine).

Hotel Roca Teliz (☎ 877-0407; jccanopus@hotmail.com; cnr Hidalgo & Abasolo; s low/high season M\$100/160, d low/high season M\$160/250; 🗺️) Good budget digs, especially for solo travelers, the 'Rock' has a cool central courtyard, dark but clean rooms, and is located right on the Hidalgo pedestrian mall. Add M\$100 for air-con.

Hotel Caribe Maya (☎ 877-0684; Madero 9; d with fan/air-con M\$250/300; 🗺️) The old blue tiles need replacing, but this place offers rooms that, though a bit musty, are solid value even in the high season.

Hotel Marcianito (☎ 877-0111; Abasolo 10; r M\$300-350) The 'Little Martian' is a neat, tidy and non-pod-people-owned hotel with 13 slightly dark, fan-cooled rooms that have a bit too much air freshener. Upper-floor rooms are the more expensive ones. Plaid quilts seem cutely out of place.

MIDRANGE

Hotel D'Gomar (☎ 877-0541; Av Rueda Medina 150; d with fan M\$350, with air-con low/high season M\$500/650; 🗺️) A friendly place facing the ferry dock between Morelos and Bravo, this has four floors of attractive, ample and well-maintained rooms

with double beds (air-con rooms have two) and large bathrooms. Most have hammocks, and both coffee and water are free. The mirror in the stairway gives warped, funhouse-style reflections as you head to your room.

Hotel Belmar (☎ 877-0430; www.rolandi.com; Hidalgo 110; d with air-con low/high season M\$350/950, ste with Jacuzzi M\$950/1340; 🗺️) Above the Pizza Rolandi restaurant and run by the same friendly family. All rooms are comfy and well kept, with tiled floors and (some) balconies. Prices span four distinct seasons.

Hotel Mesón del Bucanero (☎ 877-1222, 800-712-3510; www.bucaneros.com; Hidalgo 11; d M\$400-700; 🗺️) Above Restaurant Bucaneros, between Abasolo and Madero. Its nicely decorated rooms (most with air-con) all have TVs and are priced according to their various combinations of beds, balcony, tub and fridge – one even has a blender and toaster. Rooms air out nicely if the windows are opened.

Villa Kiin (☎ 877-1024; www.villakiin.com; Calle Zazil-Ha s/n; d low season M\$400-1290, high season M\$990-1690) This is the best buy in this price range. Beautiful cabanas right by the beach offer something similar to what's in Tulum, while palm-shaded hammocks and a common kitchen make it easy to do nothing all afternoon.

Hotel Francis Arlene (☎/fax 877-0310; Guerrero 7; r with fan/air-con low season M\$450/550, high season M\$550/650; 🗺️) This place offers comfortable, good-sized, pastel-and-white rooms with fan and fridge. Most have a king-sized bed or two doubles, and many have balconies and sea views. The lounging frog sculptures will either seem hokey or cute. Either way they kinda fit right in.

TOP END

All rooms in this category have air-con.

Hotel Playa de la Media Luna (☎ 887-0759; www.playamedialuna.com; Sección Rocas, lotes 9 & 10, Punta Norte; r M\$950-1500; 🗺️ 🗺️) The older, cheaper rooms (M\$400 to M\$600) are a pretty good deal as you get to use the hotel's pool, though the beds are a bit sproingy. The rooms in the new house are a bit fancier, some with ocean views, all featuring bedspreads that should have left this world when *Three's Company* went off the air. Big spenders should head next door to the Hotel Secreto.

Hotel Cabanas María del Mar (☎ 877-0179; www.cabanadelmar.com; Carlos Lazo 1; d low season M\$750-990, high season M\$1100-1300; 🗺️ 🗺️) Near Playa Norte, it has 73 rooms with firm beds and 'pretty in

pink' bedspreads. All have balconies or terraces, many with sea or pool views and lovely tiled bathrooms. A lush courtyard, restaurant and swimming pool top things off. Rates include continental breakfast.

Hotel Na Balam (☎ 877-0279; www.nabalam.com; Calle Zazil-Ha 118; r low/high season M\$1500/2400, ste M\$3000/3600; ♿ ♿) Butterflies flit around the beautiful hibiscus and palm garden, and many rooms face Playa Norte. All rooms are decorated with simple elegance and have safes, hammocks, private balconies or patios... and no TVs. The hotel offers yoga and meditation classes as well as massage services, and has a pool and restaurant. There's also entertainment here (opposite).

Eating

Mercado Municipal (Town Market; Guerrero) Inside the remodeled market are a couple of stalls selling hot food cheap – a plate of chicken *mole* and rice, or tuna with olives in a tortilla, can go for as little as M\$15. Other stalls sell a variety of produce, and a juice stand serves up liquid refreshments. Four open-air restaurants out the front serve simple, filling meals at fair prices.

La Flor de Michoacán (cnr Hidalgo & Bravo; juices M\$8-M\$15; ☎ 9am-9pm) Near the plaza, this is the place to go for excellent and inexpensive milkshakes, fruit drinks and shaved ices.

Aluxes Coffee House (Matamoros; bagels M\$20, sandwiches M\$40-50; ☎ 8am-10pm Wed-Mon) Aluxes serves bagels with cream cheese, sandwiches, muffins, and hot and iced coffee. Between Guerrero and Hidalgo.

our pick Mañana (☎ 877-0555; cnr Matamoros & Guerrero; dishes M\$20-70; ☎ 8am-4pm; ♿) A good-vibe place with colorful hand-painted tables, superfriendly service and some excellent veggie options – the hummus and veggie baguette is the restaurant's signature dish – Mañana is perhaps the best lunch spot on the island. It also has coffee, *licuados* (blends of fruit or juice with water or milk, and sugar) and some Middle Eastern dishes. There's a book exchange, too.

Restaurante Bucaneros (☎ 877-0126; Hidalgo; mains M\$26-120, set meals M\$120; ☎ 7am-11pm) Below the Hotel Mesón del Bucanero between Abasolo and Madero, this is a fan-cooled, mostly outdoor restaurant with a pleasing ambience and a variety of alcoholic and nonalcoholic tropical shakes and drinks. The best deal is the *menú especial* (set menu), which gives

you a choice of several mains accompanied by soup or salad and a dessert.

La Lomita (Juárez; mains M\$40-120; ☎ 9am-10:30pm Mon-Sat) The 'Little Hill' serves good, cheap Mexican food in a small, colorful setting between Allende and Uribe. Seafood and chicken dishes predominate. Try the fantastic bean and avocado soup, or ceviche.

Viva Cuba Libre (Calle Hidalgo Plaza Almeyros; mains M\$60-90; ☎ 5pm-midnight Tue-Sun) It competes for decibel levels with neighboring restaurants, but really, we all like Cuban *son* (a type of dance) more than bad disco remixes, don't we? Apart from that, you get a well-deserved break from Mexican fare with *ropa vieja* (slow-cooked shredded beef), Cuban lobster and other Caribbean favorites. *Mojitos* (Cuban mint, lime and rum cocktails) are two for M\$50. Viva Cuba indeed!

Mininos (Av Rueda Medina; mains M\$60-130; ☎ 11am-9pm) A tiny, colorfully painted shack with a sand floor right on the water, Mininos dishes up cocktails of shrimp, conch and octopus, as well as heaping plates of delicious ceviche and seafood soups.

Pizza Rolandi (☎ 877-0430; Hidalgo; mains M\$70-120, pizzas M\$60-130; ☎ 8am-11pm) Below the Hotel Belmar, between Abasolo and Madero, it bakes very good thin-crust pizzas and calzones in a wood-fired oven. The menu also includes pasta, fresh salads, fish, good coffee and some Italian specialties – definitely *don't* come here looking for Mexican.

Xpress Super, a chain supermarket on the plaza, has a solid selection of groceries, baked goods and snacks.

Drinking & Entertainment

Isla Mujeres' highest concentration of nightlife is along Hidalgo, and hot spots on or near the beach form an arc around the northern edge of town. Loud disco-bar-restaurants open and close seasonally on Hidalgo, usually to be replaced by something almost the same. If no hours are listed you can assume the venue opens in the afternoon and doesn't close until at least midnight.

Poc-Na Hostel (cnr Matamoros & Carlos Lazo; ☎ sunset-sunrise) Has a beachfront joint with bonfires and more hippies than all the magic buses in the world. It's a scene, but it's a chill, cooled-out scene.

Fayne's (Hidalgo; ☎ 5pm-midnight) One of the latest disco-bar-restaurants, often featuring

live reggae, salsa and other Caribbean sounds. Near Matamoros.

La Malquerida (☎ 877-1639; cnr Hidalgo & Matamoros; ☎ 10am-midnight) Seems pricier than it could be and doesn't have the view the beach bars do, but it's open daily and sometimes has live music.

Playa Sol (Playa Norte; ☎ 9am-10pm or whenever) A happening spot day and night, with volleyball, a soccer area and good food and drinks at decent prices. It's a great spot to watch the sunset, and in high season bands play reggae, salsa, merengue or other danceable music. Just follow the beach to the party.

Hotel Na Balam (Calle Zazil-Ha) Caters to an older set, and has a beach bar that's a popular spot on weekend afternoons (every other week in the off-season), with live music, dancing and a three-hour-long happy hour.

La Peña (Guerrero; ☎ 7:30pm-3am or later) This English-run club features the sound of waves, lots of wood and a nice pool table. Off the north side of the plaza, it has a great atmosphere and a fabulous music mix. Some say it's the best in town.

Getting There & Away

There are several points of embarkation to reach Isla Mujeres. The following description starts from the northernmost port and progresses southeast (see Map p75). To reach Puerto Juárez or Punta Sam from Ciudad Cancún, catch any bus (M\$4) displaying those destinations and/or 'Ruta 13' as it heads north on Avenida Tulum. Some R1 (Zona Hotelera; M\$6.50) buses make the trip as well; ask before boarding.

PUNTA SAM

Car ferries, which also take passengers, depart from Punta Sam (off Map p77), about 8km north of Cancún center, and take about an hour to reach the island. Departure times are 8am, 11am, 2:45pm, 5:30pm and 8:15pm from Punta Sam; and 6:30am, 9:30am, 12:45pm, 4:15pm and 7:15pm from Isla Mujeres. Walk-ons and vehicle passengers pay M\$15; drivers are included in the fare for cars (M\$190), vans (M\$240), motorcycles (M\$75) and bicycles (M\$60). If you're taking a car in high season (believe us, you don't need one), it's good to get in line an hour or so before departure time. Tickets go on sale just before the ferry begins loading.

PUERTO JUÁREZ

Just over 4km north of Ciudad Cancún (15 minutes by bus) is Puerto Juárez (Map p75). Enclosed, air-con express boats depart from here for Isla Mujeres (one way M\$35, 25 minutes) every 30 minutes from 6am to 8:30am, then hourly until 9:30pm with a final departure at 11pm; they rarely leave on time.

ZONA HOTELERA

Services from the following two spots in the Zona Hotelera change names and schedules frequently; ask your concierge to check for you before heading out to catch boats from any of the following places. All take about 25 minutes to reach Isla Mujeres.

El Embarcadero

Shuttles depart from this dock at Playa Linda (Map p75) four times daily in low season, between 9:30am and 1:30pm, returning from Isla Mujeres at 10:30am, 1:30pm, 3:30pm and 5:15pm. The one-way fare (M\$75) includes soft drinks. High season sees up to seven departures each way. El Embarcadero is a beige building between the Gran Costa Real Hotel and the channel, on the mainland side of the bridge (Blvd Kukulcán Km 4).

Playa Tortugas

The **Isla Shuttle** (☎ 883-3448) leaves from the dock on Playa Tortugas (Map p75) on Blvd Kukulcán Km 6.35 at 9:15am, 11:30am, 1:45pm and 3:45pm, returning from Isla Mujeres at 10:15am, 12:30pm, 3:30pm and 6:30pm. The one-way fare is M\$90.

Getting Around

With all rented transportation it's best to deal directly with the shop supplying it. They're happier if they don't have to pay commissions to touts, and the chances for misunderstandings are fewer. Rates are usually open to negotiation.

BICYCLE

Cycling is a great way to get around the island. Many bicycles are single-speed, with coaster (ie push-back-on-the-pedal) brakes; these give you a good workout on the gradual hills. A number of shops rent bikes for about M\$20/80 per hour/day. Arrive early in the day to get your pick of the better ones and take the time to have the seat adjusted properly. Some places ask for a deposit of about M\$100.

David (☎ 044 998-860-0075; Av Rueda Medina), near Abasolo, has a decent selection.

BUS & TAXI

Local buses depart about every 25 minutes (but don't bank on it) from next to the Centro de Convenciones (near the back of the market) or from the ferry dock and head along Avenida Rueda Medina, stopping along the way. Get taxis from the stand at the dock or flag one down. You can get to the entrance of Hacienda Mundaca, within 300m of the Turtle Farm (Tortugranja), and as far south as Playa Lancharos (1.5km north of Playa Garrafón). Taxi rates are set by the municipal government and posted at the taxi stand just south of the passenger ferry dock. As always, agree on a price before getting in.

MOTORCYCLE & GOLF CART

Take a look around before you rent. The island is tiny and you can walk from the dock to any part of the town in 15 minutes. Two-wheeled motorized transportation can be dangerous; even on sedate Isla Mujeres people get seriously injured or die in bike mishaps. Inspect the vehicle carefully before renting. Costs vary, and are sometimes jacked up in high season, but generally start at about M\$100 per hour, with a two-hour minimum, M\$300 all day (9am to 5pm) and M\$350 for 24 hours.

Many people find golf carts a good way to get around the island, and caravans of them can be seen tooling down the roads. They average M\$150/450 per hour/day and M\$550 for 24 hours. A good, no-nonsense place for both bikes and golf carts is **Pepe's Moto Rent** (☎ 877-0019) on Hidalgo between Matamoros and Abasolo.

PARQUE NACIONAL ISLA CONTOY

Spectacular Isla Contoy is a bird-lover's delight: a national park and sanctuary that is an easy day trip from Isla Mujeres. About 800m at its widest point and more than 7km long, it has dense foliage that provides ideal shelter for more than 100 species of bird, including brown pelicans, olive cormorants, turkey birds, brown boobies and frigates, as well as being a good place to see red flamingos, snowy egrets and white herons.

Most of the trips stop for snorkeling both en route to and just off Contoy, which sees about 1500 visitors a month. Bring binoculars, mosquito repellent and sun block.

The trip gives you about two hours of free time to explore the island's two interpretive trails, skim through materials in the visitors center and to climb the 27m-high observation tower. For M\$100 per person, a park biologist will take you on a tour of Laguna Puerto Viejo, a prime nesting site; funds go toward park upkeep and research projects. Contact the **park headquarters** (☎ 998-877-0118) on Isla Mujeres. **Amigos de Isla Contoy** (www.islacontoy.org) has a website with good information on the island's ecology.

Getting There & Away

Daily visits to Contoy are offered by the **Fisherman's Cooperative Booth** (Map p91; ☎ 998-877-1363; Av Rueda Medina) on Isla Mujeres. The trip (M\$500 per person) lasts from 9am to 5pm and includes a light breakfast, lunch (with fish caught en route), snorkeling (gear provided), park admission, scientific information on the island, and your choice of purified water, soft drinks or beer.

ISLA HOLBOX

☎ 984 / pop 2000

Isn't life great when it's low-fi and low-rise? That's the attitude on friendly Isla Holbox (hol-bosh) with its sandy streets, colorful Caribbean buildings, and lazing, sun-drunk dogs. There's so little to do here, in fact, that even the bars close at 8pm or 9pm (at least during low season). Holbox is thus a welcome refuge for anyone looking to just get away from it all ('all' likely meaning the hubbub of Cancún!).

The island is about 30km long and from 500m to 2km wide, with seemingly endless beaches, tranquil waters and a galaxy of shells in various shapes and colors. Lying within the 1.54 sq km Yum Balam reserve, Holbox is home to more than 150 species of bird, including roseate spoonbills, pelicans, herons, ibis and flamingos. The waters are abundant with fish, and dolphins can be seen year-round. In summer, whale sharks congregate relatively nearby in unheard-of quantities. And strong northerly winds could make for great kiteboarding and windsurfing (at press time both these activities were prohibited; ask before you set sail).

The water is not the translucent turquoise common to Quintana Roo beach sites, because here the Caribbean mingles with the darker Gulf of Mexico. The island's dark-

A GAME OF DOMINOES – SWIM WITH THE WHALE SHARKS

Between mid-May and mid-September, massive whale sharks congregate around Isla Holbox to feed on plankton. They are the largest fish in the world, weighing up to 15 tons and extending from gaping mouth to arching tail as long as 15m. Locals call them dominoes because of their speckled skin.

The best time to swim with these gentle giants is in July. A trip will cost you M\$800, plus M\$20 to visit the marine reserve. During the shoulder seasons, you can get up to a dozen boats rotating around a single whale shark. It's unpleasant for both shark and swimmer, so think twice about taking a tour during this season.

The World Wildlife Fund has been working with the local community since 2003 to develop responsible practices for visiting the whale sharks, trying to balance the economic boon of these tours with the environmental imperatives of protecting a threatened species.

When swimming with the whale shark only three swimmers (including your guide) are allowed in the water at a time. You are not allowed to touch the fish, and are required to wear either a life jacket or wetsuit to ensure you do not dive below the shark.

Willy's Tours (☎ 875-2008; holbox@hotmail.com, Av Tiburón Ballena), near Mini Súper Besa, offers tours swimming with whale sharks (M\$800 per person), birding (M\$800 to M\$1200 per boat), crocodile spotting (M\$2270 per boat) and fishing (M\$3500 per boat). Boats can accommodate six to 12 people. Ask to stop for a quick snorkel on the way back from your trip – the guides will normally agree to this.

water lagoon on the south side inspired the Maya to name it Holbox or 'black hole.' During the rainy season there are clouds of mosquitoes: bring repellent and be prepared to stay inside for a couple of hours after dusk.

Orientation & Information

Golf carts are big here, but walking to the town square from the dock only takes about 15 minutes. Keep going and you'll hit the beach. Budget hotels and most of the town's restaurants are clustered around the plaza. A few cabanas are further out along the island's northern shore in what locals call the Zona Hotelera. Nobody uses street names, but Calle Juárez connects the town with the ferry dock.

Note that the island has no bank or ATM, and many places to stay and eat do not accept credit cards. Bring more cash than you think you'll use, then double that amount.

Cyber@Shark (☎ 875-2044; per hr M\$15; ☒ noon-midnight Mon-Fri, 10am-midnight Sat & Sun) offers internet and VOIP/phone connections.

Dial ☎ 066 for police, fire or medical assistance.

Many hotels will book tours of the area's attractions. Posada Mawimbi (p98) offers canoe and kayak trips to the other side of the island, as well as motorboat trips toward the central areas of the island.

Sleeping

Isla Holbox is the perfect place to bring a book and lounge in a hammock under some palm trees. Not surprisingly, cabanas are everywhere, but the town plaza has some reasonable hotels. Remember that many budget options and some midrange ones have either no hot water or have it only at certain times of the day. The first three listings are utilitarian concrete constructions inland from the beach. The Mawimbi and Tortugas are newer, Italian-run places at the edge of the beach, using lots of varnished hardwood, timbers and thatch. If you're taking a taxi, make sure the driver brings you to the place you've requested.

Posada La Raza (☎ 875-2072; Juárez; s with fan/air-con M\$250/400, d with fan/air-con M\$350/500; ☒) A modest, clean, one-story place on the west side of the parque. Rooms have one double and one single bed. Fan-cooled rooms have ceiling and pedestal fans, making for good circulation. Guests have use of a small kitchen and hand-laundry facilities, and can hang clothes or sunbathe on the roof.

Posada d'Ingrid (☎ 875-2070; www.posadadingrid.com; r with air-con M\$350-500; ☒) A friendly bright-blue place one block west and one block north of the northwest edge of the parque. All six rooms have hot water and TV; there's a simple *palapa* in the courtyard.

Posada Los Arcos (☎ 875-2072; saul954@hotmail.com; Juárez; d with fan M\$350, with air-con M\$400-550; ☒) Next

door to Posada La Raza, this is a touch more upscale. Unfortunately, cracks in the door-frames mean tons of mosquitoes can easily get in (a problem easily remedied by buying a mosquito coil and burning it near the door before you go to bed). Its rooms are located around a central courtyard and all have hot and cold water. Rates vary by 50% in summer.

Posada Mawimbi (☎ /fax 875-2003; www.mawimbi.net; d low/high season M\$400/600, ste M\$800-1000; ♿) Mosquito nets are a welcome luxury in this pleasant two-story place just off the beach and about three blocks east of Juárez. The standard rooms have a fan and comfortable beds, while the suites offer air-con (not really necessary). Many rooms also have a balcony and hammock, and some have kitchenettes. Blue-and-yellow tiled sinks make even shaving a pleasure. Conch lamps light the walkways after dark – a beautiful finishing touch.

our pick **Hotel La Palapa** (☎ 875-2121; www.hotella-palapa.com; d low/high season M\$500/700; ♿) Arguably the best midrange option on the island, Palapa is brand-spanking new, and offers cozy beach-front rooms, private patios (complete with hammocks) and a cloistered beach area complete with an outdoor *fogata* (fireplace). The staff are efficient and friendly, and it's located right near the restaurants of the town's center, 100m east of Juárez along the beach.

Hotelita Casa Las Tortugas (☎ /fax 875-2129; www.holboxcasalastortugas.com; r low season M\$500-800, high season M\$700-1100) Has the same rustic but refined style as its neighbor, the Mawimbi, with an even greater abundance of charming touches, particularly in the bathrooms. Many rooms have kitchenettes and balconies, with hammocks to laze in outside. There's a beach-front café that serves the complimentary continental breakfast.

Villas Delfines (☎ /fax 875-2197; www.holbox.com; bungalows low season M\$900-1500, high season M\$1200-1500) This eco-tel on the beach about 1km east of town composts waste, catches rainwater and uses solar power. Its large beach bungalows are built on stilts, fully screened and fan-cooled. The hotel rents kayaks and has a restaurant that offers very reasonable meal plans. It's great for those going green, but the accommodations are not quite as *accommodating* as other lodgings in this price category.

Eating

The influx of Italians has been good for gourmets. Italian, seafood and lobster meals are

all good, but eat early, especially in the off-season. Many places close by 9pm.

La Isla del Colibri (breakfast M\$35-60, mains M\$50-160; ☎ 8am-1pm & 5-10:30pm) A small restaurant in a gaily painted, Caribbean-style wooden house on the southwest corner of the parque. It serves huge fruit plates, breakfasts (and coffee), *licuados*, juices and a variety of meat and seafood dishes.

Edelin Pizzería & Restaurant (pizzas M\$50-150, mains M\$40-100; ☎ 11am-midnight) On the southeast corner of the plaza, it serves good, Sardinian-style pizza, as well as *tortas* (sandwich in a roll), ceviches, fish fillets, shrimp and lobster; beer costs M\$15.

our pick **Los Pelicanos** (☎ 998-192-4575; meals M\$60-200; ☎ 5pm-midnight, closed Mon) Half a block south from the plaza's southeast corner, this friendly eatery is lauded by locals as the best restaurant in town. The house specialty is homemade pasta with your choice of sauce. It serves up other Italian favorites and a smattering of seafood dishes, including a pepper-seared tuna and a delicious fish soup. The friendly international owners give you free bruschetta to kick off the meal, and there's a good selection of Italian wines.

Buena Vista Grill (☎ 875-2102; meals M\$100-200; ☎ 11am-9pm) This casual eatery next to Faro Viejo has plastic chairs, but serves up grilled fish specialties including whole grilled fish or fillets wrapped in banana leaves. The dayvaries.

Getting There & Around

A *barco* (boat) ferries passengers (M\$40, 25 minutes) to Holbox from the port village of Chiquilá nine times daily from 5am to 6pm in winter, 6am to 7pm in summer. Buses departing Chiquilá usually wait for the boat to arrive. Smaller, faster and wetter *lanchas* (motorboats) make the crossing whenever anyone's willing to pay M\$250 for the entire boat (up to about six people with gear; the fare is higher after dark).

Two Mayab buses – with no bathroom, so use the grungy one in the nearby restaurant (M\$3) beforehand if you think you'll need to go – leave Cancún daily for Chiquilá (M\$70, 3½ hours) at 7:50am and 12:40pm. There's also an Oriente bus from Valladolid (M\$70, 2½ hours) at 2:45am. From Mérida, take an overnight Noreste bus to Chiquilá (M\$124, seven hours) at 11:30pm.

OFF THE MAP – ALTERNATIVE TOURISM ON THE RISE IN QUINTANA ROO

Many Maya communities are beginning to welcome tourism – it may be the only way to maintain their language and culture as mass migration to boom towns such as Cancún draws away the best and brightest, and children ask to study English rather than Yucatec.

Organizations such as **Puerta Verde** (www.puertaverde.com.mx) are helping these communities build tourist infrastructure. Two of the program's projects can be found on the road to Chiquilá in the towns of Solferino and San Ángel. You can go kayaking, cycling or learn about medicinal plants in San Ángel. Further north, Solferino has an orchid garden, jungle camping spots and canopy tours.

Taking a taxi from Cancún is another possibility; you may be able to get a taxi for M\$600.

Buses (all 2nd class) leave Chiquilá for Cancún (M\$70) at 7:30am and 1:30pm; Tizimin (M\$50) at 7:30am, 1:30pm and 4:30pm; Valladolid (M\$70) at 5:30am; and Mérida (M\$124) at 5:30am.

If you're driving you can either park your vehicle in the Chiquilá parking lot for M\$30 per day (8am to 6pm or any fraction thereof), take your chances parking it on the pier (which is crowded in high season) or try to catch the infrequent car ferry to Holbox. Since you won't need the car on the island, leaving it on the mainland is a better option.

Holbox' sand streets see few autos, but golf carts have become ubiquitous and, for many residents, rather annoying. If you need one, try **Rentadora El Brother** (☎ 875-2018; cart per hr/day/24hr M\$100/600/800), on Juárez near the beach – but consider using your walking shoes instead.

RIVIERA MAYA

The Riviera Maya (Tulum Corridor) is a strip of coastline that stretches from Cancún in the north to the town of Tulum, about 135km southward. Once a beautiful stretch of undeveloped jungle, stunning coastline and barrier coral reef, it is now fast becoming a strip of giant all-inclusive resort hotels.

Undaunted by hurricanes or efforts by locals to prevent such incursions, megatels are scooping up the mangrove swamps and turning them into golf courses. 'Ecoparks' are also booming. The developers buy giant swaths of acreage under the guise of being 'environmental,' then turn them into theme-based tourist traps, many of which charge exorbitant entry fees.

