

# Yucatán State



A wild undercurrent, writhing like a liquid goddess, resides beneath the scrub jungle, pyramids and rolling hills of Yucatán state.

You feel her tides as you walk beneath the towering Maya pyramids of Chichén Itzá and Uxmal, imagining the rich waves of history, slaughter, deceit, fame and famine that rolled through these mighty power centers. She ebbs and flows in the intact colonial cities of Mérida, Valladolid and Izamal as *huipil* (woven tunic)-clad mestizas mingle with trendy students, factory workers, tourists and the wealthy elite as they ply the streets of the peninsula's modern-day cultural crossroads. She gurgles and spits and purges and pulls in the bird-clogged estuaries along the coasts, and underground in the vast system of caves and cenotes (limestone sinkholes) that pock the region.

Sitting regally on the northern tip of the peninsula, Yucatán state sees less mass tourism than her flashy neighbor, Quintana Roo. She is sophisticated and savvy, and the perfect spot for travelers more interested in cultural exploration than beach bumming. Sure, there are a few nice beaches in Celestún and Progreso, but most people come to this area to explore the ancient Maya sites peppered throughout the region, like the Ruta Puuc, which will take you to four or five ruins in just a day.

Visitors also come to experience the past and present in the cloistered corners of colonial cities, to visit henequen haciendas lost to time (or restored by caring hands to old glory), and to discover the energy, spirit and subtle contrasts of this authentic corner of southern Mexico.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at colonial architecture, take a few Spanish-language courses or attend a free concert in **Mérida** (opposite), the cultural capital of the peninsula
- Find out why they named **Chichén Itzá** (p186) the 'seventh modern wonder of the world,' or why **Ek'Balam** (p196) should have at least made the list
- Scan the salty horizon for flamingos, harpy eagles and crocodiles among the mangroves of **Reserva de la Biósfera Ria Celestún** (p180) or **Río Lagartos** (p198)
- Bump your way through the countryside on a horse-drawn train cart, stopping to dive into the sparkling azure riffs of the cenotes of **Cuzamá** (p175)
- Spin off the tourist track to the less-visited areas around **Valladolid** (p193) and the remote archaeological sites of the **Ruta Puuc** (p172)



POPULATION: 1,818,948

AREA: 39,340 SQ KM

## MÉRIDA

☎ 999 / pop 781,146

Since the Spanish conquest, Mérida has been the cultural capital of the entire peninsula. At times provincial, at others 'muy cosmopolitano,' it is a town steeped in colonial history, with narrow streets, broad central plazas and the region's best museums. It's also a perfect hub to kick off your adventure into the rest of Yucatán state. There are cheap eats, good hostels and hotels, thriving markets and goings-on just about every night somewhere in the downtown area.

Long popular with European travelers looking to go beyond the hubbub of Quintana Roo's resort towns, Mérida is not an 'undiscovered Mexican gem' like some of the tourist brochures claim. Simply put, it's a tourist town, but a tourist town too big to feel like a tourist trap. And as the capital of Yucatán state, Mérida is also the cultural crossroads of the region, and there's something just a smidge elitist about the people who live here. They've got a damned nice town, and they know it.

## HISTORY

Francisco de Montejo (the Younger) founded a Spanish colony at Campeche, about 160km to the southwest, in 1540. From this base he took advantage of political dissension among the Maya (see boxed text, p174), conquering T'ho (now Mérida) in 1542. By decade's end Yucatán was mostly under Spanish colonial rule.

When Montejo's conquistadors entered T'ho, they found a major Maya settlement of lime-mortared stone that reminded them of the Roman architecture in Mérida, Spain. They promptly renamed the city and proceeded to build it into the regional capital, dismantling the Maya structures and using the materials to construct a cathedral and other stately buildings. Mérida took its colonial orders directly from Spain, not from Mexico City, and Yucatán has had a distinct cultural and political identity ever since.

During the War of the Castes (p36), only Mérida and Campeche were able to hold out against the rebel forces. On the brink of surrender, the ruling class in Mérida was saved by reinforcements sent from central Mexico in exchange for Mérida's agreement to take orders from Mexico City.

Mérida today is the peninsula's center of commerce, a bustling city that has benefited greatly from the *maquiladoras* (low-paying, for-export factories) that opened in the 1980s and 1990s, and the tourism industry that picked up during those decades. This success means the town grows more each year, with immigrants flooding in from all around Mexico. There's even a large Lebanese community in town. This still being the provinces, locals refer to the Lebanese as Turks.

## ORIENTATION

The Plaza Grande, as Méridanos call the main square, has been the city's heart since the time of the Maya. Though Mérida now sprawls several kilometers in all directions, most of the services and attractions for visitors are within five blocks of the Plaza Grande. Following the classic colonial plan, the square, holding the cathedral and seats of government, is ringed by several barrios (neighborhoods). Each barrio has its park and church (side by side), usually bearing the same name: for example Iglesia de Santiago is next to Parque de Santiago in Barrio de Santiago. Locals orient themselves and often give directions referring to the barrios.

Odd-numbered streets run east-west; even-numbered streets run north-south. House numbers may increase very slowly, and addresses are usually given in this form: 'Calle 57 No 481 x 56 y 58' (between streets 56 and 58).

From 8pm Saturday to 11pm Sunday, Calles 60 and 62 are closed to motor vehicles between Plaza Grande and Calle 55.

## INFORMATION

### Bookstores

**Librería Dante** (☎ 928-3674; Calle 59 btwn Calles 60 & 62; 🕒 8am-9:30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) Has a small selection of paperbacks in English, as well as some guidebooks, and a large selection of archaeology books in English, French, German and Spanish. The company has other branches throughout the city, including one on Plaza Grande (☎ 928-2611) on the corner of Calle 61 and Calle 62.

### Emergency

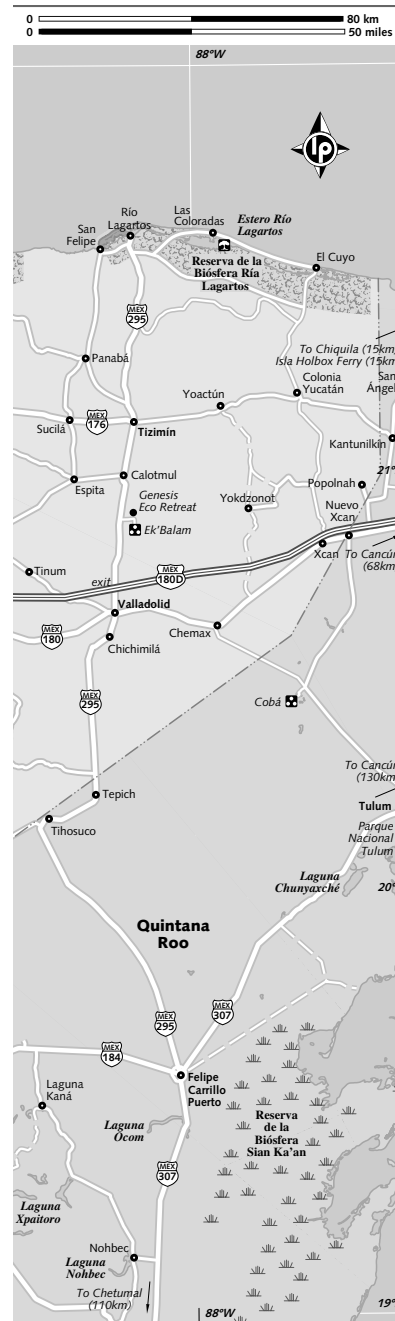
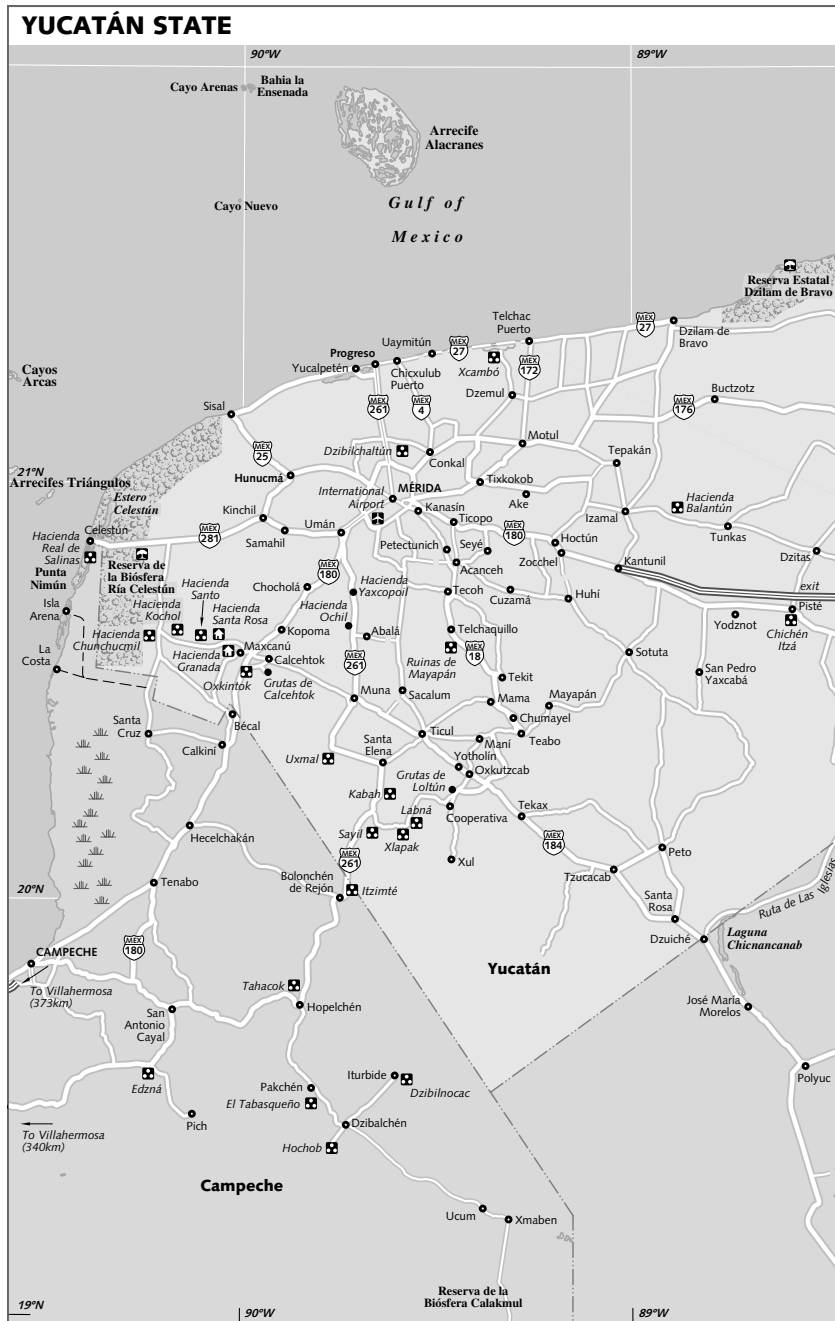
**Emergency** (☎ 066)

**Fire** (☎ 924-9242)

**Police** (☎ 925-2034)

**Red Cross** (☎ 924-9813)

**Tourist police** (☎ 925-2555 ext 260)



YUCATÁN STATE

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**Internet Access**

Most internet places around town charge M\$10 per hour. Plans are in the works to make the entire downtown Plaza Grande a wi-fi hotspot.

**Laundry**

Most upmarket hotels offer overnight laundry service.

**Lavandería La Fe** (☎ 924-4531; Calle 64 btwn Calles 55 & 57; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) Charges M\$40 per 3kg load (less for smaller loads).

**Media**

**Yucatán Today** (☎ 927-8531; www.yucantoday.com; Calle 39 No 483 int 10 btwn Calles 54 & 56) A Spanish-English magazine devoted to tourism in Yucatán. Pick up a copy of the magazine or visit the website for great tips and useful information.

**Medical Services**

**Hospital O'Horán** (☎ 924-4800, 924-1111; Av de los Itzáes) For most treatments (including prescriptions and consultations) you're best off going to a private clinic. Ask at your consulate or hotel for a recommendation.

**Money**

Banks and ATMs are scattered throughout the city. There is a cluster of both along Calle 65 between Calles 60 and 62, one block south of the Plaza Grande. *Casas de cambio* (money-exchange offices) offer faster service and longer hours than banks, but often with poorer rates.

**Post**

**Main post office** (☎ 928-5404; Calle 53 No 469 btwn Calles 52 & 54; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, for stamps only 9am-1pm Sat)

**Postal service booth** Airport (🕒 Mon-Fri); CAME bus terminal (Calle 70 btwn Calles 69 & 71; 🕒 Mon-Fri)

**Telephone**

Card phones can be found throughout the city. Internet cafés also offer Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)-based phone services.

**Toilets**

There are pay toilets in the **CAME bus terminal** (Calle 70 btwn Calles 69 & 71). The free museums are also good spots to unburden yourself. Bring your own toilet paper, and be sure all used paper is put in the trashcan, not flushed (the drains can't cope).



### Tourist Information

The tourist information booths at the airport and the CAME bus terminal have coupons for lodging discounts and hotel suggestions. Three tourist offices downtown have more current information, brochures, bus schedules and maps.

**City tourist office** (☎ 942-0000 ext 80119; Calle 62 on Plaza Grande; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) Just south of the main entrance to the Palacio Municipal, it is staffed with helpful English speakers. It offers free walking tours of the city at 9.30am (see p157).

**State tourist office** (☎ 930-3101; Calle 61 on Plaza Grande; 🕒 8am-9pm) In the entrance to the Palacio de Gobierno. It usually has an English speaker on hand.

**Tourist Information Center** (☎ 924-9290; cnr Calles 60 & 57A; 🕒 8am-9pm) Less than two blocks north of the state tourist office, on the southwest edge of the Teatro Peón Contreras, this office is used for training tourism students. There's always an English speaker on hand, and sometimes a speaker of Italian or French.

### Travel Agencies

**Nómadas Travel** (☎ 948-1187; www.nomadastravel.com.mx; Prolongación Paseo de Montejo No 370, Colonia Benito Juárez Norte) It's out of the way in the north of town, but it books flights and offers services for student travelers.

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Guard against pickpockets, bag snatchers and bag slanders in the town's markets and when you're in any crowded area. Outright muggings are very rare. Much more scary are the buses that travel at breakneck speed along the narrow streets; sidewalks are often narrow and crowded.

Hawkers are annoying but generally harmless. Mérida's **Policía Turística** (Tourist Police; ☎ 925-2555 ext 260) wear brown-and-white uniforms and are your best bet if you've been robbed; during the day you can almost always find an officer at the Palacio de Gobierno or elsewhere on the Plaza Grande.

### SIGHTS

#### Plaza Grande

'El Centro' is one of the nicest plazas in Mexico. Huge laurel trees shade the park's benches and wide sidewalks, and it is surrounded by a bustle of pedestrians who shop or sip coffee at the many open-air cafés. It was the religious and social center of ancient T'ho; under the Spanish it was the Plaza de Armas, the parade ground, laid out by



**DAY-TRIPPER**

Mérida is a great base for day trips into the countryside. By staying in local communities you'll help create a more sustainable model for tourism, encouraging local businesses and providing an incentive for folks to reinvest in their communities, traditions and culture. That said, it's sometimes nice to return to the sophistication and comfort of the capital. Here are some worthwhile trips:

- **Cuzamá** Three amazing cenotes (limestone sinkholes) accessed by horse-drawn cart (p175). The cost for a group of four is around M\$150.
- **Ruta Puuc** Ruin yourself by visiting all five sites (including megadraw Uxmal) in one day (p172). Trip lasts about eight hours and costs around M\$330 per person. Extend your trip by visiting **Mayapán** (p174) and the **Loltún caves** (p174).
- **Celestún** Head out early to catch a mangrove birding tour (p180). It's about M\$228 per person, including the boat trip. Bring a bunch of friends to save money! For a bit more dough, you can visit the ruined haciendas along the way.
- **Dzibilchaltún & Progreso** Visit the ruins and cenote for about M\$80 (p182) or extend your trip for an afternoon of beach time in Progreso (p183).
- **Put the guidebook down** Close this book for a day and find adventure in the spirited offbeat towns and wilderness areas of Yucatán's backroads (for our tips, see boxed text, p175).

**Paseo de Montejo**

Paseo de Montejo, which runs parallel to Calles 56 and 58, was an attempt by Mérida's 19th-century city planners to create a wide boulevard similar to the Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City or the Champs Élysées in Paris. Though more modest than its predecessors, the Paseo de Montejo is still a beautiful swath of green, relatively open space in an urban conglomeration of stone and concrete. There are rotating sculpture exhibits along the paseo.

Europe's architectural and social influence can be seen along the paseo in the fine mansions built by wealthy families around the end of the 19th century. The greatest concentrations of surviving mansions are north of Calle 37, and on the first block of Avenida Colón west of Paseo de Montejo.

**Museo Regional de Antropología**

The massive Palacio Cantón houses the **Museo Regional de Antropología** (Regional Anthropology Museum of the Yucatán; ☎ 923-0557; cnr Paseo de Montejo & Calle 43; admission M\$37; 🕒 8am-8pm Tue-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun). Construction of the mansion lasted from 1909 to 1911, and its owner, General Francisco Cantón Rosado (1833-1917), lived here for only six years before his death. The palace's splendor and pretension make it a fitting symbol of the grand aspirations of Mérida's elite during the last years of the *porfiriato*, the period from 1876 to 1911 when Porfirio Díaz held despotic sway over Mexico.

The museum covers the peninsula's history since the age of mastodons. Exhibits on Maya culture include explanations (many in Spanish only) of such cosmetic practices as forehead-flattening (done to beautify babies) causing eyes to cross, and sharpening teeth and implanting them with tiny jewels. If you plan to visit archaeological sites near Mérida, you can study the exhibits here – some with plans and photographs – covering the great Maya cities of Mayapán, Uxmal and Chichén Itzá, as well as lesser-known sites such as the marvelous Ek' Balam. There's also a good bookstore with many archaeological titles.

**Parque Centenario**

About 12 blocks west of the Plaza Grande lies the large, verdant **Parque Centenario** (admission free; 🕒 6am-6pm Tue-Sun), bordered by Avenida Itzáes, which leads to the airport and becomes the highway to Campeche. The park's **zoo** (admission free; 🕒 6am-6pm Tue-Sun) features the fauna of Yucatán, as well as some exotic species. To get there, take a bus west along Calle 61 or 65.

**Museo de Arte Popular de Yucatán**

The **Museo de Arte Popular de Yucatán** (Yucatecan Museum of Popular Art; cnr Calle 50A & Calle 57 in the Casa Molina; admission M\$30; 🕒 9:30am-4:30pm Tue-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) is six blocks east of the Plaza Grande in a building built in 1906. There's a small rotating exhibit downstairs that features pop art from around Mexico, but

honestly, you're better off heading to any artisan market in the countryside – you'll see the same style of work, and it won't cost you a single peso, unless you want to buy something. The upstairs exhibits don't have any explanatory signs yet, but they give you an idea of how locals embroider *huipiles*, carve ceremonial masks and weave hammocks.

Across the plaza from the museum is **Iglesia La Mejorada**, a large 17th-century church. The building just north of it was a monastery (El Convento de La Mejorada) until the late 19th century. It now houses an architectural school, but visitors are sometimes allowed to view the grounds.

**COURSES**

The **Centro de Idiomas del Sureste** (CIS; ☎ 923-0954; www.cisyucatan.com.mx; Calle 52 No 455 btwn Calles 49 & 51) offers Spanish-language courses. You can also often find a private tutor through your hostel.

**TOURS****City Tours**

The **city tourist office** (☎ 942-0000 ext 80119; Calle 62 on Plaza Grande) offers free daily guided walking tours of the historic center (sometimes in English), focusing on Plaza Grande.

Tours depart at 9.30am from in front of the Palacio Municipal.

**Transportadora Turística Carnaval** (☎ 927-6119) conducts two-hour guided tours of Mérida in English and Spanish on its Paseo Turístico bus (M\$75) departing from Parque Santa Lucía (on the corner of Calles 55 and 60) at 10am, 1pm, 4pm and 7pm Monday to Saturday, and 10am and 1pm Sunday. You can buy your tickets ahead of time at nearby Hotel Santa Lucía, among other places.

**Regional Tours**

**Turitranmería** (☎ 928-1871; www.turitranmerida.com.mx; cnr Calles 55 & 58) is one of the largest of the many agencies offering group tours to sites around Mérida, including Celestún, Chichén Itzá, the Ruta Puuc and Izamal. Prices cost M\$300 to M\$450.

The owners of reputable **Ecoturismo Yucatán** (☎ 920-2772; www.ecoyuc.com.mx; Calle 3 No 235) are passionate about both sharing and protecting the state's natural treasures. Trips focus on archaeology, birding, natural history, biking and kayaking. One-day excursions cost around M\$1200; eight-day jungle tours M\$20,150.

Many hotels will book these tours, as will **Nómadas Youth Hostel** (☎/fax 924-5223; www.nomadas-travel.com; Calle 62 No 433), which also arranges

**SIGNS O' THE TIMES**

Visitors to Mérida will notice small, artistic plaques on the corners of some buildings beside major intersections. The ceramic plaques are located about 3m above the sidewalk – about where you'd expect to see a street sign if signposts weren't used.

Indeed the plaques, which feature paintings of people, animals and other subjects with their Spanish names underneath, are old-fashioned Mérida street signs. For example, on the building housing a Burger King (cnr Calles 59 & 60), you'll see a painted figure of a dog and, just below it, the words *el perro* (the dog).

Signs like this one were placed on corner buildings during colonial days by conquistadors trying to teach the native populace some Spanish. The signs reflected the streets' local names. Unfortunately, all of the original plaques disappeared over time; the several dozen you see today were affixed to buildings relatively recently by city officials hoping to increase tourism and maintain a piece of history. Although new, the plaques are said to closely resemble the originals, and their locations are supposedly historically accurate.

A sign on the corner of Calles 65 and 60, for example, shows an old lady. The sign was posted at that particular location because local people knew the street as 'the old lady's street' on account of an elderly woman who had once worked in a bakery near the corner.

Likewise, the 'two faces' sign found at the junction of Calles 65 and 58 has its origin in a liar who lived nearby. The 'headless man' street (look for the sign on the corner of Calles 67 and 60) took its name from a man who had the misfortune of being under a window when it broke and was beheaded by a falling piece of glass.

a variety of other tours, from DIY trips in your rented car or on public transportation (with written instructions) to nearly all-inclusive (some meals) trips in private buses. Many tours include lodging at other hostels as well as insurance. *Nómadas* will help to match up travelers into groups for sharing cars and costs.

ATS buses conducts a day tour to Uxmal, Kabah and the Ruta Puuc sites, beginning from the Terminal de Segunda Clase in Mérida at 8am. See p170 for details.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Anniversary of the Universidad de Yucatán** For most of February the Universidad de Yucatán celebrates its anniversary with free performances by the Ballet Folklórico, concerts of Afro-Cuban music and *son* (Mexican folk music that blends elements of indigenous, Spanish and African musical styles), and other manifestations of Yucatán's cultural roots.

**Carnaval** Prior to Lent, in February or March, and features colorful costumes and nonstop festivities. It's celebrated with greater vigor in Mérida than anywhere else in Yucatán state.

**Festival de Trova Yucateca** This festival celebrates *trovas*, romantic ballads. For more on *trovas*, see p45. Held in March.

**Semana Santa** (Holy Week) A major celebration in Mérida over Easter week. The main feature of the celebrations is the city's Passion Plays.

Between September 22 and October 14, *gremios* (guilds or unions) venerate the Cristo de las Ampollas (Christ of the Blisters) statue in the cathedral with processions.

**Exposición de Altares de los Muertos** A big religious tradition. Throughout Mexico families prepare shrines to welcome the spirits of loved ones back to earth. Many Maya prepare elaborate dinners outside their homes, and Mérida observes the occasion with festivities and displays in the town center from 11am on November 1 until 11am the next day.

## SLEEPING

From about December 15 to January 6, and during Semana Santa (Easter week), many midrange and top-end hotels raise their prices by 10% to 20%. These times and during July and August (which also see price increases at some places) tend to be the busiest; it's wise to book ahead. Rates quoted in the following listings are for the low season.

When business is slow many places will offer discounts, some without being asked (it never hurts to ask for a *descuento* if it's not

offered, but don't be cruel). If you're arriving at the CAME bus terminal, check at the tourist information booth for flyers offering hotel discounts.

