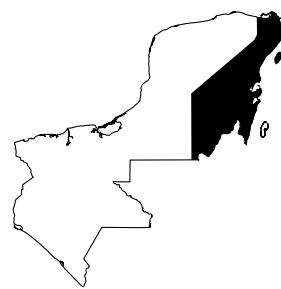


Quintana Roo



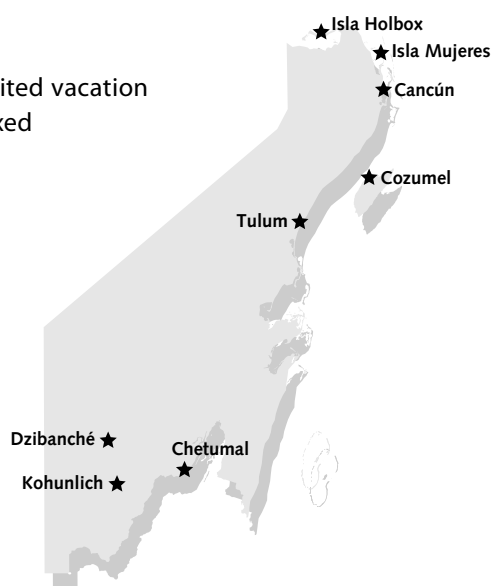
The oddly shaped, oddly named eastern edge of the Yucatán Peninsula lives up to just about every expectation. Its white-sand beaches are lined with picture-perfect coconut palms and rimmed by turquoise-green water. Divers come here for great visibility (often 30m or more), for the jewel of Cozumel, and for the longest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere. The parks and reserves are a wildlife-lover's wonderland, hosting howler and spider monkeys, jaguars, ocelots, bandicoots and hundreds of species of unique birds.

Quintana Roo (kin-tah-nah *roh*) is just as fascinating underground: the state's unique cenotes (limestone caves filled with fresh water) are otherworldly. Many of them were used by the Maya for religious rituals and some still contain artifacts from those ancient days of sacrifice and sun-worship. Paradoxically, the state's other claim to fame is its partying in and around Cancún, particularly during the US college spring break. But, if you are looking to get away from it all, head to Isla Holbox, Tulum, or Xcalak, where it's easy to stake a claim on a stretch of sand and feel like it's your own.

In 2004 two hurricanes, Emily and Wilma, walloped Cancún and its surrounding coastline, damaging many of the shallower snorkeling reefs and putting some tourist spots under water. While the full recovery may take years, much damage was already hard to notice by 2006, except for the random mammoth-sized ferry tossed up on top of the palm trees like God's bathtub toy. Another kind of hurricane is also having an effect; real-estate development is booming along the Riviera Maya, gobbling up mangrove swamps, barrier beaches and estuaries. It remains to be seen how well the area can balance the influx of tourists with the protection of its fragile ecological patrimony.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sunbathe on perfect beaches or start a long-awaited vacation bender in **Cancún** (opposite) or at the more relaxed **Isla Mujeres** (p84)
- Swim with dolphins at **Isla Holbox** (p92)
- Dive with eagle rays and morays at **Cozumel** (p104)
- Go iguana-spotting among the mysterious, spectacularly situated ruins of **Tulum** (p121)
- Watch the Río-style dancers of **Chetumal** (p138) heat up the nights during Carnaval
- Marvel at Jurassic-like jungles amid the mysterious ruins of **Kohunlich** (p148) and **Dzibanché** (p147)



CANCÚN

☎ 998 / pop 542,000

People either love or hate Cancún. Sure, it's touristy, and some folks deplane and head immediately elsewhere. But there's something to be said for just kicking back poolside with a cool drink in your hand. Cancún revolves around making your vacation everything you've wanted it to be, and there's a lot to be discovered, even in the midst of it all. Even if you're planning to rough it for most of your Yucatán travel, Cancún or its nearby islands can make a luxury bookend for some who want to recharge their batteries by the pool before heading home.

Cancún's wild nights make college fraternity parties seem like Sunday morning in church – especially during US spring break (roughly mid-March to mid-April), when the city swells with college kids. If you're not in a party mood, consider heading to a quieter club downtown, or take an evening stroll in Parque Las Palapas after having a cocktail at one of the open-air restaurants.

When you look around at the giant hotels and supermalls it's hard to imagine that pre-1970s there was nothing here but sand and fishermen. In the 1970s Mexico's ambitious planners decided to outdo Acapulco with a brand-new, world-class resort located on the Yucatán Peninsula. The place they chose was a deserted sand spit located offshore from the little fishing village of Puerto Juárez, on the peninsula's eastern shore: Cancún. Vast sums were sunk into landscaping and infrastructure, yielding straight, well-paved roads, potable tap water and great swaths of sandy beach. More than two million tourists fly in to spend one or two weeks in resort hotels, thronging the beaches and packing the clubs. Many board buses for excursions to Chichén Itzá, Xcaret or Tulum, or browse for handicrafts in air-conditioned shopping malls.

ORIENTATION

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

Downtown Cancún

Ciudad Cancún is where you should stay if you're looking to save a bundle. Prices

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

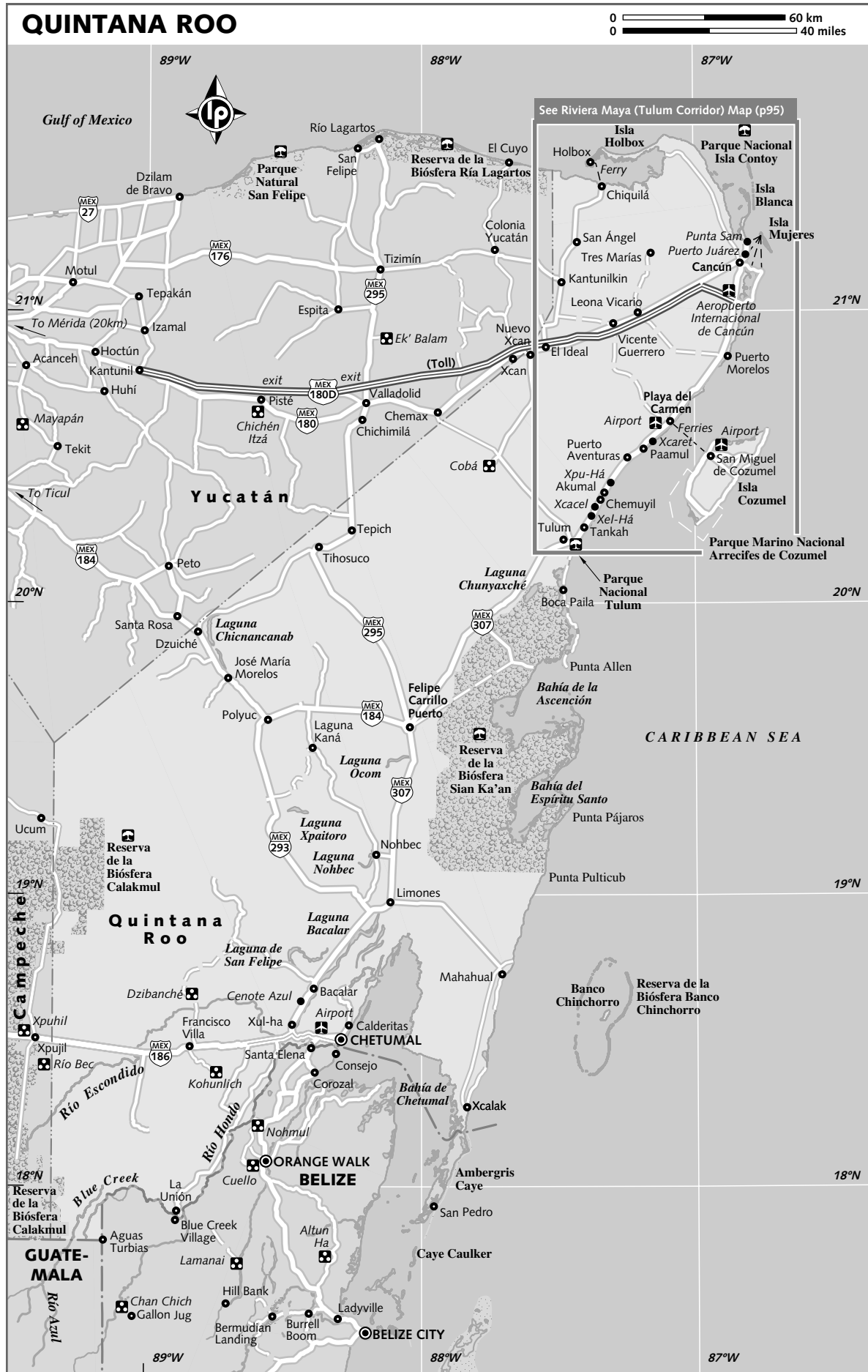
Plaza Las Américas, on Avenida Tulum at the south edge of the centro, is a vast modern shopping mall that includes the Liverpool and Chedraui department stores, a multiplex cinema, a food court and a salsa dance club. Don't confuse it with Plaza América, a small, aging arcade on Avenida Cobá with a few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

Zona Hotelera

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

From Punta Cancún, the boulevard heads south for about 13km, flanked on both sides for much of the way by huge hotels, shopping centers, dance clubs and many restaurants and bars, to Punta Nizuc (Nizuc Point). Here it turns westward and then rejoins the mainland, cutting through light tropical forest for a few more kilometers to its southern terminus at Cancún's international airport.

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



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

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Fama (Map p74; ☎ 884-6541; Av Tulum 105 SM 22 M4 Lotes 27 & 27A) Downtown near the southern end of Tulipanes, it has a large variety of magazines, Mexican road atlases and books in various languages. Also racy swimsuits if you discover the one you brought is too modest.

Emergency

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 884-1616)

Fire (☎ 060)

Police (Map p70; ☎ 060; Blvd Kukulcán)

Immigration

Instituto Nacional de Migración (Map p74; Immigration Office; ☎ 884-1404; Av Nader 1 at Av Uxmal; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri) For visa and tourist-card extensions (usually same-day service), visit the immigration office downtown. Enter the left-hand, southernmost of the two offices.

Internet Access

Zona Hotelera Internet access costs a first-born child at most places; you are much better off using the Internet downtown. Hotels can charge as much as US\$5 per 15 minutes. Public Internet in Cancún centro is speedy and cheap: US\$1.50 per hour or less. Many of these facilities also offer phone and fax services.

Cancun@ (Map p74; ☎ 892-3484; Av Uxmal 22D; per hr US\$1.50; ☎ 8am-2am) On the south side of Av Uxmal.

CyberShop C@fe (Map p70; ☎ 883-1129; Paseo Pok-Ta-Pok s/n; per hr US\$2) The cheapest place in the Zona Hotelera, right next to the Lavandería Lagoon.

Vikings del Caribe (Map p74; Av Uxmal at Pino; per hr US\$1.20; ☎ 8am-midnight) Lightning-fast connections at bargain rates, as well as a variety of phone services.

Laundry

Lava y Seca (Map p74; ☎ 892-4789; Crisantemos 20; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Downtown; charges US\$3 to wash, dry and fold up to 3kg.

Lavandería Lagoon (Map p70; ☎ 044 999-883-1129; Paseo Pok-Ta-Pok; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat) All the resorts in the Zona offer laundry service, but Lavandería Lagoon charges US\$1.30 per kilogram and takes two hours.

Left Luggage

Pay-in-advance lockers (per 24hr US\$6) are at the airport, just outside customs at the international arrivals area.

Medical Services

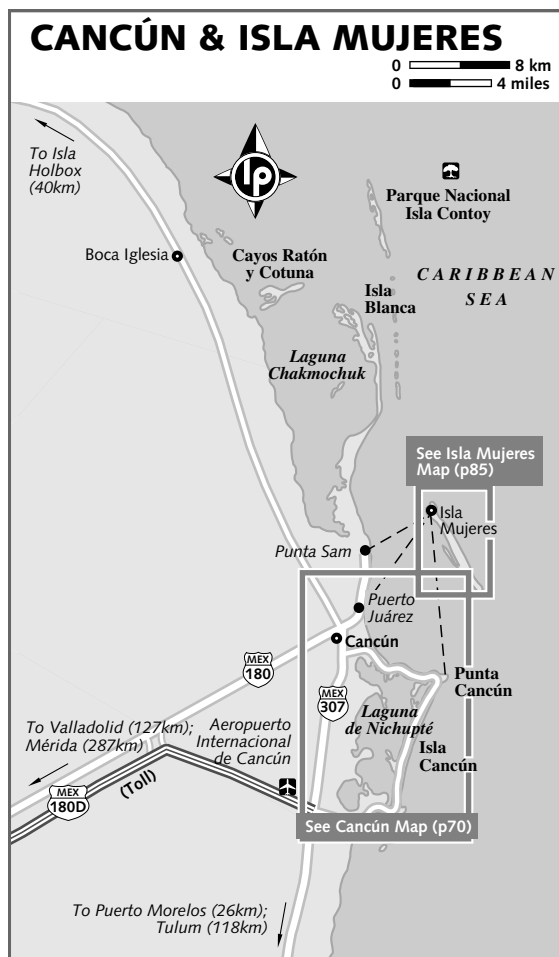
American Medical Care Center (Map p70; ☎ 883-0113; Plaza Quetzal, Blvd Kukulcán Km 8) Has bilingual (Spanish and English) doctors and 24-hour emergency care. Major US insurance plans are accepted.

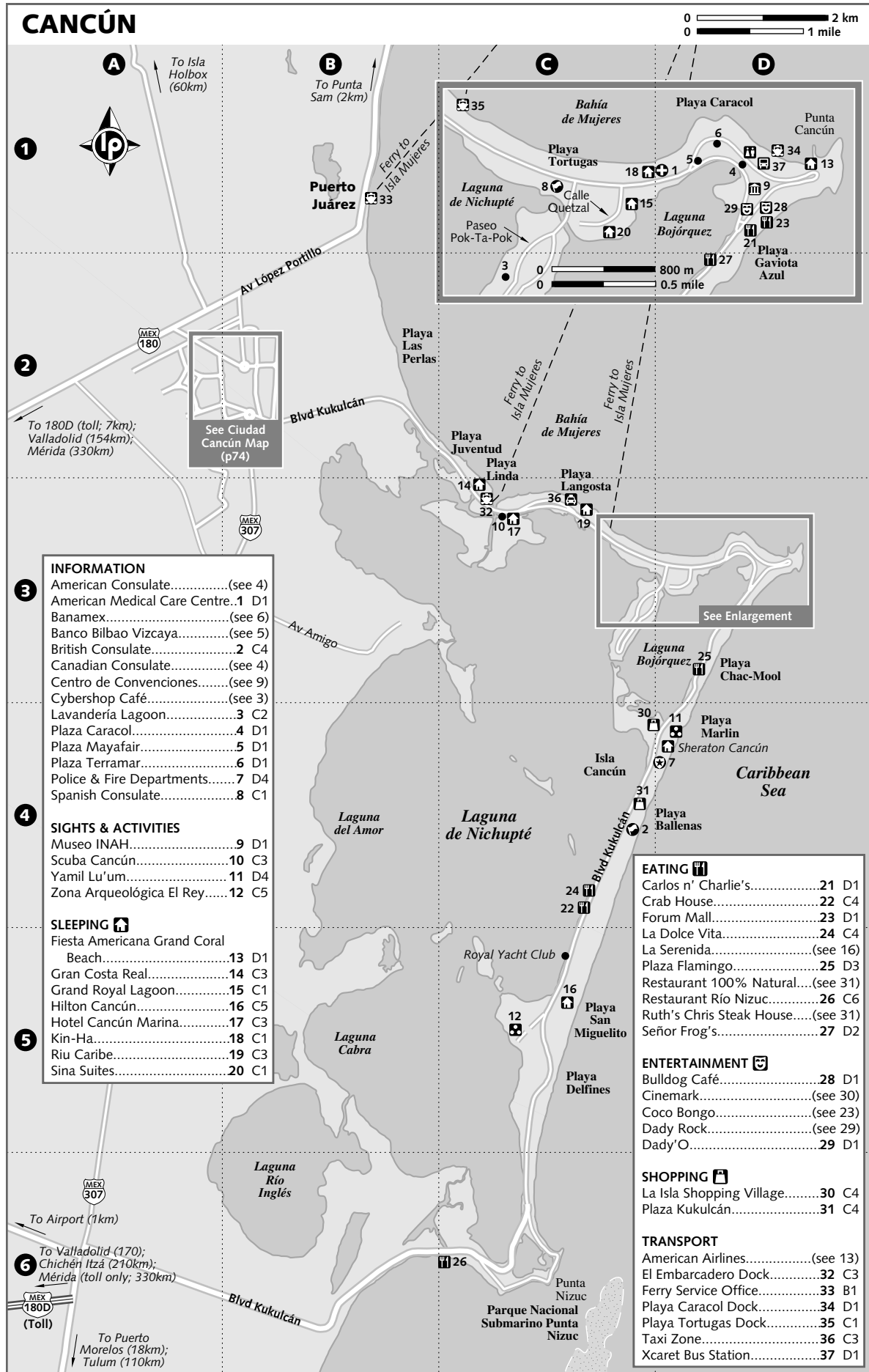
Centro Medico Caribe Cancún (Map p74; ☎ 883-9257; Av Yaxilan 74A; ☎ 24hr) A small facility near the bus terminal with 24-hour assistance.

Money

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

Ubiquitous cash machines make getting dough (and spending it) easy: the Zona Hotelera has numerous ATMs, as do all the major shopping malls, and many offer both dollars and pesos. Rates in general are less favorable than those found downtown, but not enough to warrant a special trip unless you're exchanging mucho dinero. ATMs are also located at Cancún's international airport; for more details see p81.





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Post

There is no post office in the Zona Hotelera, but most hotels' reception desks sell stamps and will mail letters. There's a FedEx office in the CAME bus terminal (Map p74) to send your mail if you don't trust the Mexican postal system.

Main post office (Map p74; ☎ 884-1418; cnr Avs Xel-Há & Sunyaxchén; 📧 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Downtown at the edge of Mercado 28. You can also post mail in the red postal boxes sprinkled around town; collection frequency varies – sometimes measured in weeks.

Telephone

Phoning by VOIP (voice over Internet protocol) can be done at most Internet cafés.

Call Center (Map p74; Av Cobá 5) At Soberanis Hostal. Offers good rates on international calls and calls to other parts of Mexico, as well as decent Internet connections at reasonable rates.

Toilets

There are pay (US\$0.30) toilets in the CAME terminal (Map p74) downtown. Many Internet cafés have a small bathroom in back, free for Internet users. Cleanliness varies.

Tourist Information

Cancún Convention & Visitors Bureau (Map p74; ☎ 884-6531; Av Cobá; 🕒 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri) This place near Av Tulum, Downtown, has ample supplies of printed material and usually a fairly knowledgeable English-speaker in attendance. Its primary focus is Cancún, but the bureau has information on Quintana Roo as well.

State tourism office (Sedetur; Map p74; ☎ 884-8073; Pecari 23; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Fri) The Convention & Visitors Bureau's parent is mysteriously tucked away near Cobá, a fair walk south of the center, but its information is good and includes all of Quintana Roo.

Travel Agencies

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

Nómadas Travel (Map p74; ☎ 892-2320; www.nomadastravel.com; Av Cobá 5) Downtown, next to the Soberanis Hostal, Nómadas is a student-oriented agency that books and makes changes to air tickets, makes some accommodation reservations on the Yucatán Peninsula, and offers packages to Cuba, among other services.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The biggest safety danger in Cancún isn't street crime – it's the streets themselves. Traffic speeds by along narrow roads and pedestrians (often drunk) are frequently in-

jured. A night spent clubbing is more likely to lead to a poked eye or twisted ankle than a mugging; however, if anyone *does* demands money, don't argue with them. Most violent incidents have involved fights where tourists or locals have actively put themselves in danger.

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

Hawkers can be irritating but are not dangerous. The best way to avoid them is to just keep walking. If you stop and dawdle, it will be seen as an invitation to haggle for a sale. As frustrating as this may be, remember that these vendors are just trying to make a living for themselves and their families.

See p72 for information on Cancún's water hazards.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Maya Ruins

There are two sets of Maya ruins in the Zona Hotelera and, though neither is particularly impressive, both are worth a look if time permits. In the **Zona Arqueológica El Rey** (Map p70; admission US\$3; 🕒 8am-5pm), on the west side of Blvd Kukulcán between Km 17 and Km 18, there's a small temple and several ceremonial platforms. The other, much smaller, site is **Yamil Lu'um** (Map p70; admission free), atop a beachside knoll on the parklike grounds near the Sheraton Cancún hotel. Only the outward-sloping remains of the weathered temple's walls still stand, but the ruin makes for a pleasant venture, as much for its lovely setting as anything else. To reach the site visitors must pass through either of the hotels flanking it or approach it from the beach – there is no direct access from the boulevard.

The tiny Maya structure and *chac-mool* (Maya rain god) statue on the beautifully kept grounds of the Sheraton Hotel are authentic.

Museo Inah

Closed at the time of research due to Hurricane Wilma damage, this **museum** (Map p70;

SEX, LIES, AND VIDEOTAPE

Cancún has always been a party hardy town, but in recent years an alarming number of tourists fly in not for the booze or the beaches, but for sex. Underage sex. While the age of consent remains disturbingly low (12 years old) prostitutes must be 18 or older; however, this hasn't stopped paedophilia rings profiteering in the trade of children.

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

However, the ongoing plight of Lydia Cacho Ribeiro, a Mexican female journalist in Quintana Roo, illustrates that Mexico has a long way to go – and the power that the rich still wield in Mexico. After publishing a book, *Demons in Eden*, linking high-ranking government officials to a Cancún-based paedophilia ring, Cacho was kidnapped and brought to the state of Puebla, where she was placed under house arrest and accused of defamation.

Despite compelling evidence that even included videotape, Cacho was kept in Puebla against her will. Reporters Without Borders stated that she had received death threats.

Thanks to international attention and a lucky break for her defense (men were caught on tape discussing the plan to kidnap her), at least one of the defamation charges was dropped in January, 2006. At the time of writing she was still on trial, but it had been moved to her home state of Quintana Roo, where she faces a much better chance of acquittal. Nevertheless, the fate of Ms Cacho remains uncertain, and Cancún continues to attract – and cater to – sex tourism.

Concerned readers can learn more about the issue by reading Ms Cacho's book or by following the case on the Reporters Without Borders website (www.rsf.org).

☎ 883-0305; admission US\$3.50; 🕒 9am-8pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun), operated by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), is on the south side of the Centro de Convenciones in the Zona Hotelera. Skulls exhibiting the deformities caused intentionally by Maya parents to beautify their children are a bit creepy but also on display are jewelry and artifacts – most from the post-Classic period (AD 1200–1500); part of a Classic-period hieroglyphic staircase (inscribed with dates from the 6th century); and the stucco head that gave the local archaeological zone its name of El Rey (The King).

Most of the informative signs are in Spanish only, but at the ticket counter you can get a fractured-English information sheet detailing the contents of the 47 showcases. The museum also has a small but good selection of books on Maya-related subjects, and a gift counter.

Beaches

ACCESS

Under Mexican law you have the right to walk and swim on every beach in the country except those within military compounds. In practice, it is difficult to approach many stretches of beach without walking through

the lobby of a hotel, particularly in the Zona Hotelera. However, as long as you look like a tourist (this shouldn't be hard, right?), you'll usually be permitted to cross the lobby and proceed to the beach.

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

BEACH SAFETY

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

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

Blue Normal, safe conditions.

Yellow Use caution, changeable conditions.

Red Unsafe conditions; use a swimming pool instead.

Water Sports

For decent snorkeling, you need to travel to one of the nearby reefs. Resort hotels, travel agencies and various tour operators in the area can book you on day-cruise boats that take snorkelers to the barrier reef, as well as to other good sites in the region. To see the relatively sparse aquatic life off Cancún's beaches, you can rent equipment for about US\$10 a day from most luxury hotels. Most of the major resorts rent kayaks and the usual water toys; a few make them available to guests free of charge.

Scuba Cancún (Map p70; ☎ 849-5226; www.scubacancun.com.mx; Blvd Kukulcán 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 US\$27 and a variety of dive options (including cenote, night and nitrox dives), as well as fishing trips, at reasonable prices (one/two tank US\$54/68, equipment rental extra). The bilingual (English and Spanish) staff are safety oriented and environmentally aware; there are Japanese- and Korean-speaking instructors on call as well.

TAJ MAHAL CENOTE

One of the newer cenote discoveries, Taj Mahal is close to Cancún and gives a chance to see what these things are all about. It's a doable dive, snorkel, or even a chance to just go 'wow.' Sturdy steps and lots of people make it a good starting place for those who may or may not get hooked.

CANCÚN FOR CHILDREN

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

damaging for kids or babies: make sure your children are properly protected.

If the beach gets boring or you want a change of scene, the theme parks of Xel-Há (p117) or Xcaret (p115) make a good day trip. The label 'Eco' is a bit misleading and US\$60 per person is ridiculous, but kids will enjoy the chance to see the local wildlife, look at the exhibits and watch the demonstrations.

TOURS

Most hotels and travel agencies work with companies that offer tours to surrounding attractions. Popular day trips are Chichén Itzá, Cobá, Tulum, and the theme parks at Xel-Há (p117) and Xcaret (p115). Often local touts at the hotels and agencies are paid only in commissions, so if you chat with someone and decide to take the tour later, be sure to take the time to find the same person who assisted you or he/she may not get paid.

Alltournative (☎ 984-873-2036; www.alltournative.com; Av 38 Norte, L3 M200, btwn Avs 1 & 5, Playa del Carmen; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) A Playa del Carmen-based outfit that will pick up in Cancún. Packages include ziplining, rappelling and kayaking, as well as custom-designed trips.

Mundo Maya Travel (Map p74; ☎ 884-4564 ext 403; www.mayaworld.cc; Av Cobá 5) In the lobby of the Soberanis Hostal, it offers good rates on tours to such places as Chichén Itzá (US\$40, including guide and buffet lunch), Tulum ruins and Xel-Há (US\$44, including guide), and Xcaret (US\$59.50). All prices are per person and include admission.

Nómadas Travel (Map p74; ☎ 892-2320; www.nomadastravel.com; Av Cobá 5) A popular agency that operates out of the lobby of Soberanis Hostal downtown. Offers a variety of reasonably priced packages to popular destinations.

BURNING ISSUES

Most people get to Cancún, strip to their swimsuit, and then *fry*: the sun here is so strong that even a half-hour will burn folks who aren't already bronze. Some tourists leave with permanent skin-scarring burns. You can minimize painful, embarrassing lobster-red skin by being smart: avoid the strong midday sun, use SPF 30 or 45 sunscreen and take it easy your first few days. Or keep your shirt on.

CIUDAD CANCÚN

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To Hwy 180 (1km); Puerto Juárez (4km)

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To Mambo Café

To Plaza Las Américas

CRANIAL DEFORMATION

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

SLEEPING

Almost all hotels offer discounts in the ‘low’ season, but at many places there are up to five different rates: Christmas and New Year are at a premium you can count on, but there are high rates in March and April for US spring break, Easter, and even July and August (when locals have their holidays). Ask if there is a ‘promotion,’ too, as many places may be willing to deal.

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

Downtown

BUDGET

‘Budget’ is a relative term; prices in Cancún are higher for what you get than most anywhere else in Mexico. Much of Cancún’s cheap lodging is within a few blocks of the bus terminal. Go northwest on Av Uxmal to reach the first four places described here. Hotel hawkers tend to waylay anyone exiting the bus station, sometimes going so far as to insult people heading to other hotels. ‘God Bless you if you stay *there!*’ was one choice line. Just say ‘No’ and keep heading to the place you planned on.

Mexico Hostels (Map p74; ☎ 887-0191; www.mexicohostels.com.mx; Palmera 30; dm US\$10 ☒ ☑) Brightly colored, cheery, and run by kindly *senoras*, this hostel has fan-cooled four- and six-bed rooms (single-sex and co-ed), lockers, cheap Internet access, laundry, and a full rooftop kitchen beneath an airy *palapa* (palm-leaf-roofed shelter). Rooms are clean, with good ventilation (the entire facility is nonsmoking). There is no air-con

here. Breakfast is disappointing: guests are rationed two pieces of bread and free coffee. It offers 10% discount for Hostelling International or ISIC, IST or GO25 card holders.

Las Palmas Hotel (Map p74; ☎ 884-2513; Palmera 43; d US\$28) For the price it’s probably nicer at the Mexico Hostels around the corner, but this is a clean, comfortable option if you’re looking for a room of your own. No parakeets anymore, alas. Continental breakfast includes freshly squeezed orange juice.

Hotel El Alux (Map p74; ☎ 884-6613; www.hotelalux.com; cnr Avs Uxmal & Laurel; s US\$29.50, d/tw US\$32.50/38.50) With its pastel, fantasy-themed exterior you may feel like you’re walking into a frosted cake, but the lobby is nicely decorated with Mexican paintings and bamboo. The 35 rooms are ample if a bit musty at first, with spotless bathrooms. Each has phone, TV and pleasant red-tile floors.

Casa de Huéspedes Punta Allen (Map p74; ☎ 884-0225; www.puntaallen.da.ru; Punta Allen 8; s/d US\$35/40) On a side street that’s a bit dicey after dark, this friendly, family-run guesthouse has ample rooms, spotless tiles and nice bathrooms. The restaurant is being remodeled. From Av Uxmal, walk south along Av Yaxchilán and take the first right.

Hotel Cancún Rosa (Map p74; ☎ 884-0623; Margaritas 2; r \$44-67; ☒) Has a large aquarium in the lobby. Bland rooms are done in pastels and have good beds. Check-out is noon. Hallways are fresh-smelling but a bit dark.

Soberanis Hostal (Map p74; ☎ 884-4564, 800-101-0101; www.soberanis.com.mx; Av Cobá 5; dm US\$12, d US\$52.50; ☒) It’s good value, has 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

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel El Rey del Caribe (Map p74; ☎ 884-2028; www.reycaribe.com; cnr Avs Uxmal & Náder; d US\$43-89; ☒ (P) ☎) A beautiful spot with jungle courtyard, azure swimming pool and small Jacuzzi. Many of the 25 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. 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. The price range reflects five different seasons.

Soberanis also has four-bed 'hostel' rooms with the same amenities as the regular rooms, including a free continental breakfast. The cafeteria serves affordable lunches and dinners and the hotel also has a bar, Internet facilities (per hr US\$1), a phone center, a tour agency and also a student-oriented travel agency.