That said, the parts along the way that aren't developed to death are quite beautiful. Tulum is worth a visit. Its ruins – perched above a perfect beach – are simply breathtaking. Playa del Carmen has exciting nightlife and some great food. And Cozumel remains one of the world's top diving destinations. Qualified divers will find exhilarating cavern-diving opportunities in the Riviera Maya area, and the cenotes, Yucatán's natural limestone caves, are spectacular.

Stop in the small towns along the Riviera Maya or head inland to catch glimpses of the Mexico that tourism forgot.

PUERTO MORELOS

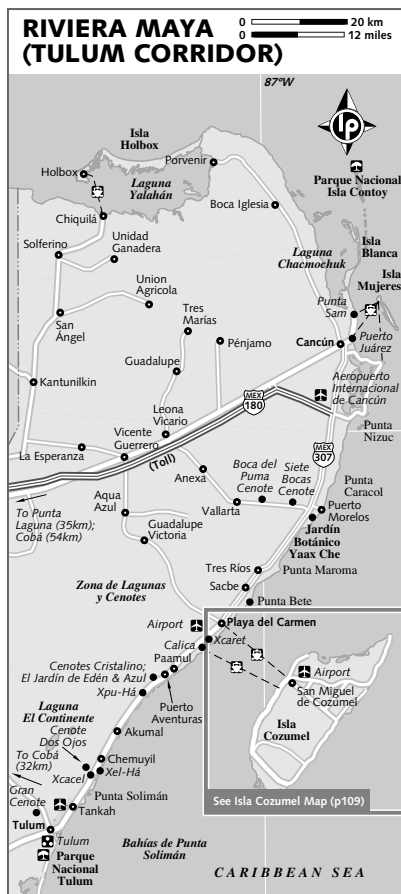
☎ 998 / pop 3000

Halfway between Cancún and Playa del Carmen, Puerto Morelos retains its quiet, small-town feel despite the building boom north and south of town. While the village offers enough restaurants and bars to keep you entertained by night, it's really the shallow Caribbean waters that draw visitors here. Brilliantly contrasted stripes of bright green and dark blue separate the shore from the barrier reef – a tantalizing sight for divers and snorkelers – while inland a series of excellent cenotes beckon the adventurous. Unfortunately, Hurricanes Wilma and Emily knocked down most of the beach's lovely palms – those naughty girls. In their munificence, they did leave behind the sparkling sand beaches.

Like many resort towns along the coast, Puerto Morelos used to be a fishing village. Today it retains that laid-back appeal, but development is on the rise, including plans for a new cruise-ship port. There's a nice market just a few minutes' walk from the plaza, with a great selection of crafts, hammocks and reasonably priced souvenirs.

Orientation & Information

Puerto Morelos' central plaza is 2km east of Hwy 307 nearly at the end of the main road



into town (the main dock is the true end of the road). The town, all of three streets wide from east to west, stretches several blocks to the north of the plaza and about three long blocks south.

Alma Libre (☎ 871-0713; www.almalibrebooks.com; ☎ 10am-3pm & 6-9pm Tue-Sat, 4-9pm Sun, closed Jul-Sep) has more than 20,000 new and used books. The friendly owners are also a great resource for information about the area.

The HSBC ATM stands off the northeast corner of the plaza.

Computips (per hr M\$15; ☎ 9am-8:30pm Mon-Fri, 3-8:30pm Sat & Sun), an air-con internet place on the plaza, is one of several Puerto Morelos internet cafés.

Lavandería 'Vicar' (☎ 206-9055; Av Gomez M5L6; ☎ 7am-9pm) charges M\$15 per kilogram.

Goyo Morgan, of **Goyo's** (☎ 221-2679), on the plaza, offers jungle tours (adult/child under 12 years M\$400/200). He can be difficult to locate at times, but is a wealth of information about the area, especially edible and medicinal jungle plants. He also offers *temescal* (bathhouse) sessions. See p42 for more on *temescal*.

Sights & Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

The barrier reef that runs along most of the coast of Quintana Roo is only 600m offshore here, providing both divers and snorkelers with views of sea turtles, sharks, stingrays, eagle rays, moray eels, lobsters, staghorn and brain corals and, of course, loads of colorful tropical fish. Several sunken ships make great wreck diving, and the dive centers have cenote trips as well.

Keep in mind (if you're a do-it-yourselfer) that any divers or snorkelers are required to pay M\$20 for an entry bracelet to the marine park; if you're snorkeling, you need a personal flotation device. While the proximity of the reef makes it a tempting destination for beach-based swimmers, strong currents and lots of boat traffic can be hazardous. You're best off hiring a boat from the dock (M\$250) or arranging to tag along with a dive center group as they head out.

You'll find dive shops in Hotel Ojo de Agua and Hotel del Cid.

Dive Puerto Morelos (☎ 206-9084; www.divepuerto-morelos.com; ☎ 8am-7pm) offers snorkeling, diving and cenote trips, or it costs M\$3250 for PADI certification. It often closes during the low season.

CENOTES

For chilling cenote action, check out the 'eco-park' **Boca del Puma** (☎ 577-6420; www.bocadelpuma.com; ☎), 16km west of Puerto Morelos, near the village of Vallarta, or **Siete Bocas** (admission M\$50; ☎), 13km west of Puerto Morelos, which has seven mouths and some serious tourism development going on.

Sleeping

Hotels can be surprisingly full even at non-peak times, so call or book ahead if at all possible.

Posada Amor (☎ 871-0033; www.posadaamor.com; s & d from M\$380, tr & q M\$500) About 100m south-

west of the plaza, it has been in operation for many years. The simple white-walled rooms have some creative touches, and ocean-blue bedsprings seem just right. There's a shady back area with tables and plenty of plants, the restaurant offers good meals, and there's a friendly expat bar. Prices drop by 15% from May to October.

Posada El Moro (☎ 871-0159; www.posadaelmoro.com; Av Gomez; s/d M\$500/750; ☎) It has cheery geraniums in the halls and courtyard, and white walls with red trim. Rooms are slightly stuffy, and some have kitchenettes. All have couches that fold out into futons, and there's a small plunge pool. Rates include continental breakfast. Prices drop substantially in low season. All in all, you're probably better off at the Amor.

Hotel Ojo de Agua (☎ 871-0027; www.ojo-de-agua.com; 1-2-bed r with air-con M\$600/700, with fan & kitchenette M\$800) Offers 33 rooms in a fairly modern building on a nice stretch of beach. It's about three blocks north of the plaza and has its own restaurant, which offers a nice buffet breakfast.

Hotel Hacienda Morelos (☎ /fax 871-0448; www.haciendamorelos.com; d M\$890; ☎) On the waterfront about 150m south of the plaza, it has 15 very appealing, breezy rooms with sea views, kitchenettes and air-con, as well as a small pool and a good restaurant. This is a great value.

Ceiba del Mar (☎ 872-8060; www.ceibadelmar.com; d M\$3700; ☎) OK, it's probably out of most folks' price ranges, but it's worth knowing about, as it's one of the classiest hotels on the Riviera Maya. There's a day-spa that's open to 'outsiders.' It's 2km north of town on the beach.

Eating

Tio's (dishes M\$15-30; ☎ 6am-11pm) A modest, friendly place directly across from the light-house, just off the northeast corner of the plaza. It serves great fish tacos in the morning (three for M\$18!), and good Yucatecan and Mexican dishes the rest of the time, such as *panuchos* (tortilla stuffed with mashed beans, fried, then topped with shredded turkey or chicken, onion and slices of avocado), *salbutes* (same as *panuchos* but without the bean stuffing), *sopa de pollo* (chicken soup) and *tortas*.

Le Café d'Amancia (sandwiches M\$20-40; ☎ 8am-3pm & 6-10pm; ☎) This is a spotlessly clean place

with pleasing ambience on the southwest corner of the plaza. It serves bagels, sandwiches, pies, coffee, and fruit and veggie *licuados*. There's internet machines (formerly known as computers) upstairs.

Mama's Bakery (☎ 845-6810; mains M\$30-60; ☎ 7:30am-2pm) At Mama's try the kiwi-raisin muffins, great carrot cake or the signature sticky buns. Yum! It also offers egg dishes and wonderful smoothies. This intimate, friendly place is a bit hard to find, but don't give up – it's well worth the short walk from the square. Heading north along Gómez, go about four blocks and look on your left for the bamboo wind chimes under the *palapa*. The small sign is easy to overlook.

Hola Asia (☎ 871-0679; mains M\$70-120; ☎ 1-10pm Wed-Mon) On the south side of the plaza, this has become a local institution. Once a tiny café, it has expanded yearly and now serves Japanese sushi, Thai, Chinese and Indian dishes. General Tso's chicken and whole Thai fish are favorites. There's a bar and large dining area upstairs.

John Gray's Kitchen (☎ 871-0665; Av Niños Héroes L6; mains M\$100-200; ☎ 6-10pm Mon-Sat) One block west and two blocks north of the plaza, this 'kitchen' turns out some truly fabulous food. John, the personable owner-chef, has won international acclaim. The eclectic menu changes frequently and may include duck breast with chipotle-tequila-honey sauce, fresh fish with baked tomatoes and kalamata olive sauce, and an array of scrumptious desserts.

Entertainment

Puerto Morelos' nightlife scene is pretty chill. You can hop in a taxi or bus for a night of raunchy fun in neighboring Playa del Carmen if you just can't stand the quiet. Some of the restaurants have bars and live music, and some stay open late.

Don Pepe's (☎ 871-0613; ☎ noon-3am) This is an old standby, popular with the mellow set and karaoke masters. Come here to hang out, talk, watch the plaza or catch live music if it happens to be on.

Café Finca la Chiquilla (Av Rojo Gomez s/n; ☎ 8am-10pm or later) This place, directly across from Don Pepe's, is one of a kind, a great little spot with occasional live music, a full bar, and coffee that is not only freshly ground and roasted, but even *grown and picked* by the owners from their coffee plantation in Puebla.

It's very popular with locals and tourists alike. Meals are also served for M\$40 to M\$70.

Next to Posada Amor, the following bookend bars are popular with expats:

Bara, Bara (☎ noon-1am) Appeals to a younger crowd.
Que Hora Es (☎ noon-1am)

Shopping

One of the best reasons to come to Puerto Morelos is to hit the artisans market, one block south of the plaza's west corner. You can find authentic Tixkokob hammocks, fine jewelry, pottery and clothing at much better prices than you'll see in Playa del Carmen or Cancún. It's refreshingly low-key, and you can often see the craftspeople at work. Mauricio Soriano is the person to find for hammocks. He will explain the different types and offers a wide variety of styles to choose from. See p163 for more information on hammocks.

Getting There & Away

Most Playa Express and Riviera buses that travel between Cancún and Playa del Carmen drop you on the highway. Some Mayab buses enter town; the Riviera bus running between Cancún airport and Playa del Carmen will sometimes enter the town on request. The 2nd-class bus fare from Cancún is M\$17. *Colectivos* cost M\$4.

Taxis are usually waiting at the turnoff to shuttle people into town, and there's often a taxi or two near the plaza to shuttle people back to the highway. Many drivers will tell you the fare is per person or overcharge in some other manner; strive for M\$20 for the 2km ride, for as many people as you can stuff in.

JARDÍN BOTÁNICO

Two kilometers south of the turnoff for Puerto Morelos is the **Jardín Botánico Yaax Che** (admission M\$70; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat; 📍), a 60-hectare nature reserve with nearly 3km of trails through several native habitats. The garden has sections dedicated to epiphytes (orchids and bromeliads), palms, ferns, succulents (cacti and their relatives), ornamental plants and plants used in traditional Maya medicine. The flora is identified in English, Spanish and Latin. The preserve also holds a large animal population, including the only coastal troops of spider monkeys left in the region. Birders come to observe the many migratory and resident bird species. A lookout tower affords views over the mangrove to Puerto Morelos and the sea.

For the anthropologically minded, the preserve has re-creations of a Maya house and a *chiclero* camp (temporary shelters where locals lived while extracting sap from the 'zapote' or chicle tree; the sap was boiled down and used as the base for chewing gum), as well as some genuine Maya ruins (c AD 1400). Bring insect repellent. Buses may be hailed directly in front of the garden.

TRES RÍOS

Tres Ríos (☎ 998-887-8077; www.tres-rios.com; Hwy 307 Km 54) is not open to the public, nor will it ever be, according to resort spokespeople. Rather, it will be a superexclusive ecoresort, and open only to guests of the Hacienda Tres Ríos, slated to open in the summer of 2008.

PUNTA BETE

Punta Bete, a rocky, reef-hugged point 65km south of Cancún, is reached by a dirt road that runs past a large new housing development and weaves 2.5km from Hwy 307 (turn at the sign for Xcalacoco) before reaching the sea. North and south of the stubby point there are beautiful and occasionally wide stretches of beach upon which sit a few small, low-profile hotels, a few restaurants and a superpricey resort.

Coco's Cabanas (☎ /fax 998-887-5470; www.tulumresorts.com; r low/high season M\$700/850; 📍) consists of five nicely decorated cabanas with electricity, fan, good beds and hammocks. It's a short walk from the beach and has a bar, a small pool, a pleasant garden area and a restaurant.

The hotels and restaurants in Punta Bete are within walking distance of each other, but you're best off getting here by rental car or taxi.

PLAYA DEL CARMEN

☎ 984 / pop 100,380

Playa del Carmen, now the third-largest city in Quintana Roo – its population more than doubled over the past five years – is the hippest city on all of the Yucatán Peninsula. Sitting coolly on the lee side of Cozumel, the town's beaches are jammed with super-fit Europeans – they let Americans in, too, if they meet the weight requirements! The waters aren't as clear as those of Cancún or Cozumel, and the beach sands aren't quite as champagne-powder-perfect as they are further north, but still Playa (as it's locally known) grows and grows.

Strolling down Playa del Carmen's pedestrian mall, Quinta Avenida (Fifth Ave), is a fabulous game of see-and-be-seen. It's where the beautiful people go – a city of fashion and fitness, understated chic and European cool.

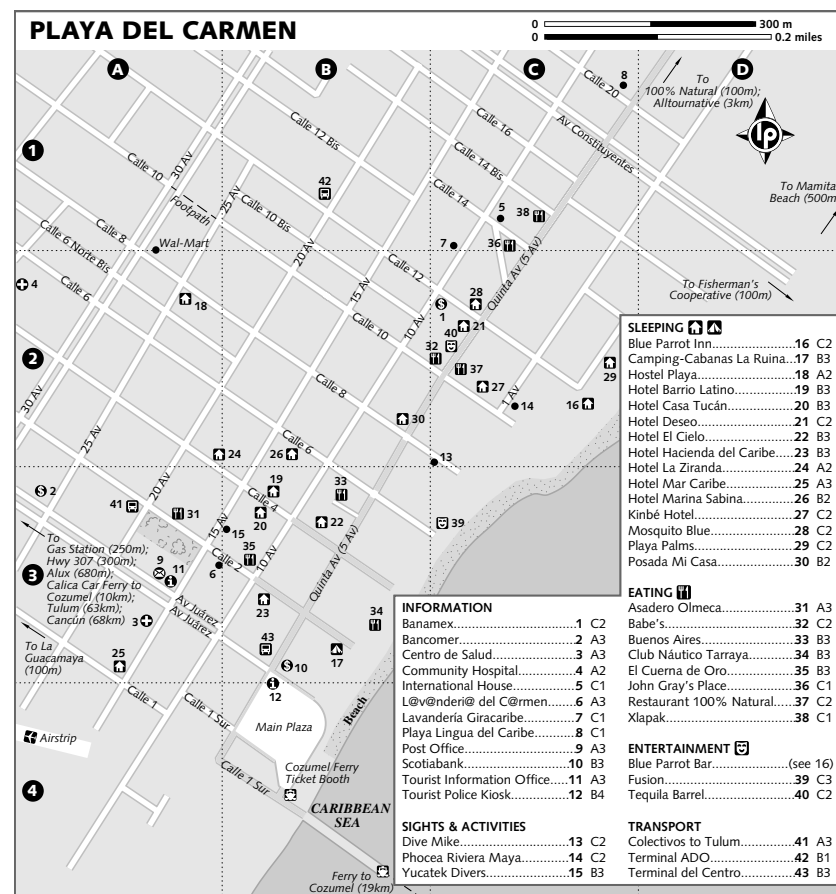
The town is ideally located: close to Cancún's international airport, but far enough south to allow easy access to Cozumel, Tulum, Cobá and other worthy destinations. The reefs here are excellent, and offer diving and snorkeling close by. Look for rays, moray eels, sea turtles and a huge variety of corals. The lavender sea fans make for very picturesque vistas.

With daily cruise-ship visitors, Playa is starting to feel like a mass-tourism destina-

tion, but it retains its European chic, and one need just head two blocks west of the hoity-toity pedestrian mall to catch real glimpses of Mexico.

Orientation

Playa is mostly laid out on an easy, one-way grid. Quinta Avenida (*keen-ta*) is the most happening street in town, especially along its pedestrian stretch (the tourist zone). La Nueva Quinta (New Fifth Ave) is also called La Zona Italiana for the number of Italians operating businesses here. It begins on Calle 22 and stretches north for 10 blocks. It's not as happening as the old Quinta, but probably will be in a year or two. The main bus terminal is at the intersection of Quinta



THOSE MYSTERIOUS ALUXES

Aluxes (a-loosh-es) are Yucatecan forest sprites, and many of the Maya still believe they can bring good or bad luck, even death, to those around them. Therefore, when forests are cleared, whether to make a field or build a house, offerings of food, alcohol and even cigarettes are made to placate them.

Avenida and Juárez, but there is another one further away on Calle 12.

Some people are afraid that leaving the tourist zone will result in instant death, or at least a quick mugging. Unless you're being stupid, you've got little to fear, and the quiet side streets have a wealth of restaurants and cheap hotels.

Information**EMERGENCY**

Ambulance, fire & police (☎ 066)

Tourist police kiosk (☎ 873-2656; ☎ 24hr) Guards the north corner of the main plaza.

INTERNET ACCESS

There are enough internet cafés in Playa to keep Bill Gates in fancy khakis for the rest of his life.

LAUNDRY

L@vanderi@ del C@rmen (Calle 2 No 402; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat) Conveniently has an internet café in front of the lavandería. Between Calle 10 and Calle 15.

Lavandería Giracaribe (10 Av; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat) Costs M\$14 a kilogram. Between Calle 12 and Calle 14.

MEDICAL SERVICES

In a medical emergency dial ☎ 066.

Centro de Salud (☎ 873-0493; cnr 15 Av & Av Juárez)

Community Hospital (35 Av)

MONEY

These are some of the many banks around town.

Banamex (cnr Calle 12 & 10 Av)

Bancomer (Av Juárez)

Scotiabank (Quinta Av)

POST

Post office (cnr 15 Av & Av Juárez; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information office (☎ 873-2804; cnr Av Juárez & 15 Av; ☎ 9am-8:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) Well stocked with brochures and usually staffed by a speaker of English, Italian and German.

Dangers & Annoyances

Playa is generally safe: you are very unlikely to experience street crime or muggings. However, pickpockets do circulate, especially in crowded dance clubs. Never leave valuables unattended on the beach, especially on the isolated stretches to the north. Run-and-grab thefts while victims are swimming or sleeping on isolated beaches are a common occurrence (the jungle has eyes).

Sights & Activities**DIVING & SNORKELING**

In addition to great ocean diving, all of the following outfits offer cenote dives (for more on nearby cenotes, see boxed text, p119).

Dive Mike (☎ 803-1228; www.divemike.com; Calle 8), between Quinta Avenida and the beach, offers snorkeling tours by boat to reefs and a secluded beach for M\$350 including refreshments and all gear. To tag along on a dive boat is M\$100. Ask the staff about cenote snorkel tours (M\$500). English, German, French, Italian, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and Spanish are spoken.

At **Phocea Riviera Maya** (☎ 873-1210; www.phoecarivieramaya.com; 1 Av) French, English and Spanish are spoken. **Yucatek Divers** (☎ 803-1363; www.yucatek-divers.com; 15 Av), between Calle 2 and Calle 4, has German, French, English, Spanish and Dutch speakers, and offers handicapped/limited-mobility dives.

BEACHES

Beachgoers will agree that it's pretty darn nice here. You can swim on Playa's lovely white-sand beaches nearly anywhere: just head down to the ocean, stretch out and enjoy. Numerous restaurants front the beach in the tourist zone; flag down a waiter if you need something frosty to beat the heat. Nights are breezy, sometimes chilly, so bring more than just a bathing suit if you're planning on going for a midnight stroll.

If crowds aren't your thing, go north of Calle 38, where a few scrawny palms serve for shade. Here the beach extends for uncrowded kilometers, making for good camping,

but you need to be extra careful with your belongings, as thefts are a possibility.

Many women go topless in Playa (though it's not a common practice in most of Mexico, and generally frowned upon by locals – except the young bucks, of course). **Mamita's Beach**, north of Calle 28, is considered the best place to free the girls.

FISHING

Playa used to be a fishing village, and you can still go out on small skiffs in search of kingfish, tarpon, barracuda, and maybe even a sailfish. April to July is the best time.

Fisherman's Cooperative (☎ 984-130-9892; kabul.yuc@hotmail.co), at the beachfront kiosk near Avenida Constituyentes, runs four-hour trips from M\$1800 to M\$2100.

Courses

Playa has a couple of good language schools. While it makes more sense to study Spanish in a place such as Mérida, where English is not so widely spoken, you can't beat practicing your Spanish by ordering margaritas beachfront. (Hint: *'dos margaritas por favor'* will do the trick, and you didn't even have to pay for a single class. Don't worry Lonely Planet's got your back!)

International House (☎ 803-3388; www.ihriviera.maya.com; Calle 14) Offers homestays (the best way to learn a language), a small residence hall and Spanish lessons. Twenty hours of instruction per week costs M\$2000. Residence hall rooms are M\$300 per night (you can stay there even if you aren't taking classes). Homestays are M\$280 per night, including two meals, but you have to be studying with the school.

Playa Lingua del Caribe (☎ 873-3876; www.playa.lingua.com; Calle 20) Offers 20-hour-per-week classes for around M\$1850. It also offers occasional classes in Maya language, stone carving, cooking, and even salsa dancing.

Tours

Alltournative (☎ 873-2036; www.alltournative.com; Av 38 Norte, L3 M200; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) offers packages include ziplining, rappelling and kayaking, as well as custom-designed trips. It also takes you to nearby Maya villages for an 'authentic' experience, that could easily be had on your own.

Sleeping

Surprisingly affordable hotels can be found even in the tourist zone, and a number of hostels offer dorm-style lodging in the M\$100

range. Thus, a week, even a month in Playa can be affordable – and once you're here you'll find excuses to stay. You can find great deals by heading away from the beach on Calle 4, Calle 6 and Calle 8 and looking beyond the tourist zone.

BUDGET

Camping-Cabanas La Ruina (☎ /fax 873-0405; laruina@prodigy.net.mx; Calle 2; sites or hammock spaces per person M\$100, d with bathroom M\$300-550, d without bathroom M\$200; ☎) Pitch your tent or hang your hammock in a large lot near the beach. It's very casual, and beach gear can be stored (insecurely) in the courtyard. Some rooms have ceiling fans, some have air-con – the cheapest are bare and bleak, the most expensive front the beach.

Hostel Playa (☎ 803-3277; www.hostelplaya.com; Calle 8; dm/d/tr M\$120/300/450) While it's a bit away from the center, this is Playa's best youth hostel. The best thing about this spirited place is the ambience: it has a huge, central common area, great kitchen, and both beer and spirits are allowed until 12:30am, when people either head to bed or go out to the clubs. No meals are served, but there's free coffee and bottled water (M\$10 to fill a water bottle), and the staff are extremely helpful and have great suggestions on what to see and do.

Hotel Marina Sabina (☎ 873-0113; www.mariasabina.hotel.com; Calle 6 btwn Av 5 & 10; dm M\$120, s/d M\$450/550) It's not great, but it's better than the other hostels in the area. The cramped rooms aren't worth it, but the hostel space isn't so bad. Plus, you're right next to Quinta Avenida, so you'll definitely get the chance to party on.

Hotel Mar Caribe (☎ 873-0207; cnr 15 Av & Calle 1; r low season M\$200-350, high season M\$350-550; ☎) A simple, secure and very clean nine-room place with mostly fan-cooled rooms (there are three rooms with air-con). The owners speak French, Spanish and some English. One can almost imagine Steinbeck working on a novel at one of the dark wooden tables.

MIDRANGE

Posada Mi Casa (☎ 873-1972; posada1@prodigy.net.mx; cnr Quinta Av & Calle 8; d low season M\$400-500, high season M\$500-600; ☎) A very reasonable option right in the center of the Zona, the Mi Casa has spotless tiled-floor rooms and large bathrooms, though some rooms could use an extra chair...or even a chair at all. The friendly owners will let you leave luggage in a back room even after you've checked out.

Hotel La Ziranda (☎ 873-3933; www.hotellaziranda.com; Calle 4; r with air-con low/high season M\$400/700; 🏠) This place was constructed in late 2000. Its two peach-colored buildings have 15 nice rooms, all with balconies or terraces and two double beds or one king. Trees have been left in place and several walkways have holes to allow them to grow. Fan-cooled rooms are M\$100 cheaper.

Hotel Barrio Latino (☎ /fax 873-2384; www.hotelbarriolatino.com; Calle 4; d low season M\$400-500, high season M\$700-900; 🏠 📺) Offers 16 clean, colorful rooms with good ventilation, ceiling fans, tiled floors, bathrooms and hammocks (in addition to beds). The friendly Italian owners speak English and Spanish, the place is often full and the front gate is always kept locked. Discounted rates for extended stays. Rates include breakfast, and guests get to make free international calls at certain times of day.

Hotel Casa Tucán (☎ /fax 873-0283; www.casatucan.de; Calle 4; r low season M\$450-650, high season M\$500-650; 🏠 📺) This German-run hotel is a warren of 29 rooms of several types. Rooms have fans or air-con, a couple have kitchenettes, and the cheapest don't have bathrooms. The Tucán has a swimming pool, a pleasant tropical garden and a café serving good, affordable food. Between Avenidas 10 and 15.

Hotel El Cielo (☎ 873-1227; www.hotelcielo.com; Calle 4; d low/high season M\$550/1150; 🏠) On the low-end of Playa's new chic boutiques is the Cielo. Funky, modern rooms come with creamsicle-and-red bed covers and hand-painted azulejos (a welcomed rustic touch in an otherwise modern environment). There are plans to make a lounge upstairs. It's between Avenidas 10 and Quinta.

our pick Kinbé Hotel (☎ 873-0441; www.kinbe.com; Calle 10; d low/high season M\$640/830, ste M\$1220/1690; 🏠) An Italian-owned and operated hotel, it has 29 clean, simple but elegant rooms with lovely aesthetic touches, azure bedspreads, a gorgeous lush courtyard garden and a breezy rooftop terrace with fab views from the 3rd floor. It's near 1 Avenida.

