

Yucatán Peninsula



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

Despite overzealous development, the natural beauty of the Yucatán abides. The ethereal coo of the mot-mot still reverberates overhead, while below continue to writhe the creepy-crawlies that keep this scrub-jungle land renewed year after year. Deep below, in the realm of Ah Puch (God of the Underworld), gurgle freshwater rivers that pull their way through massive limestone caverns all the way to the pitch-perfect waters of the Caribbean Sea and Gulf.

From the deep blue rises the Mesoamerican Reef, the world's second-largest barrier reef, making this coast a diving and snorkeling destination par excellence. And several ocean-front lagoons and cenotes (limestone sinkholes) offer spectacular, accessible swimming.

Around here, the past is the present and the present is the past: they intermingle, toil and tangle eternally like two brawling brothers. You'll witness it in the towering temples of the Maya, Toltecs and Itzá, in the cobblestone streets of colonial centers, and in the sagacious smiles of southern Mexico's native sons and daughters, the Maya.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Set out for a morning bird-watching mission from the remote Costa Maya beach town of **Xcalak** (p907), then head out a bit later for a dive at **Banco Chinchorro** (p906)
- Feel the burn as you haul yourself up the massive pyramid of **Calakmul** (p955), heavy-nosed toucans soaring past toward their tree-top jungle hideaways
- Marvel at the colonial architecture or attend a free concert in **Mérida** (p914), the cultural capital of the peninsula
- Find out why they named **Chichén Itzá** (p937) the 'seventh modern wonder of the world,' or why **Ek' Balam** (p945) should have made the list
- Stay out until dawn in one of the happening beachfront clubs in **Playa del Carmen** (p882), before taking the ferry across to **Isla Cozumel** (p886) the next day for a snorkel and swim



History

The Maya – accomplished astronomers and mathematicians, and architects of some of the grandest monuments ever known – created their first settlements in what is now Guatemala as early as 2400 BC. Over the centuries, the expansion of Maya civilization moved steadily northward, and by AD 550 great Maya city-states were established in southern Yucatán. In the 10th century, with the invasion of the bellicose Toltecs from Central Mexico, the great cities of southern Yucatán slowly dissolved, as attention shifted northward to new power centers like Chichén Itzá.

The last of the great Maya capitals, Mayapán (p932), started to collapse around 1440, when the Xiú Maya and the Cocom Maya began a violent and protracted struggle for power. In 1540, Spanish conquistador Francisco de Montejo the Younger (son of legendary conquistador Francisco de Montejo the Elder) utilized the tensions between the still-feuding Maya sects to conquer the area. The Spaniards allied themselves with the Xiú against the Cocom, finally defeating the Cocom and gaining the Xiú as reluctant converts to Christianity.

Francisco de Montejo the Younger, along with his father, Francisco de Montejo the Elder, and cousin (named...you guessed it, Francisco de Montejo) founded Mérida in 1542 and within four years brought most of the Yucatán Peninsula under Spanish rule. The Spaniards divided up the Maya lands into large estates where the natives were put to work as indentured servants.

When Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, the new Mexican government used the Yucatecan territory to create huge plantations for the cultivation of tobacco, sugarcane and *henequén* (agave rope fiber). The Maya, though legally free, were enslaved in debt peonage to the rich landowners.

In 1847, after being oppressed for nearly 300 years by the Spanish and their descendants, the Maya rose up in a massive revolt. This was the beginning of the War of the Castes. Finally, in 1901, after more than 50 years of sporadic, but often intense, violence, a tentative peace was reached; however, it would be another 30 years before the territory of Quintana Roo came under official government control. To this day some Maya do not recognize that sovereignty.

The commercial success of Cancún in the early 1970s led to hundreds of kilometers of public beach along the Caribbean coast being sold off to commercial developers, displacing many small fishing communities. While many indigenous people still eke out a living by subsistence agriculture or fishing, large numbers now work in the construction and service industries. Some individuals and communities, often with outside encouragement, are having a go at ecotourism, opening their lands to tourists and/or serving as guides.

Climate

The Yucatán Peninsula is hot and humid. The rainy season is mid-August to mid-October, when there's afternoon showers most days. The best time to visit is during the dryer, slightly cooler months between November and March. Hurricane season runs from June to November.

Parks & Reserves

There are several national parks on the peninsula, some scarcely larger than the ancient Maya cities they contain – Parque Nacional Tulum, home to the Tulum Ruins (p896), is a good example of this. National biosphere reserves covering thousands of hectares of land or sea include Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Lagartos (p946), Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún (p934) and Reserva de la Biosfera Banco Chinchorro (p906). Even more impressive are the vast Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul (p955) and Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an (p904).

Dangers & Annoyances

Dangers are few. Violent crime in the Yucatán Peninsula is extremely rare; in fact residents pride themselves on the safety record of their neighborhoods and streets. Theft in big cities like Cancún, Playa del Carmen and Mérida does occasionally occur, usually in very crowded areas, such as busy markets.

Unattended bags and belongings – even that ratty old pair of flip-flops – may be stolen from the beach, and there have been reports of bus travelers having their bags stolen, especially on second-class night buses. One common scheme is to short-change drivers at gas stations: count your pesos carefully.

While these tranquil waters are generally safe for swimming, occasional strong

HURRICANE ALLEY: THE PATH OF WILMA AND DEAN

Hurricanes have always walloped the Yucatán, but in recent years it feels as though they are just getting bigger and badder.

It started on October 22, 2005, when Hurricane Wilma hit the Yucatán's northeast coast – and stayed there for more than 30 hours. The 13th hurricane of the turbulent 2005 season – and fourth to reach Category 5 status – Wilma vented her worst forces on Isla Holbox, Cozumel, Puerto Morelos and Cancún, causing M\$80 billion in damages. Playa del Carmen and the Riviera Maya to the south were left largely unscathed.

Two years later Dean came into town, leveling the town of Mahahual, displacing 100,000 residents in Chetumal and felling thousands of trees in southern Quintana Roo. While residents are slowly recovering from these hurricanes, the environmental wounds inflicted by Wilma, her wicked stepsister Emily, and Dean could take much longer to heal. Many trees were uprooted by the storms, leaving dead branches that will serve as fuel for fires, adding to those already left behind in the wake of Hurricane Isidore, which ravaged the state of Yucatán in 2002.

currents, especially during the *norte* (north wind) season from November to March, can wreck diving and snorkeling plans. And then there are the street hustlers who will try to arrange your sleeps, eats, drugs and dates. It's easiest just to not give these folks the time of day, though a simple, 'no, gracias' normally suffices.

Getting There & Away

The majority of flights into the peninsula arrive at Aeropuerto Internacional de Cancún, and virtually all flights into Cancún from the rest of the world pass through the US or Mexico City. The region's other four international airports are at Cozumel, Chetumal, Mérida and Campeche, with only Cozumel and Mérida receiving direct flights from the US and Canada.

Getting Around

Before the late 1960s there was little infrastructure in the Yucatán Peninsula, which means that most of the main roads and highways are relatively new, and the construction and expansion of highways, roads and thoroughfares (mostly to facilitate tourism) continues. Except in the downtown areas of Cancún and Mérida, car travel in the Yucatán is convenient and easy.

The bus system in the peninsula is reliable and inexpensive. First- and 2nd-class buses will carry you safely and comfortably between all major cities and towns, and most sites in between. Buses run from the peninsula's major cities (Campeche, Cancún, Chetumal and Mérida) to most other parts of Mexico as well.

QUINTANA ROO

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

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

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

Most trips to Quintana Roo will begin and end in Cancún. Chicer-than-thou Playa del Carmen, Cozumel (truly a diver's delight), and Isla Mujeres round out the overly touristed (but still pretty damned good places to spend your vacation) fairylands of Quintana Roo.

Several hurricanes – Wilma, Emily and Dean to name just the biggies – have slammed into the region in recent years. But Quintana

Roo is too big now to be knocked out by mere hurricane winds. It'll take at least a dozen greedy real-estate developers, a ball of twine and a couple million more complacent visitors to signal the death knell.

The high season for Quintana Roo is July and August, mid-December to mid-January and late February to early March (the US spring break). A week on either side of Easter is also high season, but generally coincides with spring break.

CANCÚN

☎ 998 / pop 526,700

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

Like Las Vegas, Ibiza or Dubai, Cancún is a party city that just won't give up. Top that off with a pretty good beach and you have one of the Western Hemisphere's biggest tourist draws, bringing in as many as 4 million visitors (mostly from the US) each year.

It's hard to believe this little fishing town would become a worldwide phenomenon. In the 1970s Mexico's ambitious planners decided to outdo Acapulco with a brand-new, world-class resort located on the Yucatán Peninsula, and Cancún was born. Although it isn't for everyone – and this type of mass-tourism certainly won't interest all travelers – if you're here, you might as well dig into the kitsch and crap that make this city unique.

Orientation

Cancún is actually made up of two very distinct areas: the downtown area, Ciudad Cancún, and the hotel zone, Zona Hotelera. On the mainland lies Ciudad Cancún. The area of interest to tourists is referred to as *el centro* (downtown). The main north-south thoroughfare is Av Tulum, a 1km-long tree-shaded boulevard lined with banks, shopping centers and restaurants. There are also quite a few nice, small hotels in the downtown area. Though not near the water, the beach is just a taxi or bus ride away from downtown accommodations.

This sandy spit of an island, Isla Cancún, is usually referred to as the Zona Hotelera. Blvd Kukulcán, a four-lane divided avenue,

leaves Ciudad Cancún and goes eastward out on the island for several kilometers, passing condominium developments, several hotels and shopping complexes, to Punta Cancún (Cancún Point) and the Centro de Convenciones (Convention Center).

There aren't many buildings in the Zona Hotelera that have numbered addresses. Instead, because the vast majority of them are on Blvd Kukulcán, their location is described in relation to their distance from Km 0, the boulevard's northern terminus in Ciudad Cancún, identified with a roadside 'Km 0' marker. Each kilometer is similarly marked.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Fama (Map p870; ☎ 884-65-41; Av Tulum 105 SM 22 MA Lotes 27 & 27A)

EMERGENCY

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 884-16-16)

Fire (☎ 060)

Police (Map p869; ☎ 060; Blvd Kukulcán)

Tourist Police (☎ 885-22-77)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés in Cancún centro are plentiful, speedy and cheap, costing M\$15 per hour or less.

LAUNDRY

Lava y Seca (Map p870; ☎ 892-47-89;

Crisantemos 20; per kg M\$15; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat)
Downtown.

LEFT LUGGAGE

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

MEDICAL SERVICES

American Medical Care Center (Map p869; ☎ 884-61-33; Plaza Quetzal, Blvd Kukulcán Km 8)

MONEY

There are several banks with ATMs on Av Tulum, between Avs Cobá and Uxmal.

POST

Main post office (Map p870; ☎ 884-14-18; cnr Avs Xel-Há & Sunyaxché; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Cancún Convention & Visitors Bureau (Map p870; ☎ 884-65-31; Av Cobá; 🕒 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri)
State Tourist Office (Sedetur; Map p870; ☎ 884-80-73; Pecari 23; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Fri)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Nómadas (Map p870; ☎ 892-23-20; www.nomadas.travel.com; Av Cobá 5) Downtown, next to the Soberanas Hostel, Nómadas is a student-oriented agency.

Dangers & Annoyances

Cancún has a reputation for being safe, and the Zona Hotelera is particularly well policed and secure; however, it is always best not to leave valuables unattended in your hotel room or beside your beach towel.

Vehicular traffic on Blvd Kukulkán, particularly as it passes between the malls, bars and discotheques at Punta Cancún, is a serious concern.

A system of colored pennants warns beachgoers of potential dangers:

Blue Normal, safe conditions.

Yellow Use caution; changeable conditions.

Red Unsafe conditions; use a swimming pool instead.

Sights & Activities**MAYA RUINS**

There are two sets of Maya ruins in the Zona Hotelera and, though neither is particularly impressive, both are worth a look if time permits. In the **Zona Arqueológica El Rey** (Map p869; admission M\$34; 🕒 8am-5pm), on the west side of Blvd Kukulkán between Km 17 and Km 18, there's a small temple and several ceremonial platforms.

The other, smaller site is **Yamil Lu'um** (Map p869; admission free), atop a beachside knoll near the Sheraton Cancún hotel. To reach the site visitors must pass through either of the hotels flanking it or approach it from the beach – there is no direct access from the boulevard. The tiny Maya structure and Chac (Maya rain god) statue on the beautifully kept grounds of the Sheraton Hotel are authentic.

BEACHES

Under Mexican law, you have the right to walk and swim on every beach in the country, except those within military compounds. In practice, it is difficult to approach many stretches of beach without walking through the lobby of a hotel, particularly in the Zona Hotelera. However, unless you look suspicious

or like a local (hotels tend to discriminate against locals, particularly the Maya), you'll usually be able to cross the lobby unnoticed and proceed to the beach.

Starting from Ciudad Cancún in the north-west, all of Isla Cancún's beaches are on the left-hand side of the road (the lagoon is on your right; all appear on Map p869). The first beaches are **Playa Las Perlas**, **Playa Juventud**, **Playa Linda**, **Playa Langosta**, **Playa Tortugas** and **Playa Caracol**; after rounding Punta Cancún, the beaches to the south are **Playa Gaviota Azul**, **Playa Chac-Mool**, **Playa Marlin**, the long stretch of **Playa Ballenas** and finally, at Km 17, **Playa Delfines**.

Delfines is about the only beach with a public parking lot; unfortunately, its sand is coarser and darker than the exquisite fine sand of the more northerly beaches.

WATER SPORTS

For decent **snorkeling**, you need to travel to one of the nearby reefs. Resort hotels, travel agencies and various tour operators in the area can book you on day-cruise boats that take snorkelers to the barrier reef, as well as to other good sites within 100km of Cancún. To see the sparse aquatic life off Cancún's beaches, you can rent snorkeling equipment for about M\$100 a day from most luxury hotels.

Scuba Cancún (Map p869; ☎ 849-52-26; www.scubacancun.com.mx; Blvd Kukulkán Km 5.2), a family-owned and PADI-certified dive operation with many years of experience, was the first dive shop in Cancún. It offers a Cancún snorkeling tour for M\$290 and a variety of dive options (including cenote, night and nitrox dives), as well as fishing trips, at reasonable prices (one-/two-tank M\$594/740, equipment rental extra).

Tours

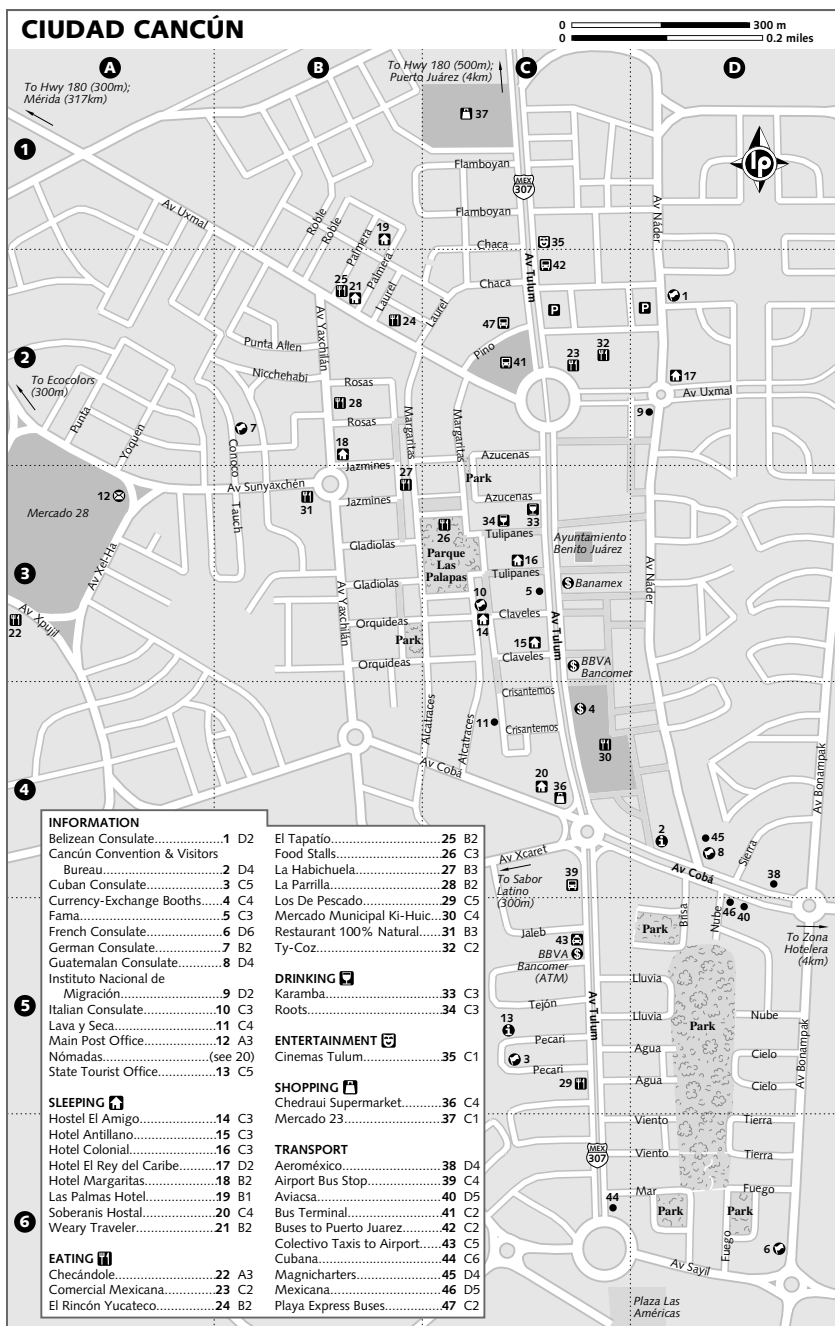
Most hotels and travel agencies work with companies that offer tours to surrounding attractions.

Nómadas Travel (Map p870; ☎ 892-23-20; www.nomadastravel.com; Av Cobá 5) offers a variety of reasonably priced packages to popular destinations.

**Sleeping
DOWNTOWN
Budget**

The area around Parque Las Palapas has numerous hostels and budget digs as well.

Wearly Traveler (Map p870; ☎ 887-01-91; www.wearlytravelerhostel.com; Palmera 30; dm fan/air-con M\$100/110;



Traveler-landia or the hostels near Parque Palapas. Continental breakfast includes freshly squeezed orange juice.

Hostel El Amigo (Map p870; ☎ 892-70-56; Alcatraces 29; dm fan/air-con; M\$120/140; 🏠 🚿 🚰 🚰) Right on the corner of Parque Las Palapas, this small hostel has shiny new shared rooms, a quiet sitting area for a post-beach *cerveza* and, of course, the requisite computers. The dorms have fewer beds than at other hostels, meaning you won't meet tons of travelers, but will probably get a better night's sleep.

Soberanis Hostal (Map p870; ☎ 884-45-64, 800-101-01-01; www.soberanis.com.mx; Av Cobá 5; dm/d M\$120/590; 🏠) It's a good value with a nice location, and is a fun place to meet friends. All rooms have very comfortable beds, tiled floors, cable TV and nicely appointed bathrooms. Though primarily a hotel, the Soberanis also has four-bed 'hostel' rooms with the same amenities as the regular rooms, including free continental breakfast. The cafeteria serves decent lunches and dinners, and the hotel also has a bar, internet facilities (per hr M\$10), a phone center, a tour agency and also a student-oriented travel agency.

our pick Hotel Colonial (Map p870; ☎ 884-15-35; Tulipanes 22; d fan/air-con M\$350/450; 🏠 🚿) Perhaps the best buy in its price range, the Colonial has a central courtyard, super-clean rooms with traditional textile bedspreads and a pleasant central courtyard. Get a room toward the back as the street noise in this party district can be a bit much.

Midrange

Hotel Antillano (Map p870; ☎ 884-11-32, 800-288-70-00; fax 884-18-78; www.hotelantillano.com; Claveles 1; d M\$500-700; 🏠 🚿) A large beige shoebox with a groovy-groupie-bee-bop feel just off Av Tulum, this is a very pleasant and quiet place with a relaxing lobby, nice pool, good central air-con and cable TV. Rooms on Av Tulum are noisier than those in the back. Rates include a welcome drink, continental breakfast and a Zona Hotelera beach pass.

our pick Hotel El Rey del Caribe (Map p870; ☎ 884-20-28; www.reycaribe.com; cnr Avs Uxmal & Náder; d M\$630-820; 🏠 🚿 🚰 🚰 🚰) El Rey is a true eco-tel that composts, employs solar collectors and cisterns, uses gray water on the gardens and even has a few composting toilets. This is a beautiful spot with jungle courtyard, azure swimming pool and small Jacuzzi. Many of the 31 rooms have a fully equipped kitchenette; all

have comfortable beds, hairdryers and safes (you can use your own lock). Two children under 11 can stay for free, and good prices are offered in low season.

Top End

Hotel Margaritas (Map p870; ☎ 884-93-33, 800-537-84-83; www.margaritascancun.com; cnr Avs Yaxchilán & Jazmines; s & d M\$1300, tr M\$1500; 🏠 🚿) The curvaceous swimming pool is eye-catching. The 100 guestrooms are clean but musty, so check and see if one with a balcony is available. If so, they air out nicely. This place is across the street from the Suites Caribe and also sports six floors. There's a (pricey) restaurant, a decent bar, Jacuzzi and helpful staff.

ZONA HOTELERA

Midrange

Sina Suites (Map p869; ☎ 883-10-17; www.cancunsiinasuites.com.mx; Calle Quetzal 33; ste M\$800-2000; 🏠 🚿) Right on the lagoon, this is a great deal in low season, when prices drop by as much as 20%. The hotel was completely renovated after Hurricane Wilma, and its 36 spacious suites are still lookin' good: each with two double beds, a separate living room (with a sofa bed) and satellite TV, a kitchen and one and a half bathrooms. Bring some friends to save money. This gleaming white hotel also has a pool and restaurant surrounded by Brady Bunch-inspired AstroTurf.

Top End

Me by Meliá (Map p869; ☎ 881-25-00; www.mebymelia.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 12; d low/high season M\$1780/3200; 🏠 🚿 🚰 🚰 🚰) 'Enough about you, let's talk about me!' That's the philosophy at this uber-modern, expressionist-inspired hotel. It won't suit everyone, but if you prefer clean lines over your standard Cancún baroque, then Me is the place for you. Only half the rooms have ocean views, and it just ain't worth it to pay this much and not have a view of the Caribbean blue.

Riu Caribe (Map p869; ☎ 848-78-50; www.riu.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 5.5; s low/high season M\$1900/2140, d M\$2690/3860; 🏠 🚿 🚰 🚰 🚰) Riu rules the Riviera Maya – they're everywhere. This particular Riu has 541 rooms (all with ocean views), including 60 junior suites, and a family-friendly atmosphere – head over to the Riu Palace for romance. All come with private terraces that overlook a dazzling swimming pool and 200m of beach. The gorgeous lobby has pretty tiled

floors and stained-glass ceiling, and a nice view of the water. Prices listed are all-inclusive; room-only rates are not available.

Eating

Mercados 23 and 28 have a number of tiny places, and Parque Las Palapas has food stands. These restaurants are all in the downtown area, and there are some good budget places there, too. For groceries, try **Comercial Mexicana** (Map p870; cnr Avs Tulum & Uxmal), a centrally located supermarket close to the bus station.

BUDGET

Los de Pescado (Map p870; Av Tulum 32; ceviche & tacos M\$16-75; ☎ 10am-5:30pm) It's easy to order at this restaurant as there are only two choices: *ceviche* or tacos. Knock either back with a beer or two, and you'll see why this is one of the best budget spots in downtown. With its thatched roof, you can tell the owners take a certain pride in their work – that's why this is always the most crowded restaurant on the block.

Ty-Coz (Map p870; ☎ 884-60-60; Av Tulum; sandwiches M\$30-40; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat) A bakery-café just north of the Comercial Mexicana supermarket. It has granite tabletops and a pleasing ambience, and serves good coffee, baguettes and croissants, as well as sandwiches made with a variety of meats and cheeses. There's also a spot near Km 7.5 on Blvd Kukulcán.

El Tapatío (Map p870; ☎ 887-83-17; cnr Avs Uxmal & Palmera; dishes M\$40-90, set meals M\$35; ☎ 9-11:30am Sun) Touristy but good – a popular choice for hostel-goers, who suck down the mammoth fruit and veggie juices, shakes and smoothies at any time of day.

El Rincón Yucateco (Map p870; Av Uxmal 24; dishes M\$40-100; ☎ noon-10pm Mon-Sat) A reasonably priced Yucatecan place that's across from Hotel Cotty, serving a nice variety of favorites along with very weak 'American'-style coffee. *Sopa de lima* (chicken soup with lime) is light: a good option for anyone nursing a stomach problem (or a hangover).

MIDRANGE

ourpick Checándole (Map p870; ☎ 884-71-47; Av Xpujil 6 SM 27; mains M\$50-130; ☎ daily noon-8pm) This is the must-eat-at restaurant in Cancún. It's a bit away from the city center but well worth the trip. Dressed up with a palapa roof, Checándole specializes in Chilango (Mexico City) cuisine. The *menu del día* (fixed three-course meal) is just M\$45, and great value.

Restaurant 100% Natural (Map p870; ☎ 884-01-02; Av Sunyachén; mains M\$40-150; ☎ 7am-11pm; ♻) Vegetarians and health-food nuts delight in this health food chain near Av Yaxchilán, which serves juice blends (try the 'Crazy Yog' or the 'Vampiro'), a wide selection of yogurt-fruit-vegetable combinations, and brown rice, pasta, fish and chicken dishes. The on-site bakery turns out whole-wheat products, and the entire place is very nicely decorated and landscaped.

La Parrilla (Map p870; ☎ 884-81-93; Av Yaxchilán 51; mains M\$70-370; ☎ noon-2am) Any Cancún eatery founded before the 1980s gets to call itself venerable, and La Parrilla, founded in 1975, should get a capital V. A traditional Mexican restaurant popular with locals and tourists alike, it serves a varied menu from all over Mexico, with Yucatecan specialties thrown in. Try the tasty *calamares al mojo de ajo* (squid in garlic sauce), steaks or sautéed grouper. *Mole* enchiladas and delicious piña coladas both run about M\$60.

TOP END

ourpick La Habichuela (Map p870; ☎ 884-31-58; Margaritas 25; mains M\$150-420) An elegant restaurant with a lovely courtyard dining area, just off Parque Las Palapas. The specialty is shrimp and lobster in curry sauce served inside a coconut with tropical fruit, but almost anything on the menu is delicious. The seafood *ceviche* and *tapa al ajillo* (potatoes in garlic) are mouthwatering.

Drinking

Roots (Map p870; ☎ 884-24-37; Tulipanes 26; cover Fri & Sat M\$50; ☎ 6pm-1am Mon-Sat) Pretty much the hippest downtown bar, it features jazz, reggae or rock bands and the occasional flamenco guitarist. It's also a pretty decent restaurant.

Karamba (Map p870; ☎ 884-00-32; cnr Azucenas & Av Tulum; ☎ 10pm-6am Thu-Sun) Cover ranges from free to M\$70. Come here for a varied crowd of gays, lesbians and cross-dressers.

Entertainment

CINEMAS

Genemark (Map p869; ☎ 883-56-03; La Isla Shopping Village)

NIGHTCLUBS

The Zona Hotelera's main nightlife is loud and booze-oriented. Dance clubs charge around

M\$150 cover. Some don't open before 10pm, and most don't close until dawn.

Coco Bongo (Map p869; ☎ 883-50-61; Forum Mall; 🕒 10:30pm-5am) This is often the venue for MTV's coverage of Spring Break, and tends to be a happening venue just about any day of the week.

DadyO (Map p869; ☎ 800-234-97-97; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9; 🕒 10pm-4:30am) The predominant beats are Latin, house, techno, trance and hip-hop, and the crowd is mainly 20-something.

Sabor Latino (Map p870; ☎ 892-19-16; cnr Avs Xcaret & Tankah; cover men/women M\$60/40, Wed free; 🕒 10:30pm-6am, low season closed Sun-Tue) On the 2nd floor of Chinatown Plaza, the live acts feature Dominican salsa and other tropical styles.

Shopping

Mercado Municipal Ki-Huic (Map p870; Av Tulum) This warren of stalls and shops carries a wide variety of souvenirs and handicrafts.

Locals head to either **Mercado 28** (Map p870) or **Mercado 23** (Map p870) for clothes, shoes, inexpensive food stalls, hardware items and so on. Of the two, Mercado 23 is the least frequented by tourists. If you're looking for a place *without* corny T-shirts, this is where to go.

Across Av Tulum is the **Chedraui supermarket** (Map p870), whose upstairs clothing department sometimes has souvenir-grade items at very affordable prices.

Getting There & Away

AIR

About 8km south of the city center, **Aeropuerto Internacional de Cancún** (Cancún International Airport; ☎ 886-00-47) is the busiest in southeast Mexico. The following airlines service Cancún:

Aeroméxico (Map p870; ☎ 287-18-68; Av Cobá 80) Just west of Av Bonampak.

American Airlines (Map p869; ☎ 800-904-60-00; Hotel Fiesta Americana Coral Beach, Blvd Kukulcán Km 8.7) Has an airport counter as well.

Avianca (Map p870; ☎ 887-42-14; Av Cobá 39) Also has an airport counter.

Azteca (☎ 886-08-31) Airport counter.

Click (☎ 884-20-00) Airport counter.

Continental (☎ 886-00-06, 800-900-50-00; www.continental.com) Airport counter.

Copa (☎ 886-06-53) Airport counter.

Cubana (Map p870; ☎ 887-72-10; Calle Tulum)

Delta (☎ 800-123-47-10, 886-06-68) Airport counter.

Grupo Taca (☎ 886-00-08; www.taca.com) Airport counter.

Magnicharters (Map p870; ☎ 884-06-00; Av Nader 93)

Mexicana (Map p870; ☎ 881-90-90, 24hr 800-502-20-00; Av Cobá 39)

Northwest (☎ 800-907-47-00) Airport counter.

United Airlines (☎ 800-003-07-77; www.united.com) Airport counter.

US Airways (☎ 800-007-88-00; www.usairways.com) Airport counter.

BOAT

There are several embarkation points to reach Isla Mujeres from Cancún, including Punta Sam (M\$15), Puerto Juárez (M\$35) and Zona Hotelera (M\$70). Head to Chiquilá to get to Holbox. While there are ferries to Cozumel from Cancún, you are better off getting there from Playa del Carmen's dock.

See p878 for details of boats to Isla Mujeres and p881 for boats to Isla Holbox.

BUS

The **bus terminal** (Map p870; cnr Avs Uxmal & Tulum) sits where Avs Uxmal and Tulum meet. Services are available in 1st and 2nd class, and in several luxury options. Across from the bus terminal, a few doors from Av Tulum, is the ticket office and mini-terminal of **Playa Express** (Map p870; Pino). It runs shuttle buses down the Caribbean coast to Tulum about every 30 minutes until early evening, stopping at big towns and points of interest en route. See the box on p874 for major daily routes.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Rental-car agencies with facilities at the airport include **Alamo** (☎ 886-01-79), **Avis** (☎ 886-02-22), **Budget** (☎ 884-69-55), **Dollar** (☎ 886-01-79) and **Hertz** (☎ 884-13-26). Hwy 180D, the 238km toll (*cuota*) road running much of the way between Cancún and Mérida, costs M\$329 for the distance and has only two exits before the end. The first, at Valladolid, costs M\$194 to reach from Cancún, and the second, at Pisté (for Chichén Itzá), is an additional M\$48.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

White TTC buses to downtown (M\$80) leave the airport every 20 minutes or so between 5:30am and 11:30pm, stopping in the domestic and international terminals. In town they travel up Av Tulum and will stop on request.

Going to the airport from downtown, the same TTC airport buses ('Aeropuerto Centro') head south on Av Tulum. You can

flag them down anywhere it's feasible, from well north of the bus terminal to well south of Av Cobá.

Colectivos (M\$110) depart for the Zona Hotelera and downtown from in front of the international terminal every 15 minutes.

Cheaper ADO shuttles leave from the domestic terminal for downtown (M\$35) or Playa del Carmen (M\$65). Riviera runs nine express buses to Playa del Carmen between 7am and 7:30pm (M\$80, 45 minutes to one hour).

Taxis into town or to the Zona Hotelera cost up to M\$450 (up to four people) if you catch them right outside the airport. If you follow the access road out of the airport, however, and past the traffic-monitoring booth (a total of about 300m), you can often flag down an empty taxi leaving the airport that will take you for much less (you can try for M\$50).