MIDRANGE

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

Hotel Suites Olimpo (Map p74; ☎ 884-0875; www.hotelolimo.migueb.com; Av Bonampak 221 SM4; s/d US\$50, q US\$60; ☎) Beds are a bit spongy, but the rooms are clean and include phone and cable TV. Some have kitchenettes, and some are noisier than others. Prices are higher if you require a *factura* (receipt). It's right across from Hotel Bonampak.

Hotel Bonampak (Map p74; ☎ 884-0280; www.hotelbonampak.com; Av Bonampak 225 SM4; s/d US\$52/65; (P) ☎) Not a speck of character, but this motel is good value: the pool is sunny, the wide stairways are airy and fresh, the rooms are spotless and many have small balconies. There's a small café in the lobby if you need a bite and don't feel like heading far from your room.

Hotel Antillano (Map p74; ☎ 884-1132, 800-288-7000; fax 884-1878; Claveles 1; d US\$50-70; ☎) A large beige shoebox 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 Avenida

Tulum are noisier than those in the back. Rates include a welcome drink, continental breakfast and a Zona Hotelera beach pass.

Hotel Suites Caribe Internacional (Map p74; ☎ 884-3999; www.caribeinternacional.com; cnr Avs Sunyachén & Yaxchilán; d/tr US\$79/84; (P) ☎) Internet and a restaurant-bar were in the works at time of research. This six-story hotel boasts 80 rooms with cable TV. The junior suites have two comfortable beds, a sofa and kitchenette. Amenities include secure parking, a small pool in an agreeable courtyard, and a restaurant and bar. Rates are often negotiable here; try asking for a discount.

Hotel Plaza Caribe (Map p74; ☎ 884-1377, in the USA 866-294-8514; www.hotelplazacaribe.com; Pino btwn Avs Tulum & Uxmal; d US\$84-135; ☎) Directly across from the bus terminal, offers 140 comfortable rooms with full amenities, including a pool and restaurant. Rooms have white-tile floors and comfy beds; baths are clean but overchlorinated. The *palapa*-covered bar is a nice place to sip a drink on a hot day.

Hotel Margaritas (Map p74; ☎ 884-9333, 800-711-1531; ventashic@sybcom.com; cnr Avs Yaxchilán & Jazmines; s & d US\$100, tr US\$150; ☎) 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 (pricy) restaurant, a decent bar, Jacuzzi, and helpful staff.

Zona Hotelera**MIDRANGE**

Hotels near Blvd Kukulcán in the Zona Hotelera are close to cheap, convenient transportation. All the following hotels are on Laguna Nichupté rather than the sea, but some have agreements with seaside beach clubs so guests can get their fill of the Caribbean. Many were hard hit by the hurricane and some closed for renovation.

Sina Suites (Map p70; ☎ 883-1017; suitessina@cancun.novenet.com.mx; Calle Quetzal 33; ste US\$50-140; ☎) A comfortable, friendly place with 33 spacious suites. Bright white walls make it seem like a villa on a Greek island. Each suite has two double beds, a separate living room (with a sofa bed) and satellite TV, a kitchen and 1½ bathrooms. Other amenities

include a pool featuring great views across the lagoon (as do some of the rooms), a bar and a restaurant.

Hotel Cancún Marina (Map p70; ☎ 287-3200, 800-262-7462; hmarinac@prodigy.net.mx; Blvd Kukulcán Km 5.5; r US\$85; 🍷) A popular place that was pretty hurricane-scrubbed at the time of research. It has a water-sports center, a very inviting pool and a pleasant restaurant-bar overlooking the lagoon. Among the 87 rooms (equipped with hairdryers and safes) are 10 penthouses. Hopefully things will be back to normal soon.

Grand Royal Lagoon (Map p70; ☎ 883-2749; www.grlagoon.com; Quetzal 8-A; r & studio US\$90-100; 🍷) A breezy place with cable TV and safes; most rooms have two double beds, while some have kings. Some studios come with kitchenette and balcony, and an outdoor ping-pong table makes for fun. The hotel has a small pool, and guests have use of the Fat Tuesday beach club. The hotel is 100m off Blvd Kukulcán Km 7.7.

TOP END

Double-room rates in this category start at US\$112 and top off at it-costs-WHAT-per-night?! All of the resorts described below are in the Zona Hotelera and border the Caribbean. Guestrooms come equipped with air-con and satellite TV, and many have balconies with sea views. Many hotels only offer all-inclusive packages, often at reasonable rates if you're willing to forgo eating or entertainment elsewhere. Often the best room rates are available through booking hotel-and-airfare packages; shop around.

Kin-Ha (Map p70; ☎ 891-5400; www.ambiancevillas.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 8; r/ste US\$112/242, with ocean view US\$162/309; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) A rare kid-friendly all-inclusive, Kin-Ha offers daycare and babysitting, plus a 'kids club' designed to let parents relax while the kids are occupied. A self-contained hotel, this has 134 rooms and suites in four buildings. All rooms feature a balcony and two double beds or one king-sized bed...or you can just use the beachside mattresses. A travel agency, car-rental agency, minimarket, bars and a gym are on the premises. Prices listed are all-inclusive.

Riu Caribe (Map p70; ☎ 848-7850; www.riu.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 5.5; s low/high season US\$193/214, d US\$269/386; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) The Riu Car-

ibe has 500 rooms (all with ocean views), including 52 junior suites. All come with private terraces that overlook a dazzling swimming pool and 200m of beach. The lobby is gorgeous, with a nice view of the water, pretty tiled floors and stained-glass ceiling. Prices listed are all-inclusive; room-only rates are not available.

Gran Costa Real (Map p70; ☎ 881-1300, in the USA 800-543-7556; www.realresorts.com.mx; Blvd Kukulcán Km 4; d US\$198-448; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) A large, all-inclusive resort in attractive grounds. The 355 rooms are posh, the staff is attentive, and the pool will make you feel that there's little reason to venture outside. It has a shared-facilities agreement with the much more spectacular Gran Caribe Real. Prices listed are all-inclusive.

Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach (Map p70; ☎ 881-2300; in USA 800-343-7821; www.fiestamericana.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9.5 L6; r US\$250; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) All rooms have ocean-facing balconies and very spacious bathrooms, though the interior decorating here seems a bit busy. It's in a nice location that's close to lots of the Zona Hotelera action if you're planning to party.

Hilton Cancún (Map p70; ☎ 881-8000; www.hilton.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 17; d US\$280; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) You'll find seven cascading pools, a beautiful zen-inspired garden spa, and yoga on the beach here. The blue-and-turquoise bed throws are attractive, matching the view outside. Bathrooms are adequate.

EATING

Downtown

Restaurants in the city center range from ultra-Mexican taco joints to fairly smooth and expensive salons.

BUDGET

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

Santa Clara (Map p74; ☎ 887-83-83; Av Bonampak 157; cones US\$2-4; 🕒 9am-10pm) Specializes in ice cream, but also serves coffee and various sweet dishes. It has milk and cheese as well, all locally produced.

Ty-Coz (Map p74; ☎ 884-6060; Av Tulum; sandwiches US\$3-4; 🕒 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.

Tatis La Casa del Pan (Map p74; ☎ 892-3877; cnr Pecari & Av Tulum; breakfast US\$3.50-5, sandwiches & light dishes US\$3.50-6; 🕒 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 7am-3pm Sat) Friendly and fun, with art on the walls and a great selection of wholesome fare. Come here for coffee and espresso that might be your last good cup of coffee before heading off into the rest of Yucatán. The crêpes are delicious.

El Tapatio (Map p74; ☎ 887-8317; cnr Avs Uxmal & Palmera; dishes US\$4-9, set meals US\$3.50) Touristy but good – a popular choice for hostel-goers around the corner, who suck down the mammoth fruit and veggie juices, shakes, and smoothies at any time of day.

El Rincón Yucateco (Map p74; ☎ 892-3225; Av Uxmal 24; dishes US\$4-10; 🕒 24hr 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 and good *comidas corridas* (set lunches). *Sopa de lima* ('lime soup'; chicken soup with lime) is light, a good option for anyone nursing a stomach problem.

For self-catering, try **Comercial Mexicana** (Map p74; cnr Avs Tulum & Uxmal), a centrally located supermarket close to the bus station. It has a good selection of produce, meats, cheeses and cookies.

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

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

MIDRANGE

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

Rolandi's Restaurant-Bar (Map p74; ☎ 883-2527; Av Cobá 12; mains US\$7-12; 🕒 1pm-12:30am) A Swiss-Italian eatery with a wood-fired pizza oven, between Avenidas Tulum and Náder just off the southern roundabout. It serves elaborate pizzas, spaghetti plates and a range of northern Italian dishes.

Restaurant 100% Natural (Map p74; Cien por Ciento Natural; ☎ 884-0102; Av Sunyachén; mains US\$5-12; 🕒 7am-11pm) Near Avenida Yaxchilán, this is one of a chain of restaurants serving juice blends (try the 'Crazy Yog' or the 'Vampiro'), a wide selection of yogurt-fruit-vegetable combinations, and brown rice, pasta, fish and chicken dishes. The on-site bakery turns out whole-wheat products, and the entire place is very nicely decorated and landscaped. Service is excellent – at times even too attentive.

La Parrilla (Map p74; ☎ 887-6141; Av Yaxchilán 51; mains US\$6.50-27; 🕒 noon-3am Mon-Sat, noon-midnight Sun) A traditional Mexican restaurant popular with locals and tourists alike. It serves a varied menu from all over Mexico, with Yucatecan specialties thrown in. Mains include tasty *calamares al mojo de ajo* (squid in garlic sauce, US\$10.70), steaks and sautéed grouper. *Mole* enchiladas and delicious piña coladas both run about US\$6.50. Lobster tail in Devil sauce is a tantalizing option. If you're lucky, a waiter will serve you beer...balancing it on his head from the bar to your table.

Irori (Map p74; ☎ 892-3072; Av Tulum 226; rolls US\$5-9, nigiri pair US\$3-7, teppanyaki meals US\$10-35; 🕒 1-11pm Mon-Sat, 1-7pm Sun) A Japanese-run restaurant serving sushi and many other Japanese favorites in an intimate and nicely decorated setting. There's even a kid's menu if you've got sushi-scoffing rugrats in tow.

El Pescador (Map p74; ☎ 884-2673; Av Tulipanes 28; mains US\$11-28; 🕒 11am-11pm) One of the best options for seafood lovers. At El Pescador you'll find a mouthwatering variety of creatively named delicacies. Try the lobster and shrimp shishkebab or the creatively named 'Shrimp Angels on Horseback' (bacon-wrapped prawns) for a wonderful, if pricey, treat. The octopus cocktails are also great. The pitcher of margaritas packs a deceptive punch.

TOP END

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

Carrillo's Lobster House (Map p74; ☎ 884-1227; Claveles 35; shrimp & fish dishes US\$12-20, lobster dishes US\$32) Try Carrillo's Plato Cozumel if you're looking for something a bit special. This somewhat formal restaurant has air-conditioning indoors and is fan-cooled outdoors, and entertainment is provided by mariachis. Follow the good smells leading to the blue building and you'll be in the right place.

La Habichuela (Map p74; ☎ 884-3158; Margaritas 25; mains US\$15-32) An elegant restaurant with a lovely courtyard dining area, just off Parque Las Palapas. The specialty is shrimp and lobster in curry sauce served inside a coconut with tropical fruit, but almost anything on the menu is delicious. The seafood ceviche and *tapa al ajillo* (potatoes in garlic) are mouthwatering. The gorgeous aquarium in the lobby makes for a very attractive wait (reservations are advised). Finish with lime sorbet splashed with Xtabentun, a Yucatecan anise-flavored liqueur.

Zona Hotelera**BUDGET**

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

Restaurant Río Nizuc (Map p70; mains US\$4.50-9; ☎ noon-5pm) About as close to sea level as a restaurant can be, this breezy hole in the wall, er, wharf is at the end of a short, nameless road near Blvd Kukulcán Km 23, at the edge of a mangrove-flanked channel. Octopus, conch and fish are served in various ways (fried, with garlic, as ceviche), and the beer is cheap. Get there early, as it closes when the fish is gone.

MIDRANGE

The Zona Hotelera is a vast swath of mainly Tex-Mex-style places catering to the just-flew-in crowd. Prices are higher and quality is lower than what you'll find downtown. A number of places cater to a young crowd, with conga lines where waiters cheer and pour watery tequila down dancers' throats as they weave by. So you'll either want to head *for* or *away from* **Señor Frog's** (Map p70; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9.8; dishes US\$10-20) and **Carlos 'n Charlie's** (Map p70; Blvd Kukulcán Km 5.5; dishes US\$10-18) for that kind of dining experience

(though the latter was closed at time of research due to hurricane damage).

La Isla Shopping Village, Plaza Flamingo and the Forum mall hold other options to get a bite, including pizzas and burgers.

TOP END

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

Crab House (Map p70; ☎ 885-3936; Blvd Kukulcán Km 14.8; dishes US\$14-20; ☎ 1-11:30pm) Offers a lovely view of the lagoon that complements the seafood. The long menu includes many shrimp and fillet-of-fish dishes. Crab and lobster are priced by the pound (US\$19.50 to US\$40.50).

Matachi Seaside Grill (Map p70; ☎ 881-8000; Blvd Kukulcán Km 17; mains US\$15-40) Formerly La Sirenita, the Matachi is a stylish, intimate place inside the Hilton, right on the beach. It offers a variety of Mexican and Asian-inspired cuisine, seafood, sushi and other creative entrées.

La Dolce Vita (Map p70; ☎ 885-0161; www.cancunitalianrestaurant.com; Blvd Kukulcán Km 14.6; pizzas US\$12.50-15, mains US\$14.50-40; ☎ noon-11pm) One of Cancún's fanciest Italian restaurants, it offers white wicker chairs and soft, romantic lighting, plus great lagoon views and attentive staff. Try the chicken with sun-dried tomatoes and finish with crêpes Suzette (for two). With a bottle of red, white, or rosé this could be the start or the finish of a wonderful day.

Ruth's Chris Steak House (Map p70; ☎ 885-0500; Kukulcán Plaza; steaks US\$22-35; ☎ 1-11pm) Ruth's Chris chain is known internationally for its aged, corn-fed, USDA prime beef. Pricey, but steak lovers don't seem to mind.

ENTERTAINMENT

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

Clubs**DOWNTOWN**

Downtown clubs are generally mellower than those in the rowdy Zona Hotelera. Built into the **Plaza de Toros** (Bullring; Map p74; cnr Avs Bonampak & Sayil) are several bars, some with music, that draw a largely local crowd.

Roots (Map p74; ☎ 884-2437; Tulipanes 26; cover Fri & Sat US\$5; 🕒 6pm-1am Mon-Sat) Features jazz, reggae or rock bands and the occasional flamenco guitarist. Roots is a full-menu restaurant as well as a club, serving pasta, salads, seafood and meat dishes, with main dishes running US\$8 to US\$16. Thursday seems to be the best night for catching nice tunes with a crowd.

Mambo Café (Map p74; ☎ 887-7891; Plaza Las Américas; cover men/women US\$5/3; 🕒 10pm-6am Thu-Sun) Upstairs from the food court in the middle of the huge mall on the southern stretch of Av Tulum. It features live salsa, Cuban and other Caribbean music and is very popular with Cancún's young people. Women enter free on Thursday nights.

Sabor Latino (Map p74; ☎ 892-1916; cnr Avs Xcaret & Tankah; cover men/women US\$6/4, Wed free; 🕒 10:30pm-6am, low season closed Sun-Tue) On the 2nd floor of Chinatown Plaza, this is another happening club. Its live acts feature Dominican salsa, and other tropical styles.

Karamba (Map p74; ☎ 884-0032; cnr Azucenas & Av Tulum; 🕒 10pm-6am Thu-Sun) A venerable standby above the Ristorante Casa Italiana, it has frequent drink specials. Cover ranges from free to US\$7. Come here for a varied crowd of gays, lesbians, and cross-dressers.

Picante (Map p74; Av Tulum 20; 🕒 9pm-6am) Set back from Avenida Tulum a few blocks north of Avenida Uxmal, this place isn't as 'spicy' as its name suggests, but it is a long-time neighborhood gay bar. It often features movies shown at high volume until about 1am, when the dance music comes on.

ZONA HOTELERA

The club scene in the Zona Hotelera is young, loud and booze-oriented – the kind that often has an MC urging women to display body parts to hooting and hollering crowds. Carlos 'n Charlie's and Señor Frog's (both p79) have dancing in the evenings. Most of the dance clubs charge around US\$20 admission, which may include two or three drinks; admission with open-bar privileges (ie drink all you want) is US\$20 to US\$25, rising to US\$40 to US\$50 during spring break. Though some clubs open as early as 5:30pm, most don't get hopping much before midnight.

If you're serious about your partying, consider a 'Party Hopper Package,' available at most of the lobby tour offices or

GAY & LESBIAN CANCÚN

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

Backstage Theater-Cabaret (Map p74; ☎ 887-9106; Tulipanes 30) Backstage features drag shows, strippers (male and female), fashion shows and musicals. Terrific ambiance, joyful crowd.

Karamba (see left) Popular with cross-dressers.

Picante (see left) More for talkers than dancers.

at other travel agents downtown. Usually US\$40 to US\$50 will buy all you can drink at four or five of the popular clubs; some packages include van transportation.

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

Coco Bongo (Map p70; ☎ 883-5061; Forum Mall; 🕒 10:30pm-5am) This is often the venue for MTV's coverage of spring break, and tends to be a happening venue just about any day of the week. The club opens with celebrity impersonators, dancers and circus acts (clowns, acrobats and the like) for an hour or so, then the rock, pop and hip-hop start playing.

Dady'O (Map p70; ☎ 800-234-9797; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9; 🕒 10pm-4:30am) Opposite the Forum mall, this is one of Cancún's more elaborate dance clubs. The setting is a five-level black-walled faux cave with a two-level dance floor and what seem like zillions of laser beams and strobes. The predominant beats are Latin, house, techno, trance and hip-hop, and the crowd is mainly twenty-somethings.

Dady Rock (Map p70; ☎ 883-3333; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9; 🕒 5:30pm-3:30am) A steamy rock and roll club with recorded techno and rock and live music, it is next door to Dady'O and attracts a slightly older crowd than its neighbor. Admission is free until 10pm.

Bulldog Café (Map p70; ☎ 883-1133 ext 544; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9; 🕒 10pm-late) Bills itself as 'the home of rock and roll,' and features live bands and a jumbo Jacuzzi that's made to look a bit like a cenote but is really just a showcase for bikini-clad staff to splash

around. Look for the giant bulldog sign outside and you'll know you've found the right place.

Cinema

In general Hollywood movies are shown in English with Spanish subtitles; however, English-language children's movies are usually dubbed in Spanish. Either way, catching a flick can be a nice option if you're sunfried or just want to take a break from the beach. Ticket prices run about US\$4 for children and adults, and Wednesday afternoons are often discounted further.

Cinemark (Map p70; ☎ 883-5603; La Isla Shopping Village) This cineplex shows only English-language, first-run Hollywood hits.

Cinemas Tulum (Map p74; ☎ 884-3451; Av Tulum 10) This theater shows first-run Hollywood movies in English with Spanish subtitles, as well as foreign films and current Mexican releases.

SHOPPING

Neither downtown nor the Zona Hotelera fits the bill as a bargain-hunter's paradise – the store coupons in *Cancún Tips* for 35% off any jewelry purchase should give you some idea of the mark-ups involved. Still, Cancún can be a great place to shop for souvenirs and jewellery.

Plaza Kukulcán (Map p70; Blvd Kukulcán Km 13) The largest (and definitely among the stuffiest, attitude-wise) of the indoor malls is chichi Plaza Kukulcán. Some shops were undergoing Wilma-related repairs at the time of research, but should be back to normal soon. Of note here is the huge art gallery (taking up near half of the 2nd floor), the many stores selling silverwork, and La Ruta de las Indias, a shop featuring wooden models of Spanish galleons and replicas of conquistadors' weaponry and body armor. But all is not lost; the plaza has a bowling alley and a large food court.

La Isla Shopping Village (Map p70; Blvd Kukulcán Km 12) Unique among the island's malls, this is an indoor-outdoor place with canals, an aquarium, ultramodern parasol structures and enough other visual distractions to keep even the most inveterate hater of shopping amused while his or her significant other browses the numerous stores. For tipplers on your list, consider picking up a bottle of Xtabentun, a Yucatecan anise-flavored liqueur.

Mercado Municipal Ki-Huic (Map p74; Av Tulum) This warren of stalls and shops carries a wide variety of souvenirs and handicrafts. You can find silverwork, *hamacas*, wooden figurines, and T-shirts ranging from tasteful to disgusting. It's 100% tourist trap, so even hard bargaining may not bring down prices as much here as elsewhere.

Colormax (Map p74; ☎ 887-4625; Av Tulum 22; 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) Colormax, just north of Calle Claveles, offers a wide assortment of Fuji film including Velvia, Provia and Reala. It does developing as well.

Locals head to either Mercado 28 (Map p74) or Mercado 23 (Map p74) for clothes, shoes, inexpensive food stalls, hardware items and so on. Of the two, Mercado 23 is the least frequented by tourists. If you're looking for a place *without* corny T-shirts, this is the place to go.

Across Avenida Tulum is the Chedraui supermarket, whose upstairs clothing department sometimes has souvenir-grade items at very affordable prices.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Cancún's **international airport** (☎ 886-0049) is the busiest in southeastern Mexico. The airport has a few ATMs; the best place to change money is the Banamex bank along the back wall outside the domestic baggage-claim area (behind the coffee shop); it has an ATM and offers good exchange rates. Opposite the bank are (inconvenient) pay-in-advance baggage lockers costing US\$6 for 24 hours (a tip is appreciated, but optional). There's wifi access and a free, Spanish-only public Internet terminal that has sticky, punch-button keys.

Cancún is served by many direct international flights (for more information see p272). Between Mexicana and its subsidiary, Click, there is at least one and up to eight direct daily flights to each of the following destinations: Mexico City (one way US\$137), Oaxaca (US\$248), Tuxtla Gutiérrez (US\$246), Villahermosa (US\$259) and Mérida (US\$200). Click offers flights daily to Mérida, and six to Cozumel. It also flies twice daily to Havana, Cuba (round-trip only, US\$305), but you can get better package deals through local travel agents. US visitors heading to Cuba should pay particular attention to the recent US crackdown

on agencies and visitors organizing trips to Cuba. George W doesn't want you spending your dollars there even if you want to. Cubana, the Cuban national airline, has daily flights as well.

Aviacsa, a regional carrier based in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, has direct flights from Cancún to Mexico City, with connections for Oaxaca, Tapachula, Tuxtla Gutiérrez and Villahermosa, as well as points in central and northern Mexico.

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

Grupo Taca flies from Cancún to Flores via Guatemala City, connecting to points in Central America several times a week.

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

Aeroméxico (Map p74; ☎ 287-1820; Av Cobá 80) Just west of Av Bonampak.

American Airlines (Map p70; ☎ 800-904-6000; Hotel Fiesta Americana Coral Beach, Blvd Kukulcán Km 8.7) Has an airport counter as well.

Aviacsa (Map p74; ☎ 887-4214; fax 884-6599; Av Cobá 37) Also has an airport counter.

Azteca (☎ 886-0831) Airport counter.

Click (☎ 884-2000) Airport counter.

Continental (☎ 886-0169, 800-900-5000; www.continental.com) Airport counter.

Copa (☎ 800-265-2672) Airport counter.

Cubana (Map p74; ☎ 887-7210; Calle Tulum)

Delta (☎ 800-123-4710, 886-0368) Airport counter.

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

Magnicharters (Map p74; ☎ 884-0600; Av Náder 93)

Mexicana (Map p74; ☎ 881-9090, 24hr 800-502-2000; Av Cobá 39)

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

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

Boat

See p90 for details of boats to Isla Mujeres and p93 for boats to Isla Holbox.

Bus

Cancún's modern bus terminal occupies the wedge formed where Avenidas Uxmal and Tulum meet. Upon leaving you'll be asked by every taxi driver if you want a ride; you'll also be approached by hotel hawkers pushing 'deals.' Despite this, it's a

safe area and you'll be fine walking around. Across Pino from the bus terminal, a few doors from Avenida Tulum, is the ticket office and mini-terminal of Playa Express, which runs air-conditioned buses down the coast to Tulum approximately every half hour until early evening, stopping at major towns and points of interest along the way. Riviera covers the same ground with its 1st-class (though not necessarily better) service.

ADO sets the 1st-class standard, while UNO, ADO GL and Super Expreso provide luxury services. Mayab provides good 'intermediate class' (modern, air-con buses, tending to make more stops than 1st class) to many points. Oriente's 2nd-class air-con buses often depart and arrive late. Nor-este buses vary in quality; some are pretty shabby indeed.

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

Car

Rental-car agencies with facilities at the airport include: **Alamo** (☎ 886-0179), **Avis** (☎ 886-0222), **Budget** (☎ 886-0026), **Dollar** (☎ 886-0179) and **Hertz** (☎ 886-0150). You can receive better rates if you reserve ahead of time, but it doesn't hurt to do comparison shopping after arriving and before signing your original agreement.

You're better off leaving the rental car parked inside Cancún and walking or catching a bus to most places in town till you're ready to get out of town. Be warned also that Hwy 180D, the 238km toll (*cuota*) road running much of the way between Cancún and Mérida, costs US\$28.50 for the distance and has only two exits before the end. The first, at Valladolid, costs US\$19.50 to reach from Cancún and the second, at Pisté (for Chichén Itzá), is an additional US\$4.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

White TTC buses to downtown Cancún (US\$4) leave the airport about every 20 minutes between 5:30am and 11:30pm from a small parking lot at the end of the domes-

BUS SERVICES FROM CANCÚN

Destination	Cost	Duration	Departures
Chetumal	US\$17-25	5½-6½hr	many buses
Chichén Itzá	US\$7-14	3-4hr	1 Riviera bus at 9am, hourly 2nd-class Oriente buses from 5am to 5pm
Chiquilá (for Isla Holbox)	US\$7	3½hr	Mayab buses at 8am & 12:30pm, Noreste buses at 1:45pm
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	US\$10-12	3½-4hr	eight 1st-class Riviera buses & hourly 2nd-class Mayab buses
Mérida	US\$15-21	4-6hr	15 UNO, ADO GL & Super Expresso buses, hourly 2nd-class Oriente buses (5am-5pm)
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	US\$103	24hr	2 ADO buses
Mexico City (TAPO)	US\$80-103	22-24hr	1 ADO & 4 ADO GL buses
Palenque	US\$48	12-13hr	3 Altos and Colón buses
Playa del Carmen	US\$2.40-3.20	1-1¼hr	Riviera every 15 min 5am-midnight, many Playa Express and Mayab buses. See also opposite.
Puerto Morelos	US\$1.20-1.60	40min	numerous buses
Ticul	US\$19,	6hr	6 Mayab buses
Tizimín	US\$8-9	3-4hr	nine 2nd-class Noreste & Mayab buses
Tulum	US\$5.40-6.40	2¼-3hr	many Riviera, Playa Express & other buses
Valladolid	US\$7-11	2-3hr	many buses
Villahermosa	US\$52	12hr	11 buses

tic terminal. A straight line drawn from the exit of the international arrivals terminal (past all the vans) would reach the small lot and its ticket booth decorated with a Coca-Cola sign. Once in town, the buses travel up Avenida Tulum and will stop most anywhere you ask. One central stop is across from the Chedraui supermarket on Avenida Cobá (not to be confused with the Chedraui further south in Plaza Las Américas).

Going to the airport from 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; some official stops are shown on the Ciudad Cancún map.

Comfortable *colectivos* (shared vans) depart from the curb in front of the international terminal about every 15 minutes for the Zona Hotelera and downtown; they charge US\$9 per person. If volume allows, they will separate passengers into downtown and Zona groups. Otherwise, depending who's going exactly where, they may head downtown first and then to the Zona. Going the opposite way, via Punta Nizuc, can take up to 45 minutes from the airport to downtown.

Cheaper ADO shuttles leave from the domestic terminal side, charging US\$3.20 to go downtown or US\$6.50 direct to Playa del Carmen. Riviera also runs nine express 1st-class buses from the airport to Playa del Carmen between 7am and 7:30pm (US\$8, 45 minutes to one hour). The service is direct and tickets are sold at a counter that is located in the international section of the airport.

Regular taxis into town or to the Zona Hotelera cost up to US\$40 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 US\$5) because the driver is no longer subject to the expensive regulated airport fares.

Colectivo taxis head to the airport from a stand in front of the Hotel Cancún Handall on Av Tulum about a block south of Av Cobá. These operate between 6am and 9pm (but check beforehand), charge US\$4 per person and leave when full. The official rate for private taxis from town is US\$15.

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 Avenida Tulum toward Av Cobá, then eastward on Avenida Cobá. The one-way fare is US\$0.65, but since change is often unavailable this varies between US\$0.60 and US\$0.70. Having correct change in advance makes things easier.

To reach Puerto Juárez and the Isla Mujeres ferries, catch a Ruta 13 ('Pto Juárez' or 'Punta Sam'; US\$0.40) bus heading north on Avenida Tulum. Some R1 buses make this trip as well; tickets cost US\$0.65.

Taxi

Cancún's taxis do not have meters. Fares are set, but you should always agree on a price before getting in; otherwise you could end up paying for a 'misunderstanding.' From downtown to Punta Cancún is US\$8, to Puerto Juárez US\$3. Hourly and daily rates should run about US\$20 and US\$80 respectively.

NORTH OF CANCÚN

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

ISLA MUJERES

☎ 998 / pop 12,500

Quiet, welcoming Isla Mujeres (Island of Women) lies just north of Cancún and is an ideal day trip or a destination in its own right. There's not much here and that's the whole point: come to bask in quiet shallows or stretch out on the sand, to snorkel or scuba dive, or just to put the sunglasses on and open that book you've been waiting to read.

Yes, there are T-shirt shops and agencies renting mopeds and golf carts, but there's nothing near the number of touts you'll find in Cancún, and Isla Mujeres continues to offer some good value in food and lodging despite the inevitable increases over the years.

The Pintando Isla Mujeres program has invited 400 artists from all around the world to paint many of the town's buildings, brightening up the streets and making for fun walks. Wilma shook things up a bit, and at the time of research various establishments were still making repairs. Some were closed for good.

History

A glimpse at the sunbathers and it's hard to think the name 'Island of Women' doesn't come from the bikini-clad tourists, but the name Isla Mujeres goes at least as far back as Spanish buckaneers, who (legend has 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 clay idols are thought to have represented the goddess. The island may also have figured in the extensive Maya salt trade, which extended for hundreds of miles along the coastline.