Playa Palms (☎ 803-3908; www.playapalms.com; Av 1 Bis; d low/high season M\$720/1330; 🏠 📺) A rip-roaring deal in low season (get the best price online), Playa Palms is right on the beach. The shell-shaped rooms have balconies that look out to the ocean past the curly-whirly dip pool. Go with the cheaper studios to get the best views at the best price. All rooms have kitchenettes.

TOP END

Hotel Hacienda del Caribe (☎ 873-3132; www.haciendadelcaribe.com; Calle 2 No 130; d low/high season M\$670/900; 🏠 📺) This Mexican-run place was built in 2000. Its bright-yellow, quiet, comfortable rooms have lovely décor, air-con and cable TV. Many have balconies. The courtyard has a small pool with hydromassage, and parking in a nearby lot is free while you stay.

Blue Parrot Inn (☎ 206-3350, in USA 800-435-0668; Calle 12; r low season M\$1240-2840, high season M\$2330-5370; 🏠 📺) Many of the charming units have terraces, sea views and full kitchens. But it's a bit pricey to not be right on the ocean. It also has an immensely popular bar (opposite).

Hotel Deseo (☎ 879-3620; www.hoteldeseo.com; cnr Quinta Av & Calle 12; d M\$1680-2380; 🏠 📺 📺) If you can still afford your rock-and-roll lifestyle, then you're going to love the hi-fi lounge atmosphere of Deseo. There's a very chill lounge and plunge pool right in front of your blindingly white room (white is evidently the color of desire). Pay a bit more for an upstairs balcony room, and be prepared to stay up late.

Mosquito Blue (☎ 873-1245; www.mosquitoblue.com; Quinta Av; r low season M\$2090-4050, high season M\$2720-4750; 🏠 📺 📺) Between Calle 12 and Calle 14. Strives for – and at times achieves – ultrachicness. Its cloistered interior boasts two pools and courtyards, a bar and restaurant, and very nicely decorated rooms furnished in Indonesian mahogany. Art and artistic touches abound throughout the hotel, which has junior and master suites as well as the standard and deluxe rooms.

Eating

As happens in other tourist-oriented places on the Yucatán Peninsula, some Playa restaurants add a service charge to the bill. You are not required to pay it; however, a 10% to 15% tip for good service is appreciated.

El Cuerna de Oro (cnr Calle 2 & 10 Av; set meals M\$30-50; 🕒 7am-10pm) Hearty, homestyle set meals are served in this casual eatery near the bus station. You get a giant portion of your selected dish (the three or four options change nightly) plus rice, beans and unlimited refills of the nightly drink, such as hibiscus water or iced tea. The breakfasts are skippable.

our pick Restaurant 100% Natural (☎ 873-2242; cnr Quinta Av & Calle 10; mains M\$35-100; 🕒 7am-11pm; 🍷) The trademarks of this quickly establishing chain – vegetable- and fruit-juice blends, salads, various vegetable and chicken dishes

and other healthy foods – are delicious and filling. There's another branch on the corner of Quinta Avenida and Calle 22.

Babe's (Calle 10; mains M\$50-100; 🕒 noon-11:30pm Mon-Sat, 5-11:30pm Sun) Babe's serves some excellent Thai food, including a yummy homestyle *tom kha gai* (chicken and coconut-milk soup) brimming with veggies. Excellent Vietnamese salad (with shrimp and mango) is another specialty. Most dishes can be done vegetarian, and to mix things up a bit the Swedish cook has some tasty Greek items on the menu as well. There's another Babe's along the Nueva Quinta.

Club Náutico Tarraya (☎ 873-2040; Calle 2; mains M\$50-120; 🕒 noon-9pm) One of the few restaurants in Playa del Carmen that dates from the 1960s. It continues to offer good seafood at decent prices in a casual place on the beach with a nice view.

La Guacamaya (cnr Calle 1 Sur & Av 30; meals M\$60 🕒 noon-10pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) Locals love this large open-air restaurant. Veggies beware, if it doesn't have hoofs, it's unlikely to make it on the menu. Try the *tablazo*, a monstro mixed grill with every cut of meat imaginable for less than M\$100.

Xlapak (☎ 879-3595; Quinta Av; meals M\$70-180; 🕒 8am-11pm) Serves delicious food at unbelievably low prices. Lunch and dinner consists of a starter, a main dish (accompanied by rice, steamed veggies and garlic bread) and a desert. Try the chicken with *chaya* (a spinach-like green) salsa and wash it down with one of a wide selection of juices and drinks. The restaurant is very nicely done up like a Maya temple, with faithfully rendered reproductions of Maya murals on the walls and plants everywhere. It's between Calle 14 and Calle 14 Bis.

Buenos Aires (☎ 873-2751; Calle 6; mains M\$90-240; 🕒 noon-11:30pm) In a new location, this Argentinean-owned steak house is well known for its *parrilla*, an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord (M\$350 for two people). Waiters bring your meat to you on a skewer. You can also sample ribs, empanadas, burgers and other 'lighter' fare.

John Gray's Place (☎ 803-3689; www.johngrayrestaurant.com; Calle Corazón 51A; mains M\$110-250; 🕒 6-11pm Mon-Sat) The sister restaurant to John Gray's Kitchen in Puerto Morelos, it has a dark-wood bar downstairs, and the same spectacular food. Crab cakes melt on the tongue, set off by a dash of Asian vinaigrette and a few cilantro leaves. Chicken with cilantro pesto is a favorite.

Norah Jones croons in the background as you polish off your glass of wine. Calle Corazón is between Calle 12 and Calle 14.

Alux (☎ 803-2936; Av Juárez; mains M\$120-140; 🕒 7pm-2am) About three blocks west of Hwy 307, the Alux is an amazing must-visit. It's a restaurant-lounge situated in a cavern: stalactites, stalagmites, pools and all. Candles and dim electric lights illuminate numerous nooks and crannies converted into sofalike seating. Wander through, have a bite to eat or a drink and revel in the atmosphere. It offers live music nightly at 10pm, and a party on Saturday night. Snacks are M\$40 to M\$90.

Head out of the tourist zone to find cheap, quality eats such as great grilled chicken from **Asadero Olmeca** (Calle 2; mains M\$30; 🕒 7am-6pm), next to the Tulum-bound *colectivos*. There's a ton of cheap food stands on Avenida 10 between Calle 8 and Calle 10 near the center. Choose between tacos, kebabs and pizza.

Entertainment

Venues here come and go, so ask around if you're wondering where the party is (or where it isn't). You'll find everything from mellow, tranced-out lounge bars to classic rock-and-roll places. Here are a few options we found fun.

Tequila Barrel (☎ 873-1061; Quinta Av; 🕒 8am-2am) With a large dancing area in back, this sparkling clean bar and grill between Calles 10 and 12 pours a huge selection of tequila and other spirits, and spins old rock and Motown CDs.

Blue Parrot Bar (☎ 873-0083; Calle 12; 🕒 11am-4am) This is the Blue Parrot Inn's immensely popular open-sided *palapa* beachfront bar with swing chairs, a giant outdoor dance stage, indoor section if the weather's bad...and lots of sand.

our pick Fusion (Calle 6; 🕒 until late) Groove out beachside under that Playa moon at Fusion. There's live music most nights.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Ferries to Cozumel (M\$110 one way) leave at 6am, 8am, 9am, 10am, 11am, 1pm, 3pm, 5pm, 6pm, 7pm, 9pm and 11pm. The air-conditioned catamaran takes about a half-hour, depending on weather. Buy tickets at the booth on Calle 1 Sur. An open-air boat (same ticket price but running less regularly) takes 45 minutes to an hour; it operates mostly in the summer season.

BUS SERVICES FROM PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Destination	Cost (M\$)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Cancún	34	1	numerous 4am-midnight
Cancún international airport	80	1	frequent ADO buses 8am-6:15pm
Chetumal	18-18.80	5-5½	9 ADO buses 6:15am-11:56pm, numerous Mayab buses 1:30am-11:15pm
Chichén Itzá	18	3-4	1 ADO bus at 8am
Cobá	68	1-1¼	ADO buses at 8am & 9am
Mérida	310	5	Frequent ADO buses; ADO GL at 4pm, 9:30pm & 11:45pm
Palenque	540	12-13	ADO GL at 7pm
San Cristóbal de Las Casas	780	16-18	ADO GL at 7pm
Tulum	22	1	frequent Riviera & Mayab buses
Valladolid	77-140	2½-3½	Mayab at 7:30am & 2:30pm

BUS

Playa has two bus terminals; each sells tickets and provides information for at least some of the other's departures. The newer one, **Terminal ADO** (20 Av), just east of Calle 12, is where most 1st-class buslines arrive and depart. Riviera's buses (which don't entirely deserve the designation '1st-class' anyhow) use the old terminal. A taxi from Terminal ADO to the main plaza will run about M\$15.

The old bus station, **Terminal del Centro** (c/r Av Juárez & Quinta Av), gets all the 2nd-class (called 'intermedio' by such lines as Mayab) services. Riviera buses to Cancún and its airport have a separate ticket counter on the Avenida Juárez side of the terminal. The table (above) shows some distances, travel times and prices for buses.

COLECTIVOS

Colectivos are a great option for cheap travel southward to Tulum (M\$25, 45 minutes). They depart from Calle 2 near 20 Avenida as soon as they fill (about every 10 or 15 minutes) from 5am to 10pm. They will stop anywhere along the highway between Playa and Tulum, charging a minimum of M\$10. Luggage space is somewhat limited, but they're great for day trips.

ISLA COZUMEL

☎ 987 / pop 73,200

Cozumel is too resilient, too proud to give into the Señor Frog's of this world. And leaving the tourist area – and the Señor Frog's merchandise megamart behind – you still see an island of quiet cool and genuine authenticity. Garages still have shrines to the

Virgin, there's a spirited Caribbean pathos, and of course there's some tourist things to do, such as diving down to some of the best damned reefs in the world.

A hugely popular diving spot since 1961, when Jacques Cousteau, led by local guides, showed its spectacular reefs to the world, Cozumel lies 71km south of Cancún. Measuring 53km by 14km, it is Mexico's largest island. Called Ah-Cuzamil-Peten (Island of Swallows) by its earliest inhabitants, Cozumel has become a world-famous diving and cruise-ship destination. Hurricane Wilma did some serious damage to the snorkeling sites around the island – while they are still beautiful, it will take years for them to recover completely. Fortunately, most of the deep-water reefs missed the brunt of the storm. The squadrons of eagle rays have dwindled due to overfishing of the shellfish stocks – no shellfish, no eagle rays.

While diving and snorkeling are the main draws, the tourist zone offers lots of shopping 'deals' (often not very cheap), and a pleasant town square in which to spend the afternoon. In February there is a festive Carnival, which brings dancers festooned with feathers out into the streets. It's not Rio, but it's still fun. There are some small Maya ruins and a few eco-themed parks.

The less-visited, windswept far side of the island has beautiful beaches and a few large waves. Rent a scooter or convertible bug and head over for a picnic lunch, but watch the currents if you head out for a swim or surf.

History

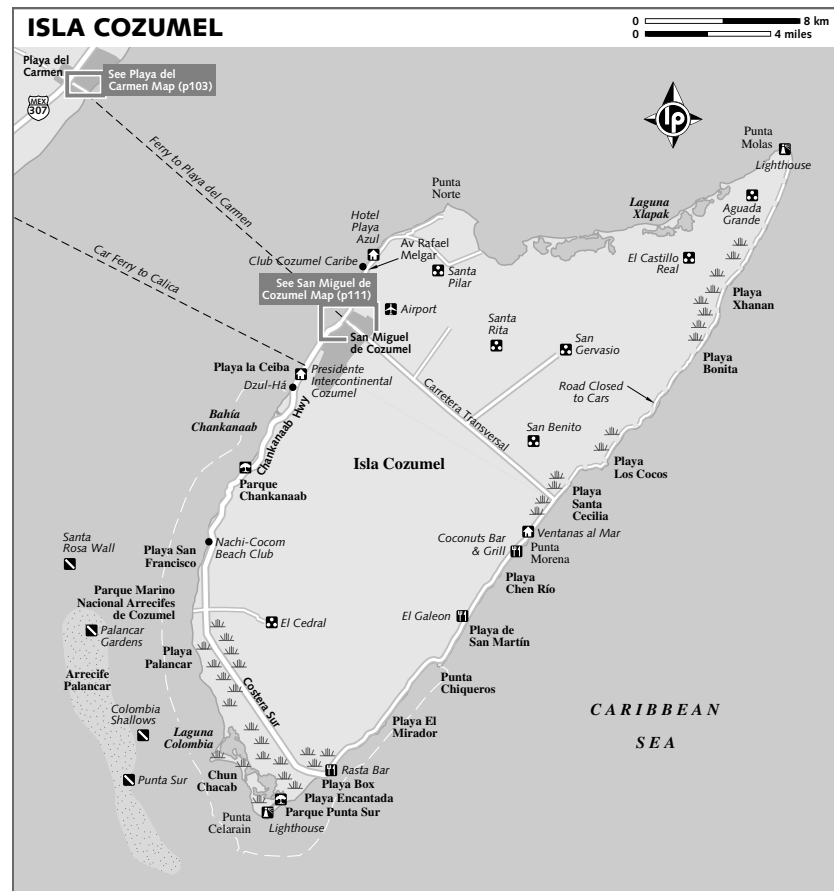
Maya settlement here dates from AD 300. During the post-Classic period Cozumel

flourished as a trade center and, more importantly, a ceremonial site. Every Maya woman living on the Yucatán Peninsula and beyond was expected to make at least one pilgrimage here to pay tribute to Ixchel, the goddess of fertility and the moon, at a temple erected in her honor. Archaeologists believe this temple was at San Gervasio, a bit north of the island's geographical center.

At the time of the first Spanish contact with Cozumel (in 1518, by Juan de Grijalva and his men), there were at least 32 Maya building groups on the island. According to Spanish chronicler Diego de Landa, a year later Hernán Cortés sacked one of the Maya centers but left the others intact, apparently satisfied with converting the island's

population to Christianity. Smallpox introduced by the Spanish wiped out half the 8000 Maya and, of the survivors, only about 200 escaped genocidal attacks by conquistadors in the late 1540s.

The island remained virtually deserted into the late 17th century, its coves providing sanctuary for several notorious pirates, including Jean Lafitte and Henry Morgan. In 1848 indigenous people fleeing the War of the Castes began to resettle Cozumel. At the beginning of the 20th century the island's (by then mostly mestizo) population grew, thanks to the craze for chewing gum. Cozumel was a port of call on the chicle export route, and locals harvested the gum base on the island. After the demise of chicle



Cozumel's economy remained strong owing to the construction of a US air base here during WWII.

When the US military departed, the island fell into an economic slump, and many of its people moved away. Those who stayed fished for a living until 1961, when Cousteau's documentary broadcast Cozumel's glorious sea life to the world. The tourists began arriving almost overnight.

Orientation & Information

It's easy to make your way on foot around the island's only town, San Miguel de Cozumel. The waterfront boulevard is Avenida Rafael Melgar; along Melgar south of the main ferry dock (Muelle Fiscal) is a narrow sand beach. The main plaza is opposite the ferry dock. The airport is 2km northeast. Much of the roads in the town's center were under construction as of press time, but local authorities say they should be back to normal soon.

An excellent documentary on Cozumel diving is available at www.cozumelnaturaltreasure.com.

The following places are all in San Miguel de Cozumel.

BOOKSTORES

Fama (☎ 872-5020; Av 5 Norte; 🕒 9am-10pm Mon-Sun) Carries books and periodicals in English and Spanish. Between Avenida Benito Juárez and Calle 2 Norte.

EMERGENCY

Tourist police Patrols the island and staffs a kiosk (open 8am to 11pm) one-quarter of a block inland on Calle 11 Sur from Avenida Rafael Melgar.

INTERNET ACCESS

Phonet (Av Benito Juárez 5; per hr M\$15; 🕒 8am-11pm Mon-Sun)

LAUNDRY

Express Lavandería (☎ 872-2932; Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas; 🕒 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-4pm Sun) Self-serve washing and drying costs M\$50 per load. Between Avenidas 5 and 10 Sur.

Servi-Lav (☎ 872-3951; Av 10 Norte; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) Charges M\$10 per kilogram. Between Calles 6 and 8.

LEFT LUGGAGE

A convenience store at the landward end of the ferry dock stores luggage for M\$20 per

day, but the shelves used are not big enough for a full-sized backpack.

MEDICAL SERVICES

There are at least two hyperbaric chambers in San Miguel.

Buceo Médico Mexicano (☎ 872-1430; fax 872-1848; Calle 5 Sur) Between Avenida Rafael Melgar and Avenida 5 Sur.

Cozumel Hyperbaric Research (☎ 872-0103; Calle 6 Norte) Between Avenida 5 and Avenida 10 Norte, in the Médica San Miguel clinic.

MONEY

ATMs are the best way to get quick cash. For currency exchange, try any of the banks near the main plaza, such as Banorte or HSBC. All are open 8am or 9am to 4:30pm Monday to Friday and on Saturday morning. The many *casas de cambio* (currency-exchange houses) around town may charge as much as 3.5% commission (the bank rate is 1%) to cash a traveler's check.

POST

Post office (cnr Calle 7 Sur & Av Rafael Melgar; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

TELEPHONE

The Telecomm office, near the post office, handles faxes, money orders and such. Telmex card phones are abundant around town and are often cheaper than making calls at internet cafés.

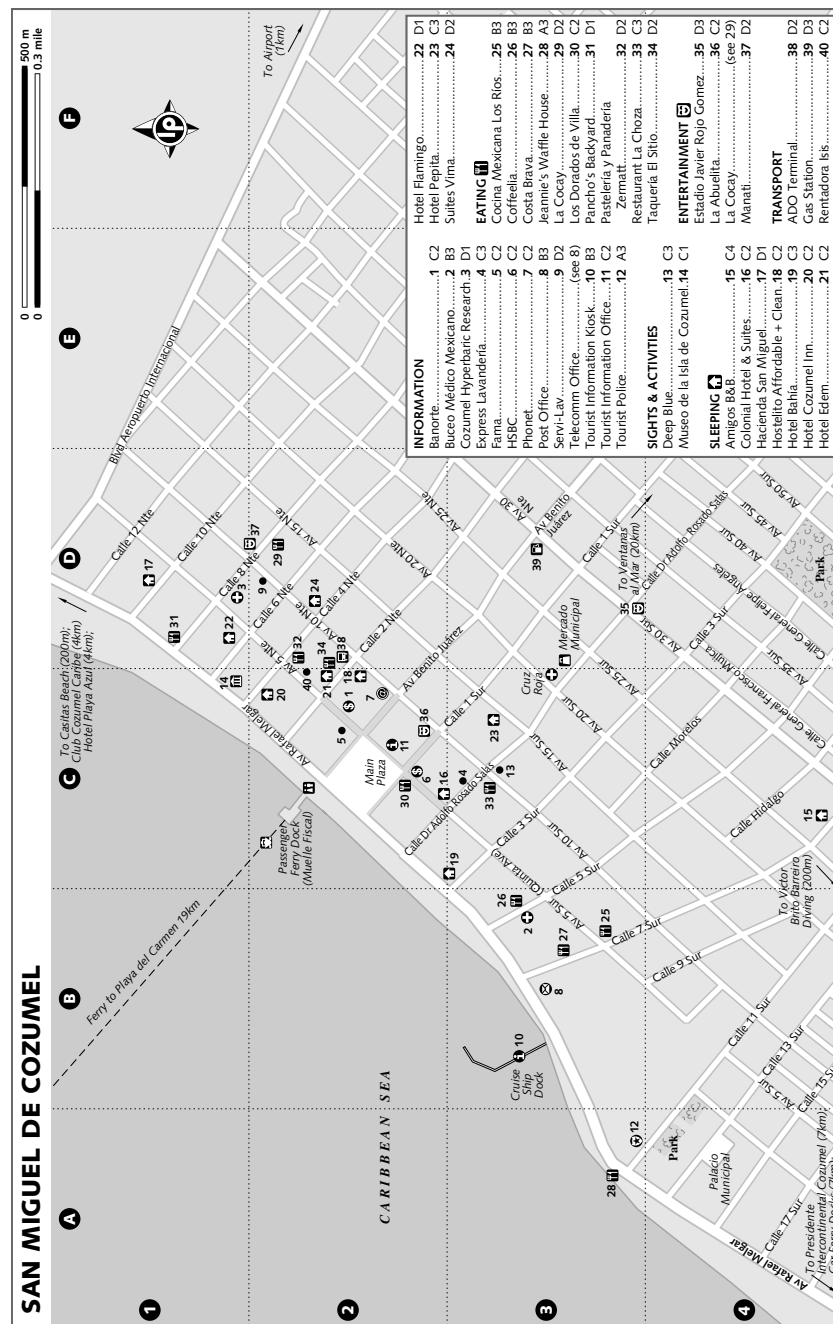
TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information office (☎ 869-0211; 🕒 8am-8pm) Operates kiosks at the passenger ferry, cruise-ship and car-ferry docks.

Sights & Activities

MUSEO DE LA ISLA DE COZUMEL

Exhibits at the fine **Museo de la Isla de Cozumel** (☎ 872-1434; Av Rafael Melgar; admission M\$30; 🕒 8am-5pm) in San Miguel present a clear and detailed picture of the island's flora, fauna, geography, geology and ancient Maya history. Thoughtful and detailed signs in English and Spanish accompany the exhibits. It's a good place to learn about coral before hitting the water, and it's one not to miss before you leave the island. A courtyard in the back contains a *na* (thatched Maya hut) with someone in attendance who will explain (in Spanish) the various elements that made up Maya domestic life: the



toys, utensils, foodstuffs, a raised garden bed for kitchen herbs and more.

DIVING

Despite the massive hit of Hurricane Wilma, Cozumel – and its 65 surrounding reefs – remains one of the most popular diving destinations in the world. ‘It will take 10 years without a hurricane for the reef to get back in shape,’ says Deep Blue’s Pedro Venegas. ‘[But] even a year after Wilma, the reef’s recuperation was incredible.’

It has fantastic year-round visibility (commonly 30m or more) and a jaw-droppingly impressive variety of marine life that includes spotted eagle rays, moray eels, groupers, barracudas, turtles, sharks, brain coral and some huge sponges. The island has strong currents (normally around 3 knots), making drift dives the standard, especially along the many walls. Even when diving or snorkeling from the beach you should evaluate conditions and plan your route, selecting an exit point down-current beforehand, then staying alert for shifts in currents. Always keep an eye out (and your ears open) for boat traffic as well. It’s best not to snorkel alone away from the beach area.

Prices vary, but in general expect to pay about M\$880 for a two-tank dive (less if you bring your own buoyancy control device and regulator), M\$650 for an introductory ‘resort’ course and M\$4000 for PADI open-water certification. Multiple-dive packages and discounts for groups or those paying in cash can bring these rates down significantly. For more information, pick up a copy of Lonely Planet’s *Diving & Snorkeling Cozumel*, with detailed descriptions of local dive sites.

There are scores of dive operators on Cozumel. The following are some reputable ones that come recommended. All limit the size of their groups to six or eight divers, and take pains to match up divers of similar skill levels. Some offer snorkeling and deep-sea fishing trips as well as dives and diving instruction. Those out of the center will provide transport.

Deep Blue (☎/fax 872-5653; www.deepbluecozumel.com; cnr Av 10 Sur & Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas) This PADI, National Association of Underwater Instructors (NAUI), Technical Diving International (TDI) and International Association of Nitrox and Technical Divers, Inc (IANTD) operation has very good gear and fast boats that give you a chance to get more dives out of a day.

Victor Brito Barreiro (☎/fax 872-3223; www.angelfire.com/ga/cozumeldiving) Based south of town. Victor is head of Cozumel’s diving instructors association and has many years of experience. Highly recommended.

If you encounter a decompression emergency, head immediately to one of Cozumel’s two hyperbaric chambers (p110).

SNORKELING

Good snorkeling can be found at Casitas just north of San Miguel de Cozumel and Dzul-Há to the south. Snorkelers are required to pay M\$20 for park admission. The best snorkeling sites are reached by boat. A half-day boat tour will cost from M\$350 to M\$500. Most strictly snorkeling outfits operating in town go to one of three stretches of reef near town, all accessible from the beach. If you go with a dive outfit instead, you can often get to better spots, such as Palancar Reef or the adjacent Colombia Shallows, near the island’s southern end. **Ramón Zapata** (☎ 044 987-100-2256) runs snorkeling trips leaving from Playa Palancar for about M\$250 per person, but you’ll need to make your own way to the beach.

You can save on boat fares (and see fewer fish) by walking into the gentle surf north of town. One good spot is Hotel Playa Azul, 4km north of the turnoff to the airport; its *palapas* offer shade, and it has a swimming area with a sheltering wharf and a small artificial reef. If you’d like to sit at one of the *palapas* the waiters ask only that you buy a drink or a club to eat. Next door to the south, the **Club Cozumel Caribe** (☎ 800-833-5971; www.dubcozumelcaribe.info) has underwater cement statuary that makes for some interesting snorkeling. It has a decent beach and pool, and, as of press time, you didn’t need to pay anything to get in. You will need to fork over some cash, however, to don snorkel gear (M\$50) or test your mettle on the rock-climbing wall (M\$350). It also has a snack bar.

EXPLORING THE ISLAND

In order to see most of the island you will have to rent a vehicle or take a taxi; cyclists will need to brave the regular strong winds. The following route will take you south from San Miguel, then counterclockwise around the island. There are some places along the way to stop for food and drink, but it’s good to bring water all the same.

COZUMEL’S TOP DIVE SITES

Ask any dive operator in Cozumel to name the best dive sites in the area and the following names will come up time and again.

Santa Rosa Wall

This is the biggest of the famous sites. The wall is so large most people are able to see only a third of it on one tank. Regardless of where you’re dropped, expect to find enormous overhangs and tunnels covered with corals and sponges. Stoplight parrot fish, black grouper and barracuda hang out here. The average visibility is 30m and minimum depth 10m, with an average closer to 25m. Carry a flashlight with you, even if you’re diving at noon, as it will help to bring out the color of coral at depth and illuminate the critters hiding in crevices. Hurricane Wilma left shallower spots with uncovered coral, but for the most part it is unharmed.

Punta Sur Reef

Unforgettable for its coral caverns, each of which is named, this reef is for experienced, properly certified divers only. Before you dive be sure to ask your dive master to point out the Devil’s Throat. This cave opens into a cathedral room with four tunnels, all of which make for some pretty hairy exploration. Only advanced divers should consider entering the Devil’s Throat, but anyone who visits Punta Sur Reef will be impressed by the cave system and the butterfly fish, angelfish and whip corals that abound here.