Colectivos head to the airport from a stand in front of the Hotel Cancún Handall on Av Tulum about a block south of Av Cobá. They charge M\$20 per person and leave when full. The official rate for private taxis is M\$200.

BUS

To reach the Zona Hotelera from downtown, catch any bus with 'R1,' 'Hoteles' or 'Zona Hotelera' displayed on the windshield as it travels along Av Tulum toward Av Cobá, then eastward on Av Cobá. The one-way fare is M\$6.50, but since change is often unavailable this varies between M\$6 and M\$7. To reach Puerto Juárez

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

TAXI

Cancún's taxis don't have meters. Fares are set, but always agree on a price before getting in. From downtown to Punta Cancún is M\$80, to Puerto Juárez M\$30. Hourly and daily rates should run about M\$150 to M\$200 and M\$700 to M\$800 respectively.

ISLA MUJERES

☎ 998 / pop 14,000

If you are going to visit just one of Quintana Roo's islands, then Isla Mujeres (Island of Women) is probably the place for you. It's not as crowded as Cozumel, yet offers more to do and see than chiller-than-thou Holbox. Sure, there are quite a few tacky-tacky tourist shops, but folks still get around by golfcart and the crushed-coral beaches are better than those of Cozumel or Holbox. There's not much here and that's the whole point: come to bask in quiet shallows or stretch out on the sand, to snorkel or scuba dive, or just to put the sunglasses on and open that book you've been dying to finish.

History

The name Isla Mujeres goes at least as far back as Spanish buccaneers, who (legend has

DAILY BUSES FROM CANCÚN

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Chetumal	M\$210	5½-6½hr	frequent
Chichén Itzá	M\$140	3-4hr	hourly from 5am to 5pm
Chiquilá (for Isla Holbox)	M\$70	3½hr	Mayab buses at 7:50am & 12:40pm, Noreste bus at 1:45pm
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	M\$130	3½-4hr	8 daily
Mérida	1st class M\$270	4-6hr	15 daily
	2nd-class M\$200	4-6hr	hourly (5am-5pm)
Mexico City (TAPO)	M\$1100	22-24hr	5 daily
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	M\$1060	24hr	2 daily
Palenque	M\$490	12-13hr	4 daily
Playa del Carmen	M\$34	1-1¼hr	frequent (see also below)
Puerto Morelos	M\$12-17	-	Take Playa del Carmen buses
Ticul	M\$190-220	6hr	6 daily
Tizimín	M\$85	3-4hr	9 daily
Tulum	M\$62	2¼-3hr	frequent
Valladolid	M\$110	2-3hr	frequent
Villahermosa	M\$540	12hr	11 daily



it) kept their lovers in safe seclusion there while they plundered galleons and pillaged ports on the mainland. An alternate theory suggests that in 1517, when Francisco Hernández de Córdoba sailed from Cuba and arrived here to procure slaves, the expedition discovered a stone temple containing clay figurines of Maya goddesses and may have named the island after the icons.

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

Orientation

The island is 8km long, 150m to 800m wide and 11km off the coast. You'll find most of the restaurants and hotels in the town of Isla Mujeres, with the pedestrian mall on Hidalgo serving as the focal point. The ferry arrives in the town proper on the island's northern tip. On the southern tip are the lighthouse and vestiges of the Maya temple. The two are

linked by Av Rueda Medina, a loop road that more or less follows the coast. Between them are a handful of small fishing villages, several saltwater lakes, a string of westward-facing beaches, a large lagoon and a small airstrip.

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

Information

HSBC Bank (Map p876; Av Rueda Medina)

Internet café (Map p876; cnr Matamoros & Guerrero; per hr M\$15; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat) As yet unnamed; offers access to the web.

Lavandería Automática Tim Pho (Map p876; ☎ 877-05-29; cnr Juárez & Abasolo; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) Up to 4kg takes two hours and costs M\$50.

Mañana (Map p876; ☎ 866-43-47; cnr Matamoros & Guerrero; ☎ 10am-7pm) This café (p878) sells books.

Medical Center (Map p876; Guerrero) Between Madero and Morelos.

Police (☎ 877-00-82)

Post office (Map p876; ☎ 877-00-85; cnr Guerrero & López Mateos; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist information office (Map p876; ☎ 877-07-67; Av Rueda Medina; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & Sun)

Sights & Activities

BEACHES & SWIMMING

Once you reach **Playa Norte** (Map p876) the island's main beach, you won't want to leave. Its warm shallow waters are the color of blue-rasperry syrup and the beach is crushed coral. Five kilometers south of town is **Playa Lancheros** (Map p875), the southernmost point served by local buses. The beach is less attractive than Playa Norte, but it sometimes has free musical festivities on Sunday. A taxi ride to Lancheros is M\$20. Another 1.5km south of Lancheros is **Playa Garrafón** (Map p875), with translucent waters, colorful fish and no sand. Avoid the overhyped and overpriced Parque Natural (which has constructed a horrendous eyesore of an observation tower that has you praying for a hurricane) and visit instead **Hotel Garrafón de Castilla** (Map p875; ☎ 877-01-07; Carretera Punta Sur Km 6; admission M\$20; ☎ 9am-5pm), which provides chairs, umbrellas, showers and baths for the entrance fee. Snorkeling gear is M\$60 extra. The hotel rents lockers and towels, and offers snorkeling tours to the offshore reef for M\$200. Taxis from town cost M\$50.

DIVING & SNORKELING

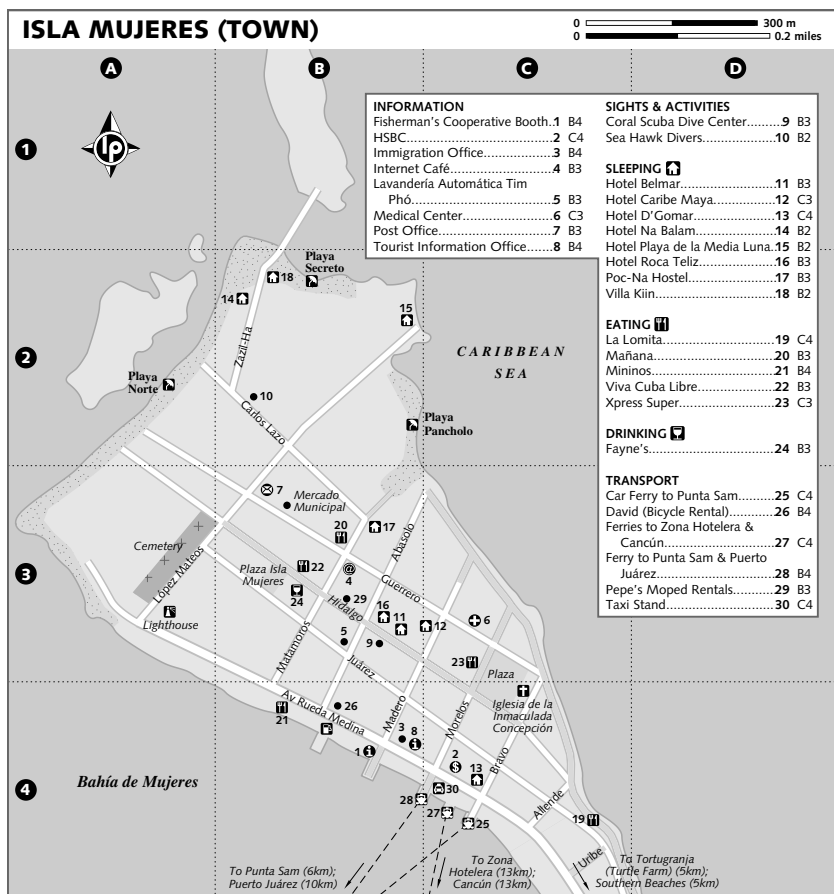
Many of the diving and snorkeling sites in the Cancún–Isla Mujeres area were affected by Hurricanes Emily and Wilma in 2005. That said, hurricane damage is part of natural reef ecology, and the reefs are now growing anew. Within a short boat ride of the island there's a handful of lovely dives, such as Barracuda, La Bandera, El Jigüero and Manchones. You can expect to see sea turtles, rays and barracuda, along with a wide array of hard and soft corals. A popular nonreef dive is **Ultrafreeze** (or El Frío), where you'll see the intact hull of a 60m-long cargo ship – thought to have been deliberately sunk in 30m of water.

Snorkeling with whale sharks (M\$1250) just off Isla Holbox is the latest craze (see

boxed text, p880). The season runs from July through September. Folks at the dive shops listed below can arrange your trip.

To protect and preserve the reefs, a M\$20 fee is charged for all diving and swimming. At all of the reputable dive centers you need to show your certification card, and you will be expected to have your own gear. Equipment rental adds M\$100 to the prices listed here; you'll pay another M\$100 if you need a wetsuit.

Sea Hawk Divers (Map p876; ☎ /fax 877-02-96; www.isla-mujeres.net/seahawkdivers; Carlos Lazo) offers dives for M\$450 (one tank) to M\$600 (two tanks), a resort course for M\$850, PADI Open Water certification (M\$3200), and snorkeling tours from M\$250.



GOING GREEN WITH THE TURTLES

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

In the 1980s, efforts by a local fisherman led to the founding of the **Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm** (Isla Mujeres Tortugranja; Map p875; ☎ 877-05-95; Carretera Sac Bajo Km 5; admission M\$30; ☎ 9am-5pm; ♿), 5km south of town, which protects the turtles' breeding grounds and places wire cages around their eggs to protect against predators.

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

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

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

Coral Scuba Dive Center (Map p876; ☎ 877-07-63; www.coralscubadivecenter.com; Hidalgo) offers dives for M\$290 to M\$590, snorkel trips for M\$220 and a variety of courses.

The fisherfolk of Isla Mujeres have formed a cooperative to offer snorkeling tours of various sites from M\$200, including the reef off Playa Garrafón, and day trips to Isla Contoy for M\$500. You can book through the **Fisherman's Cooperative Booth** (☎ 877-13-63; Av Rueda Medina) in a *palapa* steps away from the dock. Booking here ensures your money goes to locals.

Sleeping

BUDGET

our pick Poc-Na Hostel (Map p876; ☎/fax 877-00-90; www.pocna.com; cnr Matamoros & Carlos Lazo; campsites per person M\$65, dm with/without card M\$90/110, d M\$240-350; ♿ ☎) Mexico's oldest youth hostel, Poc-Na ranks among the country's best. The large main common area has hammocks to chill in and an excellent sound system putting out tunes until the wee hours. The property extends through 100m of sand and coconut palms to the edge of the Caribbean and the hostel's own beach bar. Though there are no cooking facilities for guests, the kitchen serves good, inexpensive food (and beer and wine).

Hotel Roca Teliz (Map p876; ☎ 877-04-07; jccanopus@hotmail.com; cnr Hidalgo & Abasolo; s low/high season M\$100/160, d low/high season M\$160/250; ♿) Good

budget digs, especially for solo travelers, the 'Rock' has a cool central courtyard and dark but clean rooms, and is located right on the Hidalgo pedestrian mall. Add M\$100 for air-con.

Hotel Caribe Maya (Map p876; ☎ 877-06-84; Madero 9; d with fan/air-con M\$250/300; ♿) The old blue tiles need replacing, but this place offers rooms that, though a bit musty, are solid value even in the high season.

MIDRANGE

Hotel D'Gomer (Map p876; ☎ 877-05-41; Av Rueda Medina 150; d with fan M\$350, with air-con low/high season M\$500/650; ♿) A friendly place facing the ferry dock between Morelos and Bravo, this has four floors of attractive, ample and well-maintained rooms. Most have hammocks, and both coffee and water are free.

Hotel Belmar (Map p876; ☎ 877-04-30; fax 877-04-29; www.rolandi.com; Hidalgo 110; d with air-con low/high season M\$350/950, ste with Jacuzzi M\$950/1340; ♿) Above the Pizza Rolandi restaurant and run by the same friendly family. All rooms are comfy and well kept, with tiled floors and (some) balconies. Prices span four distinct seasons.

Villa Kiin (Map p876; ☎ 877-10-24; www.villakiin.com; Calle Zazil-Ha s/n; d M\$990-1690) This is the best buy in this budget range. Beautiful *cabañas* right by the beach offer something similar to what's in Tulum, while palm-shaded hammocks and a common kitchen make it easy to do nothing all afternoon.

TOP END

Hotel Playa de la Media Luna (Map p876; ☎ 887-07-59; www.playamedialuna.com; Sección Rocas, lotes 9 & 10, Punta Nte; old rooms M\$400-600, new rooms M\$950-1500; 🏠 🚿) The budget rooms are a pretty good deal as you get to use the hotel's pool, though the beds are a bit springy. The rooms in the new house are a bit fancier, some with ocean views, all featuring bedspreads that should have left this world when *Three's Company* went off the air. Big spenders should head next door to the Hotel Secreto.

Hotel Na Balam (Map p876; ☎ 877-02-79; fax 877-04-46; www.nabalam.com; Calle Zazil-Ha 118; r low/high season M\$1500/2400, ste M\$3000/3600; 🏠 🚿) Butterflies flit around the beautiful hibiscus and palm garden, and many rooms face Playa Norte. All rooms are decorated with simple elegance, and have safes, hammocks, private balconies or patios...and no TVs. The hotel offers yoga and meditation classes as well as massage services, and has a pool and restaurant.

Eating

our pick **Mañana** (Map p876; ☎ 877-05-55; cnr Matamoros & Guerrero; dishes M\$20-70; 🕒 8am-4pm; 🍴) A good-vibe place with colorful hand-painted tables, super-friendly service and some excellent veggie options – the hummus and veggie baguette is the restaurant's signature dish – Mañana is perhaps the best lunch spot on the island.

La Lomita (Map p876; Juárez; mains M\$40-120; 🕒 9am-10:30pm Mon-Sat) 'The Little Hill' serves good, cheap Mexican food in a small, colorful setting. Seafood and chicken dishes predominate. Try the fantastic bean and avocado soup, or *ceviche*.

Viva Cuba Libre (Map p876; Hidalgo; mains M\$60-90; 🕒 5pm-midnight Tue-Sun) It competes for decibel levels with neighboring restaurants, but really, we all like Cuban *son* more than bad disco remixes, don't we? Apart from that, you get a well-deserved break from Mexican fare with *ropa vieja* (slow-cooked shredded beef), Cuban lobster and other Caribbean favorites. Mojitos are two for M\$50. Viva Cuba indeed!

Mininos (Map p876; Av Rueda Medina; mains M\$60-130; 🕒 11am-9pm) A tiny, colorfully painted shack with a sand floor right on the water, Mininos dishes up cocktails of shrimp, conch and octopus, as well as heaping plates of delicious *ceviche* and seafood soups.

Inside the remodeled **mercado municipal** (town market; Guerrero) are a couple of stalls selling hot

food cheap – a plate of chicken *mole* and rice, or tuna with olives in a tortilla, can go for as little as M\$15.

Xpress Super (Map p876), a chain supermarket on the plaza, has a solid selection of groceries, baked goods and snacks.

Drinking & Entertainment

Isla Mujeres' highest concentration of nightlife is along Hidalgo, and hot spots on or near the beach form an arc around the northern edge of town.

Poc-Na Hostel (Map p876; cnr Matamoros & Carlos Lazo; 🕒 sunset-sunrise) Has a beachfront joint with bonfires and more hippies than all the magic buses in the world. It's a scene, but it's a chill, cooled-out scene.

Fayne's (Map p876; Hidalgo; 🕒 5pm-midnight) One of the latest disco-bar-restaurants, often featuring live reggae, salsa and other Caribbean sounds.

Getting There & Away

There are several points of embarkation to reach Isla Mujeres. The following description starts from the northernmost port and progresses southeast (see Map p869). To reach Puerto Juárez or Punta Sam from downtown Cancún, catch any bus (M\$4) displaying those destinations and/or 'Ruta 13' as it heads north on Av Tulum. Some R1 (Zona Hotelera; M\$6.50) buses make the trip as well; ask before boarding.

PUNTA SAM

Car ferries, which also take passengers, depart from Punta Sam, about 8km north of Cancún center, and take about an hour to reach the island. Departure times are 8am, 11am, 2:45pm, 5:30pm and 8:15pm from Punta Sam, and 6:30am, 9:30am, 12:45pm, 4:15pm and 7:15pm from Isla Mujeres. Walk-ons and vehicle passengers pay M\$15; drivers are included in the fare for cars (M\$190), vans (M\$240), motorcycles (M\$75) and bicycles (M\$60).

PUERTO JUÁREZ

About 4km north of the Cancún city center (15 minutes by bus) is Puerto Juárez. Enclosed, air-con express boats depart from here for Isla Mujeres (M\$35 one-way, 25 minutes) every 30 minutes from 6am to 8:30am, then hourly until 12:30am with a final departure at 9pm; they rarely leave on time.

ZONA HOTELERA

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

El Embarcadero

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

Playa Tortugas

The **Isla Shuttle** (☎ 883-34-48) leaves from the dock on Playa Tortugas (Blvd Kukulcán Km 6.35) at 9:15am, 11:30am, 1:45pm and 3:45pm, returning from Isla Mujeres at 10:15am, 12:30pm, 3:30pm and 6:30pm. The one-way fare is M\$90.

Getting Around

BICYCLE

Cycling is a great way to get around the island. A number of shops rent bikes for about M\$20/80 an hour/day. Some places ask for a deposit of about M\$100. **David** (Map p876; ☎ 044-998-860-00-75; Av Rueda Medina), near Abasolo, has a decent selection.

BUS & TAXI

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

MOTORCYCLE & GOLF CART

Inspect the bike carefully before renting. Costs vary, and are sometimes jacked up

in high season, but generally start at about M\$100 per hour, with a two-hour minimum, M\$300 all day (9am to 5pm) and M\$350 for 24 hours.

Many people find golf carts a good way to get around the island, and caravans of them can be seen tooling down the roads. They average M\$150/450 per hour/day and M\$550 for 24 hours. A good, no-nonsense place for both bikes and golf carts is **Pepe's Moped Rentals** (Map p876; ☎ 877-00-19; Hidalgo).

PARQUE NACIONAL ISLA CONTOY

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

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

For M\$100 per person, a park biologist will take you on a tour of Laguna Puerto Viejo, a prime nesting site; funds go toward park upkeep and research projects. Contact the **park headquarters** (☎ 998-877-01-18) on Isla Mujeres. **Amigos de Isla Contoy** (www.islacontoy.org) has an office in downtown Cancún, and their website has good information on the island's ecology.

Getting There & Away

Daily visits to Contoy are offered by the Isla Mujeres **fisherman's cooperative** (Map p876; ☎ 998-877-13-63; Av Rueda Medina). The trip (M\$500 per person) lasts from 9am to 5pm and includes a light breakfast, lunch (with fish caught en route), snorkeling (gear provided), park admission, scientific information on the island, and your choice of purified water, soft drinks or beer.

ISLA HOLBOX

☎ 984 / pop 2000

Isn't life great when it's low-fi and low-rise? That's the attitude on friendly Isla Holbox (hol-bosh), with its sand streets, colorful Caribbean buildings and lazing, sun-drunk dogs. The water is not the translucent

A GAME OF DOMINOS – SWIM WITH THE WHALE SHARKS

Between mid-May and mid-September, massive whale sharks congregate around Isla Holbox to feed on plankton. The best time to swim with these gentle giants is in July. A trip will cost you M\$800, plus M\$20 to visit the marine reserve.

The WWF has been working with the local community since 2003 to develop responsible practices for visiting the whale sharks. Only three swimmers (including your guide) are allowed in the water at a time when swimming with whale sharks. You are not allowed to touch the fish, and are required to wear either a life vest or a wetsuit to ensure you do not dive below them.

Willy's Tours (x875-20-08; holbox@hotmail.com, Av Tiburón Ballena near Mini Súper Besa) offers whale shark (M\$800 per person), birding (M\$800 to M\$1200 per boat), crocodile (M\$2270 per boat) and fishing (M\$3500 per boat) tours. Boats can accommodate six to 12 people.

turquoise common to Quintana Roo beach sites, because here the Caribbean mingles with the darker Gulf of Mexico.

The island is about 30km long and from 500m to 2km wide, with seemingly endless beaches, tranquil waters and a galaxy of shells in various shapes and colors. Lying within the 1541 sq km Yum Balam reserve, Holbox is home to more than 150 species of bird, including roseate spoonbills, pelicans, herons, ibis and flamingos. In summer, whale sharks congregate relatively nearby in unheard-of quantities.

Orientation & Information

Budget hotels and most of the town's restaurants are clustered around the plaza. A few *cabañas* are further out along the island's northern shore in what locals call the Zona Hotelera. The island has no bank or ATM, and many places to stay and eat do not accept credit cards.

Dial ☎ 066 for police, fire or medical assistance.

Sleeping

Posada La Raza (☎ 875-20-72; Juárez; s with fan/air-con M\$250/400, d with fan/air-con M\$350/500; 🏠) A modest, clean one-story place on the west side of the *parque*. Rooms have one double and one single bed. Fan-cooled rooms have ceiling and pedestal fans, making for good circulation. Guests have use of a small kitchen and hand-laundry facilities, and can hang clothes or sunbathe on the roof.

Posada Los Arcos (☎ 875-20-72; saul954@hotmail.com; Juárez; d with fan M\$350, with air-con M\$400-550; 🏠) Next door to Posada La Raza, this is a touch more upscale. Unfortunately, cracks in the doorframes means tons of mosquitoes can get in (a problem that's easily remedied by

buying a mosquito coil and burning it near the door before you go to bed). Its rooms are located around a central courtyard, and all have hot and cold water. Rates rise by 50% in summer.

ourpick Hotel La Palapa (☎ 875-21-21; www.hotellapalapa.com; d low/high season M\$500/700; 🏠) Arguably the best midrange option on the island, Palapa is brand-spanking new, and offers cozy beachfront rooms, private patios (complete with hammocks), and a cloistered beach area complete with an outdoor *fogata*. It's 100m east of Juárez along the beach.

Posada Mawimbi (☎/fax 875-20-03; www.mawimbi.net; d low/high season M\$400/600, ste low/high season M\$800-1000; 🏠) Mosquito nets are a welcome luxury in this pleasant, two-story place just off the beach and about three blocks east of Juárez. Many rooms also have a balcony and hammock, and some have kitchenettes.

Villas Delfines (☎/fax 875-21-97; www.holbox.com; bungalows M\$1200-1500) This eco-tel on the beach about 1km east of town composts waste, catches rainwater and uses solar power. Its large beach bungalows are built on stilts, fully screened and fan-cooled. The hotel rents kayaks and has a restaurant that offers very reasonable meal plans.

Eating

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

Buena Vista Grill (☎ 875-21-02; mains M\$100-200; ☎ 11am-9pm) This casual eatery next to Faro Viejo has plastic chairs, but serves up grilled fish specialties including whole grilled fish or

fillets wrapped in banana leaves. The day of the week it is closed varies.

ourpick Los Pelicanos (☎ 998-192-45-75; mains M\$60-200; ☎ 5pm-midnight, closed Mon) Half a block south from the plaza's southeast corner, this friendly eatery is lauded by locals as the best restaurant in town. The house specialty is homemade pasta with your choice of sauce. They serve up other Italian favorites and a smattering of seafood dishes, including a pepper-seared tuna and a delicious fish soup.

Getting There & Around

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

Two Mayab buses leave Cancún daily for Chiquilá (M\$70, 3½ hours) at 7:50am and 12:40pm. There's also an Oriente bus from Valladolid (M\$70, 2½ hours) at 2:45am. From Mérida, take an overnight Noreste bus to Chiquilá (M\$124, 7 hours) at 11:30pm.

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

OFF QUINTANA ROO'S BEATEN TRACKS

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

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

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

If you're driving you can either park your vehicle in the Chiquilá parking lot for M\$30 per day (8am to 6pm or any fraction thereof) or take your chances parking it on the pier (which is crowded in high season).

Rentadora El Brother (☎ 875-20-18; cart per hr/day/24hr M\$100/600/800), on Juárez near the beach rents golf carts.

PUERTO MORELOS

☎ 998 / pop 3000

Halfway between Cancún and Playa del Carmen, Puerto Morelos retains its quiet, small-town feel despite the building boom north and south of town. While the village offers enough restaurants and bars to keep you entertained by night, it's really the shallow Caribbean waters that draw visitors here. Unfortunately, Hurricanes Wilma and Emily knocked down most of the beach's lovely palms – those naughty girls. In their munificence, they did leave behind the sparkling sand beaches. One of the best reasons to come to Puerto Morelos is to hit the artisans' market, one block south of the plaza's west corner.

Two kilometers south of the turnoff for Puerto Morelos is the **Jardín Botánico Yaax Che** (admission M\$70; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat; ☎), a 600,000 sq meter nature reserve with nearly 3km of trails through several native habitats.

For chilling cenote action, check out the 'eco-park' **Boca del Puma** (☎ 577-64-20; www.bocadelpuma.com, 16km west of Puerto Morelos, near the village of Vallarta; ☎) or **Siete Bocas** (☎ 13km west of Puerto Morelos, M\$50; ☎), which has seven mouths and some serious tourism development going on.

Orientation & Information

Puerto Morelos' central plaza is 2km east of Hwy 307 nearly at the end of the main road into town (the main dock is the true end of the road). There's an HSBC ATM on the plaza.

Alma Libre Bookstore (☎ 871-07-13; www.alma.librebooks.com; ☎ 10am-3pm & 6-9pm Tue-Sat, 4-9pm Sun, closed Jul-Sep)

Dive Puerto Morelos (☎ 206-90-84; www.divepuerto.morelos.com; ☎ 8am-7pm)

Goyo's (☎ 221-26-79) On the plaza. Offers jungle tours (adult/child under 12 M\$400/200)

Sleeping

Posada Amor (☎ 871-00-33; www.posadaamor.com; s & d from M\$380, tr & q M\$500) About 100m south-west of the plaza, this posada has been in operation for many years. The simple white-walled rooms have some creative touches, and ocean-blue bedspreads seem just right.

Posada El Moro (☎ 871-01-59; www.posadaelmoro.com; Av Gomez; s/d M\$500/750; 📺) It has cheery geraniums in the halls and courtyard, and white walls with red trim. Rooms are slightly stuffy, and some have kitchenettes. All have couches that fold out into futons, and there's a small plunge pool. Rates include continental breakfast. Prices drop substantially in low season. All in all, you're probably better off at the Amor.

Hotel Hacienda Morelos (☎ /fax 871-04-48; www.haciendamorelos.com; d M\$890; 📺 📺) On the waterfront about 150m south of the plaza, the Morelos has 15 very appealing, breezy rooms with sea views, kitchenettes and air-con, as well as a small pool and a good restaurant. This is great value.

Eating

Tío's (mains M\$15-30; 🕒 6am-11pm) A modest, friendly place directly across from the light-house, just off the northeast corner of the plaza. Serves great fish tacos in the morning (three for M\$18!), and good Yucatecan and Mexican dishes.

Le Café d'Amancia (sandwiches M\$20-40; 🕒 8am-3pm & 6-10pm; 🍷) This is a spotlessly clean place with pleasing ambience on the south-west corner of the plaza. It serves bagels, sandwiches, pies, coffee and fruit and veggie *licuados*. There's internet machines (FKA computers) upstairs.

Hola Asia (☎ 871-06-79; mains M\$70-120; 🕒 1-10pm Wed-Mon) On the south side of the plaza, this Asian restaurant has become a local institution.

John Gray's Kitchen (☎ 871-06-55; Av Niños Héroes L6; mains M\$100-200; 🕒 6-10pm Mon-Sat) One block west and two blocks north of the plaza, this 'kitchen' turns out some truly fabulous food. The eclectic menu changes frequently.

Getting There & Away

Most Playa Express and Riviera buses that travel between Cancún and Playa del Carmen drop you on the highway. Some Mayab buses enter town; the Riviera bus running between

Cancún airport and Playa del Carmen will sometimes enter the town on request. The 2nd-class bus fare from Cancún is M\$17. *Colectivos* to/from Cancún cost M\$4.

Taxis are usually waiting at the turnoff to shuttle people into town (M\$20), and there's often a taxi or two near the plaza to shuttle people back to the highway.

PLAYA DEL CARMEN

☎ 984 / pop 100,400

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

With daily cruise ship visitors, Playa is starting to feel like a mass-tourism destination, but it retains its European chic, and one need just head two blocks west of haughty-taughty 5 Av to catch glimpses of real Mexico.

Orientation & Information

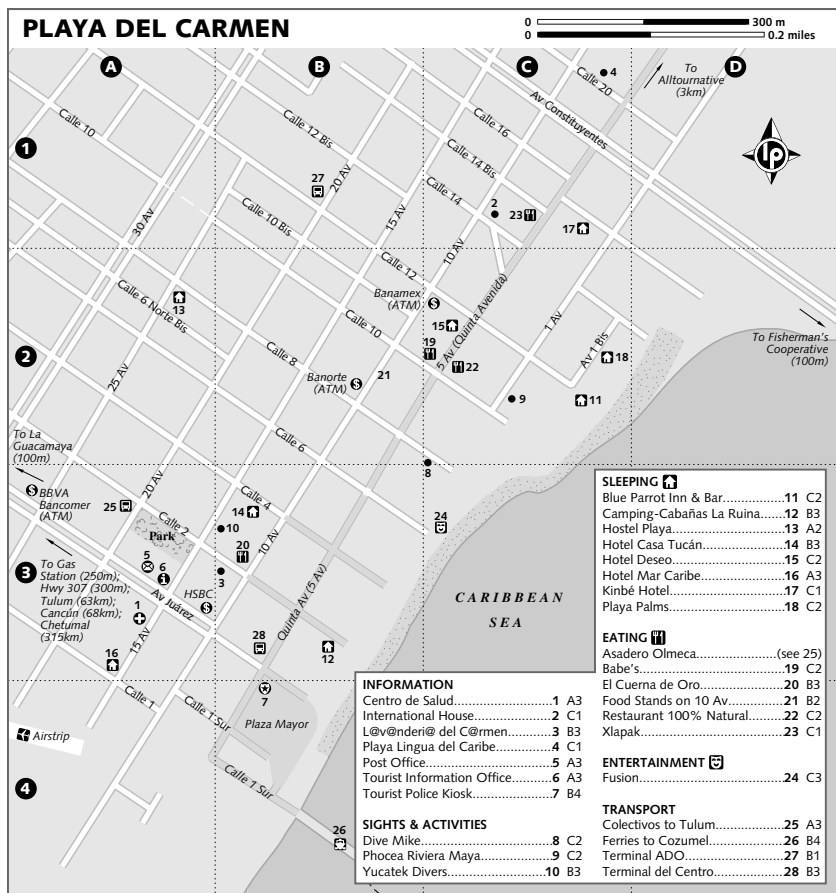
Playa is mostly laid out on an easy, one-way grid. Quinta Av (*keen-ta*; 5 Ave) is the most happening street in town, especially along its pedestrian stretch (the Tourist Zone). La Nueva Quinta begins at Calle 22 and stretches north for 10 blocks. The main bus terminal is at the intersection of Quinta Av and Juárez, but there is another one further away on Calle 12.

Banamex (nr Calle 12 & 10 Av)

Centro de Salud (☎ 873-04-93; nr 15 Av & Av Juárez)

THOSE MYSTERIOUS ALUXES

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



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

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

Tourist information office (☎ 873-28-04; cnr Av Juárez & 15 Av; ☎ 9am-8:30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun)

Tourist police kiosk (☎ 873-26-56; ☎ 24hr)

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

Dive Mike (☎ 803-12-28; www.divemike.com; Calle 8) offers snorkeling tours for M\$350. To tag along on a dive boat is M\$100.

At **Phocea Riviera Maya** (☎ 873-12-10; www.phoecarivieramaya.com; 1 Av) French, English and Spanish are spoken. **Yucatek Divers** (☎ 803-13-63; www.yucatek-divers.com; 15 Av) has German,

French, English, Spanish and Dutch speakers, and offers handicapped/limited-mobility dives.

BEACHES

Beachgoers will agree that it's pretty darn nice here. If crowds aren't your thing, go north of Calle 38, where a few scrawny palms serve for shade. Many go topless in Playa (though it's not a common practice in most of Mexico, and generally frowned upon by locals – except the young bucks, of course). Mamita's Beach, north of Calle 28, is considered the best place to free the girls.

FISHING

Fisherman's Cooperative (☎ 984-1309892; kabulyuc@hotmail.com; Beachfront kiosk near Av Constituyentes) This

DETOUR: CRISTALINO CENOTE

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

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

co-op has four-hour that trips run from M\$1800 to M\$2100.