Orientation

The island is 8km long, 150m to 800m wide and 11km off the coast. The town of Isla Mujeres, with its ferry docks, is at the island's northern tip, and a lighthouse and vestiges of the Maya temple are at the southern tip. 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

BOOKSTORES

Mañana (☎ 044 998-866-4347; cnr Matamoros & Guerrero; ☎ 10am-7pm) This café (p89) has some nice bookshelves and swaps or sells, depending on your needs.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet café (cnr Matamoros & Guerrero; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat) As yet unnamed, offers access to the web at US\$1.50 per hour.

LAUNDRY

Tim Pho (☎ 877-0529; cnr Juarez & Abasolo; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) Friendly and cheap: up to 4kg takes two hours and costs US\$5.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Medical Center (Guerrero btwn Madero & Morelos)

MONEY

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

HSBC (Av Rueda Medina)

POST & TELEPHONE

The island has an abundance of Telmex card phones.

Post office (☎ 877-0085; Guerrero at López Mateos; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Immigration office (☎ 877-0189; Av Rueda Medina; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun) Next door to the tourist information office, but frequently has a sign up that reads, 'Sorry, gone to Cancún.'

Tourist information office (☎ 877-0767; Av Rueda Medina; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & Sun) Between Madero and Morelos. It offers a number of brochures, and one member of its friendly staff speaks English; the rest speak Spanish only.

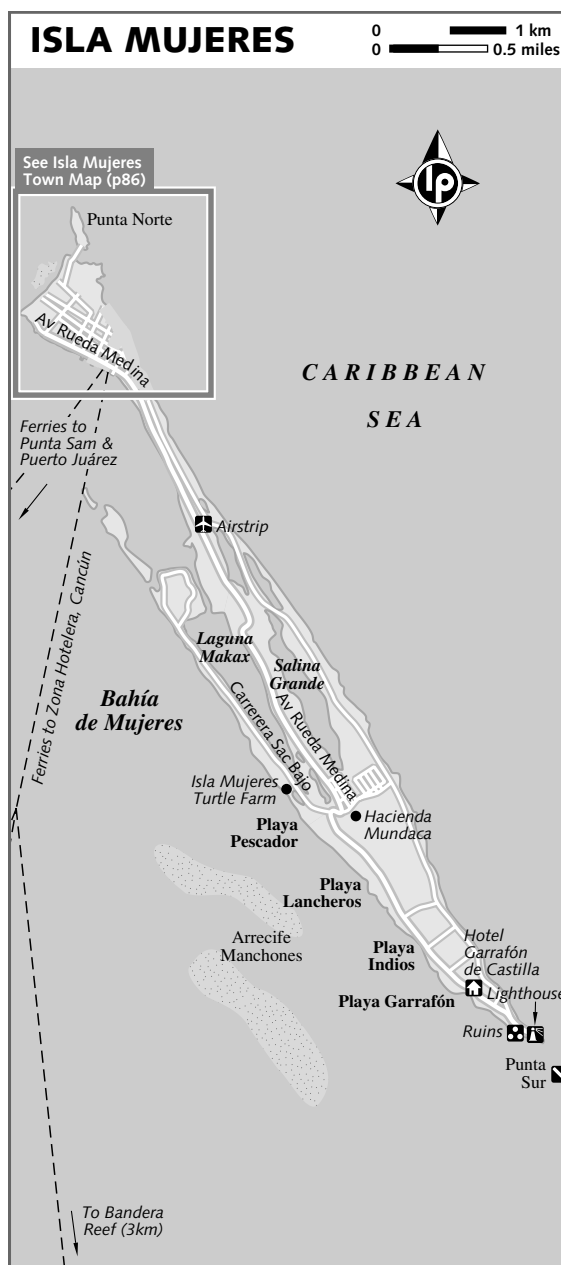
Sights & Activities

BEACHES & SWIMMING

Once you reach **Playa Norte**, the island's main beach, you won't want to leave. Its warm shallow waters are the color of blue-raspberry syrup and the beach is crushed coral. Unlike the outer beach, Playa Norte is safe and the water is only chest-deep even far from shore. If you tire of sunbathing, cool off with something frosty at one of the many bars.

Five kilometers south of town is **Playa Lancheros**, the southernmost point served by local buses. The beach is less attractive than Playa Norte, but it sometimes has free musical festivities on Sunday. A taxi ride to Lancheros is US\$2.

Another 1.5km south of Lancheros is **Playa Garrafón**, with translucent waters, colorful fish and no sand. Unfortunately the reef here has been heavily damaged by hurricanes and careless visitors. The water can be very choppy, sweeping you into jagged areas, so it's best to stay near shore. Avoid the overhyped and overpriced Parque Natural (which has constructed a horrendous eyesore of an observation tower that has you praying for a hurricane) and visit instead **Hotel Garrafón de**



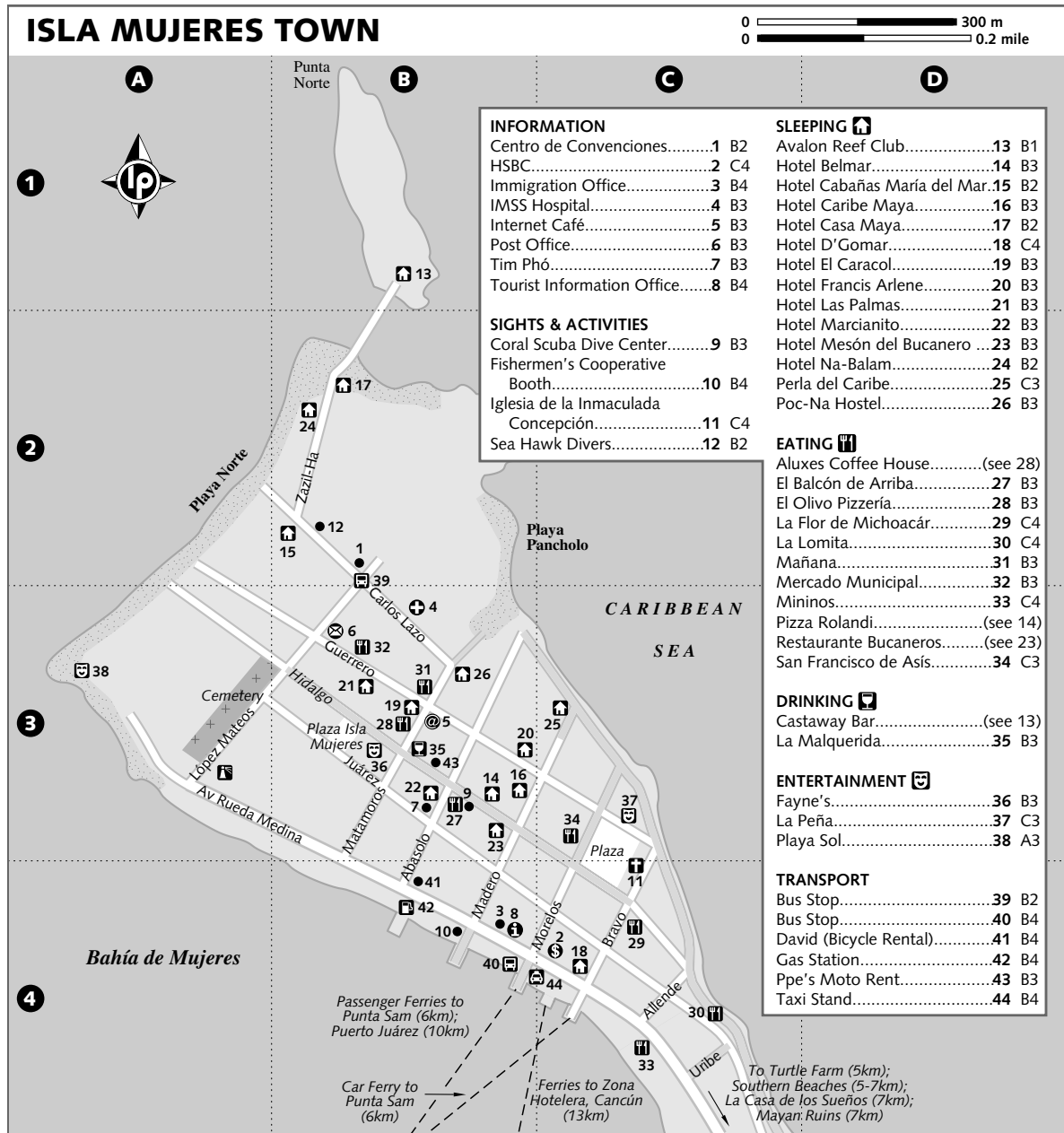
Castilla (☎ 877-0107; Carretera Punta Sur Km 6; admission US\$2; 🕒 9am-5pm), which provides chairs, umbrellas, showers and baths for the entrance fee. Snorkeling gear is US\$6 extra. It has a roped-off swimming area (from which one could sneak-swim into the *parque* next door, were one so inclined) as well as a restaurant and snack bar. The hotel rents lockers and towels, and offers snorkeling tours to the offshore reef for US\$20. Taxis from town cost US\$5.

HACIENDA MUNDACA

This **estate** (Av Rueda Medina; admission US\$1; 🕒 9am-5pm) is at the large bend in Avenida Rueda Medina, about 4km south of the town. Its story is perhaps more intriguing

than the ruins that remain. A 19th-century slave trader and reputed pirate, Fermín Antonio Mundaca de Marechaja, fell in love with a local woman known as La Trigueña (The Brunette). To win her, Mundaca built a two-story mansion complete with gardens and graceful archways, as well as a small fortification.

But while Mundaca was building the house, La Trigueña married another islander. Brokenhearted, Mundaca died and his house, fortress and garden fell into disrepair. Some documents indicate that Mundaca died during a visit to Mérida and was buried there. Others say he died on the island, and indeed there's a grave in the town cemetery that supposedly con-



tains his remains. Despite the skull and crossbones on his headstone (a common *memento mori*) there's no evidence in history books that Mundaca was ever a pirate. Instead, it is said he accumulated his wealth by transporting slaves from Africa to Cuba, where they were forced to work in mines and sugarcane fields.

Today the mostly ruined complex has some walls and foundations, a large central pond, some rusting cannons and a partially rebuilt house. At the southern end stand a gateway and a small garden. You can still make out the words *Entrada de La Trigueña* (La Trigueña's Entrance) etched into the impressive stone arch of the gate.

The shady grounds make for pleasant strolling (bring repellent), and a small zoo is scattered across them, holding local fauna, including a cage-crazed jaguar, some spider monkeys, crocodiles, *jabalíes* (peccaries), a boa constrictor and the smallest species of deer on the North American continent. Kids may find it fun; adults may want to unlock the cages.

Hacienda Mundaca is easily reached by bus or bike; a taxi from town will cost US\$3.

TURTLE FARM

Three species of sea turtle lay eggs in the sand along the island's calm western shore. Although they are endangered, sea turtles are still killed throughout Latin America for their eggs and meat, which is considered a delicacy. In the 1980s, efforts by a local fisherman led to the founding of the **Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm** (Isla Mujeres Tortugranja; ☎ 877-0595; Carretera Sac Bajo Km 5; admission US\$2; 🕒 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.

The main draw here is several hundred sea turtles, ranging in weight from 150g

to more than 300kg. The farm also has a small but good quality aquarium, displays on marine life and a gift shop. Tours are conducted in Spanish and English.

If you're driving, 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 (US\$3).

PUNTA SUR

At the south end of the island lie a lighthouse, a modern sculpture garden and the severely worn remains of a temple dedicated chiefly to Ixchel, Maya goddess of the moon and fertility. In 1988 Hurricane Gilbert nearly finished the ruins off; what was left was pummeled by Emily and Wilma in 2004, and there's now little to see other than the sculpture garden, the sea and, in the distance, Cancún. Unless you're desperate to pay the steep entry fee (US\$5), head left before the lighthouse and enjoy the view from the small dirt parking lot. From downtown, a taxi costs US\$5.

DIVING & SNORKELING

As many as 40% of the diving and snorkeling sites in the Cancún/Isla Mujeres area were affected by hurricanes Emily and Wilma in 2004, and at the time of research some of these areas were closed to diving. That said, within a short boat ride of the island there's a handful of lovely dives, such as Barracuda, La Bandera, El Jigüeo and Manchones. A popular nonreef dive is **Ultrafreeze** (or El Frío), the intact hull of a 60m-long cargo ship thought to have been deliberately sunk in 30m of water, 90 minutes by boat northeast of Isla Mujeres. The name of the site is due to the unusually cool water found there. A rental 3mm shorty wetsuit will barely keep you warm; consider asking for a hood if you tend to get chilled while diving.

To protect and preserve the reefs, a US\$2 fee is charged for all diving and swimming. Please pay it, as this money is used to preserve natural patrimony. At all of the reputable dive centers you need to show your certification card, and you will be expected to have your own gear. Equipment rental adds US\$10 to the prices listed here; you'll pay another US\$10 if you need a wetsuit.

Sea Hawk Divers (☎ /fax 877-0296; <http://mjmnet.net/seahawkdivers/home.htm>; Carlos Lazo) offers dives for US\$45 (one tank) to US\$60 (two tanks), a resort course for US\$85, PADI Open Water certification (US\$300), and snorkeling tours from US\$25.

Coral Scuba Dive Center (☎ 877-0763; www.coral-scubadivecenter.com; Hidalgo btwn Abasolo & Madero) offers dives for US\$29 to US\$59, snorkel trips for US\$22 and a variety of courses.

The fisherfolk of Isla Mujeres have formed a cooperative to offer snorkeling tours of various sites from US\$20, including the reef off Playa Garrafón, and day trips to Isla Contoy for US\$50. You can book through the **Fisherman's Cooperative Booth** (☎ 877-1363; Av Rueda Medina) in a *palapa* steps away from the dock. Booking here ensures your money goes to locals.

DEEP-SEA FISHING

The fishing cooperative (see above) offers trips to fish for marlin, swordfish and dorado from US\$50/150 per hour/half day, including bait and tackle, soft drinks, snacks and beer.

Sleeping

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

BUDGET

Poc-Na Hostel (☎ /fax 877-0090; www.pocna.com; cnr Matamoros & Carlos Lazo; sites per person US\$6.50, dm with/without card US\$9/10, d US\$24; 🚻 📺) Only moments away from one of the island's nicest beaches and decorated with shells and hibiscus flowers, Mexico's oldest youth hostel ranks among the country's best. It has fan-cooled six-, eight- and 10-bed co-ed dorms as well as women's dorms and a few air-con doubles. The large main common area has hammocks to chill in and an excellent sound system putting out tunes till the wee hours. The property extends through 100m of sand and coconut palms to the edge of the Caribbean and the hostel's own beach bar. Though there are no cooking facilities for guests, the kitchen serves good, inexpensive food (and beer and wine).

Hotel Las Palmas (☎ 877-0965; Guerrero 20; d US\$30) Has perhaps the narrowest bathrooms in Mexico, and the toilets lack seats. Rooms are musty at first, but beds are firm and comfortable. Good location makes this peach-colored hotel worth a peek, but check a room first before deciding to stay here.

Hotel Caribe Maya (☎ 877-0684; Madero 9; d with fan/air-con US\$25/30; 🚻) The old blue tiles need replacing, but this place offers rooms that, though a bit musty, are solid value even in the high season.

Hotel El Caracol (☎ 877-0150; fax 877-0547; Matamoros 5 btwn Hidalgo & Guerrero; d with fan/air-con low season US\$15/25, high season US\$20/35; 🚻) Old green-tiled floors are a bit off-putting, but El Caracol offers 18 clean, well-furnished rooms with insect screens and tiled bathrooms. Rooms and beds smell fresh. Bathrooms are spotless. Air-con works, but adds US\$10 to the cost of the room.

Hotel Marcianito (☎ 877-0111; Abasolo 10; r US\$30-35) The 'Little Martian' is a neat, tidy and recommended hotel with 13 slightly dark, fan-cooled rooms that have a bit too much air freshener. Upper-floor rooms are the more expensive ones. Plaid quilts seem cutely out of place.

MIDRANGE

Hotel D'Gomar (☎ 877-0541; Av Rueda Medina 150; d with fan US\$35, with air-con low/high season US\$50/65; 🚻) A friendly place facing the ferry dock between Morelos and Bravo, this has four floors of attractive, ample and well-maintained rooms with double beds (air-con rooms have two) and large bathrooms. Most have hammocks, and both coffee and water are free. The mirror in the stairway gives warped, funhouse-style reflections as you head to your room.

Hotel Francis Arlene (☎ /fax 877-0310; Guerrero 7; r with fan/air-con low season US\$50/55, high season US\$60/65; 🚻) Offers comfortable, good-sized, pastel-and-white rooms with fan and fridge. Most have a king-sized bed or two doubles, and many have balconies and sea views. The lounging frog sculptures will either seem hokey or cute. Either way they kinda fit right in.

Perla del Caribe (☎ 877-0444; fax 877-0306; Madero 24; d US\$70; 🚻 📺) A new coat of paint hasn't kept this place from looking pretty hurricane-scrubbed. One block north of Guerrero right on the eastern beach, it has

a pool and restaurant. All rooms have balconies and many have sea views.

Hotel Mesón del Bucanero (☎ 877-1222, 800-712-3510; www.bucaneros.com; Hidalgo 11 btwn Abasolo & Madero; d US\$29-72; 🍷) Above the Bucaneros restaurant. Its nicely decorated rooms (most with air-con) all have TVs and are priced according to their various combinations of beds, balcony, tub and fridge – one even has a blender and toaster. Rooms air out nicely if the windows are opened.

Hotel Belmar (☎ 877-0430; fax 877-0429; www.rolandi.com; Hidalgo 110 btwn Abasolo & Madero; d with air-con low/high season US\$35/90, ste with Jacuzzi US\$95/134; 🍷) Above the Pizza Rolandi restaurant and run by the same friendly family. All rooms are comfy and well kept, with tiled floors and (some) balconies. Prices span four distinct seasons.

Hotel Casa Maya (☎ 877-0045; www.kasamaya.com.mx; Calle Zazil-ha s/n; r US\$80-165) Beautiful cabanas right by the beach offer something similar to what's in Tulum. Palm-shaded hammocks and a common kitchen make it easy to do nothing all afternoon.

TOP END

All rooms in this category have air-con.

Hotel Cabanas María del Mar (☎ 877-0179; fax 877-0213; www.cabanasmariadelmar.com; cnr Carlos Lazo 1; d low season US\$55-88, high season US\$110-121; 🍷 🍷) Near Playa Norte, it has 73 rooms with firm beds and pink bedspreads. All have balconies or terraces, many with sea or pool views and lovely tiled bathrooms. A lush courtyard, restaurant and swimming pool top things off. Rates include continental breakfast.

Hotel Na Balam (☎ 877-0279; fax 877-0446; www.nabalam.com; Calle Zazil-Ha 118; r low/high season US\$150/202, ste US\$175/302; 🍷 🍷) Butterflies flit around the beautiful hibiscus and palm garden, and many rooms face Playa Norte. All rooms are decorated with simple elegance, and have safes, hammocks, private balconies or patios...and no TVs. The hotel offers yoga and meditation classes as well as massage services, and has a pool and restaurant. There's also entertainment here (see p90).

Avalon Reef Club (☎ /fax 999-2050, 800-713-8170; www.avalonvacations.com; Calle Zazil-Ha at Islote Yunque; d US\$350; 🍷 🍷) Occupies its own islet off the northern tip of Isla Mujeres. Hard hit by Wilma but should be back to normal by the

time this book is printed: the smallish studios and villas are in two-story structures detached from the hotel tower, and are equipped with kitchenettes. The complex boasts multiple restaurants and bars, a pool and a spa-fitness center and prices given here are all-inclusive. Red marble baths make for a relaxing soak after a 'hard' day on the beach.

Eating

Aluxes Coffee House (Matamoros btwn Guerrero & Hidalgo; bagels US\$2, sandwiches US\$4-5; ☎ 8am-10pm Wed-Mon) Serves bagels with cream cheese, sandwiches, muffins, and hot and iced coffee.

El Olivo Pizzería (Matamoros btwn Guerrero & Hidalgo; pizza slices US\$1-2; ☎ 1-10pm) Sells delicious slices of pizza, with plain mozzarella or various toppings.

Mañana (☎ 044 998-866-4347; cnr Matamoros & Guerrero; dishes US\$2-5; ☎ 10am-7pm) This small, relaxing café has colorful, hand-painted tables and serves baguette sandwiches, coffee, *licuados* (blends of fruit or juice with water or milk, and sugar) and some Middle Eastern dishes. The hummus with onions and mushrooms is a delicious signature dish.

La Lomita (Juárez btwn Allende & Uribe; mains US\$3.50-6; ☎ 9am-10:30pm Mon-Sat) 'The Little Hill' serves good, cheap Mexican food in a small, colorful setting. Seafood and chicken dishes predominate. Fantastic bean and avocado soup.

Mininos (Av Rueda Medina btwn Allende & Uribe; mains US\$5-8; ☎ 11am-9pm) A tiny, colorfully painted shack dishing up cocktails of shrimp, conch and octopus, heaping plates of delicious ceviche, and seafood soups.

El Balcón de Arriba (☎ 877-0513; Hidalgo 12; mains US\$5-10; ☎ 3-11pm) Just east of Abasolo, this is an airy, casual 2nd-floor eatery popular with tourists. El Balcón serves good fruit drinks, some veggie dishes and a large selection of seafood. Try the rich *camarones a la Reina* if you have a friend who can help out.

Restaurante Bucaneros (☎ 877-0126; Hidalgo btwn Abasolo & Madero; mains US\$2.60-12, set meals US\$12; ☎ 7am-11pm) Below the Hotel Mesón del Bucanero, this is a fan-cooled, mostly outdoor restaurant with a pleasing ambience and a variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic tropical shakes and drinks. The best deal is the set *menú especial*, which gives you a choice of several mains accompanied by soup or salad and a dessert.

Pizza Rolandi (☎ 877-0430; Hidalgo btwn Abasolo & Madero; mains US\$7-12, pizzas US\$6-13; ☎ 8am-11pm) Below the Hotel Belmar, it bakes very good thin-crust pizzas and calzones in a wood-fired oven. The menu also includes pasta, fresh salads, fish, good coffee and some Italian specialties – definitely *don't* come here looking for Mexican.

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

Inside the remodeled **mercado municipal** (town market; Guerrero btwn Matamoros & López Mateos) 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 US\$1.50. Other stalls sell a variety of produce, and a juice stand serves up liquid refreshments. Four open-air restaurants out the front serve simple but decent and filling meals at fair prices.

San Francisco de Asís, a chain supermarket on the plaza, has a solid selection of groceries, baked goods and snacks.

Drinking & Entertainment

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

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

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

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

Hotel Na Balam (Calle Zazil-Ha) Has a beach bar that's a popular spot on weekend after-

noons (every other week in the off-season), with live music, dancing and a three-hour-long happy hour.

Castaway Bar (☎ 999-2050; Calle Zazil-Ha at Islote Yunque; ☎ 11am-late) A little way up the beach from Na Balam and across the bridge at the Avalon Reef Club. It features regular promotions such as 'Ladies Drink Free' night and 'Viva México,' with mariachis and tequila specials.

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

Getting There & Away

There are several points of embarkation to reach Isla Mujeres. The following description starts from the northernmost port and progresses southeast (see Map p70). To reach Puerto Juárez or Punta Sam from downtown Cancún, catch any bus (US\$0.40) displaying those destinations and/or 'Ruta 13' as it heads north on Avenida Tulum. Some R1 (Zona Hotelera; US\$0.65) 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 US\$1.50; drivers are included in the fare for cars (US\$19), vans (US\$24), motorcycles (US\$7.50) and bicycles (US\$6). If you're taking a car in high season, it's good to get in line an hour or so before departure time. Tickets go on sale just before the ferry begins loading.

PUERTO JUÁREZ

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 (US\$3.50 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 (US\$7.50) includes soft drinks. High season sees up to seven departures each way. El Embarcadero is a beige building between the Gran Costa Real Hotel and the channel, on the mainland side of the bridge (Blvd Kukulcán Km 4).

Playa Tortugas

The **Isla Shuttle** (☎ 883-3448) leaves from the dock on Playa Tortugas (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 US\$9.

Getting Around

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

BICYCLE

Cycling is a great way to get around the island. Many bicycles are single-speed, with coaster (ie push-back-on-the-pedal) brakes; these give you a good workout on the gradual hills. A number of shops rent bikes for about US\$2/8 an hour/day. Arrive early in the day to get your pick of the better ones and take the time to have the seat adjusted properly. Some places ask for a deposit of about US\$10. **David** (☎ 044 998-860-0075; Av Rueda Medina), near Abasolo, has a decent selection.

BUS & TAXI

Local buses depart about every 25 minutes (but don't bank on it) from next to the Centro de Convenciones (near the back of the market) or from the ferry dock and head

along Avenida Rueda Medina, stopping along the way. Get taxis from the stand or flag one down. You can get to the entrance of Hacienda Mundaca, within 300m of the Turtle Farm (Tortugranja), and as far south as Playa Lancheros (1.5km north of Playa Garrafón). Taxi rates are set by the municipal government and posted at the taxi stand just south of the passenger ferry dock. As always, agree on a price before getting in.

MOTORCYCLE & GOLF CART

Take a look around before you rent. The island is tiny and you can walk from the dock to any part of the town in 15 minutes. Two-wheeled motorized transportation can be dangerous; even on sedate Isla Mujeres people get seriously injured or die in bike mishaps. Inspect the vehicle carefully before renting. Costs vary, and are sometimes jacked up in high season, but generally start at about US\$8 per hour, with a two-hour minimum, US\$25 all day (9am to 5pm) and US\$35 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 US\$15/45 per hour/day and US\$55 for 24 hours. A good, no-nonsense place for both bikes and golf carts is **Ppe's Moto Rent** (☎ 877-0019; Hidalgo btwn Matamoros & Abasolo).

PARQUE NACIONAL ISLA CONTOY

Spectacular Isla Contoy is a bird-lover's delight: a national park and sanctuary that is an easy day trip from Isla Mujeres. About 800m at its widest point and more than 7km long, it has dense foliage that provides ideal shelter for more than 100 species of 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.

Getting There & Away

Daily visits to Contoy are offered by the **fisherman's cooperative** (☎ 998-877-1363; Av Rueda Medina). The trip (US\$50 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.

The trip gives you about two hours of free time to explore the island's two interpretive trails and to climb the 27m-high observation tower. For US\$10 per person, a park biologist will take you on a tour of Laguna Puerto Viejo, a prime nesting site; funds go toward park upkeep and research projects. Contact the **park headquarters** (☎ 998-877-0118) on Isla Mujeres.

ISLA HOLBOX

☎ 984 / pop 1800

Friendly Isla Holbox (hol-bosh) has a quietude unthinkable in Cancún. There's so little to do here that even the bars close at 8pm or 9pm if it's not high season, Friday or Saturday. Isla Holbox is thus a welcome refuge for anyone looking to just get away from it all ('all' likely meaning Cancún!). The island is about 30km long and from 500m to 2km wide, with seemingly endless beaches, tranquil waters and a galaxy of shells in various shapes and colors. Lying within the 154,052-hectare Yum Balam reserve, Holbox is home to more than 150 species of bird, including roseate spoonbills, pelicans, herons, ibis and flamingos. The waters are abundant with fish, and dolphins can be seen year-round; in summer, whale sharks congregate relatively nearby in unheard-of quantities. Strong northerly winds make for great kiteboarding and windsurfing.

The water is not the translucent turquoise common to Quintana Roo beach sites, because here the Caribbean mingles with the darker Gulf of Mexico. During the rainy season there are clouds of mosquitoes; bring repellent and be prepared to stay inside for a couple of hours after dusk.

Hurricane Wilma hit Isla Holbox hard, forcing all residents to flee to the mainland while the storm surge submerged the entire island. Most hotels will proudly point to the water line, usually about 1.5m high. Returning visitors will notice some changes but, for the most part, efforts to rebuild have succeeded and most establishments are fine to visit.

Orientation & Information

Golf carts are big here, but walking to the town square from the dock only takes about 15 minutes. Keep going and you'll hit the beach. Most of the restaurants and hotels are clustered around the plaza; a few cabanas are further out along the island's northern shore. No-one uses street names, but Calle Juárez connects the town to the ferry dock. A small tea shop called **La Libelula** (The Dragonfly; ☎ 6pm-10pm Tue-Sun) often has movie nights; a US\$2 club membership gets you unlimited free popcorn and nightly specials. It's about two blocks east of the plaza, with a colorful sign.

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

Cyber@Shark (☎ 875-2044; per hr US\$15; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Fri, 10am-midnight Sat & Sun) offers Internet and VOIP/phone connections. The town's teens hang out here in droves, even late at night.

Dial ☎ 066 for police, fire, or medical assistance if there's an emergency.

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

Sleeping

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

Posada La Raza (☎ 875-2072; Juárez; d US\$20, in summer US\$35) A modest, clean one-story place on the west side of the *parque*. Rooms have one double and one single bed, and ceiling and pedestal fans. Guests have use of a small kitchen and hand-laundry facilities, and can hang clothes or sunbathe on the roof.

Posada Los Arcos (☎ 875-2043; Juárez; s/d/tr/q with fan US\$20/25/30/35) Next door to Posada La Raza and well wave-scrubbed at the time of research, this is a touch more upscale. Its rooms are located around a central courtyard and all have hot and cold water. Rates rise by 50% in summer.

Posada d'Ingrid (☎ 875-2070; r with air-con US\$35-50; 🚿) A friendly bright-blue place one block west and one block north of the northwest edge of the *parque*. All six rooms have hot water and TV; there's a simple *palapa* in the courtyard.

Hotelito Casa Las Tortugas (☎/fax 875-2129; www.holboxcasalastortugas.com; r low season US\$30-45, high season US\$55-70) Has the same rustic but refined style as its neighbor, the Mawimbi, with an even greater abundance of charming touches, particularly in the bathrooms. Many rooms have kitchenettes and balconies, with hammocks to laze in outside, and there's a wonderful common area in the form of a hutlike lookout above the 2nd floor.

Posada Mawimbi (☎/fax 875-2003; www.mawimbi.com.mx; d US\$70, with kitchenette US\$100) Mosquito nets are a welcome luxury in this pleasant, two-story place just off the beach and about three blocks east of Juárez. All of the rooms have a fan and comfortable beds; many rooms also have a balcony and hammock. Blue-and-yellow tiled sinks make even shaving a pleasure. Conch lamps light the walkways after dark – a beautiful finishing touch. Prices can drop 50% in the low season.