Colombia Shallows

Also known as Colombia Gardens, Colombia Shallows lends itself equally well to snorkeling and scuba diving. Because it’s a shallow dive (maximum depth 10m, average 2m to 4m), its massive coral buttresses covered with sponges and other resplendent life-forms are well illuminated. The current at Colombia Gardens is generally light to moderate. This and the shallow water allows you to spend hours at the site if you want, and you’ll never get bored spying all the elkhorn coral, pillar coral and anemones that live here.

Palancar Gardens

Also known as Palancar Shallows, and thus one of the spots that sustained serious Wilma damage, this dive can be appreciated by snorkelers due to the slight current usually found here and its modest maximum depth (20m). The Gardens consists of a strip reef about 25m wide and very long, riddled with fissures and tunnels. The major features here are enormous stovepipe sponges and vivid yellow tube sponges, and you can always find damselfish, parrot fish and angelfish around you. In the deeper parts of the reef, divers will want to keep an eye out for the lovely black corals.

Sad to say, access to many of Cozumel’s best stretches of beach has become limited. Resorts and residential developments with gated roads create the most difficulties. Pay-for-use beach clubs occupy some other prime spots, but you can park and walk through or around them and enjoy adjacent parts of the beach without obligation. Sitting under their umbrellas or otherwise using the facilities requires you to fork out some money, either a straight fee or a *consumo mínimo* (minimum consumption of food and drink), which can add up to a pretty ridiculous M\$150 per person in some places. It’s not always strictly applied, especially when business is slow.

Several sites along the island’s west coast offer horse riding (most of the horses look ready to keel over). The asking price is M\$160 an hour; bargain hard.

Parque Chankanaab

A popular snorkeling spot, especially when cruise ships are in port, is **Parque Chankanaab** (admission M\$160; ☎ 7am-6pm; 📍). However, there’s not a lot to see in the water beyond some brightly colored fish and deliberately sunken artificial objects. The beach is a nice one, though, and 50m inland is a limestone lagoon surrounded by iguanas and inhabited by turtles. You’re not allowed to swim or

snorkel here, but it's picturesque all the same. The beach is lined with *palapas* and fiberglass lounge chairs, and you can rent snorkel and dive equipment.

Dolphin shows are included in the admission price, as is the use of dressing rooms, lockers and showers. There's a small archaeological park containing replica Olmec heads and Maya artifacts, a small museum featuring objects from Chichén Itzá, and a botanical garden with 400 species of tropical plants. Other facilities include a restaurant, a bar and snack shops. A taxi from town costs M\$100 one way.

El Cedral

This Maya ruin is the oldest on the island. It's the size of a small house and has no ornamentation, but costs nothing to visit and is easy to reach, unlike San Gervasio and other ruins on Cozumel. It's 3.5km down a signed paved road that heads off to the left (east) a kilometer or two south of Nachi-Cocom's access road, hiding amid a forest of pole structures painted yellow and white and erected as souvenir stalls. El Cedral is thought to have been an important ceremonial site; the small church standing next to the tiny ruin today is evidence that the site still has religious significance for locals.

Playa Palancar

About 17km south of town, Palancar is another great beach. It has a beach club renting hydro bikes, kayaks, snorkel gear and sailboats, plus a restaurant and a dive operation. Near the beach, Arrecife Palancar (Palancar Reef) has some very good diving (it's known as Palancar Gardens), as well as fine snorkeling (Palancar Shallows), though the shallow spots were marked by Wilma. See boxed text, p113, for more information.

Parque Punta Sur

The southern tip of the island has been turned into a rather overpriced 'ecotouristic park' (☎ 872-0914; admission M\$100; ☎ 9am-5pm). Visitors board an open vehicle for the 3km ride to visit picturesque Celarain lighthouse and the small nautical museum at its base. Another vehicle carries visitors to **Laguna Colombia**, part of a three-lagoon system that is the habitat of crocodiles and many resident and migratory waterfowl. Crocs can be seen (when they feel like it) from shore, via

a trail through mangrove or a bridge over the lagoon.

East Coast

The eastern shoreline is the wildest part of the island and presents some beautiful seascapes and many small blowholes (there's a bunch around Km 30.5). Swimming is dangerous on most of the east coast because of riptides and undertows. With a bit of care you can sometimes swim at Punta Chiqueros, Playa Chen Río and Punta Morena.

As you travel along the coast, consider stopping for lunch or a drink at the Rasta Bar (Km 29.5), El Galeon (Km 43.1) or Coconuts Bar & Grill (Km 43.5). El Galeon rents surf and boogie boards for M\$200 and M\$70 per hour, respectively. Or just bring a picnic lunch and plan on having the beach to yourself.

Punta Molas

Beyond where the east-coast highway meets the Carretera Transversal, intrepid travelers may take a poorly maintained, infrequently traveled and almost impossible to find track toward Punta Molas, the island's northeast point, accessible only by all-terrain vehicles (ATV) or on foot. If you head up this road be aware that you can't count on flagging down another motorist for help in the event of a breakdown or accident, and most rental agencies' insurance policies don't cover any mishaps on unpaved roads. Word on the street is that Donald Trump has plans to build in the area, but the road was officially closed to cars and 4WDs as of press time. About 17km up the road are the Maya ruins known as **El Castillo Real**, and a few kilometers further is **Aguada Grande**. Both sites are quite far gone, their significance lost to time. In the vicinity of Punta Molas are some fairly good beaches and a few more minor ruins.

San Gervasio

This **Maya complex** (admission M\$60; ☎ 7am-4pm) is Cozumel's only preserved ruins, and a prime example of the local government's efforts to milk dollars out of cruise-ship passengers. San Gervasio is thought to have been the site of the sanctuary of Ixchel, goddess of fertility, and thus an important pilgrimage site at which Maya women – in particular prospective mothers – worshipped. But its

structures are small and crude, and the clay idols of Ixchel were long ago destroyed by the Spaniards.

Sleeping

All hotel rooms come with private bathroom and fan, unless otherwise noted. Almost all places raise their rates at Christmas and Easter. 'High season' is mid-December to mid-April, but whatever the season, if business is slow, most places are open to negotiation.

BUDGET

The following listings are in San Miguel de Cozumel.

our pick **Hostelito Affordable + Clean** (☎ 869-8157; www.hostelito.com; Av 10; dm M\$120, d M\$350) The name says it all: brand-spanking new Hostelito is affordable *and* clean. There's one shared dorm room downstairs for boys and girls with bamboo privacy screens, giant lockers and amazingly clean showers. (How's that for truth in advertising?) Upstairs you'll find a great terrace, kitchen and common area, as well as a six-person group room and two doubles. It has wi-fi and luggage storage and is located between Avenida Benito Juárez and Calle 2 Norte on Avenida 10.

Hotel Edem (☎ 872-1166; Calle 2 Norte No 124; d with fan/air-con M\$180/320; ☎) Great location and saintly rates make the Edem a prime deal. It has a turtle-filled fountain and a friendly Siamese cat, and the no-nonsense senora keeps the doors locked after 9pm. Rooms are clean and simple, with hammock hooks and scaldingly hot showers. There's a deposit for the threadbare towels (like anyone would run off with them).

Hotel Cozumel Inn (☎ 872-0314; fax 872-3156; Calle 4 Norte; d with fan/air-con M\$320/370; ☎) A green building with 26 well-maintained rooms with good beds, and a small (sometimes suspect!) swimming pool, the Cozumel is a good deal, especially in high season. Mustiness airs out quickly. Find it between Avenida Rafael Melgar and Avenida 5 Norte.

Hotel Pepita (☎/fax 872-0098; Av 15 Sur; d low/high season M\$350/400; ☎) The HP's owner, Maria Teresa, takes pride in her work, and it shows. This is the best economic hotel in the city. It's friendly, with well-maintained rooms grouped around a garden. All have two double beds, refrigerators and air-con (many catch a good breeze), and there's free morning coffee.

MIDRANGE

The following listings are in San Miguel de Cozumel.

Suites Vima (☎/fax 872-5118; Av 10 Norte; s/d M\$400/500; ☎) Has spotless and spacious modern rooms with tiled floors, Barney Rubble-hard beds, good air-con and bathrooms, fridges, tables and chairs. The décor is mint green, highlighted by other pastels. A small swimming pool with a current to swim against lies in a green area in back. No kids aged under 13, please.

Amigo's B&B (☎ 872-3868; www.cozumelbedandbreakfast.net; Calle 7 Sur No 57; d/tr/q Jan 4-Apr 30 M\$650/750/850, Sep & Oct M\$400/500/600, May 1-Aug 31 & Nov 1-Dec 20 M\$500/600/700; ☎) Has a large garden, wi-fi access, an inviting pool and a good lounging area stocked with reading material. It's worth the hike from the center to enjoy one of the three well-appointed, cottage-style rooms here. All have air-con and full kitchenettes and rates include a good breakfast. Book ahead.

Hotel Bahía (☎ 872-9090, 800-227-2639; www.suitesbahia.com; cnr Av Rafael Melgar & Calle 3 Sur; d with balcony/ocean view M\$660/800; ☎) Offers some rooms with sea views and balconies. All rooms have the same amenities and general setup as the Colonial (they're under the same management). Rates include continental breakfast.

Colonial Hotel & Suites (☎ 872-9090, 800-227-2639; www.suitescolonial.com; Av 5 Sur; ste low/high season M\$720/850; ☎) This place is down a passageway off Avenida 5 Sur between Calles 1 Sur and Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas. It features lovely studios and nice, spacious, one-bedroom 'suites' (beds are separated from the rest of the room by low partitions) with kitchenettes. All rooms have cable TV, fridge and air-con, and lots of varnished-wood touches. Rates include coffee and pastries.

Hotel Flamingo (☎ 872-1264; www.hotelflamingo.com; Calle 6 Norte 81; r low season M\$750-1500, high season M\$850-1600; ☎) The colorful Hotel Flamingo is a nicely decorated place with spacious air-conditioned rooms (some with fridges) sporting direct-dial phones. Common areas include a leafy courtyard where you can eat breakfast, a 2nd-floor pool table, a bar and a rooftop sun deck with good sea views. Wi-fi access makes it a good choice for laptop-toters. Make reservations via the internet to save a few pesos.

Hacienda San Miguel (☎ 872-1986; www.hacienda sanmiguel.com; Calle 10; r Sep-Dec 18 M\$850-1300, Jan-Aug from M\$1050; ☎) It's a quiet place built and

furnished to resemble an old hacienda, and niceties such as bathrobes and continental breakfast served in your room make this very good value. It offers divers' packages, and long stays can bring rates down by amazing amounts – check the web for deals.

TOP END

Several kilometers north and south of town are a few big luxury resort hotels. All rooms in this category have air-con.

Ventanas al Mar (☎ 105-2684; www.ventanasalmar.biz; Costera Oriente Km 43.5; r low/high season M\$940/1050; ♿) Notable as it's the only windward hotel on the island, Ventanas al Mar might be right for you if you are looking to get away from it all (way away from it all). After dark you'll need to go into town as the windward-side restaurants are closed. But the rooms offer great ocean views, and nice touches such as hand-painted tiles. Beware: the constant wind is enough to drive you batty.

Presidente Intercontinental Cozumel (☎ 872-9500; www.intercontinental.com; Carretera a Chankanaab Km 6.5; r from M\$2000; ♿) This is one of the island's oldest luxury hotels. It has a lovely beach and 253 posh guestrooms, many with sea views, set amid tropical gardens and swimming pools. Wild (large!) iguanas roam the grounds. Unlike the all-inclusives further south, the Presidente is sufficiently close to town to allow you several dining options; truth be told, the city has grown south around the hotel.

Hotel Playa Azul (☎ 869-5160; www.playa-azul.com; Carretera a San Juan Km 4; d from M\$2350, ste from M\$2800; ♿) This is in the sedate area north of town on its own pretty little stretch of beach (it's not deep but it's a gem), and there's good snorkeling (the current is sometimes strong). All rooms have a sea view, a balcony or terrace, and one king or two queen beds. The hotel has a bar, restaurant and gorgeous pool, and guests can play golf free at a nearby course. There's still a mandatory M\$250 cart fee though.

Eating BUDGET

Head out of the 'zone' for the best food in Cozumel, and maybe even discover your own greasy spoon. Cheapest of all eating places are the little market *loncherias* (lunch stalls) next to the Mercado Municipal on Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas between Avenida 20 and Avenida 25 Sur. Most offer soup and a main

course for around M\$30, with a large selection of dishes available; ask about the cheap *comida corrida* (fixed-price menu) not listed on the menu.

Taquería El Sitio (Calle 2 Norte; M\$15-30; ☎ 7am-1pm) For scrump-diddily-umptious tacos and *tortas*, head over to El Sitio. It has fancy-upped the canopy-covered eating area with a mural of a cruise ship and jumping dolphins. It's two doors east of Hotel Edem.

Pastelería y Panadería Zermatt (cnr Av 5 Norte & Calle 4 Norte; bread M\$20; ☎ 7am-8:30pm Mon-Sat) Bakes pastries, cakes, pizzas and whole-wheat breads and serves decent coffee. Unlike many Mexican bakeries, it does its cooking in the early morning.

our pick Coffeelia (☎ 872-7402; Calle 5 Sur; breakfast M\$40-70, set meals M\$57; ☎ 7:30am-11pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun; ♿) A great way to start or finish the day: head over to Coffeelia for warm smiles and delicious food – and great coffees, including espressos. Coffeelia (rhymes with Ophelia) is a focal point for Cozumel's art community. The menu includes quiche, good salads and vegetarian dishes, and organic Chiapas coffee roasted fresh locally. Thursday is story night in the pleasant garden area.

Cocina Mexicana Los Ríos (☎ 044 987-800-9043; cnr Quinta Av & Calle 7; mains M\$30-40; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Sat) Ceviches, chicken and seafood: all simple and good. Red plastic furniture and Bellafonte tunes are part of this cheap, clean café not far from the post office. *Comida corridas* are M\$30 (a smokin' deal), and get you a main, a soup, tortillas, soda or other nonalcoholic drinks and dessert.

Costa Brava (☎ 869-0093; Calle 7 Sur No 57; mains M\$50-120; ☎ 6:30am-11pm) Painted in bright, pre-school primary colors, this casual place with its lovely Virgencita shrine has good prices on lobster dishes, chicken and shrimp.

Jeannie's Waffle House (☎ 878-4647; cnr Av Rafael Melgar & Calle 11 Sur; breakfast dishes M\$55-80, sandwiches M\$50-60; ☎ 7am-7pm) The views of the water are great from the outdoor patio. Jeannie's serves waffles, of course, plus hash-brown potatoes, eggs, sandwiches and other tidbits. Great frozen coffees beat the midday heat.

Los Dorados de Villa (☎ 872-0196; Calle 1 Sur; mains M\$50-120; ☎ 8am-midnight) Near the edge of the plaza, it specializes in food from the Distrito Federal (Mexico City and surroundings), but has a wide variety of Mexican dishes including seafood and cuts of meat. The spinach crêpes are great as are the complimentary chips.

MIDRANGE

Restaurant La Choza (☎ 872-0958; cnr Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas & Av 10 Sur; mains M\$80-170; ☎ 7am-10:30pm) An excellent and popular restaurant specializing in authentic regional cuisine. All mains come with soup. La Choza sometimes offers a *comida corrida* (M\$100) in the afternoon.

TOP END

Pancho's Backyard (☎ 872-2141; cnr Av Rafael Melgar & Calle 8 Norte; mains M\$110-160; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 4-10:30pm Sun) Very atmospheric, set in a beautifully decorated inner courtyard. The food's not bad either, focusing on international favorites and (drumroll please) seafood.

La Cocay (☎ 872-5533; Calle 8 Norte No 208; mains M\$110-230; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Sat) Romantic, coconut-scented candlelight and an intimate atmosphere make this snazzy restaurant a lot of fun. Sit at the bar sipping a good single malt or find a quiet table in the corner (or the back garden) to chat with someone special. The menu changes seasonally, but focuses on light, Mediterranean-influenced fare. The welcoming owners, Gary and Kathy Klein, seem to know every guest by name.

Entertainment

San Miguel de Cozumel's nightlife is quiet and subdued. Most restaurants are open for drinks, but by 11pm things wind down. Try the plaza first if you're looking to mingle with the wilder cruise-ship crowd. You are best off asking around, as the clubs change frequently.

Estadio Javier Rojo Gomez (cnr Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas & Av 30 Sur) Hosts rock concerts, *lucha libre* (professional wrestling) matches and just about any other event you can think of. Most events happen on the weekends, but ask around.

La Cocay (☎ 872-5533; Calle 8 Norte No 208; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Sat) A great place for an after-dinner drink and has nice ambience, with candles and a high ceiling.

La Abuelita (cnr Calle 1 Sur & Av 10 Sur) Grab a drink with locals at the 'little grandma.' Turns out granny is quite an enterprising lady: there's an Abuelita Dos and Tres in other parts of town.

Manati (cnr Calle 8 Norte & Av 10 Norte) Get there early for the *comida corrida* or stay late to listen to live music (Thursday to Saturday) in this cute bistro-bar combo.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Some airlines fly direct from the USA; European flights are usually routed via the USA or Mexico City. **Continental Airlines** (☎ 800-900-5000, in USA & Canada 800-231-0856; www.continental.com) has direct flights from Newark and Houston. **Delta Airlines** (☎ 800-123-4710, in USA & Canada 800-241-4141; www.delta.com) has a direct flight from Atlanta. **Mexicana de Aviación** (☎ 800-801-2010; www.mexicana.com) flies direct to Mexico City, Miami and Dallas. There are currently no direct flights from Cancún to Cozumel; you'll need to fly through Mexico City. In the end, you're better off taking a bus-ferry combo.

BOAT

Passenger ferries run to Cozumel from Playa del Carmen, and vehicle ferries leave the Calica facility (officially known as the Terminal Marítima Punta Venado) south of Playa del Carmen. However, the vehicle ferry does not take rentals. Unless you're driving your own car, use the Playa passenger ferry (M\$110 one way) instead. There's normally a passenger ferry every hour to and from Cozumel, depending on the season. The ferry runs from 6am to midnight. Schedules are not set in stone, but currently there are six departures from Cozumel for Calica between 4:30am and midnight. Six ferries return from Calica between 2am and 9pm. Sundays have four departures in each direction. Fares are M\$500 for cars and M\$800 for a van-sized vehicle (both fares include the driver's passage). You need to line up at least one hour before departure (earlier is better, they say).

BUS

OK, it may sound silly, but you can actually get long-distance bus tickets in advance at the **ADO terminal** (☎ 872-1706; cnr Av 10 & Calle 2 Norte; ☎ 6:30am-9pm). Tickets are for services from the **Playa del Carmen Terminal del Centro** (Map p103; cnr Juárez & Quinta Av) for all over Yucatán and Mexico.

Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is about 2km northeast of town. You can take a *colectivo* from the airport into town for about M\$70 (slightly more to the hotels south of town), but you'll have to take a taxi (M\$120 from town to M\$200 from southern hotels) to return to the airport.

BICYCLE

A full day's bicycle rental typically costs M\$80 to M\$150 (depending on season), and can be a great way to get to the northern and southern beaches on the west side of flat Cozumel. The completely separate bicycle/scooter lane on the Chankanaab Hwy sees a good deal of car traffic from confused tourists and impatient cab drivers, so be careful.

CAR

A car is the best way to get to the island's further reaches, and you'll get plenty of offers to rent one. All rental contracts should automatically include third-party insurance (*daños a terceros*), which runs about M\$100 per day. Check that taxes are included in the price you're quoted – they often are not. Collision insurance is usually about M\$150 extra with a M\$5000 deductible for the cheapest vehicles. Rates start at around M\$450 all-inclusive, though you'll pay more during late December and January. There are plenty of agencies around the main plaza, but prices drop about 50% from the dock to the fringes of the tourist zone.

When renting, check with your hotel to see if it has an agreement with any agencies, as you can often get discounts. Note that some agencies will deduct tire damage (repair or replacement) from your deposit, even if tires are old and worn. Be particularly careful about this if you're renting a 4WD for use on unpaved roads; straighten out the details before you sign. And always check your car's brakes before driving off.

One fairly no-nonsense place, with cars in good shape, is **Rentadora Isis** (☎ 872-3367; Av 5 Norte), between Calles 2 and 4 Norte. VW Beetles rent for around M\$300 for 24 hours, with little seasonal variation in prices.

If you rent, observe the law on vehicle occupancy. Usually only five people are allowed in a vehicle. If you carry more, the police will fine you. You'll need to return your vehicle with the amount of gas it had when you signed it out or pay a premium. This can be tricky as agencies usually don't rent out cars with full tanks. There's a gas station on Avenida Benito Juárez five blocks east of the main square.

MOTORCYCLE

Solo touring of the island by motorcycle or scooter is OK provided you have experience with them and with driving in Mexico. Two

people on a bike is asking for trouble, though, as the machines' suspension will be barely adequate for one. Many auto drivers speed and pass aggressively on Cozumel, and it has its share of *topes* (speed bumps). Riders are injured in solo crashes nearly every day, and deaths, usually involving other vehicles, are not uncommon. That said, rental opportunities abound, with prices ranging from M\$180 to M\$400 a day (depending on the agency, the season, volume of business and whether the stars are aligned properly), but you may be able to haggle down to less, with third-party insurance and tax included. Collision insurance is not usually available for motorcycles: you break, you pay.

To rent, you must have a valid driver's license and leave a credit-card slip or put down a deposit (usually M\$1000). There is a helmet law and it is enforced.

Rentadora Isis (left) rents scooters for M\$180 per day – you need to return them before dark.

TAXI

Some locals refer to the 'taxi mafia'; as in some other towns on the Yucatán Peninsula, the taxi syndicate on Cozumel wields a good bit of power. Fares in and around town are M\$30 per ride; luggage may cost extra. Carry exact change as drivers often 'can't' provide it.

XCARET

Once a precious spot open to all, **Xcaret** (☎ 984-871-5200; www.xcaret.com; adult/child 5-12yr M\$676/338, with buffet & snorkel gear M\$971/481; ☎ 8:30am-9pm; ♿), pronounced *shkar-et*, is 10km south of Playa del Carmen and has been turned into a heavily Disneyfied 'ecopark.' Cruise-ship passengers often swear by the place, but the contrived, premium-priced 'beauty' here doesn't compare with the wealth of authentic and often free options available to those who don't mind veering off the beaten path. The park also has a mixed environmental record. Despite encouraging good ecological practices for visitors (like not wearing sunscreen while swimming in delicate lagoons) and financing a number of environmental research projects with visitor revenues, the resort reportedly imported its sand beach, which can wreak environmental mayhem on neighboring reefs. It also used explosives to clear natural debris when building the park, according to a report by Ron Mader on www.planeta.com. So should you go? Kids

DETOUR: CRISTALINO CENOTE

On the west side of the highway south of Playa del Carmen is a series of cenotes (limestone sinkholes/caverns filled with water) that you can visit and usually swim in for a price. Among these is **Cristalino Cenote** (adult/child M\$40/20; ☎ 6am-5:30pm), just south of the Barceló Maya Resort. It's easily accessible, only about 70m from the entrance gate, which is just off the highway. The well-tended cenote has mangrove on one side and a large open section you can dive into by climbing a ladder up to a ledge above it. The water extends about 20m into an overhang, cave-like portion.

Two more sinkholes, Cenote Azul and El Jardín de Edén, are just south of Cristalino along the highway. But Cristalino is the best of the three.

will surely enjoy the aquarium, turtles and dolphins, but you may be better off taking them to a truly natural environment to enjoy the wonders of, well, nature.

Buses for Xcaret leave from the Zona Hotelera in Cancún (Map p75).

RANCHO PUNTA VENADO

This delightful spot for **horse riding** (☎ 998-887-1191; www.puntavenado.com; ☎ 8am-5pm) is about 5km south of Xcaret and 2km further east of the highway. The ranch sits on some 8 sq km of land, much of it virgin jungle, and has a cenote and a 3km-long stretch of isolated beach. In addition to guided horse tours (M\$500 per person, maximum group size 20 people) you can also make arrangements to snorkel, kayak or (if you must) ATV. In the course of a ride you're likely to see monkeys, deer, coatis and various other mammals, as well as crocodiles, snakes and lots of birds, including the occasional toucan. The horses are well cared for and the owners are very hospitable.

PAAMUL

Paamul, 87km south of Cancún, is a de facto private beach on a sheltered bay. Like many other spots along the Caribbean coast, it has signs prohibiting entry to nonguests, and parking is limited.

The attractions here are great diving and a sandy, palm-fringed beach, which, though lovely, has many small rocks, shells and spiked sea urchins in the shallows offshore; take appropriate measures. A large recreational vehicle (RV) park here is greatly favored by snowbirds; the 'BC' license plates you see are from British Columbia, not Baja California. An attractive alabaster sand beach lies about 2km north.

Scuba-Mex (☎ /fax 984-875-1066; www.scubamex.com) offers diving trips to any of 30 superb

sites at very reasonable prices (with your gear/rental M\$290/390).

Paamul Hotel (☎ 999-925-9422; www.paamul.com.mx; d & cabanas low/high season M\$600/1000; ♿) has eight beachfront rooms with good beds and air-con, and 10 lovely, spacious cabanas built on stilts. Each cabana has two beds, a ceiling fan, hot-water bathroom and a veranda. Gaps in the wooden floors provide additional ventilation, and a serene atmosphere prevails.

Giant sea turtles come ashore here at night in July and August to lay their eggs. If you run across one during an evening stroll along the beach, keep your distance and don't turn your flashlight on or you might scare it away. Do your part to contribute to the survival of these endangered turtles; let them lay their eggs in peace.

If you come by bus, it's a 500m walk from the highway to the hotel and beach.

XPU-HÁ

Xpu-há (shpoo-*ha*) is a beach area about 95km south of Cancún that extends for several kilometers. It's reached by numbered access roads (most of them private).

Hotel Villas del Caribe (☎ 984-128-4260; www.xpuhahotel.com; cabanas M\$650-750, M\$800-900), at the end of X-4 (Xpu-há access road 4), is a laid-back place sitting on a handsome stretch of beach whose northern reaches are nearly empty. All rooms have a terrace or balcony and are very clean and quiet, with fans and good beds; most have hammocks as well. Guests can participate in yoga and meditation classes, and the hotel offers meal plans at its good on-site restaurant.

AKUMAL

Famous for its beautiful beach and large, swimmable lagoon, Akumal (Place of the Turtles) does indeed see some sea turtles

come ashore to lay their eggs in the summer, although fewer and fewer arrive each year thanks to resort development. Akumal is one of the Yucatán Peninsula's oldest resort areas and consists primarily of pricey hotels, condominiums and residential developments (occupied mostly by Americans and Canadians) on nearly 5km of wide beach bordering four consecutive bays. With the exception of Villa Las Brisas, all sights and facilities are reached by taking the first turnoff, Playa Akumal, as you come south on the highway. It's about 500m from the highway to the entrance.