ENTERTAINMENT RESORTS

Xcaret (☎ 984-871-52-00; www.xcaret.com; adult/child 5-12yr M\$676/338, with buffet & snorkel gear M\$971/481; ☎ 8:30am-9pm), 10km south of Playa del Carmen, and **Xel-Há** (☎ 998-883-32-93; www.xel-ha.com; adult/child 5-11yr M\$382/264; ☎ 9am-6pm; ♿), 45km south of Playa del Carmen, are two 'eco-resorts'. Both have Disney-esque activities, high price tags and questionable environmental records.

TOURS

Alltournative (☎ 873-20-36; www.alltournative.com; Av 38 Nte, L3 M200; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Packages include zip-lining, rappelling and kayaking, plus custom-designed trips. It also takes you to nearby Maya villages for an 'authentic' experience, which could easily be had on your own.

Courses

International House (☎ 803-33-88; www.ihriveramaya.com; Calle 14) has Spanish classes (M\$2000), residence hall (M\$300 per night) and home stays (M\$280 per night). **Playa Lingua del Caribe** (☎ 873-38-76; www.playalingua.com; Calle 20) offers Spanish (M\$1850), Maya or cooking classes.

Sleeping**BUDGET**

Hostel Playa (☎ 803-32-77; www.hostelplaya.com; Calle 8; dm M\$120, d M\$300, tr M\$450) While it's a bit away from the center, this is Playa's best youth hostel. The best thing about this spirited place is the ambience: it has a huge, central common area and a great kitchen, and both beer and spirits are allowed until 12:30am, when people either head to bed or go out to the clubs.

Camping-Cabañas La Ruina (☎ /fax 873-04-05; laruina@prodigy.net.mx; Calle 2; campsites or hammock spaces

per person M\$100, d without bathroom M\$200, d M\$300-550; ♿) Pitch your tent or hang your hammock in a large lot near the beach. It's very casual, and beach gear can be stored (insecurely) in the courtyard. Some rooms have ceiling fans, some have air-con – the cheapest are bare and bleak, and the most expensive front the beach.

Hotel Mar Caribe (☎ 873-02-07; cnr 15 Av & Calle 1; r M\$350-550; ♿) A simple, secure and very clean nine-room place with mostly fan-cooled rooms (there's three rooms with air-con). The owners speak French, Spanish and some English. One can almost imagine Steinbeck working on a novel at one of the dark wooden tables.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Casa Tucán (☎ /fax 873-02-83; www.casatucan.de; Calle 4; r M\$500-650; ♿ ♿) This German-run hotel is a warren of 29 rooms of several types. Rooms have fans or air-con, a couple have kitchenettes, and the cheapest don't have bathrooms. The Tucán has a swimming pool, a pleasant tropical garden and a café serving good, affordable food.

Playa Palms (☎ 803-39-08; www.playapalms.com; Av 1 Bis, btwn Calles 12 & 14; d low/high season M\$720/1330; ♿ ♿) A rip-roaring deal in low season (get the best price online), Playa Palms is right on the beach. The shell-shaped rooms have balconies that look out to the ocean past the curly-whirly dip pool. Go with the cheaper studios to get the best views at the best price. All rooms have kitchenettes.

our pick Kinbé Hotel (☎ 873-04-41; www.kinbe.com; Calle 10; d low/high season M\$640/830, ste M\$1220/1690; ♿) An Italian-owned and operated hotel, it has 29 clean, simple but elegant rooms with lovely aesthetic touches, azure bedspreads, a gorgeous lush courtyard garden and a breezy rooftop terrace with fab views from the 3rd floor.

TOP END

Blue Parrot Inn (☎ 206-33-50, in the US 800-435-0668; Calle 12; r M\$2330-5370; 📶 📺 📺) Many of the charming units have terraces, sea views and full kitchens. But it's a bit pricey to not be right on the ocean. It also has an immensely popular bar, the Blue Parrot (right).

Hotel Deseo (☎ 879-36-20; www.hoteldeseo.com; 5 Av; d M\$1680-2380; 📶 📺 📺) If you can still afford your rock-and-roll lifestyle, then you're going to love the hi-fi lounge atmosphere of Deseo. There's a very chill lounge and plunge pool right in front of your blindingly white room (white is evidently the color of desire).

Eating

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

El Cuerna de Oro (cnr Calle 2 & 10 Av; set meals US\$3-5; 🕒 7am-10pm) Hearty, home-style set meals are served in this casual eatery near the bus station. You get a giant portion of your selected dish (the three or four options change nightly) plus rice, beans and unlimited refills of the nightly drink, such as hibiscus water or iced tea. The breakfasts are skippable.

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

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

ourpick Restaurant 100% Natural (☎ 873-22-42; cnr Quinta Av & Calle 10 mains M\$35-100; 🕒 7am-11pm; 🍷) The trademarks of this quickly establishing chain – vegetable- and fruit-juice blends, salads, various vegetable and chicken dishes and other healthy foods – are delicious and filling.

Xlapak (☎ 879-35-95; Quinta Av; breakfast M\$30, lunch & dinner M\$70-180; 🕒 8am-11pm) Serves delicious food at unbelievably low prices. Lunch and dinner consists of a starter, a main dish (accompanied by rice, steamed veggies and garlic bread) and a dessert. Try the chicken with *chaya* (a spinachlike green) salsa and wash it down with one of a wide selection of juices and drinks. The restaurant is very nicely done up like a Maya temple, with faithfully rendered reproductions of Maya murals and plants everywhere.

Entertainment

Venues here come and go, so ask around if you're wondering where the party is (or where it isn't).

Blue Parrot Bar (☎ 873-00-83; Calle 12 at beach; 🕒 11am-4am) This is the Blue Parrot Inn's immensely popular open-sided *palapa* beach-front bar with swing chairs, a giant outdoor dance stage, indoor section if the weather's bad...and lots of sand.

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

Getting There & Away**BOAT**

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

BUS

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

The old bus station, **Terminal del Centro** (cnr Av Juárez & Quinta Av), gets all the 2nd-class (called 'intermedio' by such lines as Mayab) services. Riviera buses to Cancún and its airport have a separate ticket counter on the Av Juárez side of the terminal.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Cancún	M\$34	1hr	numerous 4am-midnight
Cancún International Airport	M\$80	45min-1hr	frequent 8am-6:15pm
Chetumal	1st-class M\$19	5-5½hr	9 daily
	2nd-class M\$18	5-5½hr	frequent 1:30am- 11:15pm
Chichén Itzá	M\$18	3-4hr	1 daily
Cobá	M\$68	1-1¼hr	2 daily
Mérida	M\$310	5hrs	frequent
Palenque	M\$540	12-13hr	1 daily
San Cristóbal de Las Casas	M\$780	16-18hr	1 daily
Tulum	M\$22	1hr	frequent
Valladolid	M\$77- 140	2½-3½hr	2 daily

COLECTIVOS

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

ISLA COZUMEL

☎ 987 / pop 73,200

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

While diving and snorkeling are the main draws around here, the tourist zone offers lots of shopping 'deals' (often not very cheap) and a pleasant town square to spend the afternoon. In February there is a festive Carnival, which brings dancers festooned with feathers out into the streets. There

are also some small Maya ruins and a few eco-themed parks.

History

Maya settlement here dates from AD 300. During the Postclassic period Cozumel flourished as a trade center and, more importantly, a ceremonial site. Every Maya woman living on the Yucatán Peninsula and beyond was expected to make at least one pilgrimage here to pay tribute to Ixchel (the goddess of fertility and the moon) at a temple erected in her honor. Archaeologists believe this temple was at San Gervasio, a bit north of the island's geographical center.

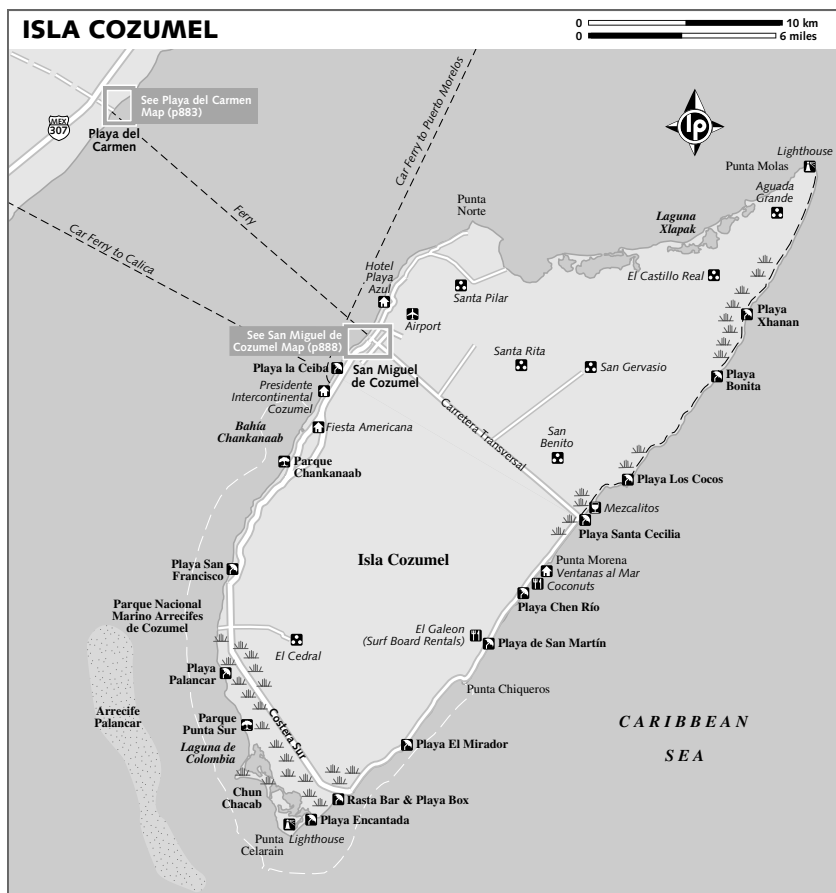
At the time of the first Spanish contact with Cozumel (in 1518, by Juan de Grijalva and his men), there were at least 32 Maya building groups on the island. According to Spanish chronicler Diego de Landa, a year later Cortés sacked one of the Maya centers but left the others intact, apparently satisfied with converting the island's population to Christianity. Smallpox introduced by the Spanish wiped out half the 8000 Maya and, of the survivors, only about 200 escaped genocidal attacks by conquistadors in the late 1540s.

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

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

Orientation & Information

It's easy to make your way on foot around the island's only town, San Miguel de Cozumel. The waterfront boulevard is Av Rafael Melgar; along Melgar south of the main ferry dock



(Muelle Fiscal) is a narrow sand beach. The main plaza is opposite the ferry dock. The airport is 2km northeast. There are ATMs, banks and internet joints on the plaza.

Cozumel Hyperbaric Research (Map p888; ☎ 872-01-03; Calle 6 Nte) In the Médica San Miguel clinic.

Express Lavandería (Map p888; ☎ 872-29-32; Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-4pm Sun) Self-serve washing and drying costs M\$50 per load.

Fama (Map p888; ☎ 872-50-20; Av 5 Nte; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sun) Carries books and periodicals in English and Spanish.

Post office (Map p888; cnr Calle 7 Sur & Av Rafael Melgar; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist information booth (Map p888; ☎ tourist information 869-02-11) Operated by the town's tourist information office.

Tourist police (Map p888; cnr Calle 11 Sur & Rafael Melgar; ☎ 8am-11pm) Patrol the island and staff a kiosk.

Sights & Activities

MUSEO DE LA ISLA DE COZUMEL

Exhibits at this fine museum (Map p888; ☎ 872-14-34; Av Rafael Melgar; admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-5pm) present a clear and detailed picture of the island's flora, fauna, geography, geology and ancient Maya history.

DIVING

Despite the massive hit of Hurricane Wilma, Cozumel – and its 65 surrounding reefs – remains one of the most popular diving destinations in the world. It has fantastic year-round visibility (commonly about) and a

SAN MIGUEL DE COZUMEL

0 500 m
0 0.3 miles



To Hotel Playa Azul (14km)
To Airport (2.2km)

Blvd Aeropuerto Internacional

To Hotel Playa Azul (14km)

To Car Ferry Docks (7km);
Luxury Hotels (7km)

Palacio Municipal
Calle 15 Sur
Calle 17 Sur

Park
Calle 13 Sur

Av Rafael Melgar
Calle 11 Sur
Calle 9 Sur
Calle 7 Sur
Calle 5 Sur
Calle 3 Sur
Calle 1 Sur

Plaza Mayor
HSBC
Calle 2 Norte
Calle 4 Norte
Calle 6 Norte
Calle 8 Norte
Calle 10 Norte
Calle 12 Norte

Passenger Ferry Dock (Muelle Fiscal)

Cruise Ship Dock

Av Benito Juárez
Av 1 Sur
Av 3 Sur
Av 5 Sur
Av 7 Sur
Av 9 Sur
Av 11 Sur
Av 13 Sur
Av 15 Sur
Av 17 Sur
Av 19 Sur
Av 21 Sur
Av 23 Sur
Av 25 Sur
Av 27 Sur
Av 29 Sur
Av 31 Sur

Av 60 Norte
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Av 25 Norte
Av 20 Norte
Av 15 Norte
Av 10 Norte
Av 5 Norte

Av 75 Norte
Av 70 Norte
Calle 2 Norte
Calle 1 Sur
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Calle 5 Sur
Calle 7 Sur
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Calle 13 Sur
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Calle 17 Sur
Calle 19 Sur
Calle 21 Sur
Calle 23 Sur
Calle 25 Sur
Calle 27 Sur
Calle 29 Sur
Calle 31 Sur

To Mezcalites (10km);
Ventanas al Mar (14km);
Cocumús (14km)

INFORMATION	SLEEPING
Centro Médico de Cozumel.....1 E4	Hacienda San Miguel.....11 D1
Cozumel Hyperbaric Research (Hyperbaric Chamber).....2 D2	Hostelo Affordable + Clean.....12 C2
Cruz Roja.....3 C3	Hotel Bahía.....13 C2
Express Lavandería.....4 C3	Hotel Cozumel Inn.....14 C2
Fama.....5 C2	Hotel Edem.....15 C2
Post Office.....6 B3	Hotel Flamingo.....16 D1
Tourist Information Booth.....7 C2	Hotel Peplita.....17 C3
Tourist Police Kiosk.....8 A4	Suites Vima.....18 D2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	EATING
Cocina Mexicana Los Rios.....19 B3	Café.....20 B3
Deep Blue.....9 C1	Coffeella.....21 B3
Museo de la Isla de Cozumel.....10 C1	Los Dorados de Villa.....22 C2
	Mercado Municipal.....23 D3
	Pancho's Backyard.....24 D1
	Restaurant La Chozza.....25 C3
	Taquería El Sillo.....26 D2
	DRINKING
	La Abuelita.....27 C2
	Mameli.....28 D2
	ENTERTAINMENT
	Estadio Javier Rojo Gomez.....29 D3
	TRANSPORT
	ADO Terminal.....30 D2
	Rentadora Ista.....31 C2

CARIBBEAN
SEA

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D

C

B

A

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Please consider the following tips when diving, and help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs:

- Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms, or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, touch only exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible, as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells, or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimize your disturbance of marine animals. *Never* ride on the backs of turtles.

For important diver safety information, please refer to the boxed text, p964.

jaw-droppingly impressive variety of marine life that includes spotted eagle rays, moray eels, groupers, barracudas, turtles, sharks, brain coral and some huge sponges. The island has strong currents (normally around 3 knots), making drift dives the standard, especially along the many walls. Always keep an eye out (and your ears open) for boat traffic as well. It's best not to snorkel alone away from the beach area.

The top dives in the area include **Santa Rosa Wall**, **Punta Sur Reef**, **Colombia Shallows** and **Palancar Gardens**. Prices vary, but in general expect to pay about M\$880 for a two-tank dive (less if you bring your own BCD and regulator), M\$650 for an introductory 'resort' course and M\$4000 for PADI open-water certification. For more information, pick up a copy of Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling Cozumel*.

There are scores of dive operators on Cozumel. The following are some reputable ones that come recommended. Some offer snorkeling and deep-sea fishing trips, as well as dives and diving instruction.

Deep Blue (Map p888; ☎ /fax 872-56-53; www.deep

bluecozumel.com; Av 10 Sur) This PADI, NAUI, TDI and IANTD operation has very good gear and fast boats that give you a chance to get more dives out of a day.

Victor Brito Barreiro (☎ /fax 872-32-23; www.angel fire.com/ga/cozumeldiving/MMT.htm) Based south of town. Victor is head of Cozumel's diving instructors association and has many years of experience. Highly recommended.

If you encounter a decompression emergency, head immediately to one of Cozumel's hyperbaric chambers (p887).

SNORKELING

Good snorkeling can be found at Casitas and Dzul-Há. Snorkelers are required to pay M\$20 for park admission. The best snorkeling sites are reached by boat. A half-day boat tour will cost from M\$350 to US\$500. **Ramón Zapata** (☎ 044-987-100-22-56) runs snorkeling trips leaving from Playa Palancar for about M\$250 per person, but you'll need to make your own way to the beach.

EXPLORING THE REST OF THE ISLAND

In order to see most of the island you will have to rent a vehicle or take a taxi; cyclists

will need to brave the regular strong winds. The following route will take you south from San Miguel, then counterclockwise around the island. There are some places along the way to stop for food and drink, but it's good to bring water all the same.

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

Parque Chankanaab

This **park** (Map p887; admission M\$160; ☎ 7am-6pm; ♿) is a popular snorkeling spot, especially when cruise ships are in port, though there's not a lot to see in the water beyond some brightly colored fish and deliberately sunken artificial objects. The beach is a nice one, though, and 50m inland is a limestone lagoon surrounded by iguanas and inhabited by turtles. You're not allowed to swim or snorkel there, but it's picturesque all the same. The beach is lined with *palapas* and fiberglass lounge chairs, and you can rent snorkel and dive equipment.

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

El Cedral

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

Playa Palancar

About 17km south of town, Palancar is another great beach. It has a beach club renting hydro bikes, kayaks, snorkel gear and sail-

boats, plus a restaurant and a dive operation. Near the beach, Arrecife Palancar (Palancar Reef) has some very good diving (Palancar Gardens), as well as fine snorkeling (Palancar Shallows), though the shallow spots were marked by Wilma.

Parque Punta Sur

The southern tip of the island has been turned into a rather overpriced 'ecotouristic' **park** (Map p887; ☎ 872-09-14; admission M\$100; ☎ 9am-5pm). Visitors board an open vehicle for the 3km ride to visit picturesque Celarain **lighthouse** and the small nautical museum at its base. Another vehicle carries visitors to **Laguna de Colombia**, part of a three-lagoon system that is the habitat of crocodiles and many resident and migratory waterfowl. Crocs can be seen (when they feel like it) from shore, via a trail through mangrove or a bridge over the lagoon.

East Coast

The eastern shoreline is the wildest part of the island and presents some beautiful seascapes and many small blowholes (there's a bunch around Km 30.5). Swimming is dangerous on most of the east coast because of riptides and undertows. With a bit of care you can sometimes swim at Punta Chiqueros, Playa Chen Río and Punta Morena. As you travel along the coast, consider stopping for lunch or a drink at the Rasta Bar (Km 29.5), El Galeon (Km 43.1) or Coconuts (Km 43.5). El Galeon rents surf and boogie boards for M\$200 and M\$70 per hour, respectively.

Punta Molas

Beyond where the east coast highway meets the Carretera Transversal, intrepid travelers may take a poorly maintained, infrequently traveled and almost impossible to find track toward Punta Molas, the island's northeast point, accessible only by all-terrain vehicles (ATV) or on foot. About 17km up the road are the Maya ruins known as **El Castillo Real**, and a few kilometers further is **Aguada Grande**. Both sites are quite far gone, their significance lost to time. In the vicinity of Punta Molas are some fairly good beaches and a few more minor ruins.

San Gervasio

This **Maya complex** (Map p887; admission M\$60; ☎ 7am-4pm) is Cozumel's only preserved ruins, and

a prime example of the local government's efforts to milk dollars out of cruise-ship passengers. San Gervasio is thought to have been the site of the sanctuary of Ixchel, goddess of fertility, and thus an important pilgrimage site at which Maya women – in particular prospective mothers – worshipped. But its structures are small and crude, and the clay idols of Ixchel were long ago destroyed by the Spaniards.

Sleeping

BUDGET

ourpick Hostelito Affordable + Clean (Map p888; ☎ 869-81-57; www.hostelito.com; Av 10; dm/d M\$120/350) The name says it all: this brand-spanking new Hostelito is affordable *and* clean. There's one shared dorm room downstairs for boys and girls with bamboo privacy screens, giant lockers and amazingly clean showers. Upstairs you'll find a great terrace, kitchen and common area, as well as a six-person group room and two doubles. They have wi-fi and luggage storage.

Hotel Edem (Map p888; ☎ 872-11-66; Calle 2 Nte 124; d with fan/air-con M\$180/320; 🏠) A great location and saintly rates make the Edem a prime deal. It has a turtle-filled fountain and a friendly Siamese cat, and the no-nonsense señora keeps the doors locked after 9pm. Rooms are clean and simple, with hammock hooks and scalding hot showers. There's a deposit for the threadbare towels (like anyone would run off with them!).

Hotel Cozumel Inn (Map p888; ☎ 872-03-14; fax 872-31-56; Calle 4 Nte; d with fan/air-con M\$320/370; 🏠 🏠) A green building with 26 well-maintained rooms with good beds and a small (sometimes suspect!) swimming pool, the Cozumel is a good deal, especially in high season. Mustiness airs out quickly.

Hotel Pepita (Map p888; ☎ /fax 872-00-98; Av 15 Sur; d M\$400; 🏠) The HP's owner, María Teresa, takes pride in her work, and it shows. This is the best economy hotel in the city. It's friendly, with well-maintained rooms grouped around a garden. All have two double beds, refrigerators and air-con (many catch a good breeze), and there's free morning coffee.

MIDRANGE

Suites Vima (Map p888; ☎ /fax 872-51-18; Av 10 Nte; s/d M\$400/500; 🏠 🏠) Has spotless and spacious modern rooms with tiled floors, Barney Rubble-hard beds, good air-con and bath-

rooms, fridges, tables and chairs. The decor is mint green, highlighted by other pastels. A small swimming pool with a current to swim against lies in a green area in back. No kids aged under 13, please.

Hotel Bahía (Map p888; ☎ 872-90-90, 800-227-26-39; www.suitesbahia.com; cnr Av Rafael Melgar & Calle 3 Sur; d incl breakfast with balcony/ocean view M\$660/800; 🏠 🏠) Offers some rooms with sea views and balconies. All rooms have cable TV, fridge and air-con. Rates include continental breakfast.

Hotel Flamingo (Map p888; ☎ 872-12-64; www.hotelflamingo.com; Calle 6 Nte 81; r M\$850-1600; 🏠) The colorful Hotel Flamingo is a nicely decorated place with spacious air-conditioned rooms (some with fridges) sporting direct-dial phones. Common areas include a leafy courtyard where you can eat breakfast, a 2nd-floor pool table, a bar, and a rooftop sundeck with good sea views. Wi-fi access makes it a good choice for laptop-toters. Make reservations via the internet to save a few pesos.

TOP END

Hacienda San Miguel (Map p888; ☎ 872-19-86; www.haciendasanmiguel.com; Calle 10 Nte; r from M\$1050; 🏠) It's a quiet place built and furnished to resemble an old hacienda, and niceties such as bathrobes and continental breakfast served in your room make this very good value. It offers divers' packages, and long stays can bring rates down by amazing amounts. Check the web for deals.

Presidente Intercontinental Cozumel (Map p887; ☎ 872-95-00; www.intercontinental.com; Carretera a Chankanaab Km 6.5; r from M\$2000; 🏠 🏠) This is one of the island's oldest luxury hotels. It has a lovely beach and 253 posh guestrooms, many with sea views, set amid tropical gardens and swimming pools. Wild (large!) iguanas roam the grounds. Unlike the all-inclusives further south, the Presidente is sufficiently close to town to allow you several dining options; truth be told, the city has grown south around the hotel.

Hotel Playa Azul (Map p887; ☎ 869-51-60; www.playa-azul.com; Carretera a San Juan Km 4; d/ste from M\$2350/2800; 🏠 🏠) This is in the sedate area north of town on its own pretty little stretch of beach (it's not deep but it's a gem), and there's good snorkeling (current is sometimes strong). All rooms have a sea view, a balcony or terrace, and one king or two queen beds. The hotel has a bar, restaurant and gorgeous

pool, and guests can play golf free at a nearby course. They still get you with a mandatory M\$250 cart fee.

Eating

BUDGET

Cheapest of all eating places are the little market *loncherías* (lunch stalls) next to the Mercado Municipal on Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas between Ays 20 and 25 Sur.

Taquería El Sitio (Map p888; Calle 2 Nte; M\$15-30; ☎ 7am-1pm) For scrump-diddily-umptious tacos and tortas, head over to El Sitio. They fancied-up the canopy-covered eating area with a mural of a cruise ship and jumping dolphins. It's two doors east of the Hotel Edem.

our pick Coffeelia (Map p888; ☎ 872-74-02; Calle 5 Sur; breakfast M\$40-70, set meals M\$57; ☎ 7:30am-11pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun; ☎) A great way to start or finish the day: head over to Coffeelia for warm smiles and delicious food – and great coffees, including espressos. Coffeelia (rhymes with Ophelia) is a focal point for Cozumel's art community. The menu includes quiche, good salads and vegetarian dishes, and organic Chiapas coffee roasted fresh locally. Thursday is story night in the pleasant garden area.

Cocina Mexicana Los Ríos (Map p888; ☎ 987-800-90-43; cnr Av 5 Sur & Calle 7 Sur; mains M\$30-40; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Sat) *Ceviches*, chicken and seafood: all simple and good. Red plastic furniture and Bellafonte tunes are part of this cheap, clean café not far from the post office. *Comida corridas* (prix-fixe menus) are M\$30 (a smoking deal), and get you a main entrée, a soup, tortillas, soda or other nonalcoholic drinks and dessert.

Costa Brava (Map p888; ☎ 869-00-93; Calle 7 Sur 57; mains M\$50-120; ☎ 6:30am-11pm) Painted in bright, preschool primary colors, this casual place with its lovely *Virgencita* shrine has good prices on lobster dishes, chicken and shrimp.

Los Dorados de Villa (Map p888; ☎ 872-01-96; cnr Calle 1 Sur & Av 4 Sur; mains M\$50-120; ☎ 8am-midnight) Near the edge of the plaza, it specializes in food from the Distrito Federal (Mexico City and surroundings), but has a wide variety of Mexican dishes including seafood and cuts of meat. The spinach crêpes are great as are the complimentary chips.

Restaurant La Choza (Map p888; ☎ 872-09-58; cnr Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas & Av 10 Sur; mains M\$80-170; ☎ 7am-10:30pm) An excellent and popular

restaurant specializing in authentic regional cuisine. All mains come with soup. La Choza sometimes offers a *comida corrida* (M\$100) in the afternoon.

Pancho's Backyard (Map p888; ☎ 872-21-41; cnr Av Rafael Melgar & Calle 8 Nte; mains M\$110-160; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 4-10:30pm Sun) Very atmospheric, set in a beautifully decorated inner courtyard. The food's not bad, either!

Entertainment

Cozumel's nightlife is quiet and subdued. Try the plaza first if you're looking to mingle with the wilder cruise-ship crowd. You are best off asking around, as the clubs change frequently.

La Abuelita (Map p888; cnr Calle 1 Sur & Av 10 Sur) Grab a drink with locals at the 'little grandma.' Turns out granny is quite an enterprising lady: there's an Abuelita Dos and Tres in other parts of town.

Manati (Map p888; cnr Calle 8 Nte & Av 10 Nte) Get there early for the *comida corrida* or stay late to listen to live music (Thursday to Saturday) in this cute bistro-bar combo.

Estadio Javier Rojo Gómez (Map p888; cnr Av Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas & Av 30 Sur) hosts rock concerts, *lucha libre* wrestling matches and just about any other event you can think of.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Some airlines fly direct from the USA; European flights are usually routed via the USA or Mexico City. **Continental** (☎ 800-900-50-00, in the US & Canada 800-231-0856; www.continental.com) has direct flights from Newark and Houston. **Delta** (☎ 800-123-47-10, in the US & Canada 800-241-4141; www.delta.com) has a direct flight from Atlanta. **Mexicana** (☎ 800-801-20-10; www.mexicana.com) flies direct to Mexico City, Miami and Dallas. There are currently no direct flights from Cancún to Cozumel; you'll need to fly through Mexico City. In the end, you're better off taking a bus-ferry combo.

BOAT

Passenger ferries run to Cozumel from Playa del Carmen, and vehicle ferries leave the Calica facility (officially known as the Terminal Marítima Punta Venado) south of Playa del Carmen. However, the vehicle ferry does not take rentals. Unless you're driving your own car, use the Playa passenger ferry

(M\$110 one-way) instead. There's normally a passenger ferry every hour to and from Cozumel, depending on the season. The ferry runs from 6am to midnight. Schedules are not set in stone, but currently there are six departures from Cozumel for Calica between 4:30am and midnight. Six ferries return from Calica between 2am and 9pm. Sundays have four departures in each direction. Fares are M\$500 for cars and M\$800 for a van-sized vehicle (both including the driver). You need to line up at least one hour before departure (earlier is better, they say).

BUS

OK, it may sound silly, but you can actually get long-distance bus tickets in advance at the **ADO terminal** (Map p888; ☎ 872-17-06; cnr Av 10 & Calle 2 Nte; 🕒 6:30am-9pm). Tickets are for services from Playa del Carmen's bus terminal for all over Yucatán and Mexico.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

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

BICYCLE

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

CAR

A car is the best way to get to the island's further reaches, and you'll get plenty of offers to rent one. All rental contracts should automatically include third-party insurance (*daños a terceros*), which runs about M\$100 per day. Check that taxes are included in the price you're quoted – they often are not. Collision insurance is usually about M\$150 extra with a M\$5000 deductible for the cheapest vehicles. Rates start at around M\$450 including third-party insurance (collision is extra and may be covered by your credit card), though you'll pay more during late December and January.

There are plenty of agencies around the main plaza, but prices drop about 50% from the dock to the fringes of the tourist zone.

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

One fairly no-nonsense place, with cars in good shape, is **Rentadora Isis** (Map p888; ☎ 872-33-67; Av 5 Nte btwn Calles 2 & 4 Nte). VW Beetles rent for around M\$300 for 24 hours, with little seasonal variation in prices.

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

MOTORCYCLE

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

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

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

EXPLORE MORE SOUTH OF PLAYA DEL CARMEN

South of Playa del Carmen are several worthwhile coastal villages. These areas tend toward the upscale, and offer spectacular diving, snorkeling and some amazing beaches. Here are a few of our faves:

- **Rancho Punta Venado** (www.puntavenado.com) Five kilometers south of Xcaret, this is a great spot for horseback riding.
- **Paamul** Eighty-seven kilometers south of Cancún, the secluded beach makes this area popular with visiting RV travelers, sea turtles and divers alike. **Paamul Hotel** (www.paamul.com.mx) offers lodging. **Scuba-Mex** (www.scubamex.com) provides diving services.
- **Xpu-Há** This is a sugary-sweet beach area 95km south of Cancún. Visit www.locogringo.com for lodging information.
- **Tankah** A few kilometers south of the Hwy 307 turnoff for Punta Solimán you'll find this cozy beach community. There's great diving, a series of seven cenotes and some decent midrange hotel options. Visit www.tankah.com for info.

TAXI

As in some other towns in the Yucatán, the taxi syndicate in Cozumel wields a good bit of power. Fares in and around town are M\$30 per ride; luggage may cost extra. Carry exact change as it's not uncommon for drivers to claim they are unable to provide it.

AKUMAL

☎ 984

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

Activities

Although increasing population is taking its toll on the reefs that parallel Akumal, diving remains the area's primary attraction. Hurricane Dean also reportedly did some minor damage to the area's reef, though we were unable to verify this independently when

we passed through town. Ask about conditions before you commit to a trip.

Dive trips and deep-sea fishing excursions are offered by **Akumal Dive Shop** (☎ 875-90-32; www.akumal.com). It also offers snorkeling trips to the reef and beaches unreachable by car for M\$250, fishing for M\$1500 and diving for M\$700.