## Budget

Rooms in this category have fans unless otherwise noted; spending the extra money for air-con is well worth it in the hotter months. Many dirt-cheap places don't have toilet seats.

**our pick** **Nómadas Youth Hostel** (☎ /fax 924-5223; www.nomadastravel.com; Calle 62 No 433 at Calle 51; dm M\$85, s or d with/without bathroom M\$240/200; (P) (Q)) This is Mérida's Backpacker's Central, and the best hostel in the city. There are mixed and women's dorms, as well as private rooms. All rates include breakfast, and guests have use of a fully equipped kitchen with fridge and purified water, 24-hour hot showers, internet and hand-laundry facilities. It even has free salsa classes and it's planning on building a pool out back. Luggage lockers are free while you stay, and M\$15 a day while you travel. Bring mosquito repellent and earplugs, as the front rooms can get traffic noise.

**Hostel Zocalo** (☎ 924-5223; Calle 63 No 508; dm M\$100, s/d M\$140/230; (Q)) Great location and a beautiful old colonial building make this hostel unique. Its owners are lovingly restoring it by hand. It has firm beds and a simple breakfast is included. The hosts offer a wealth of information about the area.

**Hostal del Peregrino** (☎ 924-5491; www.hostaldelperegrino.com; Calle 51 No 488; dm M\$130, d M\$400) On a quiet street, it's earthy, homey and tasteful. For the price, you're probably better off at *Nómadas*, but if you're looking to get away from the groovy-groupie backpacker scene, this may be the place for you. Breakfast is included in the price, and it offers low-season discounts and wi-fi.

**Hotel Los Arcos** (☎ 924-9728; Calle 63 btwn Calles 62 & 64; s/d M\$170/230; (P) (Q)) Peach pink with frosting-cake colors, this clean hotel offers pretty good value for budget hunters. The slightly dark rooms have OK bathrooms and beds, good screens and nice décor. Some rooms have air-con.

**Hotel y Restaurant San José** (☎ 928-6657; san-jose92@latinmail.com; Calle 63 btwn Calles 62 & 64; s/d/tr M\$140/160/180, with air-con M\$260/280/300; (Q)) The walls are crumbling in this fading hotel 30m west of the Plaza Grande, but with a lot of

elbow grease and a bit of heavy detergent staff manage to keep the place spick-and-span. The 30 good-sized rooms are all set well off the street. It offers value and is a favorite with visiting Mennonites.

**Hotel Casa Becil** (☎ 924-6764; hotelcasabecil@yahoo.com.mx; Calle 67 No 550C btwn Calles 66 & 68; s/d/tr M\$180/220/260, d with air-con M\$300-330; (Q)) Almost a hostel but not quite, the Casa Becil's friendly owner calls it a 'BBC,' for breakfast, bed and coffee. It offers very inexpensive, clean rooms with a fully equipped kitchen downstairs, an intimate courtyard, a sun deck, beautiful tiled floors, left-luggage service, book exchange, tours and more. The rooms are breezy, without a hint of stuffiness, and the owner speaks excellent English.

**Hotel del Mayab** (☎ 928-5174; Calle 50 No 536A btwn Calles 65 & 67; s/d with fan M\$250/270, with air-con M\$350/400; (P) (Q)) This place is clean and low-key, and offers off-street parking. Streetside rooms can be noisy, but interior rooms are quiet, and the hotel has a large swimming pool.

**Posada del Ángel** (☎ 923-2754; Calle 67 No 535 btwn Calles 66 & 68; s/d/tr/q with fan M\$200/270/340/410, with air-con M\$260/340/420/550; (Q) (P)) A neocolonial hotel three blocks northeast of the CAME bus terminal, it offers rooms with good beds and crisp, clean sheets; it's quieter here than at most other hotels in the area.

**Hotel Dolores Alba** (☎ 928-5650; fax 928-3163; www.doloresalba.com; Calle 63 btwn Calles 52 & 54; r without air-con M\$260, d with air-con M\$420-490; (Q) (Q) (P)) Rooms are on three floors (with an elevator) around two large courtyards. Those in the new, modern wing are quite large, with good beds and TV, and face the lovely pool. The hotel has secure parking and is quiet, well managed and friendly.

**our pick** **Casa Ana B&B** (☎ 924-0005; www.casaana.com; Calle 52 No 469 btwn Calles 53 & 51; r M\$300-450; (Q) (Q)) Though out of the way, Casa Ana is an intimate escape and the best budget B&B in town. It features a small natural-bottom pool and a cozy overgrown garden complete with Cuban tobacco plants (memories of home for the Cuban owners, no doubt). The rooms are spotless, with clean sheets, Mexican hammocks and (whew) nice mosquito screens.

**Alvarez Family Guest House** (☎ 924-3060; casa.alvarez@hotmail.com; Calle 62 No 448 btwn Calles 51 & 53; s/d M\$350/400, d with air-con M\$500; (Q)) Impeccably clean and in a family's home, this 'hostel plus' offers a friendly, one-of-the-family ambience,

nice showers, spotless baths and laundry. The guesthouse is full of beautiful antiques, including an old cylinder-style gramophone player, which Enrique, the accommodating owner, may demonstrate on request.

## Midrange

Compared with many parts of the peninsula, a host of Mérida's midrange places provide surprising levels of comfort for the price.

**Hotel Trinidad** (☎ 923-2033; www.hotelesstrinidad.com; Calle 62 No 464 btwn Calles 55 & 57; d M\$400; (Q)) Occupies a colonial house and a newer wing, and has a variety of rooms, each with its own unique décor and charm. Some rooms have good kitchenettes, most have air-con, and there's even a rooftop Jacuzzi. It has great common areas (including two courtyards, one with a lovely garden), a billiard table, a book exchange, a small café, 24-hour tea, luggage storage, and guests have use of the pool at the nearby Hotel Trinidad Galería. All rates include continental breakfast.

**Hotel Santa Lucía** (☎ /fax 928-2672, in USA 1-800-560-2445; hstlucia@prodigy.net.mx; Calle 55 No 508 btwn Calles 60 & 62; s/d/tr M\$400/450/500; (Q) (P) (Q)) Across from the park of the same name, this hotel is clean, secure and popular, and has an attractive lobby. The pool is small but clean, and the rooms have TV and phone. Rates include breakfast. Someone here really likes potted plants.

**Hotel Trinidad Galería** (☎ 923-2463; www.hotelesstrinidad.com; Calle 60 No 456 near Calle 51; r with/without air-con M\$400/300, ste M\$450-550; (Q) (Q) (P)) It's like walking into the 'General's Labyrinth' or a Salvador Dali Dream. Odd – at times freakish – artwork and statuary gather dust in every corner of this rambling hotel. You will either love this wacky place or find it disquieting. The rooms vary considerably: some are dark and musty, while others offer well-vented bathrooms with good mosquito screens; all have original artwork and interesting posted rules, which include: 'All deaths will be reported to the authorities.' The art is the main reason to come here, a refreshing change from the usual framed poster. Even if you don't stay, it's worth popping your head in.

**Hotel Aragón** (☎ /fax 924-0242; www.hotelaragon.com; Calle 57 No 474 btwn Calles 52 & 54; s/d M\$450/480; (Q) (Q) (P)) The common areas of this hotel are great, with a large courtyard and a narrow pool along one side. If only it followed the same theme in the modern, rather stagnant

rooms. Still the room rates include a continental breakfast and purified water, making this a solid value option.

**Hotel Montejo** (☎ 928-0390; fax 924-2692; www.hotelmontejo.com; Calle 57 btwn Calles 62 & 64; s/d/tr with air-con \$440/510/560; 🏠) This is an eclectic, one-of-a-kind hotel with a central courtyard loaded with 400-year-old stone columns. Its big, clean rooms with classic colonial doors and tiled bathrooms are distributed around the courtyard on two floors. It's a bit overpriced for what you get.

**Hotel Medio Mundo** (☎ /fax 924-5472; www.hotelmediomundo.com; Calle 55 No 533 btwn Calles 64 & 66; d with fan M\$600, r/ste with air-con M\$750; 🏠 🍷) This former private residence has been completely remodeled and painted in lovely colors. Its 12 ample, simply furnished rooms have super-comfortable beds, tiled floors, beautiful tiled sinks, great bathrooms and plenty of natural light. One of the two courtyards has a small swimming pool, the other a fountain. The well-traveled, charming hosts prepare large, delicious 'Continental Plus' breakfasts (M\$80) and make their guests feel like part of the family.

**Casa Mexilio** (☎ /fax 928-2505, in USA 800-538-6802; www.casamexilio.com; Calle 68 No 495 btwn Calles 57 & 59; r M\$550-850, ste M\$1200; 🏠 🍷 🍷 🍷) It occupies a well-preserved, historic house with a maze of quiet, beautifully appointed rooms (some with fan, some air-con), a small bar and a postage-stamp-sized pool with Jacuzzi. All room rates include a full breakfast in the period dining room, and the hotel serves dinner as well.

**Hotel Maison Lafitte** (☎ 928-1243; www.maisonlafitte.com.mx; Calle 60 No 472; d/tr M\$750/800; 🏠) The Maison Lafitte offers a full buffet breakfast in its rates, has friendly staff and a nice location – central but still away from it all. The building was once an old colonial house and has a lush garden and a clean, heart-shaped pool. The rooms are a bit bland, but the sit-down showers are a fun luxury.

**Gran Hotel** (☎ 924-7730; fax 924-7622; www.granhoteldemerida.com.mx; Calle 60 No 496 btwn Calles 59 & 61; s/d M\$710/850, tr & q M\$1350; 🏠) This was indeed a grand hotel when built in 1901; it's a bit faded now but retains many elegant and delightful decorative flourishes. The 28 rooms have period furnishings; some overlook Parque Hidalgo. There's no pool, making it a bit overpriced, but who needs a pool when you're staying at the Gran?

**Hotel Colonial** (☎ 923-6444; fax 928-3961; www.hotelcolonial.com.mx; Calle 62 No 476 btwn Calles 57 & 59; d/tr M\$760/850; 🏠 🍷) The Colonial features 73 comfortable rooms in a fairly modern building with a small clover-shaped pool and perhaps Mexico's smallest bar. 'Promocion' (promotion) rates can drop the prices by up to M\$150. It's recently renovated a few rooms; ask for a newer room.

**our pick Los Arcos Bed & Breakfast** (☎ 928-0214; www.losarcosmerida.com; Calle 66 btwn Calles 49 & 53; s/d M\$850/950; 🏠 🍷) Certainly not for minimalists – there's art on every wall and in every corner – Los Arcos is a lovely, gay-friendly B&B with two guestrooms at the end of a drop-dead-gorgeous garden and pool area. Parrots, chihuahuas, a Jacuzzi and palm trees add to the décor. Rooms have an eclectic assortment of art and antiques, excellent beds and bathrooms, and come stocked with CD players, bathrobes and sarongs. All guests have access to the internet and a huge CD library. Rates include a full, hot breakfast.

### Top End

During nonpeak times, walk-in rates may be cheaper than booking in advance.

**Hotel Casa del Balam** (☎ 924-2150, in USA or Mexico 800-624-8451; fax 924-5011; www.casabalam.com; Calle 60 No 488; d M\$1200; 🏠 🍷) This place is centrally located and has a great pool and large, quiet colonial-style rooms. It often offers hefty discounts during quiet times.

**Hotel Hacienda Mérida** (☎ 924-4363; www.hotelhaciendamerida.com; Calle 62 btwn Calles 51 & 53; r M\$1500-1750; 🏠 🍷) A new entrant in the upscale boutique category, the Hacienda is lovely by night with illuminated columns leading you past the pool to your classically styled chambers. By day you can see that the hotel still needs a bit of work to qualify for the hefty price tag. Still, it beats staying in a heartless business hotel for most.

**Hyatt Regency Mérida** (☎ 942-0202; fax 925-7002; www.hyatt.com; Av Colón 344; d from M\$1700; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Not far from the Fiesta Americana Mérida (another good top-end bet), the 17-story Hyatt offers some of Mérida's chichi hotel digs, with some 300 rooms, tennis courts, a gym and steam bath, and a great pool with swim-up bar.

### EATING

As in other touristed areas of the Yucatán Peninsula, many restaurants in Mérida have

begun adding a service charge (usually 10%) to the bill.

### Budget

**our pick Mercado Municipal Lucas de Gálvez** (cnr Calles 56A & 67) Mérida's least-expensive eateries are in the Mercado Municipal Lucas de Gálvez; most are open from early morning until early evening. Upstairs joints have tables and chairs and more varied menus; main-course platters of beef, fish or chicken go for as little as M\$12. Look for *recados* (spice pastes). Downstairs at the north end are some cheap *taquerías* (taco joints), where you sit on a stool at a narrow counter, while near the south end are *coctelerías* (seafood shacks, specializing in shellfish cocktails) serving shrimp, octopus and conch cocktails, as well as ceviche starting at around M\$20.

**Mercado Municipal No 2** (Calle 57) Numero Dos is a less crowded, but still cheap and good market on the north side of Parque de Santiago, packed with juice stalls, *loncherías* (simple restaurants often only open for lunch) and even a cheap ice-cream place.

**Fey Esperanza** (☎ 241-0995; Calle 60 No 452 cnr Calle 51; tacos & tortas M\$8-28; 🍷 7:30am-5:30pm Mon-Sat) This popular hole-in-the-wall offers simple snacks like tacos and *tortas* (sandwich in a roll). High spenders can go upscale with a set lunch (M\$28) with your choice of meat, rice, beans, salad and *agua fresca* fruit juice. The service is super-friendly.

**La Flor de Santiago** (☎ 928-5591; Calle 70 btwn Calles 57 & 59; mains \$30-60; 🍷 7am-11pm) Chiapas coffee is served in incongruous, chipped Willowware cups in this cafeteria-style eatery. The guacamole is near perfect, and there is a wide selection of Mexican comfort foods, such as

chicken tamales or turkey soup. A Saturday or Sunday breakfast buffet costs M\$60. It's all good, and the friendly, no-nonsense waiters are obliging.

**La Casa del Cheesecake** (cnr Calle 47 & 66; cake slice M\$15-20; 🍷 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) This veritable institution offers cheesecakes, whole or by the slice, in an array of funky flavors that may include peach or even Kahlua.

**El Trapiche** (☎ 928-1231; Calle 62 No 491 btwn 59 & 61; mains M\$26-50; 🍷 8am-midnight) A great place close to El Centro, El Trapiche has cheap Mexican eats in a casual environment that includes passing visits by just about every peddler around. As you eat, you can stock up on Cuban cigars or Chiapas belts or jewelry. If you don't want to buy anything and just want to eat, choose a table in the back near the fountain. Pitchers of *agua de melon* (cantaloupe blended with water and a touch of sugar) cost only M\$45.

A few blocks east of the Plaza Grande are side-by-side **supermarkets** (Calle 56 btwn Calles 63 & 65) as well as a branch of **Super Bodega** (cnr Calles 67 & 54A), a market-department store chain.

Both markets are great spots to pick up ingredients for a sumptuous DIY dinner or picnic lunch.

For good, cheap breakfasts, try a selection of *panes dulce* (sweet rolls and breads) from one of Mérida's several bakeries, such as **Panificadora Montejo** (Calle 62) on the corner of the main plaza. A full bag of goodies usually costs no more than M\$25.

### Midrange

**Il Caffé Italiano** (☎ 928-0093; Calle 57A btwn Calles 58 & 60; mains M\$75-150; 🍷 8am-midnight Mon-Sat) It's an Italian-style café with nice espressos, good

### ASK A LOCAL: LAURA'S PICKS

Laura Alonzo Fuentes is a vegetarian who grew up in an affluent corner of Mérida. She now lives in the US, but we caught up with her before she left to see where Mérida's young professionals dine – all of these spots are outside the downtown area and offer good eats for carnos and vegos alike. Call for directions and reservations, or make your own top five.

- **100% Natural** (☎ 948-4254) A great spot for vegos, with fresh smoothies and homemade bread.
- **La Bologna** (☎ 926-2505) Italian class. As the great H Simpson might say 'mmmm, bologna.'
- **La Habichuela** (☎ 926-3626) Fancy modern takes on classic dishes.
- **La Trattato** (☎ 927-0434) Miami-style open-air dining.
- **Trotters** (☎ 942-0202) For stylish international cuisine.

mains and very interesting desserts: the strawberries with balsamic vinegar and ice cream is something completely different.

**Pop Cafetería** (☎ 928-6163; Calle 57 btwn Calles 60 & 62; breakfast M\$28-48, mains M\$35-90; ☎ 7am-midnight Mon-Sat, 8am-midnight Sun) There's an Art Deco bebop feel to this little cafeteria-style restaurant, which serves cheap breakfast combinations and a good variety of Mexican dishes; try the chicken in dark, rich *mole* (a handmade chocolate and chili sauce; M\$45).

**Main Street** (☎ 923-6850; Calle 60 btwn Calles 59 & 61; breakfast M\$50-80, mains M\$60-140; ☎ 7am-11pm) On the edge of Parque Hidalgo, this eatery serves generous, reasonably priced breakfasts, as well as ample portions of pasta and other dishes, including mediocre pizza. The outdoor tables offer prime people-watching opportunities.

**Amaro** (☎ 928-2451; www.restauranteamaro.com; Calle 59 btwn Calles 60 & 62; mains M\$55-100; ☎ 11am-1am or 11pm if it's slow; ☎) A romantic dining spot, especially at night, when there's usually a duo performing ballads. It's set in the courtyard of the house in which Andrés Quintana Roo – poet, statesman and drafter of Mexico's Declaration of Independence – was born in 1787. The service and food are good (but check your bill carefully), and the menu includes Yucatecan dishes and a variety of vegetarian plates, as well as some continental dishes, crêpes and pizzas.

**Pane e Vino** (☎ 928-6228; Calle 62 btwn Calles 59 & 61; mains M\$70-100; ☎ 6pm-midnight Tue-Sun; ☎) This Italian-run joint serves tasty antipasti and salads (with olive oil and balsamic vinegar if you wish), lasagna, fish, meat and a selection of respectable wines by the glass or bottle. The star attractions are the fresh handmade pasta dishes, which vary daily and usually include gnocchi, ravioli and fettuccine.

**Restaurante Kantún** (☎ 923-4493; Calle 45 btwn Calles 64 & 66; mains M\$60-120; ☎ noon-7pm Tue-Sun) The Kantún serves some of the best seafood in town. Main dishes are all prepared to order and delicately seasoned or sauced; try the *filete Normanda*, a fillet stuffed with smoked oysters and topped with anchovies. There are a few meat offerings for nonfishy types. The service is friendly and attentive, if almost formal at times.

## Top End

**Restaurante Pórtico del Peregrino** (☎ 928-6163; Calle 57 btwn Calles 60 & 62; mains M\$70-140; ☎ noon-midnight) There are several pleasant, traditional-style

dining rooms (some with air-con) surrounding a small courtyard in this upscale eatery. Yucatecan dishes such as *pollo pibil* (chicken flavored with achiote sauce and wrapped in banana leaves) are its forte, but you'll find many international dishes and a broad range of seafood and steaks as well. *Mole poblano*, a chocolate and chili sauce, is a house specialty, as is artery-clogging *queso relleño* (Dutch cheese stuffed with spiced ground beef).

**Alberto's Continental Patio** (☎ 928-5367; cr Calles 64 & 57; mains M\$70-170, set dinners M\$240-280; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Sat, 6-11pm Sun; ☎) Alberto's offers yet more colonial-courtyard (as well as indoor) dining. The setting is extremely atmospheric, chockablock with religious artifacts, Maya ceramic figures and greenery. Middle Eastern dishes such as hummus, babagounoush and tabbouleh are served with pita bread, and can be a welcome change from Mexican food. The steaks, poultry and seafood are also good, as is the service. Tipplers will appreciate the fine brandy selection.

## DRINKING

It's impossible not to find a beer or bar in Mérida; if you're really desperate, ask anyone on the street to point the way to a nearby watering hole. Most of the restaurants listed earlier serve drinks or have their own bars.

**KY60** (Calle 60 btwn Calles 55 & 57; free admission; ☎ 9pm-3am) Surprisingly, despite the men-wearing-construction-outfits Village People vibe, this is not a gay bar. It's got good pool tables and is popular with guys and gals, gays and straights, locals and tourists, probably because of its reasonably priced beers, which seem to be a universal attraction.

People not needing something alcoholic can try:

**Jugos California** (☎ 923-4142; Calle 63 No 502; juices US\$1.10-2.50; ☎ 7am-10pm) On the corner next to the bread shop Panificadora Montejo, this cheery yellow-and-blue tiled place offers great fresh juices and smoothies, served with friendly smiles.

**El Hoyo** (☎ 928-1531; Calle 62 No 487; coffees US\$1.60-2.50; ☎ 8am-11:30pm Mon-Sat) This is the best place for cheap espressos and lattes, plus chessboards and books if you want to hang out. A small courtyard at the back has beautiful tilework. The Nutella crêpe is a unique specialty.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Mérida offers many folkloric and musical events in parks and historic buildings, put on by local performers of considerable skill. Admission is free except as noted in the following reviews. Check with one of the tourist information offices to confirm schedules and find out about special events; the website [www.yucatanotoday.com](http://www.yucatanotoday.com) offers monthly news and often highlights seasonal events.

**Centro Cultural Olimpo** (☎ 924-0000 ext 80152; cr Calles 62 & 61) Offers something nearly every night, from films to concerts to art installations.

**Caribbean Blue** (☎ 923-2279; Calle 60 btwn Calles 57 & 55; admission M\$30; ☎ 10pm-3:30am) One of a cluster of bars on this block that has music and dancing, with a live nine-piece salsa

band most nights. The crowd is fairly young, with a mix of locals and visitors.

Take a taxi to the Prolongación de Montejo, where you'll have your choice of bumping discos and uberchic lounges. Most charge admission. **El Cielo** (☎ 944-5127; Prolongación de Montejo btwn Calle 25 & Av Campestre) is a locals' favorite, as is the nearby **Slavia** (☎ 926-6587; Prolongación de Montejo s/n).

Mérida has several cinemas, most of which show first-run Hollywood fare in English, with Spanish subtitles (ask '¿inglés?' at the ticket office if you need to be sure), as well as other foreign films and Mexican offerings. Cinema tickets cost about M\$45 for evening shows, M\$25 for matinees. Try the following:

**Cines Rex** (Calle 57 btwn Calles 70 & 72)

**Teatro Mérida** (Calle 62 btwn Calles 59 & 61)

## YUCATECAN HAMMOCKS: THE ONLY WAY TO SLEEP

The fine strings of Yucatecan hammocks make them supremely comfortable. In the sticky heat of a Yucatecan summer, most locals prefer sleeping in a hammock, where the air can circulate around them, rather than in a bed. Many inexpensive hotels used to have hammock hooks in the walls of all guestrooms; many still do.

Yucatecan hammocks are normally woven from strong nylon or cotton string and dyed in various colors. There are also natural, undyed cotton versions. Some sellers will try to fob these off as henequen (also called sisal) or jute, telling you it's much more durable (and valuable) than cotton, and even that it repels mosquitoes. Don't be taken in; real henequen hammocks are very rough and not something you'd want near your skin. Silk hammocks are no longer made, but a silk-rayon blend has a similar feel.

Hammocks come in several widths (each shop seems to have slightly different names and numbers for them), and though much is made of the quantity of pairs of end strings they possess, a better gauge of a hammock's size and quality is its weight. The heavier the better. A *sencilla* (for one person) should be about 500g and cost around M\$120. The *doble* (double size, big enough for a large man) is about 700g to 800g and costs roughly M\$150 to M\$200. Next comes the *matrimonial* (queen size, big enough for two people to snuggle) at 1100g (M\$220) and *familiar* (king size, big enough for two people, a dog, a cat and a goldfish – but we doubt you'll really be able to fit the whole family in it; up to about 1500g, M\$270). *De croché* (very tightly woven) hammocks can take several weeks to produce and cost double or triple the prices given here.

Many stores can also sell mosquito netting for an additional M\$150 or so. And before you leave, ask staff to show you how to fold it – only fishing line takes longer to untangle.