Activities

Although increasing population is taking its toll on the reefs that parallel Akumal, diving remains the area's primary attraction. Hurricane Dean also reportedly did some minor damage to the area's reef, though we were unable to independently verify this when we passed through town. Ask about conditions before you commit to a trip.

Dive trips and deep-sea fishing excursions are offered by **Akumal Dive Shop** (☎ 984-875-9032; www.akumal.com). It also offers snorkeling trips to the reef and beaches unreachable by car for M\$250; fishing is M\$1500 and diving M\$700.

At the northern end of Akumal, **Laguna Yal-Kú** (adult/child M\$75/40; ☎ 8am-5:30pm; ♿) is a beautiful lagoon 2km from the Playa Akumal entrance. The rocky lagoon, without a doubt one of the region's highlights, runs about 500m from its beginning to the sea. It is home to large schools of brightly colored fish, and the occasional visiting turtle and manta ray. There is a tasteful sculpture garden along the shore. Showers, parking and bathrooms are included in the admission price, lockers are an extra M\$20, and snorkel gear and life jackets each cost M\$50 to rent. Cabs from the Playa Akumal entrance charge about M\$60 to the lagoon. In an effort to protect the lagoon's fragile environment, sun block is prohibited.

You can also simply find a place to park and snorkel or swim on your own, as the shallow waters are pretty and fun. Close to the shore you will not have problems with currents, though at times the surf can be rough.

Sleeping & Eating

Villa Las Brisas (☎/fax 984-876-2110; www.aventuras-akumal.com; r M\$450-2300) On the beach in Aventuras Akumal, this is an attractive,

modern place with two hotel-type rooms, some one- and two-bedroom condos and a studio apartment – all under two roofs. Room prices vary greatly by category and season. The friendly owners Horacio and Kersten speak five Western languages! The turnover is 2.5km south of the turnoff for Playa Akumal.

Que Onda (☎ 984-875-9101; www.queondaakumal.com; r/low/high season M\$700/900; ♿) It's set amid an expanse of greenery in a fairly residential area only 50m from Laguna Yal-Kú. The six fan-cooled rooms have white-tiled floors and great beds; some have sofas, and the upstairs ones have terraces. The hotel also offers a gorgeous pool, free internet access, bicycles and snorkeling gear, and half-price admission to the lagoon. The restaurant serves delicious pasta.

Just outside the entrance to Playa Akumal are two minimarkets that stock a good selection of inexpensive food. La Cueva del Pescador restaurant, inside and just north of the entrance, serves three meals daily. Que Onda has a nice restaurant and serves coffees from 11am to 4pm. Dinner is served from 5pm to 10pm; the bar closes around midnight.

XEL-HÁ

Once a pristine natural lagoon brimming with iridescent tropical fish and ringed on three sides by untouched mangroves, **Xel-Há** (☎ 998-883-3293; www.xel-ha.com; adult/child 5-11yr M\$382/264; ☎ 9am-6pm; ♿), pronounced shell-hah, is now a private park with landscaped grounds, developed cenotes, caves, nature paths, underwater walks with oxygen helmet (at additional cost), several restaurant-bars and more. Like Xcaret, its main competitor, it's overpriced and you are better off with the less expensive or free alternatives that abound.

Underwater Cave Tours

About 1km south of Xel-Há is the turnoff for **Cenote Dos Ojos**, which provides access to the enormous Dos Ojos cave system. You can take guided snorkel and dive tours of some amazing underwater caverns, floating past illuminated stalactites and stalagmites in an eerie wonderland. With an aggregate length of nearly 57km, it's the third-largest underwater cave system in the world. **Ox Bel Ha** and **Nohoch Nah Chich** (about 97km and 61km total length, respectively) are relatively nearby. Divers have tried for years to find a passage linking Dos Ojos and Nohoch Nah Chich to prove them

to be one humongous system. They succeeded in linking Nohoch with one of its outlets to the sea (at Cenote Manati in Tankah). While that was going on, new kid on the block Ox Bel Ha was found to be really big.

Hidden Worlds (☎ 984-877-8535; www.hiddenworlds.com.mx) is an American-run outfit offering guided snorkeling tours for M\$400, and one-/two-tank dives for M\$500/900. The snorkeling price includes a flashlight, wetsuit, equipment and transportation to the cenotes on a unique 'jungle mobile.'

Another way to see part of the system is through the **Dos Ojos** (☎ 8am-4:30pm) operation, a short distance north of Hidden Worlds. It's run by the Maya community that owns the land. The entrance fee is M\$100 and snorkeling gear is M\$70 more. You can dive here as well, if accompanied by a certified cave diver.

See p124 for details of more great cenotes in this area.

BAHÍAS DE PUNTA SOLIMÁN

These two beautiful, protected bays are separated by a narrow point, 123km south of Cancún and 11km north of Tulum. The area offers good wildlife-watching, kayaking, snorkeling and dining opportunities.

A few hundred meters in after the signed turnoff on Hwy 307, you can bear left (north) to reach **Oscar y Lalo's** (☎ 984-804-6973; mains M\$60-100; ☎ 10am-8pm), a picturesque restaurant that has the entire Bahía Solimán to itself. The kitchen puts out heaping plates of food, including fish fillets and barracuda steaks. Chicken fajitas are also on offer, and couples can order elaborate specials such as king crab stuffed with lobster and shrimp.

Oscar rents **kayaks** for around M\$100 per hour; you can paddle out to the reef that shelters the entire mouth of the bay and snorkel or bird-watch. The dense mangrove around the 150m stretch of (somewhat spiky) white beach breeds quite a few mosquitoes and sand flies; you'll want a tent with very good screens if you're **camping** (sites per person M\$30).

Back on the main access road, heading straight a short distance beyond the turnoff for Oscar's brings you to an intersection. Continuing straight here leads to the end of the point via a road that splits and rejoins itself a few times. The little-traveled track makes a great **nature walk**: you can see both bays, and birding in the perennially dry mangrove area is terrific. Birds of interest here

include Yucatán vireos, Yucatán woodpeckers, rose-throated tanagers, black catbirds and orange orioles. If you're very lucky you may spot one of the pumas seen in the area from time to time.

Turning right (south) at the intersection rather than going straight takes you along the edge of the bay on the other side of the point, also named **Bahía Solimán** (though some call it Bahía de San Francisco). It has terrific coral heads, tons of colorful fish, plenty of grouper and reef sharks, and the occasional sea turtle and even tuna.

A number of beach houses, some quite luxurious, line the road. Most of them rent by the week, at well over M\$10,000. A good website for house rentals in the area is www.locogringo.com.

Maya Jardín (☎ 984-125-8806; www.mayajardin.com; d M\$1250-1900; ♿) is on the southern end of the bay, and offers large rooms, free kayaks and snorkel gear to explore the bay.

The road continues south beyond another point past residential lots then continues into the Tankah area and loops back northwest to rejoin the highway.

Most people get to Punta Solimán by car, or by taking a bus to Tulum and a taxi from there.

TANKAH

A few kilometers south of the Hwy 307 turnoff for Punta Solimán is the turnoff for Tankah, which also has a picturesque stretch of beach and accommodations that have the sea for a front yard and mangrove out the back.

Besides the attractions of beach and reef, Tankah offers **Cenote Manati**, named for the gentle 'sea cows' that used to frequent it. Used to. It's actually a series of seven cenotes connected by a channel that winds through the mangrove a short distance before heading back underground briefly to reach the sea. The snorkeling's great, as is the birding, and both are free.

To reach the places described here, turn east at the 'Casa Cenote' sign, go 700m, then turn left and head north up the coast. You'll come to Tankah Inn first, then Casa Cenote, which is less than 2km from the highway.

Room rates vary seasonally and the ranges given here don't include the Christmas (and for some, Easter and Thanksgiving) peaks. High season is roughly mid-December to late April.

Tankah Inn (☎ 984-100-0703, in USA 918-582-3743; www.tankah.com; d low/high season M\$1100/1510) has five comfortable rooms with tiled floors; the beds, bathrooms and cross-ventilation are all good. A large upstairs kitchen, dining room and common area have splendid views. It offers diving, snorkeling, yoga classes, Spanish lessons and more.

Casa Cenote (☎ 998-874-5170; www.casacenote.com; ste with breakfast & dinner low/high season M\$990/2250; 🍴) is just across the road from Cenote Manatí, leading many people to apply the hotel's name to the water feature. Its seven beachside *casitas* (small houses) are lovingly done up with Maya touches, and each has a screened sliding glass door leading to its own little terrace with hammock. The restaurant serves fresh seafood, with a Texas-style barbecue on Sunday.

TULUM

☎ 984 / pop 14,790

Tulum's spectacular coastline – with all its confectioner-sugar sands, jade-green water, balmy breezes and bright sun – makes it one of the top beaches in Mexico. Where else can you get all that *and* a dramatically situated Maya ruin? There's also excellent diving, fun cenotes, great snorkeling, and a variety of lodgings and restaurants to fit every budget.

There is one big drawback. The town center, where the really cheap eats and sleeps are found, sits right on the highway, making it feel more like a truck stop than a tropical paradise. This said, both Cobá to the west and the massive Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an to the south make doable day trips.

Hurricane Dean brought some minor damage to Tulum's beachfront cabanas, but most places should be up and running by the time you read this.

Orientation

Tulum lies some 135km south of Cancún and is spread out over quite a large area. Approaching from the north on Hwy 307 the first thing you reach is Crucero Ruinas, where the old access road (closed to vehicle traffic about 100m in from the highway) heads in a straight line about 800m to the ruins' ticket booth. About 400m further south on Hwy 307 (past the gas station) is the new entrance for vehicles going to the ruins; it leads to a parking lot. Another 1.5km south on the highway brings you to

the Cobá junction; turning right (west) takes you to Cobá, and turning east leads about 3km to the north-south road servicing the Zona Hotelera, the string of waterfront lodgings extending for more than 10km south from the ruins. This road eventually enters the Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an, continuing some 50km past Boca Paila to Punta Allen.

The town center, sometimes referred to as Tulum Pueblo, strides the highway (called Avenida Tulum through town) south of the Cobá junction.

Information

Tulum has Telmex pay phones, numerous currency-exchange booths (one with an ATM), and an **HSBC bank** (Av Tulum; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) offering good exchange rates and an ATM open 24 hours.

The **post office** (Av Tulum; ☎ 9am-3:30pm Mon-Fri), between Satellite and Centauro, is about five blocks north of the bus terminal.

There are numerous internet cafés (M\$15 per hour) on Avenida Tulum.

Community Tours Sian Ka'an (☎ 114-0750; www.siankaantours.org; Av Tulum), between Orión and Centauro, runs tours to the magnificent Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an stopping at various ancient Maya sites.

Dangers & Annoyances

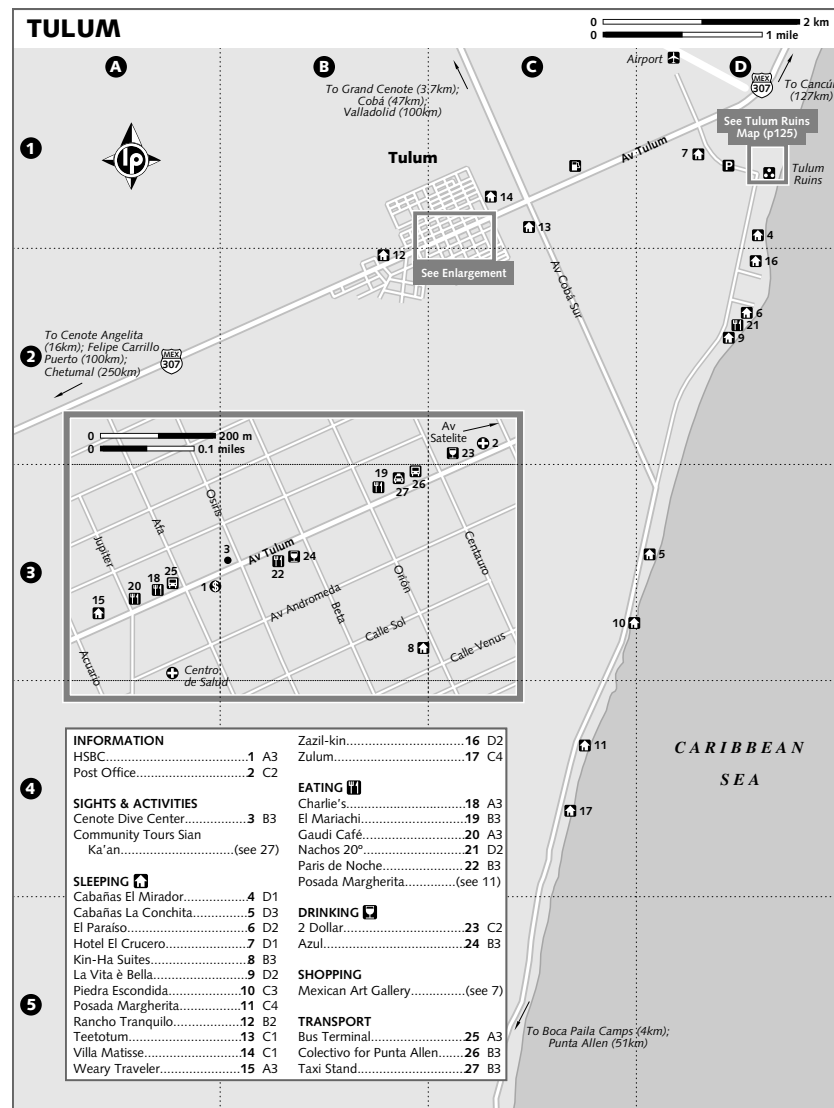
Tulum is generally safe and locals welcome tourists. However, if you nod off on the beach, your valuables (and even nonvaluables) may disappear. Do not listen to touts who wait near the T-junction of the beach and offer inexpensive cabanas – there truly is no such thing as a free lunch. And bring your own lock if you plan on staying in the cheap, no-frills beachfront cabanas.

Sights & Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

Cenote Dive Center (☎ 871-2232; www.cenotedive.com; Av Tulum) is a recommended outfit specializing in guided cavern dives and also offering cave dives, and cenote and cavern snorkeling trips. The staff speak English, Spanish, German and Scandinavian languages.

The dive shop at Zazil-kin (p127) is a PADI, National Association of Cave Diving (NACD) and TDI operation offering low-cost reef dives and renting snorkel gear for M\$100 per day.



Snorkeling or swimming from the beach is possible and fun, but be extra careful of boat traffic (a dive flag is a good idea), as the strip between the beach and reef offshore is traveled by dive boats and fishermen. If there's a heavy wind onshore, strong currents can develop on the lee side of the reef. Inexperienced swimmers should stay close to shore.

Cenote Angelita

This spectacular cenote is most notable to divers for the unique, curious, even eerie layer of hydrogen sulfide that 'fogs' the water about halfway through the descent. Look up and see the sunlight filtering down through ancient submerged tree branches that are wonderfully creepy – like outstretched witches' arms.

THE YUCATÁN PENINSULA'S TOP FIVE CENOTES

One look and it's easy to see why the Maya thought cenotes were sacred: fathomless cerulean pools, dancing shafts of light, a darkened chamber. Even if you don't buy the spiritual aspects, they're still awe-inspiring examples of nature's beauty. Here's our five faves:

- A two-tank dive at Dos Ojos (p120)
- Diving or swimming at Gran Cenote (p129)
- Diving Taj Mahal (p78)
- Sinking through eerie layers of 'foggy' water in Angelita (p123)
- Plunging into the cool triple cenotes of Cuzamá after a jouncy ride by a horse-pulled train cart (p175)

Keep in mind these are fragile environments. Avoid applying sun block or insect repellent right before entering the cenote. Be aware that the rocks are often slippery. Loud noises disturb bats and other creatures. In rare cases, tourists have been seriously injured or killed by climbing on the roots or stalactites.

For more information about Yucatán's fascinating cenotes, pick up a copy of Steve Gerrard's book *The Cenotes of the Riviera Maya*, a beautiful paperback with spectacular photos as well as detailed information about each listing.

The dive is deep and should only be done by experienced divers.

TULUM RUINS

The ruins of Tulum (admission M\$45; ☎ 8am-5pm) preside over a rugged coastline, a strip of brilliant beach and green-and-turquoise waters that will make you want to tear up that return ticket home. It's true the extents and structures are of a modest scale and the late post-Classic design, workmanship and ornamentation are inferior to those of earlier, more grandiose projects – but wow, those Maya occupants must have felt pretty smug each sunrise. Iguanas are everywhere, and many act as if they own the place.

Tulum is a prime destination for large tour groups. To best enjoy the ruins without feeling like part of the herd, you should visit them either early in the morning or late in the afternoon. Parking costs M\$40 for cars and M\$80 for vans and pickups. A M\$20 train takes you to the ticket booth from the entrance, or just hoof the 300m. Taxi cabs from town charge M\$35 and can drop you off at the old entrance road, about an 800m walk from the ticket booth. There's a less-used foot entrance just north of Cabañas El Mirador.

History

Most archaeologists believe that Tulum was occupied during the late post-Classic period (AD 1200–1521) and that it was an important

port town during its heyday. The Maya sailed up and down this coast, maintaining trading routes all the way down into Belize. When Juan de Grijalva sailed past in 1518, he was amazed by the sight of the walled city, its buildings painted a gleaming red, blue and yellow and a ceremonial fire flaming atop its seaside watchtower.

The ramparts that surround three sides of Tulum (the fourth side being the sea) leave little question as to its strategic function as a fortress. Several meters thick and 3m to 5m high, the walls protected the city during a period of considerable strife between Maya city-states. Not all of Tulum was situated within the walls. The vast majority of the city's residents lived outside them; the civic-ceremonial buildings and palaces likely housed Tulum's ruling class.

The city was abandoned about 75 years after the Spanish conquest. It was one of the last of the ancient cities to be abandoned; most others had been given back to nature long before the arrival of the Spanish. But Maya pilgrims continued to visit over the years, and indigenous refugees from the War of the Castes took shelter here from time to time.

'Tulum' is Maya for 'wall,' though its residents called it Zama (Dawn). The name Tulum was apparently applied by explorers during the early 20th century.

Exploring the Ruins

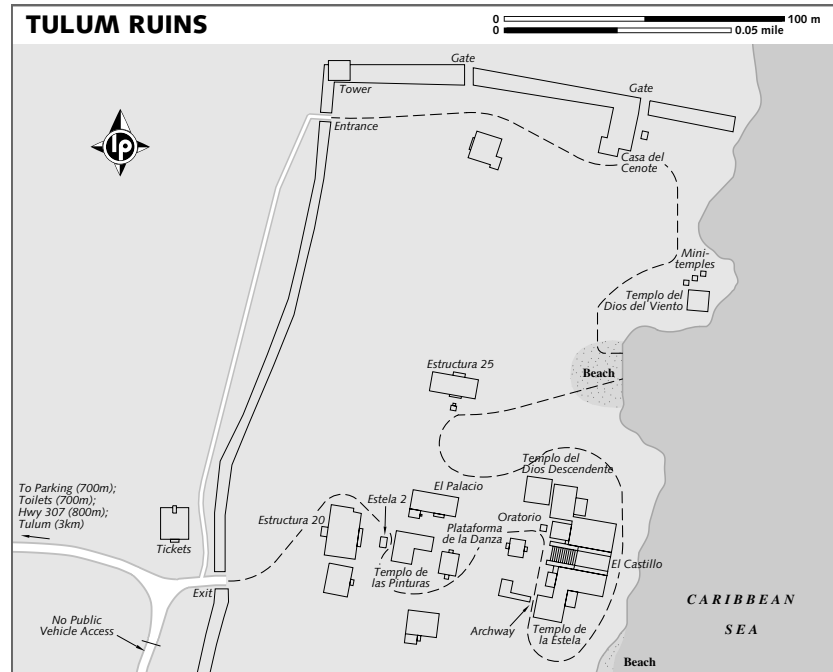
Visitors are required to follow a prescribed route around the ruins. From the ticket booth, head along nearly half the length of Tulum's enormous wall, which measures approximately 380m south to north and 170m along its sides. Just before reaching the northwest corner, you enter the site through a breach in the wall. The tower at the corner, once thought to be a guard post, is now believed by some to have been a type of shrine.

Heading east you'll reach the **Casa del Cenote**, named for the small pool at its southern base, where you can sometimes see the glitter of little silvery fish as they turn sideways in the murky water. A small tomb was found in the casa. Walk south toward the bluff holding the **Templo del Dios del Viento** (Temple of the Wind God) – roped off at the time of research – which provides the best views of El Castillo juxtaposed with the sea below.

Below the Wind God's hangout is a lovely little stretch of beach. It's quite swimmable when conditions are good, but take note of the lifeguards and the warning flags. After your dip, head west to **Estructura 25**, which

has some interesting columns on its raised platform and, above the main doorway (on the south side), a beautiful stucco frieze of the Descending God. Also known as the Diving God, this upside-down, part-human figure appears elsewhere at Tulum, as well as at several other east-coast sites and Cobá. It may be related to the Maya's reverence for bees (and honey), perhaps a stylized representation of a bee sipping nectar from a flower.

South of Estructura 25 is **El Palacio**, notable for its X-figure ornamentation. From here, head east back toward the water and skirt the outside edge of the central temple complex (keeping it to your right). Along the back are some good views of the sea. Heading inland again on the south side, you can enter the complex through a corbeled archway past the restored **Templo de la Estela** (Temple of the Stela), also known as the Temple of the Initial Series. Stela 1, now in the British Museum, was found here. It was inscribed with the Maya date corresponding to AD 564 (the 'initial series' of Maya hieroglyphs in an inscription gives its date). At first this confused archaeologists, who believed Tulum had been



settled several hundred years later than this date. It's now thought that Stela 1 was brought to Tulum from Tankah, a settlement 4km to the north dating from the Classic period.

At the heart of the complex you can admire Tulum's tallest building, a watchtower appropriately named **El Castillo** (The Castle) by the Spaniards. Note the Descending God in the middle of its façade, and the Toltec-style 'Kukulcanes' (plumed serpents) at the corners, echoing those at Chichén Itzá. To the Castillo's north is the small, lopsided **Templo del Dios Descendente**, named for the relief figure above the door.

Walking west toward the exit will take you to the two-story **Templo de las Pinturas**, constructed in several stages around AD 1400–1450. Its decoration was among the most elaborate at Tulum and included relief masks and colored murals on an inner wall. The murals have been partially restored but are nearly impossible to make out. This monument might have been the last built by the Maya before the Spanish conquest and, with its columns, carvings and two-story construction, it's probably the most interesting structure at the site.

Sleeping

The biggest choice, aside from budget, is whether to stay in the town center or out along the beach. Both have their advantages: most of the daytime action is at the beach or the ruins, while at night people tend to hit the restaurants and bars in town.

TULUM PUEBLO

You have to use a taxi (or hitchhike) to get to the beach. If you crave sand and surf, consider staying along the Zona Hotelera.

Rancho Tranquilo (☎ 871-2784; www.ranchotranquilo.com.mx; Av Tulum s/n; dm M\$120, r from M\$250-480) A nice option for those looking for hostel-type lodging, Rancho Tranquilo offers a mix of cabanas, dorms and rooms in a low-key, desert-landscaped garden. There's a covered common area and free breakfast. It can get a bit noisy, and for those without wheels it's quite far south on Avenida Tulum, and pretty dark late at night.

our pick **Weary Traveler** (☎ 871-2390; www.wearytraveler.info; Av Tulum; dm M\$120, r with/without bathroom M\$350/300; ♿) Turn right out of the bus station and walk one block south to this fun hostel. A great place to meet friends, the

Weary Traveler is known for a full breakfast that includes fruit, eggs, bread, coffee and condiments. There's internet, a shuttle to the beach, and a great central courtyard with hammocks and picnic benches. It even has its own bar. Chilly, pull-style showers and a lack of any shelving for toiletries are the only downsides.

Hotel El Crucero (☎ 871-2610; www.el-crucero.com; Crucero Ruinas; dm M\$85-100; d with fan/air-con M\$350/450; ♿) You'll feel welcome and well-taken-care-of at this friendly hotel. Dorm rooms have bathrooms and lockers, while air-con rooms are done up in themes, such as the Mexican Mural, Jungle Room and the Lizard Lounge. The hotel has a garden area plus a bar and restaurant, and internet access. You can rent bicycles and store bags as well. It's a 10-minute walk to the ruins, and 15 minutes to the beach. The hotel can arrange low-impact bicycle tours to cenotes. Local artist Enrique Diaz has a gallery here (see Shopping, p128).

Villa Matisse (☎ 871-2636; shuvinito@yahoo.com; Av Satellite No 19; d low/high season M\$400/500) Funky patchwork quilts add a splash of color to the glaringly white, clean rooms at the Matisse. Little details such as seashell bouquets and fresh plants add an intimacy and closeness. There's even hammocks hanging above the beds in the fan-cooled rooms – a nice touch.

Kin-Ha Suites (☎/fax 871-2321; www.hotelkinha.com; Orión; d with fan/air-con M\$600/750; ♿) While it's a bit overpriced, this Italian-run joint has pleasant rooms surrounding a small courtyard garden, each with a hammock out front. It's between Calles Sol and Venus.

Teetotum (☎ 745-8827; www.teetotumhotel.com; Av Cobá Sur; r low/high season M\$750/1250) There's just four rooms in this retro-hip boutique hotel 200m south of Avenida Tulum, with everything bordering on the supermaude, like the bright orange and green vinyl headboards. There are iPod docks, an upstairs lounge and dip pool, and the restaurant is excellent. It's a bit overpriced for not being on the beach, but a fun place to stay if you've got that groovy-groupie syndrome.

ZONA HOTELERA

Quality and price are so varied here that it's best to look before you decide. Accommodations range from rustic cabanas with sand floors to pricey bungalows with pricier restaurants. Some places have no electricity, or shut their

generators off at 9pm or 10pm; many have no phone.

The cheapest way to sleep in cabanas is to have your own hammock and mosquito net; if you don't, several of the inexpensive places rent them for about M\$30 a night. In the cheapest places you'll have to supply your own towel and soap, and water, hot water, and even electricity may be erratic. Bedbugs, sand fleas and mosquitoes are all a possibility. Bring repellent or consider burning a noxious mosquito coil near your door. Nights can be darned cold if there's a breeze blowing.

The following picks are ordered north to south. The last four listings are all south of where the road from town (and Cobá) meets the Tulum–Punta Allen road, forming a T-intersection (referred to hereafter as 'the T').

Cabañas El Mirador (☎ 879-6019; elfishi@hotmail.com; cabana with hammock/bed M\$130/250) The closest place to the ruins, the Mirador rents tiny 4m-by-3m cabanas that feel a bit like jail cells – they even stink a little bit. Go for a hammock bungalow as the rooms with beds aren't worth the extra money. There's a decent restaurant with great views sitting up and back from the beach.