Villas Delfines (☎/fax 875-2197; www.holbox.com; bungalows US\$90-150) This is an eco-tel on the beach about 1km east of town that composts waste, catches rainwater and uses solar power. Its large beach bungalows are built on stilts, fully screened and fan-cooled. The hotel rents windsurfers and kayaks and has a restaurant that offers very reasonable meal plans.

Faro Viejo (☎ 875-2217; www.faroviejoholbox.com.mx; Juárez at beach; d & tr US\$72-135; ste US\$200-230; 🚿) Closed for post-Wilma reconstruction, but should open again. 'The Old Lighthouse' is the most architecturally conventional of the beach accommodations; it's also on the only stretch of beach where golf-cart traffic is banned (a big plus). The hotel is comfortable and very well maintained, has a good restaurant and bar, and rents bicycles to guests for US\$50 per day. Suites sleep two to six people.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Cueva de la Pirata (☎ 875-2183; meals US\$7-14; 🕒 6pm to whenever) Mouthwatering, elegant Italian food is served here on the west side of the plaza. An excellent wine selection and some after-dinner dancing make this a great choice for a fun evening. The attractive owners have been known to dine or dance with guests. Enjoy!

Eating

The influx of Italians has been good for gourmets. Italian, seafood and lobster meals are all good, but eat early, especially in the off season. Many places close by 9pm.

Café Quimbaya (☎ 875-2255; meals US\$2-5; 🕒 7:30am-1pm & 6-10:30pm) Great coffee, sweets, milkshakes and more are served here along with unusual treats such as *huitlacoche* (corn mushroom) or hibiscus *quesadillas* (cheese and hibiscus flowers folded into a tortilla and pan fried). All food is made to order.

La Isla del Colibrí (breakfast US\$3.50-6, mains US\$5-16; 🕒 8am-1pm & 5-10:30pm Thu-Tue) 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.

Edelín Pizzería & Restaurant (pizzas US\$5-15; mains US\$4-10; 🕒 11am-midnight) On the southeast corner of the plaza, it serves good, Sardegnian-style pizza, as well as *tortas* (sandwich in a roll), ceviches, fish fillets, shrimp and lobster; beer costs US\$1.20.

Buenavista Grill (☎ 875-2102; meals US\$10-20; 🕒 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.

Getting There & Around

A *barco* (boat) ferries passengers (US\$4, 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 US\$25 for the entire boat (up to about six people with gear; the fare is higher after dark).

Two Mayab buses – with no bathroom, so use the grungy one in the nearby restaurant (US\$0.30) beforehand if you think you'll need to go – leave Cancún daily for Chiquilá (US\$6.70, 3½ hours) at 7:50am and 12:40pm. There are also Oriente buses from Valladolid (US\$6.60, 2½ hours) at 2am and Tizimín (US\$5) at 4:30am, 11am, 12:15pm and 2:15pm. Alternatively, take a 2nd-class bus traveling between Valladolid (or Mérida) and Cancún to El Ideal, on Hwy 180 about 73km south of Chiquilá. From there you can take a cab (about US\$25; be ready to bargain) or catch one of the Chiquilá-bound buses coming from Cancún, which pass through El Ideal around 10:30am and 3:30pm.

Taking a taxi from Cancún is another possibility; you may be able to get a taxi for US\$60.

Buses (all 2nd class) leave Chiquilá for Cancún (US\$6.60) at 7:30am and 1:30pm; Tizimín (US\$5) at 7:30am, 1:30pm and 4:30pm; Valladolid (US\$6.60) at 5:30am; and Mérida (US\$13.70) at 5:30am. All of these schedules are subject to change, so try to verify them ahead of time.

If you're driving you can either park your vehicle in the Chiquilá parking lot for US\$3 per day (8am to 6pm or any fraction thereof), take your chances parking it on the pier (which is crowded in high season), or try to catch the infrequent car ferry to Holbox. Since you won't need the car on the island, leaving it on the mainland is a better option.

Holbox's sand streets see few autos, but golf carts have become ubiquitous and, for many residents, rather annoying. If you need one, try **Rentadora El Brother** (☎ 875-2018; cart per hr/day/24hr US\$8/40/50), on Juárez near the beach – but consider using your walking shoes instead.

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.

RIVIERA MAYA

The Riviera Maya (Tulum Corridor) is a strip of coastline that stretches from Cancún in the north to the town of Tulum, about 135km southward. Once a beautiful stretch of undeveloped jungle, stunning coastline and barrier coral reef, it is now fast becoming a strip of giant all-inclusive resort hotels similar to the Zona Hotelera in Cancún. Undaunted by hurricanes or efforts by locals to prevent such incursions, megatels are scooping up the mangrove swamps and turning them into golf courses. Another kind of development is also booming: the eco-park, in which giant swaths of acreage are bought under the guise of being 'environmental' and then developed into theme-based tourist traps, many of which charge exorbitant entry fees.

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

The Riviera Maya's other attractions include the private 'eco'-parks of Xcaret, Xel-Há and Tres Ríos, which are good if you have kids along. Most areas are easily reached by bus or rental car.

PUERTO MORELOS

☎ 998 / pop 3000

Stripes of bright green and dark blue water separate the shore from the barrier reef, both serene and tantalizing. Frigates laze in sand-warmed thermal currents as tourists sip margaritas under *palapa*-thatched shade. In the evening, the smell of roasting chicken and wood smoke whet the appetite. Home will seem wonderfully far away.

Like many of the small fishing villages that mushroomed into tourist meccas, Puerto Morelos offers diving, snorkeling and great beaches. There's a nice market just a few minutes' walk from the plaza, with a great selection of crafts, hammocks and reasonably priced souvenirs.

Interestingly enough, thanks to Wilma's fury the beach here has almost twice as much sand as it did before October 2005. Despite the recent building boom to the north and south, which threatens to change this peaceful spot forever, for the moment anyway Puerto Morelos retains a quiet, small-town feel. Several megaresorts have been completed in the past few years.

Orientation & Information

Puerto Morelos' central plaza is 2km east of Hwy 307 nearly at the end of the main road into town (the main dock is the true end of the road). The town, all of three streets wide from east to west, stretches several blocks to the north of the plaza and about three long blocks south.

Alma Libre (☎ 871-0713; www.almalibrebooks.com; ☏ 10am-3pm & 6-9pm Tue-Sat, 4-9pm Sun, closed Jul-Sep) has more than 20,000 new and used books – from 'beach trash' to travel and wildlife guides, books on Mexican cooking and Maya culture (including a Spanish/English/Maya dictionary), as well as regional maps and much more. The friendly owners are also a great resource for info about the area.

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

Computips (per hr US\$1.50; ☏ 9am-8:30pm Mon-Fri, 3-8:30pm Sat & Sun), an air-con Internet place on the plaza, is one of several Puerto Morelos Internet cafés.

Lavandería 'Vicar' (☎ 206-9055; Av Gomez M5L6; ☏ 7am-9pm) charges US\$1 per kilo.

Goyo Morgan, of **Goyo's** (☎ 998-101-9546), on the plaza, offers jungle tours (adult/child under 12 US\$40/20). He can be difficult to locate at times, but is a wealth of information about the area, especially edible and medicinal jungle plants.

Diving & Snorkeling

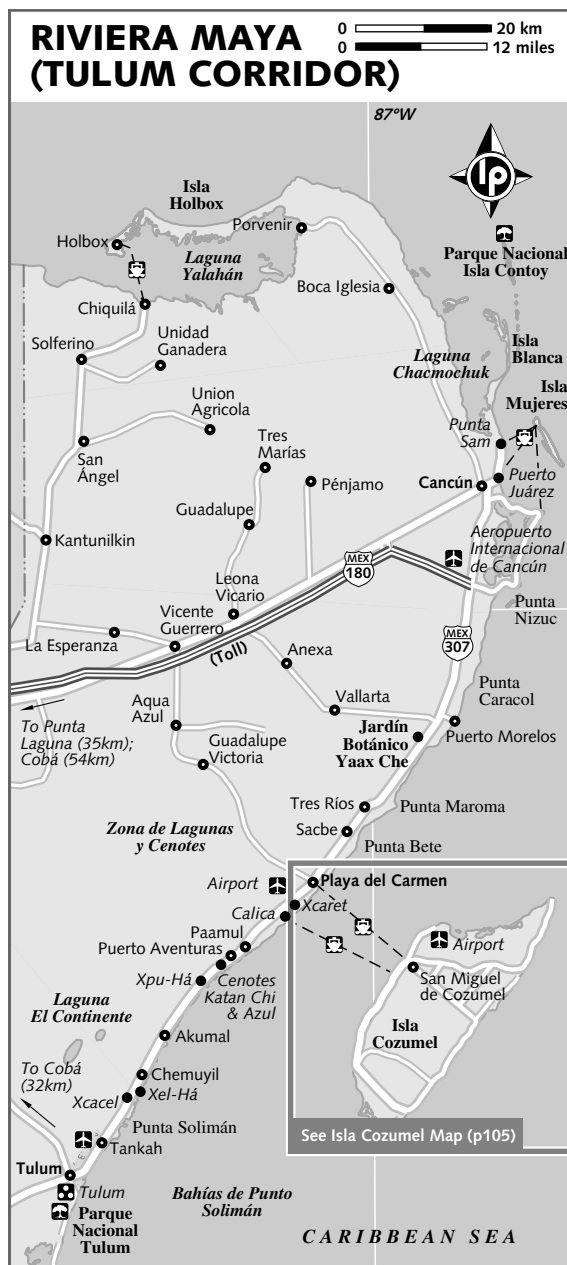
The barrier reef that runs along most of the coast of Quintana Roo is only 600m offshore here, providing both divers and snorkelers with views of sea turtles, sharks, stingrays, eagle rays, moray eels, lobsters, staghorn and brain corals and, of course, loads of colorful tropical fish. Several sunken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

Keep in mind (if you're a do-it-yourselfer) that any divers or snorkelers are required to

pay US\$2 for an entry bracelet to the marine park; if you're snorkeling, you need a personal floatation device. While the proximity of the reef makes it a tempting destination for beach-based swimmers, strong currents and lots of boat traffic can be hazardous. You're best off hiring a boat from the dock (US\$25) or arranging to tag along with a dive center group as they head out.

Mystic Diving (☎ 871-0634; www.mysticdiving.com), on the east (beach) side of the plaza, is one of several outfits in town offering dive and snorkel trips.

Dive Puerto Morelos (☎ 206-9084; www.divepuertomorelos.com; ☏ 8am-7pm) Offers snorkeling, diving and cenote trips, or it costs US\$325 for PADI certification.



Sleeping

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

Hotel Eden (☎ 871-0450; Av Quintana Roo 788; r US\$33, per month US\$560) A big turquoise shoe-box at the northeast end of town. Rooms are basic (take a peek before you pay) and service is friendly. A favorite with locals and often full.

Posada Amor (☎ 871-0033; www.posadaamor.com; s & d from US\$38, tr & q US\$50) About 100m southwest of the plaza, it has been in operation for many years. The simple white-walled rooms have some creative touches, and ocean-blue bedspreads seem just right. There's a shady back area with tables, *palapas* and plenty of plants, and the restaurant offers good meals. Prices drop by 15% from May to October.

Posada El Moro (☎ 206-9005; www.posadaelmoro.com; Av Gomez; s/d US\$50/65) It has cheery geraniums in the halls and courtyard, and white walls with blue trim. Rooms are clean and airy, and some have kitchenettes. All have couches that fold out into futons. Rates include continental breakfast.

Hotel Ojo de Agua (☎ 871-0027; fax 871-0202; www.ojo-de-agua.com; 1-/2-bed r with air-con US\$60/70; r with fan & kitchenette US\$80) Offers 36 rooms in a fairly modern building on a nice stretch of beach. It's about three blocks north of the plaza and has its own restaurant, which offers a nice buffet breakfast.

Hotel Hacienda Morelos (☎ /fax 871-0448; d US\$70; ☎ ☎) On the waterfront about 150m south of the plaza, it has 15 very appealing, breezy rooms with sea views, kitchenettes and air-con, as well as a small pool and a good restaurant. This is great value. Repairs done due to Wilma should now be completed.

Posada Restaurante Boda's (☎ 871-0232; www.bodos-apartments.com; Av Niños Heroes; r US\$45-90; ☎ ☎) Compact units on top of the restaurant. No pool, but with the ocean so close it's hard to think you'd need it. The owners speak German, Spanish and English.

Eating

Tío's (dishes US\$1.50-3; ☎ 6am-11pm) A modest, friendly place directly across from the lighthouse, just off the northeast corner of the plaza. Serves great fish tacos in the morning (three for US\$1.80), and good Yucatecan

and Mexican dishes such as *panuchos* (tortilla stuffed with mashed beans, fried, then topped with shredded turkey or chicken, onion and slices of avocado), *salbutes* (same as *panuchos* but without the bean stuffing), *sopa de pollo* and *tortas* the rest of the time.

Mama's Bakery (☎ 845-6810; mains US\$3-6; ☎ 7:30am-2pm) At Mama's try the kiwi-raisin muffins, great carrot cake or the signature sticky buns. Yum! It also offers egg dishes and wonderful smoothies. This intimate, friendly place is a bit hard to find, but don't give up – it's well worth the short walk from the square. Heading north along Gómez, go about four blocks and look on your left for the bamboo wind chimes under the *palapa*. The small sign is easy to overlook.

Le Café d'Amancia (sandwiches US\$2-4; ☎ 8am-3pm & 6-10pm) This is a spotlessly clean place with pleasing ambience on the southwest corner of the plaza. It serves bagels, sandwiches, pies, coffee and fruit and veggie *licuados*.

Hola Asia (☎ 871-0679; mains US\$7-12; ☎ 1-10pm Wed-Mon) On the south side of the plaza, this has become a local institution. Once a tiny café, it has expanded yearly and now serves Japanese sushi, Thai, Chinese and Indian dishes. General Tso's chicken and whole Thai fish are favorites. There's a bar upstairs.

John Gray's Kitchen (☎ 871-0655; Av Niños Heroes L6; mains US\$10-20; ☎ 6-10pm Mon-Sat) One block west and two blocks north of the plaza, this 'kitchen' turns out some truly fabulous food. John, the personable owner-chef, has won international acclaim. The eclectic menu changes frequently, and may include duck breast with chipotle-tequila-honey sauce, fresh fish with baked tomatoes and Kalamata olive sauce, melt-in-your-mouth crab cakes, grilled pork chop with chipotle butter, and an array of scrumptious desserts.

Entertainment

Places come and go pretty quickly here. Asking around is the best way to figure out where's best for you. Some of the restaurants have bars and live music, and some stay open late.

Don Pepe's (☎ 871-0613; ☎ noon-3am) This is an old standby, popular with the mellow

set. Come here to hang out, talk, watch the plaza or catch live music if it happens to be on.

Gioconda (☎ 6-11pm or later) Behind Spagettino's, it's another mellow place to mix; it has a mostly expat clientele.

Café Finca la Chiquilla (Av Rojo Gomez s/n; mains US\$4-7; ☎ 8am-10pm or later) This place, directly across from Don Pepés, is one of a kind, a great little spot with occasional live music, a full bar, and coffee that is not only freshly ground and roasted, but even *grown and picked* by the owners from their coffee plantation in Puebla. It's very popular with locals and tourists alike.

Shopping

One of the best reasons to come to Puerto Morelos is to hit the artisan's market, one block south of the plaza's west corner. You can find authentic Tixkokob hammocks, fine jewelry, pottery and clothing at much better prices than you'll see in Playa del Carmen or Cancún. It's refreshingly low key, and you can often see the craftspeople at work. Mauricio Soriano is the person to find for hammocks. He will explain the different types and offers a wide variety of styles to choose from. See p168 for more information on hammocks.

Getting There & Away

Most Playa Express and Riviera buses that travel between Cancún and Playa del Carmen drop you on the highway. Some Mayab buses enter town; the Riviera bus running between Cancún airport and Playa del Carmen will sometimes enter the town on request. The 2nd-class bus fare from Cancún is US\$1.60. *Colectivos* cost US\$0.40.

Taxis are usually waiting at the turnoff to shuttle people into town, and there's often a taxi or two near the plaza to shuttle people back to the highway. Many drivers will tell you the fare is per person or overcharge in some other manner; strive for US\$1.60 for the 2km ride, for as many people as you can stuff in.

JARDÍN BOTÁNICO

Two kilometers south of the turnoff for Puerto Morelos is the **Jardín Botánico Yaax Che** (admission US\$7; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat), a 60-hectare nature reserve with nearly 3km of trails through several native habitats. The

garden has sections dedicated to epiphytes (orchids and bromeliads), palms, ferns, succulents (cacti and their relatives), ornamental plants and plants used in traditional Maya medicine. The flora is identified in English, Spanish and Latin. The preserve also holds a large animal population, including the only coastal troops of spider monkeys left in the region. Birders come to observe the many migratory and resident bird species. A lookout tower affords views over the mangrove to Puerto Morelos and the sea.

For the anthropologically minded, the preserve has re-creations of a Maya house and a *chiclero* camp, as well as some genuine Maya ruins (c AD 1400). Bring insect repellent. Buses may be hailed directly in front of the garden.

TRES RÍOS

Tres Ríos (☎ 998-887-8077; www.tres-rios.com; Km 54 Hwy 307), 21km south of Puerto Morelos, is the first of three 'ecoparks' you'll encounter between Cancún and Tulum, and the least environmentally harmful one. Before Wilma closed it down it was actually a fairly cool place: a 1.5-sq-km swath of coastal forest where – despite the name – four underground rivers surface a kilometer or so from the sea. It is uncertain when it will re-open.

The park offers opportunities to explore the freshwater jungle-flanked rivers in canoes or kayaks, ride mountain bikes along jungle paths, and just hang out on the white-sand beach. An all-inclusive price gets you towels, a locker, snorkeling gear (US\$5 extra with the basic admission), speedboat rides, horseback riding and food and drink (including domestic alcohol, which you might want to save for last). Various combinations of activities are offered in promotional packages, most of which include transportation from Cancún.

If the park is open, a special Tres Ríos bus leaves Cancún's Mayfair Plaza (Blvd Kukulcán Km 8.5) at 8:30am and returns at 5pm daily. Most buses traveling Hwy 307 will drop you near the entrance.

PUNTA BETE

Punta Bete, a rocky, reef-hugged point 65km south of Cancún, is reached by a dirt road that runs past a large new housing

development and weaves 2.5km from Hwy 307 (turn at the sign for Xcalacoco) before reaching the sea. North and south of the stubby point there are beautiful and occasionally wide stretches of beach upon which sit a few small, low-profile hotels, a few restaurants and a super-pricey resort.

Coco's Cabanas (☎/fax 998-887-9964; www.cancun-reservations.com; r US\$56; 📺) consists of five nicely decorated cabanas with electricity, fan, good beds and hammocks. It's a short walk from the beach and has a bar, a small pool, a pleasant garden area and a restaurant. The English-speaking German owner has done a very good job on the whole place.

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

PLAYA DEL CARMEN

☎ 984 / pop 54,300

Playa del Carmen is a happening place. It lies in the lee of Cozumel and offers relaxing beaches, excellent food, some super hotel deals and as much night life as you can handle, though it's a bit more mellow than Cancún.

The reefs here are excellent and offer diving and snorkeling close by. Look for rays, moray eels, sea turtles and a huge variety of corals. The lavender sea fans make for very picturesque vistas, though the water is more turbid than across the channel in Cozumel. Some of the shallower reefs and snorkel spots still have sand covering them, tossed up by Wilma.

Most of Playa's foreign visitors during the 1980s and '90s were Europeans who found Cancún too commercial. In Playa, they discovered a small town with a lovely stretch of beach facing a beautiful reef, a few small hotels, and restaurants that served fresh seafood. Some of these visitors stayed. Today, many of the town's accommodations are stylish European-owned and managed inns, and the city is gradually extending further and further north, south and west as more hotels, time-shares and other residential developments continue to be built.

The official population is given as 54,300, but some residents estimate that the true figure including visitors in a good high season can be as high as 250,000. Cruise

ships regularly drop anchor here, flooding Playa's tourist zone and ensuring that touts have plenty of reason to stick around. The hawker's cute (though sometimes annoying) phrase, 'Almost free,' is now often replaced by the far less attractive, 'Hey Buddy, this stuff's cheaper than Walmart!'

Orientation

Playa is mostly laid out on an easy, one-way grid, but its northward expansion has resulted in many unsigned streets in that area, aggravated by a confusing series of *bis* streets (Calle 12 bis = Calle 12-A), some of which end after a few blocks. Quinta Avenida (*keen-ta*; 5th Ave) is the most happening street in town, especially along its pedestrian stretch (the Tourist Zone). The main bus terminal is at the intersection of Quinta Avenida and Juárez, but there is another one further away on Calle 12.

Though Quinta Avenida is a popular place to stroll and dine, or drink and people-watch, or any combination of the above, the number of restaurant and time-share touts can be dismaying at times.

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

Information

BOOKSTORES

Coffee Press (Calle 2 at Quinta Av) Sells used books and does two-for-one exchanges.

EMERGENCY

Tourist police kiosk (☎ 873-0291; 📺 24hr) Guards the north corner of the main plaza.

INTERNET ACCESS

You can't toss a stone without hitting an Internet café. Two popular options:

Antro-Net (10 Av btwn Calles 12 & 14; 📺 7am-11pm)

Cybernet (Calle 8; per hr US\$1.50; 📺 8am-11:15pm)

Just east of Quinta Av, it has generally good connections.

LAUNDRY

L@v@nderi@ del C@rmen (Calle 2 No 402 btwn Calles 10 & 15; 📺 8am-10pm Mon-Sat) Conveniently has an Internet café in front of the lavandería, so you can surf the web as your clothes get clean.

GOT DRUGS?

Let's hope you don't – or that you don't let a *federale* find them on you. Misleading information about proposed changes to Mexican possession laws has led some travelers to mistakenly believe that drug usage is now legal in Mexico. It's not. The reforms actually were intended to make it easier to make drug-related arrests, by allowing tiny amounts of common drugs (a few joints worth of pot, a line or two of coke, a few pills of X etc). Due to an outcry from the US government, the bill (once close to being signed by then presidente Vicente Fox) was stalled at the time of research. Many expect the reforms have been effectively killed off.

However, even if reforms go through (a big if), things are likely to get worse – not better – for drug-using tourists in Mexico.

Local officials will now have jurisdiction to make drug-related arrests, and local governments will have the power to impose huge fines. That splif you're waltzing around with may end up being legal, but sale or use is still prohibited, and the additional powers vested in locals may create the potential for additional corruption and bribes. Steep fines for possession are expected to appear quickly if indeed the reforms do go through.

Whether or not the drug laws do get passed, don't let the apparent hype fool you: drug use or abuse in Mexico remains extremely risky, and jail time (often measured in years) could be the result.

Lavandería Giracaribe (10 Av btwn Calles 12 & 14; ☎ 8:00am-9:00pm Mon-Sat) Friendly Lavandería Giracaribe, located next to the AntroNet, washes and dries clothes for US\$1.30 a kilogram.

MEDICAL SERVICES

In a medical emergency dial ☎ 060.

Centro de Salud (☎ 873-0493; 15 Av)

Community Hospital (35 Av)

MONEY

These are some of the many banks around town.

Banamex (cnr Calle 12 & 10 Av)

Bancomer (Av Juárez) Has ATM. Four blocks west of Terminal del Centro.

Scotiabank (Quinta Av) Has both ATM and a currency-exchange counter, across from the Terminal del Centro.

POST

Post office (cnr 15 Av & Av Juárez; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, for stamps only 9am-1pm Sat) A couple of blocks inland from the main plaza.

TOURIST INFORMATION

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

Dangers & Annoyances

Playa is generally safe: you are very unlikely to experience street crime or muggings. However, pickpockets do circulate, espe-

cially in crowded dance clubs. Never leave valuables unattended on the beach, especially on the isolated stretches to the north. Run-and-grab thefts while victims are swimming or sleeping on isolated beaches are a common occurrence (the jungle has eyes), and sneak thefts on more populated beaches are not unknown.

Activities**DIVING & SNORKELING**

In addition to great ocean diving, all of the following outfits offer cenote dives (for more on nearby cenotes, see p115).

Dive Mike (☎ 803-1228; www.divemike.com; Calle 8 btwn Quinta Av & the beach) offers snorkeling tours by boat to reefs and a secluded beach for US\$25 including refreshments and all gear. To tag along on a dive boat is US\$10. Ask the staff about cenote snorkel tours (US\$45). English, German, French, Italian, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and Spanish are spoken.

At **Phocea Riviera Maya** (☎ 873-1210; www.phocearivieramaya.com; 1 Av btwn Calles 10 & 12) French, English and Spanish are spoken. **Yucatek Divers** (☎ 803-1363; www.yucatek-divers.com; 15 Av btwn Calles 2 & 4) has German, French, English, Spanish and Dutch speakers, and offers handicapped/limited-mobility dives.

BEACHES

Beachgoers will agree that it's pretty darn nice here. You can swim on Playa's lovely

white-sand beaches nearly anywhere: just head down to the ocean, stretch out and enjoy. Numerous restaurants front the beach in the tourist zone; flag down a waiter if you need something frosty to beat the heat. The Blue Parrot's Dragon Bar (p103) is beach-side and has lots to do after midnight. Nights are breezy, sometimes chilly, so bring more than just a bathing suit if you're planning on going for a midnight stroll.

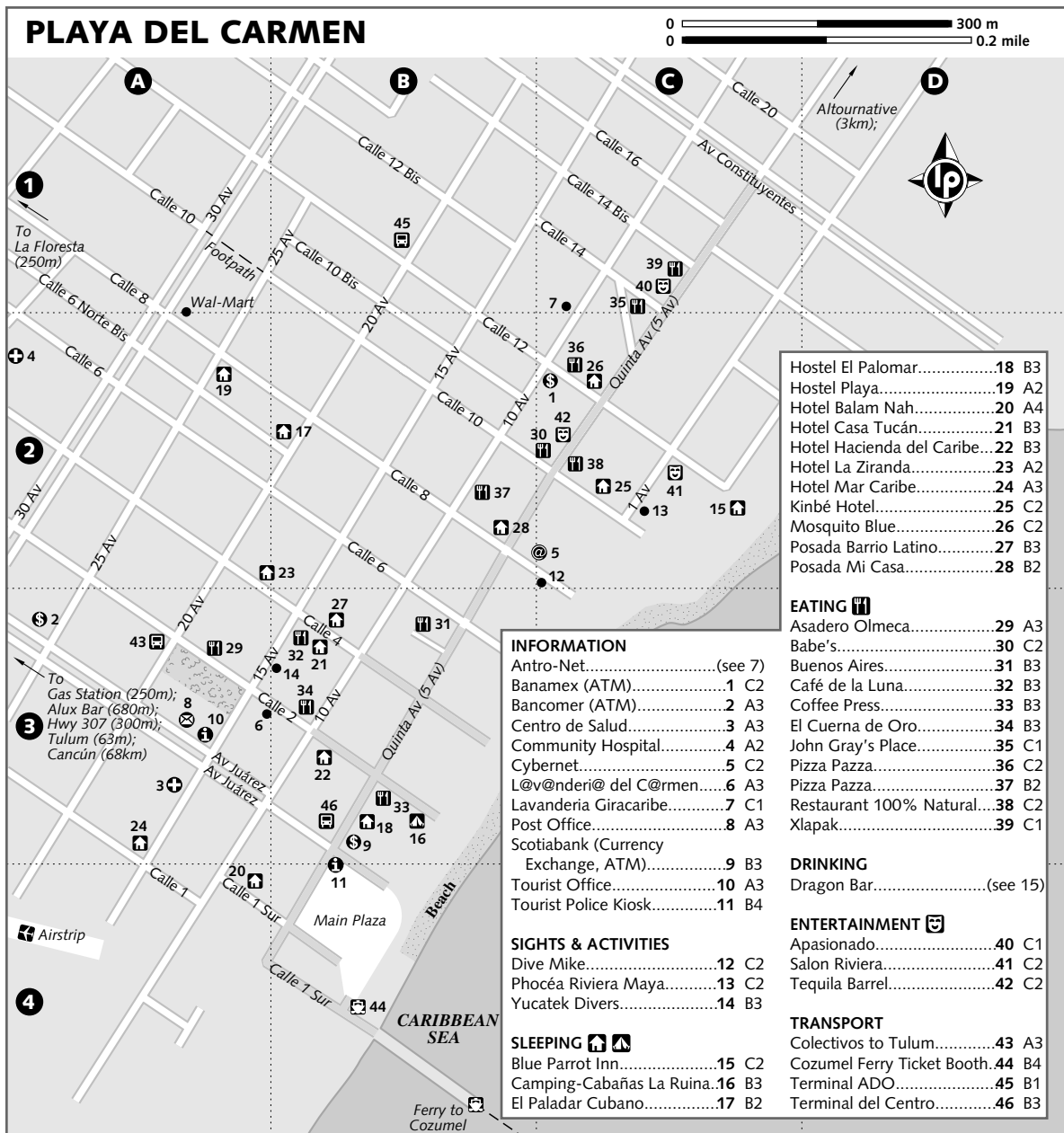
If crowds aren't your thing, go north of Calle 38, where a few scrawny palms serve for shade. Here the beach extends for uncrowded kilometers, but you need to be extra careful with your belongings, as thefts are a possibility.

Sleeping

Surprisingly affordable hotels can be found even in the tourist zone, and a number of hostels offer dorm-style lodging in the US\$10 range. Thus, a week, even a month in Playa can be affordable – and once you're here you'll find excuses to stay.

BUDGET

Hostel Playa (☎ 803-3277; www.hostelplaya.com; Calle 8; dm US\$10, d US\$30) The best thing about this hostel is the ambiance: it has a huge, central common area, great kitchen, and both beer and spirits (*absolutely* no drugs, please) are allowed until 12:30am, when people either head to bed or go out to the clubs. After 12:30am there's a strictly en-



forced quiet time, which means people who want to sleep are actually able to. No meals are served, but there's free coffee and bottled water (US\$1 to fill a water bottle), and the staff are extremely helpful and have great suggestions on what to see and do.

Camping-Cabanas La Ruina (☎ /fax 873-0405; laruina@prodigy.net.mx; Calle 2; sites or hammock spaces per person US\$7, d with bathroom US\$30-55, d US\$20; 🚻) Pitch your tent or hang your hammock (they're available for rent as well) in a large lot near the beach. 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.