You can save yourself a lot of trouble by shopping at a hammock store with a good reputation. Getting away from the heavily touristed areas helps. In Mérida, **Hamacas El Aguacate** (☎ 928-6469; cr Calles 58 & 73) has quality hammocks and decent prices, and there's absolutely no hard sell. In Quintana Roo, check out Puerto Morelos' artisans market (p102), where high-quality Tixkokob hammocks are sold.

Some of the best (and best-priced) hammocks are produced in prisons, but a less-depressing excursion is to venture out to the village of Tixkokob, near Mérida, to watch hammocks being woven. The senora at **Hamacas El Gallito** (☎ 999-996-5612; cr Calles 21 & 14; ☎ 10am-8pm) is very helpful, though she doesn't speak English. A bus runs regularly from the **Progreso bus terminal** (Calle 62 No 524 btwn Calles 65 & 67) in Mérida.



## SHOPPING

Mérida is a fine place for buying Yucatecan handicrafts. Purchases to consider include guayaberas (short-sleeved sports shirts) and traditional Maya clothing, such as the colorful, embroidered *huipiles*, panama hats and, of course, the wonderfully comfortable Yucatecan hammocks (see boxed text, p163).

During the last days of February or the beginning of March (the dates vary) is Kihuic, a market that fills the Plaza Grande with handicraft artisans and their wares from all over Mexico.

**Mercado Municipal Lucas de Gálvez** (cnr Calles 56A & 67) Mérida's main market is a great spot to pick up that perfect piece of kitsch.

## Handicrafts

**Casa de las Artesanías** (☎ 928-6676; Calle 63 btwn Calles 64 & 66; ☹ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) One place to start looking for handicrafts is this government-supported market for local artisans selling just about everything. Prices are fixed and a bit high.

**Artesanías Bazar García Rejón** (cnr Calles 65 & 60) Concentrates a wide variety of products into one area of shops.

**Miniaturas** (☎ 928-6503; Calle 59 btwn Calles 60 & 62; ☹ 10am-8pm) Here you'll find lots of small Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) tableaux, tinwork and figurines of every sort, from ceramics to toy soldiers. They all have two things in common: they're easy to pack and have nothing to do with Yucatecan artisan traditions! The store is definitely fun to browse and prices are fixed at a fair rate, so you needn't worry about bargaining.

## Clothing & Panama Hats

**Camisería Canul** (☎ 923-5661; Calle 62 btwn Calles 57 & 59; ☹ 8:30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) A good place for guayaberas and *huipiles*. It has been in business for years, offers fixed prices and does custom tailoring.

The Campeche town of Bécál is the center of the hat-weaving trade (see p214), but you can buy good examples of the hatmaker's art in Mérida. Prices range from a few dollars for a hat of basic quality to M\$80 or more for top quality. The Casa de las Artesanías has only very low-quality examples; the Artesanías Bazar García Rejón is a much better bet.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Mérida's tiny but modern airport is a 10km, 20-minute ride southwest of the Plaza Grande off Hwy 180 (Avenida de los Itzáes). It has car-rental desks, an ATM and currency-exchange booth, and a **tourist information booth** (☹ 9am-5pm) that helps mainly with hotel reservations.

Most international flights to Mérida are connections through Mexico City or Cancún. Nonstop international services are provided by Aeroméxico (daily from Los Angeles, thrice weekly from Miami), Continental Airlines and Northwest Airlines (both from Houston, total eight times weekly). Most domestic flights are operated by small regional airlines, with a few flights by Aeroméxico and Mexicana de Aviación. The following airlines are represented in Mérida:

**Aeroméxico** (☎ 800-021-4010; www.aeromexico.com); Mérida (☎ 920-1293) Flies to Mexico City, Los Angeles and Miami.

**Aviaca** (☎ 800-006-2200; www.aviasca.com.mx); Mérida (☎ 925-6890) Flies to Mexico City.

**Click Mexicana** (☎ 800-112-5425; www.clickmx.com); Mérida (☎ 946-1366; Paseo de Montejo 500B) Flies between Mérida and Cancún, Veracruz and Villahermosa, with connections to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Havana and other destinations.

**Continental Airlines** (☎ 800-900-5000; www.continental.com); Mérida (☎ 946-1888; Paseo Montejo No 437 at Calle 29) Flies nonstop between Houston and Mérida.

**Delta Airlines** (☎ 800-123-4710, reservations toll-free in USA; www.delta.com) Nonstop service from Miami.

**Mexicana de Aviación** (☎ 924-6633, 800-801-2010; www.mexicana.com; Paseo de Montejo 493) Nonstop flights to Mexico City.

**Northwest Airlines** (☎ 800-907-4700 in Mexico; www.nwa.com) Flies to Houston.

### Bus

Mérida is the bus transportation hub of the Yucatán Peninsula. See the table (opposite) for prices and more information. Take care with your gear on night buses and those serving popular tourist destinations (especially 2nd-class buses); we have received many reports of theft on the night runs to Chiapas and of a few daylight thefts on the Chichén Itzá and other routes.

There are a number of bus terminals, and some lines operate from (and stop at) more than one terminal. Tickets for departure from one terminal can often be bought at another, and destinations overlap greatly among bus

lines. Some lines offer round-trip tickets to nearby towns that reduce the fare quite a bit. Following are some of the terminals, the bus lines operating from them and areas served.

**CAME bus terminal** (☎ reservations 924-8391; Calle 70 btwn Calles 69 & 71) Sometimes referred to as the 'Terminal de Primera Clase,' Mérida's main bus terminal has (mostly 1st-class) buses to points around the Yucatán Peninsula and places such as Campeche, Mexico City, Palenque, San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Villahermosa. CAME has card phones and an ATM and runs counters for tourist, bus and hotel information. The baggage check is open 6am to midnight daily and charges M\$5 for storage from 6am to noon, M\$10 for all day.

**Fiesta Americana Mérida** (☎ 924-0855; Av Colón near Calle 56A) A small 1st-class terminal on the west side

of the hotel complex servicing guests of the luxury hotels on Avenida Colón, north of the city center. ADO GL and Super Expresso services run between here and Cancún, Campeche, Chetumal and Playa del Carmen.

**Noreste bus terminal** (Calle 67 btwn Calles 50 & 52) LUS, Occidente and Oriente bus lines use this terminal. Destinations served from here include many small towns in the northeast part of the peninsula, including Tizimín and Río Lagartos; frequent services to Cancún and points along the way; as well as small towns south and west of Mérida, including Celestún (served by Occidente), Ticul, Ruinas de Mayapán and Oxkutzcab. Some Oriente buses depart from Terminal 69 and stop here; others leave directly from here (eg those to Izamal and Tizimín).

**Parque de San Juan** (Calle 69 btwn Calles 62 & 64) From all around the square and church, vans and *combis*

## BUS SERVICES FROM MÉRIDA

Destination	Fare (\$M)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Campeche (short route)	122	2½-3½	hourly ADO buses, 3 ADO GL buses, ATS 2nd-class bus every 30min to 7:15pm
Cancún	150-260	4-6	16 2nd-class Oriente buses, 20 deluxe Super Expresso buses & many other buses
Celestún	44	2	15 2nd-class Occidente buses from Noreste bus terminal
Chetumal	170-250	6-8	2 ADO buses from CAME bus terminal, 5 2nd-class Mayab buses, 3 super-deluxe Caribe Express buses from Terminal de Segunda Clase
Chichén Itzá	54-80	1¾-2½	3 Super Expresso & hourly 2nd-class Oriente Cancún-bound buses stop at Chichén Itzá or nearby Pisté
Cobá	94-106	3½-4	Oriente bus at 5:20am
Escárcega	150-176	5-5½	4 ATS, many 2nd-class Sur buses
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	134-146	5½-6	8 Mayab, 2 ATS buses
Izamal	27	1½	frequent 2nd-class Oriente buses from Noreste bus terminal
Mayapán Ruinas	31	1½	15 LUS buses btwn 5:30am & 8pm from Noreste bus terminal, continuing to Oxkutzcab
Mexico City (Norte)	858-1136	19	ADO bus at midnight
Palenque	316-332	8-9	1 deluxe Maya de Oro bus at 8:30am, 3 ADO buses, 1 Occidente bus at 7:15pm
Playa del Carmen	258-310	4½-8	10 deluxe Super Expresso buses, 1 ADO GL bus at 1:30pm, numerous Mayab buses
Progreso	12.50	1	frequent buses 5:30am-10pm from the Progreso bus terminal, shared taxis (some with air-con) from a parking lot on Calle 60 btwn Calles 65 & 67
Río Lagartos	70-110	3-4	3 1st- & 2nd-class Noreste buses from 9am
Ruta Puuc (round-trip)	126	8	1 2nd-class ATS bus at 8am (stops 30min at each site)
Ticul	40	1¾	frequent Mayab buses, some TRP buses; frequent cheaper & quicker <i>combis</i> from Parque de San Juan from 5am-10pm
Tizimín	83	2½-4	6 1st- & 2nd-class Noreste buses (for Isla Holbox connect in Tizimín)
Tulum	172	4	Super Expresso bus at 6:30am, 11am & 1pm; there is 2nd-class service to Tulum, but it takes much longer
Uxmal	39	1-1½	15 2nd-class ATS buses, round-trip available
Valladolid	66-112	2½-3½	hourly buses, including Super Expresso, 2nd-class Oriente & ATS

(vans or minibuses) depart for Dzibilchaltún, Muna, Oxkutzcab, Tekax, Ticul and other points.

**Progreso bus terminal** (Calle 62 No 524 btwn Calles 65 & 67) Progreso has a separate bus terminal here, serving Progreso.

**Terminal de Segunda Clase** (Calle 69) Also known as Terminal 69 (Sesenta y Nueve) or simply Terminal de Autobuses, this terminal is located just around the corner from the CAME bus terminal. ADO, Mayab, Oriente, Sur and TRT run mostly 2nd-class buses to points in the state and around the peninsula. The terminal has a baggage check room.

## Car

The most flexible way to tour the many archaeological sites around Mérida is by rental car, especially if you have two or more people to share costs. Assume you will pay a total of M\$550 to M\$650 per day (tax, insurance and gas included) for short-term rental of a cheap car. Getting around Mérida's sprawling tangle of one-way streets and careening buses is better done on foot or on a careening bus.

Several agencies have branches at the airport as well as on Calle 60 between Calles 55 and 57, including **Budget** (☎ 925-1900; www.budgetcancun.com), **Avis** (☎ 946-1524; www.avis.com.mx) and **Hertz** (☎ 946-2554; www.hertz.com.mx). All rent for about M\$350 to M\$500 a day. You'll get the best deal by booking ahead of time over the internet.

See p87 for details of the expensive toll highway between Mérida and Cancún.

## GETTING AROUND

### To/From the Airport

Bus 79 (Aviación) travels between the airport and the city center every 15 to 30 minutes until 9pm, with occasional service until 11pm. The half-hour trip (M\$4) is via a roundabout route; the best place to catch the bus to the airport is on Calle 70, south of Calle 69, near the CAME bus terminal.

**Transporte Terrestre** (☎ 946-1529) provides speedy service between the airport and the city center, charging M\$100 per carload (same price for hotel pick-up). A taxi from the city center to the airport should cost about M\$80 (but it's hard to get this price from the airport, so walk out to the main street and flag one down or else prepare to pay M\$200).

## Bus

Most parts of Mérida that you'll want to visit are within five or six blocks of the Plaza

Grande and are thus accessible on foot. Given the slow speed of city traffic, particularly in the market areas, travel on foot is also the fastest way to get around.

City buses are cheap at M\$4, but routes can be confusing. Most start in suburban neighborhoods, skirt the city center and terminate in another distant suburban neighborhood. To travel between the Plaza Grande and the upscale neighborhoods to the north along Paseo de Montejo, catch the Ruta 10 on Calle 57 between Calles 58 and 60, a block north of the Parque Hidalgo, or catch a 'Tecnológico,' 'Hyatt' or 'Montejo' bus on Calle 60 and get off at Avenida Colón. To return to the city center, catch any bus heading south on Paseo de Montejo displaying the same signs and/or 'Centro.' Many will let you off on Calle 58 north of Calle 61.

## Taxi

Taxis in Mérida are not metered. Rates are fixed, with a M\$30 minimum fare, which will get you from the bus terminals to all downtown hotels. Most rides within city limits do not exceed M\$60. Taxi stands can be found at most of the barrio parks, or dial ☎ 982-1504 or ☎ 982-1171; service is available 24 hours (dispatch fees cost an extra M\$10 to M\$20).

## SOUTH OF MÉRIDA

There's a lot to do and see south of Mérida. The major draws are the old henequen plantations, some still used for cultivating leaves, and the well-preserved Maya ruins like Uxmal and the lesser-known sites along the Ruta Puuc. Beyond these tourist draws you'll find seldom-visited cenotes and caves, and traditional villages where life still moves at an agrarian pace: women still wear *huipiles* and speak Yucatec, and their men still bike out to cut firewood or shoot a pheasant for dinner. The smell of tortillas mixes with the citrus-like smell of the semi-arid plants that call the region home. It's a rough-and-tumble landscape, and one of the few spots on the peninsula where you'll actually find a few hills.

## HACIENDA YAXCOPoil

This **hacienda** (☎ 999-910-4334; Hwy 261; admission M\$50; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) is 33km southwest of central Mérida. A vast estate that grew

and processed henequen, many of its numerous French Renaissance-style buildings have undergone picturesque restorations. There's a small 17th-century museum offering glimpses at the (now defunct) giant rasping machines that turned the leaves into fiber. Frequent buses pass Yaxcopoil running between Mérida and Ticul, but it's easiest to drive here.

## HACIENDA OCHIL

Lying about 44km south of Mérida, **Hacienda Ochil** (☎ 999-910-6035; Hwy 261 Km 176; admission M\$20; ☎ 9am-6pm; ☎) provides a fascinating, though basic, look at how henequen was grown and processed. From the parking lot follow the 'truck' tracks – used by the small wheeled carts to haul material to and from the processing plant – to the right around the parklike, restored portion of the hacienda. You'll pass workshops where you might see locals fashioning handicrafts for sale and a small henequen museum with exhibits illustrating the cultivating, harvesting and processing of the plant. These include pieces of machinery and photos of hacienda life. Iguanas abound.

The *casa de máquinas* (machine house) and smokestack still stand, and Ochil also has a **restaurant** (mains M\$80-100), bar, a small cenote and a henequen patch. Mayab runs 2nd-class buses between Mérida and Muna (M\$25, one hour) that will drop you at Ochil's parking lot.

## GRUTAS DE CALCEHTOK

The **Calcehtok caves** (☎ 9:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat & Sun; ☎) are said by some to comprise the longest dry-cave system on the Yucatán Peninsula. More than 4km have been explored so far, and two of the caves' 25 vaults exceed 100m in diameter (one has a 30m-high 'cupola'). The caves hold abundant and impressive natural formations, human and animal remains and plenty of artifacts, including many *haltunes* (stone basins carved by the Maya to catch water). Archaeologists have found and removed ceramic arrowheads, quartz hammers and other tools, and you can still see low fortifications built by the Maya who sheltered here during the War of the Castes.

The opening of the main entrance is an impressive 30m in diameter and 40m deep, ringed by vegetation often buzzing with bees. It's about 1m deep in bat guano at the bottom (some visitors wear dust masks to avoid infection from a fungus on the guano). There's

nothing to stop you from exploring on your own (and possibly getting lost), but you'd be wise to employ one of the six guides, all members of the Cuy family, whose great-grandfather rediscovered the caves in 1840. They carry lanterns and flashlights.

You can opt for a basic tour or an adventure package – one that involves belly-crawling, rope descents to see human skeletons and possibly the 7m long by 20cm wide 'Pass of Death,' or 'El Parto' (The Birth: you figure it out). Tours last one to six hours and cost from M\$200 for four people. Wear sturdy shoes.

The caves are 75km southwest of Mérida off Hwy 184, a few kilometers south of the town of Calcehtok. They are best reached by car.

## OXKINTOK

Archaeologists have been excited about the ruins of **Oxkintok** (admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-5pm) for several years. Inscriptions found at the site contain some of the oldest known dates in the Yucatán, and indicate the city was inhabited from the pre-Classic to the post-Classic period (300 BC to AD 1500), reaching its greatest importance between AD 475 and 860.

Three main groups of the approximately 8-sq-km site have been restored thus far, all near the site entrance. Though much of the rebuilding work looks like it was done with rubble, you can see examples of Oxkintok, Proto-Puuc and Puuc architecture. The highest structure (15m) is Ma-1, **La Pirámide**, in the Ah-May group, which provides good views of the area. Probably the most interesting structure is **Palacio Chich** (Estructura Ca-7), in the Ah-Canul group, for its original stonework and the two columns in front carved with human figures in elaborate dress. Recently researchers discovered a labyrinth beneath La Pirámide, which unfortunately is closed to the public. You can see the blocked-off entrance quite clearly from the (facing the front) right side, about halfway up.

The ruins are reached by road by taking a west-leading fork off the road to the Grutas de Calcehtok (see left for info on getting to the Grutas de Calcehtok).

## UXMAL

Pronounced ooosh-mahl, **Uxmal** (admission M\$95, parking M\$10, guides M\$400; ☎ 8am-5pm; ☎) is one impressive set of ruins, easily ranking among the top Maya archaeological sites (and unfortunately most-visited). It is a large site with

some fascinating structures in good condition and bearing a riot of ornamentation. Adding to its appeal is Uxmal's setting in the hilly Puuc region, which lent its name to the architectural patterns in this area. *Puuc* means 'hills,' and these, rising up to about 100m, are the first relief from the flatness of the northern and western portions of the peninsula.

## History

Uxmal was an important city in a region that encompassed the satellite towns of Sayil, Kabah, Xlapak and Labná. Although Uxmal means 'Thrice Built' in Maya, it was actually constructed five times.

That a sizable population flourished in this dry area is yet more testimony to the

engineering skills of the Maya, who built a series of reservoirs and *chultunes* (Maya cisterns) lined with lime mortar to catch and hold water during the dry season. First settled about AD 600, Uxmal was influenced by highland Mexico in its architecture, most likely through contact fostered by trade. This influence is reflected in the town's serpent imagery, phallic symbols and columns. The well-proportioned Puuc architecture, with its intricate, geometric mosaics sweeping across the upper parts of elongated façades, was strongly influenced by the slightly earlier Río Bec and Chenes styles.

The scarcity of water in the region meant that Chac, the rain god or sky serpent, carried a lot of weight here. His image is ubiquitous at

the site in the form of stucco masks protruding from façades and cornices. There is much speculation as to why Uxmal was abandoned in about AD 900; a severe drought may have forced the inhabitants to relocate.

Rediscovered by archaeologists in the 19th century, Uxmal was first excavated in 1929 by Frans Blom. Although much has been restored, there is still a good deal to discover.

## Information

The site is entered through the modern Unidad Uxmal building, which holds an air-conditioned restaurant, a small museum, shops selling souvenirs and crafts, an auditorium, bathrooms, an ATM and a left-luggage facility. Also here is Librería Dante, a bookstore that stocks an excellent selection of travel and archaeological guides, and general-interest books on Mexico in English, Spanish, German and French; the imported books are very expensive.

The 45-minute sound-and-light show begins nightly at 8pm in summer and 7pm in winter, and costs M\$30. It's in Spanish, but you can rent devices with English, French, German or Italian translations (beamed via infrared) for M\$25. Specify the language you need or it may not be broadcast. You'll need to repay the M\$10 parking fee if you return for the show.

## Sights

### CASA DEL ADIVINO

As you climb the slope to the ruins, the Casa del Adivino comes into view. This tall temple (the name translates as 'Magician's House'), 39m high, was built in an unusual oval shape. It gives rather a bad first impression of Uxmal to the visitor, consisting of round stones held rudely together with lots of cement. What you see is a restored version of the temple's fifth incarnation. Four earlier temples were completely covered in the final rebuilding by the Maya, except for the high doorway on the west side, which remains from the fourth temple. Decorated in elaborate Chenes style (a style that originated further south), the doorway proper forms the mouth of a gigantic Chac mask.

Climbing the temple is not allowed.

### CUADRÁNGULO DE LAS MONJAS

The 74-room, sprawling Nuns' Quadrangle is directly west of the Casa del Adivino.

Archaeologists guess variously that it was a military academy, royal school or palace complex. The long-nosed face of Chac appears everywhere on the façades of the four separate temples that form the quadrangle. The northern temple, grandest of the four, was built first, followed by the southern, then the eastern and then the western.

Several decorative elements on the exuberant façades show signs of Mexican, perhaps Totonac, influence. The feathered-serpent (Quetzalcóatl, or in Maya, Kukulcán) motif along the top of the west temple's façade is one of these. Note also the stylized depictions of the *na* (traditional Maya thatched hut) over some of the doorways in the northern and southern buildings. Take plenty of time to look around here; the amount of detail is almost overwhelming.

Passing through the corbeled arch in the middle of the south building of the quadrangle and continuing down the slope takes you through the **Juego de Pelota** (Ball Court). From here you can turn left and head up the steep slope and stairs to the large terrace. If you've got time, you could instead turn right to explore the western **Grupo del Cementerio** (which, though largely unrestored, holds some interesting square blocks carved with skulls in the center of its plaza), then head for the stairs and terrace.

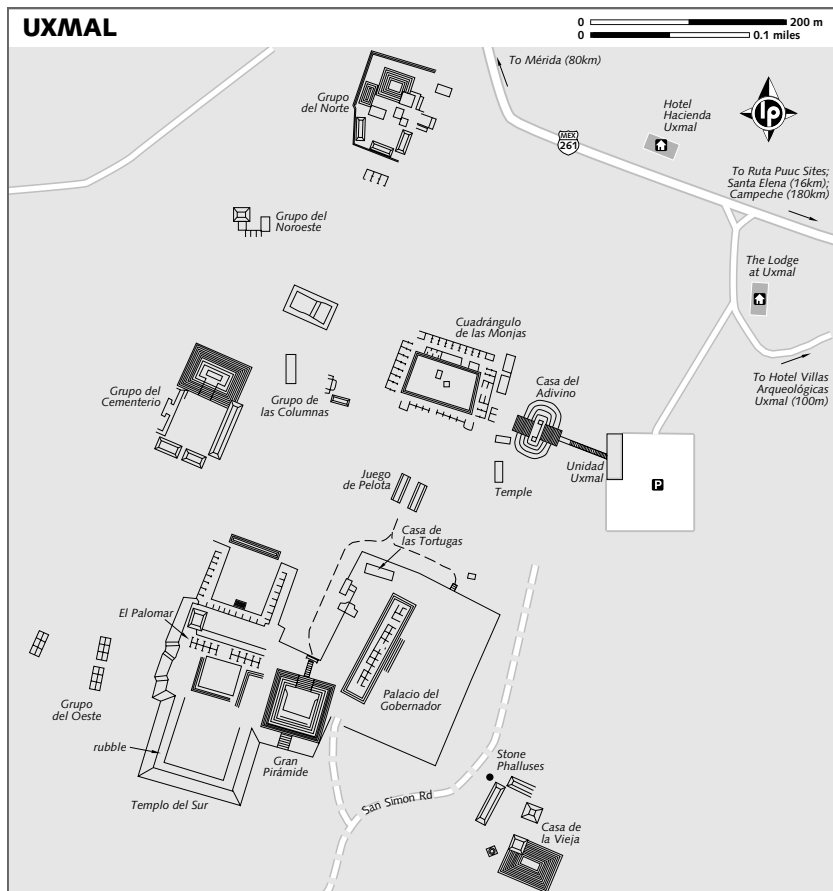
### CASA DE LAS TORTUGAS

To the right at the top of the stairs is the House of the Turtles, which takes its name from the turtles carved on the cornice. The Maya associated turtles with the rain god, Chac. According to Maya myth, when the people suffered from drought so did the turtles, and both prayed to Chac to send rain.

The frieze of short columns, or 'rolled mats,' that runs around the temple below the turtles is characteristic of the Puuc style. On the west side of the building a vault has collapsed, affording a good view of the corbeled arch – remember that the Maya never mastered key-stone arch design – that supported it.

### PALACIO DEL GOBERNADOR

The Governor's Palace, with its magnificent façade nearly 100m long, has been called 'the finest structure at Uxmal and the culmination of the Puuc style' by Mayanist Michael D Coe. The buildings have walls filled with rubble, faced with cement and then covered



in a thin veneer of limestone squares; the lower part of the façade is plain, the upper part festooned with stylized Chac faces and geometric designs, often latticelike or fretted. Other elements of Puuc style are decorated cornices, rows of half-columns (as in the House of the Turtles) and round columns in doorways (as in the palace at Sayil). Stones forming the corbeled vaults in Puuc style are shaped somewhat like boots.