Zazil-kin (☎ 124-0082; cabanas with/without bathroom M\$670/400) About a 10-minute walk from the ruins, this is a popular place. It has a dive center, a basketball court, a restaurant-bar-disco and a nice stretch of beach. All structures in this little Smurf village are very tidy and nicely painted – Papa Smurf would be proud. The cabanas' poles have been filled in with concrete, which makes them more secure (bring your own lock) but hinders ventilation. Be warned that the disco plays music at very high volumes sometimes until 1am or 2am.

El Paraíso (☎ 137-9066; r with fan low/high season M\$900/1300) Has 10 rooms in a one-story hotel-style block, each with two good beds, private hot-water bathroom, fine cross-ventilation and 24-hour electricity. The restaurant is very presentable, with decent prices, and the level beach, with its palm trees, *palapa* parasols, swing-chaired bar and soft white sand, is among the nicest you'll find on the Riviera Maya.

La Vita è Bella (☎ 871-3501; www.lavitaebella-tulum.com; bungalows low/high season M\$1000/2500, s & d without bathroom M\$350) A few hundred meters south of El Paraíso, it offers lovely bungalows with tiled floors, big comfy beds, well-screened sliding doors, good bathrooms with colorful basins and wide verandas with hammocks.

All overlook a narrow but nice beach with beach umbrellas and chairs. It's Italian-run (surprise!), so the restaurant serves delicious handmade pastas and thin-crust pizza from its wood-fired oven. Kiteboarding lessons are also offered.

Cabañas La Conchita (fax 871 2092; www.differentworld.com; d low/high season M\$1200/1600) About 2km south of the T across from some souvenir shops, the 'Little Shell' has eight units: three freestanding and five in two-story structures. Ask for the beachfront cabana with the vaulted *palapa* roof and 'muy romántico' mosquito netting. Rates include a big breakfast. When sending a fax to Cabañas La Conchita make sure to mark it 'Attn: La Conchita.'

Piedra Escondida (☎ 100-3826; www.piedraescondida.com; r low/high season M\$1250/2350) Offers very good service in its large rooms. All have bathrooms and balconies or porches and are nicely decorated; some have excellent views. La Piedra also has a pleasing *palapa*-style restaurant-bar, and shares a small beach with neighboring hotels.

Posada Margherita (☎ 100-3780; www.posadamargherita.com; Km 4.5; d low/high season M\$1300/2000) Unlike many so-called 'eco-tels' everything here is totally solar- or wind-powered – even the kitchen, which makes amazing food using mainly organic ingredients. All rooms have tiled floors, good bug screening, 24-hour lights and a terrace or balcony with hammock. The beach here is wide and lovely. The excellent restaurant was being renovated at press time, but should now be up and running. The hotel also has something virtually unheard of on the Yucatán Peninsula: wheelchair access.

Zulum (☎ 801-0314; www.xulumhotels.com; Boca Paila Km 6.5; r low/high season M\$1000/2500) This is an upscale joint with well-appointed rooms. The rooms facing the beach are worth the price, while those without ocean views are just a bit *caro* (expensive) for what they offer.

Eating

TULUM PUEBLO

All of the following places are on Avenida Tulum (Hwy 307). To escape the tourist traffic, consider putting the guidebook down for a second, leaving the main drag and finding a nice, quiet, friendly *taquería* (taco place) on a side street.

Gaudi Café (cnr Av Tulum & Jupiter; mains M\$20-60; ☎ 7am-10pm) Just south of the bus station on the same side of the street, Gaudi Café offers

great fresh-squeezed juices and good coffee. Spotlessness and relaxing music make it a great way to start the morning.

our pick El Mariachi (Av Tulum; mains M\$65-90; ☎ 7am-3am) Staff ask you your name when you walk into this tidy little eatery and bar. It seems like a small thing, but it's a barometer for the excellent service and tasty traditional food you are about to enjoy. Popular with locals and tourists alike, this open-air spot delivers yummy slow-cooked pork enchiladas, fresh grilled fish and about every cut of meat you could imagine. Find it between Orion and Centauro.

París de Noche (☎ 871-2532; Av Tulum; mains M\$70-140; ☎ 11am-11pm Mon-Fri, 7am-11pm Sat & Sun) Serves some big portions, so bring an appetite or a friend. The French owner won a *Time Out* award at the restaurant he ran in London. He serves a mix of French and Mexican dishes (as well as steaks and seafood) that include escargots, ceviche, and a delicious green salad with chèvre that's a full meal in itself. There's often two-for-one drink specials and a tasty *comida corrida*.

Charlie's (☎ 871-2573; Av Tulum; mains M\$85-140; ☎ 7:30am-11pm Tue-Sun) An old standby with attractive conch-shell décor and a wall made of old glass bottles, it's near the bus station and offers your choice of indoor or courtyard dining. The food is largely Mexican, with a selection of salads thrown in.

ZONA HOTELERA

Most of the hotel restaurants also welcome nonguests.

Posada Margherita (☎ 100-3780; mains M\$80-250) This hotel's restaurant is candlelit at night, making it a beautiful, romantic place to dine. The fantastic food, including pasta, is made fresh daily and the wines are excellent. It's on the Tulum-Punta Allen road.

Nachos 20° (☎ 100-5067; Km 2.5; lunch mains M\$80, dinner mains M\$80-160; ☎ 8am-9pm) Another appealing option. North of the T-junction on the Tulum-Punta Allen road, it has tables on a rocky bluff above the water, offering some fabulous views.

SELF-CATERING

Two small supermarkets provide an alternative to eating out: the Stop 'n Go, 100m east of Hwy 307 on the road to Cobá, and the Super Mar Caribe, about four blocks north of the bus terminal.

Drinking & Entertainment

Azul (Av Tulum; ☎ 6pm-late) Bathed in white with strips of blue neon, this lounge/disco heats up late. It's next to París de Noche.

2 Dollar (Av Tulum) Despite the name, this is a locals' watering hole. It's generally a boys-only club, and there are a few seats outside away from the blaring music.

Shopping

Avenida Tulum is lined with shops offering many items (hammocks, blankets, handicrafts) that you'll see everywhere. Prices drop drastically the further you go from the bus station - up to 50%.

Mexican Art Gallery (☎ 745-8979; inf_art@hotmail.com; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Located at the Hotel El Crucero, this gallery features the brightly colored work of local artist Enrique Diaz, whose motto is to 'paint the colors of Tulum.' His art is vivid and fun, a variety of portraits and landscapes that seem vaguely Picasso-esque.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal (just a waiting room, really) is toward the southern end of town. When leaving Tulum, you can also wait at Crucero Ruinas for intercity buses and the *colectivos* to Playa del Carmen. The table (opposite) shows some travel times and prices for buses leaving Tulum.

If you're headed for Valladolid, be sure your bus is traveling the short route through Chemax, not via Cancún. *Colectivos* leave from Avenida Tulum for Playa del Carmen (M\$25, 45 minutes), Punta Allen (at 2pm), and *colectivos* for Felipe Carrillo Puerto (M\$45, one hour) leave from just south of the hostel.

Getting Around

Except for the shuttles operated from the youth hostels, there are no *colectivos* out to the beach. You either hitch, ride a taxi, rent a bike or walk. And it's a long walk.

Bicycles can be a good way to get around and usually cost M\$150 a day.

Taxi fares are fixed and pretty cheap; from either of the two taxi stands in Tulum Pueblo (one south of the bus terminal, which has fares posted; the other four blocks north on the opposite side of the street) to the ruins is M\$35. Fares to most cabanas mentioned here are M\$35 to M\$50.

BUS SERVICES FROM TULUM

Destination	Cost (M\$)	Duration	Departures
Cancún	54-67	2hr	numerous buses
Chetumal	107-140	3½-4hr	every 2hr
Chichén Itzá	101	3½hr	2 ADO buses at 9am & 2:30pm
Cobá	30	45min	about 5 ADO or Mayab buses 7am-6pm
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	60	1½hr	numerous buses, consider taking a <i>colectivo</i>
Mahahual	122	4hr	ADO bus at 11:30am
Mérida	172	4hr (avoid 2nd-class buses which take much longer)	numerous services daily
Playa del Carmen	34	1hr	numerous buses
Valladolid	60	2hr	5 ADO & 5 Mayab buses 1:25am-6pm

GRAN CENOTE

A little over 3km from Tulum on the road to Cobá is Gran (Grand) Cenote, a worthwhile stop on your way between Tulum and the Cobá ruins, especially if it's a hot day. You can snorkel (M\$80) among small fish and see underwater formations in the caverns here if you bring your own gear. A cab from downtown Tulum costs around M\$50 one way, or it's an easy bike ride.

COBÁ

Though not as large as some of the more famous ruins, Cobá is 'cool' because you feel like you're in a *Raiders of the Lost Ark* flick. It's set deep in the jungle and many of the ruins have yet to be excavated. Walk along ancient *sacbé* pathways (stone-paved avenues; *sacbeob* is the plural in Maya), climb up vine-covered mounds, and ascend to the top of Nohoch Mul for a spectacular view of the surrounding jungle.

From an over-the-top sustainable tourism perspective, it's great to stay the night in small communities such as Cobá. The money you spend goes straight to the local economy, encouraging continued rural stewardship and minimizing the mass migration to tourist cities such as Cancún. Hiring local guides, buying local crafts and simply stopping here for lunch also help.

History

Cobá was settled earlier than Chichén Itzá or Tulum, and construction reached its peak between AD 800 and 1100. Archaeologists believe that this city once covered 50 sq km and held 40,000 Maya.

Cobá's architecture is a mystery; its towering pyramids and stelae resemble the

architecture of Tikal, which is several hundred kilometers away, rather than the much nearer sites of Chichén Itzá and the northern Yucatán Peninsula.

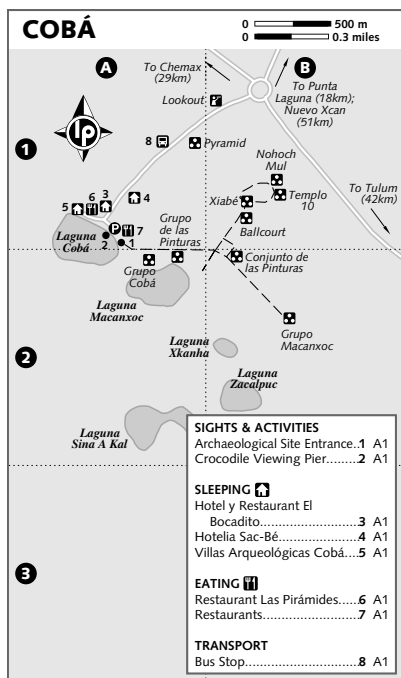
Some archaeologists theorize that an alliance with Tikal was made through marriage to facilitate trade between the Guatemalan and Yucatecan Maya. Stelae appear to depict female rulers from Tikal holding ceremonial bars and flaunting their power by standing on captives. These Tikal royal females, when married to Cobá's royalty, may have brought architects and artisans with them.

Archaeologists are also baffled by the extensive network of *sacbeob* in this region, with Cobá as the hub. The longest runs nearly 100km from the base of Cobá's great Nohoch Mul pyramid to the Maya settlement of Yaxuna. In all, some 40 *sacbeob* passed through Cobá, parts of the huge astronomical 'time machine' that was evident in every Maya city.

The first excavation was led by the Austrian archaeologist Teobert Maler in 1891. There was little subsequent investigation until 1926, when the Carnegie Institute financed the first of two expeditions led by Sir J Eric S Thompson and Harry Pollock. After their 1930 expedition, not much happened until 1973, when the Mexican government began to finance excavation. Archaeologists now estimate that Cobá contains some 6500 structures, of which just a few have been excavated and restored, though work is ongoing.

Orientation & Information

The tiny, tranquil village of Cobá, 2.5km west of the Tulum-Chemax road, has a small, cheap hotel; several small, simple and



low-cost restaurants; and the upscale Villas Arqueológicas Cobá (Club Med) hotel.

Be careful not to picnic beside the lake, as it has large crocodiles. If you want to snap a picture of a croc, try looking for one near Villas Arqueológicas Cobá in early afternoon from the pier.

The **archaeological site entrance** (admission M\$45; ☎ 8am-5pm; ♿), at the end of the road on the southeast corner of Laguna Cobá, has a parking lot that charges M\$15 per car. Be prepared to walk several kilometers on paths, depending on how much you want to see. If you arrive after 11am you'll feel a bit like a sheep in a flock. Bring insect repellent and water; the shop next to the ticket booth sells both at reasonable prices. There is a drink stand within the site near the Nohoch Mul pyramid.

A short distance inside, at the Grupo Cobá, is a concession renting bicycles at M\$30 per day. These can only be ridden within the site, and are useful if you really want to get around the further reaches; also they're a great way to catch a breeze and cool off. If the site is crowded, however, it's probably best to walk. Pedi-trikes (two people and driver cost M\$95

per day) are another popular option for those who are tired or have limited mobility.

You may want to buy a book on Cobá before coming. On-site signage and maps are minimal and cryptic. Guides near the entrance size you up and ask whatever they think you're worth, tours generally run about M\$200 to M\$400. Guides drop their prices inside the gate, so pay admission first and avoid bargaining out in the parking lot. The Nohoch Mul pyramid is the only structure the public is allowed to climb.

Sights

GRUPO COBÁ

Walk just under 100m along the main path from the entrance and turn right to get to **La Iglesia** (The Church), the most prominent structure in the Cobá Group. It's an enormous pyramid; if you were allowed to climb it, you could see the surrounding lakes (which look lovely from above on a clear day) and the Nohoch Mul pyramid.

Take the time to explore Grupo Cobá; it has a couple of corbeled-vault passages you can walk through. Near its northern edge, on the way back to the main path and the bicycle concession, is a very well-restored **juego de pelota** (ball court).

GRUPO MACANXOC

About 500m beyond the *juego de pelota*, the path forks. Going straight gets you to the Grupo Macanxoc, a group of stelae that bore reliefs of royal women who are thought to have come from Tikal. They are badly eroded, and it's a 1km walk, but the flora along the way is interesting.

GRUPO DE LAS PINTURAS

You can reach the Grupo de las Pinturas (Paintings Group) by heading 200m toward the Grupo Macanxoc and turning left. If you're on a bike, you'll have to park it here and return to it (this is the case at a few other spots as well). The temple here bears traces of glyphs and frescoes above its door and remnants of richly colored plaster inside.

You approach the temple from the south-east. Leave by the trail at the northwest (opposite the temple steps) to see two stelae. The first of these is 20m along, beneath a *palapa*. Here, a regal figure stands over two others, one of them kneeling with his hands bound behind him. Sacrificial captives lie

beneath the feet of a ruler at the base. You'll need to use your imagination, as this and most of the other stelae here are quite worn. Continue along the path past another badly weathered stela and a small temple to rejoin the Nohoch Mul path and turn right (or, if you rented a bike, turn around or go left to retrieve it).

GRUPO NOHOCH MUL

Continuing northeast you will reach another ball court on the right side of the path. Look at the ground in the center of the court to spot a carved stone skull (the winner or the loser of the ball game?) and the carved relief of a jaguar. More weathered stelae lie at the north end. After the ball court, the track bends between piles of stones – a ruined temple – and you reach a junction of sorts. Turn right (east) and head to the structure called **Xaibé**. This is a tidy, semicircular stepped building, almost fully restored. Its name means 'the Crossroads,' as it marks the juncture of four separate *sacbeob*.

Going north from here takes you past Templo 10 and Stela 20. The exquisitely carved stela – worn, but not nearly so badly as the others – bears the date AD 730 and a familiar theme: a ruler standing imperiously over two captives. In front of it is a modern line drawing depicting the original details.

By this time you will have noticed **Nohoch Mul** (Big Mound) just to the north. Also known as the Great Pyramid, which sounds a lot better than Big Mound, Nohoch Mul reaches a height of 42m, making it the second-tallest Maya structure on the Yucatán Peninsula. Calakmul's Estructura II, at 45m, is the tallest.

Climbing the old steps can be scary for some; see boxed text, p172, for tips.

Two diving gods are carved over the doorway of the temple at the top (built in the post-Classic period, AD 1100–1450), similar to the sculptures at Tulum. The view from up top is over many square kilometers of flat scrubby forest, with peeks of lake, and Xaibé as the sole visible Maya structure. Still, it's inspiring.

After descending, walk past Templo 10 and turn right to make a loop back to the ruined-temple junction. In all it's a 1.4km, half-hour walk back to the site entrance.

Sleeping & Eating

There's no organized campsite, but you can try finding a place along the shore of the lake, which is inhabited by crocodiles (local children can show you a safe swimming spot).

Hotel y Restaurant El Bocadito (☎ 984-264-7070; s/d M\$100-150) Just north of the Laguna Cobá, at the entrance to town, this place has very basic, fan-cooled rooms all with private bathrooms. Chickens cluck and dogs wander around. The restaurant (mains around M\$60) is well run and serves basic food, including an affordable set menu. It will store luggage while you visit the ruins. El Bocadito also serves as Cobá's bus terminal.

Hotelita Sac-bé (☎ 984-206-7140; s/d with fan M\$250, with air-con M\$400; ♿) Clean and friendly, the Sac-bé is on the opposite side of the street from El Bocadito and about 100m closer to the main road heading out of town. The chickens are a bit noisy in the morning, but it has nice hot showers and comfortable, springy beds.

Villas Arqueológicas Cobá (☎ 984-206-7000; cob.cccol@clubmed.com; s/d/tr M\$860/1000/1450; ♿) ☎

BODY ARTISTS: CRANIAL DEFORMATION, PIERCING & TATTOOS

Take a second to imagine what a Maya at the height of the Classic period must have looked like. Their heads were sloped back, their ears, noses, cheeks and sometimes even genitals were pierced. Their eyes were crossed and their bodies were tattooed. These were, indeed, some of the first body artists.

Cranial deformation was one of the Maya's most odd forms of body art, and was most often performed to indicate social status. Mothers would bind the head of their infant (male or female) tightly to a board while the skull was still soft. By positioning the board either on top of or behind the head, the mother could shape the skull in many ways – either long and pointy (known as 'elongated' – think *Cone Heads*) or long and narrow, extending back rather than up (known as 'oblique' – think *Alien*). As the infant grew older and the bones calcified, the headboard was no longer needed: the skull would retain its modified shape for life. Apparently, compressing the skull did not affect the intelligence or capabilities of the child. Both practices became less and less common after the Spanish arrived.

A Club Med hotel next to the lake, it was built to resemble an old hacienda, with red-tiled floors and rooms grouped around a large inner courtyard with an expansive swimming pool. The restaurant is surprisingly affordable and serves good Yucatecan cuisine, but the rooms are too small for the price. It has a small Maya ruin – yes it's for real – out back by the tennis courts.

Restaurant Las Pirámides (mains M\$60) A few doors down from Villas Arqueológicas Cobá, it has good lake views and friendly service.

Several small restaurants by the site's parking lot serve inexpensive meals.

Getting There & Away

Most buses serving Cobá swing down almost to the lake to drop off passengers before turning around. Buses run six to eight times daily between Tulum and Cobá (M\$30); six of these also serve Playa del Carmen (M\$68, one to 1¼ hours). Buses also run to Valladolid (M\$26, 45 minutes) and Chichén Itzá (M\$52, 1½ hours).

Day-trippers from Tulum can reach Cobá by forming a group to split the cost of a taxi, which costs about M\$500 round-trip, including two hours at the site.

The road from Cobá to Chemax is straightforward and in good shape. If you're driving to Valladolid or Chichén Itzá this is the way to go.

PUNTA LAGUNA

Punta Laguna is a fair-sized lake with a small Maya community nearby, 20km northeast of Cobá on the road to Nuevo Xcan. The forest around the lake supports populations of spider and howler monkeys, as well as a variety of birds, and contains small, unexcavated ruins and a cenote. A surprising jaguar population was recently discovered, though chances of seeing one are very slim. Toucans sometimes flit across the road.

A **tourist cooperative** (☎ 986-861-4094) charges M\$40 for entrance to the lake area, and about M\$200 per hour for guided visit, which is your best chance of spotting simians. Arrive at dusk or dawn to further increase your chances. The local community is increasing its tourist offerings in an effort to keep the town's youth from fleeing to work in Señor Froglandia. The new activities include a zipline tour (M\$125), a repel into a nearly pitch-black cenote (M\$200) and a shamanic

ceremony (M\$125) at a 'traditional' altar that's been erected fortuitously right on the trail to the lake. While these are fun, the best activity is renting a canoe (M\$60 per hour) to explore the lake, an eerily beautiful sight when shrouded in morning mist.

Intrepid travelers can call ahead and reserve a *palapa* for the night. Or bring your own tent and camp out near the lake. Camping or a *palapa* costs around M\$60 per night. It's best to bring your own hammock and a mosquito net. Like any rural community, Punta Laguna offers a unique opportunity to learn about the local indigenous culture, and community leaders say travelers should consider studying Maya with local women (the price varies). There's a restaurant near the cenote, but it rarely opens, so consider bringing your own food.

Public transportation is so sparse as to be nonexistent. In a car, you can reach Punta Laguna by turning southwest off Hwy 180 at Nuevo Xcan and driving 26km, or by heading 18km northeast from the Cobá junction.

SOUTHERN QUINTANA ROO

Whether you're going by rental car or starting out a bus window, you'll notice the landscape is different the further south you go. The trees get taller and the birds more colorful, until you reach the southern border with Belize where you'll be in real, honest-to-goodness jungle (well, if you're not in a sugarcane field). Hurricane Dean did some serious damage to the area (see opposite), but things are recovering quickly.

Quintana Roo's capital Chetumal is the only 'Mexican' city in Quintana Roo, and it feels different: somehow more visceral, more real. It has a fairly good Maya history museum, a number of nice restaurants and a cool local music scene.

Merely sideswiped by Dean, the '*my tranquilo*' (very tranquil) coastal towns of Punta Allen and Xcalak offer access to great birding, diving and snorkeling along this relatively pristine stretch of coast. Beautiful Laguna Bacalar provides fine escapes for people looking to get away from it all. And in the interior, the seldom-visited ruins of

DIGGING OUT AFTER DEAN – THE BIG PICTURE

Hurricane Dean, the ninth-largest Atlantic hurricane on record, slashed his way into the region on August 21, 2007. The Category 5 plowed straight through the small coastal town of Mahahual, destroying nearly 80% of the town's buildings as well as the cruise-ship dock, the town's main economic driver.

Chetumal, Punta Allen, and the areas around Laguna Bacalar all sustained damage at the hands of Dean, as did the remote Maya ruins of Dzibanché and Kohunlich. Thankfully, most of the tourist infrastructure in these areas was undamaged, though many of the trees around the remote ruins were felled by the strong winds.

In all the Mexican government reported M\$8 billion in damage and 14 hurricane-related deaths. But the region is recovering and the government has pledged M\$30 million toward reconstruction. Unlike Wilma, Dean did not destroy the major asset of these coastal areas: the sugary sand beaches. And as of press time, all the towns were back welcoming tourists.

Many of the road signs in the area were twisted and torn by Dean's winds, so you'll need to exercise caution on the roads. And there are fears that the reefs, especially the once magnificent Banco Chinchorro, may have been damaged during the storm. As of press time reports were splotchy, but some Mexican papers cited minor damage to the reefs near Akumal and Chinchorro. Refer to specific regional headings to learn more about life after Dean.

Word on the street is that the Mexican tourism authorities are going to use this as a chance to begin some major development projects in the region. Best to get there now before the cruise ships return!

Dzibanché and Kohunlich seem all the more mysterious without the tour vans. Go in the early morning and you'll likely share the spot with vultures, leaf-cutter ants, mist, and possibly an agouti or two.

This part of Quintana Roo will mostly appeal to people who want to see a section of Caribbean Mexico before it gets developed. But you'd best hurry, as big plans are in the works to rebuild this region after Dean, creating a second Riviera Maya of sorts, only they're calling it the Costa Maya. Those developer types sure are creative, aren't they?

TULUM TO PUNTA ALLEN

Punta Allen sits at the end of a narrow spit of land that stretches south nearly 40km from its start below Tulum. There are some charming beaches along the way, with plenty of privacy, and most of the spit is within the protected, wildlife-rich Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an. Hurricane Dean whipped the region pretty good, and the beaches were littered with debris when we passed through.

The road can be a real muffler-buster between gradings, especially when holes are filled with water from recent rains, making it impossible to gauge their depth. The southern half, south of the bridge at Boca Paila, is the worst stretch – some spots require experienced off-road handling or you'll sink

into a meter of sand. It is doable even in a non-4WD vehicle, but bring along a shovel and boards just in case, and plan on returning that rental with a lot more play in the steering wheel.

There's an entrance gate to the reserve about 10km south of Tulum. Entrance is M\$21. At the gate, there's a short nature trail taking you to a rather nondescript cenote (Ben Ha). The trail's short, so go ahead and take a second to have a gander.

This is where DIY adventure really takes off. Bring a couple hammocks, lots of water, a sixer of cerveza, and mosquito nets for remote coastal camping. Around 30km from the entrance gate is an excellent camping spot with the lagoon on one side and glorious blue ocean on the other.

At the time of research, one *colectivo* made the three-hour trip daily, leaving Tulum center at 2pm and arriving in Punta Allen about 5pm. Another leaves Punta Allen for Tulum at 3pm. You may also be able to come on a launch via the mainland, though that is more expensive and less frequent.

Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an

More than 5000 sq km of tropical jungle, marsh, mangroves and islands on Quintana Roo's coast have been set aside by the Mexican government as a large biosphere reserve. In

1987 the UN classified it as a World Heritage site – an irreplaceable natural treasure.

Sian Ka'an (Where the Sky Begins) is home to howler monkeys, anteaters, foxes, ocelots, pumas, crocodiles, eagles, raccoons, tapirs, peccaries, giant land crabs, jaguars and hundreds of bird species, including *chocolateras* (roseate spoonbills) and some flamingos. There are no hiking trails through the reserve; it's best explored with a professional guide.

Community Tours Sian Ka'an (Map p123; ☎ 984-114-0750; www.siankaantours.org; Av Tulum, Tulum) runs tours out of Tulum that include pickup in the Zona Hotelera. Tours include a guided walk of the interpretive trail at the Muyil archaeological site south of Tulum, and a boat trip or float trip through Lagunas Muyil, Chunyaxché and Boca Paila via an ancient Maya trade route along a natural channel. On the way you can see abundant birdlife and visit little-known Maya temples. It also offers snorkeling, birding and fishing trips further into the reserve. Trips cost between M\$950 and M\$1100. There are discounts for children under 12.