Hostel El Palomar (☎ 803-2606; hostelepalomar@hotmail.com; Quinta Av btwn Av Juárez & Calle 2; dm low/high season US\$8/11, d US\$25/40; 🚻) A friendly, nonsmoking place across from the Terminal del Centro. It has two 18-bed, single-sex dorms and, on the 3rd floor, a few modest doubles without bathroom (each with balcony, hammock and good sea views). A rooftop terrace with kitchen facilities has great views of the Caribbean. Rates include breakfast, sheets, towels, soap, BIG lockers and drinking water. Downsides are poor ventilation, cramped beds, poor toilets and no indoor common area.

Hotel Mar Caribe (☎ 873-0207; cnr 15 Av & Calle 1; s/d low season US\$25/30, high season US\$30/40) A simple, secure and very clean nine-room place with fan-cooled rooms. The owners speak French, Spanish and some English. One can almost imagine Steinbeck working on a novel at one of the dark wooden tables.

Hotel Casa Tucán (☎ /fax 873-0283; casatucan@prodigy.net.mx; Calle 4 btwn 10 & 15 Avs; r with fan/air-con US\$30/45; 🚻 🚿) 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.

Posada Mi Casa (☎ 873-1972; posada1@prodigy.net.mx; cnr 5 Av & Calle 8; s/d US\$32/42; 🚻) A very reasonable option right in the center of the Zona, the Mi Casa has spotless tiled-floor rooms and large bathrooms, though some rooms could use an extra chair...or even a chair at all. The friendly owners will let you leave luggage in a back room even after you've checked out.

Hotel La Ziranda (☎ 873-3933; www.hotellaziranda.com; Calle 4 btwn 15 & 20 Avs; r with air-con low/high season US\$35/53; 🚻) This place was constructed in late 2000. Its two peach-colored buildings have 15 nice rooms, all with balconies or terraces and two double beds or one king. Trees have been left in place and several walkways have holes to allow them to grow. Fan-cooled rooms are US\$10 cheaper.

Posada Barrio Latino (☎ /fax 873-2384; www.posadabarriolatino.com; Calle 4 btwn 10 & 15 Avs; s/d/tr low season US\$30/35/45, high season US\$40/50/60, air-con extra US\$10; 🅕 🚻) Offers 16 clean, colorful rooms with good ventilation, ceiling fans, tiled floors, bathrooms and hammocks (in addition to beds). The friendly Italian owners speak English and Spanish, the place is often full and the front gate is always kept locked. Discounted rates for extended stays. Rates include breakfast, and guests get a discount on Café de la Luna, the Italian restaurant across the street.

MIDRANGE

You can find great deals by heading away from the beach on Calles 4, 6 and 8 and looking beyond the Tourist Zone.

El Paladar Cubano (☎ 873-3708; paladarcubano@yahoo.com.mx; 20 Av Norte No 172; d US\$45-55, tr US\$60-70) Bright, colorful rooms and breezy balconies. The tiled floors are spotless, and this place is very nicely located – close to the action, but far enough away that it's not noisy.

Hotel Balam Nah (☎ 873-2116; fax 873-2117; www.hotelbalamnah.com; Calle 1 btwn Quinta & 10 Avs; d with fan/air-con US\$56/67, with air-con & balcony US\$67; 🚻) Has good beds and bathrooms (towels are twisted into kissing swans), tiled floors and, in most rooms, small fridges. Rooms are on three floors around a viney courtyard (the front, balcony rooms are not worth the price). Prices here remain the same year-round.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Kinbé Hotel (☎ 873-0441; www.kinbe.com; Calle 10 near 1 Av; d low/high season US\$50/70, ste US\$95/130; 🚻) An Italian-owned and operated hotel, it has 19 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

Hotel Hacienda del Caribe (☎ 873-3132; www.haciendadelcaribe.com; Calle 2 No 130; d low/high season US\$79/112; (P) (♿) (♿)) This Italian-run place was built in 2000. Its bright yellow, quiet, comfortable rooms have lovely décor, air-con and cable TV. Many have balconies. The courtyard has a small pool with hydro-massage, and parking in a nearby lot is free while you stay.

Mosquito Blue (☎ 873-1245; www.mosquitoblue.com; Quinta Av btwn Calles 12 & 14; d standard/deluxe Dec 16-Apr 30 & Aug 1-Aug 30 US\$130/140, May 1-Jul 31 & Sep 1-Dec 15 US\$100/110; (♿)) Strives for – and at times achieves – ultrachicness. Its cloistered interior boasts two pools and courtyards, a bar and restaurant and very nicely decorated rooms furnished in Indonesian mahogany. Art and artistic touches abound throughout the hotel, which has junior and master suites as well as the standard and deluxe rooms.

Blue Parrot Inn (☎ 873-0083, in USA 800-854-4498; fax 873-0049; Calle 12 at beach; r US\$110, ste US\$690) Many of the charming units have terraces, sea views and full kitchens. It also has the popular Dragon Bar (opposite).

Eating

As happens in other tourist-oriented places on the Yucatán Peninsula, some Playa restaurants add a service charge to the bill. You are not required to pay it; however, a 10% to 15% tip for good service is appreciated. Again, head out of the Tourist Zone to find cheap, quality eats such as great grilled chicken from **Asadero Olmeca** (mains US\$3; ☎ 7am-6pm), next to the Tulum-bound *colectivos*.

La Floresta (Hwy 307; tacos US\$1.30, ceviches & cocktails US\$7-8; ☎ 9am-4:30pm) Don't even think about it, just sit down and order at least three shrimp tacos right away. They are lightly battered, then fried and served in a soft corn tortilla with a dab of mayo and some chopped tomato and onions. Squeeze a lime wedge over it, add a touch of spicy green or red salsa and chow down.

Pizza Pazza (☎ 803-0903; slices US\$2; ☎ noon-midnight) There are two branches, one on 10 Av between Calles 8 and 10, and one on Calle 12 between 10 and Quinta Avenidas. They bake some brilliant thin-crust Sardegnian pies, with various tasty toppings.

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

Coffee Press (Calle 2 near Quinta Av; breakfast US\$3, lunch mains US\$3-5; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) Makes some of the best breakfasts and coffee in town, and serves a selection of gourmet teas. Also offers books and two-for-one exchanges.

Babe's (Calle 10 btwn Quinta & 10 Avs; mains US\$4-9; ☎ noon-11:30pm Mon-Sat, 5-11:30pm Sun) Babe's serves some excellent Thai food, including a yummy home-style *tom ka 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.

Restaurant 100% Natural (☎ 873-2242; cnr Quinta Av & Calle 10; mains US\$3.50-10; ☎ 7am-11pm) The trademarks of this place, vegetable- and fruit-juice blends, salads, various vegetable and chicken dishes and other healthy foods, are delicious and filling. The green courtyard is inviting, but service – while always friendly – is often very slow. Don't come here if you've got a ferry you have to catch.

Club Náutico Tarraya (☎ 873-2040; Calle 2 at beach; mains US\$6-12; ☎ noon-9pm) One of the few restaurants in Playa del Carmen that

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

John Gray's Place (☎ 803-3689; www.johngrayrestaurants.com; Calle Corazón 5TA btwn Calles 12 & 14; mains US\$11-25; ☎ 6-11pm Mon-Sat) The sister restaurant to John Gray's Kitchen in Puerto Morelos, it has a dark wood bar downstairs, and the same spectacular food. Crab cakes melt on the tongue, set off by a dash of Asian vinaigrette and a few cilantro leaves. Chicken with cilantro pesto is a favorite. Norah Jones croons in the background as you polish off your glass of wine.

dates from the 1960s. It continues to offer good seafood at decent prices in a casual place with a nice view.

Buenos Aires (☎ 873-2751; off Quinta Av btwn Calles 4 & 6; mains US\$6-14; ☎ 6pm-midnight) Well known for its steaks, ribs, burgers and other meaty items, made only with Angus beef, it's a grill, Argentine-style, where waiters walk around with huge skewers and slice all the *carne* you can eat onto your plate.

Alux (☎ 803-0713; Av Juárez; snacks US\$4-9, mains US\$12-14; ☎ 7pm-2am) About three blocks west of Hwy 307, the Alux is an amazing must-visit. It's a restaurant-lounge situated in a cavern: stalactites, stalagmites, pools and all. Candles and dim electric lights illuminate numerous nooks and crannies converted into sofalike seating. Wander through, have a bite to eat or a drink and revel in the atmosphere. It offers live music nightly at 10pm, and a party on Saturday night.

Xlapak (☎ 879-3595; Quinta Av btwn Calles 14 & 14bis; breakfast US\$3, lunch & dinner US\$7-18; ☎ 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 on the walls 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). You'll find everything from mellow, tranced-out lounge bars to classic rock-n-roll places. Here are a few options we found fun.

Tequila Barrel (☎ 873-1061; Quinta Av btwn Calles 10 & 12; ☎ 8am-2am) Newly expanded with a large dancing area in back, this sparkling clean bar and grill pours a huge selection of tequila and other spirits, and spins old rock and Motown CDs. Grab a partner even if you didn't come with one and cut up some rug.

Dragon Bar (☎ 873-0083; Calle 12 at beach; ☎ 11am-4am) This is the Blue Parrot Inn's immensely popular open-sided *palapa* beachfront bar with swing chairs, a giant outdoor dance stage, indoor section if the

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Salon Riviera (☎ 803-0807; cnr 12 & 1 Avs; ☎ 10pm-4am) A smoke-filled, jam-packed dance venue based on Cuban clubs of the 1950s. Waitresses weave with full trays through thick crowds, and everyone – locals and tourists – has way too much of a good time.

weather's bad...and lots of sand. A good option for nonsmokers, as the beach breezes tend to whisk the smoke away. At the time of research the *palapa* had burned down in a freak torch-juggling accident, but the bar simply opened up again a few weeks later and the party raged on...and people danced under the stars.

Apasionado (☎ 803-1101; cnr Quinta Av & Calle 14; ☎ 8:30pm-2am) A jazz bar-restaurant with live music most nights, from Latin jazz to steel drums. The upstairs venue is beautiful – an enormous *palapa* is festooned with huge flat lampshades and tin globes emitting a soft yellow light. The phyllo-wrapped tuna tartare (US\$9.80) is a real treat.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Ferries to Cozumel (US\$11 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 designation '1st-class' anyhow) use the old terminal. A taxi from Terminal ADO to the main plaza will run about US\$1.20.

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

BUS SERVICES FROM PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Destination	Cost	Duration	Departures
Cancún	US\$3.20	1hr	numerous from 5am to midnight
Cancún International Airport	US\$8	45min-1hr	frequent ADO buses btwn 8am & 6:15pm, 9 Riviera buses btwn 7am & 7:30pm
Chetumal	US\$11.60-18.80	5-5½hrs	9 ADO buses btwn 6:15am & 11:56pm, numerous Mayab buses btwn 1:30am & 10:15pm
Chichén Itzá	US\$17.10	3-4hr	1 Riviera bus at 7:30am
Cobá	US\$6	1-1¾hrs	1 Riviera bus at 7:30am, one 1st-class Super Expresso bus at 11:30am, two Mayab buses
Mérida	US\$24	5hrs	9 1st-class Super Expresso buses
Palenque	US\$52	12-13hr	1 bus each by Maya de Oro (deluxe) at 7pm, Colón (1st-class) & Altos (ostensibly 1st-class)
San Cristóbal de Las Casas	US\$64	16-18 hr	1 bus each by Maya de Oro (deluxe), Colón (1st-class) & Altos (ostensibly 1st-class)
Tulum	US\$2.70	1hr	frequent Riviera and Mayab buses
Valladolid	US\$6.25-11	2½-3½hr	various Riviera & Mayab buses

airport have a separate ticket counter on the Av Juárez side of the terminal. The table (above) shows some distances, travel times and prices for buses.

COLECTIVOS

Colectivos are a great option for cheap travel southward to Tulum (US\$2, 45 minutes). They depart from Calle 2 near 20 Avenida as soon as they fill (about every 10 or 15 minutes) from 5am to 10pm. They will stop anywhere along the highway between Playa and Tulum, charging a minimum of US\$1. Luggage space is somewhat limited, but they're great for day trips.

ISLA COZUMEL

☎ 987 / pop 74,000

Cozumel is one of the jewels of Yucatán, an immensely popular diving spot since 1961, when Jacques Cousteau, led by local guides, showed spectacular reefs to the world. It 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 destination. Despite Hurricane Wilma, which pummeled the island for 54 hours, most of the deep reefs were unharmed. Sadly, waves and sand from the storm have damaged some of the shallower snorkeling and dives sites. While they are still beautiful, it will

take years for them to recover completely. The squadrons of eagle rays have dwindled due to overfishing of the shellfish stocks – no shellfish, no eagle rays.

While diving is the main draw, the tourist zone offers lots of shopping 'deals' (often not very cheap) and you'll be hounded to buy Cuban cigars, hammocks and jewelry. In February there is a festive Carnaval, which brings dancers festooned with feathers out into the plaza, and a lot of onlookers too. It's not Rio, but it's still fun. There are some small Maya ruins and a few eco-themed parks.

The far side of the island has beautiful beaches and a few large waves, but you'll have difficulty surfing and should watch for currents. The beach near the port was horrible at last pass: the hurricane left it littered with trash, chunks of cement and rusty rebar. At the time of research plans were under way to revitalize it by bringing in bargeloads of sand and replanting the area with coconut palms, but this may be politically motivated chat. If it goes through it should mean better sunbathing for the few who aren't strapping on scuba gear.

History

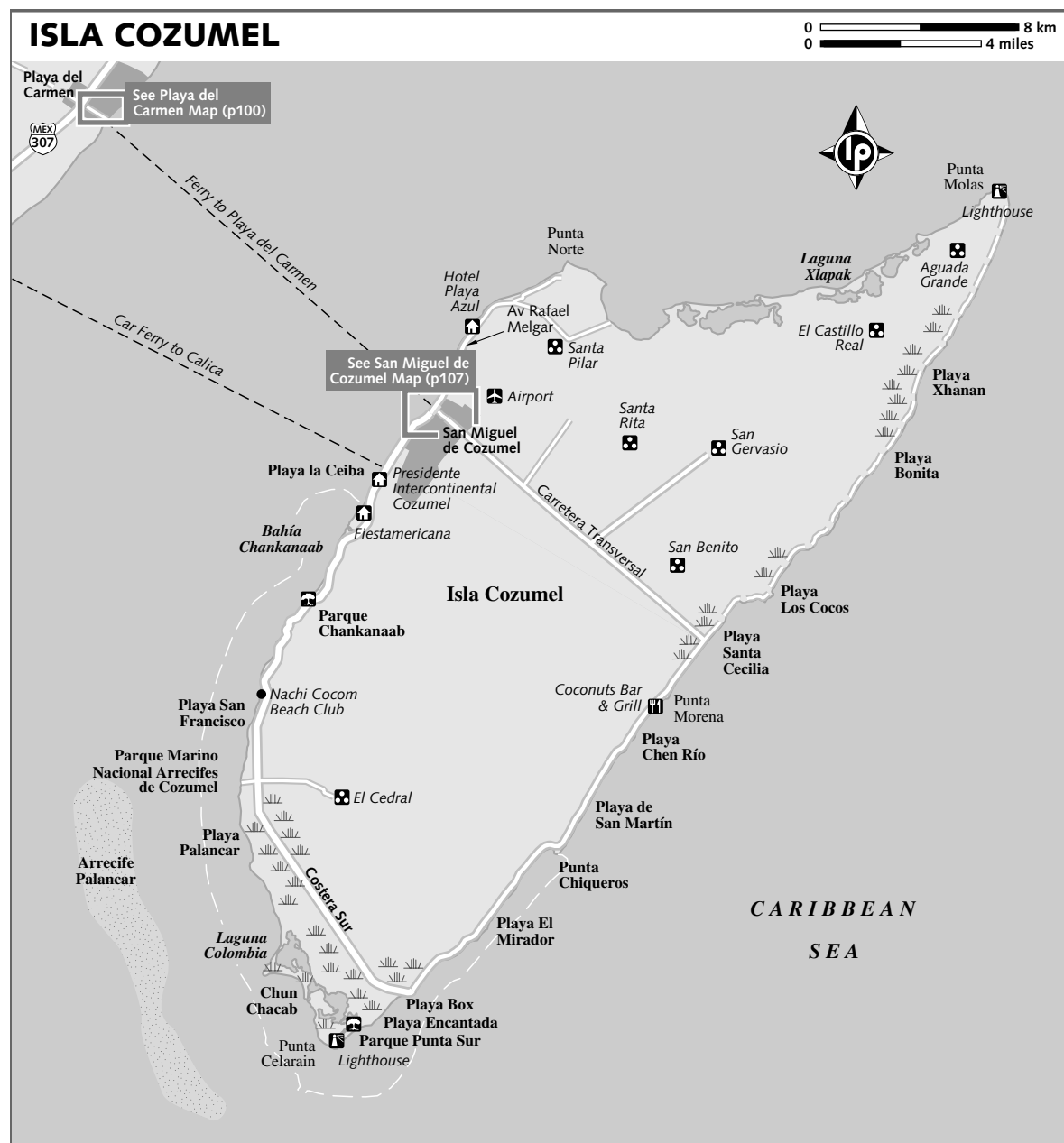
Maya settlement here dates from AD 300. During the post-Classic period Cozumel flourished as a trade center and, more importantly, a ceremonial site. Every Maya woman living on the Yucatán Peninsula

and beyond was expected to make at least one pilgrimage here to pay tribute to Ixchel, the goddess of fertility and the moon, at a temple erected in her honor. Archaeologists believe this temple was at San Gervasio, a bit north of the island's geographical center.

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

about 200 escaped genocidal attacks by conquistadors in the late 1540s.

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



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

Orientation & Information

It's easy to make your way on foot around the island's only town, San Miguel de Cozumel. The waterfront boulevard is 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. An excellent documentary on Cozumel diving is available at www.cozumelnaturaltreasure.com.

BOOKSTORES

Fama (☎ 872-5020; Av 5 Norte btwn Av Benito Juárez & Calle 2 Norte; ☏ 9am-10pm Mon-Sun) Carries books and periodicals in English and Spanish, as well as a selection of CDs, clothing and skimpy bathing suits.

EMERGENCY

Tourist police (☎ 872-0092) They patrol the island and staff a kiosk (open 8am to 11pm) at the northeast edge of the plaza.

INTERNET ACCESS

Phonet (Av Benito Juarez 5; per hr US\$1.50; ☏ 8am-midnight Mon-Sun) Open later than most and has good ergonomics and LCD screens.

LAUNDRY

Express Lavandería (☎ 872-2932; Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas btwn Avs 5 & 10 Sur; ☏ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-4pm Sun) Washing and drying costs US\$8 per load and takes about two hours.

Servi-Lav (☎ 872-3951; Av 10 Norte btwn Calles 6 & 8; ☏ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) Charges US\$1.20 per kilo. Same day service if brought in before 9am.

LEFT LUGGAGE

A convenience store at the landward end of the ferry dock stores luggage for US\$2 per day, but the shelves used are not big enough for a full-sized backpack.

MEDICAL SERVICES

There are at least two hyperbaric chambers in San Miguel.

Buceo Médico Mexicano (☎ 872-1430; fax 872-1848; Calle 5 Sur btwn Avs Rafael Melgar & 5 Sur)

Cozumel Hyperbaric Research (☎ 872-0103; Calle 6 Norte btwn Avs 5 & 10 Norte) In the Médica San Miguel clinic.

MONEY

ATMs are the best way to get quick cash. For currency exchange, try any of the banks near the main plaza. All are open 8am or 9am to 4:30pm Monday to Friday and on Saturday morning.

The many *casas de cambio* (currency-exchange houses) around town may charge as much as 3.5% commission (the bank rate is 1%) to cash a traveler's check, but they keep longer hours. Most of the major hotels, restaurants and stores will also change money or accept US dollars in payment – some at a fair rate. Many establishments charge a fee when accepting credit cards; always ask beforehand.

POST

Post office (Calle 7 Sur at Av Rafael Melgar; ☏ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

TELEPHONE

The Telecomm office handles faxes, money orders and such. Telmex card phones are abundant around town and are often cheaper than Internet cafés.

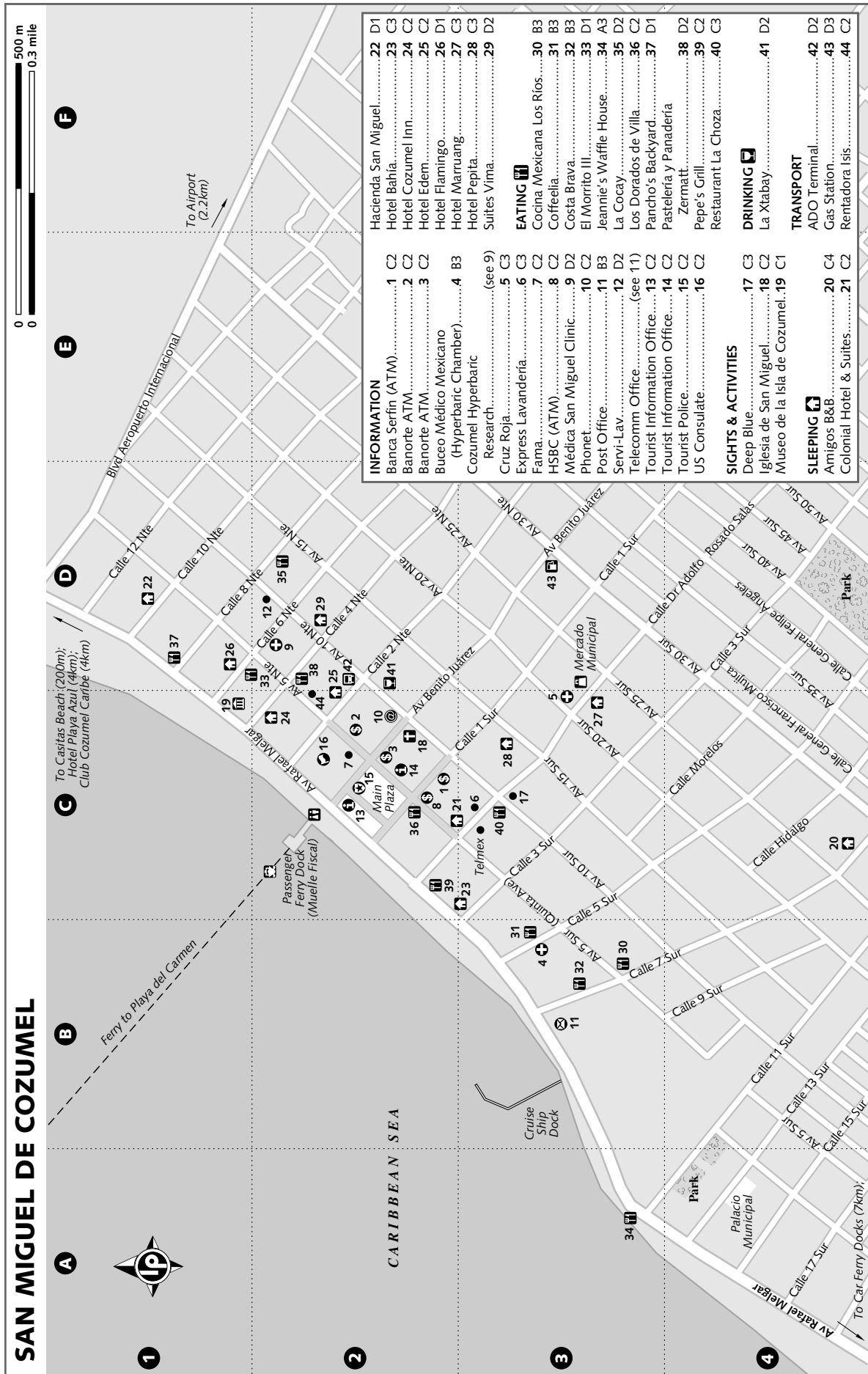
TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information office (☎ /fax 869-0212; ☏ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Hidden upstairs in the Plaza del Sol, a shopping area on the southeast side of the main plaza. It also operates a booth (open 8am to 4pm Monday to Saturday) at the foot of the ferry dock.

Sights & Activities

MUSEO DE LA ISLA DE COZUMEL

Exhibits at this fine **museum** (☎ 872-1434; Av Rafael Melgar btwn Calles 4 & 6 Norte; admission US\$3.30; ☏ 9am-5pm) present a clear and detailed picture of the island's flora, fauna, geography, geology and ancient Maya history. Thoughtful and detailed signs in English and Spanish accompany the exhibits. It's a good place to learn about coral before hitting the water, and it's one not to miss before you leave the island. A courtyard in the back contains a Maya *na* (traditional thatched house) with someone in attendance who will explain (in Spanish) the various elements that made up Maya domestic life: the toys, utensils, foodstuffs, a raised garden bed for kitchen herbs and more.



INFORMATION	Hacienda San Miguel.....	22	D1
Banca Serfin (ATM).....	1	C2	
Banorte ATM.....	2	C2	
Banorte ATM.....	3	C2	
Buque Médico Mexicano (Hyperbaric Chamber).....	4	B3	
Cozumel Hyperbaric Research.....	(see 9)		
Cruz Roja.....	5	C3	
Express Lavandería.....	6	C3	
Fama.....	7	C2	
HSBC (ATM).....	8	C2	
Médica San Miguel Clinic.....	9	D2	
Phonet.....	10	C2	
Post Office.....	11	B3	
Servi-Lav.....	12	D2	
Telecomm Office.....	(see 11)		
Tourist Information Office.....	13	C2	
Tourist Information Office.....	14	C2	
Tourist Police.....	15	C2	
US Consulate.....	16	C2	
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES			
Deep Blue.....	17	C3	
Iglesia de San Miguel.....	18	C2	
Museo de la Isla de Cozumel.....	19	C1	
SLEEPING			
Amigos B&B.....	20	C4	
Colonial Hotel & Suites.....	21	C2	
TRANSPORT			
ADO Terminal.....	42	D2	
Gas Station.....	43	D3	
Rentadora Isis.....	44	C2	
DRINKING			
La Xtabay.....	41	D2	
EATING			
Cocina Mexicana Los Rios.....	30	B3	
Coffeelia.....	31	B3	
Costa Brava.....	32	B3	
El Morrito III.....	33	D1	
Jeannie's Waffle House.....	34	A3	
La Cocay.....	35	D2	
Los Dorados de Villa.....	36	C2	
Pancho's Backyard.....	37	D1	
Pastelería y Panadería Zermatt.....	38	D2	
Pepe's Grill.....	39	C2	
Restaurant La Chocha.....	40	C3	

DIVING & SNORKELING

Despite the massive hit of Hurricane Wilma, Cozumel remains one of the most popular diving destinations in the world. It has fantastic year-round visibility (commonly 40m or more) and a jaw-droppingly impressive variety of marine life that includes spotted eagle rays, moray eels, groupers, barracudas, turtles, sharks, brain coral and some huge sponges. The island has strong currents, making drift dives the standard, especially along the many walls. Even when diving or snorkeling from the beach you should evaluate conditions and plan your route, selecting an exit point down-current beforehand, then staying alert for shifts in currents. Always keep an eye out (and your ears open) for boat traffic as well. It's best not to snorkel alone away from the beach area.

Good snorkeling can be found at Casitas and Dzul-Há. Snorkelers are required to pay US\$2 for park admission.

Prices vary, but in general expect to pay about US\$70 for a two-tank dive (less if you bring your own BCD and regulator), US\$60 for an introductory 'resort' course and US\$350 for PADI open-water certification. Multiple-dive packages and discounts for groups or those paying in cash can bring these rates down significantly. For more information, pick up a copy of Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling Cozumel*, with detailed descriptions of local dive sites.

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

Aquatic Sports (☎ 872-0640; www.scubacozumel.com; Av 15 Sur & Calle 21 Sur) Owner Sergio Sandoval has been diving for more than 30 years but is as enthusiastic as ever.

Deep Blue (☎ /fax 872-5653; www.deepbluecozumel.com; Av 10 Sur at Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas) 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. Among the dives offered are trips to Arrecife Cantarell when the eagle rays are congregating.

Victor Brito Barreiro (☎ /fax 872-3223; 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 two hyperbaric chambers (p106).

All of the best snorkeling sites are reached by boat. A half-day boat tour will cost from US\$30 to US\$50. Most strictly snorkeling outfits operating in town go to one of three stretches of reef near town, all accessible from the beach. If you go with a dive outfit instead, you can often get to better spots, such as Palancar Reef or the adjacent Colombia Shallows, near the island's southern end. **Ramón Zapata** (☎ 044 987-100-2256) runs snorkeling trips leaving from Playa Palancar for about US\$25 per person, but you'll need to make your own way to the beach.

You can save on boat fares (and see fewer fish) by walking into the gentle surf north of town. One good spot is Hotel Playa Azul, 4km north of the turnoff to the airport; its *palapas* offer shade, and it has a swimming area with a sheltering wharf and a small artificial reef. If you'd like to sit at one of the *palapas* the waiters ask only that you buy a drink or a bite to eat. Next door to the south, the Club Cozumel Caribe has underwater cement statuary that makes for some interesting snorkeling. The club was undergoing renovation at the time of research; when it reopens you should again be able to swim or walk to its waters via the Hotel Playa Azul.

EXPLORING THE ISLAND

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

Sad to say, access to many of Cozumel's best stretches of beach has become limited. Resorts and residential developments with gated roads create the most difficulties. Pay-for-use beach clubs occupy some other prime spots, but you can park and walk through or around them and enjoy adjacent parts of the beach without obligation. Sitting under their umbrellas or otherwise using the facilities requires you to fork out some money, either a straight fee or a *consumo mínimo* (minimum consumption

COZUMEL'S TOP DIVE SITES

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

Santa Rosa Wall

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

Punta Sur Reef

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

Colombia Shallows

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

Palancar Gardens

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

Arrecife Cantarell

On this section of reef off the northwest side of the island, large numbers of eagle rays congregate from late November to the end of January. Many divers are happy to see just one of these large rays up close; watching squadrons of them is quite a sight.

of food and drink), which can add up to a pretty ridiculous US\$15 per person in some places. It's not always strictly applied, especially when business is slow.

Several sites along the island's west coast offer horseback riding (most of the horses look ready to keel over). The asking price is US\$16 an hour; bargain hard.

Parque Chankanaab

This **park** (admission US\$15; ☎ 6am-6pm) has finally opened again despite heavy Wilma-related damage. It's 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 and sea lion 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 US\$10 one way.

El Cedral

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

Playa Palancar

About 17km south of town, Palancar is another great beach. It has a beach club renting hydro bikes, kayaks, snorkel gear and sailboats, plus a restaurant and a dive operation. Near the beach, Arrecife Palancar (Palancar Reef) has some very good diving (Palancar Gardens), as well as fine snorkeling (Palancar Shallows), though the shallow spots were marked by Wilma. See p109 for more information.