At the northern end of Akumal, **Laguna Yal-Kú** (adult/child M\$75/40; ☎ 8am-5:30pm; ♿) is a beautiful lagoon 2km from the entrance. The rocky lagoon, without a doubt one of the region's highlights, runs about 500m from its beginning to the sea. It is home to large schools of brightly colored fish and the occasional visiting turtle and manta ray. Cabs from the Playa Akumal entrance charge about M\$60 to the lagoon. In an effort to protect the lagoon's fragile environment, sunscreen is prohibited.

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

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

Hidden Worlds (☎ 877-85-35; www.hiddenworlds.com.mx) is an American-run outfit offering guided snorkeling tours for M\$400 and one-/two-tank dives for M\$500/900.

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

Sleeping & Eating

Villa Las Brisas (☎/fax 876-21-10; www.aventuras-akumal.com; r M\$450-2300) On the beach in Aventuras Akumal, this is an attractive, modern place with two hotel-type rooms, some one- and two-bedroom condos and a studio apartment – all under two roofs. The friendly owners Horacio and Kersten speak five Western languages! The turnover is 2.5km south of the turnover for Playa Akumal.

Que Onda (☎ 875-91-01; www.queondaakumal.com; r low/high season M\$700/900; 📺 📶) It's set amid an expanse of greenery in a fairly residential area only 50m from Laguna Yal-Kú. The six fan-cooled rooms have white-tiled floors and great beds; some have sofas, and the upstairs ones have terraces. The hotel also offers a gorgeous pool, free internet access, bicycles and snorkeling gear, and half-price admission to the lagoon. The restaurant serves delicious pasta.

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

BAHÍAS DE PUNTA SOLIMÁN

☎ 984

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

A few hundred meters in after the signed turnoff from Hwy 307, you can bear left (north) to reach **Oscar y Lalo's** (☎ 804-69-73; mains M\$60-100; campsites per person M\$30; 🕒 10am-8pm), a picturesque restaurant that has the entire Bahía Solimán to itself. The kitchen

puts out heaping plates of food, including fish fillets and barracuda steaks. Oscar rents **kayaks** (around M\$100 an hour); you can paddle out to the reef that shelters the entire mouth of the bay and snorkel or bird-watch. The dense mangrove around the 150m stretch of (somewhat spiky) white beach breeds quite a few mosquitoes and sand flies; you'll want a tent with very good screens if you're camping.

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

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

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

Maya Jardín (☎ 125-88-06; www.mayajardin.com; d M\$1250-1900; 📺 📶) is on the southern end of the bay and offers large rooms, free kayaks and snorkel gear to explore the bay.

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

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

TULUM

☎ 984 / pop 14,800

Tulum's spectacular coastline – with its confectioner sugar sands, jade-green water, balmy breezes and bright sun – make it one of the top beaches in Mexico. Where else can you get all that *and* a dramatically situated Maya ruin?

There are also excellent diving, fun cenotes, great snorkeling, and a variety of lodgings and restaurants to fit every budget.

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

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

Orientation

Tulum lies some 130km south of Cancún and is spread out over quite a large area. Approaching from the north on Hwy 307 the first thing you reach is Crucero Ruinas, where the old access road (closed to vehicle traffic about 100m in from the highway) heads in a straight line about 800m to the ruins' ticket booth. About 400m further south on Hwy 307 (past the gas station) is the new entrance for vehicles going to the ruins; it leads to a parking lot. Another 1.5km south on the highway brings you to the Cobá junction; turning right (west) takes you to Cobá, and turning east leads about 3km to the north-south road servicing the Zona Hotelera, the string of waterfront lodgings extending for more than 10km south from the ruins. This road eventually enters the Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an, continuing some 50km past Boca Paila to Punta Allen.

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

Information

Tulum Pueblo has Telmex pay phones, internet cafés, numerous currency-exchange booths (one with an ATM), two **HSBC banks** (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) and a **post office** (Av Tulum; ☎ 9am-3:30pm Mon-Fri).

Community Tours Sian Ka'an (p904) runs tours to the magnificent Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an stopping at various ancient Maya sites.

Dangers & Annoyances

If you nod off on the beach, your valuables (and even nonvaluables) may disappear. Bring

your own lock if you plan on staying in the cheap no-frills beachfront *cabañas*.

Sights & Activities

TULUM RUINS

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

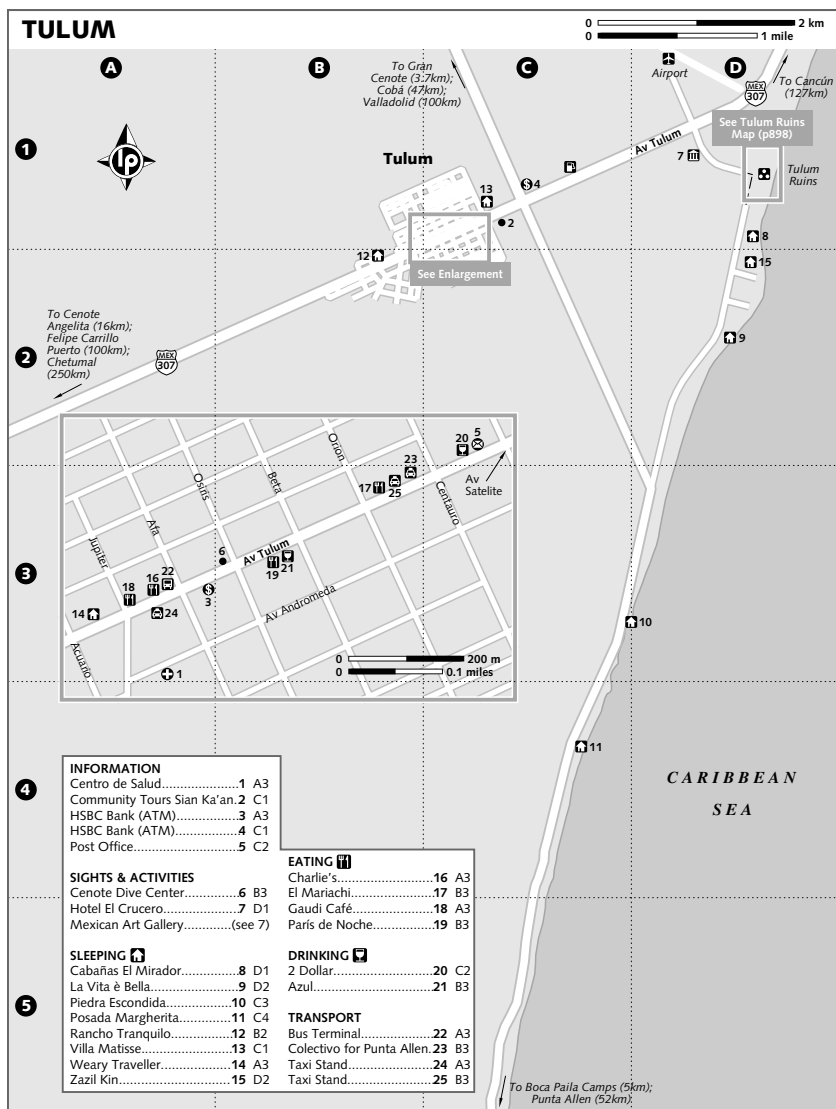
Tulum is a prime destination for large tour groups. To best enjoy the ruins without feeling like part of the herd, you should visit them either early in the morning or late in the afternoon. Parking costs M\$40 for cars and M\$80 for vans and pickups. A M\$20 train takes you to the ticket booth from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

History

Most archaeologists believe that Tulum was occupied during the late Postclassic period (AD 1200–1521) and that it was an important port town during its heyday. Remember that the Maya sailed up and down this coast, maintaining trading routes all the way down into Belize. When Juan de Grijalva sailed past in 1518, he was amazed by the sight of the walled city, its buildings painted a gleaming red, blue and yellow and a ceremonial fire flaming atop its seaside watchtower.

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

The city was abandoned about 75 years after the Spanish conquest. It was one of the



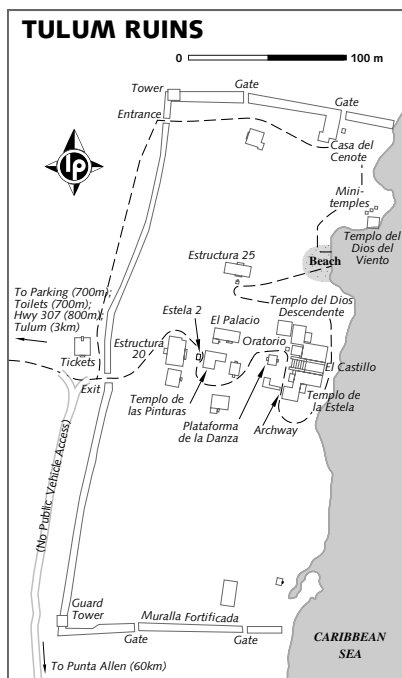
last of the ancient cities to be abandoned; most others had been given back to nature long before the arrival of the Spanish. But Maya pilgrims continued to visit over the years, and indigenous refugees from the War of the Castes took shelter here from time to time.

'Tulum' is Maya for 'wall,' though its residents called it Zama (Dawn). The name

Tulum was apparently applied by explorers during the early 20th century.

Exploring the Ruins

Visitors are required to follow a prescribed route around the ruins. From the ticket booth, head along nearly half the length of Tulum's enormous **wall**, measuring approximately



380m south to north and 170m along its sides. Just before reaching the northwest corner, you enter the site through a breach in the wall. The **tower** at the corner, once thought to be a guard post, is now believed by some to have been a type of shrine.

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

Below the Wind God's hang-out is a lovely little stretch of **beach**. It's quite swimmable when conditions are good, but take note of the lifeguards and the warning flags. After your dip, head west to **Estructura 25**, which has some interesting columns on its raised platform and, above the main doorway (on the south side), a beautiful stucco frieze of the Descending God. Also known as the Diving

God, this upside-down, part-human figure appears elsewhere at Tulum, as well as at several other east-coast sites and Cobá. It may be related to the Maya's reverence for bees (and honey), perhaps a stylized representation of a bee sipping nectar from a flower.

South of Estructura 25 is **El Palacio**, notable for its X-figure ornamentation. From here, head east back toward the water and skirt the outside edge of the central temple complex (keeping it to your right). Along the back are some good views of the sea. Heading inland again on the south side, you can enter the complex through a corbeled archway past the restored **Templo de la Estela** (Temple of the Stela), also known as the Temple of the Initial Series. Stela 1, now in the British Museum, was found here. It was inscribed with the Maya date corresponding to AD 564 (the 'initial series' of Maya hieroglyphs in an inscription gives its date). At first this confused archaeologists, who believed Tulum had been settled several hundred years later than this date. It's now thought that Stela 1 was brought to Tulum from Tankah, a settlement 4km to the north dating from the Classic period.

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

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

DIVING & SNORKELING

Cenote Dive Center (☎ 871-22-32; www.cenotedive.com; Av Tulum) is a recommended outfit specializing in guided cave dives, and cenote and cave snorkel-

keling trips. The staff speak English, Spanish, German and Scandinavian languages.

The dive shop at Zazil-Kin's (right) is a PADI, NACD and TDI operation offering low-cost reef dives and renting snorkel gear for M\$100 day.

Snorkeling or swimming right from the beach is possible and fun, but be extra careful of boat traffic (a dive flag is a good idea), as the strip between the beach and reef offshore is traveled both by dive boats and fishermen.

Cenote Angelita

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

Sleeping

TULUM PUEBLO

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

ourpick Weary Traveler (☎ 871-23-90; www.wearytraveler.info; Av Tulum; dm M\$120, r without/with bath M\$300/350; ♿ ♻️) Turn right out of the bus station and walk one block southeast to this fun hostel. A great place to meet friends, the Weary Traveler is known for a full breakfast that includes fruit, eggs, bread, coffee and condiments. There's internet, a shuttle to the beach, and a great central courtyard with hammocks and picnic benches. It even has its own bar. Chilly, pull-style showers and a lack of any shelving for toiletries are the only downsides.

Rancho Tranquilo (☎ 871-27-84; www.ranchotranquilo.com.mx; Av Tulum s/n; dm M\$120, r from M\$250-480) Another nice option for those looking for hostel-type lodging, Rancho Tranquilo offers a mix of *cabañas*, dorms and rooms in a low-key, desert-landscaped garden. There's a covered common area and free breakfast. It can get a bit noisy, and for those without wheels it's 300m further southward on Tulum Ave, and pretty dark late at night.

Hotel El Crucero (☎ 871-26-10; www.el-crucero.com; Crucero Ruinas; dm M\$85-100; d with fan/air-con M\$350/450; ♿ ♻️) You'll feel welcome and well cared for at this friendly hotel. Dorm rooms have

bathrooms and lockers, while air-con rooms are done up in themes, such as the Mexican Mural, Jungle Room and the Lizard Lounge. The hotel has a garden area plus a bar and restaurant, and internet access. You can rent bicycles and store bags as well. It's a 10-minute walk to the ruins, and 15 to the beach. The hotel can arrange low-impact bicycle tours to cenotes. Local artist Enrique Díaz has a gallery here (see p900).

Villa Matisse (☎ 871-26-36; shuvinito@yahoo.com; Av Satélite 19; d low/high season M\$400/500) Funky patchwork quilts add a splash of color to the glaringly white clean rooms at the Matisse. Little details like seashell bouquets and fresh plants add an intimacy and closeness. There are even hammocks hanging above the beds in the fan-cooled rooms – a nice touch.

ZONA HOTELERA

The cheapest way to sleep in *cabañas* is to have your own hammock and mosquito net; if you don't, several of the inexpensive places rent them for about M\$30 a night. The following picks are ordered north to south.

Cabañas El Mirador (☎ 879-60-19; elfishi@hotmail.com; cabañas with hammock/bed M\$130/250) The closest place to the ruins, the Mirador rents tiny 4m x 3m *cabañas* that feel a bit like jail cells – they even stink a little bit. Go for a hammock bungalow as the rooms with beds aren't worth the extra money. There's a decent restaurant with great views sitting up and back from the beach.

Zazil-kin (☎ 984-124-00-82; cabañas without/with bathroom M\$400/670) About a 10-minute walk from the ruins, this is a popular place. It has a dive center, a basketball court, a restaurant–bar–disco and a nice stretch of beach. All structures in this little Smurf village are very tidy and nicely painted – Papa Smurf would be proud. The *cabañas*' poles have been filled in with concrete, which makes them more secure (bring your own lock) but hinders ventilation. Be warned that the disco plays music at very high volumes (sometimes until 1am or 2am).

La Vita è Bella (☎ 871-35-01; www.lavitaebella-tulum.com; bungalows low/high season M\$1000/2500, s/d without bathroom M\$350) Lovely bungalows with tiled floors, big comfy beds, well-screened sliding doors, good bathrooms with colorful basins and wide verandas with hammocks are all on offer here, all overlooking a narrow but nice

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

Piedra Escondida (☎ 984-100-38-26; www.piedraescondida.com; r low/high season M\$1250/2350) Offers very good service in its large rooms. All have bathrooms and balconies or porches and are nicely decorated; some have excellent views. La Piedra also has a pleasing *palapa*-style restaurant-bar, and shares a small beach with neighboring hotels.

Posada Margherita (☎ 984-100-37-80; www.posadamargherita.com; Km 4.5; d low/high season M\$1300/2000) Unlike many so-called 'eco-tels,' everything here is totally solar or wind-powered – even the kitchen, which makes amazing food using mainly organic ingredients. All rooms have tiled floors, very good bug screening, 24-hour lights and a terrace or balcony with hammock. The beach here is wide and lovely. The excellent restaurant was being renovated at press time, but should now be up and running. The hotel also has something virtually unheard of in the Yucatán: wheelchair access.

Eating

TULUM PUEBLO

All of the following places are on Av Tulum (Hwy 307). To escape the tourist traffic, you might consider putting the guidebook down for a second, leaving Av Tulum and finding a quiet, friendly *taquería* on a side streets. Most hotels in the Zona Hotelera have surprisingly good restaurants.

Gaudí Café (cnr Av Tulum & Jupiter; mains M\$20-60; ☎ 7am-10pm) Just south of the bus station on the same side of the street, Gaudí Café offers great fresh-squeezed juices and good coffee. Spotlessness and relaxing music make it a great way to start the morning.

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

París de Noche (☎ 871-25-32; mains M\$70-140; ☎ 11am-11pm Mon-Fri, 7am-11pm Sat & Sun) Serves

some big portions, so bring an appetite or a friend. The French owner won a *Time Out* award at the restaurant he ran in London. He serves a mix of French and Mexican dishes (as well as steaks and seafood) that include escargot, *ceviche* and a delicious green salad with chèvre that's a full meal in itself. There's often two-for-one drink specials and a tasty *comida corrida*.

Charlie's (☎ 871-25-73; mains M\$85-140; ☎ 7:30am-11pm Tue-Sun) An old standby with attractive conch-shell decor and a wall made of old glass bottles, it's near the bus station and offers you a choice of indoor or courtyard dining. The food is largely Mexican, with a selection of salads thrown in.

SELF-CATERING

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

Drinking & Nightlife

Azul (Av Tulum; ☎ 6pm-late) Bathed in white with strips of blue neon, this lounge-disco heats up late.

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

Shopping

Mexican Art Gallery (☎ 984-745-89-79; inf_art@hotmail.com; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Located at the Hotel El Crucero, it features the brightly colored work of local artist Enrique Diaz, whose motto is to 'paint the colors of Tulum.' His art is vivid and fun, a variety of portraits and landscapes that seem vaguely Picasso-esque.

Getting There & Away

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

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

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Cancún	M\$54-67	2hr	numerous
Chetumal	M\$107-140	3½-4hr	every 2 hrs
Chichén Itzá	M\$101	3½hr	2 daily
Cobá	M\$30	45min	about 5 daily
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	M\$60	1½hr	numerous, consider taking a <i>colectivo</i>
Mahahual	M\$122	4hr	1 daily
Mérida	M\$172	4hr (2nd-class much longer)	numerous
Playa del Carmen	M\$34	1hr	numerous
Valladolid	M\$60	2hr	10 daily

Getting Around

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

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

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

GRAN CENOTE

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

COBÁ

☎ 984 / pop 300

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

Be careful not to picnic beside the lake, as it has large crocodiles. If you want to snap a

picture of a croc, try looking for them near the Club Med in early afternoon from the pier. From a sustainable tourism perspective, it's great to stay the night in small communities like Cobá. The money you spend goes straight to the local economy, encouraging continued rural stewardship and minimizing the mass migration to tourist cities like Cancún. Hiring local guides, buying local crafts and simply stopping here for lunch also helps.

History

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

Cobá's architecture is a curiosity: its towering pyramids and stelae resemble the architecture of Tikal, which is several hundred kilometers away, rather than the much nearer sites of Chichén Itzá and the northern Yucatán Peninsula.

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

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

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

Orientation & Information

The tiny, tranquil village of Cobá, 2.5km west of the Tulum–Chemax road, has a small, cheap hotel, several small, simple and low-cost restaurants and the upscale Villas Arqueológicas Cobá (Club Med) hotel.

The **archaeological site** (admission M\$45; ☎ 8am–5pm; ♿) has a parking lot that charges M\$15 per car. Be prepared to walk several kilometers on paths, depending on how much you want to see. If you arrive after 11am you'll feel a bit like a sheep in a flock. Bring insect repellent and water; the shop next to the ticket booth sells both at reasonable prices.

A short distance inside, at the Grupo Cobá, is a concession renting bicycles at M\$30 per day. Pedi-trikes (two people and driver are M\$95 per day) are another popular option for those who are tired or have limited mobility. Guides near the entrance size you up and ask whatever they think you're worth; tours generally run about M\$200 to M\$400. The Nohoch Mul pyramid is the only structure the public is allowed to climb.

Sights

GRUPO COBÁ

Walking just under 100m along the main path from the entrance and turning right brings you to the **Templo de las Iglesias** (Temple of the Churches), the most prominent structure in the Cobá Group. It's an enormous pyramid, with views from the top taking in the Nohoch Mul pyramid and surrounding lakes, but climbing it is forbidden.

Back on the main path and 30m further along, you pass through the **juego de pelota**, a well-restored ball court.

CONJUNTO DE LAS PINTURAS

Though it's signed to the left at the fork, if you're on foot you can reach the **Conjunto de las Pinturas** (Group of Paintings) by heading toward the Grupo Macanxoc a very short distance and turning left. The temple here bears traces of glyphs and frescoes above its door, and remnants of richly colored plaster inside.

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

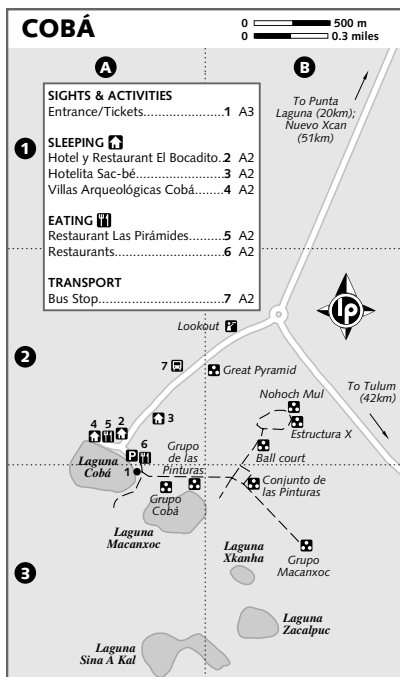
the feet of a ruler at the base. Continue along the path past another badly weathered stela and a small temple to rejoin the Nohoch Mul path and turn right.

GRUPO MACANXOC

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

NOHOCH MUL

A walk of 800m more brings you to **Nohoch Mul** (Big Mound), also known as the Great Pyramid, built on a natural hill. Along the way is another ball court – at the north end of which lie weathered stelae – and the track then bends between piles of stones (a ruined temple) before passing Templo 10 and Stele 20. The exquisitely carved stela bears a picture of a ruler standing imperiously over two captives. Eighty meters beyond stands the Great Pyramid.



DETOUR: PUNTA LAGUNA

Punta Laguna, 20km northeast of Cobá on the road to Nuevo Xcan, is a fair-sized lake with a small Maya community nearby. The forest around the lake supports populations of spider and howler monkeys, as well as a variety of birds.

A **Tourist Cooperative** (☎ 986-861-40-94) charges M\$40 for entrance to the lake area and about M\$200 per hour for guided visit. Activities include a zip-line tour (M\$125), a cenote rappel (M\$200), a shamanic ceremony (M\$125) at a 'traditional' altar, and canoeing (M\$60 per hour). Intrepid travelers can camp here or reserve a *palapa* for the night.

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

At 42m high, the Great Pyramid is the tallest-stone structure on the Yucatán Peninsula. There are two diving gods carved over the doorway of the temple at the top (built in the Postclassic period, AD 1100–1450), similar to the sculptures at Tulum. The view is spectacular!

Sleeping & Eating

There's no organized campsite, but you can try finding a place along the shore of the lake, which is inhabited by crocodiles – local children can show you a safe swimming spot, and you'd do well to heed their advice if you're going near the water.

Hotel y Restaurant El Bocado (☎ 264-70-70; s/d M\$100-150) This place has very basic, fan-cooled rooms all with private bathrooms. Chickens cluck and dogs wander around. The restaurant (mains around M\$60) is well run and serves basic food, including an affordable set menu. It will store luggage while you visit the ruins. El Bocado also serves as Cobá's bus terminal.

Villas Arqueológicas Cobá (☎ 206-70-00; cobcreecol@clubmed.com; s/d/tr M\$860/1000/1450; P ♿ ♿ ♿) A Club Med hotel next to the lake, it was built to resemble an old hacienda, with red-tiled floors and rooms grouped around a large inner courtyard with an expansive swimming pool.

Hotelita Sac-bé (☎ 206-71-40; s/d with fan M\$250, with air-con M\$400; ♿) Clean and friendly, the Sac-bé is on the opposite side of the street from El Bocado and about 100m closer to the main road heading out of town. The chickens are a bit noisy in the morning, but it has nice hot showers and comfortable, springy beds.

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

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

Getting There & Away

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

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

The 31km road from Cobá to Chemax is arrow-straight and in good shape. If you're driving to Valladolid or Chichén Itzá this is the way to go.

TULUM TO PUNTA ALLEN

Punta Allen sits at the end of a narrow spit of land that stretches south nearly 40km from its start below Tulum. There are some charming beaches along the way, with plenty of privacy, and most of the spit is within the protected, wildlife-rich Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an. Hurricane Dean whipped the region pretty good in late 2007, and the beaches were still littered with debris when we passed through.

The road can be a real muffler-buster between gradings, especially when holes are filled with water from recent rains, making it impossible to gauge their depth. The southern half, south of the bridge at Boca Paila, is the worst stretch – some spots require experienced off-road handling or you'll sink into several feet of sand. It is doable even in a non-4WD vehicle.

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

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

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

Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an

Over 5000 sq km of tropical jungle, marsh, mangroves and islands on Quintana Roo's coast have been set aside by the Mexican government as a large biosphere reserve. In 1987 the UN classified it as a World Heritage site – an irreplaceable natural treasure.

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

Community Tours Sian Ka'an (☎ 984-114-07-50; www.siankaantours.org; Av Tulum) runs tours out of Tulum that include pickup in the Zona Hotelera. They include a guided walk of the interpretive trail at the Muyil archaeological site south of Tulum, and a boat trip or float trip through Lagunas Muyil, Chunyaxché and Boca Paila via an ancient Maya trade route along a natural channel. On the way you can see abundant bird life and visit little-known Maya temples. They also offer snorkeling, birding and fishing trips further into the reserve. Trips cost between M\$950 and M\$1100. There are discounts for children under 12.

If you can get to Punta Allen, there are three locals with training in English, natural history, interpretation and birding conduct bird-watching, snorkeling and nature tours, mostly by boat, for about M\$1000 for five

to six people: **Baltazar Madera** (☎ 984-871-20-01, in Tulum 984-879-82-34), **Marcos Nery** (☎ local phone exchange 984-871-24-24) and **Chary Salazar** (enquire in town at her eponymous restaurant).

Punta Allen

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

The area is known primarily for its catch-and-release bonefishing. Tarpon and snook are very popular sport fish as well. The guides listed for Sian Ka'an (left), as well as cooperatives in town (inquire at Galletanes or Vigía Grande), do fishing trips for about M\$2000, including lunch. There's also a fishing outfit just north of town called **Pesca Maya** (☎ 998-883-42-04; www.pescamaya.com; ☎ 5am-10pm), which does daily saltwater fly-fishing runs, and it has an onsite restaurant for guests only.

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

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

SLEEPING & EATING

Posada Sirena (☎ 984-877-85-21; www.casasirena.com; d M\$400-600) Offers fully furnished *cabañas* with kitchens and hot-water showers. The rooms are simple and very big; some sport sitting areas and hammocks. There's no maid service, but they can arrange tours.

Cuzán (☎ 983-834-03-53; www.flyfishmx.com; r M\$500-900) Just south of the town's center along the main road, Cuzán has ocean-front *cabañas* – one set on the fuselage of an old boat. There's

more economic cabins away from the beach. They also offer fishing and snorkeling trips.

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

GETTING THERE & AWAY

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

FELIPE CARRILLO PUERTO

☎ 983 / pop 21,500

Now named for a progressive governor of Yucatán, this crossroads town 95km south of Tulum was once known as Chan Santa Cruz, the rebel headquarters during the War of the Castes. Besides its historical and cultural significance, Carrillo Puerto has few attractions other than the only gas station, bank and hotels for some distance around. There's a main square with a clocktower, church and cultural center. Come nighttime, the square fills up as locals take spins around the park in an age-old tradition known as *paseando* (taking a walk). Watching this simple ritual may be enough to keep you occupied for hours – you can even take a couple trips around the plaza yourself.

History

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

The oracle guided the Maya in battle for more than eight years, until their great victory, conquering the fortress at Bacalar. For

the latter part of the 19th century, the Maya in and around Chan Santa Cruz were virtually independent of governments in Mexico City and Mérida.

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

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

Sights

The **Santuario de la Cruz Parlante** (Sanctuary of the Talking Cross) is five blocks west of the gas station on Hwy 307. There's no sign at the site, but you can't miss the stone wall with a gate. Some of the town's residents do not like strangers in the sanctuary, and may try to take your camera if they see you using it here.

The **Centro Cultural Chan Santa Cruz** (admission free; ☎ 8am-9:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm & 6-8pm Sat & Sun), on the plaza, has art exhibitions, workshops, and the occasional exhibit on the War of the Castes.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Esquivel (☎ 834-03-44; hotelesquivelfcp@todito.com; Calle 65 No 746; d with fan/air-con M\$300/380; 🏠) Around the corner from the plaza and bus terminal, this is the best hotel in town. The air-con rooms are a good deal, with very clean bathrooms and tiled floors, while the fan rooms have good beds and showers, but are dark, windowless and over-perfumed.

Hotel Chan Santa Cruz (☎ 834-00-21; www.hotelchansantacruz.com; cnr Calle 67 & 68; d M\$360-400; 🏠) The rooms are just a bit too pink, giving them the feel of Martha Stewart's jail cell, but they are clean, and there's a mighty fine central courtyard complete with gaudy statuary. In the lobby there's an air-hockey table (and we said there was nothing to do in Carrillo Puerto at night!)

Lonchería 25 Horas (Calle 69; sandwiches & tacos M\$20; ☎ 24hr) Dirt-cheap without being dirty, this casual eatery sports plastic chairs and fumes of passing trucks, but has a decent selection of

eggs, sandwiches, tacos and smoothies. Find it across from the gas station.

Parrilla Galerías (☎ 834-03-13; Calle 65; mains M\$40-80) On the plaza, it has the look of a more upscale spot, but serves beer for M\$15 and tacos for M\$40 for three. The house specialty is a *parrilla* (mixed grill) with lots of accompaniments (M\$185 for three people).

Getting There & Away

Most buses serving Carrillo Puerto are *de paso* (they don't originate there).

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

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

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Cancún	1st-class M\$130	3½-4hr	10 daily
	2nd-class M\$100	3½-4hr	hourly to 9pm
Chetumal	1st-class M\$94	2-3hr	8 daily
	2nd-class M\$54	2-3hr	13 daily
Mérida	1st class M\$146	5½hr	1 daily
	2nd-class M\$134	5½hr	11 daily
Playa del Carmen	1st-class M\$68-76	2½hr	9 daily
	2nd-class M\$68-76	2½hr	hourly to 9pm
Ticul	M\$100	4½hr	11 daily (change there or at Muna for Uxmal)
Tulum	1st-class M\$45	1½hr	9 daily
	2nd-class M\$44	1½hr	hourly to 9pm (consider taking a <i>colectivo</i>)

THE COSTA MAYA

The Coast south of the Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an to the small fishing village of Xcalak is often referred to as the Costa Maya. Hurricane Dean did some serious damage to this region, especially the town of Mahahual, but recovery efforts are in place. With amazing beaches and good diving and snorkeling, the region is certain to recover at a quick pace.

Mahahual

Hurricane Dean virtually razed the coastal town of Mahahual, but it is slowly recovering. We passed by just weeks after the hurricane, and the town was still in recovery stage. Rather than eliminate Mahahual from the book entirely, which would only cause further economic hardship for the town's residents, we decided to get a local expert, Kevin Graham, to update the material for us closer to press time.

Now that Mahahual no longer has a cruise ship port – though plans are in place to rebuild it – it may be a bit more welcoming to independent-minded travelers, as it has great beaches, excellent diving nearby, and a fairly laid-back Caribbean appeal. More significantly, Mahahual offers access to **Banco Chinchorro**, the largest coral atoll in the Northern Hemisphere. Chinchorro is some 45km long and up to 14km wide, with its western edge lying about 30km off the coast, and dozens of ships have fallen victim to its barely submerged ring of coral. According to early reports, the Banco Chinchorro may have sustained some serious damage at the hands of Dean. While the reports are spotty at best – and we were unable to verify the information independently – the mangroves of the above-water portion of the atoll were destroyed, with only the ranger hut left standing.

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

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

Dreamtime Dive Center (☎ 983-834-58-23; www.dreamtimediving.com; Malecón, 2.7km south of Mahahual) runs trips to stretches of the barrier reef and offers PADI courses.

SLEEPING & EATING

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

Las Cabañas del Doctor (☎ 983-832-21-02; Km 2; cabañas without/with bathroom M\$250/350) Across the street from the beach, it offers several fairly simple dwellings. Prices rise by about M\$100 in December and Easter week.

Posada Pachamama (☎ 983-834-58-42; www.posada-pachamama.net; Km 1; r M\$550-750) Located across from the football field, which will become the town plaza on the first street behind the *malecón*, this small comfortable hotel also has a pizzeria.