If you can get to Punta Allen, three locals with training in English, natural history, interpretation and birding conduct bird-watching, snorkeling and nature tours, mostly by boat, for about M\$1000 for five to six people: **Baltazar Madera** (☎ 984-871-2001, in Tulum 984-879-8234); **Marcos Nery** (☎ 984-871-2424), reachable through the local phone exchange; and Chary Salazar (inquire in town at her eponymous restaurant). The latter two are experts on endemic and migratory bird species, and Chary also does walking tours when she's available.

Punta Allen

The town of Javier Rojo Gómez is more commonly called by the name of the point 2km south. Hurricane Gilbert nearly destroyed the town in 1988, and there was some damage, and a lot of wind-scrubbed palms, after Hurricane Dean. But Punta Allen is still walking tall. This is truly the end of the road, the 400-some-odd residents mostly work as fishermen – some working in restaurants popular with day-trippers. The village sports a laid-back ambience reminiscent of the Belizean cays. There's also a healthy reef 400m from shore that offers snorkelers and divers wonderful sights.

The area is known primarily for its catch-and-release bonefishing; tarpon and snook are very popular sportfish as well. The guides

listed for Sian Ka'an (left), as well as cooperatives in town (inquire at Galletanes or Vigía Grande eateries), do fishing trips for about M\$2000, including lunch. There's also a fishing outfit just north of town called **Pesca Maya** (☎ 998-883-4204; www.pescamaya.com; ☎ 5am-10pm), which does daily saltwater fly-fishing runs and has a restaurant for guests only.

An hour's tour of the lagoon, including turtles, bird-watching and a quick snorkel, costs M\$400 to M\$500. You'll be offered trips by one of the three co-ops. Encourage your captain not to get so close to birdlife that he scares it away. Though very rare, manatee sightings are possible.

There are no ATMs or internet cafés in town. Electricity generally works between 11am and 2pm, and 4pm and midnight.

SLEEPING & EATING

Posada Sirena (☎ 984-877-8521; www.casasirena.com; d M\$400-600) Offers fully furnished cabanas with kitchens and hot-water showers. The rooms are simple and very big; some sport sitting areas and hammocks. There's no maid service, and the Posada can arrange tours.

Cuzán (☎ 983-834-0353; www.flyfishmx.com; r M\$500-900) Just south of the town's center along the main road, Cuzán has ocean-front cabanas – one set on the fusil lodge of an old boat. There are cheaper cabins away from the beach. It also offers fishing and snorkeling trips.

Vigía Grande and Galletanes are among several of the town's dining choices, both close to the water and both owned by co-ops. They serve Mexican dishes and seafood, naturally including lobster. Neither has a phone and opening hours vary based on whether any customers are there.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The best way to reach Punta Allen by public transportation is by *colectivo* out of Tulum: one leaves daily from Tulum center at 2pm and arrives about three hours later. Driving in a rental car is another option, but prepare for 5km/h to 10km/h speeds and more than a few transmission-grinding bumps.

FELIPE CARRILLO PUERTO

☎ 983 / pop 21,530

Now named for a progressive governor of Yucatán, this crossroads town 95km south of Tulum was once known as Chan Santa Cruz, the rebel headquarters during the War of the

Castes. Besides its historical and cultural significance, Carrillo Puerto has few attractions other than the only gas station, bank and hotels for some distance around. There's a main square with a clocktower, church and cultural center. Come nighttime, the square fills up as locals take spins around the park in an age-old tradition known as *paseando* (taking a walk). Watching this simple anachronism may be enough to keep you occupied for hours – you can even take a couple of trips around the plaza yourself.

History

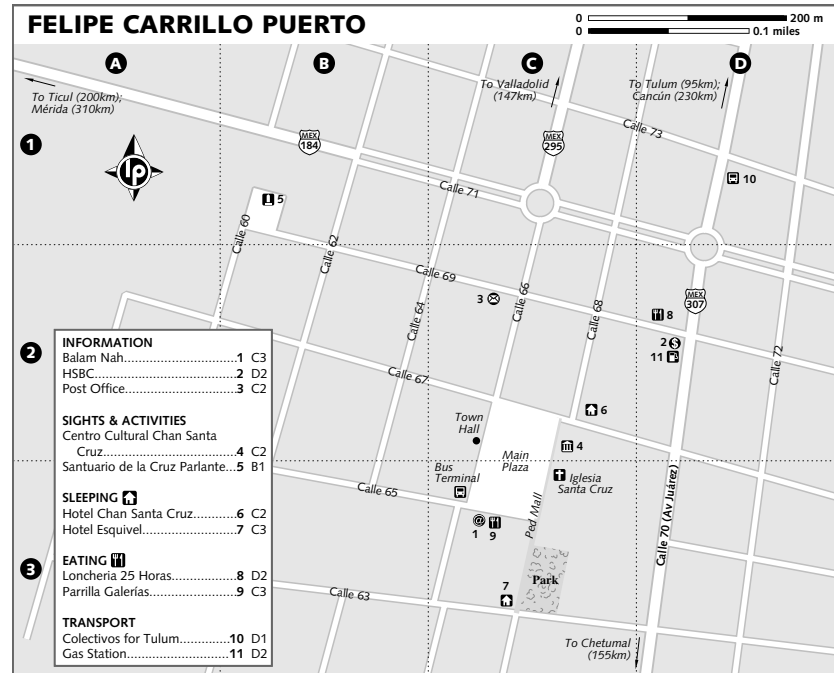
In 1849, when the War of the Castes turned against them, the Maya of the northern Yucatán Peninsula made their way to this town seeking refuge. Regrouping, they were ready to sally forth again in 1850 when a 'miracle' occurred. A wooden cross erected at a cenote on the western edge of the town began to 'talk,' telling the Maya they were the chosen people, exhorting them to continue the struggle against the Spanish and promising victory. The talking was actually

done by a ventriloquist who used sound chambers, but the people looked upon it as the authentic voice of their aspirations.

The oracular guided the Maya in battle for more than eight years, until their great victory conquering the fortress at Bacalar. For the latter part of the 19th century, the Maya in and around Chan Santa Cruz were virtually independent of governments in Mexico City and Mérida.

A military campaign by the Mexican government retook the city and the surrounding area at the beginning of the 20th century (see boxed text, p37), and the talking cross's shrine was desecrated. Many of the Maya fled to small villages in the jungle and kept up the fight into the 1930s; some resisted even into the 1950s.

Carrillo Puerto today remains a center of Maya pride. The talking cross, hidden away in the jungle for many years following the Mexican takeover, has been returned to its shrine, and Maya from around the region still come to visit it, especially on May 3, the day of the Holy Cross.



Information

Balam Nah (Calle 65; ☎ 8am-1am) On the plaza, it offers slow, cheap internet.

HSBC (cnr Calles 70 & 69) Has an ATM.

Post office (Calle 69; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Sights

The **Santuario de la Cruz Parlante** (Sanctuary of the Talking Cross) is five blocks west of the gas station on Hwy 307. There's no sign at the site, but you can't miss the stone wall with a gate. Some of the town's residents do not like strangers in the sanctuary, and may try to take your camera if they see you using it here. The building, a thatch roof set over walls, is next to a small cenote and set on a rock slope. A sign on the door says no one may enter wearing a hat or shoes.

More accessible is the **Centro Cultural Chan Santa Cruz** (admission free; ☎ 8am-9:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm & 6-8pm Sat & Sun), on the plaza, which has art exhibitions, workshops and the occasional exhibit on the War of the Castes. Be sure to check the mural outside, expressing the conviction that the war is not lost, and displaying accomplishments of Maya culture.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Esquivel (☎ 834-0344; hotelesquivefcp@todito.com; cnr Calles 63 & 68; d with fan/air-con M\$300/380; ♿) Around the corner from the plaza and bus terminal, this is the best hotel in town. The air-con rooms are a good deal, with very clean bathrooms and tiled floors, while the fan rooms have good beds and showers, but are dark, windowless and over-perfumed.

Hotel Chan Santa Cruz (☎ 834-0021; www.hotelchansantacruz.com; cnr Calles 67 & 68; d M\$360-400; ♿) The rooms are just a bit too pink, giving them the feel of Martha Stewart's jail cell. But they are clean, and there's a mighty fine central courtyard complete with gaudy

statuary. In the lobby there's an air-hockey table (and we said there was nothing to do in Carrillo Puerto at night!).

Loncheria 25 Horas (Calle 69; items M\$20; ☎ 24hr) Dirt cheap without being dirty, this casual eatery sports plastic chairs and the fumes of passing trucks (it's across from the gas station), but had a giant selection of eggs, sandwiches, tacos and smoothies.

Parrilla Galerías (☎ 834-0313; Calle 65; mains M\$40-80) On the plaza, it has the look of a more upscale spot, but serves beer for M\$15 and tacos for M\$40 for three. The house specialty is a *parrilla* with lots of accompaniments (M\$185 for three people).

Getting There & Away

Most buses serving Carrillo Puerto are *de paso* (they don't originate there). The table (below) shows some of the routes.

Colectivos leave for Playa del Carmen (M\$110, two hours) and Tulum (M\$45, one hour) from Hwy 307 just south of Calle 73.

Check your fuel before heading to or leaving Carrillo Puerto. There are few, if any, gas stations between here and Valladolid (Hwy 295), Chetumal (Hwy 307), Tulum (Hwy 307) or José María Morelos (Hwy 184). The one in Mahahual is a 50km detour.

MAHAHUAL & THE COSTA MAYA

Hurricane Dean virtually razed the coastal city of Mahahual (see p133), but it is slowly recovering. We passed by just weeks after the hurricane, and the town was still in recovery stage. Rather than eliminate Mahahual from the book entirely, which would only cause further economic hardship for the town's residents, we decided to reupstate the material closer to press time.

Now that Mahahual no longer has a cruise-ship port – though plans are in place to rebuild it – it may be a bit more welcoming to

independent-minded travelers, with great beaches, excellent diving nearby, and a fairly laid-back Caribbean appeal. More significantly, Mahahual offers access to **Banco Chinchorro**, the largest coral atoll in the northern hemisphere. Some 45km long and up to 14km wide, Chinchorro's western edge lies about 30km off the coast, and dozens of ships have fallen victim to its barely submerged ring of coral. According to early reports, the Banco Chinchorro may have sustained some serious damage at the hands of Dean. While the reports are splotchy at best – and we were unable to independently verify the information – the mangroves of the above-water portion of the atoll were destroyed, only the ranger hut left standing.

The atoll and its surrounding waters were made a biosphere reserve (the Reserva de la Biosfera Banco Chinchorro) to protect them from depredation. But the reserve lacks the personnel and equipment needed to patrol such a large area, and many abuses go undetected.

There is a ban on wreck dives as many are too shallow (or too looted) for good diving. But there are plenty of other things to see around the bank: coral walls and canyons, rays, turtles, giant sponges, grouper, tangs, eels and, in some spots, reef, tiger and hammerhead sharks. There's good snorkeling as well, including **40 Cannons**, a wooden ship in 5m to 6m of water. Looters have taken all but about 25 of the cannons, and it can only be visited in ideal conditions. The prohibition on wreck dives doesn't apply to snorkelers.

Dreamtime Dive Center (☎ 983-834-5823; www.dreamtimediving.com; malecón), 2.7km south of Mahahual, runs trips to stretches of the barrier reef and offers PADI courses.

Sleeping & Eating

Addresses are given as distances from the military checkpoint at the north entrance to town.

Las Cabanas del Doctor (☎ 983-832-2102; Km 2; cabanas with/without bathroom M\$350/250) Across the street from the beach, it offers several fairly simple dwellings. Prices rise by about M\$100 in December and Easter week.

Posada Pachamama (☎ 983-834-5842; www.posadapachamama.net; Km 1; r M\$550-750) Located across from the football field, which will become the town plaza on the first street behind the

malecón (waterfront boulevard), this small comfortable hotel also has a pizzeria.

Posada de los 40 Cañones (www.los40canones.com; Km 1.5; r M\$600-M\$1800) This Italian-owned hotel on the new *malecón* on the south side of downtown is clean and comfortable with a beach club and restaurant. Suites are available.

Doña Mari (mains M\$30-50) Septuagenarian Doña Mari is tough as nails. She began digging out the day after the hurricane hit, and eventually moved her operation to the corner of Huchanango and Calle Sierra. Her restaurant still serves tasty fish fillets prepared in various styles, accompanied by beans and tortillas.

Restaurante Mahahual (☎ 983-834-5849; mains M\$50; ☎ 7am-8pm) Reasonably priced food at the north end of the pedestrian *malecón*. Refresh with a colossal *limonada* (lime with soda water) or have a meal. Service is on Mexican time.

Getting There & Around

Mahahual is 127km south of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, and approximately 100km northeast of Bacalar. A new ADO bus terminal (a stop, really, operating between 5:30am and 6pm daily) has made getting here easier than ever, though the buses are infrequent. They depart here for Chetumal (M\$50, 2½ hours, 6am, 12:30pm and 6pm) and Cancún (M\$170, five hours, 8:30am and 6pm), with an additional departure at 3pm on Sunday and Monday. There's a Pemex gas station if you need to fill your tank.

XCALAK

The rickety wooden houses, beached fishing launches and lazy gliding pelicans make this tiny town plopped in the middle of nowhere a perfect escape. Despite its proximity to Hurricane Dean's Ground Zero in Mahahual, Xcalak (ish-kah-lak) escaped the brunt of the storm. And blessed by virtue of its remoteness and the Chinchorro barrier reef (preventing the creation of a cruise-ship port), Xcalak may yet escape the development boom.

After Dean, the inner portions of the coastal reefs near Xcalak are reportedly in better shape than the outer sections, which were hammered by heavy seas (waves reached up to 5m). Ask around before you commit to a tour. Xcalak also offers easy access to the Banco Chinchorro.

If diving isn't your thing, there's still plenty to do. Come here to walk in dusty

BUS SERVICES FROM FELIPE CARRILLO PUERTO

Destination	Cost (M\$)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Cancún	100-130	3½-4	10 1st-class buses, hourly 2nd-class buses to 9pm
Chetumal	54-94	2-3	8 1st-class & 13 2nd-class buses
Mérida	134-146	5½	11 2nd-class buses, 1st class at 3pm
Playa del Carmen	68-76	2½	9 1st-class buses, hourly 2nd-class buses to 9pm
Ticul	100	4½	11 2nd-class buses; change there for Uxmal
Tulum	44-5	1½	9 1st-class buses, hourly 2nd-class buses to 9pm, consider taking a <i>colectivo</i>

streets and sip frozen drinks while frigates soar above translucent-green lagoons. Explore a mangrove swamp by kayak, or just doze in a hammock and soak up some sun. Perhaps best of all, you won't hear a single offer for hammocks or Cuban cigars. And, though tiny, Xcalak boasts a few nice restaurants and an easygoing mix of foreigners and local fishermen.

The mangrove swamps stretching inland from the coastal road hide some large lagoons and form tunnels that invite kayakers to explore. They and the drier forest teem with wildlife and, as well as the usual herons, egrets and other waterfowl, you can see agouti, jabiru (storks), iguanas, javelinas (peccaries), parakeets, kingfishers, alligators and more. Unfortunately, the mangrove also breeds mosquitoes and some vicious *jejenes* (sand flies). There's a remote Maya ruin on the western side of the lagoon. Your hotelier can tell you how to get there.

Xcalak is seeing negative population growth. Specializing in coconuts, it was an important port during the War of the Castes, and the town even had a cinema until a series of hurricanes wiped everything away. Today, there's no signs of getting a bank, grocery store or gas station anytime soon, so stock up before you come.

Aventuras Xcalak to Chinchorro Dive Center (☎ 983-839-8865; www.xtcdivecenter.com), about 300m north of town on the coast road, offers dive and snorkel trips (from M\$650) to the wondrous barrier reef just offshore, and to Banco Chinchorro (three-tank dive M\$1750, not including rental gear). It also rents diving equipment and offers PADI open-water certificates for M\$3850, NAUI and SDI instruction, as well as fishing and birding tours.

Sleeping

The following places are among a handful on the old coastal road leading north from town (mostly run by Americans or Canadians). All have purified drinking water, ceiling fans, 24-hour electricity (from solar or wind with generator backup), bikes and/or sea kayaks for guest use, and private hot-water bathrooms. The first three have docks to swim off, and most arrange fishing excursions.

High season here is mid-December to mid-April (with very slight variations). Most places don't accept credit cards without prior

arrangements, and are best contacted through their websites or via email. Addresses here are expressed in kilometers north along the coast from town.

Villas La Guacamaya (☎ 983-839-8608; www.villa.laguacamaya.com; Km 10; d low/high season M\$500/1000; ☑) You'll be greeted by an exuberant parrot at this quiet place 10km north of Xcalak. It has two bright green rooms that face the sea and share use of a fully equipped gourmet kitchen. Each room has a double and a single bed. There's also a separate apartment with kitchen set back from the beach, and a fourth, smallish room with a double bed and a lovely bathroom. It also offers bikes, kayaks and snorkel gear for guest use.

Hotel Tierra Maya (www.tierramaya.net; Km 2; r low/high season M\$600/800, r with ocean view low/high season M\$800/900) A modern beachfront hotel featuring six lovely rooms (three quite large), each tastefully appointed and with many architectural details. Each of the rooms has mahogany furniture and a balcony facing the sea – the bigger rooms even have small refrigerators. Mains at the pleasant restaurant are around M\$160. Rates include a continental breakfast.

Casa Carolina (www.casacarolina.net; Km 2.5; d low/high season M\$750/950) A bright, cheery yellow, the Casa has four guestrooms with large, hammock-equipped balconies facing the sea. Each room has a kitchen with fridge, and the bathrooms try to outdo one another with their beautiful Talavera tile. All levels of scuba instruction (NAUI) are offered here, as well as recreational dives at the barrier reef. Rates include continental breakfast, and there's massage on offer.

Sonrisa (www.playasonrisa.com; Km 7; cabanas from M\$950) Sonrisa offers 'clothing optional' European-style sunbathing for couples – and couples only. Come here to lose the tan lines in a low-key, casual setting that includes simple cabanas, a bar-restaurant and friendly owners. Note that the cancellation penalties are steep, so read the website carefully and make sure of your plans. Rates include a continental breakfast.

Eating

Food in Xcalak tends to be tourist-grade seafood or Mexican, though the Leaky Palapa is a delectable exception.

Leaky Palapa (meals M\$50-120; ☎ 5-10pm Fri-Mon) Chef and owner, Marla and Linda, have turned an old standby into a new sensation,

serving wonderful meals such as lobster in caramel ginger sauce. Opinion was unanimous that this was the best place to go to treat your taste buds. It's about three blocks west of the plaza.

Lonchería Silvia's (mains M\$35-90; ☎ 9am-10pm) About three blocks south of the plaza and a block in from the coast, Silvia's serves mostly fish fillets and ceviche, and keeps pretty regular hours. The long menu doesn't mean that everything is available. You'll likely end up having the fish.

Getting There & Around

Cabs from Limones cost about M\$500 (including to the northern hotels). Buses cost M\$30, the same as to Mahahual even though they travel an hour longer.

Driving from Limones, turn right (south) after 55km and follow the signs to Xcalak (another 60km). Keep an eye out for the diverse wildlife that frequents the forest and mangrove; a lot of it runs out into the road.

A taxi sporadically works the town, serving the northern hotels for M\$100 and available for hire for excursions to further destinations. The coastal road between Mahahual and Xcalak was closed at press time.

LAGUNA BACALAR

Laguna Bacalar comes as a surprise in this region of tortured limestone and scrubby jungle. More than 60km long with a bottom of sparkling white sand, this crystal-clear lake offers opportunities for camping, swimming, kayaking, bird-watching and simply lazing around. Hurricane Dean scrubbed the town clean, felling a number of trees, but things were recovering nicely on our last pass.

The small, sleepy town of Bacalar lies east of the highway, 125km south of Felipe Carrillo Puerto and 39km north and east of Chetumal. It's the only settlement of any size on the lake, and is noted mostly for its old Spanish fortress and popular *balneario* (swimming facility). There's not a lot else going on, but that's why people like it here. A growing number of foreigners (chiefly Americans and Canadians) have been buying up lakeside lots.

The fortress above the lagoon was built to protect citizens from raids by pirates and the local indigenous population. It also served as an important outpost for the Spanish in the War of the Castes. In 1859 it was seized by Maya rebels, who held the fort until Quintana

Roo was finally conquered by Mexican troops in 1901. Today, with formidable cannons still on its ramparts, the fortress remains an imposing sight. It houses a **museum** exhibiting colonial armaments and uniforms from the 17th and 18th centuries.

The **balneario** (admission M\$5; ☎ 10am-7pm) lies a few hundred meters north along the *costera* (waterfront avenue) below the fort. There are some small restaurants along the avenue and near the *balneario*, which is very busy on weekends.

La Costera South

The *costera* (also known as Calle 1) winds south several kilometers along the lakeshore from Bacalar town to Hwy 307 at Cenote Azul.

Just shy of the south end of the *costera* is **Cenote Azul**, a 90m-deep natural pool on the southwest shore of the lake. It's 200m east of Hwy 307, so many buses will drop you nearby.

Sleeping

All the following places are along the *costera* and are listed from north to south.

Los Coquitos (sites per person M\$40) A nice camping area on the lakeshore, run by a family who lives in a shack on the premises. You can camp in the dense shade of the palm trees, enjoy the view of the lake from the *palapas* and swim from the grassy banks.

Casita Carolina (☎ /fax 983-834-2334; www.casita.carolina.com; d M\$250-450, palapas M\$450) This is a delightful place about 1½ blocks south of the fort. It has a large lawn leading down to the lake, five fan-cooled rooms and a deluxe *palapa* that sleeps up to four. Guests can explore the lake in the Casita's kayaks. It's best reached by taking a bus into Bacalar and walking or catching a taxi.

Hotel Laguna (☎ 983-834-2206; www.hotellaguna.bacalar.com; d M\$420; ☑) This clean, cool, turquoise place is hospitable. It boasts a small swimming pool, a restaurant, a bar and excellent views of the lake. Some rooms are showing their age. It's 2km south of Bacalar town along the *costera* and only 150m east of Hwy 307, so if you're traveling by bus on the highway you can ask the driver to stop at the turnoff.

Amigos B&B Laguna Bacalar (☎ 987-872-3868; www.bacalar.net; d M\$500; ☑) Brought to you by the same hospitable family that runs Amigos B&B in Cozumel, this ideally located lakefront

property (about 500m south of the fort) has five spacious guestrooms and a comfy shared common area. You can save M\$100 by skipping the breakfast.

Hostel Ximba Li (☎ 983-834-2516; cnr Av 3 & Calle 30; dm M\$70) This simple new hostel is located a couple of blocks from the lake and a short walk to town. Breakfast included.

Eating

Of the few places to eat right in town, Orizaba's at the northwest corner of the plaza is a good choice. Serving consistently good Yucatecan meals, the lake-view restaurant at quaintly kitsch Hotel Laguna is popular. The restaurant at Balneario Ejidal serves fresh ceviche and good grilled fish.

Getting There & Away

Southbound 2nd-class buses go through Bacalar town on Calle 7, passing a block uphill from the central square (*el parque*), which is just above the fort and has a taxi stand. Northbound 2nd-class buses run along Calle 5, a block downhill from Calle 7. Most 1st-class buses don't enter town, but many will drop you along Hwy 307 at the turnoffs to Hotel Laguna and Cenote Azul; check before you buy your ticket.

Minibuses from Chetumal to the town of Bacalar (M\$20, 45 minutes, 39km) depart from the terminal on Primo de Verdad at Hidalgo about once an hour from 5am to 9pm.

If you're driving from the north and want to reach the town and fort, take the first Bacalar exit and continue several blocks before turning left (east) down the hill. From Chetumal, head west to catch Hwy 307 north; after 25km on the highway you'll reach the signed right turn for Cenote Azul and the *costera*.

AROUND BACALAR

A few kilometers north of Bacalar town, right next to the highway, is **Puerto del Cielo Hotel y Restaurante** (r M\$400; 🍷 🍴), which offers 12 air-con rooms with hot-water bathrooms and TV. A swimming pool overlooks Laguna Bacalar, but the water is two shades greener than that of the lake. The restaurant specializes in chicken and fish dishes.

Further north, and 3.2km off the highway, is **Federico's Laguna Azul** (fax 983-834-2035; www.laguna-azul.de; sites per person M\$35, screened palapas M\$25, cabanas M\$250), a serene, secluded spot located on the north end of Laguna Bacalar. It has a

variety of accommodations, including three well-built and screened cabanas with good private bathrooms, perfect mattresses, tiled floors and a hammock; places to pitch tents or hammocks; eight RV sites with hookups; and immaculate shared bathrooms with hot and cold water. You can rent kayaks here, and eat at the family-style restaurant (you generally eat what's cooking, though it often will prepare other, simple dishes).

The German owner speaks Spanish and very good English, and checks for incoming faxes and email at least once a week. The unpaved road in comes off the east side of Hwy 307, 200m south of the southernmost *tope* (speed bump) in Pedro A Santos, which is about 6km south of the Mahahual junction. You can ask to be let off 2nd-class buses either at the speed bump (and walk the 3.2km in) or in Pedro Santos itself, to take the town's one taxi.

CHETUMAL

☎ 983 / pop 136,800

The capital city of Quintana Roo, Chetumal has stylish, friendly people, some decent restaurants, and a lively music scene. Best of all, this town is for real. It's not dolled up; it's just a quiet provincial capital going about its daily paces. Hurricane Dean displaced many of Chetumal's inhabitants, but with a bit of lumber, some tarpaulins, sweat, rummaged nails and a few quick-drying tears, the town is quietly rebuilding. None of the major tourist areas were affected.

The bayside esplanade hosts carnivals and events, and the modern Maya museum is impressive (though a bit short on artifacts). Impressive Maya ruins, amazing jungle and the border to neighboring Belize are all close by. Though sightings are infrequent (there are no tours), manatees can sometimes be seen in the rather muddy bay or nearby mangrove shores.

Carnaval (late February/early March) is particularly lively in Chetumal. Colorful nightly parades bring locals into the streets to watch floats and plumed dancers pass by.

Before the Spanish conquest, Chetumal was a Maya port for shipping gold, feathers, cacao and copper to the northern Yucatán Peninsula. After the conquest, the town was not actually settled until 1898, when it was founded to put a stop to the illegal trade in arms and lumber carried on by the

descendants of the War of the Castes rebels. Dubbed Payo Obispo, the town changed its name to Chetumal in 1936. In 1955, Hurricane Janet virtually obliterated it.

The rebuilt city is laid out on a grand plan with a grid of wide boulevards along which traffic speeds (be careful at stop signs).

Orientation & Information

Chetumal is a large city but remains (thanks largely to its network of wide, one-way streets) very drivable, almost unheard of in a state capital. The southern edge is bordered by the water. The main street, Avenida Héroes, divides the city into east and west sides, ending at the waterfront. Obregón parallels the bay and leads, heading westward, first to a *glorieta* (traffic circle), then to the airport, then to the turn for Belize.