Parque Punta Sur

The southern tip of the island has been turned into a rather overpriced 'ecotouristic park' (☎ 872-0914; admission US\$10; 🕒 9am-5pm). Visitors board an open vehicle for the 3km ride to visit picturesque Celarain lighthouse and the small nautical museum at its base.

Another vehicle carries visitors to **Laguna Colombia**, part of a three-lagoon system that is the habitat of crocodiles and many resident and migratory waterfowl. A pontoon-boat ride on the lagoon costs US\$3 extra; it gives you a chance to see more birds. 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. 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. At the time of research the few restaurants here, except for Coconuts (p113), had either been washed into the sea by Wilma or were temporarily closed. Bring a picnic lunch and plan on having the beach to yourself.

Punta Molas

Beyond where the east coast highway meets the Carretera Transversal, intrepid travelers may take a poorly maintained, infrequently traveled and almost impossible to find road toward Punta Molas, the island's northeast point, accessible only by four-wheel drive (4WD), all-terrain vehicles (ATV) or on foot. At the time of research, much of the road had been washed away by Wilma, so it remains to be seen whether repairs will happen anytime soon. 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. If you head up this road be aware that you can't count on flagging down another motorist for help in the event of a breakdown or accident, and most rental agencies' insurance policies don't cover any mishaps on unpaved roads.

San Gervasio

This **Maya complex** (admission US\$5.20; 🕒 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. Even so, the national government's INAH levies a hefty US\$3 entrance fee. The island's *ayuntamiento* (municipal government) tacks on another US\$2 for maintenance of its ticket booth and the road, which at last pass was in pretty crummy shape.

Sleeping

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

BUDGET

Hotel Edem (☎ 872-1166; gustarino@hotmail.com; Calle 2 Norte No 124; s/d/tr US\$18/22/27) Great location and saintly rates make the Edem a prime deal. It has a turtle-filled fountain and a friendly Siamese cat, and the no-nonsense Senora keeps the doors locked after 9pm. Rooms are clean and simple, with hammock hooks and scaldingly hot showers. Mornings are noisy; wear earplugs if you're a light sleeper.

Hotel Marruang (☎ 872-1678; Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas btwn Avs 20 & 25 Sur; r US\$22) Entered via a passageway across from the municipal market, this place is simple and clean, with well-screened fan rooms. The owners were remodeling at the time of research, but pretty paper butterflies brightened the halls. Be sure *not* to slam the door!

Hotel Cozumel Inn (☎ 872-0314; fax 872-3156; Calle 4 Norte btwn Avs Rafael Melgar & 5 Norte; s with fan US\$23; d with fan/air-con US\$28/34; ☎ ☎) A peach-pink building with 26 well-maintained rooms with good beds, and a small (sometimes suspect!) swimming pool. Watch out, though, the hotel's card says 'Bats with hot water'! Mustiness airs out quickly.

Hotel Pepita (☎ /fax 872-0098; Av 15 Sur btwn Calle 1 Sur & Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas; d US\$31; ☎) This place is 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. Once one of the best deals in town, the Pepita at last pass was maintaining its rates while many others were dropping theirs. It's still a great place to stay.

MIDRANGE

Suites Vima (☎ /fax 872-5118; Av 10 Norte btwn Calles 4 & 6; s/d US\$35/45; ☎ ☎) Has 12 spotless and spacious modern rooms with tiled floors, firm beds, good air-con and bathrooms, fridges, tables and chairs. The décor is mint green and other pastels. A small swimming pool with a current to swim against lies in a green area in back. No kids aged under 13, please.

Amigo's B&B (☎ 872-3868; www.bacalar.net; Calle 7 Sur No 57 btwn Avs 25 & 30 Sur; d/tr/q Jan 4-Apr 30 US\$65/75/85, Sep & Oct US\$40/50/60, May 1-Aug 31 & Nov 1-Dec 20 US\$50/60/70; ☎ ☎ ☎) Has a large garden, wifi access, an inviting pool and a good lounging area stocked with reading material. It's worth the hike from the center to enjoy one of the three well-appointed, cottage-style rooms here. All have air-con and full kitchenettes and rates include a good breakfast. Book ahead.

Hotel Bahía (☎ 872-9090, 800-227-2639; www.suitesbahia.com; cnr Av Rafael Melgar & Calle 3 Sur; d low/high season from US\$49/63; ☎ ☎) Offers some rooms with sea views and balconies. All rooms have the same amenities and general setup as the Colonial (they're under the same management). Rates include continental breakfast.

Colonial Hotel & Suites (☎ 872-9090, 800-227-2639; www.suitescolonial.com; Av 5 Sur btwn Calles Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas & 1 Sur; studios/ste Jan 4-Dec 23 US\$57/68, Dec 24-Jan 3 US\$63/75; ☎) This place is down a passageway off Av 5 Sur. It features lovely studios and nice, spacious, one-bedroom 'suites' (beds are separated from the rest of the room by low partitions) with kitchenettes. All rooms have cable TV, fridge and air-con, and lots of varnished-wood touches. Rates include coffee and pastries.

Hotel Flamingo (☎ 872-1264; www.hotelflamingo.com; Calle 6 Norte 81 btwn Avs 5 Norte & Rafael Melgar; r low season US\$59-79, high season US\$79-85; ☎) 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.

Hacienda San Miguel (☎ 872-1986; www.hacienda-sanmiguel.com; Calle 10 Norte btwn Avs 5 & Rafael Melgar; r Sep-Dec 23 US\$84-101, Jan-Aug from US\$108; 🍷) Offers small and large studios and junior suites, all with air-con and fully equipped kitchenettes, around a parklike central courtyard. 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 monthly details.

TOP END

Several kilometers north and south of town are a few big luxury resort hotels. At the time of research many were still closed due to Wilma, but all are expected to be open by the time this book goes to print. All rooms in this category have air-con.

Hotel Playa Azul (☎ 872-0199; www.playa-azul.com; Carretera a San Juan Km 4; d from US\$146, ste from US\$180; 🍷 🍷) 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, a safe, 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.

Presidente Intercontinental Cozumel (☎ 872-9500; www.intercontinental.com; Carretera a Chankanaab Km 6.5; r from US\$190; 🍷 🍷) 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.

Fiestamericana (☎ 872-2622, in USA 800-343-7821; www.fiestamericana.com; Carretera a Chankanaab Km 7.5; r with garden/ocean view from US\$219/250; 🍷 🍷) A dive resort with plenty of gardens, a spectacular swimming pool, 224 mostly ocean-view rooms (with balconies, safes and full minibars) and 'Tropical Casitas' behind the main building. Lodging options include all-inclusive and room-only plans.

Eating

BUDGET

Head out of the 'zone' for the best food in Cozumel, and maybe even discover your own greasy spoon. Cheapest of all eating places are the little market *loncherías* (lunch stalls) next to the Mercado Municipal on Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas between Avs 20 and 25 Sur. Most offer soup and a main course for around US\$3, with a large selection of dishes available; ask about cheap *comidas corridas* not listed on the menu.

Pastelería y Panadería Zermatt (cnr Av 5 Norte & Calle 4 Norte; bread US\$2; ☎ 7am-8:30pm Mon-Sat) Bakes pastries, cakes, pizzas and whole-wheat breads and serves decent coffee. Unlike many Mexican bakeries, it does its cooking in the early morning.

Coffeelia (☎ 872-7402; Calle 5 Sur btwn Avs Rafael Melgar & 5 Sur; breakfast US\$4-7, set meals US\$5; ☎ 7:30am-11pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) A great way to start or finish the day: come here for warm smiles and delicious food – and great coffees, including espressos. What the chain places wish they could be, Coffeelia (rhymes with Ophelia) is a focal point for Cozumel's art community. The menu includes quiches, good salads and vegetarian dishes, and organic Chiapas coffee roasted fresh locally. Thursday is story night.

Cocina Mexicana Los Ríos (☎ 987-800-9043; cnr Quinta Ave & Calle 7; mains US\$3-4; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Sat) Ceviches, chicken and seafood, all simple and good. Red plastic furniture and Bellafonte tunes are part of this cheap, clean café not far from the post office. *Comida corridas* are US\$3, and get you a main (such as a huge fajita plate), a soup, tortillas, soda or other nonalcoholic drinks, and dessert.

El Morrito III (☎ 872-2344; Calle 6 Norte btwn Avs Rafael Melgar & 5 Norte; mains US\$3-7; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Sat) A small, inexpensive mom 'n' pop eatery serving up good Mexican dishes such as pork pibil, egg breakfasts and *licuados*.

Costa Brava (☎ 869-0093; Calle 7 Sur No 57; mains US\$6-13; ☎ 6:30am-11pm) Painted in bright, pre-school primary colors, this casual place has good prices on lobster dishes, chicken and shrimp.

MIDRANGE

Jeannie's Waffle House (☎ 878-4647; Av Rafael Melgar & Calle 11 Sur; breakfast dishes US\$5.50-8, sandwiches US\$5-6; ☎ 7am-7pm) The views of the water are great from the outdoor patio. Jeannie's

serves waffles, of course, plus hash-brown potatoes, eggs, sandwiches and other tidbits. Great frozen coffees beat the midday heat.

Los Dorados de Villa (☎ 872-0196; Calle 1 Sur near Av 5 Sur; mains US\$5-12; ☎ 7am-11pm) 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.

Restaurant La Choza (☎ 872-0958; cnr Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas & Av 10 Sur; mains US\$8-15; ☎ 7am-10:30pm) An excellent and popular restaurant specializing in authentic regional cuisine. All mains come with soup. La Choza sometimes offers an inexpensive *comida corrida* in the afternoon.

TOP END

Pancho's Backyard (☎ 872-2141; Av Rafael Melgar & Calle 8 Norte; lunch mains US\$6-16, dinner mains US\$9-25; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 5-11pm Sun) Very atmospheric, set in a beautifully decorated inner courtyard. The food's not bad, either!

La Cocay (☎ 872-5533; lacocaycozumel@yahoo.com.mx; Calle 8 Norte No 208, btwn Calles 10 & 15; mains US\$8-30; ☎ 1pm-11pm Mon-Sat) Romantic coconut-scented candlelight and an intimate atmosphere make this snazzy restaurant a lot of fun. Sit at the bar sipping a good single malt or find a quiet table in the corner (or the back room) to chat with someone special. The menu features mouthwatering dishes such as prosciutto-wrapped shrimp stuffed with cheese and spinach or (mmm!) duck with black cherries. The signature dessert is a chocolate torte served in the form of an edible painting of chocolate and kiwi sauce. The welcoming owners seem to know every guest by name.

Pepe's Grill (☎ 872-0213; Av Rafael Melgar near Calle Dr Adolfo Rosado Salas; appetizers US\$10-12, mains US\$20-30; ☎ 5pm-11pm) This is Cozumel's traditional place to drop loads of cash in dining richly. Mains are mostly meat (steaks and prime rib), plus char-broiled lobster (US\$38). At least the prices include a salad bar (also available separately at US\$7.50). Flambé desserts are a feast for both the eyes and the tastebuds, and are prepared – quite spectacularly – tableside.

Entertainment

Cozumel's nightlife is quiet and subdued. Most restaurants are open for drinks, but by

11pm things wind down. Try the plaza first if you're looking to mingle with the wilder cruise-ship crowd. You are best off asking around, as the clubs change frequently.

La Cocay (left) is a great place for an after-dinner drink and has nice ambiance, with candles and a high ceiling.

La Xtabay (Av 10 btwn Calles 2 & 4; ☎ noon-midnight Wed-Mon) has nightly live music and cheap beers, but it's a bit seedy. Don't bring anyone you meet here home to meet mother.

Coconuts is a low-key place on the island's east side with inexpensive beers and *palapas* to sit under.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Some airlines fly direct from the USA; European flights are usually routed via the USA or Mexico City. **Continental** (☎ 800-900-5000, in USA & Canada 800-231-0856; www.continental.com) has direct flights from Newark and Houston.

Mexicana (☎ 872-0305) flies direct to Mexico City on Saturday and Sunday. **Click** (☎ 872-0928), with offices at the airport, flies a few times daily between Cancún and Cozumel.

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 instead. Schedules are not set in stone, but currently there are four departures from Cozumel for Calica between 6am and 8pm. Four ferries return from Calica between 4am and 6pm. Saturdays and Sundays have two departures in each direction. Fares are US\$50 for cars, US\$80 for a van-sized vehicles (both including the driver) and US\$7 per passenger. You need to line up at least one hour before departure (earlier is better, they say).

BUS

OK, it may sound silly, but you can actually get long-distance bus tickets in advance at the **ADO terminal** (☎ 872-1706; cnr Av 10 & Calle 2 Norte; ☎ 6:30am-9pm). Tickets are for services from the **Playa del Carmen bus terminal** (cnr Juárez & Av 5) 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 US\$4.50 (slightly more to the hotels south of town), but you'll have to take a taxi (US\$4.50 from town, US\$9 to US\$19 from southern hotels) to return to the airport.

BICYCLE

A full day's bicycle rental typically costs US\$8 to US\$15 (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*). Check that taxes are included in the price you're quoted – they often are not. Collision insurance is usually about US\$5 extra with a US\$500 deductible for the cheapest vehicles. Rates start at around US\$45 all inclusive, though you'll pay more during late December and January. There are plenty of agencies around the main plaza, but prices drop about 50% from the dock to the fringes of the tourist zone.

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

One fairly no-nonsense place, with cars in good shape, is **Rentadora Isis** (☎ 872-3367; Av 5 Norte btwn Calles 2 & 4 Norte). VW Beetles rent for around US\$30 for 24 hours, with little seasonal variation in prices.

If you rent, observe the law on vehicle occupancy. Usually only five people are al-

lowed 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 you have experience with them and with driving in 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 US\$18 to US\$40 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 US\$100). There is a helmet law and it is enforced, although most moped-rental people won't mention it. Before you sign a rental agreement, be sure to request a helmet.

The best time to rent a moped is first thing in the morning, when all the machines are there. Choose one with working horn, brakes, lights, starter, rearview mirrors and a full tank of fuel; keep in mind that the price asked will be the same whether you rent the newest machine or the oldest rattletrap.

Bring a towel to toss on the bike's seat when parked – the black plastic can get blisteringly hot in the sun. Keep in mind that you're not the only one unfamiliar with the road here, and some of your fellow travelers may be hitting the bottle. Drive carefully.

Rentadora Isis (see left) rents scooters for US\$18 per day – you need to return them before dark.

DETOUR: CRISTALINO CENOTE

On the west side of the highway south of Playa del Carmen is a series of cenotes (limestone sinkhole/caverns filled with water) that you can visit and usually swim in for a price. Among these is **Cristalino Cenote** (adult/child US\$2.50/1.50; ☎ 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, cavelike portion.

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

TAXI

Some locals refer to the 'taxi mafia'; as in some other towns in the Yucatán, the taxi syndicate in Cozumel wields a good bit of power. A movement is afoot to implement a bus service and get the syndicate to lower the fixed fares it charges. Fares in and around town are US\$3 per ride; luggage may cost extra. Carry exact change as drivers often 'can't' provide it.

XCARET

Once a precious spot open to all, **Xcaret** (☎ 984-871-5200; adult/child 5-12yr US\$62/43, with buffet & snorkel gear US\$83/58; ☎ 8:30am-9pm), pronounced *shkar-et*, is 10km south of Playa del Carmen and has been turned into a heavily Disneyfied 'ecopark.' Cruise-ship passengers often swear by the place, but the contrived, premium-priced 'beauty' here doesn't compare to the wealth of authentic and often free options available to those who don't mind veering off the tour. Kids and parents will surely enjoy the aquarium, turtles and dolphins. The Las Vegas-style Maya-themed shows, on the other hand, aren't worth sticking around (or paying) for.

Buses for Xcaret leave from the Zona Hotelera in Cancún.

RANCHO PUNTA VENADO

This delightful spot for **horseback riding** (☎ 998-887-1191; ctecante@puntaavenado.com; ☎ 8am-5pm) is about 5km south of Xcaret and 2km further east of the highway. The ranch sits on some 8 sq km of land, much of it virgin jungle, and has a cenote and a 3km-long stretch of isolated beach. In addition to guided horseback tours (US\$50 per person, maximum group size 20 people) you can also make arrangements to snorkel, kayak or (if you must) ATV. In the course of a ride

you're likely to see monkeys, deer, coatis and various other mammals, as well as crocodiles, snakes and lots of birds, including the occasional toucan. The horses are well cared for and the owners are very hospitable.

PAAMUL

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

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

Scuba-Mex (☎ /fax 984-875-1066; www.scubamex.com) offers diving trips to any of 30 superb sites at very reasonable prices (with your gear/theirs US\$29/39). It also offers dive packages and certification courses.

Paamul Hotel (☎ 999-925-9422; www.paamul.com.mx; d & cabanas low/high season US\$60/100; 📶) has eight beachfront rooms with good beds and air-con, and 10 lovely, spacious cabanas built on stilts. Each cabana has two beds, a ceiling fan, hot-water bathroom and a veranda with awning. Gaps in the wooden floors provide additional ventilation, and a serene atmosphere prevails. Karaoke and pool are possible entertainment options.

Giant sea turtles come ashore here at night in July and August to lay their eggs. If you run across one during an evening stroll along the beach, keep your distance and don't turn your flashlight on or you might

scare it away. Do your part to contribute to the survival of these endangered turtles; let them lay their eggs in peace.

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

XPU-HÁ

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

Hotel Villas del Caribe (☎ 984-873-2194, 044 984-876-9945; www.hotelvillasdelcaribe.com; cabanas US\$35-45, r US\$45-55), at the end of X-4 (Xpu-há access road 4), is a laid-back place sitting on a handsome stretch of beach whose northern reaches are nearly empty. All rooms have a terrace or balcony and are very clean and quiet, with fans and good beds; most have hammocks as well. Guests can participate in yoga and meditation classes, and the hotel offers meal plans at its good on-site restaurant.

AKUMAL

Famous for its beautiful beach and large, swimmable lagoon, Akumal (Place of the Turtles) does indeed see some sea turtles come ashore to lay their eggs in the summer, although fewer and fewer arrive each year thanks to resort development. Akumal is one of the Yucatán Peninsula's oldest resort areas and consists primarily of pricey hotels, condominiums and residential developments (occupied mostly by Americans and Canadians) on nearly 5km of wide beach bordering four consecutive bays. With the exception of Villa Las Brisas, all sights and facilities are reached by taking the first turnoff, Playa Akumal, as you come south on the highway. Note that this turn is one of those Mexican oddities where you have to swing to the right off the highway, swing left and then head straight across both lanes of traffic. 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. Dive trips and deep-sea fishing excursions are offered by **Akumal Dive Shop** (☎ 984-875-9032; www.akumal.com). It also offers snorkeling trips to the reef and beaches unreachable by

car for US\$30, and an all-day swimming, snorkeling, fishing and beach tour on a catamaran sailboat for US\$60, including food and drinks.

At the northern end of Akumal, **Laguna Yal-Kú** (adult/child US\$6/3; ☎ 8am-5:30pm) is a beautiful lagoon 2km from the entrance and over about a zillion *topes*. The rocky lagoon runs about 500m from its beginning to the sea and is home to many brightly colored fish, and the occasional visiting turtle and manta ray. Showers, parking and bathrooms are included in the admission price, lockers are an extra US\$1, and snorkel gear and life jackets each cost US\$5 to rent. Cabs from the Playa Akumal entrance charge about US\$3 to the lagoon.

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

Sleeping & Eating

Villa Las Brisas (☎ /fax 984-875-2963; www.aventuras-akumal.com; r US\$51-258) 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 speak English, Spanish, German, Italian and some Portuguese. The turnoff is 2.5km south of the turnoff for Playa Akumal.

Que Onda (☎ 984-875-9101; www.queondaakumal.com; r low/high season US\$55/90; ☎ ☎) A Swiss-run hotel and restaurant, with all the marvelous decorative touches that so often entails. 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. A large and lovely upstairs suite runs US\$115 to US\$200 depending on the season. 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, handmade daily, at prices reasonable for the area.

Just outside the entrance to Playa Akumal are two minimarkets that stock a good selection of inexpensive food. La Cueva del

Pescador restaurant, inside and just north of the entrance, serves three meals daily. Que Onda, above, has a nice restaurant and serves coffees from 11am to 4pm. Dinner is served from 5pm to 10pm; the bar closes around midnight.

XEL-HÁ

Once a pristine natural lagoon brimming with iridescent tropical fish and ringed on three sides by untouched mangroves, **Xel-Há** (☎ 984-875-6000; adult/child 5-11yr Mon-Fri US\$25/13, Sat & Sun US\$19/10; 🕒 9am-6pm), pronounced shell-hah, is now a private park with landscaped grounds, developed cenotes, caves, nature paths, underwater walks with oxygen helmet (at additional cost), several restaurant-bars and more. Like Xcaret, its main competitor, it's overpriced and you are better off with the less expensive or free alternatives that abound.

As boxed in as the nature is, it does offer some close encounters with giant turtles and dolphins, interesting dioramas and exhibits, and would be a fun place for kids if one wanted a break from the beach. Alternatively, rent some snorkel gear and plop into any shoreline for similar experiences with fish and turtles that aren't in a cage.

Underwater Cave Tours

About 1km south of Xel-Há is the turnoff for **Cenote Dos Ojos**, which provides access to the enormous Dos Ojos cave system. You can take guided snorkel and dive tours of some amazing underwater caverns, floating past illuminated stalactites and stalagmites in an eerie wonderland. With an aggregate length of nearly 57km, it's the third-largest underwater cave system in the world. Ox Bel Ha and Nohoch Nah Chich (about 97km and 61km total length, respectively), are relatively nearby. Divers have tried for years to find a passage linking Dos Ojos and Nohoch Nah Chich to prove them to be one humongous system. They succeeded in linking Nohoch with one of its outlets to the sea (at Cenote Manatí in Tankah). While that was going on, new kid on the block Ox Bel Ha was found to be really big.

Hidden Worlds (☎ 984-877-8535; www.hiddenworlds.com.mx) is an American-run outfit offering three-hour guided snorkeling tours for US\$40, and one-/two-tank dives for

US\$50/80. The snorkeling price includes a flashlight, wet suit, equipment and transportation to the cenotes on a unique 'jungle mobile.'

Another way to see part of the system is through the **Dos Ojos** (🕒 8am-4:30pm) operation, a short distance north of Hidden Worlds. It's run by the Maya community who own the land. The entrance fee is US\$8 and snorkeling gear is US\$7 more. You can dive here as well, if accompanied by a certified cave diver.

Check out p120 or more great cenotes in this area.

BAHÍAS DE PUNTA SOLIMÁN

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

A few hundred meters in after the signed turnoff from Hwy 307, you can bear left (north) to reach **Oscar y Lalo's** (☎ 984-804-6973; mains US\$6-10; sites per person US\$3; 🕒 10am-8pm), a picturesque restaurant that has the entire Bahía Solimán to itself. The kitchen puts out heaping plates of food, including fish fillets (US\$10) and barracuda steaks (US\$6), both of which come with french fries, fried banana, rice, beans and a plate of tortillas with green and red salsa. Chicken fajitas are also US\$6, and couples can order elaborate specials such as king crab stuffed with lobster and shrimp (US\$65). Tourists tend to photograph the food here, which gives you an idea of the presentation, and the restaurant's beachside hammocks are ideal for an after-meal snooze.

Oscar rents **kayaks** for US\$8 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. If you're very lucky you may spot one of the pumas seen in the area from time to time.

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

A number of **beach houses**, some quite luxurious, line the road. Most of them rent by the week, at well over US\$1000. A good website for house rentals in the area is www.locogringo.com.

One happy exception to the rent-the-whole-house-for-a-bundle rule is German-owned **Casa Seis Machos** (☎ 984-804-3345; d May-Nov US\$45, Dec-Apr US\$60), which has six fan-cooled bedrooms all with tiled floors, private bathrooms and sliding glass doors opening onto a balcony or terrace overlooking the bay.

The road continues south beyond another point and through what, at last pass, looked to be a large residential development in the making – lot after lot, each with its electricity meter waiting out the front for connection. It continues into the Tankah area and loops back northwest to rejoin the highway.

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

TANKAH

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

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

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

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

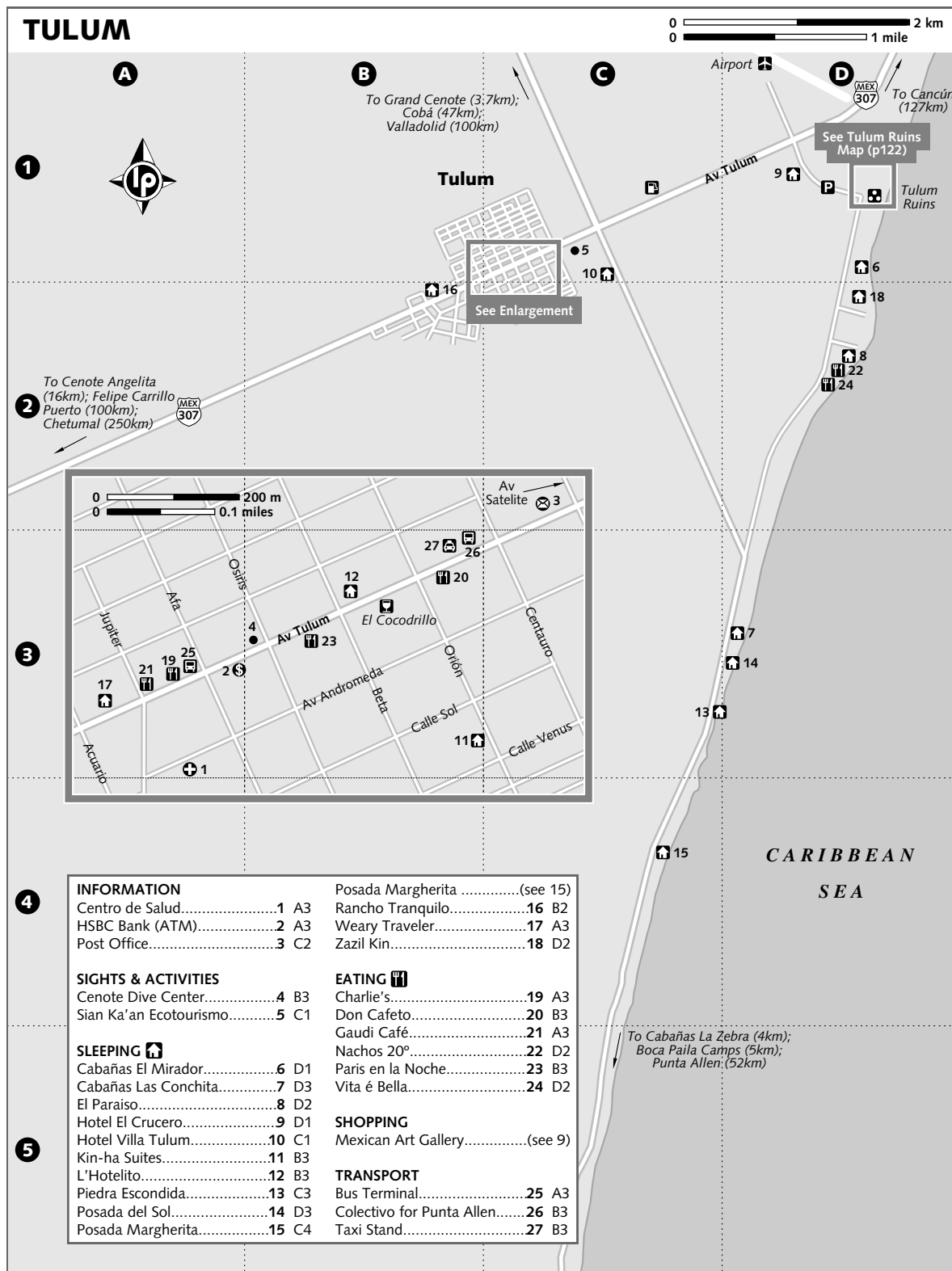
Tankah Inn (☎ in Canada 250-342-2834, in USA 936-636-7721; www.tankah.com; d low/high season US\$77/100) This has five comfortable rooms with tiled floors; the beds, bathrooms and cross-ventilation are all good. A large upstairs kitchen-dining room and common area has splendid views. At last pass the inn's dive operation was still getting back on its feet, but it was at least ready to offer snorkel tours by boat to the reef for US\$20, and rent out snorkel gear (US\$6 per day) and kayaks (US\$5 per hour, free for guests).

Casa Cenote (☎ 998-874-5170; www.casacenote.com; ste with breakfast & dinner low/high season US\$123/168) It's just across the road from Cenote Manatí, leading many people to apply the hotel's name to the water feature. Its seven beachside 'casitas' are lovingly done up with Maya touches, and each has a screened sliding glass door leading to its own little terrace with hammock. By the time you read this, all rooms should have air-con. The *palapa*-style restaurant serves fresh seafood, with a Texas-style barbecue on Sundays. Room-only rates are offered in addition to the meal plan (which lets you order anything on the menu, including shrimp and lobster).

TULUM

☎ 984 / pop 8400

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's also excellent diving, fun cenotes, great snorkeling, and a variety of lodgings and restaurants to fit every budget. The town is touristy, sure, but not at all glitzy – you're still likely to see a turkey loose on the street and (perhaps) an owner hauling dinner back home by the



wings. Both Cobá to the west and the massive Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an to the south make doable day trips.

Though technically prohibited (just realize that you *do* risk a ticket), there's a fair amount of topless and even nude swimming and sunbathing on the remoter parts of the beach.

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 Biósfera Sian Ka'an, continuing some 50km past Boca Paila to Punta Allen.

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

Information

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

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

There are numerous Internet cafés on Tulum Ave, the main street. All are open morning until late, and all offer access for about US\$1.50/hour. Some even include

free coffee. A brand-new place was opening up next to the Weary Traveler at the time of research.

Sian Ka'an Ecoturismo (p131) runs tours to the magnificent Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an stopping at various ancient Maya sites.

Dangers & Annoyances

Tulum is generally safe and locals welcome tourists, knowing that most of the area's wealth comes from gringo greenbacks. However, if you nod off on the beach, your valuables (even nonvaluables) may disappear. DO NOT listen to touts who wait near the T-junction of the beach and offer inexpensive cabanas. Lonely Planet has received numerous complaints about deceptive offers that seem cheap at first but (are you really surprised?) turn out to be unpleasant experiences.

When buying gas, be especially careful of 'magician' attendants, who use sleight of hand to make you think you accidentally gave them less money. A common trick is to quickly replace (say) a M\$500 bill with a M\$50 bill (similar colors), then claim, 'Hey, you didn't give me enough!' (Or they might spirit away some bills.) Save yourself the frustration by having exact change and counting it out loudly, bill by bill, as you pay.