### GRAN PIRÁMIDE

Though it's adjacent to the Governor's Palace, a sign by the steps of the Gran Pirámide (Great Pyramid) warns 'it is dangerous to go up' from the rear of the palace. Most visitors ignore the sign and take the shortcut from the palace's southwest corner. If you don't feel comfortable doing this, retrace your route to go back down the hillside stairs and then keep turning left following the base of the platform until you reach the pyramid's steps.

The 32m-high pyramid has been restored only on its northern side. Archaeologists theorize that the quadrangle at its summit was largely destroyed in order to construct another pyramid above it. That work, for reasons unknown, was never completed. At the top are some stucco carvings of Chac, birds and flowers.

### EL PALOMAR

West of the Gran Pirámide sits a structure whose roofcomb is latticed with a pattern reminiscent of the Moorish pigeon houses built into walls in Spain and northern Africa – hence the building's name, which means the Dovecote or Pigeon House. The nine honeycombed triangular 'belfries' sit on top of a building that was once part of a quadrangle. The base is so eroded that it is hard for archaeologists to guess its function.

### CASA DE LA VIEJA

Off the southeast corner of the Palacio del Gobernador's platform is a small complex, largely rubble, known as the Casa de la Vieja (Old Woman's House). In front of it is a small *palapa* (thatched-roof shelter) sheltering several large phalluses carved from stone. Don't get any ideas; the sign here reads 'Do not sit.'

### Tours

ATS buses depart Mérida's Terminal de Segunda Clase at 8am on a whirlwind excursion

to the Ruta Puuc sites (p172) plus Kabah and Uxmal, heading back from Uxmal's parking lot at 2:30pm. This 'tour' is transportation only; you pay all other costs. The time spent at each site is enough to get only a brief acquaintance, though some say the two hours at Uxmal is sufficient, if barely. The cost is M\$126 for the whole deal, or M\$78 if you want to be dropped off only at Uxmal in the morning and picked up in the afternoon.

More organized tours of Uxmal and other sites can be arranged in Mérida. See p157 for more details.

### Sleeping & Eating

There is no town at Uxmal, only several top-end hotels. Cheaper lodgings can be found in Santa Elena (opposite), 16km away, or in Ticul (p177), 30km to the east.

**Hotel Villas Arqueológicas Uxmal** (☎ /fax 997-974-6020, in the USA 800-514-8244; www.clubmed.com; d/tr M\$860/1060; 🍷 🍴) This Club Med is a good family spot, with a pool, tennis courts and billiards, but the rooms are rather small and the beds are curiously spongy (must be the humidity). It's also the cheapest joint around, and it has a good library to check out Catherwood's amazing Uxmal illustrations in the book *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*.

**Hotel Hacienda Uxmal** (☎ 997-976-2012, in the USA 800-235-4079; www.mayaland.com; d with air-con low season M\$880-1480, high season M\$1480; 🍷 🍴) This Mayaland Resort is 500m from the ruins. It housed the archaeologists who explored and restored Uxmal. Wide, tiled verandas, high ceilings, great bathrooms and a beautiful swimming pool make this a very comfortable place to stay. There are even rocking chairs to help you kick back after a hard day of exploring.

**The Lodge at Uxmal** (☎ 997-976-2010, in the USA 800-235-4079; www.mayaland.com; d May-Oct M\$2200-2850, Nov-Apr M\$3940-4900; 🍷 🍴) This Mayaland Resort is Uxmal's newest luxury hotel. The Hacienda's rooms are a bit nicer, but you can't beat the easy access to the ruins. The pool is equally delicious, as are the monstro tubs – some rooms even have Jacuzzis. Don't suppose Stephens and Catherwood enjoyed such luxury when they passed through the area in the late 1830s.

### Getting There & Away

Uxmal is 80km from Mérida. Most buses plying the inland route between Mérida and

Campeche will drop you off at Uxmal, Santa Elena, Kabah or the Ruta Puuc turnoff. But when you want to leave, passing buses may be full (especially on Saturday and Monday).

If you're going from Uxmal to Ticul, first take a northbound bus to Muna (M\$5, 20 minutes), from where you can catch one of the frequent buses to Ticul (M\$8, 30 minutes).

### SANTA ELENA

The nearest town to Uxmal is Santa Elena. It was originally called Nohcacab, and was virtually razed in 1847 in the War of the Castes. 'Ele-na' means burnt houses in Maya. The Mexican government changed the name to Santa Elena in a bold PR stunt. There's a small **museum** (admission M\$10; 🕒 8am-7pm) dedicated to a gruesome find: 18th-century child mummies found buried beneath the adjoining cathedral, and some henequen-related exhibits. Go for a little DIY adventure by heading 4km outside of town to the Mulchic pyramid; locals can tell you how to get there. If time permits, try asking if you can take in the view from the roof of the cathedral.

At **Bungalows Sacbé** (☎ 985-858-1281, 997-978-5158; www.sacbebungalows.com.mx; d M\$230-290) there's a nice garden, and all the rooms have fans, good screens and decent beds. Each room has an excellent book with information about local activities, flora and fauna. The friendly Mexican and French owners serve a good, cheap breakfast (M\$50). To get here, ask the bus driver to drop you off at the *campo de béisbol* (baseball field) *de Santa Elena*. It's about 200m south of the town's southern entrance.

**Flycatcher Inn** (☎ 997-107-4126, 997-102-0865; www.flycatcherinn.com; d M\$400-500, ste or cottage M\$600) features six squeaky-clean rooms, an enormous master suite and a separate cottage. All have great porches, supercomfy imported beds, plus hammocks, excellent screenage and great bathrooms. A large breakfast is included in the rates. The owners, a local Maya and his American wife, have kept most of the five hectares of land around the inn undeveloped, and a number of bird and animal species can be seen here, including the flycatchers that gave their name to the place. The inn's driveway is less than 100m north of Santa Elena's southern entrance; there's a bus stop just across the highway from it, near Restaurant El Chac-Mool.

On Hwy 261 at the southern entrance to Santa Elena, **Restaurant El Chac-Mool** (☎ 999-996-2025; mains M\$40-60; 🕒 8am-9pm) is a friendly place serving Yucatecan food that includes a hearty vegetarian plate of rice, beans and fried bananas. It has a little store, too.

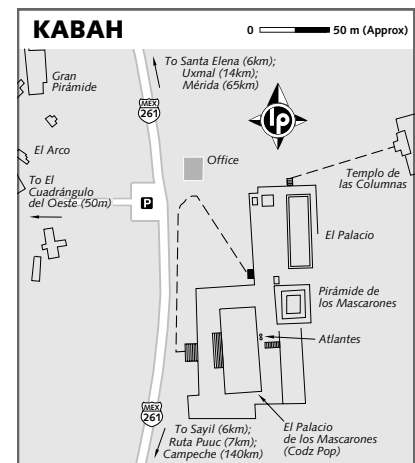
Locals say **The Pickled Onion** (mains M\$60-100; 🕒 odd hr) is the best restaurant in town. It's located just before the turnoff to Sacbé Bungalows, but is often closed.

Santa Elena is 16km southeast of Uxmal and 8km north of Kabah – for details of bus services from Uxmal, see opposite; from Ticul, see p177.

### KABAH

These **ruins** (admission M\$34; 🕒 9am-5pm), 23km southeast of Uxmal, are right astride Hwy 261. The guard shack-souvenir shop-office sells snacks and cold drinks. The bulk of the restored ruins are on the east side of the highway.

On entering, head to your right to climb the stairs of the structure closest to the highway, **El Palacio de los Mascarones** (Palace of the Masks). Standing in front of it is the Altar de los Glifos, whose immediate area is littered with many stones carved with glyphs. The palace's façade is an amazing sight, covered in nearly 300 masks of Chac, the rain god or sky serpent. Most of their huge curling noses are broken off; the best intact beaks are at the building's southern end. These noses may have given the palace its modern Maya name, Codz Poop (Rolled Mat; it's pronounced more like 'Codes Pope' than some Elizabethan curse).



When you've had your fill of noses, head north and around to the back of the Poop to check out the two restored **atlantes** (an atlas – plural 'atlantes' – is a male figure used as a supporting column). These are especially interesting, as they're some of the very few three-dimensional human figures you'll see at the Maya sites covered in this book. One is headless and the other wears a jaguar mask atop his head.

Descend the steps near the *atlantes* and turn left, passing the small **Pirámide de los Mascarones**, to reach the plaza containing **El Palacio**. The palace's broad façade has several doorways, two of which have a column in the center. These columned doorways and the groups of decorative *columnillas* (little columns) on the upper part of the façade are characteristic of the Puuc architectural style.

Steps on the north side of El Palacio's plaza put you on a path leading about 200m through the jungle to the **Templo de las Columnas** (watch out for the 'tourist trap' on the way – a person-sized hole in the middle of the pathway). This building has more rows of decorative columns on the upper part of its façade.

West of El Palacio, across the highway, a path leads up the slope and passes to the south of a high mound of stones that was once the **Gran Pirámide** (Great Pyramid). The path curves to the right and comes to a large restored **monumental arch**. It's said that the *sacbé*, or cobbled and elevated ceremonial road, leading from here goes through the jungle all the way to Uxmal, terminating at a smaller arch; in the other direction it goes to Labná. Once, all of the Yucatán Peninsula

#### PYRAMID SCHEME

It's tempting to skirt the (often unpoliced) signs that prohibit climbing, but please climb only where it's allowed. Be careful, and if you're worried about heights, give this sure-fire technique a try: zigzag up or down the steps, making diagonal passes to either side of the stairway. Once you master this style, you'll never descend again using the embarrassing sit-and-bump-down-on-your-butt method, or the painful trip-and-fall-to-your-near-death method, which is why most of the pyramids are closed to climbing in the first place.

was connected by these marvelous 'white roads' of rough limestone.

At present nothing of the *sacbé* is visible, and the rest of the area west of the highway is a maze of unmarked, overgrown paths leading off into the jungle.

There's good, affordable lodging about 8km north of Kabah at Bungalows Sacbé and the Flycatcher Inn; for details, see p171.

#### Getting There & Away

Kabah is 104km from Mérida. For details of bus services from Uxmal, see p170, and p157 for details on tours. You only get about a 25-minute visit on the ATS excursion bus.

Buses will usually make flag stops at the entrance to the ruins. Many visitors come to Kabah by car and may be willing to give you a lift out.

#### RUTA PUUC

Just 5km south of Kabah on Hwy 261, a road branches off to the east and winds past the ruins of Sayil, Xlapak and Labná, eventually leading to the Grutas de Loltún. This is the Ruta Puuc (Puuc Route), and its sites offer some marvelous architectural detail and a deeper acquaintance with the Puuc Maya civilization.

For details of bus services from Uxmal, see p170, and p177 for details on catching the ATS excursion bus, the only regularly scheduled public transport on the route. During the busy winter season it's often possible to hitch rides from one site to the next. The best way to appreciate the sites is by rented car or taxi, especially if you plan on taking time at each site.

#### Sayil

The ruins of **Sayil** (admission M\$34; ☎ 8am-5pm) are 4.5km from the junction of the Ruta Puuc with Hwy 261.

Sayil is best known for **El Palacio**, the huge three-tiered building with a façade some 85m long and reminiscent of the Minoan palace on Crete. The distinctive columns of Puuc architecture are used here over and over, either as supports for the lintels, as decoration between doorways and as a frieze above them, alternating with huge stylized Chac masks and 'descending gods.' The building was under renovation when we passed through, but the project is slated to

be finished before this book hits the shelves. Ascending the *palacio* beyond its first level was not allowed at press time.

Taking the path south from the palace for about 400m and bearing left, you come to the temple named **El Mirador**, whose rooster-like roofcomb was once painted a bright red. About 100m beyond El Mirador, beneath a protective *palapa*, is a stela bearing the relief of a fertility god with an enormous phallus, now sadly weathered.

Grupo Sur is a bit further, and offers beautifully jungle-covered ruins with tree roots twisting through the walls.

#### Xlapak

From the entrance gate at Sayil, it's 6km east to the entrance gate at **Xlapak** (admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm). The name means 'Old Walls' in Maya and was a general term among local people for ancient ruins.

The ornate **palacio** at Xlapak (shla-pak) is quite a bit smaller than those at Kabah and Sayil, measuring only about 20m in length. It's decorated with the inevitable Chac masks, columns and colonnettes and fretted geometric latticework of the Puuc style. The building is interesting and on a bit of a lean. Plenty of mot-mots brighten up the surrounding forests.

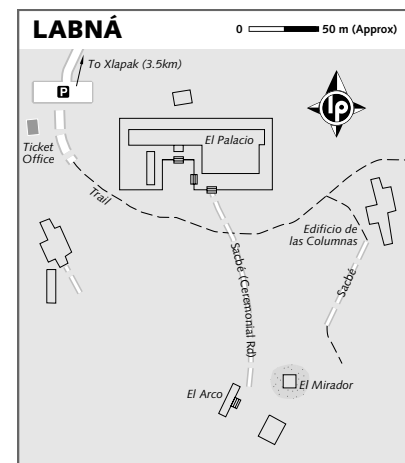
#### Labná

If you're short on time, **Labná** (admission M\$34; ☎ 8am-5pm) is the Ruta Puuc site not to miss. Its setting on a flat, open area is striking, and if no one has been through before you for a while, at each doorway you approach you're likely to startle groups of long-tailed mot-mots into flight. Between the birds and the vegetation growing atop the palace, you can almost imagine yourself one of the first people to see the site in centuries. OK, you may need to squint a bit to ignore the trimmed grass.

Archaeologists believe that at one point in the 9th century, some 3000 Maya lived at Labná. To support such numbers in these arid hills, water was collected in *chultunes* (Maya cisterns). At Labná's peak there were some 60 *chultunes* in and around the city; several are still visible. From the entrance gate at Xlapak, it's 3.5km east to the gate at Labná.

#### EL PALACIO

The first building you come to at Labná is one of the longest in the Puuc region, and



much of its interesting decorative carving is in good shape, thanks in part to a massive renovation project completed in 2006. On the west corner of the main structure's façade, straight in from the big tree near the center of the complex, is a serpent's head with a human face peering out from between its jaws, the symbol of the planet Venus. Toward the hill from this is an impressive Chac mask, and nearby is the lower half of a human figure (possibly a ballplayer) in loincloth and leggings.

The lower level has several more well-preserved Chac masks, and the upper level contains a large *chultún* that still holds water. The view of the site and the hills beyond from there is impressive.

From the palace a limestone-paved *sacbé* leads to El Arco.

#### EL ARCO

Labná is best known for its magnificent arch, once part of a building that separated two quadrangular courtyards. It now appears to be a gate joining two small plazas. The corbeled structure, 3m wide and 6m high, is well preserved, and the reliefs decorating its upper façade are exuberantly Puuc in style.

Flanking the west side of the arch are carved *na* with multitiered roofs. Also on these walls, the remains of the building that adjoined the arch, are lattice patterns atop a serpentine design. Archaeologists believe a high roofcomb once sat over the fine arch and its flanking rooms.

## EL MIRADOR

Standing on the opposite side of the arch and separated from it by the *sacbé* is a pyramid known as El Mirador, topped by a temple. The pyramid itself is largely stone rubble. The temple, with its 5m-high roofcomb, is well positioned to be a lookout, thus its name.

## GRUTAS DE LOLTÚN

About 15km north and east of Labná, a sign points left to the Grutas de Loltún, 5km further northeast. The road passes through lush orchards and some banana and palm groves, an agreeable sight in this dry region.

The **Grutas de Loltún** (Loltún Caverns; admission M\$54, parking M\$10; ☞ 9am-5pm; ♿), one of the largest dry-cave systems on the Yucatán Peninsula, provided a treasure trove of data for archaeologists studying the Maya. Carbon dating of artifacts found here reveals that the caves were used by humans 2200 years ago. Chest-high murals of hands, faces, animals and geometric motifs were apparent as recently as 20 years ago, but so many people have touched them that scarcely a trace remains, though some handprints have been restored. A few pots are displayed in a niche, and an impressive bas-relief, El Guerrero, guards the entrance. Other than that, you'll mostly see floodlit limestone formations, or the poorly aimed floodlights shining into your eyes.

To explore the labyrinth, you must take a scheduled guided tour at 9:30am, 11am, 12:30pm, 2pm, 3pm or 4pm, but they may depart earlier if enough people are waiting,

or switch to English if the group warrants it (tours are usually in Spanish). The services of the guides are included in the admission price, though they expect a small tip afterwards. Tours last about one hour and 20 minutes, with lots of lengthy stops. Some guides' presentations are long on legends (and jokes about disappearing mothers-in-law) and short on geological and historical information.

Food is available at the *parador turístico* (roadside restaurant) across the highway from the caves' parking lot. A tiny shop near the entrance sells snacks, water and beer.

## Getting There & Away

Renting a car is the best option for reaching the Grutas, and once you're out of Mérida it's easy going on pretty good roads.

There is a bus service to Oxkutzcab (osh-kootz-kahb; M\$44, 1½ hours), with departures at 8:30am and 12:30pm, from the Noreste bus terminal in Mérida. Loltún is 7km southwest of Oxkutzcab, and there is usually some transportation along the road. *Camionetas* (pickups) and *camiones* (trucks) charge about M\$10 for a ride

A taxi from Oxkutzcab may cost M\$100 or so one way.

## RUINAS DE MAYAPÁN

These **ruins** (admission M\$27; ☞ 8am-5pm) are some 50km southeast of Mérida. Though far less impressive than many Maya sites, Mayapán is historically significant, its main attractions

### THE RISE OF MAYAPÁN & THE DEATH WARRANT OF MAYA INDEPENDENCE

The rise of Mayapán played an integral role in the ultimate demise of Maya rule in the region. The city was supposedly founded by Kukulcán (Quetzalcoatl) in 1007, shortly after the former ruler of Tula arrived in Yucatán. His dynasty, the Cocom, organized a confederation of city-states that included Uxmal, Chichén Itzá and many other notable cities. Despite their alliance, animosity arose between the Cocomes of Mayapán and the Itzáes of Chichén Itzá during the late 12th century, and the Cocomes stormed Chichén Itzá, forcing the Itzáe rulers into exile. The Cocom dynasty emerged supreme in all of northern Yucatán.

Cocom supremacy lasted for almost 250 years, until the ruler of Uxmal, Ah Xupán Xiú, led a rebellion of the oppressed city-states and overthrew Cocom hegemony. The capital of Mayapán was utterly destroyed and remained uninhabited ever after.

But struggles for power continued in the region until 1542, when Francisco de Montejo (the Younger) conquered T'ho and established Mérida. At that point the current lord of Maní and ruler of the Xiú people, Ah Kukum Xiú, proposed to Montejo a military alliance against the Cocomes, his ancient rivals. Montejo accepted, and Xiú was baptized as a Christian, taking the name Francisco de Montejo Xiú (original, no?). The Cocomes were defeated and – too late – the Xiú rulers realized that they had signed the death warrant of Maya independence.

### LEAVING THE TOURIST TRAIL BEHIND: DIY ADVENTURE IN YUCATÁN

This book only touches the surface of the great adventures to be had in this region. Here's some ideas to get you started as you leave the guidebook behind for a few days of DIY adventure.

- **Tekit** is just off the road to Mayapán and has a cenote worth visiting.
- Friar Diego de Landa burnt 5000 idols, 13 altars, 27 religious and historic codices, and 197 ceremonial vases in an auto-da-fé in 1562 in the town of **Maní**. The town has a nice cathedral and the Príncipe de Tutul-Xiu restaurant's *poc chuc* is so popular that families will drive all the way here from Mérida to dive into the tender-as-a-baby's-butt slow-cooked pork.
- **La Ruta de Los Conventos** is a new tourist route taking you to colonial-era convents in the towns of Maní, Oxkutzcab, Teabo, Mama, Chumayel, Tekax and Yotholin.
- The seldom-visited town of **Yodznot**, west of Chichén Itzá on the old highway, is developing grassroots tourism.

are clustered in a compact core and visitors usually have the place to themselves. It is one of few sites where you can ascend to the top of the pyramid for a nice view.

Don't confuse the ruins of Mayapán with the Maya village of the same name, some 40km southeast of the ruins, past the town of Teabo.

## Exploring the Site

The city of Mayapán was large, with a population estimated to be around 12,000; it covered 4 sq km, all surrounded by a great defensive wall, a testament to the bellicose époque, which was its heyday. More than 3500 buildings, 20 cenotes and traces of the city wall were mapped by archaeologists working in the 1950s and in 1962. The late post-Classic workmanship is inferior to that of the great age of Maya art.

Among the structures that have been restored is the **Castillo de Kukulcán**, a climbable pyramid with fresco fragments around its base and, at its rear side, friezes depicting decapitated warriors. The reddish color is still faintly visible. The **Templo Redondo** (Round Temple) is vaguely reminiscent of El Caracol at Chichén Itzá. Close by is Itzmal Chen, a cenote that was a major Maya religious sanctuary.

## Getting There & Away

The Ruinas de Mayapán are just off Hwy 18, a few kilometers southwest of the town of Telchaquillo. LUS runs hourly 2nd-class buses between 5:30am and 8pm from the Noreste bus terminal in Mérida (M\$14 each way, 1½ hours) that will let you off near the entrance to the ruins and pick you up on your way back.

Again, you may want to consider renting a car to get here.

## CENOTES DE CUZAMÁ

Three kilometers east of the town of Cuzamá, accessed from the small village of Chunkanan, are the **Cenotes de Cuzamá** (for horse, driver, & up to 4 people M\$150; ☞ 9am-5pm), a series of three amazing limestone sinkholes accessed by horse-drawn railcart in an old henequen hacienda.

The fun, horse-drawn ride will jar your fillings loose while showing you attractive scenes of the surrounding, overgrown agave fields. Iguana sightings are a sure bet here, but keen eyes can also see vultures or caracaras, as well as other birds, lizards and the occasional rabbit or two. One of the cenotes is featured in much of Yucatán's tourist literature, and all three are spectacular, with rope-like roots descending along with ethereal shafts of light to the crystal-clear, deep-blue water. Though you may find yourself sharing a dip with other bathers, it's more likely that the drivers will time the trip so that you have most of the swimming to yourself. Several have steep stairways or ladders that are often slippery, so use caution at all times.

It's possible to rent a *palapa* in Chunkanan for around M\$130, but bring your own hammock and mosquito net.

To get here by car, take Hwy 180 toward Cancún until you get to a turnoff for Ticopo on the right; after Akankeh (there's a small pyramid here), bear left to reach Cuzamá. From there, head east at the cathedral for 3km to the cenotes. Signs will lead the way, and keep your eyes peeled for kids, dogs, livestock and sun-drunk iguanas...all will be on

the road at some point. Shared vans leave for Cuzamá (M\$30 round-trip, two hours) from Mérida's Parque de San Juan. If you use the vans, you'll need to take a pedirike from the van stop to Chunkanan, an additional M\$10.

## TICUL

☎ 997 / pop 31,147

Ticul, 30km east of Uxmal, is the largest town in this ruin-rich region. It's dusty and quiet, with certainly no nightlife other than perhaps a watering hole, but it has hotels and restaurants and transportation, and makes an attractive base for day trips to nearby ruins, though people going by public transportation to the Ruta Puuc sites will need to go to Muna or Santa Elena first. Ticul is also a center for fine *huipil* weaving, and ceramics made here from the local red clay are renowned throughout the Yucatán.

## Orientation & Information

Ticul's main street is Calle 23, sometimes called 'Calle Principal', starting from the highway and going past the *mercado* (market) to the main plaza, Plaza Mayor. A **post**

**office** (☎ 8am-2:30pm Mon-Fri) faces the plaza, as do two banks, Banamex and HSBC, with ATMs. Telmex has an office here.

Several internet cafés are dotted around near the town center. **Café Trovadores** (internet per hr M\$10, coffee M\$20; ☎ 9am-9pm) has a few computers, and sells coffee and pastries.

## Sights & Activities

Because of the number of Maya ruins in the vicinity, from which to steal building blocks, and the number of Maya in the area 'needing' conversion to Christianity, Franciscan friars built many churches in the region. Among them is Ticul's **Iglesia de San Antonio de Padua**, construction of which dates from the late 16th century. Although looted on several occasions, the church has some original touches, among them the stone statues of friars in primitive style flanking the side entrances and a Black Christ altarpiece ringed by crude medallions.