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

GETTING THERE & AROUND

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

Xcalak

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

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

commit to a tour. Xcalak also offers easy access to the Banco Chinchorro (opposite).

If diving isn't your thing, there's still plenty to do. Come here to walk in dusty streets and sip frozen drinks while frigates soar above translucent green lagoons. Explore a mangrove swamp by kayak, or just doze in a hammock and soak in some sun. Perhaps best of all, you won't hear a single offer for *hamacas* or Cuban cigars. And, though tiny, Xcalak boasts a few nice restaurants and an easygoing mix of foreigners and local fishermen.

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

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

Aventuras Xcalak to Chinchorro Dive Center (☎ 983-839-88-65; www.xtcdivecenter.com), about 300m north of town on the coast road, offers dive and snorkel trips (from M\$650) to the wondrous barrier reef just offshore, and to Banco Chinchorro (three-tank dive M\$1750, not including rental gear). It also rents diving equipment and offers PADI open-water certificate for M\$3850, NAUI and SDI instruction, as well as fishing and birding tours.

SLEEPING

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

High season here is mid-December to mid-April (with very slight variations). Most places don't accept credit cards without prior arrangements, and are best contacted through their websites or via email. Addresses here are expressed in kilometers north along the coast from town.

Villas La Guacamaya (☎ 983-839-86-08; www.villaguacamaya.com; Km 10; d low/high season M\$500/1000; 🏠) You'll be greeted by an exuberant parrot at this quiet place 10km north of Xcalak. It has two bright green rooms that face the sea and share use of a fully equipped gourmet kitchen. Each room has a double and a single bed. There's also a separate apartment with kitchen set back from the beach, and a fourth, smallish room with a double bed and a lovely bathroom. It also offers bikes, kayaks and snorkel gear for guest use.

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

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

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

EATING

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

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

Leaky Palapa (mains M\$50-120; ☎ 5-10pm Fri-Mon) Chef and owners Marla and Linda have turned an old standby about three blocks north of the plaza into a new sensation, serving wonderful meals such as lobster in caramel ginger sauce. Opinion is unanimous that this is the best place to go to treat your taste buds.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

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

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

A taxi sporadically works the town, serving the northern hotels for M\$100 and available for hire for excursions to further destinations. The route directly from Mahahual to Xcalak, known as the coastal road, was closed at the time of writing and, according to locals, might not re-open.

LAGUNA BACALAR

A large, clear, turquoise freshwater lake with a bottom of gleaming white sand, Laguna Bacalar comes as a surprise in this region of tortured limestone and scrubby jungle.

The small, sleepy town of Bacalar, just east of the highway, 125km south of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, is the only settlement of any size on the lake. It's noted mostly for its old Spanish fortress and its popular *balnearios* (bathing places). Hurricane Dean scrubbed the town clean, felling a number of trees, but things were recovering nicely on our last pass.

The fortress, **Fuerte San Felipe Bacalar** (admission M\$20; ☎ 9am-8pm Tue-Sun), was built above the lagoon to protect citizens from raids by pirates and Indians. It served as an important outpost for the whites in the War of the Castes. In 1859 it was seized by Maya rebels, who held the fort until Quintana Roo was finally conquered by Mexican troops in 1901. Today, with formidable cannons still on its ramparts, the fortress

remains an imposing sight. It houses a **museum** exhibiting colonial armaments and uniforms from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Just shy of the south end of the *costera* is **Cenote Azul**, a 90m-deep natural pool on the southwest shore of the lake. It's 200m east of Hwy 307, so many buses will drop you nearby. Of the few places to eat right in town, Orizaba's at the northwest corner of the plaza is a good choice.

Sleeping & Eating

Most accommodations and eating spots are found on the *ostera* (also known as Calle 1), which winds south several kilometers along the lakeshore from Bacalar town to Hwy 307 at Cenote Azul. The following places are listed from north to south.

Los Coquitos (campsites per person M\$40) A nice camping area on the lakeshore, run by a family who live in a shack on the premises. You can camp in the dense shade of the palm trees, enjoy the view of the lake from the *palapas* and swim from the grassy banks.

Casita Carolina (☎ /fax 983-834-23-34; www.casitacarolina.com; d M\$250-450; palapa M\$450) This is a delightful place about 1½ blocks south of the fort. It has a large lawn leading down to the lake, five fan rooms and a deluxe *palapa* that sleeps up to four. Guests can explore the lake in the Casita's kayaks. It's best reached by taking a bus into Bacalar and walking or catching a taxi.

Hotel Laguna (☎ 983-834-22-06; www.hotellagunabacalar.com; d M\$420; ♿) This clean, cool, turquoise place is hospitable. It boasts a small swimming pool, a restaurant, a bar and excellent views of the lake, directly below the hotel. Some rooms are showing their age. It's 2km south of Bacalar town along the *costera* and only 150m east of Hwy 307, so if you're traveling by bus on the highway you can ask the driver to stop at the turnoff.

Amigos B&B Laguna Bacalar (☎ 987-872-38-68; www.bacalar.net; d M\$500; ♿) Brought to you by the same hospitable family who runs Amigos B&B in Cozumel, this ideally located lakefront property (about 500m south of the fort) has five spacious guest rooms and a comfy shared common area. You can save M\$100 by skipping the breakfast.

Hostel Ximba Li (☎ 983-834-25-16; cnr Av 3 & Calle 30; dm M\$70) This simple new hostel is located a couple of blocks from the lake and a short walk to town. Breakfast included.

Serving consistently good Yucatecan meals, the lake view restaurant at quaintly kitsch Hotel Laguna is popular. The restaurant at Balneario Ejidal serves fresh *ceviche* and good grilled fish.

Getting There & Away

Southbound 2nd-class buses go through Bacalar town on Calle 7, passing a block uphill from the central square (*el parque*), which is just above the fort and has a taxi stand. Northbound 2nd-class buses run along Calle 5, a block downhill from Calle 7. Most 1st-class buses don't enter town, but many will drop you along Hwy 307 at the turnoffs to Hotel Laguna and Cenote Azul; check before you buy your ticket.

If you're driving from the north and want to reach the town and fort, take the first Bacalar exit and continue several blocks before turning left (east) down the hill. From Chetumal, head west to catch Hwy 307 north; after 25km on the highway you'll reach the signed right turn for Cenote Azul and the *costera*.

CHETUMAL

☎ 983 / pop 136,800

The capital city of Quintana Roo, Chetumal has stylish, friendly people, some decent restaurants, and a lively music scene. Hurricane Dean displaced many of Chetumal's inhabitants, but with a bit of lumber, some tarpaulins, sweat, rummaged nails and a few quick-drying tears, the town is quietly rebuilding. None of the major tourist areas were affected.

The bayside esplanade hosts carnivals and events, and the modern Maya museum is impressive (though a bit short on artifacts). Impressive Maya ruins, amazing jungle and the border to neighboring Belize are all close by. And the Free Zone between the two countries makes for interesting shopping. **Carnaval** (late February or early March) is particularly lively in Chetumal.

Before the Spanish conquest, Chetumal was a Maya port. After the conquest, the town was not actually settled until 1898, when it was founded to put a stop to the illegal trade in arms and lumber carried on by the descendants of the War of the Castes rebels. Dubbed Payo Obispo, the town changed its name to Chetumal in 1936. In 1955, Hurricane Janet virtually obliterated it.

The rebuilt city is laid out on a grand plan with a grid of wide boulevards along which traffic speeds (be careful at stop signs).

Orientation & Information

Chetumal is a large city but remains (thanks largely to its network of wide, one-way streets) very driveable (almost unheard of in a state capital). The southern edge is bordered by the water. The main street, *Héroes*, divides the city into east and west sides, ending at the waterfront. Obregón parallels the bay and leads, heading westward, first to a *glorieta* (traffic circle), then to the airport, then to the turn for Belize.

Most of the hotels and restaurants listed are clustered around the *Héroes*-Obregón intersection. There are several banks and ATMs around town, including an ATM inside the bus terminal.

Arba Internet (☎ 832-25-81; Efraín Aguilar; per hr M\$50; ☎ 8am-1am Mon-Sat, to midnight Sun)

City tourist office (☎ 835-08-00; cnr Blvd Bahía & Av Hidalgo; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Sat)

Cruz Roja (☎ 832-05-71; cnr Avs Independencia & Héroes de Chapultepec)

Fire, Medical, Police (☎ 066)

Hospital Morelos (☎ 832-45-95)

HSBC currency exchange counter (San Francisco de Asís supermarket; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat)

Immigration office (☎ 832-63-53; Av Héroes; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri)

Post office (☎ 832-22-81; cnr Plutarco Elías Calles & Av 5 de Mayo; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Telmax (Calle Lázaro Cárdenas; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) Between Avs Independencia & Benito Juárez.

Tourist information kiosk (☎ 9am-8pm) In the bus terminal.

Sights

MUSEO DE LA CULTURA MAYA

This **museum** (☎ 832-68-38; Av de los Héroes; admission M\$50; ☎ 9am-7pm Sun-Thu, to 8pm Fri & Sat) is the city's claim to cultural fame – a bold showpiece beautifully conceived and executed.

The various exhibits (labeled in Spanish and English) cover all of the Mayab (lands of the Maya), not just Quintana Roo or Mexico, and seek to explain the Maya way of life, thought and belief. The museum's **courtyard**, which you can enter for free, has salons for temporary exhibits of modern artists (such as Rufino Tamayo), paintings reproducing Maya frescoes and a *cinemuseo* giving free film showings.

MUSEO DE LA CIUDAD

The **local history museum** (Héroes de Chapultepec; admission M\$10; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Sun) is small but neatly done, and worth a 15-minute visit.

Sleeping

Instituto Quintanarroense de la Juventud (☎ 832-05-25; Heroica Escuela Naval btwn Calz Veracruz & Av Cozumel; campsites M\$30, dm M\$50) Fifty pesos a night is hard to beat, but you're going to be staying in some pretty lo-fi digs. This said, there's a super-friendly staff on hand, and it's relatively clean at this youth center and hostel.

Hotel Ucum (☎ 832-07-11, 832-61-86; Av Mahatma Gandhi 167; d with fan/air-con M\$200/\$350; (P) (☎) (☎)) This fine motel-like place looks like it may have once been used as a Jackie Chan movie set. And despite the unfortunate name (a town in Campeche), it offers pretty decent rooms, a (slightly milky) swimming pool and a restaurant serving good, inexpensive food.

Hotel Guadalupe (☎ 832-86-49; Calle Ignacio Zaragoza 226; s/d with fan M\$250/280, with air-con M\$400; (P) (☎) (☎)) You could eat dinner off the spotless floors here. Despite the cleanliness, the rooms are slightly stale, although they air out quickly.

our pick Grand Marlon Hotel (☎ 285-32-79; hotel_grandmarlon@hotmail.com; Av Juárez 88; d M\$500; (☎) (☎)) With modern clean lines, a rather funky pool area (complete with AstroTurf and a lukewarm Jacuzzi), the 'Grand' almost achieves 'hip boutique' status, and the simple, stylish rooms are an excellent deal for the price. Or, you could save a few pesos by heading across the street to the plain ol' Marlon.

Hotel Los Cocos (☎ 832-05-44; www.hotelloscocos.com.mx; cnr Av de los Héroes & Calle Héroes de Chapultepec; d with air-con & TV M\$750, ste M\$1600; (☎) (☎) (☎)) Has a great location and a seriously disco-mirrored lobby that gets your inner mojo rising. There's also a nice swimming pool, wireless access, a guarded parking lot and a popular sidewalk restaurant. Rooms have fridges, but are a bit small and musty for the price.

Holiday Inn Chetumal Puerta Maya (☎ 835-04-00; www.holimaya.com.mx; Héroes 171; d M\$1300, ste M\$1690-3630; (☎) (☎) (☎)) The best in town, with comfortable rooms that overlook a small courtyard, a swimming pool set amid tropical gardens, and a restaurant and bar.

Eating & Drinking

Barrios (cnr Avs Othón P Blanco & Independencia; mains M\$10-50; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Sat) Great little eatery with

SAVE SOME PESOS AT THE MARKETS

The best way to save some dinero is by eating at the markets in town. Across from the Holiday Inn is the Mercado Ignacio Manuel Altamirano and its row of small, simple eateries serving inexpensive meals. Similar is the upstairs area in the Nuevo Mercado Lázaro Cárdenas (Calz Veracruz). Supermercado San Francisco de Asís, just east of the bus terminal, has a wide selection of groceries, and is a full department store besides.

El Fenicio (cnr Av de los Héroes & Calle Ignacio Zaragoza; mains M\$35-90; ☎ 24hr) Arrive at this place at 11pm and you'll feel like you've somehow stepped right into a Hopper painting: the yellow light, the few solitary diners hunched over their meals. The food, a selection made up of mainly Mexican fare, is tasty and served promptly.

Pollo Brujo (☎ 837-47-47; Av Álvaro Obregón 208; ☎ 10am-10pm) A roasted half chicken costs M\$42, a whole one M\$77; take it with you or dine in the air-con salon. Service is with a snarl.

Sergio's Pizzas (☎ 832-29-91; cnr Avs Álvaro Obregón & 5 de Mayo; pizza M\$45-170, mains M\$60-160) A well air-conditioned place serving pizzas and cold beer in frosted mugs, plus Mexican and continental dishes, steaks and seafood, complemented by an extensive wine list.

Costa Azul (☎ 129-20-02; Calle Ignacio Zaragoza 166; mains M\$60-120; ☎ 11:30-8pm) Popular *palapa*-topped airy watering hole-restaurant with a fun Caribbean-Chetumalan vibe. Just plastic chairs and (sometimes) a mariachi or two.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

Chetumal's small airport is less than 2km north-west of the city center along Av Obregón.

Aviaca (☎ 01-800-771-67-33; www.aviaca.com; cnr Lázaro Cárdenas & Av 5 de Mayo) flies to Mexico City once a day Sunday to Friday.

BUSES FROM CHETUMAL

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Bacalar	minibuses M\$20 2nd-class M\$20	45min 45min	hourly from minibus terminal frequent
Belize city	M\$100	4-5hr with border formalities	18 daily from Nuevo Mercado 4:30am-6:30pm, some from main terminal 15 min later
Campeche	1st-class M\$250 2nd-class M\$170	6½-9hr 6½-9hr	1 daily 2 daily
Cancún	M\$180-210	5½-6½hr	frequent
Corozal, Belize	M\$35	1hr with border formalities	18 from Nuevo Mercado 4:30am-6:30pm, some from main terminal 15 min later
Escárcega	M\$120-160	4-6hr	5 daily
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	M\$54-90	2-3hr	frequent
Flores, Guatemala (for Tikal)	M\$290	8hr	5 daily
Mahahual	M\$50	4hr	3 daily
Mérida	deluxe M\$250 2nd-class M\$180	6-8hr 6-8hr	8 daily 3 daily
Orange Walk, Belize	M\$30-45	3¼hr with border formalities	18 from Nuevo Mercado 4:30am-6:30pm, some from main terminal 15 min later
Palenque	M\$280	7-8hr	4 daily
Playa del Carmen	M\$140-180	4½-6hr	frequent
Ticul	M\$155	6hr	6 daily
Tulum	M\$110-144	3½-4hr	frequent
Valladolid	M\$140	6hr	6 daily
Veracruz	M\$620	16hr	2 daily
Villahermosa	M\$330	7-9hr	5 daily
Xcalak	M\$66	5hr	3 daily
Xpujil	M\$55-78	2-3hr	9 daily

For flights to Belize City (and on to Flores, to reach Tikal) or to Belize's cays, cross the border into Belize then catch a flight from Corozal.

BUS

The main bus terminal is about 2km north of the center, near the intersection of Avs Insurgentes and Belice. Services are provided by Deluxe Omnitr del Caribe, Maya de Oro and Super Expreso (deluxe); ADO and Cristóbal Colón (1st class); and (2nd class) TRT, Sur and Mayab (a cut above), among others. The terminal has lockers (in the store against the east wall, near the pay toilets), a bus information kiosk (open until 3pm), an ATM, a cafeteria and shops.

You can also buy tickets for some lines and get information about most bus services at the **ADO office** (Av Belice; ☎ 6am–10pm), just west of the Museo de la Cultura Maya.

Many local buses, and those bound for Belize, begin their runs from the **Nuevo Mercado Lázaro Cárdenas** (cnr Calz Veracruz & Confederación Nacional Campesina), about 10 blocks north of Av Primo de Verdad on a corner also called Segundo Circuito by locals. From this market, most 1st-class Belize-bound buses continue to the long-distance terminal and depart from there 15 minutes later; the 2nd-class buses don't. Tickets can be purchased on board the buses for 2nd-class transportation and at the main terminal if you are traveling 1st class or deluxe.

The **minibus terminal** (cnr Avs Primo de Verdad & Miguel Hidalgo) has services to Bacalar and other nearby destinations. Departures listed in the table opposite are from the main terminal unless otherwise noted.

TAXI

Gibson Tours and Transfers (www.gibsonstoursandtransfers.com) charges M\$250/500 to the border/Corozal.

Getting Around

From anywhere in town taxis charge a flat fare of M\$20. From the traffic circle at Av Héroe, you can also get a *combi* (van) for M\$3 to the town center via the Santa María or Calderitas eastbound busses. To reach the terminal from the center, catch a *combi* from Av Belice behind the Museo de la Cultura Maya. Ask to be left at the *glorieta* (traffic circle) at Av Insurgentes. Head left (west) to

reach the terminal. The immigration office is about 800m north of the *glorieta*. (Ask for the *oficina de inmigración*.)

CORREDOR ARQUEOLÓGICO

The Corredor Arqueológico comprises the archaeological sites of **Dzibanché** and **Kohunlich**. At the time of research, Dzibanché was closed due to heavy treefall, after Dean's whirlwind visit. It's open now, but the site is missing many of the trees that made it so great. Kohunlich also suffered serious treefall, but was open to the public.

Sights

DZIBANCHÉ

Though it's a chore to get to, this **site** (admission M\$37) is definitely worth a visit for its secluded, semi-wild nature. Dzibanché ('writing on wood') was a major city extending more than 40 sq km, and on the road in you pass huge mounds covered in trees. There are a number of excavated palaces and pyramids, but the site itself is not completely excavated.

KOHUNLICH

The **archaeological site** (admission M\$40, guide M\$250) sits on a carpeted green. The ruins, dating from both the late Preclassic (AD 100–200) and the early Classic (AD 300–600) periods, are famous for the great **Templo de los Mascarones** (Temple of the Masks), a pyramidlike structure with a central stairway flanked by huge, 3m-high stucco masks of the sun god.

A few hundred meters southwest of Plaza Merwin are the **27 Escalones** (27 Steps), the remains of an extensive residential area.

The hydraulic engineering used at Kohunlich was a great achievement; 90,000 of the site's 210,000 sq meters were cut to channel rainwater into Kohunlich's once enormous reservoir.

Getting There & Away

The turnoff for Dzibanché from Hwy 186 is about 44km west of Chetumal, on the right just after the Zona Arqueológica sign. From there it's another 24km north and east along a pot-holed road. It's quite passable in a passenger car. Just after the tiny town of Morocoy you'll need to turn right again.

Kohunlich's turnoff is 3km west along Hwy 186 from the Dzibanché turnoff, and the site lies at the end of a paved 8.5km road.

There is no public transportation running directly to either of the sites. They're best visited by car, though Kohunlich could conceivably be reached by taking an early bus to the village of Francisco Villa near the turnoff, then either hitchhiking or walking the 8.5km to the site. Flag down a bus from the main highway to get back to Chetumal or Xpujil. Tour operators in Xpujil offer trips to Kohunlich and Dzibanché for M\$750.

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*-clad *indígenas* 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 near Celestún and Río Lagartos, and underground in the vast system of caves and cenotes that pock the region. 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.

MÉRIDA

☎ 999 / pop 781,100

Since the 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 city 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 hub and bub 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.

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 p932), 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, 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* (assembly plants) that opened in the 1980s and '90s and the tourism industry that picked up during those decades.

Orientation

The Plaza Grande, as *meridianos* 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 the 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 (☎ 928-36-74; Calle 59; 🕒 8am-9:30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) Between Calles 60 and 62.

EMERGENCY

Emergency (☎ 066)

Fire (☎ 924-92-42)

Police (☎ 925-20-34)

Red Cross (☎ 924-98-13)

Tourism Police (☎ 925-25-55 ext 260)

INTERNET ACCESS

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

LAUNDRY

Most upmarket hotels offer overnight laundry service.

Lavandería La Fe (☎ 924-45-31; Calle 64; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) Charges M\$40 per 3kg load.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital O’Horán (☎ 924-48-00, 924-11-11; Av de los Itzáes)

MONEY

Banks and ATMs are scattered throughout the city.

POST

Post Office (☎ 928-54-04; Calle 53 No 469; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, for stamps only 9am-1pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

City tourist office (☎ 942-00-00 ext 80119; Calle 62; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) On Plaza Grande.

State tourist office (☎ 930-31-01; Calle 61; 🕒 8am-9pm) On Plaza Grande.

Tourist Information Center (☎ 924-92-90; cnr Calles 60 & 57A; 🕒 8am-9pm)

Yucatán Today (☎ 927-85-31; www.yucatanoday.com; Calle 39 No 483 int 10) A Spanish-English magazine devoted to tourism in Yucatán.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Nómadas Travel (☎ 948-11-87; www.nomadastravel.com.mx; Prolongación Paseo de Montejo 370, Colonia Benito Juárez Nte) Books flights and offers services for student travelers.

Dangers & Annoyances

Guard against pickpockets, bag snatchers and bag slashers in the market 70 district and in any crowd. Outright muggings are very rare. Mérida’s **Policía Turística** (Tourist Police; ☎ 925-25-55 ext 260) wear brown-and-white uniforms and are your best bet if you’ve been robbed.

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 Francisco de Montejo the Younger. A ceremony is held daily marking the raising and lowering of the Mexican flag. On Sunday hundreds of *meridanos* take their *paseo* (stroll) here, and there’s a cultural exhibit – normally dance or live music – nearly every night.

CATEDRAL DE SAN ILDEFONSO

On the plaza’s east side, on the site of a former Maya temple, is Mérida’s hulking, severe **cathedral** (🕒 6am-noon & 4-7pm), begun in 1561 and completed in 1598. Some of the stone from the Maya temple was used in its construction. The massive crucifix behind the altar is **Cristo de la Unidad** (Christ of Unity), a symbol of reconciliation between those of Spanish and Maya heritage. To the right over the south door is a painting of Tutul Xiú, *cacique* of the town of Maní, paying his respects to his ally Francisco de Montejo at T’ho (de Montejo and Xiú jointly defeated the Cocomes; Xiú converted to Christianity, and his descendants still live in Mérida).

In the small chapel to the left of the altar is Mérida’s most famous religious artifact, a statue called **Cristo de las Ampollas** (Christ of the Blisters). Local legend says the statue was carved from a tree that was hit by lightning and burned for an entire night without charring. It is also said to be the only object to have survived the fiery destruction of the

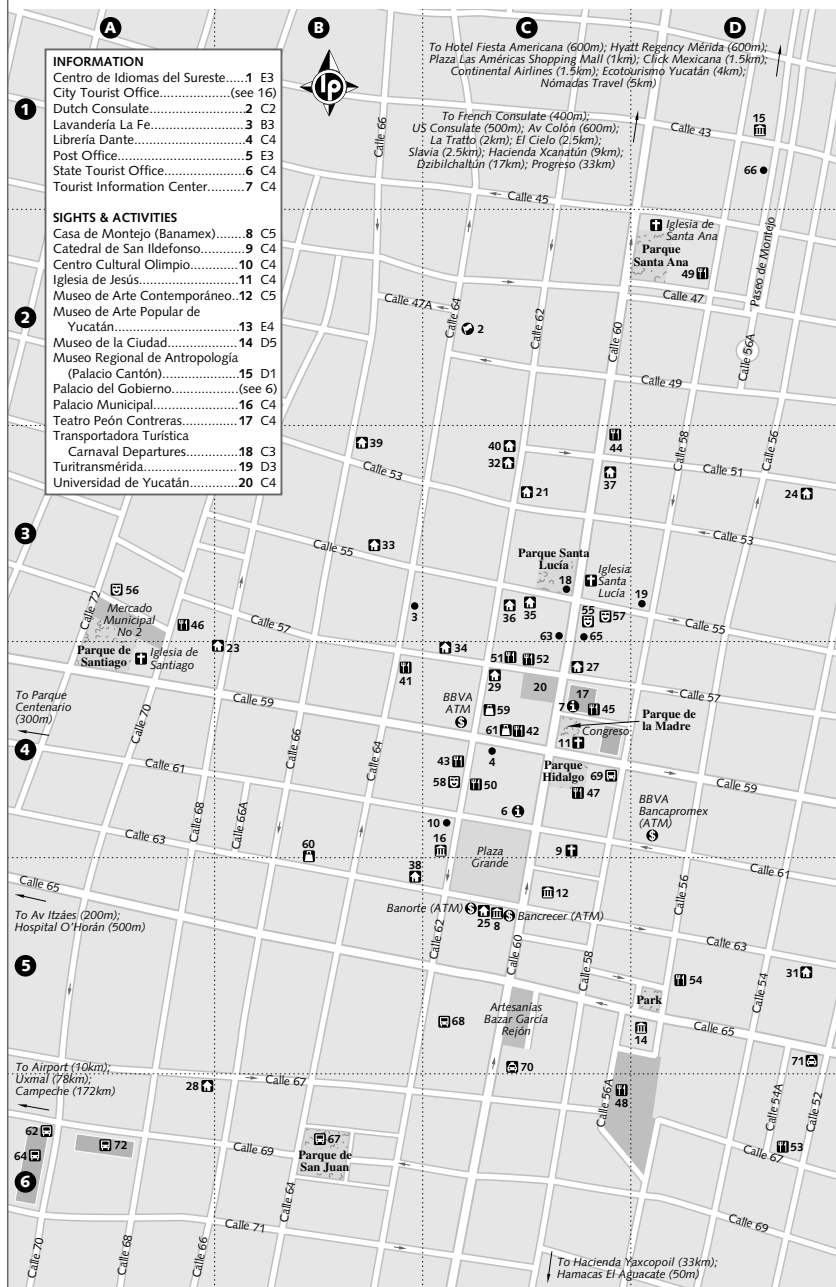
MÉRIDA

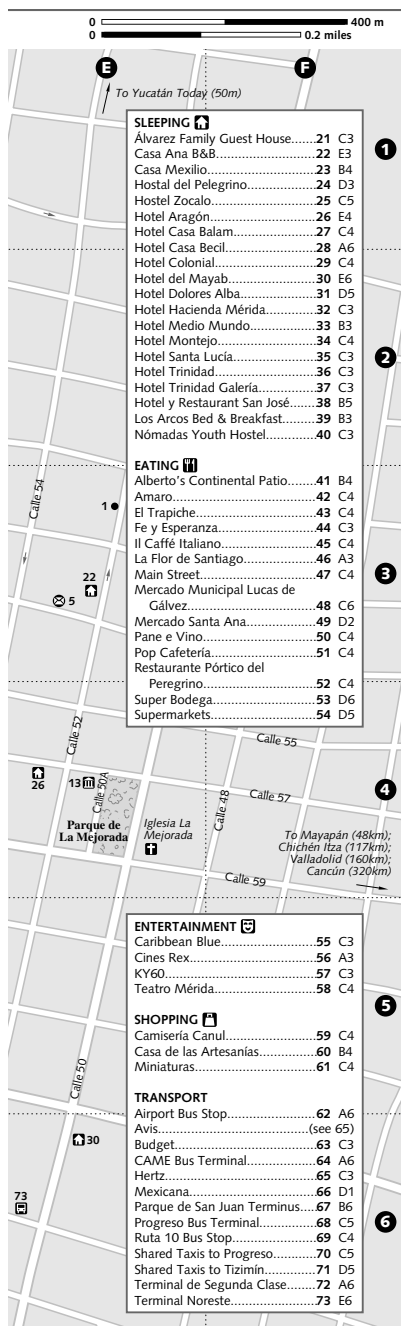
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church in the town of Ichmul (though it was blackened and blistered from the heat). The statue was moved to the Mérida's cathedral in 1645.

Other than these items, the cathedral's interior is largely plain, its rich decoration having been stripped away by angry peasants at the height of anticlerical fervor of the Mexican Revolution.

AROUND THE CATHEDRAL

South of the cathedral, housed in the former archbishop's palace, is the **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo** (Macay; ☎ 928-32-36; Calle 60; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Sun-Thu, to 8pm Fri & Sat). This attractive museum holds permanent exhibits of Yucatán's most famous painters and sculptors, as well as revolving exhibits by local craftspeople.

The **Casa de Montejo** (Palacio de Montejo, Calle 63; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) is on the south side of the Plaza Grande and dates from 1549. It originally housed soldiers but was soon converted into a mansion that served members of the Montejo family until 1970. These days it houses a bank, and you can enter and look around during bank hours. At other times, content yourself with a close look at the façade, where triumphant conquistadors with halberds hold their feet on the necks of generic barbarians (though they're not Maya, the association is inescapable). Typical of the symbolism in colonial statuary, the vanquished are rendered much smaller than the victors; works on various churches throughout the region feature big priests towering over or in front of little 'Indians.' Also gazing across the plaza from the façade are busts of Montejo the Elder, his wife and his daughter.

Across the square from the cathedral is Mérida's **Palacio Municipal** (City Hall). Originally built in 1542, it was twice refurbished, in the 1730s and the 1850s. Adjoining it is the **Centro Cultural Olimpio** (☎ 924-00-00 ext 80152; cnr Calles 62 & 61), Mérida's municipal cultural center. Attempts to create a modern exterior for the building were halted by government order, to preserve the colonial character of the plaza. The ultramodern interior serves as a venue for music and dance performances (see p922) as well as other exhibitions. Schedules for performances and frequent film showings are posted outside.

On the north side of the plaza, the **Palacio de Gobierno** (admission free; ☎ 8am-10pm) houses the

state of Yucatán's executive government offices (and one of its tourist information centers). It was built in 1892 on the site of the palace of the colonial governors. Be sure to have a look inside at the murals painted by local artist Fernando Castro Pacheco. Completed in 1978, they were 25 years in the making and portray a symbolic history of the Maya and their interaction with the Spaniards.

MUSEO DE LA CIUDAD

The **city museum** (☎ 923-68-69; Calle 56; admission free; 🕒 9am-8pm Tue-Fri, to 2pm Sat & Sun) is housed in the old post office and offers a great reprieve from the hustle, honks and exhaust of this market neighborhood. There are exhibits tracing back the city's history to pre-Conquest days up through the *henequén* belle époque and into the 20th century.

CALLE 60

Rhe 17th-century **Iglesia de Jesús**, also called Iglesia de la Tercera Orden, rises a block north of the Plaza Grande, beyond shady Parque Hidalgo. Built by the Jesuits in 1618, it is the sole surviving edifice from a complex of buildings that once filled the entire city block.

North of the church is the enormous bulk of the **Teatro Peón Contreras** (cnr Calles 60 & 57; 🕒 visitors 9am-6pm Tue-Sat), built between 1900 and 1908, during Mérida's *henequén* heyday. It boasts a main staircase of Carrara marble, a dome with faded frescoes by Italian artists and various paintings and murals throughout the building.

Across Calle 60 from the theater is the main building of the **Universidad de Yucatán**. The modern university was established in the 19th century by Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto and General Manuel Cepeda Peraza.

A block north of the university is pretty little **Parque Santa Lucía** (cnr Calles 60 & 55), with arcades on the north and west sides. When Mérida was a lot smaller, this was where travelers would get on or off the stagecoaches that linked towns and villages with the provincial capital. The **Bazar de Artesanías**, the local handicrafts market, is held here at 11am on Sunday.

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 Av Colón west of Paseo de Montejo.

MUSEO REGIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGÍA

The massive Palacio Cantón houses Yucatán's regional **anthropology museum** (☎ 923-05-57; cnr Paseo de Montejo & Calle 43; admission M\$37; 🕒 8am-8pm Tue-Sat, to 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 *palacio*'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.

PARQUE CENTENARIO

About 12 blocks west of the Plaza Grande lies this large, verdant **park** (admission free; 🕒 6am-6pm Tue-Sun), bordered by Av 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

This **art museum** (Yucatecan Museum of Popular Art; cnr Calle 50A & Calle 57; admission M\$30; 🕒 9:30am-4:30pm Tue-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) in the Casa Molina 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, where you'll see the same style of work, and it doesn'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* (embroidered tunics), 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.