YUCATÁN'S TOP FIVE CENOTES

One look and it's easy to see why the Maya thought cenotes were sacred: fathomless cerulean pools, dancing shafts of light, a darkened chamber. Even if you don't buy the spiritual aspects, they're still awe-inspiring examples of nature's beauty. If you get bitten by the cenote bug, try these activities.

- A two-tank dive at Dos Ojos (p117)
- Diving or swimming at Gran Cenote (p127)
- Diving Taj Mahal (p73)
- Sinking through eerie layers of 'foggy' water in Angelita (opposite)
- Plunging into the cool triple cenotes of Cuzamá after a jouncy ride by a horse-pulled train cart (p180)

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

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

If you do have problems, English-speaking tourist police are helpful and will make an effort to recover your money and/or valuables. Don't get your hopes up though.

Sights & Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

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

The dive shop at Zazil-Kin's (p124) is a PADI, NACD and TDI operation offering low-cost reef dives and renting snorkel gear for US\$5 day, or you can try a two-stop snorkeling tour to the reef by boat for US\$12, including gear and water.

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. If there's a heavy wind onshore strong currents can develop on the lee side of the reef. Inexperienced swimmers should stay close to shore or go out with a licensed dive operator.

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 only be done by experienced divers.

TULUM RUINS

The **ruins of Tulum** (admission US\$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. Even on dark, stormy days, the ruins with their imposing ramparts look fit for the cover of a magazine. It's true the extents and structures are of a modest scale and the late post-Classic design, workmanship and ornamentation

are inferior to those of earlier, more grandiose projects – but wow, those Maya occupants must have felt pretty smug each sunrise. Iguanas are everywhere, and many act as if they own the place. Please don't pester or feed them.

Tulum is a prime destination for tour groups from Cancún or off the cruise ships docked in the area. 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 US\$4 for cars and US\$8 for vans and pickups. The optional shuttle from the parking lot to the ticket booth (about a seven-minute walk) is US\$1.50 round-trip. Taxi cabs from town charge US\$3.50 and can drop you off at the old entrance road, about an 800m walk from the ticket booth.

History

Most archaeologists believe that Tulum was occupied during the late post-Classic period (AD 1200–1521) and that it was an important port town during its heyday. When Juan de Grijalva sailed past in 1518, he was amazed by the sight of the walled city, its buildings painted a gleaming red, blue and yellow and a ceremonial fire flaming atop its seaside watchtower.

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

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

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

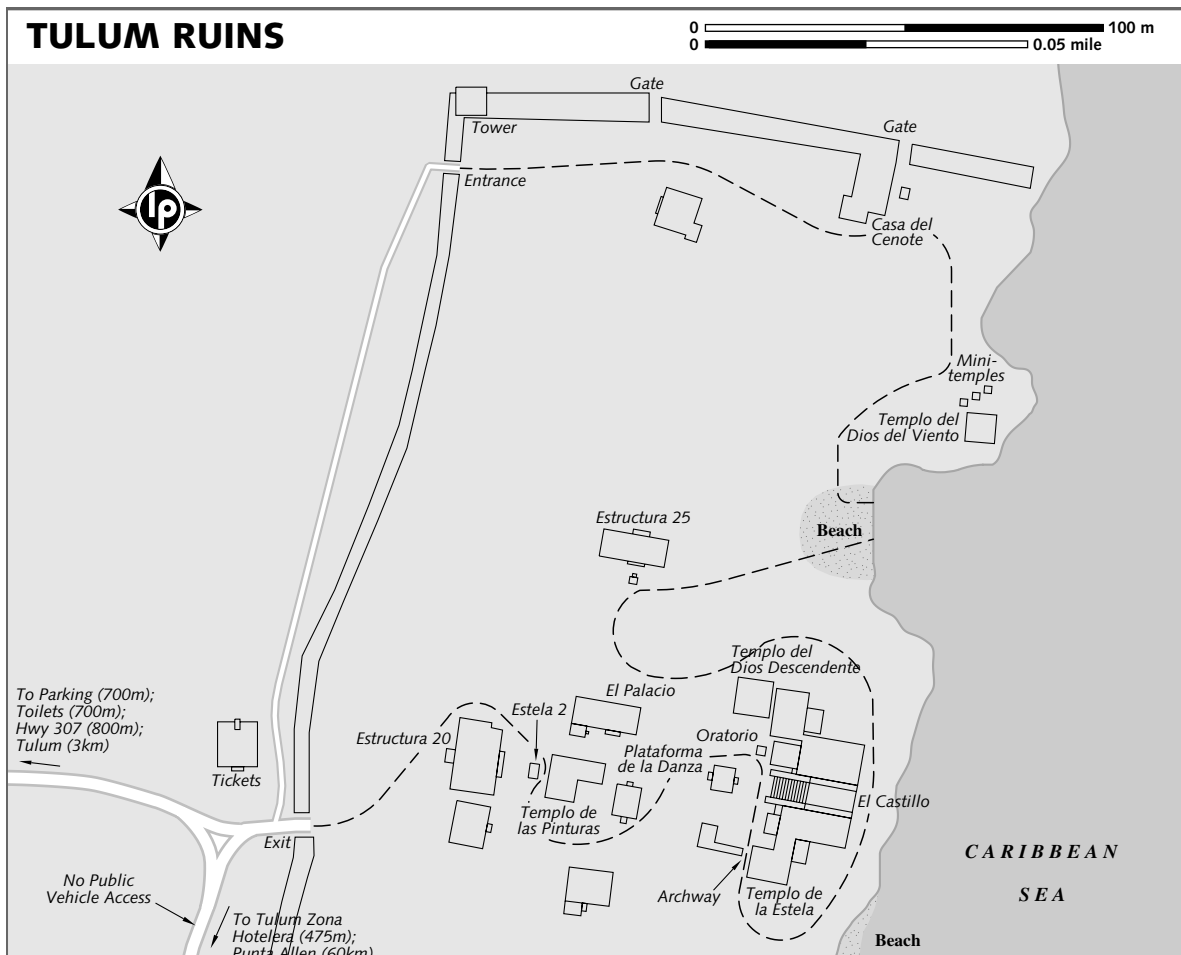
Exploring the Ruins

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

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

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 façade, and the Toltec-style 'Kukulcanes' (plumed serpents) at the corners, echoing those at Chichén Itzá. To the Castillo's north is the small, lopsided **Templo del Dios Descendente**, named for the relief figure above the door.

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

Have a last look over the whole ruins before heading out the exit (which was until very recently the entrance; INAH seems to delight in changing these things around from time to time).

Sleeping

The biggest choice, aside from budget, is whether to stay in the town center or out along the beach. Both have their advantages: most of the daytime action is at the beach or the ruins, while at night people tend to hit the restaurants and bars in town. Few things beat waking up and watching the sun rise over the beach, but there's something to be said for a short walk home after a night out rather than a long taxi ride back to the beach area. Hotels in town and at Crucero Ruinas are easier to reach and generally more secure than the seaside lodgings. There are no vans to the beach.

TULUM PUEBLO & NORTH

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

Weary Traveler (☎ 871-2389; www.wearytraveler.info; Av Tulum; s/d US\$12/21) Turn right out of the bus station and walk one block south. A fun hostel and 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, salsa lessons, 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 were the only downsides.

Rancho Tranquilo (☎ 871-2784; www.ranchotranquilo.com.mx; Av Tulum s/n; dm US\$12, r from US\$25-48) Another nice option for those looking for hostel-type lodging, Rancho Tranquilo offers a mix of cabanas, dorms and rooms in a low-key, desert-landscaped garden. There's a covered common area and free breakfast. It gets some noise from a nearby club, but it's still a great option, especially if Weary Traveler is full. The only downside for those without wheels is that it's 300m further southward on Tulum Ave, and pretty dark late at night.

Kin-Ha Suites (☎ /fax 871-2321; www.hotelkinha.com; Orión btwn Calles Sol & Venus; d with fan/air-con US\$35/40; ♿) About seven blocks northeast of the bus terminal. Italian-run, it has pleasant rooms surrounding a small courtyard garden, each with a hammock out front.

Hotel El Crucero (☎ 871-2610; www.el-crucero.com; Crucero Ruinas; r for 4 persons US\$85, d/tw with fan US\$30/40; tw with air-con US\$45; ♿) You'll feel welcome and well-taken-care-of at this friendly hotel. Dorm rooms have bathrooms and lockers, while air-con rooms are done up in themes, such as the Mexican Mural, Jungle Room and the Lizard Lounge. The hotel has a garden area plus a bar and restaurant, and Internet access. You can rent bicycles and store bags as well. It's a 10-minute walk to the ruins, and 15 to the beach. The hotel can arrange low-impact bicycle tours to cenotes. Local artist Enrique Diaz has a gallery here (see p126).

L'Hotelito (☎ 871-2061; l.hotelito@hotmail.com; Av Tulum; d/tr/q with air-con low season US\$30/35/40, high season US\$60/70/75; ♿) A decent Italian-run place done in bright colors with tile-floored rooms. It's on the west side of the

highway three blocks north of the bus terminal. The restaurant serves homemade pastas, often preceded by tantalizing aromas. Rooms with fan and no air-con cost US\$5 less.

Hotel Villa Tulum (☎ 984-871-2418; www.hotelvillatum.com; Av Cobá Sur s/n; r low/high season US\$65/120) A beautiful pool and a convenient middle location (you can walk to either the town *or* the beach – though it's a hike) make this a nice choice. It has a senora and simple quads. Very quiet.

ZONA HOTELERA

Tulum's Zona Hotelera is a long string of cabanas and hotels stretching from the southernmost part of the Tulum Ruin access road all the way to the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Quality and price are so varied here that it's best to look before you decide. If you're going for a place with shared bathrooms, check them out: one place had graffiti (on the flush lever of the only working toilet) that said: 'Push here to flood the floor.' Accommodations range from rustic cabanas with sand floors to pricey bungalows with pricier restaurants. Some places have no electricity, or shut their generators off at 9pm or 10pm; many have no phone. For some people this might be a problem, but for most it is part of the charm.

The cheapest way to sleep in cabanas is to have your own hammock and mosquito net; if you don't, several of the inexpensive places rent them for about US\$3 a night. In the cheapest places you'll have to supply your own towel and soap, and water, hot water, and even electricity may be erratic. Bedbugs (see p161), sand fleas and mosquitoes are all a possibility. Bring repellent. Nights can be darned cold if there's a breeze blowing. Also see the tips for Tulum's cabanas (below).

The following places are ordered north to south; not all establishments are listed. Again, watch out for the 'deals' you'll be offered as you walk towards your intended destination.

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

Cabañas El Mirador (cabana with hammock US\$10) The closest place to the ruins. It has 28 simple cabanas, all a long walk from the shared bathrooms – which needed a little TLC at last pass. The beach is wide here, and a decent restaurant with great views sits back and above the cabanas.

Zazil-kin (☎ 984-807-6176; s/d/tr cabana without bathroom US\$26/32/38; d US\$84-120) About a 10-minute walk from the ruins, this is a popular place. It has a dive center, a basketball

TIPS FOR TULUM'S CABANAS

The waterfront cabanas south of the Tulum ruins are famous among backpackers. The first four sit nearly side by side within 1km of the ruins. Thereafter, they are mixed in with more expensive places and spread out over 11km. Here are a few tips if you intend to stay at one:

- Cabanas closest to the ruins are usually fully occupied by 10am or 11am every day from mid-December through March and in July and August. Arrive early, or make a reservation the night before.
- Taxis or bicycles are recommended to cover the distance between the cabanas and the bus terminal or the bus stops at Crucero Ruinas and the Zona Arqueológica; it's 3km from the highway to the coast road alone. Many people hitch the distance.
- The cheapest cabanas are made of sticks and built on sand (some have concrete floors). Bring a mosquito net to hang over yourself at night.
- Few of the flimsy, primitive cabanas can be reliably secured. Thieves lift the poles in the walls to gain entrance, burrow beneath through the sand or pile it up to reach windows, or jimmy the locks. Thefts are common. Never leave valuables unattended in a cabana.
- Bring a pair of sandals or flip-flops. Most of the cabanas, even at the pricier places, have shared bathrooms. Shoes help you keep sand out of your bed and reduce the chance of catching athlete's foot.

court, a restaurant-bar-disco and a nice stretch of beach. All structures are very tidy and nicely painted. The cabanas' poles have been filled in with concrete, which makes them more secure (bring your own lock) but hinders ventilation. Be warned that the disco plays music at very high volumes sometimes until 1am or 2am, and there's a charge for the use of electricity (such as for charging cell phones).

El Paraíso (☎ 984-845-7689; r with fan low/high season US\$70/100) Has 10 rooms in a one-story hotel-style block, each with two good beds, private hot-water bathroom, fine cross-ventilation and 24-hour electricity. The restaurant is very presentable, with decent prices, and the level beach, with its palm trees, *palapa* parasols, swing-chaired bar and soft white sand, is among the nicest you'll find on the Riviera Maya.

La Vita è Bella (☎ 871-3501; www.lavitaebella.com; bungalows low/high season US\$120/180, s/d without bathroom US\$35) A few hundred meters south of El Paraíso, it offers lovely bungalows with tiled floors, big comfy beds, well-screened sliding doors, good bathrooms with colorful basins and wide verandas with hammocks. All overlook a narrow but nice beach with beach umbrellas and chairs. It's Italian-run (surprise!), so the restaurant serves delicious hand-made pastas and thin-crust pizza from its wood-fired oven. Kiteboarding lessons are also offered.

Cabañas La Conchita (fax 871 2092 www.differentworld.com; s & d low/high season US\$110/160, tr & q US\$140/200) About 2km south of the T across from some souvenir shops, it has eight units: three freestanding and five in two-story structures. They're well built and all have safes, 24-hour hot water and electricity from 6pm to 10pm (candles after 10pm); most have cool concrete walls, standard windows with some degree of sea view and lockable doors (good security). The beach and landscaping here are lovely. Rates include a big breakfast. When sending a fax to Cabañas La Conchita make sure to mark it 'Attn: La Conchita.'

Piedra Escondida (☎ 984-100-3826; www.piedraescondida.com; s low/high season US\$125/165, d US\$165/195) Offers very good service in its eight large rooms (four upstairs and four at ground level). 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 (☎ 984-100-3780; www.posadamargherita.com; Km 4.5; d low/high season US\$120/180) 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. Overlooking it is the fine restaurant (see p126). The hotel also has something virtually unheard of in the Yucatán: wheelchair access. The four ground-floor rooms have ramps, wide doorways and wide bathrooms with grab rails; the restaurant and other public areas have ramps or paths.

Cabañas La Zebra (www.zebratum.net; cabanas US\$25-40) This place is 8.5km south of the T, the last 2km or so of which is a bit bumpy. Wilma killed the hot water here, but perhaps that will be repaired soon. The units have bathrooms, fans, 24-hour electricity, one single and one double bed, and ocean views. The property is more forested than many others listed here, and has a restaurant-bar. Prices may vary up to \$20 depending on the season.

Eating

TULUM PUEBLO

The places listed here are decent, but many of Tulum's restaurants are disappointing, catering to tourists who don't know good Tex-Mex. Service can be frustratingly slow, especially at the places that add a hefty tip automatically to the bill. Escape by leaving Av Tulum and finding nice, quiet, friendly cheap eats on the side streets. Consider getting fresh produce from the markets.

All of the following places are on Avenida Tulum (Hwy 307).

Gaudi Café (Cnr Av Tulum & Jupiter; mains US\$2-6; ☎ 7am-10pm) Just south of the bus station on the same side of the street, Gaudi Café offers great fresh-squeezed juices and good coffee. Spotlessness and relaxing music make it a great way to start the morning.

Don Cafeto (breakfast US\$3-6, mains US\$6-12; ☎ 7am-10pm) Offers good breakfasts and Mexican food (including seafood dishes), as well as coffee. Most orders are accompanied

by a great assortment of pickled vegetables, such as spicy carrots, peppers or garlic.

París de Noche (☎ 871-2532; mains US\$7-14; 🕒 noon-2am Tue-Sun) Serves some big portions, so bring an appetite or a friend. The French chef won a *Time Out* award at the restaurant he ran in London. He serves a mix of French and Mexican dishes (as well as steaks and seafood) that include escargots, ceviche, and a delicious green salad with chèvre that's a full meal in itself.

Charlie's (☎ 871-2573; mains US\$8.50-14; 🕒 7:30am-11pm Tue-Sun) An old standby with attractive conch-shell décor and a wall made of old glass bottles, it's near the bus station and offers your choice of indoor or courtyard dining. The food is largely Mexican, with a selection of US\$5 salads thrown in. It's one of the few places in Tulum that actually *does* accept MasterCard or Visa. Priceless!

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.

ZONA HOTELERA

Posada Margherita (☎ 984-100-3780; mains US\$8-25) This hotel's restaurant is candlelit at night, making it a beautiful, romantic place to dine. The fantastic food, including pasta, is made fresh daily and the wines are excellent. The restaurant and other public areas have ramps or paths for wheelchair access. Consider a walk along the beach after your meal. Make an advance reservation.

Most of the other hotel restaurants (p124) also welcome nonguests.

Nacho's 20° (☎ 984-100-5067; km 2.5; lunch mains US\$8, dinner mains US\$8-16; 🕒 8am-9pm) is another appealing option. North of the T-junction, it has tables on a rocky bluff above the water, offering some fabulous views. Service is personable and the food is fair. There's a great seafood platter for two for US\$35. The plastic chairs are casual but, with the view, who cares?

Shopping

Avenida Tulum is lined with shops offering many items (hammocks, blankets, handicrafts) that you'll see everywhere. Prices drop drastically the further you go from the bus station – up to 50%. Bargaining or buying two or more items will drop prices further.

Mexican Art Gallery (☎ 984-745-8979; 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 for intercity buses and the *colectivos* to Playa del Carmen. The table (below) shows some travel times and prices for buses leaving Tulum.

BUS SERVICES FROM TULUM

Destination	Cost	Duration	Departures
Cancún	US\$5.40-6.70	2hr	numerous buses
Chetumal	US\$10.70-14	3½-4hr	numerous buses
Chichén Itzá	US\$9.90	3½hr	2 ADO buses at 9am & 2:30pm
Cobá	US\$2.60-2.80	45min	about 5 ADO or Mayab buses from 7am to 6pm
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	US\$4.30-5.50	1½hr	numerous buses
Mahahual	US\$10.50	4hr	3 ADO Mahahual buses at 1:30am, 2:05am & 9:35am
Mérida	US\$16.30-18	4hr (avoid 2nd-class buses, which take much longer)	numerous services daily
Playa del Carmen	US\$2	1hr	numerous buses
Valladolid	US\$4.90-5.70	2hr	5 ADO & 5 Mayab buses from 1:25am to 6pm

If you're headed for Valladolid, be sure your bus is traveling the short route through Chemax, not via Cancún. *Colectivos* leave from Avenida Tulum for Playa del Carmen (US\$2, 45 minutes), Punta Allen (at 2pm), and *colectivos* for Felipe Carrillo Puerto (US\$4, one hour) leave from just south of the hostel.

Getting Around

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

Bicycles can be a good way to get around and usually cost US\$15 a day.

Taxi fares are fixed and pretty cheap; from either of the two taxi stands in Tulum Pueblo (one south of the bus terminal, which has fares posted; the other four blocks north on the opposite side of the street) to the ruins it's US\$3.50. Fares to most cabanas mentioned here are US\$3.50 to US\$4.50.

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 (US\$5) among small fish and see underwater formations in the caverns here if you bring your own gear. A cab from downtown Tulum costs US\$5 one way, or it's an easy bike ride.

COBÁ

Though not as large as some of the more famous ruins, Cobá is 'cool' because you feel like you're in a *Raiders of the Lost Ark* flick. It's set deep in the jungle and many of the ruins have yet to be excavated. Walk along ancient *sacbé* pathways (stone-paved avenues; *sacbeob* is the plural in Maya), climb up vine-covered mounds, and ascend to the top of Nohoch Mul, one of the few pyramids in Yucatán visitors are allowed to climb – it offers 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. There's a crocodile viewing pier. At last pass, one large croc had been named Raul.

History

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

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

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

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

The first excavation was 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 US\$3; ☎ 8am-5pm) has a parking lot that charges US\$1.50 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, and at the time of research there was a drink stand within the site near the Nohoch Mul pyramid. Avoid the midday heat if possible; it gets extremely humid here. Most people spend around two hours at the site.

A short distance inside, at the Grupo Cobá, is a concession renting bicycles at US\$2.50 per day. These can only be ridden within the site, and are useful if you really want to get around the further reaches; also they're a great way to catch a breeze and cool off. If the site is crowded, however, it's probably best to walk. Pedi-trikes (two people and driver US\$7.50 per day) are another popular option for those who are tired or have limited mobility.

You may want to buy a book on Cobá before coming. On-site signage and maps are minimal and cryptic. Guides near the entrance size you up and ask whatever they think you're worth, anywhere from US\$15 (90 minutes) to more than US\$75, depend-

ing on the length of the tour. Guides drop their prices inside the gate, so pay admission first and avoid bargaining out in the parking lot. At last pass, the Nohoch Mul pyramid was the only structure the public was allowed to climb.

Sights

GRUPO COBÁ

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

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

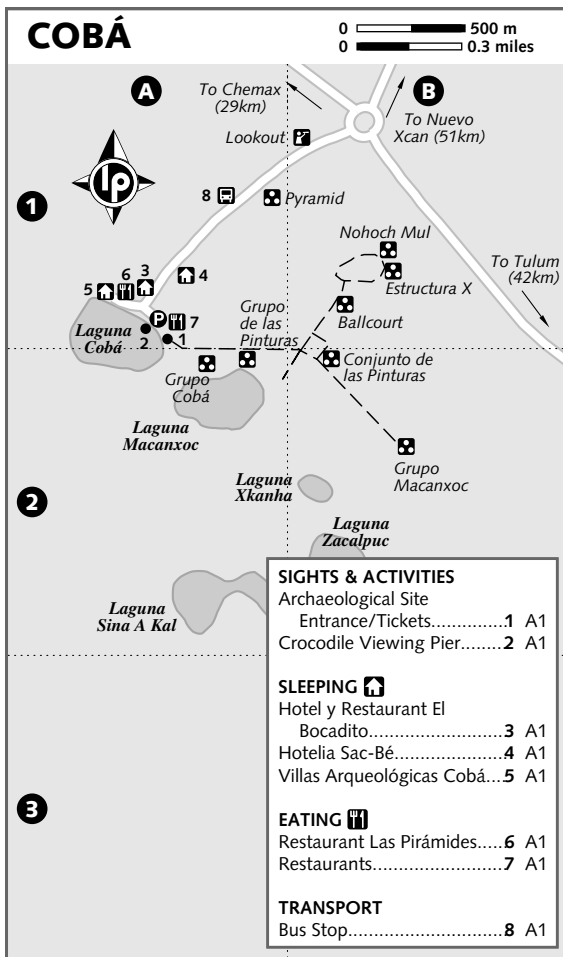
GRUPO MACANXOC

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

GRUPO DE LAS PINTURAS

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

You approach the temple from the southeast. Leave by the trail at the northwest (opposite the temple steps) to see two stelae. The first of these is 20m along, beneath a *palapa*. Here, a regal figure stands over two others, one of them kneeling with his hands bound behind him. Sacrificial captives lie beneath the feet of a ruler at the base. You'll need to use your imagination, as this and most of the other stelae here are quite worn. Continue along the path past another badly weathered stela and a small



temple to rejoin the Nohoch Mul path and turn right (or, if you rented a bike, turn around or go left to retrieve it).

GRUPO NOHOCH MUL

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

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

By this time you will have noticed **Nohoch Mul** (Big Mound) just to the north. Also known as the Great Pyramid, which sounds a lot better than Big Mound, Nohoch Mul reaches a height of 42m, making it the second-tallest Maya structure on the Yucatán Peninsula. Calakmul’s Estructura II, at 45m, is the tallest. Climbing the old steps can be scary for some; see the boxed text, p172, for tips.

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

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

Sleeping & Eating

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

Hotel y Restaurant El Bocado (☎ 984-264-7071; r US\$12-20) This place has very basic, fan-cooled rooms all with private bathrooms. Chickens cluck and dogs wander around. The restaurant (mains US\$5 to US\$15) is well run and serves basic food, including an US\$8.50 set menu. It will store luggage while you visit the ruins. El Bocado also serves as Cobá’s bus terminal.

Villas Arqueológicas Cobá (☎ /fax 984-206-7000; d/tr/ste US\$82/101/137; 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. It’s one of three on the Peninsula, all with nearly the exact same plan. The restaurant is surprisingly affordable and serves good Yucatecan cuisine; the rooms are pretty fair (a little small for the price), with good air-con. Its Maya ruin (genuine) is depressingly surrounded by a golf-course and astroturf.

Hotelita Sac-bé (☎ 984-206-7140; s/d with fan US\$170/250, with air-con US\$250/350) 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 US\$6) A few doors down from the Club Med, it has good lake views and friendly service. Several small restaurants by the sites 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 (US\$2.60 to US\$2.80); six of these also serve Playa del Carmen (US\$5.10 to US\$5.80, one to 1¼ hours). Buses also run to Valladolid (US\$2.50, 45 minutes) and Chichén Itzá (US\$5.20, 1½ hours).

Day-trippers from Tulum can reach Cobá by forming a group to split the cost of a taxi, which costs about US\$50 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.

PUNTA LAGUNA

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

Villagers charge US\$3 for entrance to the lake area, and about US\$30 for a guided visit, which is your best chance of spotting simians. Some of the locals have been making observations for biologists, watching the monkeys' every move and writing them down; they can tell you a lot about them, in Spanish and English. One guide is currently learning Italian.

You can also rent canoes to paddle on the lake, an eerily beautiful sight when shrouded in morning mist. The best time to arrive is early morning – around sun-up, before the monkeys are in full swing – or late afternoon, when the spider monkeys come to the water to drink. A howler monkey's howl is worth hearing: ear-splitting and oddly human, it sounds more like a beast of Tolkein's fantasy than something one finds in the wild.

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

SOUTHERN QUINTANA ROO

Whether you're going by rental car or staring out a bus window, you'll notice the landscape is different the further south you go. The trees get taller and the birds more colorful, until at the southern border you'll be in real, honest-to-goodness jungle (well, if you're not in sugar-cane fields). The city of Chetumál is the only 'Mexican' city in Quintana Roo, and it feels different: more colonial, more cosmopolitan. It has a fairly good museum about the Maya, a number of nice restaurants and a local music scene.

Carnaval, in mid- to late February, brings nightly parades and loud music.

There are some pleasant and tranquil seaside destinations along the coast at Punta Allen and Xcalak. Several good-value hotels overlook the beautiful Laguna Bacalar, offering fine escapes for people who are really looking to get away from it all. Fewer tourists means the ruins of Dzibanché and Kohunlich seem more mysterious: go in the early morning and you'll likely share the spot only with vultures, leaf-cutter ants, mist, and possibly an agouti or two.

The southern half of Quintana Roo will mostly appeal to people who want to see a section of Caribbean Mexico before it gets developed, but they'd best hurry, as big plans are in motion for some parts of the region.

TULUM TO PUNTA ALLEN

Punta Allen is the end of a narrow spit of land that stretches south nearly 40km from its start below Tulum. There are some charming beaches along the way, with plenty of privacy, and most of the spit is within the protected, wildlife-rich Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an.

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. After Km 36 watch out for crumbled drainage culverts which can easily swallow a tire. It is doable even in a non-4WD vehicle, but bring along a shovel and boards just in case, and plan on returning that rental with a lot more play in the steering wheel.

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 Biósfera 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.

Sian Ka'an Ecoturismo (☎ 984-871-2363; siankaan_tours@hotmail.com; Av Tulum btwn Satélite & Géminis, 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 through Lagunas Muyil, Chunyaxché and Boca Paila via an ancient Maya trade route along a natural channel. Or so says the guide; the local Maya maintain that their ancestors carved it out. On the way you can see abundant bird life and visit little-known Maya temples. The tour ends with beach time and a picnic, followed by a van ride up the coast on the notorious road (the good half). It costs US\$68 per person (US\$54.40 per child aged five to seven years), including food and drinks.

If you can get to Punta Allen, three locals with training in English, natural history, interpretation and birding conduct bird-watching, snorkeling and nature tours, mostly by boat, for about US\$110 for five to six people: **Baltazar Madera** (☎ 984-871-2001, in Tulum 984-879-8234), **Marcos Nery** (reachable through the local phone exchange: ☎ 984-871-2424) and Chary Salazar (enquire in town at her eponymous restaurant). The latter two are experts on endemic and migratory bird species, and Chary also does walking tours when she's available.

Punta Allen

The town of Javier Rojo Gómez is more commonly called by the name of the point 2km south. Nearly destroyed by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988 but spared by Wilma, Punta Allen has a population of fewer than 400, many of whom fish for lobster, and sports a laid-back ambience reminiscent of the Belizean cayes. There's also a healthy reef 400m from shore that offers snorkelers and divers wonderful sights.

The area is known primarily for its catch-and-release bonefishing, and for that many people come a long way; tarpon and snook are very popular sportfish as well. The guides listed for Sian Ka'an (left), as well as cooperatives in town (inquire at Galletanes or Vigía Grande), do fishing trips for about US\$200, including lunch. There's also a fishing outfit just north of town called **Pesca Maya** (☎ 998-883-4204; www.pescamaya.com; ☎ 5am-10pm), which does daily saltwater fly-fishing runs and has a restaurant for guests only.

An hour's tour of the lagoon, including turtles, bird-watching and a quick snorkel, costs US\$40. You'll be offered trips by one of the three co-ops. Encourage your captain not to get so close to bird life that it scares it away. Though very rare, manatee spottings are possible.

You can access the Internet at **Puntanet** (☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat) for US\$2 per hour.

SLEEPING & EATING

Tres Marías (d US\$25) A locally run set of simple cabanas in the middle of town.

Posada Sirena (☎ /fax 984-877-8521; www.casa.sirena.com; d US\$30-50) Offers fully furnished cabanas with kitchens and hot-water showers. Every room has a blender.

Hospedaje Cooperativa Las Boyas (☎ 984-878-017; r with kitchenettes US\$70) There are two rooms here that are simple but well located. They're on the north corner near the 'Mini-Super Caamal.' Look for the mermaid and inquire inside.