Diagonally opposite the Plaza Mayor is the recently built Plaza de la Cultura, which is all cement and stone but nevertheless an agreeable place to take the evening breeze,

enjoy the view of the church and greet passing townspeople.

Saturday mornings in Ticul are picturesque: Calle 23 near the market is closed to motorized traffic, and the street fills with three-wheeled cycles transporting shoppers between the market and their homes.

## Sleeping

**Hotel San Miguel** (Calle 28 No 295D; s/d M\$100/130; (P)) Near the market, the friendly management offers worn, simple rooms (some musty) with fan and bathroom. The beds put a spring in your sleep, but maybe not in your step the next day.

**Hotel Sierra Sosa** (☎ /fax 972-0008; Calle 26 No 199A; s M\$150, d/tr M\$170/190, air-con extra M\$60; (P)) The Sierra Sosa is just northwest of the Plaza Mayor. It's friendly and a bit run-down, but has good beds and OK bathrooms.

**Hotel San Antonio** (☎ 972-1983; cnr Calles 25A & 26; s M\$260, d/tr M\$300/350; (P)) A clean lobby with TV and shiny tiled floors sets a good impression that is confirmed by rooms with decent beds; some rooms have great views of the Plaza de la Cultura. The hotel lacks character, but here in Ticul, that's kind of reassuring. All rooms have TV, phone and clean bathroom – there's also off-street parking and a pleasant restaurant.

**Hotel Plaza** (☎ 972-0484; www.hotelplazayucatan.com; cnr Calles 23 & 26; d/ste M\$360/460; (P)) Spacious rooms with white-tiled floors, firm beds and small but fun balconies make this a nice choice. The old building adds character, though the street-facing rooms are sometimes noisy. You could eat off the bathroom floors. Laundry service, wi-fi, phone and pickup/drop-off in Mérida are additional reasons to consider staying here.

## Eating

**Flor del Campo** (☎ 972-1875; cnr Calles 23 & 28; juice M\$8-15; ☎ 6:30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 6:30am-3pm Sun) Juice up for the day at this tiny place, which just has chilled juices (no smoothies). It's like sipping a part of the rainbow.

**El Buen Samaritano** (Calle 23) Bakes bread and sweet rolls.

**Restaurant El Colorin** (☎ 972-0094; Calle 26 No 199B; set meal M\$35; ☎ 7am-9pm) A cheap restaurant, half a block northwest of Plaza Mayor, offering homemade meals.

**Pizzeria La Gondola** (☎ 972-0112; Calle 23 No 208; mains M\$40-90; ☎ 8am-1pm & 5-11pm) A clean place

on the corner that's open late, it has sandwiches and slightly pricey pizzas with the usual plethora of toppings. 'Order by number' options make it easy for non-Spanish speakers to get exactly what they want.

**Super Willy's** (Calle 23) Across from the market, this is a small supermarket with a big variety of groceries and household items.

Ticul's lively **mercado** (Calle 28A btwn Calles 21 & 23) provides all the ingredients for picnics and snacks, and offers nice photo ops, too. It also has lots of those wonderful eateries where the food is good, the portions generous and the prices low. Stalls at the new **Bazar de Comidas** (cnr Calles 25 & 24) serve inexpensive prepared food.

## Entertainment

**Cine Ideal** (Calle 23 btwn Calles 26A & 28) shows mostly Spanish-dubbed films.

## Getting There & Away

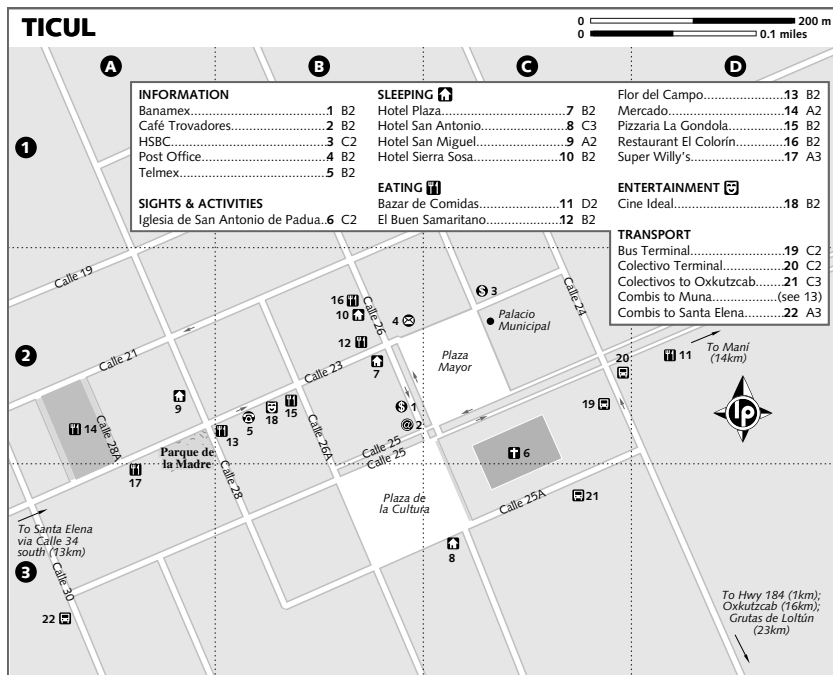
### BUS, COLECTIVO & TAXI

Ticul's 24-hour **bus terminal** (Calle 24) is behind the massive church. Mayab runs frequent 2nd-class buses between Mérida and Ticul (M\$40, 1½ hours) from 4:30am to 9pm. Mayab and ADO run 11 buses to Felipe Carrillo Puerto (M\$100, four hours), frequent ones to Oxtutzcab (M\$8 to M\$12) and five daily to Chetumal (M\$150, six hours). There are also eight Mayab buses to Cancún daily (M\$210, six hours), three of which also serve Tulum (M\$150) and Playa del Carmen (M\$170). ADO and Super Expresso have less frequent 2nd- and 1st-class services, respectively, to some of these destinations.

**Colectivos** (shared vans) go direct to Mérida's Parque de San Juan (M\$33, 1½ hours) from their shiny new **colectivo terminal** (cnr Calles 24 & 25) as soon as they're full between 5am and 7:30pm. **Combi**s for Oxtutzcab (M\$10, 30 minutes) leave from Calle 25A on the south side of the church between 7am and 8:30pm.

**Colectivos** to Santa Elena (M\$10), between Uxmal and Kabah, depart from Calle 30 between 6:15am and 7:30pm. They take Hwy 02 and drop you in Santa Elena to catch another bus northwest to Uxmal (15km) or south to Kabah (3.5km).

You can take a **combi** or bus to Muna (M\$10) from in front of Flor del Campo on Calle 23 near Calle 28, and then south to Uxmal. Ruta Puuc-bound travelers can



### UNDERSTANDING THE MODERN MAYA

The area between Ticul and Tihosuco is truly the Maya heartland. Indeed, the Maya in these parts entered the 21st century continuing to honor the gods of rain, wind and agriculture, just as their ancestors had done before them.

Yucatán state has the second-highest percentage of indigenous-language speakers in all of Mexico, after Oaxaca. But the number of Maya speakers is rapidly declining. In 2000, 37% of Yucatecans spoke Maya, just five years later only 33.9% claimed they spoke the language. So where have all the Maya gone? Many have moved to big tourist cities like Cancún, while others have moved all the way up to the US. Many small Maya communities are beginning to welcome tourists in an effort to keep young folks from fleeing to the cities. It's ironic, but inviting foreigners in may prove the best way to maintain traditions.

The homes of today's rural Maya are still rectangular wood-framed huts with lean-to roofs of palm. The walls are made of bamboo poles or branches, and the spaces between the poles are often filled with mud to keep pests out. Contemporary Maya prefer hammocks to beds, just like their ancestors.

Anywhere from a stone's throw to an hour's walk from a Maya hut is a *milpa* (corn field). Corn tortillas remain a staple of the Maya diet, but the Maya also raise pigs and turkeys and produce honey, squash and other crops, which they sell from town markets. Many of the younger generation, particularly men, hitchhike out to work for a week in the larger towns such as Playa del Carmen or Cancún and return for a day or two on long weekends or holidays. A *small* family will have about five children.

catch a 6:30am bus from Ticul to Muna and pick up the ATS tour bus (M\$50) for Labná, Sayil, Xlapak, Kabah and Uxmal at 9am on its way from Mérida. It returns to Muna at 3pm. Any of the buses leaving Ticul before 8am for Muna (or Mérida) will get you to Muna in time to catch the ATS Ruta Puuc bus. Another way would be to catch a *colectivo* from Ticul to Santa Elena, then walk a few blocks to Hwy 261, cross it and wait for the Ruta Puuc bus to come by at about 9:30am.

Alternatively, for M\$550 you can get a taxi in Ticul that will stop at the Grutas de Loltún, Labná, Sayil, Xlapak, Kabah and Uxmal, and wait for you while you see each place. If you wish to stay at Uxmal for the 7pm sound-and-light show, the cost is M\$100.

### CAR

The quickest way to Uxmal, Kabah and the Ruta Puuc sites is via Santa Elena. From central Ticul, go west to Calle 34 and turn south; it heads straight to Santa Elena.

Those headed east to Quintana Roo and the Caribbean coast can take Hwy 184 from Ticul through Oxkutzcab to Tzucacab and José María Morelos (which has a gas station). At Polyuc, 130km from Ticul, a road turns left (east), ending after 80km in Felipe Carrillo Puerto. The right fork of the road goes south to Laguna Bacalar.

Between Oxkutzcab and Felipe Carrillo Puerto or Bacalar there are few restaurants or gas stations, and no hotels. Mostly you see small, typical Yucatecan villages, with their traditional Maya thatched houses, *topes* (speed bumps), agricultural activity and iguanas.

### TICUL TO TIHOSUCO

The route from Ticul to Tihosuco, in Quintana Roo, is seldom traveled by tourists. Some might say, 'There's nothing to see.' But others will welcome the opportunity to travel through farmland and jungle and see glimpses of Maya life that have remained the same for centuries. Part of the route is called La Ruta de los Conventos (The Route of the Convents), as each of these tiny villages has a cathedral or church, many in beautiful disrepair. Prepare to hear mainly Maya, though many people speak Spanish as well.

The towns of Oxkutzcab, Tekax and Tihosuco offer budget accommodations. Beyond Oxkutzcab, the towns along this route are linked by *combis* and, less frequently, local buses; they may be hailed from the roadside.

### Oxkutzcab

Located 16km southeast of Ticul, Oxkutzcab is renowned for its daily produce market and colonial church. Markets were the principal means of trade for the ancient Maya, and the

peninsula's indigenous people still travel from the countryside to central communities to exchange produce at stalls beside a main square. Oxkutzcab is such a community.

Here, alongside Hwy 184, which becomes a slow-moving, two-lane road as it passes through the town center, the visitor can't miss seeing the magnificent **Franciscan mission**, out front of which is the sprawling produce market.

The church is remarkable mostly for its ornamental façade, at the center of which is a stone statue of St Francis, the mission patron. The church, which was constructed at a snail's pace from 1640 to 1693, is also remarkable for its magnificent altarpiece. Indeed, it's one of only a few baroque altarpieces in the Yucatán to survive the revolts that have occurred since its construction.

A mural in the plaza across from the market depicts inquisitor Friar Diego de Landa's auto-da-fé in Maní, when he burnt thousands of idols (see boxed text, p35).

**Hotel Puuc** (☎ 997-975-0103; cnr Calles 55 & 44; s/d M\$230/280; 📺) offers a great deal for the price, with air-con in every business-hotel-style room. The beds are Flintstone firm, and there's a pretty good restaurant downstairs.

### Tekax

Unlike the church at Oxkutzcab, the one in Tekax has been looted a couple of times, initially during the War of the Castes and later during the Mexican Revolution.

Situated in an increasingly prosperous area, due to a successful crop switch from corn to sugarcane and citrus, Tekax residents recently replaced the church's damaged floor with a beautiful tiled floor and added a lovely new stone altar. According to *Maya Missions: Exploring the Spanish Colonial Churches of Yucatán*, a fabulous book by Richard and Rosalind Perry, during construction of the church one of the church's belfries collapsed, burying (and presumably crushing) the many indigenous laborers under tons of rubble. Miraculously, as local legend has it, no one lost their life in the collapse.

Also noteworthy is the shape of the church, which undoubtedly was constructed of materials taken from nearby Maya temples. The general form of the church is that of a three-tiered pyramid. Possibly the architecture was based on the Maya structure from which the blocks were taken.

### Tihosuco

Tihosuco, located inside the state of Quintana Roo, was a major military outpost for the Spanish during the late 16th century and for 300 years thereafter. During this time the town came under numerous Maya assaults, and in 1686 it was attacked, though not sacked, by pirates led by legendary Dutch buccaneer Lorencillo.

During many of those attacks, the Spaniards retreated to the heavily fortified 17th-century church at the town center, which for much of its life served as both a house of God and an arsenal and stronghold. But the town and church fell to rebel hands in 1866 following a long siege, and much of the magnificent building was gutted. What remains of the once-great church is still worth investigating. Services are still held inside, as in many other roofless churches in the region.

Also in Tihosuco, housed in an 18th-century building one block straight ahead of the church, is the **Museo de la Guerra de Castas** (Museum of the War of the Castes; admission M\$5; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). It does a good job of detailing the more than three centuries of oppression suffered by the Maya on the peninsula, but only a couple of explanations are translated into English. There's a small botanical garden here as well.

From Tihosuco, it's a fast ride up Hwy 295 to Valladolid (p193). Going the other way, Hwy 295 goes south to Felipe Carrillo Puerto (p134).

## WEST & NORTH OF MÉRIDA

### CELESTÚN

☎ 988 / pop 6423

West of Mérida, Celestún is a sleepy sun-scorched fishing village that moves at a turtle's pace – and that's the way locals like it. There's a pretty little square in the center of the town and some nice beaches (though the water is a bit turbid), but the real draw here is Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún, a wildlife sanctuary abounding in waterfowl, with flamingos as the star attraction.

It makes a good beach-and-bird day trip from Mérida, and it's also a great place to kick back and do nothing for a few days,



especially if you've become road weary. Fishing boats dot the appealing white-sand beach that stretches to the north for kilometers, and afternoon breezes cool the town on most days. Celestún is sheltered by the peninsula's southward curve, resulting in an abundance of marine life and less violent seas during the season of *nortes* (winds and rains arriving from the north).

### Orientation & Information

All you need to know is that Calle 11 is the road into town (it comes due west from Mérida), ending at Calle 12, the road paralleling the beach, along which lie most of the restaurants and hotels. Don't plan on using high-speed internet here, and bring lots of cash as there are no banks or ATMs.

### Sights & Activities

#### RESERVA DE LA BIÓSFERA RÍA CELESTÚN

The 591-sq-km Reserva de la Biósfera Ría Celestún is home to a huge variety of animals and birdlife, including a large flamingo colony.

The best months to see the flamingos are from March or April to about September, outside the season of the *nortes*. Morning is the best time of day, though from 4pm onward the birds tend to concentrate in one area after the day's feeding, which can make for good viewing.

### Tours

In Celestún, you can hire a boat for bird-watching either from the bridge on the highway into town (about 1.5km inland) or from the beach itself. Boats depart from outside Restaurant Celestún, at the foot of Calle 11. The restaurant's beachfront *palapa* is a pleasant place to wait for a group to accumulate, rather than the tiny *palapa* at the boats themselves. Otherwise, Turitrasmérida in Mérida organizes flamingo tours (for details, see p157).

Unfortunately, hiring a boat can be a frustrating experience, and a lesson in false expectations. Knowing what to expect will save you some frustration. First, operators tend to try to collect as many people as possible, often telling one couple 'Sure, the tour will leave at 8:30am,' and another couple 'We'll wait for you until 9am.' Prices are often quoted assuming eight passengers, but if only four or six people show up that means the quoted price

rises, often to the irritation of people who've waited 30 minutes to an hour. You can solve this problem by coming up with a group of eight on your own.

Trips from the beach last 2½ to three hours and begin with a ride along the coast for several kilometers, during which you can expect to see egrets, herons, cormorants, sandpipers and many other bird species. The boat then turns into the mouth of the *ría* (estuary) and passes through a 'petrified forest,' where tall coastal trees once belonging to a freshwater ecosystem were killed by saltwater intrusion long ago and remain standing, hard as rock.

Continuing up the *ría* takes you under the highway bridge where the other tours begin and beyond which lie the flamingos. Depending on the tide, the hour and the season, you may see hundreds or thousands of the colorful birds. Don't encourage your captain to approach them too closely; a startled flock taking wing can result in injuries and deaths (for the birds). In addition to taking you to the flamingos, the captain will wend through a 200m mangrove tunnel and visit one or both (as time and inclination allow) of the freshwater cenote-springs welling into the salt water of the estuary, where you can take a refreshing dip.

Currently, a boat from the beach costs M\$1200 to operate; the average price with eight people ends up around M\$150 per passenger. If it's just you and a friend, try asking for M\$1000 for the boat. If you remember that trips happen on Mexican time, you'll enjoy it a lot more.

Tours from the bridge, where there is a parking lot, ticket booth and a place to wait for fellow passengers, are slightly cheaper and last about 1½ hours. For M\$140 per passenger (maximum six passengers), you get to see the flamingos, mangrove tunnel and spring. It's also possible to add a trip from the bridge south to the 'petrified forest,' for an additional M\$100 per passenger and a total time of about 2½ hours.

With either the bridge or beach option, your captain may or may not speak English. An English-speaking guide can be hired at the bridge for about M\$200 per hour; this reduces the maximum possible number of passengers, of course. Bring snacks, water and sunscreen for the longer tours. There is no bank in town, and neither credit cards nor traveler's checks are accepted by the tour operators.

### BEACH & BIRDING

North of town, beyond the small navy post, you'll find more secluded stretches of beach. In the same area, but inland of the road, lies a large section of scrub stretching east to the estuary that also provides good birding opportunities. South and east of town, toward the abandoned Hacienda Real de Salinas, is another good area for nature observation. Flamingos, white pelicans, cormorants, aningas and many other species frequent the shores and waters of the *ría* (river).

### HACIENDA REAL DE SALINAS

This abandoned hacienda a few kilometers south and east of town once produced dyewood and salt, and served as a summer home for a Campeche family. It's 5km in from the mouth of the estuary. Out in the *ría* you can see a cairn marking an *ojo de agua dulce* (freshwater spring) that once supplied the hacienda.

The buildings are decaying in a most scenic way; you can still see shells in the wall mixed into the building material, as well as pieces of French roof tiles that served as ballast in ships on the way from Europe. Many intact tiles with the brickworks' name and location, Marseille, are still visible in what's left of the roofs. The hacienda makes a good bicycle excursion from town. Coming south, go left

at the Y junction, or turn right to reach El Lastre (The Ballast), a peninsula between the estuary and its western arm. Flamingos, white pelicans and other birds are sometimes seen here. If the water is high enough, it's possible to ask your flamingo tour captain to try stopping here on the way back from the birds.

### Sleeping

Celestún's hotels are all on Calle 12, within a short walk of one another. The following list runs from south to north. Try to book ahead if you want a sea view, especially on weekends.

**Hostel Ría Celestún** (☎ 916-2597; hostelrycelestun@hotmail.com; cnr Calles 12 & 13; dm M\$60-70, s/d low season M\$80/100, high season M\$100/180; ☑) This hostel offers a good cheap sleep, with single-sex or mixed fan-cooled dorms (slightly dusty), kitchen and laundry facilities, a courtyard and TV room for common areas, bicycle rentals and internet access. The staff are great sources of info about the area, and can provide directions for doing just about anything.

**Hotel Sofia** (☎ in Mérida 999-189-8959; Calle 12; s/d M\$150/300; ☑) The rooms smell a bit, but they are pretty well maintained and a decent value. It also has secure parking and the owners let guests use the (hand) laundry facilities.

**Hotel María del Carmen** (☎ /fax 916-2170; cnr Calles 12 & 15; d with fan/air-con M\$250/300; ☑ ☑) This place

### HENEQUEN: A SMELLY, BITTER HARVEST

Yucatán state would have been little more than a provincial backwater if it weren't for a spiky son-of-a-bitch-of-a-plant named Agave Fourcroydes. Some call it henequen, others call it sisal; call it what you will, the up-to-2m-high lanced-leaved plant used to create strong maritime rope was chlorophyll gold from the late 19th century to the end of WWI for the 'sisal barons' of Yucatán.

Today henequen is still cultivated in the region; however, cheap synthetics and imported Brazilian fibers are now dominating the market. But the state still has its hand in the production of sisal ropes: the fibers from Brazil are now woven into rope in the *maquiladoras* (for-export factories) around the state. You will normally smell a henequen plant before you see it, as they emit a putrid, excremental odor. And just like in the old days when indigenous labor was employed under slave conditions, the *maquiladoras* of today still create huge profit margins, while paying employees only M\$44 per day.

Once planted, henequen can grow virtually untended for seven years. Thereafter, the plants are stripped for fiber, yielding about 25 leaves annually. A plant may be productive for upwards of two decades. To get at the fibrous interior, the leaves are cut off by machete, taken to a factory and crushed between heavy rollers. The pulpy vegetable matter is scraped away to reveal fiber strands up to 1.5m in length, which are slightly stretchable and resistant to marine organisms.

Growing henequen on the peninsula is still economically viable, if barely. The decline has been hard on the few Maya farm workers who still struggle to keep the defibering machines operating on a few former haciendas. The town of Ake, east of Mérida, has one of only three remaining working rasping machines in the region.

has 14 clean and pleasant beachfront rooms tucked behind a picturesque maroon-colored false front; rooms on the upper floors have balconies facing the sea. Prices drop when things are slow.

**Hotel Los Manglares** (☎ 998-916-2156; www.hotel-manglares.com; Calle 12, 1km north of Calle 11; d M\$850, cabana M\$1600; ♿ ♿ (P) (♿)) While the architecture doesn't blend perfectly with the laid-back feel of town, this is a nice upscale choice. The rooms all have sea views and private balconies. The well-appointed cabanas have minikitchens, Jacuzzis and a small common area, making them perfect for families.

### Eating

Celestún's specialties are crab, octopus, small shrimp from the lagoon and, of course, fresh fish. Restaurants close early (7:30pm or so) on weeknights.

**Restaurante Chivirico** (cnr Calles 11 & 12; mains M\$60-120; ☎ 10am-7:30pm) A large place with wicker chairs and a TV with Spanish soaps as its ambience, the Chivirico has excellent seafood and is well worth a visit. The *ensalada de jaiba* (crab salad; M\$60) is delicious.

**Restaurant Los Pamponos** (Calle 12, just north of Calle 11; mains M\$60-120; ☎ 11am-7pm) A tranquilloer-than-thou joint on the beach, this is a great spot for afternoon drinks on the sand. Try the octopus ceviche or a fish fillet stuffed with the brim with shellfish.

**La Playita** (mains M\$70-120; ☎ 10am-7pm) It's right on the (sometimes windy) beach with great views. Cheap seafood and ceviche are its main draw.

### Getting There & Away

Buses from Mérida head for Celestún (M\$44, two hours) 17 times daily between 5am and 8pm from Noreste bus terminal. The route terminates at Celestún's plaza, a block inland from Calle 12. Returning buses also run from 5am to 8pm.

By car from Mérida, the best route to Celestún is via the new road out of Umán.

### RUINED HACIENDAS ROUTE

A fascinating alternative return route if you're driving out of Celestún is to turn south off Hwy 281 where a sign points to Chunchucmil. The road has frequent potholes along the 25km stretch to Chunchucmil, which is the name of both a ruined henequen hacienda and a nearby Maya archaeological site.

You should ask locally before visiting any of these haciendas. A land dispute kicked off protests in Chunchucmil in 2007. Paying local boys a small tip to show you around goes a long way to ease the mounting tensions regarding who, in fact, owns (and therefore has the right to develop) these haciendas.

After Chunchucmil the road is in good shape (look for the covered Maya mounds as you drive away), and about every 5km passes another ruined hacienda – easy to spot as there's a *fútbol* (soccer) pitch in front of each one – all the way to Hacienda Granada, shortly before the road hits old Hwy 180. Several buildings are pretty hard to see from the road, so you'll need to stop frequently to really give them their due. There are two **talleres de arte popular** (pop art workshops) near the church in Granada. Stop by from 10am to 6pm (Monday to Saturday) to watch local women create *jipijapa* (palm frond) hats and baskets.