Tours

CITY TOURS

The **city tourist office** (☎ 942-00-00 ext 80119; Calle 62) on Plaza Grande offers free guided walking tours of the historic center (sometimes in English), focusing on Plaza Grande. Tours depart at 9:30am daily from in front of the Palacio Municipal.

Transportadora Turística Carnaval (☎ 927-61-19) 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.

REGIONAL TOURS

Turitramérica (☎ 928-18-71; www.turitramerica.com.mx; cnr Calles 55 & 58) is one of the largest of the many agencies offering group tours to sites around Mérida. Prices range from M\$300 to M\$450.

The owners of reputable **Ecoturismo Yucatán** (☎ 920-27-72; 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 924-52-23; www.nomadastravel.com; Calle 62 No 433), which also arranges a variety of other tours, from do-it-yourself trips in your rented car or on public transportation (with written instructions) to nearly all-inclusive (some meals) trips in private buses.

ATS buses conduct a day tour to Uxmal, Kabah, and the Ruta Puuc sites, beginning from the Terminal de Segunda Clase in Mérida at 8am. See Tours, p928, for details.

Courses

You can often find a private tutor through your hostel. **Centro de Idiomas del Sureste (CIS)** (☎ 923-09-54; www.cisyucatan.com.mx; Calle 52 No 455) offers Spanish courses.

Festivals & Events

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.

Prior to Lent, in February or March, **Carnaval** features colorful costumes and non-stop festivities. The **Festival de Trova Yucateca** is held in March. For more on *trova* see p83.

Semana Santa (Holy Week) is a major celebration in Mérida. 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.

Another big religious tradition is the **Exposición de Altares de los Muertos** held on the night of November 1. 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 center of town 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 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.

BUDGET

Hostel Zócalo (☎ 924-52-23; Calle 63 No 508; dm M\$100, s/d M\$140/230; ☑) 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 are a wealth of information about the area.

our pick **Nómadas Youth Hostel** (☎/fax 924-52-23; www.nomadastravel.com; Calle 62 No 433; dm M\$85, s or d without/with bathroom M\$200/240; (P) (Q)) This is Mérida's backpacker central, and the best hostel in the city. 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. They even have free salsa classes and are planning on building a pool out back. Bring mosquito repellent and earplugs, as the front rooms can get traffic noise.

Hostal del Peregrino (☎ 924-54-91; 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 are 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 they offer low-season discounts and wi-fi.

Álvarez Family Guest House (☎ 924-30-60; casa.alvarez@hotmail.com; Calle 62 No 448; 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 ever-accommodating owner, may demonstrate on request.

Hotel Casa Becil (☎ 924-67-64; hotelcasabecil@yahoo.com.mx; Calle 67 No 550C; 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. The place offers very inexpensive, clean rooms with a fully equipped kitchen downstairs, an intimate courtyard, a sun deck, beautiful tile 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 y Restaurant San José (☎ 928-66-57; sanjose92@latinmail.com; Calle 63; 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 bit of heavy detergent they manage to keep the place spick-and-span. The 30 good-

sized rooms are all set well off the street. This place offers value and is a favorite with visiting Mennonites.

Hotel del Mayab (☎ 928-51-74; Calle 50 No 536A; s/d with fan M\$250/270, with air-con M\$350/400; (P) (Q) (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.

our pick **Casa Ana B&B** (☎ 924-00-05; www.casaana.com; Calle 52 No 469; 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).

Hotel Trinidad Galería (☎ 923-24-63; www.hotelestrinidad.com; Calle 60 No 456; r without/with air-con M\$300/400, ste M\$450-550; (P) (Q) (Q)) It's like walking into the 'General's Labyrinth' or a Salvador Dalí 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.

Hotel Dolores Alba (☎ 928-56-50, 800-849-50-60; fax 928-31-63; 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, have good beds, air-con and TV, and face the lovely pool.

Hotel Trinidad (☎ 923-20-33; www.hotelestrinidad.com; Calle 62 No 464; d M\$400; (Q)) Occupies a colonial house and a newer wing, and has a variety of rooms, each with its own unique decor and charm. Some rooms have good kitchenettes, most have air-con, and there's even a rooftop Jacuzzi.

Hotel Santa Lucía (☎/fax 928-26-72, in the US 1-800-560-2445; hstlucia@prodigy.net.mx; Calle 55 No 508; s/d/tr M\$400/450/500; (P) (Q) (Q)) Across from the park of the same name, it is clean, secure and popular, and has an attractive lobby. The pool is small but clean, and the rooms have air-con, TV and phones. Rates include breakfast.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Aragon (☎/fax 924-02-42; www.hotelaragon.com; Calle 57 No 474; s/d M\$450/480; (P) (Q) (Q)) The

common areas of this hotel are great with a large courtyard and a narrow pool along one side. If only they 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.

Hotel Montejo (☎ 928-03-90; fax 924-26-92; www.hotelmontejo.com; Calle 57; s/d/tr with air-con M\$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 924-54-72; www.hotelmediomundo.com; Calle 55 No 533; d with fan M\$600, r/stc 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, tile floors, beautiful tile sinks, great bathrooms and plenty of natural light.

Casa Mexilio (☎ /fax 928-25-05, in the US ☎ 800-538-6802; www.casamexilio.com; Calle 68 No 495; 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.

Hotel Colonial (☎ 923-64-44; fax 928-39-61; www.hotelcolonial.com.mx; Calle 62 No 476; d/tr M\$760/850; 🏠) The Colonial features 73 comfortable rooms with air-con in a fairly modern building with a small clover-shaped pool and perhaps Mexico's smallest bar. They've recently renovated a few rooms; ask for a newer room.

our pick **Los Arcos Bed & Breakfast** (☎ 928-02-14; www.losarcosmerida.com; Calle 66; 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 decor. Rooms have an eclectic assortment of art and antiques, excellent beds and bathrooms, and come stocked with CD players, bathrobes and sarongs.

TOP END

Hotel Casa del Balam (☎ 924-21-50, in the US or Mexico 800-624-8451, fax 924-50-11; www.casabalbam.com; Calle 60 No 488; d M\$1200; 🏠) This place is centrally located and has a great pool and large, quiet colonial-style rooms with powerful central

air-con. The Balam often offers hefty discounts during quiet times.

Hotel Hacienda Mérida (☎ 924-43-63; www.hotelhaciendamerida.com; Calle 62; 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. This said, it beats staying in a heartless business hotel for most.

Hyatt Regency Mérida (☎ 942-02-02; fax 925-70-02; www.hyatt.com; Av Colón 344; d from M\$1700; 🏠) Not far from the Fiesta Americana (another good high-end bet), the 17-story Hyatt offers some of Mérida's chi-chiest hotel digs, with some 300 rooms, tennis courts, a gym and steam bath, and a great pool with swim-up bar.

Eating

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.

Mercado Municipal No 2 (Calle 70) Numero Dos is a less crowded, but still cheap and good market on the north side of Parque de Santiago.

Fey Esperanza (☎ 241-09-95; Calle 60 No 452; tacos & tortas M\$8-28; 🕒 7:30am-5:30pm Mon-Sat) This popular hole in the wall offers simple snacks like tacos and tortas. 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 (☎ 928-55-91; Calle 70; mains M\$30-60; 🕒 7am-11pm) Chiapas coffee is served in incongruous, chipped Willow-ware 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.

El Trapiche (☎ 928-12-31; Calle 62 No 491; 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 melón* (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) as well as a branch of **Super Bodega** (cnr Calles 67 & 54A), a market-department store chain.

MIDRANGE

Il Caffè Italiano (☎ 928-00-93; Calle 57A; mains M\$75-150; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Sat) It's an Italian-style café with nice espressos, good mains and very interesting desserts: the strawberries with balsamic vinegar and ice cream is something completely different.

Pop Cafetería (☎ 928-61-63; Calle 57; breakfast M\$28-48, mains M\$35-90; ☎ 7am-midnight Mon-Sat, 8am-midnight Sun) There's an Art Deco feel to this little cafeteria-style restaurant, which serves up cheap breakfast combinations and a good variety of Mexican dishes; try the chicken in dark, rich *mole* (M\$45).

Main Street (☎ 923-68-50; Calle 60; breakfast M\$50-80, mains M\$60-140; ☎ 7am-11pm) On the edge of Parque Hidalgo, it 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 (☎ 928-24-51; www.restauranteamaro.com; Calle 59; mains M\$55-100; ☎ 11am-1am; 🍷) The Amaro is a romantic dining spot, especially at night, when there's usually a duo performing ballads. It is 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, crepes and pizzas. If it's slow it will close at 11pm.

Pane e Vino (☎ 928-62-28; Calle 62; 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), lasagne, fish, meat and a selection of respectable wines by the glass or bottle. The star attractions are the fresh handmade pastas, which vary daily and usually include gnocchi, ravioli and fettuccine.

TOP END

Restaurante Pórtico del Peregrino (☎ 928-61-63; Calle 57; mains M\$70-140; ☎ noon-midnight) There are sev-

eral 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* (chicken in a chocolate and chili sauce) is a house specialty, as is artery-clogging *queso relleno* (Dutch cheese stuffed with spiced ground beef).

Alberto's Continental Patio (☎ 928-53-67; cnr Calles 64 & 57; mains M\$70-170, set dinners M\$240-280; ☎ 1pm-11pm Mon-Sat, 6pm-11pm Sun; 🍷) Alberto's offers yet more colonial-courtyard (as well as indoor) dining. The setting is extremely atmospheric, check-a-block with religious artifacts, Maya ceramic figures and greenery. Middle Eastern dishes such as hummus, baba-ganoush and tabouleh 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.

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. Check with one of the tourist information offices to confirm schedules and find out about special events; www.yucatanoday.com offers monthly news and often highlights seasonal events. The Centro Cultural Olímpico (see p917) has something on nearly every night, from films to concerts to art installations.

Mérida has several cinemas, most of which show first-run Hollywood fare in English, with Spanish subtitles (ask '*jinglés?*' 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 **Cines Rex** (Calle 57), between Calles 70 and 72, or **Teatro Mérida** (Calle 62), between Calles 59 and 61.

Take a cab to the Prolongación de Montejo, where you'll have your choice of bumping discos and uber-chic lounges. Most charge a cover. **El Cielo** (☎ 944-51-27; Prolongación de Montejo), between Calle 25 and Av Campestre, is a local favorite, as is the nearby **Slavia** (☎ 926-65-87; Prolongación de Montejo s/n).

Caribbean Blue (☎ 923-22-79; Calle 60; M\$30 cover; ☎ 10pm-3:30am), between Calles 57 & 55, is one

of a cluster of bars on this block that have music and dancing, with a live nine-piece salsa band most nights. The crowd is fairly young, with a mix of locals and visitors.

KY60 (Calle 55 btwn Calles 58 & 60; no cover; ☎ 9pm-3am) is not a gay bar, despite the Village People, men-wearing-construction-outfits vibe. It's got nice 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. It's between Calles 57 and 55.

Shopping

Mérida is a fine place for buying Yucatecan handicrafts. Purchases to consider include hammocks and traditional Maya clothing such as the colorful, embroidered *huipiles*, panama hats and of course the wonderfully comfortable *guayaberas* (thin-fabric shirts with pockets and appliquéd designs worn by Yucatecan men).

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 from all over Mexico.

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

HANDICRAFTS

Casa de las Artesanías (☎ 928-66-76; Calle 63; ☎ 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. It's between Calles 64 and 66.

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

Miniaturas (☎ 928-65-03; Calle 59; ☎ 10am-8pm) Here you'll find lots of small Día de los Muertos tableaux, tinwork and figurines of every sort, from ceramics to toy soldiers. It's between Calles 60 and 62.

CLOTHING & PANAMA HATS

Camisería Canul (☎ 923-56-61; Calle 62; ☎ 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. It's between Calles 57 and 59.

The Campeche town of Bécál is the center of the hat-weaving trade, but you can buy good examples of the hat-makers' art in Mérida.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Mérida's tiny but modern airport is a 10km, 20-minute ride southwest of the Plaza Grande off Hwy 180 (Av de los Itzáes). It has car-rental desks, an ATM and currency-exchange booth and a **tourist office** (☎ 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 and Northwestern (both from Houston, total eight times weekly). Most domestic flights are operated by small regional airlines, with a few flights by Aeroméxico and Mexicana.

Aeroméxico (☎ at airport 920-12-93, 800-021-40-10; www.aeromexico.com) Flies to Mexico City, Los Angeles and Miami.

Aviaca (☎ 800-006-22-00, at airport 925-68-90; www.aviaca.com.mx) Flies to Mexico City.

Click Mexicana (☎ 800-112-54-25, 946-13-66; Paseo de Montejo 500B) Flies between Mérida and Cancún, Veracruz and Villahermosa, with connections to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Havana and other destinations.

Continental Airlines (☎ 800-900-50-00, 946-18-88; Paseo Montejo 437; www.continental.com) Flies nonstop between Houston and Mérida.

Delta (☎ in the US 1-800-123-4710; www.delta.com) Offers nonstop service from Miami.

Mexicana (☎ 924-66-33, 800-112-54-25; Paseo de Montejo 493) Nonstop flights to Mexico City.

BUS

Mérida is the bus transportation hub of the Yucatán Peninsula. 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 out of (and stop at) more than one terminal. Tickets for departure from one terminal can often be bought at another, and destinations overlap greatly among lines. Some lines offer round-trip tickets to nearby towns that bring the fare down quite a bit. Following are some of the terminals, the bus lines operating out of them and areas served.

Hotel Fiesta Americana (☎ 924-08-55; Av Colón)

A small 1st-class terminal on the west side of the hotel complex, near Calle 56A, servicing guests of the luxury hotels on Av Colón, north of the center. ADO GL and

Super Expresso services run between here and Cancún, Campeche, Chetumal and Playa del Carmen.

Parque de San Juan (Calle 69) From all around the square and church, vans and *combis* (vans or minibuses) depart for Dzibilchaltún Ruinas, Muna, Oxtutzcab, Tekax, Ticul and other points.

Progreso (Calle 62 No 524 btwn Calles 65 & 67) Progreso has a separate bus terminal for its buses.

CAME Terminal (reservations ☎ 924-83-91; Calle 70 btwn Calles 69 and 71) Sometimes referred to as the 'Terminal de Primera Clase,' Mérida's main terminal has

(mostly 1st-class) buses to points around the Yucatán Peninsula and such places as 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.

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 CAME. ADO, Mayab, Oriente, Sur and TRT run mostly

BUSES FROM MÉRIDA

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

2nd-class buses to points in the state and around the peninsula. ATS buses run Uxmal and Ruta Puuc from here. The terminal has a luggage checkroom.

Terminal Noreste (Calle 67 btwn Calles 50 and 52) LUS, Occidente and Oriente use this terminal. Destinations served from here include many small towns in the northeast 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 and Oxkutzcab. Some Oriente buses depart from Terminal 69 and stop here; others leave directly from here (eg those to Izamal and Tizimín).

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** (☎ 925-19-00; www.budgetcancun.com), **Avís** (☎ 946-15-24; www.avis.com.mx) and **Hertz** (☎ 946-25-54; 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 p874 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 Terminal.

Transporte Terrestre (☎ 946-15-29) provides speedy service between the airport and the center, charging M\$100 per carload (same price for hotel pick-up). A taxi from the 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 out at Av 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 ☎ 982-15-04 or ☎ 982-11-71; service is available 24 hours (dispatch fees are 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 scent 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.

Uxmal

Some visitors rank **Uxmal** (admission M\$95, parking M\$10, guides M\$400; ☎ 8am-5pm; 🗺) (pronounced 'oosh-mahl') among the top Maya archaeological sites. It certainly is one of the most harmonious and peaceful. Fascinating, well-preserved structures made of pink-hued

limestone cover the wide area. 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 to about 100m, are the only ones in the northwest region of the otherwise flat peninsula.

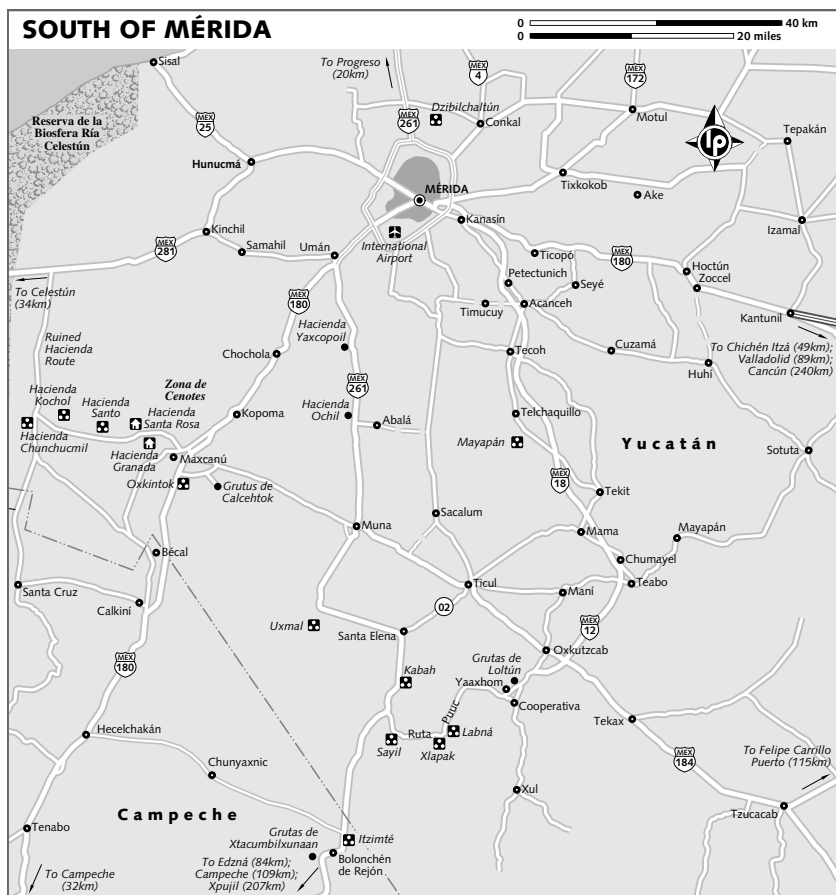
HISTORY

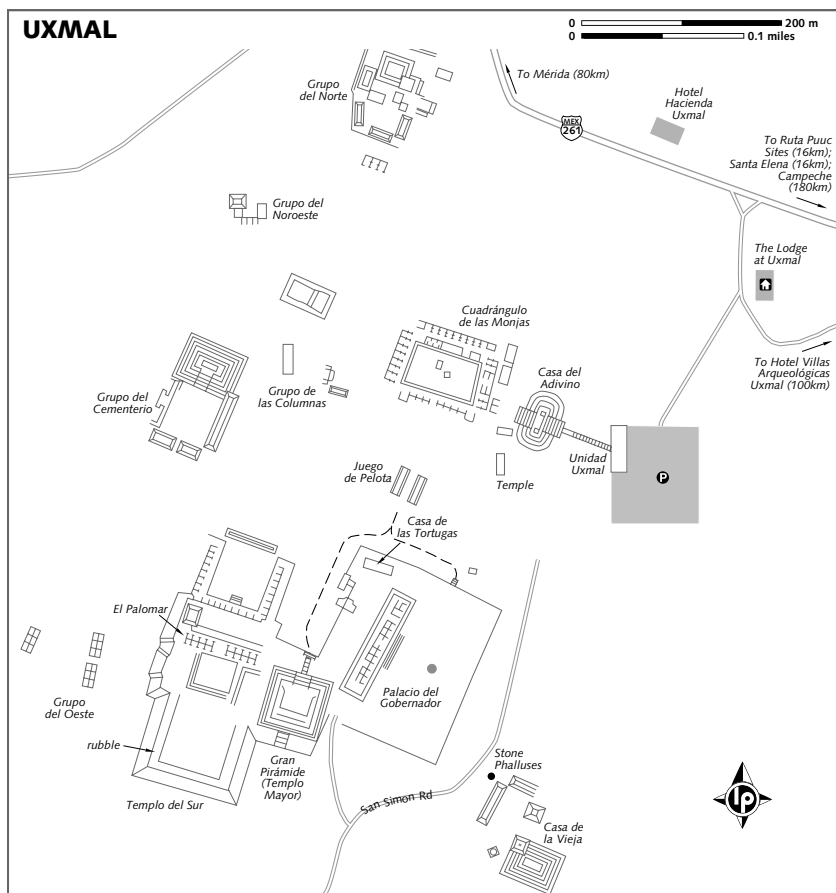
Uxmal was an important city, and its dominance extended to the nearby towns of Sayil, Kabah, Xlapak and Labná. Although Uxmal means 'Thrice Built' in Maya, it was actually constructed five times.

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* (cisterns) lined with lime mortar to catch and hold water during the dry season. First settled in 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 facades, was also 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, was supreme in importance. His image is ubiquitous at the site, in the form of stucco masks protruding from facades and cornices. There is





much speculation as to why Uxmal was largely abandoned in about AD 900; drought conditions may have reached such proportions that the inhabitants had to relocate. Later, the Xiu dynasty, which had controlled Uxmal for several hundred years, moved their seat of power to near present-day Mani, launching a rebellion on the kingdom of Mayapán, which had usurped much of the power in the region.

Rediscovered by archaeologists in the 19th century, Uxmal was first excavated in 1929 by Frans Blom. Although much has been restored, much has yet to be discovered.

INFORMATION

The price of admission, if you retain the wristband ticket, includes a 45-minute **sound-and-**

light show (8pm summer, 7pm winter). It's in Spanish, but translation devices are available (M\$25). The cost of the show only is M\$30, applicable toward the next day's site admission.

SIGHTS

Casa del Adivino

This 39m-high temple (the Magician's House) was built on an oval base. The smoothly sloping sides have been restored, and they date from the temple's fifth incarnation. The four earlier temples were covered in the rebuilding, except for the high doorway on the west side, which remains from the fourth incarnation. Decorated in elaborate Chenes style, the doorway proper forms the mouth of a gigantic Chac mask.

Cuadrángulo de las Monjas

The 74-room, sprawling Nuns' Quadrangle is 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 facades 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 finally the western.

Several decorative elements on the facades show signs of Toltec, Río Bec and Chenes influence. The feathered-serpent (Quetzalcóatl, or, in Maya, Kukulcán) motif along the top of the west temple's facade is one of these. Note also the stylized depictions of the *na* (Maya thatched hut) over some of the doorways in the northern and southern buildings.

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). Turn left and head up the steep slope and stairs to the large 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 that supported it.

Palacio del Gobernador

The Governor's Palace has a magnificent facade nearly 100m long, which Mayanist Michael D Coe called 'the finest structure at Uxmal and the culmination of the Puuc style.' Buildings in Puuc style have walls filled with rubble, faced with cement and then covered in a thin veneer of limestone squares; the lower part of the facade is plain, the upper part festooned with stylized Chac faces and geometric designs, often lattice-like 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).

Gran Pirámide

The 32m-high Great Pyramid has been restored only on its northern side. Archaeologists theorize that the quadrangle at its summit was largely destroyed in order to construct a second pyramid above it. Why that work was never completed remains unknown.

El Palomar

West of the Great Pyramid sits a structure whose roof comb is latticed with a pattern reminiscent of the Moorish pigeon houses built into walls in Spain and northern Africa, hence the building's name, 'The Dovecote.' The nine honeycombed triangular 'belfries' sit on top of a building that was once part of a quadrangle.

Casa de la Vieja

Off the southeast corner of the Palacio del Gobernador 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* sheltering several large phalluses carved from stone.

TOURS

ATS buses depart Mérida's Terminal de Segunda Clase at 8am on a whirlwind excursion to the Ruta Puuc sites, 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 at Uxmal in the morning and picked up from there in the afternoon.

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 (see p933), 30km to the east.

Hotel Villas Arqueológicas Uxmal (off Map p927; ☎ / fax 997-974-60-20, in the US 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 springy.

DIY: EXPLORE THE BACKROADS SOUTH OF MÉRIDA

There are numerous attractions worth seeing as you travel south from Mérida. Here are a few of our favorites:

- **Hacienda Yaxcopoil** A vast estate that grew and processed *henequén*; many of its numerous French Renaissance-style buildings have undergone picturesque restorations.
- **Hacienda Ochil** Provides a fascinating, though basic, look at how *henequén* was grown and processed.
- **Grutas de Calcehtok** These caves are said by some to comprise the longest dry-cave system on the Yucatán Peninsula.
- **Oxkintok** Inscriptions found at the site contain some of the oldest known dates in the Yucatán, and indicate that the city was inhabited from the Preclassic to the Postclassic period (300 BC to AD 1500), reaching its greatest importance between AD 475 to 860.
- **Ruined Hacienda 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. Here you'll find a series of old haciendas.
- **Ticul to Tihosuco** The route from Ticul to Tihosuco, in Quintana Roo, is seldom traveled by tourists. Part of the route is called the Ruta de los Conventos (Route of the Convents), as each of these tiny villages has a cathedral or church, many in beautiful disrepair.
- **Cuzamá** Three kilometers east of the town of Cuzamá, accessed from the small village of Chunchucmil, are the Cenotes de Cuzamá, a series of three amazing limestone sinkholes accessed by horse-drawn railcart in an old *henequén* hacienda.

Hotel Hacienda Uxmal (☎ 997-976-20-12, in the US 800-235-4079; www.mayaland.com; d with air-con 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.

The Lodge at Uxmal (☎ 997-976-20-10, in the US 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 monster basin tubs – some rooms even have Jacuzzis.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Uxmal is 80km from Mérida. Most buses that take the inland route between Mérida and Campeche will drop you off at Uxmal, Santa Elena, Kabah or the Ruta Puuc turnoff. But be aware that 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) then catch one of the frequent buses from there to Ticul (M\$8, 30 minutes).

Santa Elena

The nearest town to Uxmal is Santa Elena. It has 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 *henequén*-related exhibits. Go for a little DIY adventure by heading 4km outside town to the Mulchic pyramid; locals can tell you how to get there.

Bungalows Saché (☎ 985-858-12-81 or 997-978-51-58; www.sachebungalows.com.mx; d M\$230-290) There's a nice garden here, and all the rooms have fans, good screens and decent beds. 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 (☎ 997-107-41-26 or 997-102-08-65; www.flycatcherinn.com; d M\$400-500, ste or cottage M\$600) It features six squeaky-clean rooms, an enormous master suite and a separate cottage. All have great porches, super-comfy imported beds, plus hammocks, excellent spaage and great bathrooms. 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.

Restaurant El Chac-Mool (☎ 999-996-20-25; mains M\$40-60; ☎ 8am-9pm) On Hwy 261 at the southern entrance to Santa Elena, this is a friendly place serving Yucatecan food that includes a hearty vegetarian plate of rice, beans and fried bananas. They have a little store here, too.

Santa Elena is 16km southeast of Uxmal and 8km north of Kabah – for details of bus services from Uxmal, see p929; from Ticul see p933.

Kabah

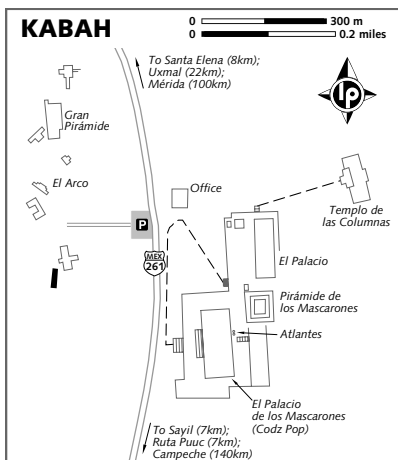
After Uxmal, Kabah (AD 750–950) was the most important city in the region. The **ruins** (admission M\$34; ☎ 8am-5pm) straddle Hwy 261. The guard shack-cum-souvenir shop (selling snacks and cold drinks) and the bulk of the restored ruins are on the east side of the highway.

The facade of **El Palacio de los Mascarones** (Palace of Masks) 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 beak is at the building's south end. These curled-up noses may have given the palace its modern Maya name, Codz Poop (Rolled Mat).

Once you're up to your ears in noses, head around back 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 among the very few 3D human figures you'll see at a Maya site. One is headless and the other wears a jaguar mask atop his head. A third atlas stands by the office near the entrance.

From here be sure to check out **El Palacio** (The Palace), with its groups of decorative *columnillas* (little columns) on the upper part of the facade; these are a distinctive characteristic of Puuc architectural style. A couple of hundred meters through the jungle from here is **Templo de las Columnas**. This building has more rows of impressive decorative columns.

Across the highway from El Palacio, a path leads to the **Gran Pirámide** (Great Pyramid). And from the Great Pyramid the path ends at the impressive, restored **El Arco**. It's said that the *saché* (cobble 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, much of the Yucatán Peninsula was con-



nected by these marvelous 'white roads' of rough limestone.

Kabah is 100km from Mérida, a ride of about two hours (see p929). Buses will usually make flag stops at the entrance to the ruins.

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, ending at the Grutas de Loltún. This is the Ruta Puuc, and its sites offer some marvelous architectural detail and a deeper acquaintance with the Puuc Maya civilization, which flourished between about AD 750 and 950.

The most convenient way to visit the Ruta Puuc sites is by car; however, there is a reliable bus service that tours the route daily as well (see p933).

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 facade some 85m long, reminiscent of the Minoan palace on Crete. The distinctive columns of Puuc architecture are used here over and over – as supports for the lintels, as decoration between doorways and as a frieze above them – alternating with huge stylized Chac masks and 'descending gods.'

Taking the path south from the palace for about 400m and bearing left, you come to the temple **El Mirador**, whose roosterlike roof comb was once painted 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.

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, only about 20m in length. It's decorated with the 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 motmots (a colorful bird) brighten up the surrounding forests.

LABNÁ

This is *the* site not to miss. Archaeologists believe that, at one point in the 9th century, some 3000 Maya lived at **Labná** (admission M\$34; ☞ 8am-5pm). To support such numbers in these arid hills, water was collected in *chultunes*. At Labná's peak there were some 60 *chultunes* in and around the city; several are still visible.

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. On the west corner of the main

structure's facade 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 from there, of the site and the hills beyond, is impressive.

From the palace a limestone-paved *sacbé* leads to **El Arco Labná**, which is best known for its magnificent arch, once part of a building that separated two courtyards. The corbeled structure, 3m wide and 6m high, is well preserved, and the reliefs decorating its upper facade are exuberantly Puuc in style.

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 roof comb, is well positioned to be a lookout, hence its name.

GRUTAS DE LOLTÚN

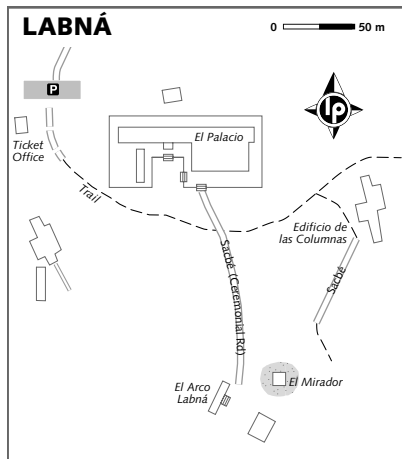
Fifteen kilometers northeast of Labná, a sign points out the left turn to the Grutas de Loltún, 5km further northeast. The road passes through lush orchards and some banana and palm groves, a refreshing sight in this dry region.

These **caverns** (admission M\$54; ☞ 9am-5pm; ♿) are the largest, most interesting cave system on the Yucatán Peninsula, and a treasure trove of data for archaeologists. Carbon dating of artifacts found here reveals that humans used the caves 2500 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 barely a trace remains. Now, visitors to the illuminated caves see mostly natural limestone formations, some of which are quite lovely.

To explore the labyrinth, you must take a scheduled guided tour at 9:30am, 11am, 12:30pm, 2pm, 3pm or 4pm. The service of the guides is included in the admission price, but since they receive little of that, an additional tip (M\$20 to M\$50 per person) is appreciated.

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.



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 (Quetzalcóatl) 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 Itzá 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, who had moved the capital close to present-day Maní, 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.

There is a bus service to Oxkutzcab (osh-kootz-kahb; M\$44, 1½ hours), with departures at 8:30am and 12:30pm, from the Centro Bus Station in Mérida. Ioltún 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, on Hwy 18. Though far less impressive than many Maya sites, Mayapán is historically significant, its main attractions are clustered in a compact core, and visitors usually have the place to themselves.

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

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.

TICUL

☎ 997 / pop 31,100

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 market to the main plaza, Plaza Mayor. A **post office** (☎ 8am-2:30pm Mon-Fri) faces the plaza, as do two banks with ATMs. Telmex has an office here. Several internet cafés are dotted around near the town center.