Most of the hotels and restaurants listed are clustered around the Avenida Héroes/Obregón intersection.

EMERGENCY

Ambulance, fire & police (☎ 066)

INTERNET ACCESS

Arba (☎ 832-2581; Efraín Aguilar; per hr M\$10; ☎ 8am-1am Mon-Sat, 8am-midnight Sun) Several other similar cafés are nearby.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Both of these places can handle medical emergencies.

Cruz Roja (☎ 832-0571; cnr Aves Independencia & Héroes de Chapultepec)

Hospital Morelos (☎ 832-4595) Just northeast in the same block.

MONEY

There are several banks and ATMs around town, including an ATM inside the bus terminal.

Cambalache (Av Héroes) Between Calles Plutarco Elías and Ignacio Zaragoza. A currency exchange.

HSBC (San Francisco de Asís supermarket; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) Currency exchange. With adjacent ATM, it's just east of the bus terminal, a few kilometers north of downtown.

POST

Post office (☎ 832-2281; cnr Plutarco Elías Calles & Av 5 de Mayo; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

TELEPHONE

There is no shortage of public phones around town, from which you can place international calls. The bus terminal also has an international phone and fax service.

Telmex (Calle Lazaro Cárdenas; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) Between Avenidas Independencia and Benito Juárez. It's possible to place long-distance calls and send faxes here.

TOURIST INFORMATION

City tourist office (☎ 835-0860; cnr Blvd Bahía & Av Miguel Hidalgo; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Sat) Near the waterfront; dispenses advice.

Immigration office (☎ 832-6353; Av Héroes; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri) Far north of downtown, on the left about four blocks north of Avenida Insurgentes (and the bus terminal). It's open for tourist-card extensions and such.

Tourist information kiosk (☎ 9am-8pm) In the bus terminal, this is usually staffed by an English-speaker and offers a map of the city and information on hotels.

Dangers & Annoyances

Chetumal is generally safe, but be cautious just the same, especially if walking alone late at night. Crime does happen, but it is rarely aimed at tourists.

If you are heading south to Belize be sure to read the boxed text, p146.

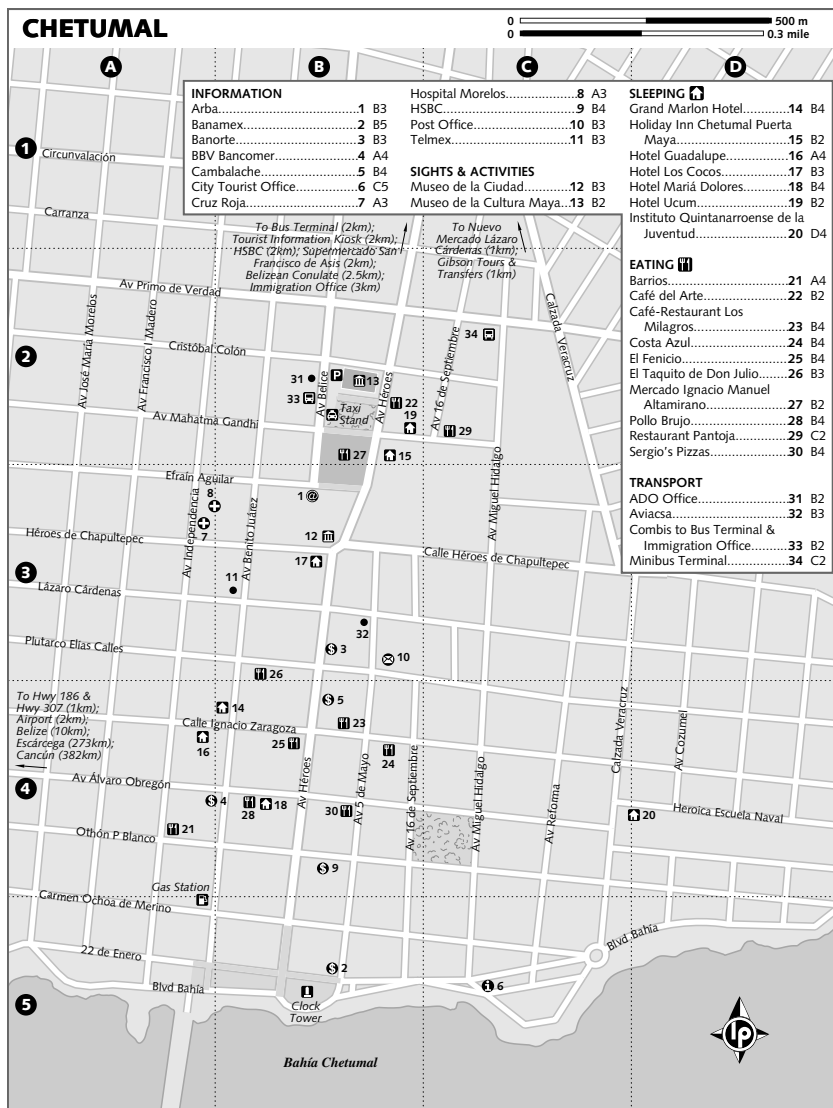
Well-dressed swindlers sometimes pretend to be travelers in trouble. If you listen long enough they will ask for money for a bus ticket to somewhere expensive, such as Acapulco.

Sights

MUSEO DE LA CULTURA MAYA

The **Museo de la Cultura Maya** (☎ 832-6838; Av Héroes; admission M\$50; ☎ 9am-7pm Sun-Thu, 9am-8pm Fri & Sat) is the city's claim to cultural fame – a bold showpiece beautifully conceived and executed.

It's organized into three levels, mirroring Maya cosmology. The main floor represents this world; the upper floor the heavens; and the lower floor Xibalbá, the underworld. The various exhibits (labeled in Spanish and English) cover all of the Mayab (lands of the Maya), not just Quintana Roo or Mexico, and seek to explain the Maya way of life, thought and belief. Scale models show the great Maya buildings as they may have appeared, including a temple complex set below Plexiglas you can walk over. Though artifacts are in short supply there are replicas of stelae and a burial chamber from Honduras' Copán, reproductions of the murals found in Room 1 at Bonampak, and much more. Ingenious mechanical and computer



displays illustrate the Maya's complex calendrical, numerical and writing systems.

The museum's **courtyard**, which you can enter for free, has salons for temporary exhibits of modern artists (such as Rufino Tamayo), paintings reproducing Maya frescoes and a *cinemuseo* (cinema showing historic films) giving free film showings. In the middle of

the courtyard is a *na* with implements of daily Maya life on display: gourds, grinders and a metate. Just walk past the ticket window.

Look for a bronze bust in the middle of Avenida Héros, just east of the museum's entrance. It depicts Jacinto Pat, one of the Maya leaders who planned the insurrection that became the War of the Castes.

MUSEO DE LA CIUDAD

The **Museo de la Ciudad** (Local History Museum; Héros de Chapultepec; admission M\$10; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Sun) is small but neatly done, displaying historic photos, military artifacts and old-time household items (even some vintage telephones and a TV). All labels are in Spanish but, even if you don't read the language, it's worth visiting for 15 minutes of entertainment.

Sleeping

Instituto Quintanarroense de la Juventud (☎ 832-0525; Heroica Escuela Naval; sites M\$30, dm M\$50) Between Calzada Veracruz and Avenida Cozumel. The price is hard to beat, and kind Spanish-speaking staff will assist with information. Downsides include showers that tease with a minute of warmth before turning icy, many toilets flood or don't flush, and most stalls don't have doors. The beds are OK, the rooms are a bit stuffy, and there are single-sex and couples rooms.

Hotel Ucum (☎ 832-0711, 832-6186; Av Mahatma Gandhi 167; d with fan/air-con M\$200/\$350; ☎ ☎) This fine motel-like place looks like it may have once been used as a Jackie Chan movie set. And despite the unfortunate name (a town in Campeche), it offers pretty decent rooms, a (slightly milky) swimming pool and a restaurant serving good, inexpensive food.

Hotel María Dolores (☎ 832-0508; Av Álvaro Obregón 206; s M\$220, d without/with air-con M\$240/270) Follow the 'Duke of Ducks' to this little pink-and-aquamarine hotel west of Avenida Héros. The beds are a bit saggy, but some of the fan-cooled rooms are a good size and there's off-street parking and a free water jug in the lobby (an enviro-traveler's delight).

Hotel Guadalupe (☎ 832-8649; Calle Ignacio Zaragoza 226; s/d with fan M\$250/280, r with air-con M\$400; ☎ ☎) You could eat dinner off the spotless floors of this hotel's spick-and-span rooms. Despite the cleanliness, the rooms are slightly stale but air out quickly. Peach-pink walls make the place cheery, and the staff are very friendly.

our pick Grand Marlon Hotel (☎ 285-3279; hotel_grandmarlon@hotmail.com; Av Juárez 88; d M\$500; ☎ ☎) With modern clean lines, a rather funky pool area (complete with Astroturf and a luke-warm Jacuzzi), the 'Grand' almost achieves 'hip boutique' status. And the simple, stylish rooms are an excellent deal for the price. Or, you can save a few pesos by heading across the street to the plain ol' Marlon.

Hotel Los Cocos (☎ 832-0544; www.hotelloscocos.com.mx; cnr Av Héros & Calle Héros de Chapultepec; d with air-con

& TV M\$750, ste M\$1600; ☎ ☎ ☎) Has a great location and a seriously disco-mirrored lobby that gets your inner Dirk Diggler's mojo rising. There's also a nice swimming pool, wireless access, a guarded parking lot and a popular sidewalk restaurant. Rooms have fridges, but are a bit small and musty for the price.

Holiday Inn Chetumal Puerta Maya (☎ 835-0400; www.holimaya.com.mx; Av Héros 171; d M\$1300, ste M\$1690-3630; ☎ ☎ ☎) The best in town, with comfortable rooms that overlook a small courtyard, a swimming pool set amid tropical gardens, and a restaurant and bar. The Maya sun mirror in the lobby adds interesting flair.

Eating & Drinking

El Taquito de Don Julio (Plutarco Elías Calles 220; tacos M\$8-12, mains M\$50-70; ☎ noon-5pm & 7pm-1am Mon-Sat) This is an airy, simple dining room and a good spot for night owls. The small tacos cost slightly more with cheese; other menu offerings include cheap snacks, *tortas* and vegetarian brochettes (M\$35).

Barrios (cnr Othón P Blanco & Independencia; mains M\$10-50; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Sat) Great little eatery with Mexican favorites such as *salbutes* or quesadillas and *cebada* (a refreshing barley drink).

Café del Arte (Av Héros 171; snacks M\$20-50; ☎ 8am-1pm & 7-10pm) This is a pretty hip joint right across the street from the museum. The friendly owner, Raquel, offers up good snacks and coffee drinks, and is also a painter. Many of her pieces adorn the walls.

Café-Restaurant Los Milagros (☎ 832-4433; Calle Ignacio Zaragoza; breakfast M\$25-70, mains M\$40-60; ☎ 7:30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 7:30am-1pm Sun) Serves great espresso and food indoors and outdoors. A favorite with Chetumal's student and intellectual set, it's also a place to play chess or dominoes, chat, or observe a local radio program being broadcast from one of the tables.

Restaurant Pantoja (☎ 832-3957; cnr Avs Mahatma Gandhi & 16 de Septiembre; mains M\$30-70; ☎ 7am-7pm) A popular, family-run restaurant serving breakfasts, enchiladas and a variety of meat dishes. It offers a M\$40 *menu del día*. Although fan-cooled, it gets a bit warm in the afternoon.

Pollo Brujo (☎ 837-4747; Av Álvaro Obregón 208; half-whole chicken M\$42-77; ☎ 10am-10pm) West of Hotel María Dolores. Only chicken is served in this joint; take it with you or dine in the air-con salon. Service is with a snarl.

El Fenicio (cnr Av Héros & Calle Ignacio Zaragoza; mains \$35-90; ☎ 24hr) Come here at 11pm and you'll feel like you've stepped into a Hopper painting: the

yellow light, the few solitary diners hunched over a meal. The food, a selection of mainly Mexican fare, is tasty and served promptly. Flan and decent American-style coffee are a tasty way to finish the day.

Sergio's Pizzas (☎ 832-2991; cnr Avs Álvaro Obregón & 5 de Mayo; pizza M\$45-170, mains M\$60-160; 🍷) A well air-conditioned place serving pizzas and cold beer in frosted mugs, plus Mexican and continental dishes, steaks and seafood, complemented by an extensive wine list.

Costa Azul (☎ 129-2002; Calle Ignacio Zaragoza 166; mains M\$60-120; 🍷 11:30am-8pm) Popular *palapa*-topped bar-restaurant with a fun Caribbean-Chetumalan vibe. Just plastic chairs and (sometimes) a mariachi or two.

Across from the Holiday Inn is the Mercado Ignacio Manuel Altamirano and its row of small, simple eateries serving inexpensive meals. Similar is the upstairs area in the **Nuevo Mercado Lázaro Cárdenas** (Calzada Veracruz).

Supermercado San Francisco de Asís, just east of the bus terminal, has a wide selection of groceries, and is a department store besides.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Chetumal's small airport is roughly 2km northwest of the city center along Avenida Obregón.

Aviaca (☎ 01-800-771-6733; www.aviaca.com; cnr Lázaro Cárdenas & Av 5 de Mayo) flies to Mexico City once a day Sunday to Friday.

For flights to Belize City (and on to Flores, to reach Tikal) or to Belize's cays, cross the border into Belize and fly from Corozal.

BUS

The main bus terminal is about 2km north of the center, near the intersection of Avenidas Insurgentes and Belice. Services are provided by Deluxe Omnitur del Caribe, Maya de Oro and Super Expresso; ADO and Cristóbal Colón (1st class); and (2nd class) TRT, Sur and Mayab (a cut above), among others. The terminal has lockers (in the store against the east wall, near the pay toilets), a bus information kiosk (open until 3pm), an ATM, a cafeteria and shops.

BUS SERVICES FROM CHETUMAL

Destination	Cost (M\$)	Duration	Departures
Bacalar	20	45min	hourly minibuses from minibús terminal; many Mayab buses from main terminal
Belize City, Belize	100	3-4hr	18 1st- & 2nd-class Novelos & Northern buses depart from Nuevo Mercado 4:30am-6:30pm, some depart main terminal 15min later
Campeche	170-250	6½-9hr	1 ADO bus at noon, TRT buses at 4:15am & 2:15pm
Cancún	180-210	5½-6½hr	many buses
Corozal, Belize	35	1hr with border formalities	18 1st- & 2nd-class Venus & other buses depart Nuevo Mercado 4:30am-6:30pm, some depart main terminal 15min later
Escárcega	120-160	4-6hr	5 buses 4:15am-10:30pm
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	54-90	2-3hr	many buses
Flores, Guatemala (for Tikal)	290	8hr	5 Servicio San Juan, Línea Dorado & Mundo Maya buses 6:20am-2:30pm
Mahahual	50	4hr	2nd-class buses at 4am, 6am & 3:15pm
Mérida	180-250	6-8hr	8 Omnitur del Caribe & Super Expresso buses, 3 Mayab buses
Orange Walk, Belize	30-45	2½hr	18 1st- & 2nd-class Novelos & Northern buses depart Nuevo Mercado 4:30am-6:30pm, some depart main terminal 15min later
Palenque	280	7-8hr	4 Altos & Colón buses
Playa del Carmen	140-180	4½-6hr	many buses
Ticul	155	6hr	6 Mayab buses
Tulum	110-144	3½-4hr	many buses
Valladolid	140	6hr	6 Mayab buses
Veracruz	620	16hr	2 ADO buses
Villahermosa	330	7-9hr	5 ADO buses
Xcalak	66	5hr	2nd-class buses at 4am, 6am & 3:15pm
Xpujil	55-78	2-3hr	9 buses 4:15am-10:30pm

You can also buy tickets for some lines and get information about most bus services at the **ADO office** (Av Belice; 🕒 6am-10pm), just west of the Museo de la Cultura Maya.

Many local buses, and those bound for Belize, begin their runs from the Nuevo Mercado Lázaro Cárdenas, on Calzada Veracruz at Confederación Nacional Campesina (also called Segundo Circuito), about 10 blocks north of Avenida Primo de Verdad. From this market, most 1st-class Belize-bound buses continue to the long-distance terminal and depart from there 15 minutes later; the 2nd-class buses don't. Tickets can be purchased on board the buses or (1st-class only) at the main terminal.

The **minibus terminal** (cnr Avs Primo de Verdad & Miguel Hidalgo) has services to Bacalar and other nearby destinations. Departures listed in the table (opposite) are from the main terminal unless otherwise noted.

TAXI

Gibson Tours & Transfers (www.gibsonstoursandtransfers.com) charges M\$250/500 to the border/Corozal. Though pricier than a bus, its taxi can wait for you and it can assist with border problems (see boxed text, p146).

Getting Around

From anywhere in town taxis charge a flat fare of M\$20. From the traffic circle at Avenida Héroe, you can also get a *combi* (van) for M\$3 to the town center via the Santa María or Calderitas eastbound buses. To reach the terminal from the center, catch a *combi* from Avenida Belice behind the Museo de la Cultura Maya. Ask to be left at the *glorieta* at Avenida Insurgentes. Head left (west) to reach the terminal. The immigration office is about 800m north of the *glorieta*. (Ask for the *oficina de inmigración*.)

CORREDOR ARQUEOLÓGICO

The Corredor Arqueológico comprises the archaeological sites of Dzibanché and Kohunlich. After Hurricane Dean, Dzibanché was closed due to heavy treefall. It's open now, but the site is missing many of the trees that made it so great. Kohunlich also suffered serious treefall, but has remained open to the public.

Sights

DZIBANCHÉ

Though it's a chore to get to, this **archaeological site** (admission M\$37; 🕒 8am-5pm) is definitely

TINY TRAILBLAZERS

The small trails you'll see crisscrossing the cleared areas in many of the ruins baffle observant visitors. What made them? A rodent? To get the answer right you have to think tiny: ants.

Leaf-cutter ants, to be specific. Sometimes marching up to several kilometers from their colony, leaf-cutter ants walk in single file along predetermined routes, often wearing down a pathway over a period of months or years. Patient observers can often see the tiny landscapers at work, carrying fingernail-sized clippings back home. Though they can bite if molested, these ants are generally harmless and should be left in peace to do their work.

worth a visit for its secluded, semiwild nature. While many of the trees were toppled by Dean, the site is recovering, and the temples withstood the blasting (those Maya were some bee's-knees architects!).

Dzibanché (*dzee-ban-chay*; literally, 'writing on wood') was a major city extending more than 40 sq km, and on the road in you pass huge mounds. The site itself is not completely excavated.

The first restored structure you come to is Edificio 6, the **Palacio de los Dinteles** (Palace of the Lintels), which gave the site its name. This is a perfect spot to orient yourself for the rest of the site: facing Edificio 6's steps, you are looking east. It's a pyramid topped by a temple with two vaulted galleries; the base dates from the early Classic period (AD 300-600), while the temple is from the Late Classic period (AD 600-900). Climb the steps and stand directly under the original lintel on the right (south) side of the temple. Looking up you can see a Maya calendrical inscription with the date working out to AD 733. This is some old wood.

On descending, head to your left (south) and thread between a mound on the right and a low, mostly restored, stepped structure on the left. This structure is Edificio 16, **Palacio de los Tucanes**; in the center from the side you first approach on are the visible remains of posts that bore a mask. The path then brings you into **Plaza Gann**. Circling it counterclockwise takes you past Edificio 14 (stuck onto the north side of a larger building), decorated at the base with *tamborcillos* (little drums), in Late Classic

Río Bec style – look up the dirt hill to see them. The larger building to the south is Edificio 13, **Templo de los Cautivos**, so named for the carvings in its steps of captives submitting to whatever captives submitted to in those days. This seems to be the dominant (if you'll pardon the pun) theme in most Maya stelae.

On the east side of the plaza is Dzibanché's highest structure, the **Templo de los Cormoranes** (Temple of the Cormorants; Edificio 2), whose upper structure has been restored. The lower part is covered in greenery. A vaulted passage beckons halfway up, but at last pass it was forbidden to climb the temple.

Exit the plaza by climbing the stone steps to the north of Edificio 2. At the top of the stairs is **Plaza del Xibalhá** (Plaza of the Underworld), though it's higher than Plaza Gann.

Opposite Palacio Norte is, of course, Palacio Sur, and from here you can see more of Edificio 2, but the most notable building is across the plaza: Edificio 1, the **Templo del Buho** (Temple of the Owl). It had an inner chamber with a stairway leading down to another chamber, in which were found the remains of a Very Important Personage (VIP) and burial offerings. The nearly 360-degree views from the very top of the temple (it's a

bit dicey, so be careful) are quite impressive. You can see Grupo Lamay to the west and you may spot Kinich-Ná, more than 2km to the northwest.

Kinich-Ná

Part of Dzibanché but well removed from the main site, Kinich-Ná consists of one building. But what a building: the megalithic Acrópolis held at least five temples on three levels, and a couple more dead VIPs with offerings. The site's name derives from the frieze of the Maya sun god once found at the top of the structure. It's an easy drive of 2km along a narrow but good road leading north from near Dzibanché's visitors center.

KOHUNLICH

The most accessible of the corridor's ruins has nearly 200 mounds still covered in vegetation. The surrounding jungle was a thick tangle of half-felled trees at last pass. The speed of vegetation regeneration in this tropical area means that it should be well on its way to recovery by the time this book hits the shelves. The **archaeological site** (admission M\$40, guide M\$250; ☎ 8am-5pm) sits on a carpeted green. Drinks are sometimes sold at the site, and it has toilets.

NO-MAN'S-LAND

'No-Man's-Land' is the strip of territory after the Mexican exit but before you've crossed into Belize. Many tourists head to Chetumal expecting to make a quick zip across the border and back to renew their tourist card. While most tourists cross without problem, the occasional unscrupulous official will invent an excuse to not let you through even though it is perfectly legitimate.

Often they'll say there's a 'minimum 72-hour stay in Belize.' (There isn't.) Or they'll claim that you need a Mexican re-entry stamp for them to let you through. (You don't.) Sometimes they'll say that Belize doesn't welcome day trips, as 'tourists don't spend enough money in their country.' (The Belizean consulate says trips, even day trips, across the border are perfectly fine, as do the Mexican officials.)

If a guard decides to single you out, there's not a lot you can do other than pay up or beg your way back into Mexico and try again. The following should help:

- Group up with other foreign travelers.
- Get visas and other papers stamped at the Belize office in Chetumal prior to crossing.
- Don't disclose that you're intending a day trip.
- Even if you are not planning to return to Mexico, if you have more than a few days left on your tourist card you can have it prestamped for a re-entry by Mexican exit officials. This costs only M\$100 and is a good way to ensure a smooth crossing onward.
- Often the yellow-shirted guards are more understanding and helpful than the white-shirted officials behind the desk.
- Crossing back into Mexico, be sure to check that your Belize exit stamp is clear and easy to read, with the official's signature and the date written inside.

The ruins, dating from both the late pre-Classic (AD 100–200) and the early Classic (AD 300–600) periods, are famous for the great **Templo de los Mascarones** (Temple of the Masks), a pyramid-like structure with a central stairway flanked by huge, 3m-high stucco masks of the sun god. The thick lips and prominent features are reminiscent of Olmec sculpture. Of the eight original masks, only two are relatively intact following the ravages of archaeological looters.

The masks themselves are impressive, but you can only see them from close up because the large thatch coverings that have been erected to protect them from further weathering obscure the view. Try to imagine what the pyramid and its red masks must have looked like in the old days as the Maya approached them across the sunken courtyard at the front.

A few hundred meters southwest of Plaza Merwin are the **27 Escalones** (27 Steps), the remains of an extensive residential area.

The hydraulic engineering used at Kohunlich was a great achievement; 90,000 of the site's 210,000 sq meters were cut to channel rainwater into Kohunlich's once enormous reservoir.

Getting There & Away

The turnoff for Dzibanché from Hwy 186 is about 44km west of Chetumal, on the right just after the Zona Arqueológica sign. From there it's another 24km north and east along a pot-holed road. It's quite passable in a passenger car, but watch for livestock, sun-drunk iguanas and birdlife. Just after the tiny town of Morocoy you'll need to turn right again. It's easy to miss the sign unless you're looking for it.

Kohunlich's turnoff is 3km west along Hwy 186 from the Dzibanché turnoff, and the site lies at the end of a paved 8.5km road. It's a well-paved straight shot from the highway.

At the time of writing, there was no public transportation running directly to either of the sites. They're best visited by car, though Kohunlich could conceivably be reached by taking an early bus to the village of Francisco Villa near the turnoff, then either hitchhiking or walking the 8.5km to the site. To return by bus to Chetumal or head west to Xpujil or Escárcega you must hope to flag down a bus on the highway; not all buses will stop.

Taxis can be rented per hour in Chetumal for as little as M\$200; a group could pile in and split the cost.

Tour operators in Xpujil (p225) offer trips to Kohunlich and Dzibanché for M\$750.

ZONA LIBRE

A bustling free-trade zone sprawling over 24 muddy hectares in a no-man's-land between the borders of Belize and Mexico, the Zona Libre draws thousands of Mexicans seeking cheap liquor and cigarettes, knockoff clothing and CDs and other shiny things.

Minibuses depart from their terminal in Chetumal at the corner of Avenidas Primo de Verdad and Hidalgo about every half-hour between 6am and 9pm, charging M\$8 for the 20-minute trip. If traffic is bad at the border you can get off and walk over the bridge, then turn left; you can't miss it. Walking back you may need to show your passport, but usually officials will just ask where you've been and wave you through.

SOUTH TO BELIZE & GUATEMALA

Corozal

☎ 501 / pop 8800

This fairly laid-back town, 18km south of the Mexico–Belize border, is an appropriate introduction to English-speaking Belize. There's a simple plaza in the center, a waterfront and a lot of chickens running around. Visitors might want to check out the butterfly farm, take a boat trip to neighboring islands from Thunderbolt Dock or visit the smallish Santa Rita archaeological site just minutes away from town. A Belize Bank with an ATM is at the plaza.

The following places are within a five-minute walk from the bus stop.

Corozal Guest House (☎ 422-0634; Av 6 No 22; US\$22.50; ☎) makes big claims to be 'Your Friendly Guest House,' and indeed it is. It's clean and simple, with spacious rooms, towels and soap.

Both **Al's Cafe** (☎ 8am-3pm) and **Patty's Bistro** (☎ 8am-3pm) offer inexpensive Belizean meals for around US\$3.

Gilharry Bus service, across the street, has US\$4 rides to the Belize–Mexico border. From Corozal you can take buses to Melchor de Mencos, Guatemala, which will take you to Flores and the Maya supersite of Tikal. You can also head to Belize City.

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