**Hacienda Santa Rosa** (☎ 999-910-4852; www.starwood.com/luxury; r M\$3290, ste M\$4090-4660) is the only hacienda in the area that has been converted into a hotel. The 11 rooms show amazing variety; some have private walled gardens with bathtubs or plunge pools.

### DZIBILCHALTÚN

About 17km north of downtown Mérida (a 25-minute drive), **Dzibilchaltún** (Place of Inscribed Flat Stones; admission M\$63, children under 13yr free; ☎ 8am-5pm, 5:30am-5pm at equinox) was the longest continuously utilized Maya administrative and ceremonial city, serving the Maya from 1500 BC or earlier until the European conquest in the 1540s. At the height of its greatness, Dzibilchaltún covered 15 sq km. Some 8500 structures were mapped by archaeologists in the 1960s; only a few of these have been excavated and restored. In some ways it's unimpressive if you've already seen larger places, such as Chichén Itzá or Uxmal, but twice a year humble Dzibilchaltún shines. At sunrise on the equinoxes (approximately March 21 and September 22), the sun aligns directly with the main door of the **Templo de las Siete Muñecas** (Temple of the Seven Dolls), which got its name from seven grotesque dolls discovered here during excavations. As the sun rises, the temple doors glow, then 'light up' as the sun passes behind. It also casts a cool square beam on the crumbled wall behind.

Whether you come to strike a Y-shaped 'feel the pyramid power' pose, to snap a picture or just to see what the fuss is about, it's pretty impressive – many who've seen both feel the sunrise here is more spectacular than Chichén Itzá's famous snake (p188), and is well worth getting up at the crack of dawn to witness.

Enter the site along a nature trail that terminates at the modern, air-conditioned **Museo del Pueblo Maya** (☎ 8am-4pm Tue-Sun), featuring artifacts from throughout the Maya regions of Mexico, including some superb colonial-era religious carvings and other pieces. Exhibits explaining Maya daily life and beliefs from ancient times until the present are labeled in Spanish and English. Beyond the museum, a path leads to the central plaza, where you'll find an open chapel that dates from early Spanish times (1590-1600).

The **cenote Xlacah** is more than 40m deep. In 1958 a National Geographic Society diving expedition recovered more than 30,000 Maya artifacts, many of ritual significance, from the cenote. The most interesting of these are now on display in the site's museum. South of the cenote is **Estructura 44** – at 130m it's one of the longest Maya structures in existence.

Larking costs M\$10. Minibuses and *colectivos* depart frequently from Mérida's Parque de San Juan for the village of Dzibilchaltún Ruinas (M\$8, 30 minutes), a little over 1km from the museum. Taxis will cost around M\$120 round-trip.

### PROGRESO

☎ 969 / pop 35,519

If Mérida's heat has you dying for a quick beach fix, or you want to see the longest wharf (7km) in Mexico, head to Progreso (also known as Puerto Progreso). The beach is fine, well groomed and long; however, except for the small *palapas* erected by restaurants, it's nearly shadeless and is dominated by the view of the wharf, giving it a rather industrial feel. Winds can hit here full force off the Gulf in the afternoon and can blow well into the night, which should mean good kiteboarding and windsurfing, but currently there's neither unless you've brought your own rig. As with other Gulf beaches, the water is murky; visibility even on calm days rarely exceeds 5m. None of this stops Méridanos from coming in droves on weekends, especially in summer. Even on spring weekdays it can be difficult to find a room with a view. Once or twice a week

the streets flood with cruise-ship tourists, but the place can feel empty on off nights, which makes a refreshing change.

There's also a strong evangelical presence here, so on Sunday prepare to see families in their finest clothes heading to church. You're as likely to be approached by people offering pamphlets (sometimes even in English) about redemption as by hammock sellers.

### Orientation & Information

Downtown Progreso's streets have new signs in anticipation of the tourist boom, and its confusing dual numbering system has largely been eliminated. Even-numbered streets run east-west; odd ones north-south. The bus terminal, on Calle 29, is west of Calle 82, a block north (toward the water) from the main plaza. From the plaza on Calle 80, it's six short blocks to the waterfront *malecón* (boulevard; Calle 19) and *muelle* (wharf); along the way are two Banamex banks, one with an ATM.

Internet cafés offering so-so access are sprinkled everywhere, especially around the bus terminal and Calles 29 and 78. Some stay open until 9pm, others as late as 1am, charging about M\$15 per hour.

### Sleeping & Eating

All hotels and restaurants listed are no more than 11 blocks north and east of the bus terminal. Head inland to get cheaper, more authentic eats.

**Hotel Miralmar** (☎ 935-0552; Calle 27 No 124 at Calle 76; s/d with fan M\$230/260, d with air-con M\$330; ♿) You're probably better off down by the beach, but if you want to keep it real in town, this is a good budget bet. Four blocks inland, it has mostly comfortable beds, decent bathrooms and good natural light. Rooms on the upper floor have better ventilation and private bathrooms, in curious prefab clover-shaped units.

**Hotel Tropical Suites** (☎ 935-1263; fax 935-3093; cnr malecón & Calle 70; d/tw with fan M\$250/300, with air-con M\$250/350; ♿) Across the street from Hotel Real del Mar, this seaside hotel has 21 tidy, nonmusty, smallish rooms, some with sea views. The 1st-floor rooms facing the street don't afford much privacy.

**Hotel Real del Mar** (☎ 935-0798; cnr malecón & Calle 70; s/d M\$200/300, seaside d M\$550; ♿) There's large balconies offering panoramic ocean views on both floors of this sprawling hotel. The décor is nice, with tiled floors, a small fountain and

a tropical green-and-yellow paint job, and the satiny sheets are *'muy romantico.'*

**Restaurant Mary Doly** (Calle 25 btwn Calles 74 & 76; breakfast M\$18-30, mains M\$30-80; ☎ 7am-9pm) Near Hotel Miralmar, this is a homey place with good, cheap seafood and meat dishes and breakfasts. The freshly squeezed orange juice is very refreshing.

**Restaurant El Cordobes** (☎ 935-2621; cnr Calles 80 & 31; mains M\$45-90; ☎ 6am-midnight) Also near Hotel Miralmar, this locals' joint is on the north side of the plaza in a 100-year-old building. Weak 'American' coffee is served quickly, with a warm smile, and it's a perfect place to relax for a bit, sluice down a cerveza and look out on the main plaza.

**Restaurant Los Pelicanos** (☎ 935-5378; cnr malecón & Calle 70; mains M\$55-100, special dishes M\$200; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Sat, 8am-8pm Sun) By Hotel Real del Mar, Los Pelicanos has a shady terrace, sea views, a good menu and moderate prices, considering its location. It's usually very windy. Peaches and cream is a satisfying way to finish a meal.

### Getting There & Away

Progreso is 33km north of Mérida along a fast four-lane highway that's basically a continuation of the Paseo de Montejo. The **bus station** (Calle 29, btwn Calles 80 & 82) has numerous Mérida-bound buses from 5:20am to 10pm. For bus information to Progreso from Mérida, see p164.

### EAST OF PROGRESO

Heading east from Progreso, Hwy 27 parallels the coast for 70km, to Dzilam de Bravo, before turning inland. It's a beautiful drive, and you'll pass miles of mixed mangrove clumps and notice that on the right (south) the mud takes on a pink color. Unsurprisingly, this area is named the Laguna Rosada (Pink Lagoon). Heading east from Dzilam, the road continues a further 100km to hit the coast at the charming fishing village of San Felipe (p200).

On the seaward side (the north) of the Rose Lagoon things are less pristine with a lot of new timeshares, condo-mundos and hotels. Local fishing communities are taking a big hit as prices rise with the tourism and second-home boom. But things are still pretty laid-back here. It might even be a good spot to do a little guerrilla camping on the beach. Remember, the beach is public property in Mexico.

The most interesting bits of this area are relatively close to Progreso and are best explored by car. **Telchac Puerto** (below) is the best place to base operations in the region.

At **Uaymitún** a tall wooden observation tower at the edge of the lagoon allows you to watch flamingos, as well as ibis, herons, spoonbills and other waterfowl.

The buildings thin out beyond Uaymitún, and about 16km east of it a road heads south from the coast some 3km across the bird-riddled lagoon to the turnoff for the ruins of **Xcambó**, a Maya salt-distribution center with a few reconstructed structures. While it's technically free to visit the ruins, the caretaker will ask for a small donation.

Following the road south beyond the ruins turnoff takes you into grassy marshland with cattails and scatterings of palm trees, a beautiful landscape providing ample opportunities for bird-spotting without even getting out of the car.

Continuing south on this road takes you back to civilization at Motul, from where you can head in any number of directions: east and south to Izamal, west and north to the Dzibilchaltún ruins, southwest to Tixkokob and its beautiful hammocks (see boxed text, p163), or west and south to Mérida via Conkal, whose Convento de San Francisco de Asís now houses the new **Museo de Arte Sacro** (admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun). This is a small but well-done museum of religious art and artifacts, including 18th- and 19th-century altarpieces and carvings of saints, good historical and archaeological exhibits detailing the foundation (and later restoration) of Yucatán's monasteries, and contemporary profane and religious artwork. Some of the latter is surprisingly racy. All labeling is in Spanish. Be sure to check out the architecture of the convent itself, including the *noria* (irrigation system) out back.

### Telchac Puerto

There really isn't much to do in Telchac Puerto but sit on the brown-sand beach, suck the briny air and wait for the earth to turn another rotation. The town, just a few kilometers east of the turnoff to Xcambó on the road to Dzilam, is a good place to base yourself for adventures along this forgotten-but-not-totally-lost coast. There are no ATMs or banks here, and it's best to arrive by car. Locals recommend Tiburón Restaurant in the town center.

The simple **Hotel Libros y Sueños** (☎ 991-917-4125; www.l-y-s.net; Calle 23 No 200; s/d with fan M\$200/250) has a big English-language library, clean rooms and wi-fi, and it's just a block away from the beach.

The monstro all-inclusive **Hotel Reef Yucatán** (☎ 999-941-9494; www.reefyucatan.com; Zona Hotelera Telchac Puerto; r per person M\$990; ☎ ☎ ☎) has 150 rooms, a big swimming pool and a pretty damned good beach. Expect boilerplate all-inclusive rooms, service and food.

## EASTERN YUCATÁN STATE

Scrub jungle, intact colonial cities, cenotes aplenty and Yucatán's largest coastal estuary are but a few of the attractions in the eastern portion of this state. Oh, and then there's the seventh modern wonder of the world, Chichén Itzá, as well as a smattering of less-visited (but nonetheless impressive) Maya ruins.

### IZAMAL

☎ 988 / pop 15,100

In ancient times Izamal was a center for the worship of the supreme Maya god, Itzamná, and the sun god, Kinich-Kakmó. A dozen temple pyramids were devoted to these or other gods. No doubt these bold expressions of Maya religiosity are why the Spanish colonists chose Izamal as the site for an enormous and impressive Franciscan monastery, which still stands at the heart of this town, located about 70km east of Mérida.

The Izamal of today is a quiet provincial town, nicknamed La Ciudad Amarilla (The Yellow City) for the traditional yellow buildings that spiral out from the center like a budding daisy. It's easily explored on foot, and horse-drawn carriages add to the city's charm. Making a trip here even easier is the excellent tourist map, available in several languages (English and Spanish are always available, but there's also French, German and even Japanese), describing various walking tours and locations where handicraft demonstrations take place.

### Sights & Activities

When the Spaniards conquered Izamal, they destroyed the major Maya temple, the Ppapp-Hol-Chac pyramid, and in 1533

began to build from its stones one of the first monasteries in the western hemisphere. Work on **Convento de San Antonio de Padua** (admission free; ☎ 6am-8pm) was finished in 1561. Under the monastery's arcades, look for building stones with an unmistakable maze-like design; these were clearly taken from the earlier Maya temple.

The monastery's principal church is the **Santuario de la Virgen de Izamal**, approached by a ramp from the main square. The ramp leads into the **Atrium**, a huge arcaded courtyard in which the **fiesta of the Virgin of Izamal** takes place each August 15. There's a **sound-and-light show** (admission M\$40; ☎ 8:30pm Tue, Thu & Sat) here three nights a week.

At some point the 16th-century **frescoes** beside the entrance of the sanctuary were completely painted over. For years they lay concealed under a thin layer of whitewash until a maintenance worker who was cleaning the walls discovered them recently. The church's original altarpiece was destroyed by a fire believed to have been started by a fallen candle. Its replacement, impressively gilded, was built in the 1940s. In the niches at the stations of the cross are some superb small figures.

In the small courtyard to the left of the church, look up and toward the Atrium to see the original sundial projecting from the roof's edge. A small **museum** (☎ 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) at the back commemorates Pope John Paul II's 1993 visit to the monastery. He brought with him a silver crown for the statue of the patron saint of Yucatán, the Virgin of Izamal.

The monastery's front entrance faces west; it's flanked by Calles 31 and 33 on the north and south, respectively, and Calles 28 and 30 on the east and west. The best time to visit is in the morning, as the church is occasionally closed during the afternoon siesta.

Southeast of the convent on the plaza is the small **Museo de los Grandes Maestros del Arte Mexicano** (Calle 31 No 201; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun), an art museum and gallery showcasing pop art from around Mexico. It's also worth taking the time to visit the **talleres de arte** (artisan workshops) found throughout the city. Your little yellow map will lead the way to adventures and cultural attractions beyond the scope of this book.

Three of the town's original 12 Maya **pyramids** have been partially restored. The largest

### PUEBLOS AND PLACES OFF THE MAP

There's a ton of good off-the-map adventures to be had in and around town. Here are a few of our favorites:

- **Cuauhtémoc** A small community 6km south of Izamal on an extension of Calle 24, with a 17th-century chapel.
- **Kimbilá** Located 8km west of Izamal on an extension of Calle 31, this town is famous for its embroidery.
- **Iztamatul, Habuk, Chaltún Há & beyond** They've discovered some 80 pre-Hispanic structures within the city limits. Habuk, Izamatul and Chaltún Há are just a few. They are all free to the public, and you can hire a guide at the tourist center.

(and the third largest in Yucatán) is the enormous **Kinich-Kakmó**, three blocks north of the monastery. You can climb it for free.

If you want a real jungle experience, ask at the **tourist center** (☎ 988-954-0009, Calle 30 No 323) for Esteban Abán, the jewelry maker, who offers guided trips to Ox-Huadz, an unexcavated ruin. You'll need to make arrangements at least a day in advance, depending on Abán's availability, but the trip offers great birding and Indiana Jones-style ruin-hunting. You can also rent bikes at the tourist center.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Posada Flory** (☎ 954-0562; Calle 30 No 267, cnr Calle 22; s/d M\$180/250; 🚽) There's a nice little center patio in this small, uber-clean budget hotel, probably the best low-end deal in town. You can air-con yourself for a few extra pesos.

**our pick** **Macan Ché** (☎ /fax 954-0287; www.macan.ch.com; Calle 22 No 305; d M\$380-600; 🚽 📺 📶) It's about three long (yes, long!) blocks east of the monastery (take Calle 31 toward Cancún and turn right on Calle 22) to this very Zen boutique hotel, which has a cluster of cottages and a small 'cenote' pool in a woody setting. The most expensive of the 12 rooms has air-con and a kitchenette. Rates include a big breakfast. Free wi-fi and Local Area Network (LAN) for guests.

**El Toro** (Calle 31 No 303; mains M\$60-90; 🕒 8am-midnight) At the southeast corner of the roundabout in front of the monastery, this

small family-run establishment specializes in Yucatecan fare (with a few international favorites thrown in to keep the tourists happy). Try a twist on the traditional with the *pozole con coco* (Maya corn stew with coconut overtones).

Several *loncherías* occupy spaces in the market on the monastery's southwest side.

### Getting There & Away

Oriente operates frequent buses between Mérida and Izamal (M\$27, 1½ hours) from the Noreste bus terminal. There are buses from Valladolid (M\$41, two hours) as well. Coming from Chichén Itzá you must change buses at Hochtún. Izamal's bus terminal is two short blocks west of the monastery.

### CHICHÉN ITZÁ

☎ 985

The most famous and best restored of the Yucatán Maya sites, **Chichén Itzá** (Mouth of the Well of the Itzáes; admission M\$95, parking M\$10, sound-&-light show M\$30, guide M\$500-600; 🕒 8am-6pm summer, 8am-5:30pm winter), while tremendously overcrowded – every gaper and his grandmother is trying to check off the new seven wonders of the world – will still impress even the most jaded visitor. Many mysteries of the Maya astronomical calendar are made clear when one understands the design of the 'time temples' here. Other than a few minor passageways, climbing on the structures is not allowed.

At the **vernal and autumnal equinoxes** (March 20 to 21 and September 21 to 22), the morning and afternoon sun produces a light-and-shadow illusion of the serpent ascending or descending the side of El Castillo's staircase. The site is mobbed on these dates, however, making it difficult to see, and after the spectacle, parts of the site are sometimes closed to the public. The illusion is almost as good in the week preceding and following each equinox (and draws much smaller crowds), and is re-created nightly in the sound-and-light show year-round. Some find the spectacle fascinating, others think it's overrated. Either way, if you're in the area around the equinox and you've got your own car, it's easy to wake up early for Dzibilchaltún's fiery sunrise (see p182) and then make it to Chichén Itzá by midafternoon, catching both spectacles on the same day.

The heat, humidity and crowds can be fierce; try to do your exploration of the site (especially around El Castillo) either early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

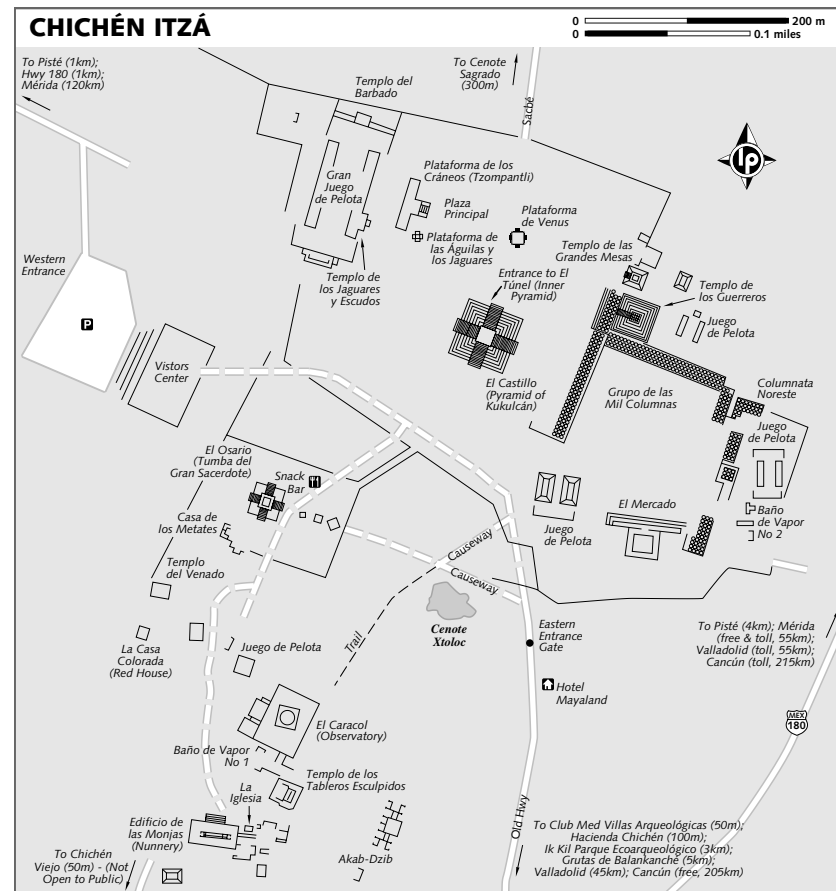
### History

Most archaeologists agree that the first major settlement at Chichén Itzá, during the Late Classic period, was pure Maya. In about the 9th century, the city was largely abandoned for reasons unknown. It was resettled around the late 10th century, and shortly thereafter it is believed to have been invaded by the Toltecs, who had migrated from their central highlands capital of Tula, north of Mexico City. The bellicose Toltec culture was fused with that of the Maya,

incorporating the cult of Quetzalcóatl (Kukulcán, in Maya). You will see images of both Chac-Mool, the Maya rain god, and Quetzalcóatl, the plumed serpent, throughout the city.

The substantial fusion of highland central Mexican and Puuc architectural styles makes Chichén unique among the Yucatán Peninsula's ruins. The fabulous El Castillo and the Plataforma de Venus are outstanding architectural works built during the height of Toltec cultural input.

The sanguinary Toltecs contributed more than their architectural skills to the Maya. They elevated human sacrifice to a near obsession, and there are numerous carvings of the bloody ritual in Chichén demonstrating this.



After a Maya leader moved his political capital to Mayapán while keeping Chichén as his religious capital, Chichén Itzá fell into decline. Why it was subsequently abandoned in the 14th century is a mystery, but the once-great city remained the site of Maya pilgrimages for many years.

## Orientation

Most of Chichén's lodgings, restaurants and services are arranged along 1km of highway in the village of Pisté, to the western (Mérida) side of the ruins. It's 1.5km from the ruins' main (west) entrance to the nearest hotel (Pirámide Inn) in Pisté, and 2.5km from the ruins to Pisté's village plaza, which is shaded by a huge tree. Buses to Pisté generally stop at the plaza; you can make the hot walk to and from the ruins in 20 to 30 minutes.

On the eastern (Cancún) side, it's 1.5km from the highway along the access road to the eastern entrance to the ruins; three top-end hotels line the road, the closest being only about 100m from the entrance.

## Information

The western entrance has a large parking lot and a big visitors center. Facilities include two bookstores with a good assortment of guides and maps, a restaurant serving decent if somewhat pricey food, a Banamex ATM, Telmex card phones, excellent free bathrooms and, around the corner from the ticket counter, a free *guardaequipaje* (room for storing luggage) where you can leave your belongings while you explore the site.

As at most sites, filming with a video camera costs M\$35 extra, and tripods require a special permit from Mexico City. Hold on to your wristband ticket; it gives you in-and-out privileges and admission to that evening's sound-and-light show. Explanatory plaques around the site are in Spanish, English and Maya.

The 45-minute sound-and-light show in Spanish begins at 8pm each evening in summer and 7pm in winter. It costs M\$30 if you don't already have a ruins wristband, and it counts toward the admission price the following day. Devices for listening to English, French, German or Italian translations (beamed via infrared) rent for M\$25. Specify the language you need or it may not be broadcast.

## Sights

### EXPLORING THE RUINS

#### Visitors Center

The visitors center has a small but worthwhile museum (☎ 8am-5pm), with sculptures, reliefs, artifacts and explanations in Spanish, English and French.

The **Chilam Balam Auditorio**, next to the museum, sometimes has video shows about Chichén and other Mexican sites. The picture quality can be truly abominable, but the air-con is great. In the central space of the visitors center stands a scale model of the archaeological site, and off toward the toilets is an exhibit on Edward Thompson's excavations of the Cenote Sagrado.

#### El Castillo

As you approach from the visitors center into the site, El Castillo (also called the Pyramid of Kukulcán) rises before you in all its grandeur. The first temple here was pre-Toltec, built around AD 800, but the present 25m-high structure, built over the old one, has the plumed serpent sculpted along the stairways and Toltec warriors represented in the doorway carvings at the top of the temple. You won't get to see these temple-top carvings as you are not allowed to ascend the pyramid.

The structure is actually a massive Maya calendar formed in stone. Each of El Castillo's nine levels is divided in two by a staircase, making 18 separate terraces that commemorate the 18 20-day months of the Maya vague year. The four stairways have 91 steps each; add the top platform and the total is 365, the number of days in the year. On each façade of the pyramid are 52 flat panels, which are reminders of the 52 years in the Maya calendar round. See boxed text, p43, for more on the Maya calendar.

To top it off, during the spring and autumn equinoxes, light and shadow form a series of triangles on the side of the north staircase that mimic the creep of a serpent (note the carved serpent's heads flanking the bottom of the staircase).