Sights & Activities

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 to 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.

Saturday mornings in Ticul are picturesque: Calle 23 near the public market is closed to motorized traffic, and the street fills with three-wheeled cycles transporting shoppers between the market and their homes. **Cine Ideal** (Calle 23), between Calles 26A and 28, shows mostly Spanish-dubbed films.

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 fans and bathrooms.

Hotel Sierra Sosa (☎ /fax 972-00-08; Calle 26 No 199A; s M\$150, d/tr M\$170/190, air-con extra M\$60; **PS**) The Sierra Sosa is just northwest of the plaza. It's friendly and a bit rundown, but has good beds and OK bathrooms.

Hotel San Antonio (☎ 972-19-83; cnr Calles 25A & 26; s M\$260, d/tr M\$300/350; **P** **PS**) A clean lobby with TV and shiny tiled floors sets a good impression that is confirmed by decent beds; some rooms have great views of the square. The hotel lacks character, but here in Ticul, that's kind of reassuring.

Hotel Plaza (☎ 972-04-84; www.hotelplazayucatan.com; cnr Calles 23 & 26; d/ste M\$360/460; **PS**) Spacious rooms with white-tile 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.

Eating

Restaurant El Colorín (☎ 972-00-94; Calle 26 No 199B; set meal M\$35; ☎ 7am-9pm) A cheap restaurant, half a block northwest of the plaza, it offers homemade meals.

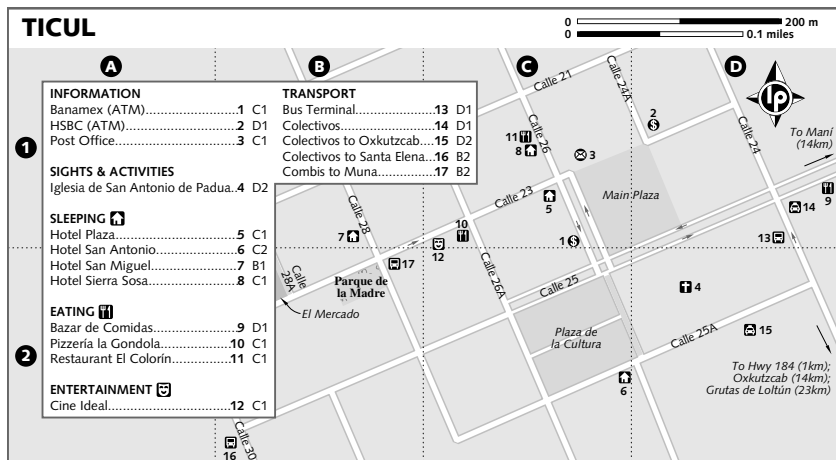
Pizzería La Gondola (☎ 972-01-12; Calle 23 No 208; mains M\$40-90; ☎ 8am-1pm, 5pm-11pm) A clean place on the corner that's open late, it has sandwiches and slightly pricey pizzas with the usual plethora of toppings.

Ticul's lively **public market** (Calle 28A), between Calles 21 and 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** (Calle 25) serve inexpensive prepared food.

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 Oxkutzcab (M\$8



to M\$12) and five a day 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 Expreso have less frequent 2nd- and 1st-class services, respectively, to some of these destinations.

Colectivo vans go direct to Mérida's Parque de San Juan (M\$33, 1½ hours) from their shiny new **terminal** (cnr Calles 24 & 25) as soon as they're full between 5am and 7:30pm. *Combis* for Oxkutzcab (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 Lonchería Mary on Calle 23 near Calle 28, and then south to Uxmal. Ruta Puuc-bound travelers can 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, Xlapak, Sayil, Kabah and Uxmal, and wait for you while you see each place and bring you back to Ticul at the end of the day. If you wish to stay at Uxmal for the 7pm sound-and-light show, the cost is M\$100.

CAR

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.

CELESTÚN

☎ 988 / pop 6400

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 this town and some nice beaches (though the water is a bit turbid), but the real draw here is the Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún, a wildlife sanctuary abounding in waterfowl, with flamingos as the star attraction.

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 BIOSFERA RÍA CELESTÚN

The 591-sq-km Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún is home to a huge variety of animal and bird life, 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*. It's best to visit in the morning or late afternoon.

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. Beach departures are from outside Restaurant Celestún, at the foot of Calle 11.

Prices are often quoted assuming eight passengers, but if only four or six people show up that means the quoted price per person rises, often to the irritation of people who've waited 30 minutes to an hour.

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. Don't encourage your captain to approach birds too closely; a startled flock taking wing can result in injuries and deaths (for the birds).

Currently, a boat from the beach costs M\$1200 for the trip, the average price

with eight people ends up around M\$150 per passenger.

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). 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.

AROUND TOWN

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. Flamingos, white pelicans, cormorants, anhingas and many other species frequent the shores and waters of the *ría*. South and east of town is the abandoned Hacienda Real de Salinas, another good area for nature observation.

Sleeping

The following list runs from south to north.

Hotel María del Carmen (☎ /fax 916-21-70; cnr Calles 12 & 15; d with fan/air-con M\$250/300; P) This place 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.

Hostel Ría Celestún (☎ 916-25-97; hostelrycelestun@hotmail.com; cnr Calles 12 & 13; dm M\$60-70, s/d M\$100/180; P) It 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.

Hotel Sofía (in Mérida ☎ 999-189-89-59; Calle 12; s/d M\$150/300; P) The rooms smell a bit here, 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 Los Manglares (☎ 998-916-21-56; www.hotelmanglares.com; Calle 12; d M\$850, cabañas M\$1600; P) While the architecture doesn't perfectly blend with the laid-back feel of town, this is a nice upscale choice. The rooms all have sea views and private balconies. Find it 1km north of Calle 11.

Eating

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.

Restaurante Chivirico (cnr Calles 11 & 12; 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; ☎ 11am-7pm) A more-tranquil-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 to the brim with shellfish. It's just north of Calle 11.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Mérida head for Celestún (M\$44, two hours) 17 times daily between 5am and 8pm from the terminal on Calle 67, between Calles 50 and 52. 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.

DZIBILCHALTÚN

Lying about 17km due north of central Mérida, **Dzibilchaltún** (Place of Inscribed Flat Stones; admission M\$63, children under 13 free; ☎ 8am-5pm) was the longest continuously utilized Maya administrative and ceremonial city, serving the Maya from around 1500 BC until the European conquest in the 1540s. At the height of its greatness, Dzibilchaltún covered 15 sq km. Some 800 structures were mapped by archaeologists in the 1960s; few of these have been excavated and restored.

The **Templo de las Siete Muñecas** (Temple of the Seven Dolls), which got its name from seven grotesque dolls discovered here during excavations, is a 1km walk from the central plaza. It would be most unimpressive but for its precise astronomical orientation: the rising and setting sun of the equinoxes lights up the temple's windows and doors, making them blaze like beacons, signaling the year's important turning points.

The **Cenote Xlacah**, now a public swimming hole, 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**, which at 130m is one of the longest Maya structures in existence.

Parking costs M\$10. Minibuses and *colectivo* taxis depart frequently from Mérida's **Parque de San Juan** (Calle 69), between Calles 62 and 64, 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 35,500

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 kite-boarding and windsurfing, but currently there's neither, unless you've brought your own. As with other Gulf beaches, the water is murky; visibility even on calm days rarely exceeds 5m. None of this stops *meridanos* from coming in droves on weekends, especially in the summer months.

East of Progreso, you pass **Laguna Rosada**, a good spot for flamingo sighting, on your way to **Telchak Puerto**, a burgeoning tourist town. Along the way, take time to stop at an observation tower in **Uaymitún** and the **Xcambó** Maya ruins.

Even-numbered streets run east-west; odd ones north-south. The **bus terminal** (Calle 29) is west of Calle 82. From the plaza on Calle 80, it is six short blocks to the waterfront *malecón* (Calle 19) and *muelle* (wharf); along the way are two Banamex banks, one with an ATM.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Real del Mar (☎ 935-07-98; cnr *malecón* & Calle 70; s/d M\$200/300, seaside r M\$550; 🍷) There are large balconies offering panoramic ocean views on both floors of this sprawling hotel. The decor is nice, with tiled floors, a small fountain, and

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

Hotel Tropical Suites (☎ 935-12-63; fax 935-30-93; 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, it's a seaside hotel with 21 tidy, non-musty, smallish rooms, some with sea views. The 1st-floor rooms opening on the street don't afford much privacy.

Restaurant Mary Doly (Calle 25; breakfast M\$18-30, mains M\$30-80; ☎ 7am-9pm) This is a homey place with good, cheap seafood, meat and breakfasts. It's between Calles 74 and 76.

Restaurant El Cordobés (☎ 935-26-21; cnr Calles 80 & 31; mains M\$45-90; ☎ 6am-midnight daily) This locals' joint is located 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, sluce down a *cerveza*, and look out on the main plaza.

Restaurant Los Pelicanos (☎ 935-53-78; cnr *Malecón* & Calle 70; mains M\$55-100, special dishes M\$200; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Sat, to 8pm Sun) By Hotel Real del Mar, it has a shady terrace, sea views, a good menu and moderate prices, considering its location.

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 here from Mérida, see p923.

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. It was probably these bold expressions of Maya religiosity that provoked the Spaniards to build the enormous Franciscan monastery that stands today at the heart of this town.

Just under 70km east of Mérida, Izamal is a quiet, colonial gem of a town, nicknamed La Ciudad Amarilla (the Yellow City) for the yellow paint that brightens the walls of practically every building. It is easily explored on foot and makes a great day trip from Mérida.

Sights

When the Spaniards conquered Izamal, they destroyed the major Maya temple,

the Papp-Hol-Chac pyramid, and in 1533 began to build from its stones one of the first monasteries in the New World. 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 mazelike design; these were clearly taken from the earlier Maya temple.

The monastery's principal church is the **Santuario de la Virgen de Izamal**. Here the **Atrium, a huge arcaded courtyard**, is where the **fiesta of the Virgin of Izamal** takes place each August 15, and where a dramatic **sound-and-light show** (M\$40) is presented at 8:30pm on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday nights.

Three of the town's original 12 Maya **pyramids** have been partially restored so far. The largest is the enormous **Kinich-Kakmó** (free admission; ☎ 8am-5pm), three blocks north of the monastery.

Sleeping & Eating

Posada Flory (☎ 954-05-62; Calle 30 No 267; 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.

ourpick Macan Ché (☎ /fax 954-02-87; www.macanche.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.

El Toro (Calle 31 No 303; mains M\$60-90; ☎ 8am-midnight) This small family-run establishment at the southeast cnr of the roundabout in front of the monastery 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 2nd-class terminal. There are buses from Valladolid (M\$41, two hours) as well. Coming from Chichén Itzá you must change buses at Hóctún. Izamal's bus terminal is two short blocks west of the monastery.

CHICHÉN ITZÁ

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-5:30pm winter, to 6pm summer) while tremendously overcrowded – every gawker and their 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 20–21 and September 21–22), the morning and afternoon sun produces a light-and-shadow illusion of the serpent ascending or descending the side of El Castillo's staircase. Chichén is mobbed on these dates, however, making it difficult to get close enough to see. The illusion is almost as good in the week preceding and following each equinox, and is re-created nightly in the sound-and-light show year-round.

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 Mayanists believe that shortly thereafter it was invaded by the Toltecs, who had migrated from their central highlands capital of Tula, north of Mexico City. Toltec culture was fused with that of the Maya, incorporating the Toltec cult of Quetzalcóatl (Kukulcán, in Maya). Throughout the city, you will see images of both Chac, the Maya rain god, and Quetzalcóatl, the plumed serpent.

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 warlike 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 ranged along 1km of highway in the village of Pisté, to the western side of the ruins. It's 1.5km from the ruins' main entrance to the first hotel (Pirámide Inn) in Pisté. Highway 180 is known as Calle 15A as it crosses through Pisté.

Information

The western entrance has a large parking lot and a big **visitors center**. 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 might not be broadcast.

Sights

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 p48 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 serpents' 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.

GRAN JUEGO DE PELOTA

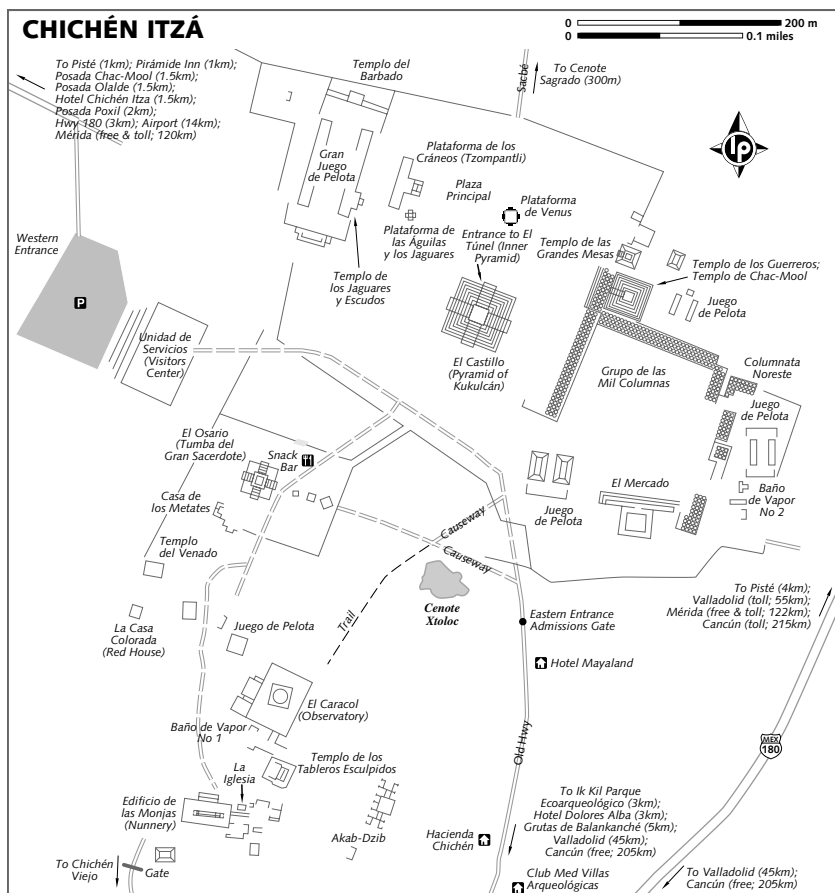
The great ball court, the largest and most impressive in Mexico, is only one of the city's eight courts, indicative of the importance of the games held here. The court is flanked by temples at either end and bounded by towering parallel walls with stone rings cemented up high.

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, 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. Along the walls of the ball court are stone reliefs, including scenes of players being decapitated.

The court's acoustics are amazing – 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 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) is 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 held 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 depicts 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

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.

GRUPO DE LAS MIL COLUMNAS

Comprising the Templo de los Guerreros (Temple of the Warriors), the Templo de

Chac-Mool (Temple of Chac-Mool) and the Baño de Vapor (Sweat House or Steam Bath), this group, behind El Castillo, takes its name (Group of the Thousand Columns) from the forest of pillars stretching south and east.

EL OSARIO

The Ossuary, otherwise known as the Bonehouse or the Tumba del Gran Sacerdote (High Priest's Grave), is a ruined pyramid 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 serpent heads at the base of its staircases.

EL CARACOL

Called El Caracol (the Snail) by the Spaniards for its interior spiral staircase, this observatory is one of the most fascinating and important of all the Chichén Itzá buildings. 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 directions. 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 of the building. A smaller adjoining building to the east, known as La Iglesia (the Church), is covered almost entirely with carvings.

AKAB-DZIB

On the path 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 annex door, whose lintel depicts a priest

with a vase etched with hieroglyphics that have never been translated.

IK KIL PARQUE ECOARQUEOLÓGICO

A little over 3km southeast of the eastern entrance to the ruins is **Ik Kil Parque Ecoarqueológico** (☎ 985-858-15-25; adult/child M\$60/30; 🕒 8am-6pm), whose cenote has been developed into a divine swimming spot. Small cascades of water plunge from the high limestone roof, which is ringed by greenery. There's a good buffet and nice *cabañas* onsite. Get your swim in by no later than 1pm to beat the tour groups.

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* (flattish stones on which corn was ground) and *manos* (grinding stones; basically mortar and pestle) incense burners and pots. In the years following the discovery, the ancient ceremonial objects were removed and studied. Supposedly all the objects here are the originals, returned and placed exactly where they were found.

The **Grutas de Balankanché** (admission Mon-Sat M\$54, Sun M\$20; 🎫 ticket booth 9am-5pm) are located 5km east of the ruins of Chichén Itzá, on the highway to Cancún. Compulsory 40-minute tours (minimum six people) are accompanied by poorly recorded narrations: English (11am, 1pm and 3pm); Spanish (9am, noon, 2pm and 4pm); and French (10am).

Sleeping

Pirámide Inn (☎ 985-851-01-15; www.chichen.com; Calle 15A No 30; hammock or campsites per person M\$40, d M\$410; 📶 🚰 🚿) Apart from the cozy rooms, you can pitch a tent or hang a hammock under a *palapa*, enjoy the inn's pool and watch satellite TV in the lobby.

Posada Olalde (☎ 985-851-00-86; 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 *pensiones*. It has clean, quiet and attractive rooms, a few twiddling parakeets, and four decent-sized bungalows. The friendly manager speaks Spanish and English, as well as some German and Maya.

Posada Poxil (☎ 985-851-01-16; Calle 15A; s/d/tr M\$150/200/250) At the western end of Pisté, it has seven bright and cheery rooms with good light, fans and towels that have seen better days. There's also an inexpensive restaurant serving big breakfasts (M\$35) and Yucatecan dishes.

Posada Chac-Mool (☎ 985-851-02-70; 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, it has fairly basic doubles with good screens. Some are available with good air-con to augment the fans.

Hotel Chichén Itzá (☎ 985-851-00-22; fax 985-851-00-23; www.mayaland.com; Calle 15A No 45; r fan only M\$300, r M\$600-1000; ♿ ♿ ♿) On the west side of Pisté, it has 42 pleasant rooms with tile floors and old-style brick-tile ceilings. Parents may bring two kids under 13 for free.

Hotel Mayaland (☎ 985-851-01-00, in the US 800-235-4079; www.mayaland.com; d/ste/royal ste M\$1700/2500/3450; ♿ ♿) Less than 100m from the ruins' eastern entrance – from the lobby and front rooms you can look out at El Caracol. The rooms, pools and garden bungalows are very 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 unspoiled jungle, just so their patrons could have a nicer view.

Hacienda Chichén (in Mérida ☎ 999-924-21-50; in the US 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.

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 (☎ 985-851-00-33; mains M\$35-70; ☎ 7am-9pm) They recently renovated this old standby. There's a pleasant garden, and the regional fare is simple but tasty. It's attached to the new Felix Inn.

Restaurant Hacienda Xaybe'h (☎ 985-851-00-39; 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.

Xunan (☎ 985-851-01-31; Calle Principal s/n; mains M\$40-90; ☎ 7am to 9pm) Service is a bit slow here, 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.

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, 1½ hours) at 2:25pm and 5pm, Cancún (M\$140, 2½ hours) at 4:30pm, Tulum (M\$101, 2½ hours) at 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 passing through Pisté serve the ruins (hail the bus and check with the driver), and they will take passengers from Pisté 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 in 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 cabs at Chichén's parking lot.

VALLADOLID

☎ 985 / pop 45,900

Also known as the Sultaness 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.

History

Valladolid has seen its fair share of turmoil and revolt over the years. 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 Zaci (*sah-kee*), where they faced heavy resistance from the local Maya. Eventually the Elder's son, Montejo the Younger, 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 in Tepich, not far south on the border with Quintana Roo. After a two-month siege, the city's defenders were finally overcome.

Orientation & Information

The old highway passes through the center of town, 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. The main plaza has banks of Telmex card phones in each corner. High-speed internet is available at numerous small cafés in and around the town center for around M\$10 per hour.

Hospital Valladolid (☎ 856-28-83; cnr Calles 49 & 52; ☎ 24hr)

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

Tourist office (☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun)

Sights

TEMPLO DE SAN BERNARDINO & CONVENTO DE SISAL

The **church** (☎ 8am-noon & 5-9pm) named for San Bernardino de Siena and the Convent of 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. The adjacent **convent** is often closed to the public; your best bets of gaining entrance to it are during the vacation periods of *Semana Santa*, 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.

MUSEO DE SAN ROQUE

This church turned **museum** (Calle 41; admission free; ☎ 9am-9pm), between Calles 38 and 40, 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 Zaci** (Calle 36; admission M\$25; ☎ 8am-6pm), set in a park that also holds traditional stone-walled thatched houses and a small zoo. People swim in Zaci, though being mostly open it has some dust and algae. Enter from Calle 39.

A bit more enticing but less accessible is **Cenote Dzitnup** (Xkeken; 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* (communal landholding) that maintains both cenotes charges M\$35 for use of a video camera in either one.

Pedaling a rented bicycle (see p944) to the cenotes takes about 20 minutes. By bike from

town, and they are actually pretty clean. Stop by his bike rental shop (see right), which is not so clean, for details.

Hotel María Guadalupe (☎ 856-20-68; hotelmariaguadalupe@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 856-21-67; www.hotelzací.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.

Hotel San Clemente (☎ /fax 856-22-08; www.hotelsandemente.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 decor 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 pool and central courtyard.

El Mesón del Marqués (☎ 856-20-73; fax 856-22-80; www.mesondelmarques.com; Calle 39 No 203; d standard/superior M\$580/710; ☎ ☎) It's worth staying in this hotel only if you're willing to anty up for the superior rooms with their crispy-clean bedspreads, quaint blue-and-yellow tilework and firm mattresses. There's also a charming old courtyard with a swimming pool and wi-fi.

Eating

Bazar Municipal (cnr Calles 39 & 40) This place at the plaza's northeast corner is a collection of market-style shops, popular for their big, cheap breakfasts.

Squimoz (☎ 856-41-56; Calle 39 No 219; mains M\$20-50; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, to 3pm Sun) A delightful little shop just a few doors east of the ADO terminal, Squimoz offers cakes, pastries and good espresso drinks.

Hostería del Marqués (☎ 856-20-73; Calle 39 No 203; mains M\$50-130; ☎ 7am-11pm) Probably the best restaurant in town for lunch and dinner, it is in Hotel El Mesón del Marqués. You can dine in the tranquil colonial courtyard with its bubbling fountain or the air-con salon looking onto it. The restaurant also offers some vegetarian choices and steaks priced by weight.

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.

La Chispa de 1910 (☎ 856-26-68; Calle 41 No 201; ☎ 5pm-1am Mon-Thu, to 2am Fri-Sun) Sparks fly at this bar-restaurant that often features live music.

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 *casana* (large mansion).

Getting There & Away

BUS

Valladolid's main bus station is the convenient **Terminal 46** (nr Calles 39 & 46), also called the ADO Terminal. The principal services are Oriente, Mayab and Expreso (2nd class) and ADO and Super Expreso (1st class).

Cancún (M\$70-110; 2-3hr) Many buses.

Chetumal (M\$140; 6hr; 5 Mayab buses)

Chichén Itzá/Pisté (M\$36; 45min) Fourteen Oriente Mérida-bound buses between 7:15am and 5:30pm; stop near ruins during opening hours.

Chiculil (for Isla Holbox) (M\$70; 2½hr) Oriente bus at 2:45am

Cobá (M\$26; 45min; 4 buses)

Izamal (M\$41; 2hr; 2 buses at 12:45pm & 3:50pm)

Mérida (M\$74-110; 2-3hr) Many buses.

Playa del Carmen (M\$78-140; 2½-3½hr; 8 buses)

Tizimín (M\$20; 1hr; 12 buses)

Tulum (M\$47-60; 2hr; 6 buses)

COLECTIVOS

Often faster and more reliable and comfortable than 2nd-class buses, the shared vans 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 Calle 39, M\$60) and Cancún (from the cathedral, M\$70) take a little over two hours – confirm they're nonstop, though. *Colectivos* for Pisté and Chichén Itzá (M\$20, 40 minutes) leave across the road from the bus terminal, and for Tizimín from the east side of the plaza.

Getting Around

Bicycles are a great way to see the town and get out to the cenotes. **Tres Hermanos** (Calle 44; ☎ 7:30am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 2pm Sun), between Calles 39 and 41, and Antonio 'Negro' Aguila (p943) 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 turnover for this fascinating **archaeological site** (admission M\$27, guide M\$250; ☎ 8am-5pm) is 17km north of Valladolid. Ek' Balam is another 6km east of this. 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 **Acropolis**, 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).

From the Ek' Balam parking lot you can visit the **X-Canche Cenote** (☎ 985-107-47-74; admission M\$30, bike rental M\$70, bike, rappel & kayak tour M\$110; ☎ 8am-5pm).

Sleeping & Eating

our pick **Genesis Eco-Retreat** (☎ 985-852-79-80; www.genesisretreat.com; d M\$400-600; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This is a true eco-tel: gray water is used for landscaping, some rooms are naturally cooled, insects are naturally 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 a temascal steam bath – and the restaurant offers delicious veggie meals. The hotel is sometimes closed between September and early October.

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 44,200

Tizimín is dusty and 'authentic,' meaning that you won't find much here that's designed with the tourist in mind. Most people find themselves here if they're traveling to Río Lagartos or Holbox. Still, the tree-filled Parque Principal is pleasant, particularly at sundown, and 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 looking at while you're waiting to make your bus connection. The church fronts Tizimín's main plaza, the Parque Principal, which has an HSBC with ATM and currency exchange on its southwest side.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel San Carlos (☎ 863-20-94; hsanCarlos@hotmail.com; Calle 54 No 407; r with air-con M\$290; ☎) Two blocks west of the plaza, this is the nicest hotel in town. All the air-conditioned rooms have private patios looking onto the shared garden area.

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

Getting There & Away

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

Cancún (M\$85; 3-3½hr) Fifteen Mayab and Noreste buses. **Chiquilá (for Isla Holbox)** (M\$50, 1½hr) Departures at 7:30am, 1:30pm and 4:30pm.

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

Mérida (M\$83; 2½-3½hr) Second-class Noreste buses at 5:30am, 9am, 2:30pm, 4pm and 5pm.

Río Lagartos/San Felipe (M\$20-25, 1hr) Six Noreste buses between 6am and 4:15pm; some buses continue 12km west to San Felipe (same price); some *colectivos*.

Valladolid (M\$20; 1hr) Sixteen Oriente buses between 5:30am and 7:30pm.

A taxi ride 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 2100

The largest and most spectacular flamingo colony in Mexico warrants a trip to this fishing village, 103km north of Valladolid, 52km north of Tizimín, lying within the **Reserva**

de la Biosfera Ría Lagartos. The mangrove-lined estuary is also home to snowy egrets, red egrets, tiger herons, snowy white ibis, hundreds of other bird species and a small number of the crocodiles that gave the town its name (Alligator River).

The Maya knew the place as *Holkobén* and used it as a rest stop on their way to the nearby lagoons (Las Coloradas), from which they extracted salt. (Salt continues to be extracted, on a much vaster scale now.) Spanish explorers mistook the inlet for a river and the crocs for alligators, and the rest is history. Intrepid travelers can head east of town past Las Coloradas on a coastal dirt road all the way to the small town of El Cuyo.

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 Tours

The brilliant orange-red birds can turn the horizon fiery when they take wing. You can generally get within 100m of flamingos before they walk or fly away. Depending on your luck, you'll see either hundreds or thousands of them.

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). Prices vary with boat, group size (maximum five) and destination. The lowest you can expect to pay is around M\$500 per boat; a full boat to Nahochín runs to as much as M\$700 per boat.

The best tours are given by the licensed guides operating from **Restaurante-Bar Isla Contoy** (☎ 862-00-00; Calle 19) at the waterfront. They offer extensive day tours as well as night excursions. Crocodiles are a common nocturnal sight, and from May through September sea turtles are easily spotted.

Alternatively, you can negotiate with one of the eager men in the waterfront kiosks near the entrance to town. They speak English and will connect you with a captain (who usually doesn't speak English).

Sleeping & Eating

Posada Las Gaviotas (☎ 862-05-07; Calle 12; d M\$250) This simple budget option offers clean fan-cooled rooms bathed in avocado green right on the riverfront. There's no toilet seats.

Hotel Villas de Pescadores (☎ 862-00-20; villa_pescadores@prodigy.net.mx; cnr Calle 14 & Calle 9; d 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.

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 Tizimin (M\$20 to M\$25, one hour), Mérida (M\$110, three to four hours) and San Felipe (M\$10, 20 minutes) to Río Lagartos. Noreste and Mayab also serve Cancún (M\$120, three to four hours) three times daily.

SAN FELIPE

This seldom-visited fishing village, 12km west of Río Lagartos, makes a nice day trip or overnight stay. Birding and the beach are the main attractions, both of which are just across the estuary at Punta Holohit.

Hotel San Felipe de Jesús (☎ 862-20-27; 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.

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.

CAMPECHE STATE

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

The backroads of the northern region bring you to forgotten underground wonderworlds, the massive restored Edzná archaeological site, and a handful of smaller, less-traveled Maya ruins.

This is also the wildest corner of the peninsula, and the Reserva de la Biosfera

Calakmul is Mexico's largest. Beyond the cacophonous roar of the howlers and hiccapping frogs rise massive Maya ruined cities like Calakmul and Becán. Along the coast, the Laguna de Términos is great for birding expeditions.

The southern coast of Campeche was affected by an oil spill in October 2007, and boomtowns like Ciudad del Carmen are changing the spirit (and environment) of the region. Nevertheless, the age-old grace of the *campechano* people abides.

CAMPECHE

☎ 981 / pop 211,700

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

Besides the numerous mansions built by wealthy Spanish families during Campeche's heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries, two segments of the city's famous wall have also survived, as have no fewer than seven of the *baluartes* (bastions or bulwarks) that were built into it.

History

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

The settlement soon flourished as the major port of the Yucatán Peninsula, but this made it subject to pirate attacks. After a particularly appalling attack in 1663 left the city in ruins, the king of Spain ordered construction of

Campeche's famous bastions, putting an end to the periodic carnage.

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

Orientation

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

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

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

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

LAUNDRY

Kler Lavandería (Calle 16 305; per kilo M\$10; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Dr Manuel Campos (☎ 811-17-09; Av Circuito Baluartes Nte) Between Calles 14 and 16.

MONEY

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

POST

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

TOURIST INFORMATION

Coordinación Municipal de Turismo (☎ 811-39-89; www.ayuntamientodecampeche.gob.mx; Calle 55 No 3; ☎ 9am-9pm)

Secretaría de Turismo (☎ 816-67-67; Plaza Moch Couoh; ☎ 9am-9pm)

Sights & Activities

PLAZA PRINCIPAL

Shaded by spreading carob trees, and ringed by tiled benches with broad footpaths radiating from a belle époque kiosk, Campeche's

CAMPECHE



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appealingly modest central square started life in 1531 as a military camp. Over the years it became the focus of the town's civic, political and religious activities and remains the core of public life. The plaza is seen at its best on weekend evenings, when it's closed to traffic and concerts are staged (see p952).

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

CATEDRAL DE NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LA PURÍSIMA CONCEPCIÓN

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

CENTRO CULTURAL CASA NÚMERO 6

During the pre-revolutionary era, when the mansion was occupied by an upper-class *campechano* family, '**Number Six**' (Calle 57 No 6; admission M\$5; ☎ 9am-9pm) was a prestigious plaza address. Wandering the premises, you'll get an idea of how the city's high society lived back then.

BALUARTE

After a particularly blistering pirate assault in 1663, the remaining inhabitants of Campeche set about erecting protective walls around their city. Built largely by indigenous labor with limestone extracted from nearby caves, the barrier took more than 50 years to complete. Stretching over 2km around the urban core and rising to a height of 8m, the hexagonal wall was linked by eight bulwarks. The seven that remain display a treasure trove of historical paraphernalia, artifacts and indigenous handicrafts. You can climb atop the bulwarks and stroll sections of the wall for sweeping views of the port.

Two main entrances connected the walled compound with the outside world. The **Puerta del Mar** (Sea Gate; crnr Calles 8 & 59) provided access from the sea, opening onto a wharf where

small craft delivered goods from ships anchored further out. (The shallow waters were later reclaimed so the gate is now several blocks from the waterfront.) The **Puerta de Tierra** (Land Gate; Calle 18; admission free; ☎ 9am-9pm), on the eastern side of the town wall, was opened in 1732 as the principal ingress from the suburbs. It is now the venue for a sound-and-light show (p952).