The older pyramid *inside* El Castillo boasts a red jaguar throne with inlaid eyes and spots of jade; also lying behind the screen is a *chac-mool* figure. The entrance to **El Túnel**, the passage up to the throne, is at the base of El Castillo's north side. You can't go in, though.

### DREDGING CHICHÉN'S SACRED CENOTE

Around 1900 Edward Thompson, a Harvard professor and US consul to Yucatán, bought the hacienda that included Chichén Itzá for M\$750. No doubt intrigued by local stories of female virgins being sacrificed to the Maya deities by being thrown into the site's cenote, Thompson resolved to have the cenote dredged.

He imported dredging equipment and set to work. Gold and jade jewelry from all parts of Mexico and as far away as Colombia was recovered, along with other artifacts and a variety of human bones. Many of the artifacts were shipped to Harvard's Peabody Museum, but some have since been returned to Mexico.

Subsequent diving expeditions in the 1920s and 1960s turned up hundreds of other valuable artifacts. It appears that all sorts of people, including children and old people, the diseased and the injured, and the young and the vigorous, were forcibly obliged to take an eternal swim in Chichén's Cenote Sagrado.

The cenote is reached by walking about 200m north from the Plataforma de Venus.

#### Gran Juego de Pelota

The great ball court, the largest and most impressive in Mexico, is only one of the city's eight courts, indicative of the importance the games held here. The court, to the left of the visitors center, is flanked by temples at either end and is bounded by towering parallel walls with stone rings cemented up high.

There is evidence that the ball game may have changed over the years. Some carvings show players with padding on their elbows and knees, and it is thought that they played a soccerlike game with a hard rubber ball, with the use of hands forbidden. Other carvings show players wielding bats; it appears that if a player hit the ball through one of the stone hoops, his team was declared the winner. It may be that during the Toltec period the losing captain, and perhaps his teammates as well, were sacrificed (and you thought your dad was hard on you in Little League).

Along the walls of the ball court are stone reliefs, including scenes of decapitations of players. The court exhibits some interesting acoustics – a conversation at one end can be heard 135m away at the other, and a clap produces multiple loud echoes.

#### Templo del Barbado & Templo de los Jaguares y Escudos

The structure at the northern end of the ball court, called the Temple of the Bearded Man after a carving inside of it, has some finely sculpted pillars and reliefs of flowers, birds and trees. The Temple of the Jaguars and Shields, built atop the southeast corner of the ball court's wall, has some columns with carved rattlesnakes and tablets with etched

jaguars. Inside are faded mural fragments depicting a battle.

#### Plataforma de los Cráneos

The Platform of Skulls (*tzompantli* in Náhuatl, a Maya dialect) is located between the Templo de los Jaguares and El Castillo. You can't mistake it, because the T-shaped platform is festooned with carved skulls and eagles tearing open the chests of men to eat their hearts. In ancient days this platform was used to display the heads of sacrificial victims.

#### Plataforma de las Águilas y los Jaguares

Adjacent to the *tzompantli*, the carvings on the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars depict those animals gruesomely grabbing human hearts in their claws. It is thought that this platform was part of a temple dedicated to the military legions responsible for capturing sacrificial victims.

#### Cenote Sagrado

From the *tzompantli*, a 300m rough stone road runs north (a five-minute walk) to the huge sunken well that gave this city its name. The Sacred Cenote is an awesome natural well, some 60m in diameter and 35m deep. The walls between the summit and the water's surface are ensnared in tangled vines and other vegetation. There are ruins of a small steam bath next to the cenote, as well as a modern drinks stand with toilets. See boxed text, above, for the historical details.

#### Grupo de las Mil Columnas

This group to the east of El Castillo takes its name, which means 'Group of the Thousand

Columns', from the forest of pillars stretching south and east. The star attraction here is the **Templo de los Guerreros** (Temple of the Warriors), adorned with stucco and stone-carved animal deities. At the top of its steps is a classic reclining *chac-mool* figure – you're no longer allowed to ascend to it.

Many of the columns in front of the temple are carved with figures of warriors. Archaeologists working in 1926 discovered a Temple of Chac-Mool lying beneath the Temple of the Warriors.

You can walk through the columns on its south side to reach the **Columnata Noreste**, notable for the 'big-nosed god' masks on its façade. Some have been reassembled on the ground around the statue. Just to the south are the remains of the **Baño de Vapor** (Steam Bath or Sweat House) with an underground oven and drains for the water. The sweat houses were regularly used for ritual purification.

### El Osario

The Ossuary, otherwise known as the Bonehouse or the Tumba del Gran Sacerdote (High Priest's Grave), is a ruined pyramid to the southwest of El Castillo. As with most of the buildings in this southern section, the architecture is more Puuc than Toltec. It's notable for the beautiful serpent heads at the base of its staircases. A square shaft at the top of the structure leads into a cave beneath it that was used as a burial chamber; seven tombs with human remains were discovered inside. These days a snack bar with telephone and toilets stands nearby.

### El Caracol

Called El Caracol (The Snail) by the Spaniards for its interior spiral staircase, this observatory, to the south of the Ossuary, is one of the most fascinating and important of all Chichén Itzá's buildings (but, alas, you can't enter it). Its circular design resembles some central highlands structures, although, surprisingly, not those of Toltec Tula. In a fusion of architectural styles and religious imagery, there are Maya Chac rain-god masks over four external doors facing the cardinal points. The windows in the observatory's dome are aligned with the appearance of certain stars at specific dates. From the dome the priests decreed the times for rituals, celebrations, corn-planting and harvests.

### Edificio de las Monjas & La Iglesia

Thought by archaeologists to have been a palace for Maya royalty, the so-called Edificio de las Monjas (Nunnery), with its myriad rooms, resembled a European convent to the conquistadors, hence their name for the building. The building's dimensions are imposing; its base is 60m long, 30m wide and 20m high. The construction is Maya rather than Toltec, although a Toltec sacrificial stone stands in front. A smaller adjoining building to the east, known as La Iglesia (The Church), is covered almost entirely with carvings. Currently, on the far side at the back there are some passageways that are still open, leading a short way into the labyrinth inside. They are dank, slippery, smell of bat urine and it's easy to twist an ankle, but Indiana Jones wannabes will think it's totally cool.

### Akab-Dzib

East of the Nunnery, the Puuc-style Akab-Dzib is thought by some archaeologists to be the most ancient structure excavated here. The central chambers date from the 2nd century. The name means 'Obscure Writing' in Maya and refers to the south-side annex door, whose lintel depicts a priest with a vase etched with hieroglyphics that have never been translated.

### Chichén Viejo

Old Chichén comprises largely unrestored ruins, scattered about and hidden in the bush south of the Nunnery. The predominant architecture is Maya, with Toltec additions and modifications. At the time of research, the public was not allowed to enter the area.

### CENOTE IK KIL

About 3km east of the eastern entrance to Chichén Itzá is the turnout for **Ik Kil Parque Eoarqueológico** (☎ 858-1525; adult/child M\$60/30; ☎ 8am-6pm), whose cenote has been developed into an OK swimming spot. For anyone who's visited some of the other cenotes this will seem touristy, dirty and expensive; those who're heading back to Cancún or anyone with mobility difficulties will probably enjoy peeking, as it offers some idea of what makes cenotes so unusual and there are good stairs with some handrails. As with other cenotes in the region, do not pull on the roots that hang down into the water. It took them a long time to get there.

Small cascades of water plunge from the high limestone roof, which is ringed by greenery. A good buffet lunch costs an extra M\$120 (beverages extra). Get your swim in by no later than 1pm to beat the tour groups. The grounds also hold five lovely **cabanas** (up to 8 people M\$1000-2000; ☎) with Jacuzzi.

### GRUTAS DE BALANKANCHÉ

In 1959 a guide to the Chichén ruins was exploring a cave on his day off when he came upon a narrow passageway. He followed the passageway for 300m, meandering through a series of caverns. In each, perched on mounds amid scores of glistening stalactites, were hundreds of ceremonial treasures the Maya had placed there 800 years earlier: ritual *metates* and *manos* (grinding stones), incense burners and pots. In the years following the discovery, the ancient ceremonial objects were removed and studied. Eventually most of them were returned to the caves, and placed exactly where they were found.

The turnout for the **caverns** (admission Mon-Sat M\$54, Sun M\$20; ☎ ticket booth 9am-5pm) is 5km east of Chichén Itzá (about 5km southeast of Cenote Ik Kil) on the highway to Cancún. Second-class buses heading east from Pisté toward Valladolid and Cancún will drop you at the Balankanché road. The entrance to the caves is 350m north of the highway.

Outside the caves you'll find a good **botanical garden** (displaying native Yucatecan flora with information on the medicinal and other uses of the trees and plants), a small museum, a shop selling cold drinks and souvenirs, and a ticket booth with free luggage storage. The museum features large photographs taken during the exploration of the caves, and descriptions (in English, Spanish and French) of the Maya religion and the offerings found in the caves. Also on display are photographs of modern-day Maya ceremonies called Ch'a Chaac, which continue to be held in all the villages on the Yucatán Peninsula during times of drought and consist mostly of praying and making numerous offerings of food to Chac.

Compulsory 40-minute tours (minimum six people, maximum 20) have melodramatic recorded narration that is nearly impossible to make out and is not very informative, but if you'd like it in a particular language, English is at 11am, 1pm and 3pm; Spanish is at 9am, noon, 2pm and 4pm; and French is at 10am.

Be warned that the cave is unusually hot, and ventilation is poor in its further reaches. The lack of oxygen (especially after a few groups have already passed through) makes it difficult to draw a full breath until you're outside again.

### Sleeping

Don't hesitate to haggle for a bed in the low season (May, June, September and October), when prices drop. Hwy 180 is known as Calle 15A on its way through Pisté.

### BUDGET

**Pirámide Inn** (☎ 851-0115; www.chichen.com; Calle 15A No 30; per person hammock or tent sites M\$40, d M\$410; ☎) Next to the eastern bus stop in Pisté. They're into world peace here, and so are we! Campers can pitch a tent or hang a hammock under a *palapa*, enjoy the inn's pool and watch satellite TV in the lobby. Campers also have use of tepid showers, clean shared toilet facilities and a safe place to stow gear. The 42 spacious rooms have good bathrooms and two spring-me-to-the-moon double beds. The hotel also has a book exchange, swimming pool, Mayan-style sweat lodge, and a restaurant serving international and vegetarian cuisine. You're as close as you can get to the ruins for cheap, though it's still a hike of about 3km. Animals are welcome.

**Posada Olalde** (☎ 851-0086; cnr Calles 6 & 17; s/d M\$200/250, bungalows M\$200) Two blocks south of the highway by Artesanías Guayacán, this is the best of Pisté's several *posadas* (inns). It has clean, quiet and attractive rooms, a few twiddling parakeets and four decent-sized bungalows. Some toilets are missing seats. All accommodations are fan-cooled (though there were plans to install air-con), and the friendly manager speaks Spanish and English, as well as some German and Maya.

**Posada Poxil** (☎ 851-0116; Calle 15A; s/d/tr M\$150/200/250) At the western end of Pisté, this *posada* has seven bright and cheery rooms with good light, towels that have seen better days, and fans. There's also an inexpensive restaurant serving big breakfasts (M\$35) and Yucatecan dishes. The hot water is 'solar heated,' not a bit warmer than tepid. Alas no toilet seats!

**Posada Chac-Mool** (☎ 851-0270; Calle 15A; s/d with fan M\$200/270, with air-con M\$350/410; ☎) Just east of Hotel Chichén Itzá and on the opposite (south) side of the highway in Pisté, Chac-Mool has

fairly basic doubles with good screens. Some rooms have air-con to augment the fans.

#### MIDRANGE

**Pirámide Inn** (☎ 851-0115; www.chichen.com; Calle 15A No 30; d M\$410; 🏠 🚿) See the review on p191.

**Hotel Chichén Itzá** (☎ 985-851-0022; fax 985-851-0023; www.mayaland.com; Calle 15A No 45; r fan only M\$300, r M\$600-1000; 🏠 🚿 🚿) On the west side of Pisté, this hotel has 42 pleasant rooms with tiled floors and old-style brick-tiled ceilings. Rooms in the upper range face the pool and the nicely landscaped grounds, and all have firm beds and minibars. Parents may bring two kids under 13 years for free.

#### TOP END

All of these hotels are close to the archaeological zone's eastern entrance.

**Club Med Villas Arqueológicas** (☎ 856-6000, in the USA 800-514-8244; www.clubmed.com; d/tr/ste M\$810/1010/1370; 🏠 🚿) A Club Med hotel, this is 300m from the east entrance. It is an exact clone of the villas at Cobá and Uxmal, a walled hacienda-style complex sporting a profusion of red floor tiles, a library with billiard table, and 40 smallish but comfortable rooms recently upgraded with nice touches of marble and tile.

**Hacienda Chichén** (☎ in Mérida 999-924-2150, in the USA 800-624-8451; www.haciendachichen.com; d M\$1700-2200; 🏠 🚿) About 300m from the ruins' entrance, this is on the grounds of a 16th-century estate. The hacienda's elegant main house and ruined walls make a great setting, and huge ceiba trees offer welcome shade. The archaeologists who excavated Chichén during the 1920s lived here in bungalows, which have been refurbished and augmented with new ones.

**Hotel Mayaland** (☎ 851-0100, in the USA 800-235-4079; www.mayaland.com; d/ste/royal ste M\$1700/2500/3450; 🏠 🚿) Less than 100m from the ruins' entrance – from the lobby and front rooms you can look out at El Caracol. The rooms, pools and garden bungalows are nicely built and well appointed, but when you're at El Caracol you'll wish the management hadn't cut an ugly swath through the jungle just so hotel patrons could have a nicer view.

#### Eating

The highway through Pisté is lined with more than 20 eateries, large and small. The

cheapest are the market stalls on the main plaza opposite the large tree.

**Restaurant Sayil** (☎ 851-0033; mains M\$35-70; 🕒 7am-9pm) A recently renovated old standby, with a pleasant garden and simple but tasty regional fare. It's attached to the new Felix Inn.

**Xunan** (☎ 851-0131; Calle Principal s/n; mains M\$40-90; 🕒 7am-9pm) Service is a bit slow, but this colorful eatery (at the front of a souvenir stand) offers good food at reasonable prices and is a nice change from the tourist buffets. Portions are generous.

**Restaurant Hacienda Xaybe'h** (☎ 851-0039; buffet lunch & dinner M\$110; 🕒 7:30am-6:30pm; 🍷 🚿) Set a block back from the highway opposite Hotel Chichén Itzá, this is a large, rather fancy place with nice grounds. It's popular with tours and the food is a bit overpriced; the selection of salads makes it a good option for vegetarians. Diners can use the swimming pool free of charge!

#### Getting There & Away

Oriente has ticket offices near the east and west sides of Pisté, and 2nd-class buses passing through town stop almost anywhere along the way. Many 1st-class buses only hit the ruins and the west side of town, close to the toll highway.

When they're running on schedule, Oriente's 2nd-class buses pass through Pisté bound for Mérida (M\$52, 2½ hours) hourly between 8:15am and 4:15pm. Hourly Oriente buses to Valladolid (M\$36, 50 minutes) and Cancún (M\$80, 4½ hours) pass between 7am and 5:30pm. There is a service to Cobá (M\$52, 1½ hours) as well.

First-class buses serve Mérida (M\$80, 1¼ hours, 2:25pm and 5pm), Cancún (M\$140, 2½ hours, 4:30pm), Tulum (M\$101, 2½ hours, 8am and 4:30pm) and Playa del Carmen (M\$180, four hours).

Shared vans to Valladolid (M\$20, 40 minutes) pass through town regularly.

#### Getting Around

During Chichén Itzá's opening hours, 1st- and 2nd-class buses serve the ruins (check with the driver), and they will take passengers from town for about M\$6 when there's room. For a bit more, 2nd-class buses will also take you to the Cenote Ik Kil and the Grutas de Balankanché (be sure to specify your destination when buying your ticket).

If you plan to see the ruins and then head directly to another city by 1st-class bus, buy your bus ticket at the visitors center before hitting the ruins, for a better chance of getting a seat.

There is a taxi stand near the west end of town; the price to the ruins is M\$25. There are usually taxis at Chichén's parking lot.

#### VALLADOLID

☎ 985 / pop 45,868

Also known as the Sultanness of the East, Yucatán's third-largest city is known for its quiet streets and sun-splashed, pastel walls. She certainly is one sultry babe, and it's worth staying here for a few days or even a week as the provincial town makes a great hub for visits to Río Lagartos, Chichén Itzá, Ek' Balam and a number of nearby cenotes. The city resides at that magic point where there's plenty to do, yet it still feels small, manageable and affordable. Slow down for a day by renting a bicycle and tootle out to the nearby cenotes. Sit on a bench in one of the many squares and watch men play board games or kids chase pigeons. Buy a dollar's worth of fresh tortillas and let an afternoon pass lazily by.

#### History

Valladolid has seen its fair share of turmoil and revolt. The city was first founded in 1543 near the Chouac-Ha lagoon some 50km from the coast, but it was too hot and there were way too many mosquitoes for Francisco de Montejo, nephew of Montejo the Elder, and his merry band of conquerors. So they upped and moved the city to the Maya ceremonial center of Zací (sah-kee), where they faced heavy resistance from the local Maya. Eventually the Elder's son – Montejo the Younger – ultimately took the town. The Spanish conquerors, in typical fashion, ripped down the town and laid out a new city following the classic colonial plan.

During much of the colonial era, Valladolid's physical isolation from Mérida kept it relatively autonomous from royal rule, and the Maya of the area suffered brutal exploitation, which continued after Mexican independence. Barred from entering many areas of the city, the Maya made Valladolid one of their first points of attack following the 1847 outbreak of the War of the Castes (p36) in Tepich. After a two-month siege, the city's defenders were

finally overcome. Many fled to the safety of Mérida; the rest were slaughtered.

Today Valladolid is a prosperous seat of agricultural commerce, augmented by some light industry and a growing tourist trade. Many Vallisetas speak Spanish with the soft and clear Maya accent.

#### Orientation & Information

The old highway passes through the town center, though most signs urge motorists toward the toll road north of town. To follow the old highway eastbound, take Calle 41; westbound, take Calle 39. To preserve the colonial flavor of the town center, Valladolid has limited the posting of signs by businesses to those approved by the city. This can sometimes make it difficult to find an establishment; you need to keep a keen eye out for small cardboard signs on open doors.

Various banks (most with ATMs) near the town center are generally open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 1pm Saturday. The main plaza, Parque Francisco Cantón Rosado, has banks of Telmex card phones in each corner.

High-speed internet is available at numerous small cafés in and around the town center; all charge around M\$10 per hour and are open 9am-ish to as late as midnight.

**Hospital Valladolid** (☎ 856-2883; cnr Calles 49 & 52; 🕒 24hr) Near the Convento de Sisal, it handles emergencies.

**Main post office** (cnr Calles 39 & 40; 🕒 8:30am-3pm Mon-Fri)

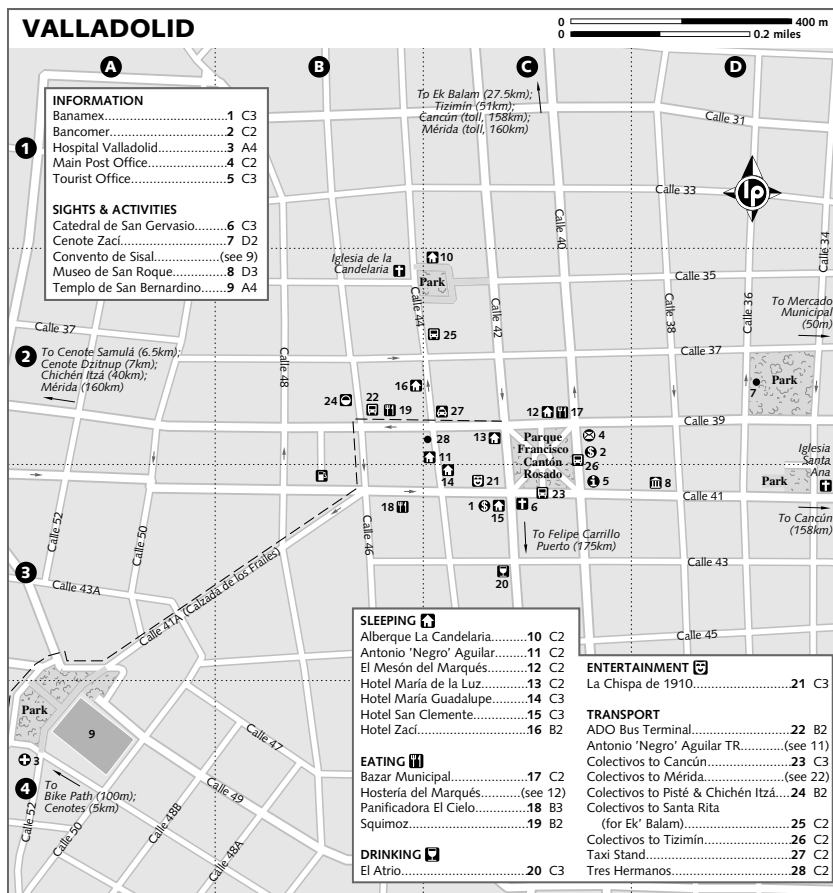
**Tourist office** (🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) On the east side of the plaza, it is frequently unattended and provides mediocre information.

#### Sights

##### TEMPLO DE SAN BERNARDINO & CONVENTO DE SISAL

The **Templo de San Bernardino** (Church of San Bernardino; 🕒 8am-noon & 5-9pm) and the Convento de Sisal are about 700m southwest of the plaza. They were constructed between 1552 and 1560 to serve the dual functions of fortress and church.

You may have to knock on the church's left-hand door to gain admittance, or someone may approach and offer you a short tour in exchange for a gratuity. Either way, it's worth peeking inside. Its charming decoration includes beautiful rose-colored walls,



arches, some recently uncovered 16th-century frescoes and a small image of the Virgin on the altar. These are about the only original items remaining; the grand wooden *retablo* (altarpiece) dates from the 19th century. The adjacent convent is often closed to the public; your best bets for gaining entrance to it are during the vacation periods of Easter week, August and Christmas (December 14 to January 6). It's well worth a visit. The walled grounds hold a cenote with a vaulted dome built over it and a system of channels that once irrigated the large garden.

If you're arriving by bicycle, note that it's prohibited to ride on the wide concrete paths leading from the street to the church.

### MUSEO DE SAN ROQUE

Previously a church, the **Museo de San Roque** (Calle 41 btwn Calles 38 & 40; admission free; ☎ 9am-9pm) has models and exhibits relating the history of the city and the region. Other displays focus on various aspects of traditional Maya life.

### CENOTES

Among the region's several underground cenotes is **Cenote Zací** (Calle 36, enter from Calle 39; admission M\$25; ☎ 8am-6pm), set in a park that also holds traditional stone-walled thatched houses and a small zoo. People swim in Zací, though being mostly open it contains some dust and algae. Look in the water for catfish or overhead for a bat or two.

A bit more enticing but less accessible is **Cenote Dzitnup** (Xkekén; admission M\$25; ☎ 8am-5pm), 7km west of the plaza. It's artificially lit and very swimmable, and a massive limestone formation dripping with stalactites hangs from its ceiling. Across the road about 100m closer to town is **Cenote Samulá** (admission M\$25; ☎ 8am-6pm), a lovely cavern pool with *álamo* roots stretching down many meters from the middle of the ceiling to drink from it. The *ejido* (indigenous communal landholding) that maintains both cenotes charges M\$35 for use of a video camera in either one.

Pedaling a rented bicycle (see p196) to the cenotes takes about 20 minutes. By bike from the town center take Calle 41A (Calzada de los Frailes), a street lined entirely with colonial architecture, which leads past the Templo de San Bernardino and the convent. Keep to the right of the park, then turn right on Calle 49. This opens onto tree-lined Avenida de los Frailes and hits the old highway. Turn left onto the *ciclopista* (bike path) paralleling the road to Mérida. Turn left again at the sign for Dzitnup and continue for just under 2km; Samulá will be off this road to the right and Dzitnup a little further on the left.

Shared vans from in front of Hotel María Guadalupe (on Calle 44) go to Dzitnup for M\$10. Taxis from Valladolid's main plaza charge M\$100 for the round-trip excursion to Dzitnup and Samulá, with an hour's wait. You also can hop aboard a westbound bus; ask the driver to let you off at the Dzitnup turnoff, then walk the final 2km (20 to 30 minutes) to the site. Dzitnup has a restaurant and drinks stand. Otherwise, bring a picnic.

### MERCADO MUNICIPAL

On Calle 32, this is a good, authentic Mexican market where locals come to shop for cheap clothing, homewares, meat, produce and what-have-you, and to eat at inexpensive *taquerías*. The east side is the most colorful, with flowers and stacks of fruit and vegetables on offer. Most of the activity takes place between 6am and 2pm.

### Sleeping

Most hotels are on or near the main plaza, Parque Francisco Cantón Rosado.

### BUDGET

**Alberque La Candelaria** (☎/fax 856-2267; fidery@chichen.com.mx; Calle 35 No 201F; dm with/without

hostel card or ISIC M\$80/88, d M\$160/200; ☎) The HI-affiliated hostel was closed when we passed through, but locals said it would be reopening. Prices were last updated in 2006.

**Antonio 'Negro' Aguilar** (☎ 856-2125; Calle 44 btwn Calles 39 & 41; r M\$150) This cantankerous old character rents the cheapest separate rooms in town, and they are actually pretty clean. For details, stop by his bike-rental shop (p196), which is not so clean.

**Hotel María Guadalupe** (☎ 856-2068; hotelmaria.guadalupe@prodigy.net.mx; Calle 44 No 198A; d/tr M\$220/270) This airy hotel has eight simple and clean fan-cooled rooms, which though a bit dark are not musty. The management is friendly and provides purified water. There's a nice common area upstairs to meet fellow travelers or sip something cold after a hot day.

**Hotel Zací** (☎/fax 856-2167; www.hotelzaci.com; Calle 44 No 191; s/d/tr with fan M\$240/350/410, with air-con M\$340/400/450; ☎) Someone here really loves calla lilies. The 60 rooms with mock-colonial décor are spread around a green courtyard. Some rooms are a bit musty, but they air out.

### MIDRANGE

The hotels listed here have restaurants, free secure parking facilities and swimming pools.

**Hotel San Clemente** (☎/fax 856-2208; www.hotel.sanclemente.com.mx; Calle 42 No 206; s/d/tr with fan M\$300/360/410, with air-con M\$350/390/470; ☎) Offers good value and boasts 64 rooms with optional air-con and décor nearly identical to the Zací's, minus the calla lilies. The bathrooms are a bit dirty, but it's still a solid deal. There's a central courtyard.

**Hotel María de la Luz** (☎/fax 856-2071; www.maria.delaluzhotel.com; Calle 42 No 193; d/tr/q M\$400/480/520; ☎) The beds are a bit concave and damp, but if the Zací or San Clemente are full, you might want to check out this spot. The restaurant is actually pretty good, and serves margaritas that (at least initially) pack a punch.

**El Mesón del Marqués** (☎ 856-2073; fax 856-2280; www.mesondelmarques.com; Calle 39 No 203; d standard/superior M\$580/710; ☎) It's only worth staying in this hotel if you're willing to up the ante for the superior rooms with their crispy-clean bedspreads, quaint blue-and-yellow tilework and firm mattresses. There's also a charming old courtyard and the fine Hostería del Marqués restaurant (p196), and wi-fi is available.



## Eating & Drinking

Valladolid has a few good bakeries, including **Panificadora El Cielo** (Calle 41 btwn Calles 44 & 46; breads M\$2-10; ☎ 7am-noon & 3-9pm).

**Bazar Municipal** (nr Calles 39 & 40) This place is a collection of market-style cookshops at the plaza's northeast corner, popular for their big, cheap breakfasts. At lunch and dinner some offer *comidas corridas* (set meals) – check the price before you order. El Amigo Casiano, on the left side nearly at the back, is good, super-cheap and always crowded; it's closed for the day by 2pm. Lonchería Canul, at the very back, stays open much later and serves good food accompanied by tasty salsas.

**Squimoz** (☎ 856-4156; Calle 39 No 219 btwn Calles 44 & 46; mains M\$20-50; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 7am-3pm Sun) A delightful little shop just a few doors east of the ADO bus terminal, Squimoz offers cakes, pastries and good espresso drinks, and has a nice rear courtyard. Its rich, creamy flan is one of Yucatán's best.

**Hostería del Marqués** (☎ 856-2073; El Mesón del Marqués, Calle 39 No 203; mains M\$50-130; ☎ 7am-11pm) Probably the best restaurant in town for lunch and dinner, where you can dine in the tranquil colonial courtyard with its bubbling fountain, or the air-con salon looking onto it. It also offers some vegetarian choices, and steaks priced by weight.

**El Atrio** (Calle 42 No 205; drinks M\$10-40; ☎ 6pm-midnight) This new café and grill has a very chill atmosphere with comfy sofas in a colonial-era *casona* (large old house). There's a patio out back.

## Entertainment

Following a centuries-old tradition, dances are held in the main plaza from 8pm to 9pm Sunday, with music by the municipal band or other local groups. This is not aimed at tourists, though they're more than welcome.

**La Chispa de 1910** (☎ 856-2668; Calle 41 No 201; ☎ 5pm-1am Mon-Thu, 5pm-2am Fri-Sun) Sparks fly at this bar-restaurant that often features live music. Test your pipes by singing 'Besame Mucho' on karaoke nights (Thursday to Saturday).

## Getting There & Away BUS

Valladolid's main bus terminal is the convenient **ADO bus terminal** (nr Calles 39 & 46). The principal services are Oriente, Mayab and

Expresso (2nd class), and ADO and Super Expresso (1st class).

**Cancún** (M\$70 to M\$110, two to three hours, many buses)

**Chetumal** (M\$140, six hours, five Mayab buses)

**Chichén Itzá/Pisté** (M\$36, 45 minutes, 14 Oriente

Mérida-bound buses between 7:15am and 5:30pm) Buses stop near ruins during opening hours.

**Chiquilá (for Isla Holbox)** (M\$70, 2½ hours, Oriente bus at 2:45am)

**Cobá** (M\$26, 45 minutes, four buses)

**Izamal** (M\$41, two hours, two buses at 12:45pm and 3:50pm)

**Mérida** (M\$74 to M\$110, two to three hours, many buses)

**Playa del Carmen** (M\$78 to M\$140, 2½ to 3½ hours, eight buses)

**Tizimín** (M\$20, one hour, 12 buses)

**Tulum** (M\$47 to M\$60, two hours, six buses)

## COLECTIVOS

Often faster, more reliable and more comfortable than 2nd-class buses are the *colectivos* that leave for various points as soon as their seats are filled. Most operate from 7am or 8am to about 7pm. Direct services to Mérida (from the ADO bus terminal; M\$60) and Cancún (from in front of the cathedral; M\$70) take a little over two hours – confirm they're non-stop, though. *Colectivos* for Pisté and Chichén Itzá (M\$20, 40 minutes) leave across the road from the ADO bus terminal, and for Tizimín from the east side of the main plaza. *Colectivos* for Ek' Balam (M\$30) leave from Calle 44, between Calles 35 and 37.

## Getting Around

Bicycles are a great way to see the town and get out to the cenotes. **Tres Hermanos** (Calle 44 btwn Calles 39 & 41; ☎ 7:30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 7:30am-2pm Sun) and **Antonio 'Negro' Aguilar** (☎ 856-2125; ☎ 7am-7pm) rent bikes for about M\$8 per hour. If you want a motor behind your wheels, taxis charge M\$100 per hour.

## Ek' BALAM

The turnoff for fascinating **Ek' Balam** (admission M\$27, guide M\$250; ☎ 8am-5pm) is 17km north of Valladolid, from where the archaeological site is a further 6km east. Vegetation still covers much of the area, but excavations and restoration continue to add to the sights, including an interesting ziggurat-like structure near the entrance, as well as a fine arch and a ball court.

Most impressive is the gargantuan **Acrópolis**, whose well-restored base is 160m long and

holds a 'gallery,' actually a series of separate chambers. Built atop the base is Ek' Balam's massive main pyramid, reaching a height of 32m and sporting a huge jaguar mouth with 360-degree dentition. Below the mouth are stucco skulls, while above and to the right sits an amazingly expressive figure. On the right side stand unusual winged human figures (some call them Maya angels), whose hands are poised in gestures looking for all the world like Hindu/Buddhist *mudras* (ritual hand movements used in Hindu religious dancing; also gesture of Buddha figure). It's enough to make you wonder, either about connections between ancient civilizations or the artistic license taken by the restoration crew, though much of the plaster is supposed to be original.

The view from the top of the pyramid is fantastic as well. Across the flat terrain you can make out the pyramids of Chichén Itzá and Cobá.

From the Ek' Balam parking lot you can visit the **X-Canche Cenote** (☎ 985-107-4774; admission M\$30, bike rental M\$70, bike, rappel & kayak tour M\$110; ☎ 8am-5pm). It's worth the extra dough to take the fun rappel and kayak tour.

The town of Ek' Balam itself is worth a visit, if only to see what a fairly traditional Maya village looks like. There are two nice hotels, as well as a handful of artisan stands along the main plaza, which also serves as the town's soccer field.

## Sleeping & Eating

**ourpick Genesis Eco-Retreat** (☎ 985-852-7980; www.genesisretreat.com; d M\$400-600; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The Genesis Eco-Retreat offers B&B intimacy in a quiet, ecofriendly setting. This is a true ecotel: gray water is used for landscaping, some rooms are naturally cooled, insects are controlled by a crack squadron of mosquito-hating ducks and there's even an entire wall made out of plastic bottles. The place is postcard-beautiful – there's a chilling dip pool and *temescal* steam bath on-site – and offers delicious veggie meals. The hotel is sometimes closed between September and early October.

**Dolcemente Ek' Balam** (☎/fax 045-985-103-6073; dolcementeekbalam@gmail.com; d M\$500) It lacks a bit of soul, but Dolcemente does have a fine collection of super-clean fan-cooled rooms. The yummy restaurant specializes in (you guessed it) Italian fare.

## Getting There & Away

It's possible to catch a *colectivo* from Calle 44 between Calles 35 and 37 in Valladolid for Ek' Balam (M\$30). A round-trip taxi ride from Valladolid with an hour's wait at the ruins will cost around M\$250.

## TIZIMÍN

☎ 986 / pop 44,151

Tizimín is dusty and 'authentic,' meaning that you won't find much here that's designed with the tourist in mind. That doesn't make it less of a place to investigate, however, and some travelers may find Tizimín a refreshing change if they've just come from Playa del Carmen or Cancún. Most travelers will be bound for Río Lagartos, San Felipe and Isla Holbox, as there isn't much that warrants an overnight stay. Still, the tree-filled Parque Principal is pleasant, particularly at sundown.

The city fills with people from outlying ranches during its annual fair to celebrate **Día de los Reyes Magos** (Three Kings' Day), which lasts from January 1 to 15.

Two great colonial structures – **Parroquia Los Santos Reyes de Tizimín** (Church of the Three Wise Kings) and its former **Franciscan monastery** (the ex-convento) – are worth having a look while you're waiting for your bus connection. They're on opposite sides of Calle 51, reached by walking two blocks south on Calle 48, which itself is a block west of the bus terminals.

The church fronts Tizimín's main plaza, the Parque Principal, which has an HBSC with ATM and currency exchange on its southwest side.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Posada María Antonia** (☎ 863-2857; Calle 50 No 408; r with air-con M\$220; ☎) Just south of the church, it has 12 bare-bones rooms, each holding up to four people.

**Hotel San Carlos** (☎ 863-2094; hsancarlos@hotmail.com; Calle 54 No 407, btwn Calles 51 & 53; r with air-con M\$290; ☎) Two blocks west of the plaza, this is the nicest hotel in town. All the air-con rooms have private patios looking onto the shared garden area.

**Market** (nr Calles 47 & 48) The market, half a block west of the Noreste bus terminal, has the usual cheap eateries.

**Pizzería César's** (Calle 50; pizza M\$30-60, mains M\$60-110; ☎ 8am-1am) A popular joint near the Posada María Antonia, it serves inexpensive pasta

dishes, sandwiches and burgers in addition to pizza and steak.

### Getting There & Away

Oriente and Mayab, both offering 2nd-class services, share a **bus terminal** (Calle 47 btwn Calles 48 & 46) just east of the market. **Noreste bus terminal** (Calle 46), offering 1st- and 2nd-class services, is just around the corner.

**Cancún** (M\$85, three to 3½ hours, 15 Mayab and Noreste buses)

**Izamal** (M\$55, 2½ hours, Oriente bus at 5:30am, 11am and 4pm)

**Mérida** (M\$83, 2½ to 3½ hours, 2nd-class Noreste buses at 5:30am, 9am, 2:30pm, 4pm and 5pm)

**Río Lagartos/San Felipe** (M\$20 to M\$25, one hour, six Noreste buses between 6am and 4:15pm, some *colectivos*) Some buses continue 12km west to San Felipe (same price).

**Valladolid** (M\$20, one hour, 16 Oriente buses between 5:30am and 7:30pm)

Taxis to Río Lagartos or San Felipe charge about M\$250, and leave from outside both bus terminals. The drivers can be asked to wait for you for M\$100 per additional hour.

## RÍO LAGARTOS

☎ 986 / pop 2127

On the windy northern shore of the peninsula, sleepy Río Lagartos (Alligator River) is a fishing village that also boasts the densest concentration of flamingos in Mexico, supposedly two or three flamingos per Mexican, if one believes the math. Lying within the **Reserva de la Biósfera Ría Lagartos**, this mangrove-lined estuary also shelters 334 other species of resident and migratory birds, including snowy egrets, red egrets, tiger herons and snowy white ibis, as well as a small number of the once-numerous crocodiles that gave the town its name. It's a beautiful area. At the right time of year you can see numerous species of birds without even getting out of your vehicle.

The Maya knew the place as *Holkobén* and used it as a rest stop on their way to Las

Coloradas, a shallow part of the vast estuary that stretches east almost to the border of Quintana Roo. There they extracted precious salt from the waters, a process that continues on a much vaster scale today. Spanish explorers mistook the narrowing of the *ría* (estuary) for a *rio* (river) and the crocs for alligators, and the rest is history. Hurricane Isadore destroyed much of the mangrove forest in 2002, but it's slowly recovering.

Less than 1km east of town, on the edge of the estuary, a natural *ojo de agua dulce* (natural spring) has been developed into a swimming hole. A sometimes-empty tourist kiosk sits at the end of Calle 10 by the waterfront.

### Orientation & Information

Most residents aren't sure of the town's street names, and signs are few. The road into town is the north-south Calle 10, which ends at the waterfront Calle 13. There's no bank or ATM in town, so bring lots of cash.

### Flamingo, Shorebird & Wildlife Tours

The brilliant orange-red flamingos can turn the horizon fiery when they take wing. Depending on your luck, you'll see either hundreds or thousands of them. The best months for viewing them are June to August. The four primary haunts, in increasing distance from town, are Punta Garza, Yoluk, Necopal and Nahochín (all flamingo feeding spots named for nearby mangrove patches).

To see the flamingos, you'll need to rent a boat and driver. You'll see more birdlife if you head out at sunrise or around 4pm. Prices vary by boat, group size (maximum six) and destination. A one-hour trip costs around M\$500, and two to three hours is M\$700. In addition, the reserve charges visitors a M\$20 admission fee. Plan on packing something to eat the night before, as most restaurants open long after you'll be on the water.

You can negotiate with one of the eager men in the waterfront kiosks near the entrance to town; it's nearly impossible to get through town without being approached by someone. They speak English and will connect you with a captain (who usually doesn't). The best guides are to be found at **Restaurante-Bar Isla Contoy** (☎ 862-0000); driving into town, turn left on Calle 19 at the sign for the restaurant-bar. From the bus terminal, head to the water and turn left (west).

### FLAMINGO ETIQUETTE

Although the sight of flamingos taking to the wing is impressive, for the well-being of the birds, please ask your boat captain not to frighten the birds into flight. You can generally get to within 100m of the birds before they walk or fly away.

### CELEBRATING LA FERIA DE SANTIAGO AND DÍA DE LA MARINA

Río Lagartos knows how to party, and two festivals, La Feria de Santiago and Día de la Marina, are well worth checking out. **La Feria de Santiago**, the patron-saint festival of Río Lagartos, is held mid-July. A bullfight (really bullplay) ring is erected in the middle of town during the weeklong event, and every afternoon anyone who wishes is able to enter it and play matador with a young bull. The animal is not killed or even injured, just made a little angry at times. Don't turn your back to it or it will knock you down. Call a hotel in town to find out when the festival is being held.

Another big annual event in Río Lagartos is the **Día de la Marina** (Day of the Marine Force), which is always on June 1. On this day, following 9am Mass, a crown of flowers is dedicated to the Virgin and is carried from the church to a boat, where it is then taken 4km out to sea and placed in the water as an offering to all the fishermen who have perished at sea.

The boats, not incidentally, are heavily decorated on this day, and tourists are welcome to ride to the site for free. Just ask if you can go, and be friendly and respectful. A tip for their kindness, following the service, is always appreciated (M\$50 to M\$100 per visitor).

If time permits, seek out **Ismael Navarro** (☎ 862-0000; www.riolagartosexpeditions.com) or **Diego Núñez Martínez** (diego2909@yahoo.com), two licensed guides with formal training as naturalists. They speak English, Spanish and Italian and are up to date on the fauna and flora in the area, including the staggering number of bird species, for which they have books and the official Yucatán Peninsula checklist.

Besides their flamingo expeditions, Ismael takes four-hour shorebird tours along the mudflats in winter. Diego offers catch-and-release fly-fishing trips for tarpon and snook, and can help with lodgings reservations. Both also offer land tours for birding as well as night rides looking for crocodiles and, from May to September, sea turtles.

For M\$200 you can get a boat to take you across the lagoon for a couple of hours on the beach.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Posada Las Gaviotas** (☎ 862-0507; Calle 12 with the riverfront; d M\$250) This simple budget option right on the riverfront offers clean fan-cooled rooms bathed in avocado green. There are no toilet seats.

**Posada Isla Contoy** (☎ 862-0000; www.riolagartosexpeditions.com; Calle 19 No 134, cnr Calle 14; s/d M\$200/350; 🚽) Next to the restaurant Isla Contoy (ask there to see the rooms), this hotel has five very simple rooms. You can pay a bit extra for the air-con, which doesn't really work anyway. That's OK as there are fans overhead and a boob box with local programming to keep you company.

**Hotel Villas de Pescadores** (☎ 862-0020; villa\_pescadores@prodigy.net.mx; Calle 14 & Calle 9; d with fan/air-con M\$400/500; 🚽) Near the water's edge, this nice hotel offers nine very clean rooms, each with good cross-ventilation (all face the estuary), two beds and a fan. Upstairs rooms have balconies, and there's a rickety spiral staircase leading up to a rooftop lookout tower where adventurous guests can (careful on those stairs!) watch the sun set or sip a relaxing beverage. Guests planning on an early morning flamingo trip can ask for breakfast to be prepared before they head off (an additional M\$35 to M\$60). The owner rents bicycles and canoes as well, and there's a new restaurant on-site.

**Restaurante-Bar Isla Contoy** (Calle 19; mains M\$50-100; 🍷: 8am-9pm) A popular eatery at the waterfront, this is a good place to meet other travelers and form groups for the boat tours. Lobster, at market price, is a delicious specialty.

### Getting There & Away

Several Noreste buses run daily between Tizimín (M\$20 to M\$25, one hour), Mérida (M\$110, three to four hours) and San Felipe (M\$10, 20 minutes). Noreste and Mayab also serve Cancún (M\$120, three to four hours) three times daily.

### EAST OF RÍO LAGARTOS

The road between Río Lagartos and El Cuyo often washes out in rainy season, but it's normally passable in dry season (even with a non-4WD vehicle). Ask locally before you take the trip (you'll need your own wheels), which is

truly a birder's delight. It's best to take the trip early in the morning, when you are likely to see egrets, blue heron, osprey and gaggles of pink flamingos. If you do stop to observe wildlife, be as quiet as possible and remember that there are crocodiles in the shallows, as well as venomous snakes: don't let that great roseate spoonbill photo opportunity send you to the hospital.

Start your trip by turning east at the junction about 2km south of Río Lagartos. About 8km from the junction, on the south side of the road, is the beginning of a 1km **interpretive trail** to Petén Tucha (a *petén* is a hummock or rise often forming around a spring). You should register at the biosphere reserve's office near the junction before walking the trail.

Continuing east on the road 4km beyond the trailhead you'll reach a bridge over a very narrow part of the estuary. Fishermen cast nets here, and you can sometimes see crocs lurking in the water (look for dead horseshoe crabs on the bridge). Another 6km beyond this is **Las Coloradas**, a small town housing workers who extract salt from the vast shallow lagoons of the same name that stretch eastward for kilometers on the south side of the road. The salt is piled in gleaming mounds that look like icebergs, up to 15m high, and from a distance it appears oddly incongruous, as if you've arrived in the Arctic despite the blistering heat.

The road turns to sand after Las Coloradas, but you can still make it to El Cuyo most times of year. You may consider spending a few Robinson Crusoe days on the beach here, but the brown sands are pretty littered with trash. The unique vegetation includes century plants, an agave species that lives quietly for decades before sending up a tall stalk that blossoms, in turn triggering the final demise of the plant. These are different from the henequen agaves that you see further south.

### El Cuyo

At the end of the road, El Cuyo has a clear white-sand beach, muddy waters, and curiously smells a bit like old socks. The town sees a few local tourists looking for a short beach vacation, but not many foreigners pass through. Maybe this is the off-the-beaten-track spot you were looking for all this time.

**Cabañas Mar y Sol** (☎ 986-853-4062; cabana M\$350), one block west of the town square,

has very simple and clean cabins occupying a large swath of green grass that heads straight down to the beach. Some even have hot water and cable TV. La Cochinita restaurant is attached to the hotel and is quite popular with locals.

You can get here by the coastal road east from Río Lagartos. If the road is out, reach El Cuyo by heading back towards Tizimin and then turning left (east) at the first paved road, heading toward Yoactún. Follow this through savanna-like grassy ranchland until you come to a T-junction at Colonia Yucatán. Head left (north) and you'll arrive in El Cuyo.

At El Cuyo the road passes through broad expanses of grassy savanna with palms and some huge-trunked trees, passing the site of the original founding of Valladolid, in 1543. At Colonia Yucatán, a little over 30km south of El Cuyo, you can head east to pick up the road to Chiquilá and Isla Holbox (or in the opposite direction to Hwy 180) or west to Tizimin. Public transportation through all of this is scarce. Hitchhiking may be possible, but a rental car is by far the better way to go.

### SAN FELIPE

☎ 986 / pop 1769

San Felipe is a fishing village seldom visited by travelers, about 12km west of Río Lagartos, notable for its orderly streets, cheery Caribbean feel and painted wooden houses. With its laid-back air, this is a good alternative to staying in Río Lagartos. Getting there you'll pass primarily swampy mangrove-dotted lagoons, and perhaps surprise a turtle or two crossing the road. Its beach lies across the mouth of the estuary, at Punta Holohit, and the mangroves there and on the western edge of town are a bird-watcher's paradise. Just looking out the windows of the town's one hotel you can see white and brown pelicans, terns, cormorants, great blue herons, magnificent frigate birds and jabirus (storks).

The beach, though not great, usually has *palapas* providing shade. *Lancheros* (boat owners) charge M\$100 per boatload (round-trip) to take passengers across, or M\$800 for a half-day fishing or birding trip.

At the corner of Calles 12 and 13 is a simple **shed** (internet per hr M\$8) with five or six computers with dial-up connections. It's run by a very kind young man with a health problem and this café helps him support himself.

**Hotel San Felipe de Jesús** (☎ 862-2027; hotelsf@hotmail.com; d M\$400-450, with balcony M\$490) is a friendly, clean and cleverly constructed hotel at the edge of San Felipe's harbor. To get there, turn left at the water and proceed about 200m. Six of the 18 rooms are large and have private balconies and water views (it's definitely worth the extra pesos for these rooms). The restaurant offers good seafood at low prices.

Six buses from Tizimin pass through Río Lagartos and continue to San Felipe (M\$20 to M\$22, 1½ hours) each way. The bus ride from Río Lagartos (M\$10) takes 20 minutes. You can take a taxi from Tizimin to San Felipe for M\$250, but you will possibly need to arrange return pickup in advance or pay the driver an hourly rate to wait until you're ready to return.

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