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

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

Named after Spain's King Carlos II, the **Baluarte de San Carlos** houses the **Museo de la Ciudad** (Calle 8; admission M\$27; ☎ 8am-7:30pm Tue-Sun) between Calles 63 and 65. This small but worthwhile museum chronologically illustrates the city's tempestuous history via well-displayed objects.

Directly behind San Juan de Dios church, the **Baluarte de San Pedro** (crnr Calle 18 & Av Circuito Baluartes Nte; admission free; ☎ 9am-9pm) served a postpiracy defensive function when it repelled a punitive raid from Mérida in 1824. Climb the steep ramp to the roof and look between the battlements to see San Juan's cupola. Downstairs, the **Museo y Galería de Arte Popular** (Museum & Gallery of Folk Art; admission free; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, to 2pm Sun) displays beautiful indigenous handicrafts.

Once the primary defensive bastion for the adjacent Puerta de la Tierra, the **Baluarte de San Francisco** (Calle 18; admission M\$20, incl Baluarte de San Juan; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun), between Calles 55 and 57, houses a small arms museum. Just down the street is the **Baluarte**

de San Juan (Calle 18 btwn Calles 63 & 65; admission free with San Francisco ticket; ☎ 8am-7:30pm Tue-Sun), the smallest of the seven baluartes, containing a permanent exhibition on the history of the bulwarks. And the **Baluarte de Santa Rosa** (cnr Calles 14 & Circuito Baluartes; admission free; ☎ 10am-3pm & 6-9pm), a couple of blocks to the northwest, has Campeche's art gallery.

EX-TEMPLO DE SAN JOSÉ

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

MUSEO ARQUEOLÓGICO DE CAMPECHE & FUERTE DE SAN MIGUEL

Campeche's largest colonial fort, facing the Gulf of Mexico some 3.5km southwest of the city center, is now home to the excellent **archaeological museum** (admission M\$34; ☎ 9am-7:30pm Tue-Sun). Here you can admire findings from the sites of Calakmul, Edzná and Jaina, an island north of town once used as a burial site for Maya aristocracy.

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

FUERTE MUSEO SAN JOSÉ DEL ALTO

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

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

MALECÓN

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

Courses

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

Tours

Monkey Hostel (below), Hostal La Parroquia (opposite) and Hostal del Pirata (below) will all arrange tours and/or shuttle services to the Maya sites. Hostal del Pirata also offers kayaking tours of Isla de Jaina and the Los Petenes Biosphere Reserve (M\$300 per person), as well as tarpon-fishing expeditions.

Tranvía de la Ciudad (adult M\$80, children under 10 free; ☎ hourly 9am-1pm & 5-9pm) Three different tours by motorized *tranvía* depart from Calle 10 beside the Plaza Principal daily; all last about 45 minutes.

Xtampak Tours (☎ 811-64-73; xtampak_7@yahoo.com.mx; Calle 57 No 14; ☎ 8am-4pm & 5:30-8:30pm) Offers comprehensive city tours at 9am and 4pm daily (four hours, M\$250 per person), as well as archaeological tours to Edzná (M\$180), the Chenes sites (M\$750) and eastern Campeche.

Sleeping BUDGET

Campeche's three hostels all offer bicycle rentals and tours of archaeological sites.

ourpick Monkey Hostel (☎ 811-66-05; www.hostalcampeche.com; cnr Calles 10 & 57; dm M\$80, r without bath M\$200; ☎) You can't beat the view of the plaza and cathedral from the longest-established and most popular hostel in Campeche. The international social scene is enhanced by cozy common areas with bar, hammocks and well-worn sofas, and a friendly bilingual staff. The beds are firm, but they don't have individual fans, which can make for a hot night.

Hostal del Pirata (☎ 811-17-57; piratehostel@hotmail.com; Calle 59 No 47; dm M\$90, r without/with bathroom M\$210/230; ☎) A block from the Puerta de Tierra, this HI (Hostelling International) affiliate is ensconced in Campeche's historic center, and the building itself is a 17th-century relic. Though it hasn't attained the Monkey's popu-

larity, the Pirata's neatly kept premises may appeal to more fastidious travelers. Occupying a modern annex, dorms and 'semiprivate' rooms share modest facilities with cramped showers. The beds border on mashed-potato firmness, but you get your own fan.

Hostal La Parroquia (☎ 816-25-30; www.hostalparroquia.com; Calle 55; dm M\$90, d/q without bath M\$200/300; ☑) Half a block from the Plaza Principal, Campeche's newest hostel resides in a magnificent late-16th-century mansion. Rooms with original stone walls and exposed wooden beams flank a grand hallway that opens onto a pleasant patio with small kitchen and adjacent lawn for sunbathing. Of the three hostels, it offers the best complimentary breakfast scheme: fresh fruit, toast and coffee at the café next door. It's between Calles 10 and 12.

Hostal Colonial (☎ 816-22-22; Calle 14 No 122; s M\$170, d M\$180-200; ☑) Time stands still within this stubbornly low-tech establishment, a budget travelers' haven for six decades. Indeed, little seems to have changed since it was occupied by king's lieutenant Miguel de Castro in the colonial era. Zealously maintained rooms surround a tranquil tiled courtyard with wicker-backed rockers and a central *aljibe* (rainwater cistern).

Hostal Reforma (☎ 816-44-64; Calle 8 No 257; s M\$120-250, d M\$300; ☑) Just off the Plaza Principal, this ancient hotel in a 400-year-old building has all the potential in the world. As is, it's a rather odd, bizarre place. Enormous upstairs rooms have modern tiled bathrooms, high ceilings and great balconies, if you can handle the traffic noise. The threadbare sheets leave something to be desired. Rates vary with inclusion of TV, hot water and/or air-con; the complex scheme is posted over the reception desk.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Maya Campeche (☎ 816-80-53, 800-561-87-30; www.mayacampechehotel.com.mx; Calle 57 No 40; s/d M\$380/440; ☑ ☑) This small, boutique-style hotel in the heart of the walled city has a romantic, pseudo-colonial atmosphere and an at-times taciturn staff. Fifteen rooms with ceiling fans and painted wall motifs face a narrow courtyard.

our pick Hotel López (☎ /fax 816-33-44; www.hotellopezcampeche.com; Calle 12 No 189; d/tr/q M\$490/540/590; ☑ ☑ ☑) This elegant hotel is the best buy in the midrange category, though it lacks the charm of other colonial-styled digs. Comfortably appointed rooms open onto art

deco balconies around oval courtyards and exuberant gardens. There's a lovely new dip pool out back.

Hotel del Paseo (☎ 811-01-00; www.hoteldelpaseo.com; Calle 8 No 215; s/d/tr/q M\$500/570/680/770; ☑ ☑) Named for its proximity to the pleasant *paseo* (promenade) that connects the historic center with the Barrio San Román, this modern option has an interior promenade too, with street lamps, shops and a bar, all beneath your balcony.

Hotel Castelmarr (☎ 811-12-04; www.castelmarhotel.com; Calle 61 No 2; s/d/ste M\$750/850/1050; ☑) Once an army barracks, the Castelmarr has been operating as a hotel for 100 years now. A recent remodeling job upped the casual refinement of this small hotel. Oversized crucifixes and other colonial-era-inspired ornaments add to the charm, as do the amazingly thick walls. Just try to scream; nobody will hear you.

TOP END

Hotel Plaza Campeche (☎ 811-99-00; www.hotelplazacampeche.com; cnr Calle 10 & Circuito Baluartes; r M\$890, junior ste M\$2120; ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑) Just outside the historic center on the lovely Parque IV Centenario, the Plaza caters to business travelers. It aims for Euro-style elegance with faux French furniture, a sumptuous dining room and attentive bellhops. The spacious rooms have soothing color schemes.

Hotel del Mar (☎ 811-91-91; www.delmarhotel.com.mx; Av Ruiz Cortines 51; r with city/sea view M\$950/1320; ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑) The Miami-style del Mar, on the *malecón*, exudes luxury and a beachy glow. Rooms with sea views have balconies. Lafitte's, the downstairs bar where the waiters have to dress up like pirates, doubles as one of Campeche's more popular nightspots.

Eating

Taquería Los Patitos (Calle 8 No 289; tortas & trancas M\$6-14; ☎ 7:30am-3pm) Chow down with the longshoremen at this friendly hole in the wall, where overseer Doña Hilaria fills *tortas* (sandwiches in rolls) and *trancas* with a variety of scrumptious fillings.

Mundo Natural (cnr Calle 8 & Calle 61; juice M\$18, salad M\$20; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat; ☑) This open-air 'natural foods' bar opposite the Palacio de Gobierno prepares fresh juice combos, hefty salads and monstro *sandwichónes*.

Lonchería Las Mañanitas (Calle 49B No 3; snacks & soups M\$9-25, mains M\$70-120; ☎ 6pm-midnight Thu-Tue)

CHOW DOWN CAMPECHANO-STYLE

On Saturday and Sunday the best place to sample *campechano* cuisine is the Plaza Principal. Before sundown, stalls set up around the plaza to offer an impressive variety of home-cooked fare at reasonable prices.

Though startlingly rustic compared with Campeche's spruced-up center, the main market, **Mercado Principal** (Circuito de Baluartes Este; ☎ 7am-5pm), across the street from the Baluarte de San Pedro, offers some terrific snacks. A number of *cocina economica* (basic eatery) stalls ring the interior rotunda.

our pick **Parador Gastronómico de Cockteleros** (Av Costera; shrimp cocktails M\$40-100, fish M\$50-90; ☎ 9am-6:30pm) This complex on the north end of the *malecón*, 2.5km from the Plaza Principal, is the place to sample local seafood.

At the Portales de San Martín, a block north of Av Circuito Baluartes Norte, this place serving regional snacks under the arcades of the plaza is a popular gathering place for families and friends.

Cenaduría Portales (☎ 811-14-91; Calle 10, Portales de San Francisco 86; trancas M\$20, soups M\$25; ☎ 6pm-midnight) It specializes in regional dishes. On warm evenings, an ice-cold goblet of coconut *horchata* (a rice-based drink) really hits the spot.

Café La Parroquia (☎ 816-25-50; Calle 55 No 8; breakfast combos M\$30-40, lunch specials M\$35; ☎ 24hr) Any time of day or night, your table awaits at this classic restaurant with a dozen ceiling fans, attentive waiters in white coats and continuous Televisa broadcasts. Not just tourists but also local geezers in *guayaberas* (traditional shirts) hang out here for hours on end.

Drinking

La Casa Vieja (☎ 811-80-16; Calle 10 No 319A; ☎ 8:30am-12:30am) There's no better setting for an evening cocktail than La Casa Vieja's colonnaded balcony overlooking the Plaza Principal.

La Iguana Azul (☎ 816-39-78; Calle 55 No 11; ☎ 6pm-2am Mon-Sat) Toward the weekend this casual restaurant across from Café La Parroquia hosts local cover bands and jazz combos in its colonial courtyard.

Salón Rincon Colonial (☎ 816-83-76; Calle 59 No 60; ☎ noon-8pm) This Cuban-style drinking establishment served as a location for *Original Sin*, a 2001 movie with Antonio Banderas that was set in Havana. The *botanas* (drinking snacks) are exceptionally fine; you get a different selection with each round.

Entertainment

There's invariably someone performing on the Plaza Principal every Saturday and Sunday

evening from around 6:30pm. Also at weekends, tables are set up from 6pm to 10pm in front of the cathedral and library for La Lotería (a Mexican version of Bingo). For Campeche's hottest bars and clubs, head 1km south from the city center along the *malecón* past the Torres del Cristal.

Incidents from Campeche's pirate past are re-enacted several nights a week inside the **Puerta de Tierra** (tickets M\$50; ☎ 8pm Tue, Fri & Sat), in a Disney-esque extravaganza with lots of cannon blasts and flashing lights.

The Universidad Autónoma de Campeche (p950) has revolving art exhibits, plays and art-house movies (M\$25) at the Cine Teatro Universitario Joaquín Lanz.

Catch a free weekday concert, dance or folklore exhibit at the **Claustro del Instituto de Campeche** (Calle 12 btwn Calles 59 & 61).

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is 6km southeast of the center. **Aeroméxico** (☎ 823-40-44, 800-021-40-10) flies to Mexico City at least twice daily.

BUS

Campeche's **main bus terminal** (☎ 816-28-02; Av Patricio Trueba 237), usually called the ADO or 1st-class terminal, is about 2.5km south of Plaza Principal via Av Central. Buses provide 1st-class and deluxe service to Mérida, Cancún, Chetumal (via Xpujil), Palenque, Veracruz and Mexico City, as well as 2nd-class service to Sabancuy, Hecelchakán, Candelaria and points in Tabasco. The **2nd-class terminal** (☎ 816-28-02; Av Gobernadores 289), often referred to as the 'old ADO' station, is 1.5km east of the main market. Second-class buses to Hopelchén, Bolonchén, Xpujil and Bécab depart from here.

To get to the new terminal, catch any 'Las Flores,' 'Solidaridad' or 'Casa de Justicia' bus by the post office. To the 2nd-class terminal, catch a 'Terminal Sur' or 'Ex-ADO' bus from the same point. Another Sur terminal across from the Alameda has rural buses to Champotón and Edzná.

The table below shows the major daily departures. Services are 1st class unless otherwise noted.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Bolonchén de Rejón	2nd-class M\$50	3hr	5 daily
Cancún	M\$340	7hr	7 daily
Chetumal via Xpujil	1st-class M\$260	6hr	1 daily (noon)
Ciudad del Carmen	deluxe M\$160 1st-class M\$120	3hr 3hr	1 daily (noon) hourly
Hopelchén	2nd-class M\$37	1½hr	hourly till 5pm
Mérida via Bécab	deluxe M\$125 1st-class M\$105	2½hr (6:30pm) 2½hr	1 daily every 30 min
Mérida via Uxmal	2nd-class M\$90-140	4½hr	5 daily
Mexico City	deluxe M\$1060 1st-class M\$900	17hr 17hr	1 daily 6 daily
Palenque	deluxe M\$270 1st-class M\$220	6hr (11:30pm) 6hr	1 daily 4 daily
San Cristóbal de Las Casas	deluxe M\$410 1st-class M\$360	9hr (11:30pm) 9hr	1 daily 1 daily
Villahermosa	deluxe M\$330 1st-class M\$230	6hr 6hr	1 daily (4:30pm) multiple
Xpujil	1st-class M\$170 2nd-class M\$130	5hr 5hr	1 daily (noon) 5 daily

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

If you're heading for either Edzná, the long route to Mérida or the fast toll road going south, take Av Central and follow signs for the airport and either Edzná or the *cuota* (toll road). For the non-toll route south, just

head down the *malecón*. For the short route to Mérida go north on the *malecón*.

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

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

Maya Rent Car (☎ 811-91-91; Hotel del Mar, Av Ruiz Cortez 51)

Payless Car Rental (☎ 816-42-14; Hotel del Paseo, Calle 10 No 288, interior 3)

Getting Around

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

Taxis charge a set rate of M\$25 (M\$35 after dark) for rides within the city; by the hour they're around M\$100. Tickets for authorized taxis from the airport to the center (M\$80) are sold from a booth in the terminal. To request a taxi, call ☎ 815-55-55 or 816-66-66.

Consider renting a bicycle for a ride along the *malecón* or through the streets of the Centro Histórico. All of Campeche's hostels (p950) rent bicycles at reasonable rates.

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

AROUND CAMPECHE Edzná

The closest major ruins to Campeche are about 53km to the southeast. **Edzná** (admission M\$37; ☎ 8am-5pm) covered more than 17 sq km and was inhabited from approximately 600 BC to the 15th century AD. Most of the visible carvings date from AD 550-810. Though it's a long way from such Puuc Hills sites as Uxmal and Kabah, some of the architecture here has elements of the Puuc style. What led to Edzná's decline and gradual abandonment remains a mystery.

Beyond the entrance is a *palapa* protecting carvings and stelae from the elements. A path from here leads about 400m through vegetation to the zone's big draw,

the **Plaza Principal** (follow the signs for the Gran Acrópolis), which is 160m long, 100m wide and surrounded by temples. On your right as you enter from the north is the **Nohochná** (Big House), a massive, elongated structure that was topped by four long halls likely used for administrative tasks, such as the collection of tributes and the dispensation of justice. The built-in benches facing the main plaza were designed for spectators to view theatrical and ritual events.

Across the plaza is the **Gran Acrópolis**, a raised platform holding several structures, including Edzná's major temple, the 31m-high **Edificio de los Cinco Pisos** (Five-Story Building). It rises five levels from its vast base to the roof comb and contains many vaulted rooms. A great central staircase of 65 steps goes right to the top. Some of the weathered carvings of masks, serpents and jaguars' heads that formerly adorned each level are now in the *palapa* near the ticket office.

The current structure is the last of four remodels, and was done primarily in the Puuc architectural style. Scholars generally agree

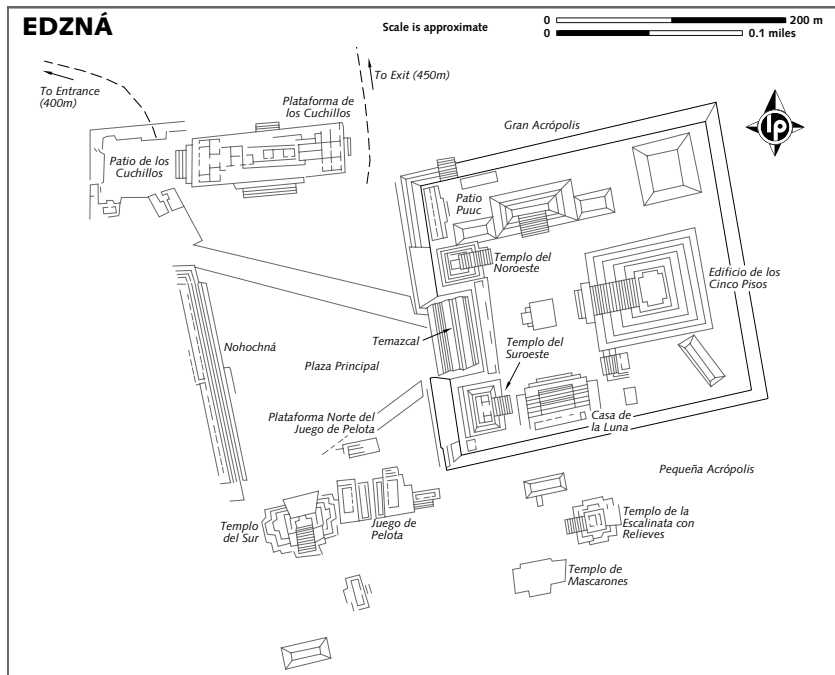
that this temple is a hybrid of a pyramid and a palace. The impressive roof comb is a clear reference to the sacred buildings at Tikal in Guatemala.

In the Pequeña Acrópolis, to the south of the main plaza, is the *palapa*-protected **Templo de Mascarones** (Temple of Masks), which features carved portrayals of the sun god, Kinich-Ahau. The central motif is the head of a Maya man whose face has been modified to give him the appearance of a jaguar.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Campeche, dilapidated buses heading to Champotón and Edzná leave from outside the Sur bus terminal at 7am and 11:15am. They return from the site at 1pm and 4pm (M\$20, one hour). Most will drop you 200m from the site entrance, so ask before boarding. It's worth checking the day before you travel, as schedules vary.

The ADO bus company offers a circuit of Edzná and several other destinations. Xtampak Tours (p950) provides an hourly shuttle service from Campeche to Edzná



DIY: EXPLORE MORE OF CAMPECHE

Leave the guidebook behind and head out into the less explored corners of Campeche. Here are some ideas to get you started.

- **Chenes Sites** Northeastern Campeche state is dotted with more than 30 sites in the distinct Chenes style, recognizable by the monster motifs around doorways in the center of long, low buildings of three sections, and temples atop pyramidal bases.
- **Laguna de Términos** The largest lagoon in the Gulf of Mexico area, the Laguna de Términos comprises a network of estuaries, dunes, swamps and ponds that together form a uniquely important coastal habitat.
- **Bécal** While on the surface Bécal may look like a somnolent *campechano* town, underground a multitude is laboring away at the traditional craft of hat making.

(M\$180, minimum two passengers) as well as guided tours of the site.

Bolonchén de Rejón & Xtacumbilxunaan

Forty kilometers east of San Antonio Cayal is Hopelchén, where Hwy 261 turns north; there's a Pemex gas station on the west side of town. The next town to appear out of the lush countryside is Bolonchén de Rejón, after 34km. Its local **festival of Santa Cruz** is held each year on May 3.

Bolonchén de Rejón is near the **Grutas de Xtacumbilxunaan** (M\$50; ☞ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun; ♿), pronounced 'Grutas de *shtaa*-koom-beel-shoo-*nahn*,' about 3km south of town. Lighted steps lead down to a barely visible cenote, beyond which a passage leads 100m further. There are few stalactites or stalagmites, but the climb back up to the green forest surrounding the cave is very dramatic.

Hwy 261 continues north into Yucatán state to Uxmal, with a side road leading to the ruins along the Ruta Puuc (p930).

To travel between Xtacumbilxunaan and the city of Campeche by car, follow Hwy 261 south back to the town of San Antonio Cayal where you'll see signs for the clearly marked (though unnumbered) road heading directly west to Campeche (approximately 50km).

ESCÁRCEGA TO XPUJIL

Highway 186 stretches due east across southern-central Campeche state, from grubby Escárcega through jungle to Xpujil and on to Chetumal – in Quintana Roo – a 273km ride. It passes several fascinating Maya sites and goes through the ecologically diverse and archaeologically rich **Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul**. The largest settlement between Escárcega and Chetumal is Xpujil – a great place to stage your exploration of the region – on Hwy 186 about 20km west of the Campeche–Quintana Roo border. The only gas station in the same stretch is about 5km east of Xpujil.

The predominant architectural styles of the region's archaeological sites are Río Bec and Chenes. The former is characterized by long, low buildings that look like they're divided into sections, each with a huge serpent or monster-mouth door. The facades are decorated with smaller masks, geometric designs (with many X forms) and columns. At the corners of the buildings are tall, solid towers with extremely small, steep, nonfunctional steps, topped by small false temples. Many of these towers have roofcombs. The Chenes architectural style shares most of these characteristics, except for the towers.

Balamkú

Discovered in 1990, **Balamkú** (admission M\$30; ☞ 8am-5pm) is 60km west of Xpujil (88km east of Escárcega). This small site's attractions are its frescoes and an exquisite, ornate stucco frieze. Amazingly, much original color is still visible on both the frescoes and the frieze. You'll notice toads dominate the designs at Balamkú. These amphibians, not only at home on land and water, were considered to move easily between this world and the next. The toad was a revered spirit guide who helped humans navigate between earth and the underworld.

The frescoes are open to public viewing, but the frieze is housed in a locked building. The caretaker will open the door and even provide a flashlight tour upon request (a tip is appreciated).

Calakmul

First discovered by outsiders in 1931, by US botanist Cyrus Lundell, **Calakmul** (☎ 555-150-20-73; admission M\$37, road maintenance fee M\$40/car, local tax M\$20 per person) means 'Adjacent Mounds.'

Mayanists consider Calakmul to be a site of vital archaeological significance. The site bears comparison in size and historical significance to Tikal in Guatemala, its chief rival for hegemony over the southern lowlands during the Classic era.

From about AD 250 to 695, Calakmul was the leading city in a vast region known as the Kingdom of the Serpent's Head. Its perpetual rival was Tikal, and its decline began with the power struggles and internal conflicts that followed the defeat by Tikal of Calakmul's king Garra de Jaguar (Jaguar Paw).

As at Tikal, there are indications that construction occurred over a period of more than a millennium. Beneath Edificio VII, archaeologists discovered a burial crypt with some 2000 pieces of jade, and tombs continue to yield spectacular jade burial masks; many of these objects are on display in Campeche city's Museo Arqueológico. Calakmul holds at least 120 carved stelae, though many are eroded.

So far, only a fraction of Calakmul's 100-sq-km expanse has been cleared, and few of its 6500 buildings have been consolidated, let alone restored; however, exploration and restoration are ongoing.

Lying at the heart of the vast, untrammelled Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul, the ruins are surrounded by rainforest, which is best viewed from the top of one of the several pyramids. There are over 250 bird species living in the reserve, and you are likely to see ocellated turkeys, parrots and toucans. The menagerie of other wildlife protected by the reserve includes jaguars, spider monkeys, pumas, ocelots and white-lipped peccaries.

SLEEPING & EATING

Rangers allow camping at the **Semarnat post** (☎ from 6am), 20km down the road from the village of Conhuas; they appreciate a donation if you use the shower and toilets.

Campamento Yaax'che (☎ 983-871-60-64; ciitcalakmul@prodigy.net.mx; campsite per person M\$50, with tent from M\$100) More than just a campground, Yaax'che, 7km along the access road, is the base for tours by Servidores Turísticos Calakmul in Xpujil, a training center for local guides and an experiment in sustainable ecotourism. You can rent a prepitched tent or set up your own under a thatched shelter.

Villas Puerta Calakmul (☎ 988-884-32-78; www.puertacalakmul.com.mx; cabañas M\$1200; 📍) This jun-

gle lodge 700m from the highway turnoff is designed for those who want to get into nature without roughing it too much.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Xtampak Tours (p950) in Campeche and Río Bec Dreams (below) near Chicanná run tours to Calakmul.

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

Chicanná

Aptly named 'House of the Snake's Jaws,' this Maya site (☎ 555-150-20-71; admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-5pm) is best known for one remarkably well-preserved doorway with a hideous fanged visage. Located 11km west of Xpujil and 400m south of the highway, Chicanná is a mixture of Chenes and Río Bec architectural styles buried in the jungle. The city attained its peak during the Late Classic period, from AD 550 to 700, as a sort of elite suburb of Becán.

our pick **Río Bec Dreams** (☎ 983-124-05-01; www.riobedreams.com; Hwy 186 Km 142; cabañas without/with bathroom M\$420/800) provides unquestionably the best accommodation in the area. This Canadian-run jungle lodge has thatched-roofed 'jungalows' sharing a bathhouse and *cabañas* with private bathrooms in the woods. Environmentally sound facilities include composting toilets, rainwater collection devices and solar electricity.

Becán

Eight kilometers west of Xpujil, **Becán** (admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-5pm) sits atop a rock outcrop, and a 2km moat snakes its way around the entire city to protect it from attack. Becán (literally 'path of the snake') is also the Maya word for 'canyon' or 'moat.' Seven causeways crossed the moat, providing access to the city. Becán was occupied from 550 BC until AD 1000.

This is among the largest and most elaborate sites in the area. The first thing you'll come to is a plaza. If you walk while keeping it to your left, you'll pass through a rock-walled passageway and beneath a corbeled arch. You will reach a huge twin-towered temple with

cylindrical columns at the top of a flight of stairs. This is **Estructura VIII**, dating from about AD 600–730. The view from the top of this temple has become partially obscured by the trees, but on a clear day you can still see structures at the Xpuhil ruins to the east.

Northwest of Estructura VIII is Plaza Central, ringed by 30m-high **Estructura IX** (the tallest building at the site) and the more interesting **Estructura X**. In early 2001, at X's far south side, a stucco mask still bearing some red paint was uncovered. It is enclosed in a wooden shelter with a window for viewing.

In the jungle to the west are more ruins, including the Plaza Oeste, which is surrounded by low buildings and a ball court. Much of this area is still being excavated and restored, so it's open to the public only intermittently.

Loop back east, through the passageway again, to the plaza; cross it diagonally to the right, climbing a stone staircase to the Plaza Sureste. Around this plaza are Estructuras I through IV; a **circular altar** (Estructura IIIA) lies on the east side. **Estructura I** has the two towers typical of the Río Bec style. To exit, you can go around the plaza counterclockwise and descend the stone staircase on the southeast side, or go down the southwest side and head left.

XPUJIL

☎ 983

The hamlet of Xpujil (pronounced 'shpu-heel') lies at the junction of east–west Hwy 186 and Campeche Hwy 261, which leads north to Hopelchén and eventually Mérida. A good base from which to explore the area's sites, Xpujil is growing rapidly in the anticipation of a tourist boom. However, it still has no bank or laundry, and the nearest gas station is 5km east of town. Several restaurants, a couple of hotels and a taxi stand are near the bus depot.

From the junction, the Xpuhil ruins are less than 1km west, Becán is 8km west, Chicanná is 12km west, Balamkú is 60km west and the Calakmul ruins are 120km southwest.

Sights

XPUHIL

Within walking distance of the town, **Xpuhil** (admission M\$30) boasts a surreal skyscraper that is a striking example of the Río Bec style. The three towers (rather than the usual two) of Estructura I rise above a dozen vaulted rooms. The central tower, soaring 53m, is

the best preserved. With its banded tiers and impractically steep stairways leading up to a temple that displays traces of a zoomorphic mask, it gives a good idea of what the other two must have looked like back in Xpuhil's 8th-century heyday. Go around back to see a fierce jaguar mask embedded in the wall below the temple.

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

Sleeping & Eating

The nicest and most reasonably priced accommodations are in Zoh-Laguna, 10km north of Xpujil. They are all contactable by dialing ☎ 200-125-65-87, the village's central phone booth.

ZOH-LAGUNA

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

XPUJIL

Cabañas de Don Jorge (☎ 871-61-28; cabañas M\$100) Don Jorge's rustic but perfectly acceptable clapboard cabins sit up on a hill behind his store–eatery, Cocina Económica Xpujil, which is opposite the entrance to the Xpuhil ruins.

Hotel Calakmul (☎ 871-60-29; 2-person cabañas with-out bathroom M\$200, d with air-con M\$450; Ⓟ 🚻) About 350m west of the junction, this sterile roadside motel has standard tiled units plus a handful of cramped bungalows out the back. The restaurant, though, comes highly recommended.

Aside from the hotel restaurants, there are various greasy spoons clustered around the bus station and roadside *taquerías* (taco places) toward the Xpuhil ruins. Try **Antojitos Mimi** (🕒 7am–10pm), opposite Hotel Calakmul, for some pretty fine *salbutes* and an ice-cold *agua de jamaica*.

Getting There & Around

No buses originate in Xpujil, so you must hope to luck into a vacant seat on one passing through. The **bus terminal** (☎ 871-60-27) is just east of the Xpuhil junction, on the north side of the highway.

EXPLORE THE RÍO BEC ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

'Río Bec' is the designation for an agglomeration of small sites, 70 at last count, in a 100-sq-km area southeast of Xpujil.

Grupo B has some of the best-restored buildings, particularly the magnificent **Estructura I**, dating from around AD 700. This palatial structure features a pair of typical tiered towers crowned by matching temples with cross motifs on their sides. Much of the current restoration work is being done at Grupo A, to the north of Grupo B. Its main structure is a 15m-long **palace** with intact towers and unusual bas-relief glyphs on the lower panels.

Access to the sites is from the collective farm of Ejido 20 de Noviembre. To get there, turn south off Hwy 186, about 10km east of the Xpujil junction, and follow a potholed road 5km to the community and its U'lu'um Chac Yuk Nature Reserve. From there, a very rough road leads 13km further south to the site. It's passable only when dry, and even then you need a high-clearance vehicle. You're best off hiring a guide with a 4WD truck. It's possible to arrange this in Xpujil or at the Ejido; the going rate is M\$600 to M\$700. A taxi from Xpujil's main junction to the Ejido will charge M\$60 for drop-off service; negotiate waiting time. Alternatively, check with Río Bec Dreams (p956) near Chicanná.

For Becán, Hormiguero, Calakmul or other sites you will need to book a tour or hire a cab: Calakmul and Balamkú (M\$600), Chicanná and Becán (M\$75), Homiguero M\$180). The taxi stand is on the north side of the junction.

AROUND XPUJIL

This southern peninsular region – now bordering modern-day Guatemala – was the earliest established, longest inhabited and most densely populated territory in the Maya world. Here you will find the most ancient and most architecturally elaborate archeological sites on the peninsula.

Ruins

HORMIGUERO

Spanish for 'anthill,' **Hormiguero** (admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-5pm) is an old site, with some buildings dating as far back as AD 50; however, the city flourished during the late Classic period. It has one of the most impressive buildings in the region. Entering the site you will see the 50m-long **Estructura II**, which has a giant Chenes-style monster-mouth doorway with much of its decoration in good condition. Also check out **Estructura V**, 60m to the north. Hormiguero is reached by heading 14km south from Xpujil junction, then turning right and heading another 8km west on a shoddily paved road.

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