Vigía Grande and Galletanes are among several of the town's dining choices, both close to the water and both owned by co-ops. They serve Mexican dishes and seafood, naturally including lobster. Neither has a phone and opening hours vary based on whether any customers are there. If they look closed, wait a bit, then ask around. Chances are someone will be happy to scamper over and fire up the grill.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The best way to reach Punta Allen by public transport 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 23,100

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. Though not a place where most travelers would want to linger, the town has a slower pace (and lower prices) than more-touristed parts of the peninsula. It seems to continually be sprucing itself up and takes pride in its civic projects. If you're lucky enough to be in town when there's an election, you'll likely see large public demonstrations in the plaza or even a candidate or two. After about 9pm the town is dead, save for a little action at the (slow) Internet cafés.

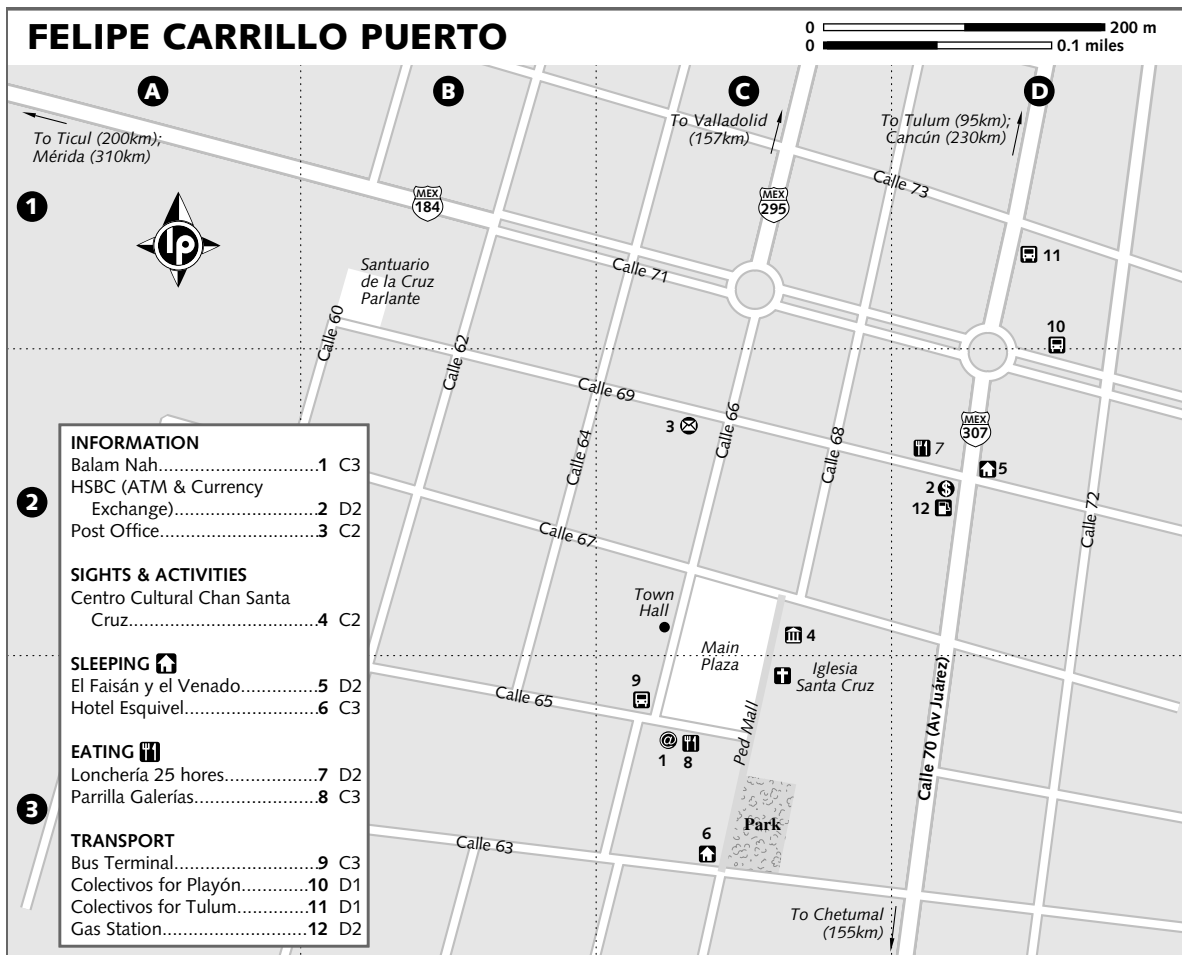
History

In 1849, when the War of the Castes turned against them, the Maya of the northern Yucatán Peninsula made their way to this

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

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

A military campaign by the Mexican government retook the city and the surrounding area at the beginning of the 20th century (see p32), and the talking cross's shrine was desecrated. Many of the Maya fled to small villages in the jungle and kept up the fight into the 1930s; some resisted even into the 1950s.



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

Information

Balam Nah (Calle 65; ☎ 8am-1am) On the plaza, it offers slow, cheap Internet connections in a smoke-free, air-con environment. There's a bathroom in back. With toilet paper!

HSBC bank (cnr Calles 70 & 69) With ATM and money exchange; lies two blocks east of the post office.

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

Sights

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

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

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Esquivel (☎ 834-0344; hotelesquivefc@todito.com; Calle 65 No 746; d with fan/air-con US\$20/35; 🚽) Around the corner from the plaza and bus terminal. 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.

El Faisán y El Venado (☎ 834-0702; cnr Av Benito Juárez & Calle 69; d US\$26; 🚽) Has colorful orange-and-yellow rooms with firm mattresses, TV and ceiling fans (as always, check the air-con before taking a room). Rooms vary a fair bit from the quite nice to pretty shabby, so ask to see yours first. Its adjacent restaurant has good, reasonably priced food; try the enormous shrimp ceviche (US\$8.60) or the good *poc chuc* (grilled pork strips, US\$7.70).

Loncheria 25 Horas (Calle 69, across from the gas station; items US\$2; ☎ 24hr) Dirt cheap without being dirty, this casual eatery sports plastic chairs and the fumes of passing trucks, but had a giant selection of eggs, sandwiches, tacos and smoothies.

Parrilla Galerías (☎ 834-0313; Calle 65; mains US\$3.50-8) On the plaza, it has the look of a more upscale spot, but serves beer for US\$1.50 and tacos for US\$0.60. The house specialty is a *parrilla* (mixed grill) with lots of accompaniments (US\$17 for three people). Accepts credit cards.

Getting There & Away

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

Colectivos leave for Playa del Carmen (US\$11, two hours) and Tulum (US\$5.20, one hour) from Hwy 307 just south of Calle 73.

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

BUS SERVICES FROM FELIPE CARRILLO PUERTO

Destination	Cost	Duration	Departures
Cancún	US\$9.60-12	3½-4hr	9 1st-class buses, hourly 2nd-class buses to 9pm
Chetumal	US\$5-8.30	2-3hr	4 1st-class & 14 2nd-class buses
Mérida	US\$12.70	5½hr	11 2nd-class buses
Playa del Carmen	US\$6.40-8.60	2½hr	9 1st-class buses, hourly 2nd-class buses to 9pm
Ticul	US\$10	4½hr	11 2nd-class buses; change there or at Muna for Uxmal
Tulum	US\$4.10-5.50	1½hr	9 1st-class buses, hourly 2nd-class buses to 9pm

MAHAHUAL & THE COSTA MAYA

Expect big changes to happen to these sleepy coastal communities over the next five years. Mahahual has been picked as the next Cancún or Playa and sees so many cruise-ship visitors that most locals simply don't understand that sometimes people arrive by car or bus. A four-lane highway slashes in a straight line through miles of spectacular mangrove from Route 307 to the shore, where the jade-green bands of ocean, barrier reefs and palm-shaded white-sand beaches seem straight out of Paradise.

Loud hawkers, hiked-up prices and cruise-ship passengers ground you in the grim reality that it actually *isn't* Paradise, though Xcalak still retains a lot of the quiet charm that the area is known for and is worth the extra drive. Mahahual is still nice too, but the chaotic Zona Turista and a new pier (still in the works) make it less peaceful. Drivers should be aware that when ships arrive the entire zone is closed for pedestrians only and you'll need to take circuitous back streets around to continue to travel south.

More significantly, Mahahual offers the closest access to **Banco Chinchorro**, the largest coral atoll in the Northern Hemisphere. Some 45km long and up to 14km wide, Chinchorro's western edge lies about 30km off the coast, and dozens of ships have fallen victim to its barely submerged ring of coral. The atoll and its surrounding waters were made a biosphere reserve (the Reserva de la Biósfera Banco Chinchorro) to protect them from depredation. But the reserve lacks the personnel and equipment needed to patrol such a large area, and many abuses go undetected.

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

Blue Ha Diving Center (www.bluehadiving.com; Hwy 307 Km 2.7) runs trips to Chinchorro

and to stretches of the barrier reef a few hundred meters from shore, which has some excellent spots as well. It takes a maximum of eight passengers to the bank, 10 to local spots. Blue Ha also offers PADI courses, and the operator, Douglas Campbell-Smith, speaks English, Spanish and German.

You can access the web or make US\$0.40 per minute calls to the USA or Canada at **@EasyCall** (Internet per hr US\$2; ☎ 9am-10pm).

Sleeping & Eating

All but Kailuum Cita are south of town. Addresses are given as distances from the military checkpoint at the north entrance to town.

Coco Ha (☎ 834-5878; Km 1.8; s/d without bathroom US\$15/18) Close to the south entrance, it rents six cabanas. They're quite basic, but have cement floors and are right on the beach. A few coconut trees provide shade, and it has a great view of the beach; however, expect this to change as the pier is built.

Las Cabanas del Doctor (☎ 983-832-2102; Km 2; cabanas with/without bathroom US\$35/25) Across the street from the beach, about 100m south of Coco Ha. It offers several fairly simple dwellings. Prices rise by about US\$10 more in December and Easter week.

Kailuum Cita (☎ in USA 1-303-674-9615 or 1-800-538-6802; www.kailuum.com; tents under palapas low/high season from US\$100/120; ☎ closed Sep-Oct) A unique, quiet refuge and the only place located north of town, Kailuum Cita has no electricity and is a true eco-tel, with nice bathrooms, oil-lanterns with pulleys, and excellent full breakfasts included. No children aged under 14 makes this an especially quiet oasis for those looking to get away from it all.

Casa del Mar (Km 2; ☎ 7:30am-afternoon) Next door to the Doctor, this friendly German-run café serves coffee (including great cappuccino), yummy apple cakes, whole-wheat bread and other delights. The owners plan to begin serving breakfasts. You can rent bikes here.

Doña Marí (mains US\$3-5) Right in town, behind the big yellow Hotel Mahahual. It's very simple and clean, and serves tasty fish fillets prepared in various styles, accompanied by beans and tortillas.

Restaurante Mahahual (☎ 983-834-5849; mains US\$5; ☎ 7am-8pm) Reasonably priced food at

the north end of the pedestrian *malecón* (waterfront boulevard). Refresh with a colossal *limonada* (lime with soda water) or have a meal. The owner clearly likes turtles. Service is on Mexican time.

Getting There & Around

Mahahual is 68km south of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, 5km south of Limones and 46km north of Bacalar. A new ADO bus terminal (a stop, really, operating between 5:30am and 6pm daily) has made getting here easier than ever, though the buses are infrequent. They depart here for Chetumál (US\$7, 2½ hours, 6am, 12:30pm and 6pm) and Cancún (US\$17, five hours, 8:30am and 6pm), with an additional departure at 3pm on Sundays and Mondays. A Mérida service is scheduled to begin but was not running at the time of research.

If you're driving, expect to be stopped at least once at a military checkpoint; they're only searching for contraband and often wave tourists through. There's a Pemex gas station if you need to fill your tank.

Bicycles work well for getting around here. Casa del Mar (see opposite) rents bicycles for US\$5 a day.

XCALAK

Plopped in the middle of nowhere, the rickety wooden houses, beached fishing launches and lazy gliding pelicans make this tiny town a perfect escape. Blessed by virtue of its remoteness and the barrier reef (preventing nearby cruise ships from docking), Xcalak may yet escape the development boom that's dooming its neighbor, Mahahual.

Come here to walk in dusty streets and sip frozen drinks while frigates soar above translucent-green lagoons. Explore a mangrove swamp by kayak, dive Banco Chinchorro's amazing barrier reef, 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 stretching inland from the coastal road hides some large lagoons and forms tunnels that invite the kayaker to explore them. It and the drier forest teem with wildlife and, as well as the usual her-

ons, 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).

With luck, Xcalak's distance from the center of the planned boom will spare it from severe impact. So far it shows no signs of getting a bank or a gas station, so stock up before you come.

Aventuras Xcalak to Chinchorro Dive Center (☎ 983-831-0461; www.xtcdivecenter.com), about 300m north of town on the coast road, offers dive and snorkel trips (US\$94) to the wondrous barrier reef just offshore, and to Banco Chinchorro (three-tank dive US\$175, not including rental gear). It also rents diving equipment and offers PADI open-water certificate for US\$385, 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 from town.

Villas La Guacamaya (☎/fax 983-839-8608; villaslaguacamaya@yahoo.com; Km 10; d low/high season US\$60/100; ☑) You'll be greeted by an exuberant parrot at this quiet place 10km north of Xcalak. It has two 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 free (limited) Internet access, and not only bikes and kayaks for guest use but snorkel gear as well.

Hotel Tierra Maya (☎ 983-836-6171, in USA 800-480-4505; www.tierramaya.net; Km 2; d small/large low season US\$67/78, high season US\$84/95; 🏠) 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. Single rates are about US\$5 less, and air-con (available in some rooms) is US\$15 extra per night. Mains at the pleasant restaurant (dinner only) are around US\$16. Rates include a light buffet breakfast.

Casa Carolina (☎ 983-839-1958; www.casacarolina.net; Km 2.5; d low/high season US\$84/95) 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.

Sonrisa (☎ 983-839-4663; www.playasonrisa.com; Km 7; cabanas from US\$95) Sonrisa offers ‘clothing optional’ European-style sunbathing for couples – and couples only. Come here to lose the tan lines in a low-key, casual setting that includes simple cabanas, a bar-restaurant and friendly owners. Note that the cancellation penalties are steep, so read the website carefully and make sure of your plans. Rates include a continental breakfast.

Eating

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

Leaky Palapa (📞 5-10pm Fri-Mon) Chef and owner, Marla and Linda, have turned an old standby into a new sensation, serving wonderful meals such as lobster in caramel ginger sauce. Opinion was unanimous that this was the best place to go to treat your tastebuds.

Lonchería Silvia’s (mains US\$3.50-9; 📞 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.

Restaurant Bar Xcalak Caribe (mains US\$5-8; 📞 noon-late) An American-run place about two blocks south of the plaza and just across the street from the beach. Diners (and drinkers) sit on the 2nd floor under a *palapa* to eat burgers, fries, fish fingers and fillets. Closes anywhere between 8pm and midnight.

Getting There & Around

Cabs from Limones cost about US\$50 (including to the northern hotels). Buses cost US\$3, 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 US\$10 and available for hire for excursions to further destinations.

LAGUNA BACALAR

A clear, turquoise freshwater lake more than 60km long and with a bottom of gleaming white sand, Laguna Bacalar comes as a surprise in this region of tortured limestone and scrubby jungle. It offers opportunities for camping, swimming, kayaking, bird-watching and lazing. A growing number of foreigners (chiefly Americans and Canadians) have been buying up lakeside lots.

The small, sleepy town of Bacalar lies east of the highway, 125km south of Felipe Carrillo Puerto and 39km north and east of Chetumal. It’s the only settlement of any size on the lake, and is noted mostly for its old Spanish fortress and popular *balneario* (swimming facility). There’s not a lot else going on, but that’s why people like it here. Rumor has it that Chepes, ‘the taco stand mayor,’ still runs a stand even while serving in office, but this has not been confirmed.

The fortress was built above the lagoon to protect citizens from raids by pirates and the indigenous people. It served as an important outpost for the Spanish in the War of the Castes. In 1859 it was seized by Maya rebels, who held the fort until Quintana Roo was finally conquered by Mexican troops in 1901. Today, with formidable cannons still

on its ramparts, the fortress remains an imposing sight. It houses a **museum** exhibiting colonial armaments and uniforms from the 17th and 18th centuries, but at the time of research it had not opened yet following a prolonged remodeling job, in spite of a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

The **balneario** (admission US\$0.50; ☎ 10am-7pm) lies a few hundred meters north along the *costera* (waterfront avenue) below the fort. There are some small restaurants along the avenue and near the *balneario*, which is very busy on weekends.

La Costera South

The *costera* (also known as Calle 1) winds south several kilometers along the lakeshore from Bacalar town to Hwy 307 at Cenote Azul. All the following places to stay and eat are on it, listed from north to south.

Los Coquitos (sites per person US\$4) 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. Water and soft drinks are sometimes for sale.

Casita Carolina (☎ /fax 983-834-2334; www.casita-carolina.com; d US\$25-45; palapa US\$40) 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 (☎ 983-834-2206; fax 983-834-2205; d US\$42; 🍷) 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 (☎ 987-872-3868; www.bacalar.net; d US\$45-55; 🍷) 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 three spacious guest rooms and a comfy shared common area. Breakfast included.

Hostel Ximba Li (☎ 983-834-2516; Av 3 at Calle 30; dm US\$7) This simple new hostel is located a couple of blocks from the lake and a short walk to town. Breakfast included.

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

Getting There & Away

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

Minibuses from Chetumal to the town of Bacalar (US\$1.30, 45 minutes, 39km) depart from the terminal on Primo de Verdad at Hidalgo about once an hour from 5am to 9pm.

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

AROUND BACALAR

A few kilometers north of Bacalar town, right next to the highway, is **Puerto del Cielo Hotel y Restaurante** (☎ /fax 983-837-0413; r US\$30; 🍷 🍷), which offers 12 air-con rooms with hot-water bathrooms and TV. A swimming pool on the grounds overlooks Laguna Bacalar. The restaurant specializes in chicken and fish dishes.

Further north, and 3.2km off the highway, is **Federico's Laguna Azul** (fax 983-834-2035; www.laguna-azul.de; sites per person US\$3.50, screened palapa US\$15, cabana US\$25), a serene, secluded spot located on the north end of Laguna

Bacalar. It has a variety of accommodations, including three well-built and screened cabanas with good private bathrooms, perfect mattresses, tiled floors and a hammock; places to pitch tents or hammocks; eight RV sites with hookups; and immaculate shared bathrooms with hot and cold water. You can rent kayaks here, and eat at the family-style restaurant (you generally eat what's cooking, though they often will prepare other, simple dishes).

The German owner speaks Spanish and very good English, and checks for incoming faxes and email at least once a week. The unpaved road in comes off the east side of Hwy 307, 200m south of the southernmost *tope* in Pedro A Santos, which is about 6km south of the Mahahual junction. You can ask to be let off 2nd-class buses either at the speed bump (and walk the 3.2km in) or in Pedro Santos itself, to take the town's one taxi.

CHETUMAL

☎ 983 / pop 134,400

Anyone who's visited Mexico City will see a lot of the DF in quiet Chetumal: it has stylish, friendly people, great restaurants, a lively music scene, dance clubs that *aren't* packed with tourists, and a whole lot more. The bayside esplanade hosts carnivals and events, and the modern Maya museum is impressive (though a bit short on artifacts). Impressive Maya ruins, amazing jungle and the border to neighboring Belize are all close by. Though sightings are infrequent (there are no tours), manatees can sometimes be seen in the rather muddy bay or nearby mangrove shores. The Free Zone between the two countries makes for interesting shopping (see p150).

Carnaval (late February or early March) is particularly lively in Chetumal. Colorful nightly parades bring throngs of locals into the streets to watch floats and plumed dancers pass by.

Before the Spanish conquest, Chetumal was a Maya port for shipping gold, feathers, cacao and copper to the northern Yucatán Peninsula. After the conquest, the town was not actually settled until 1898, when it was founded to put a stop to the illegal trade in arms and lumber carried on by the descendants of the War of the Castes rebels. Dubbed Payo Obispo, the town changed its

name to Chetumal in 1936. In 1955, Hurricane Janet virtually obliterated it.

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

Orientation & Information

Chetumal is a large city but remains (thanks largely to its network of wide, one-way streets) very 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.

EMERGENCIES

Fire (☎ 066)

Medical (☎ 066)

Police (☎ 066)

INTERNET ACCESS

@**Mercurio** (☎ 832-8548; ☎ 9:30am-9:30pm Mon-Sat)

Web Center (☎ 832-2581; Efraín Aguilar btwn Avs Belice & Héroes; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-1am Mon-Sat, 8am-midnight Sun) Several other similar cafés are nearby.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Both of these places can handle medical emergencies.

Cruz Roja (☎ 832-0571; cnr Avs Independencia & Héroes de Chapultepec)

Hospital Morelos (☎ 832-4595) Just northeast in the same block.

MONEY

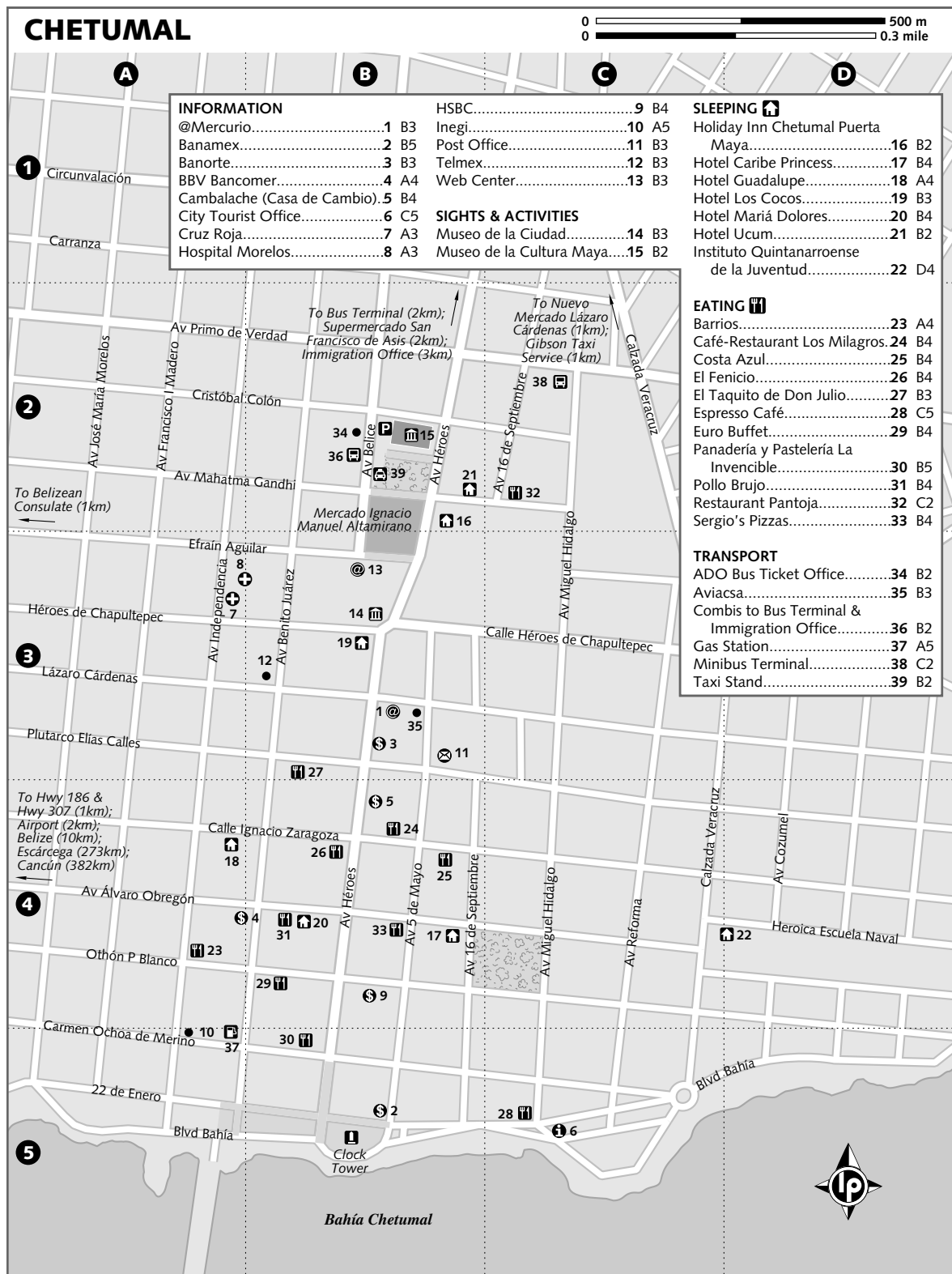
There are several banks and ATMs around town, including an ATM inside the bus terminal.

Cambalache (Av Héroes btwn Calles Plutarco Elías & Ignacio Zaragoza) A currency exchange downtown.

HSBC currency exchange counter (San Francisco de Asís supermarket; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) You can change US dollars here but it only deals with traveler's checks, euros and other currency Monday to Friday. With adjacent ATM, it's just east of the terminal.

POST

Post office (☎ 832-2281; cnr Plutarco Elías Calles & Av 5 de Mayo; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) This is quite central.



TELEPHONE

There is no shortage of public phones around town, from which you can place international calls. The bus terminal also has an international phone and fax service.

Telmex (Calle Lázaro Cárdenas, btwn Aves Independencia & Benito Juárez; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) It's possible to place long-distance calls and send faxes here.

TOURIST INFORMATION

City tourist office (☎ 835-0800; cnr Blvd Bahía & Av Hidalgo; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Sat) Near the waterfront; dispenses advice. There's also an office on Av Carmen Ochoa.

Immigration office (☎ 832-6353; Av Héroe; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri) Far north of downtown, on the left about four blocks north of Av Insurgentes (and the bus terminal). It's open for tourist-card extensions and such.

Tourist information kiosk (☎ 9am-8pm) In the bus terminal, this is usually staffed by an English-speaker and offers a map of the city and information on hotels.

Dangers & Annoyances

Chetumal is generally safe, but be cautious just the same, especially if walking alone late at night. Crime does happen, but it is rarely aimed at tourists.

If you are heading south to Belize be sure to read the boxed text, p149, as an occasional Belizean official may try to extract exorbitant bribes (up to US\$200) for 'resolving' trumped-up visa problems.

Well-dressed swindlers sometimes pretend to be travelers in trouble. They'll start with what seems like an innocent request for assistance finding luggage or a separated relative. There may be creative flourishes, such as the man is a preacher or the relative is desperate for insulin medication or (if you're wearing a Hawaiian shirt) that they've just come from Hawaii. If you listen long enough he will ask for money for a bus ticket to somewhere expensive, like Acapulco.

Sights

MUSEO DE LA CULTURA MAYA

This **museum** (☎ 832-6838; Av Héroes btwn Colón & Av Gandhi; admission US\$5; ☎ 7am-9pm) is the city's claim to cultural fame – a bold showpiece beautifully conceived and executed.

It is organized into three levels, mirroring Maya cosmology. The main floor represents this world, the upper floor the heavens, and the lower floor Xibalbá, the underworld. The various exhibits (labeled in Spanish and English) cover all of the Mayab (lands of the Maya), not just Quintana Roo or Mexico, and seek to explain the Maya way of life, thought and belief. Scale models show the great Maya buildings as they may have appeared, including a temple complex set below plexiglass you can walk over. Though artifacts are in short supply there are replicas of stelae and a burial chamber from Copán, Honduras, reproductions of the murals found in Room 1 at Bonampak and much more. Ingenious mechanical and computer displays graphically illustrate the Maya's complex calendrical, numerical and writing systems.

The museum's **courtyard**, which you can enter for free, has salons for temporary exhibits of modern artists (such as Rufino Tamayo), paintings reproducing Maya fres-

coes and a *cinemuseo* giving free film showings. In the middle of the courtyard is a *Mayana* (thatched hut) with implements of daily Maya life on display: gourds, grinders and a metate. Just walk past the ticket window.

Look for a bronze bust in the middle of Avenida Héroes, just east of the museum's entrance. It depicts Jacinto Pat, one of the Maya leaders who planned the insurrection that became the War of the Castes.

MUSEO DE LA CIUDAD

The **local history museum** (Héroes de Chapultepec btwn Avs Héroes & Benito Juárez; admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) is small but neatly done, displaying historic photos, military artifacts and old-time household items (even some vintage telephones and a TV). All labels are in Spanish but, even if you don't read the language, it's worth visiting for 15 minutes of entertainment.

Sleeping

Instituto Quintanarroense de la Juventud (☎ 832-0525; Heroica Escuela Naval btwn Calzada Veracruz & Av Cozumel; sites US\$3, dm US\$5) Five bucks a night is hard to beat, and extremely kind Spanish-speaking staff will assist with information or answer questions. Downsides include showers that tease with a minute of warmth before turning icy, many toilets flood or don't flush, and most stalls don't have doors. The beds are OK, the rooms are a bit stuffy, and there are single-sex and couples rooms. Seasoned travelers will have stayed in much, much worse; anyone expecting the luxury of hostels north in Tulum or Valladolid will be sorely disappointed.

Hotel María Dolores (☎ 832-0508; Av Álvaro Obregón 206; s US\$22, d without/with air-con US\$24/27) West of Avenida Héroes, this lime-sorbet colored hotel offers reasonable prices. The beds are a bit saggy, but some of the fan-cooled rooms are a good size and there's off-street parking and free bottled water.

Hotel Ucum (☎ 832-0711, 832-6186; Av Mahatma Gandhi 167; d with fan/air-con US\$20/\$35; ☎ ☎) Despite the unfortunate name (a town in Campeche) this is a fine, budget motel-like place with many rooms around a central courtyard/parking lot. It has a (slightly milky) swimming pool and a restaurant serving good, inexpensive food.

(Continued on page 145)

(Continued from page 140)

Hotel Guadalupe (☎ 832-8649; Calle Ignacio Zaragoza 226; s/d/tr with fan US\$22/22/25, with air-con US\$35/35/40; (P) (♿)) Seventeen spic-n-span rooms that are slightly stale smelling but which air out. Peach-pink walls make the place cheery, and the staff are very friendly. You could eat dinner off the spotless floors.

Hotel Caribe Princess (☎ /fax 832-0900; Av Álvaro Obregón 168; s/d/tr US\$39/46/56; (P) (♿)) A friendly, well-run place with an expansive lobby and comfy sofas. All rooms have air-con, phone and TV, and there's off-street parking.

Hotel Los Cocos (☎ 832-0544; www.hotelloscocos.com.mx; cnr Av Héroes & Calle Héroes de Chapultepec; d with air-con & TV US\$75-90, ste US\$100-160; (♿) (♿) (♿)) Has a great location, nice swimming pool, wireless access, a guarded parking lot and a popular sidewalk restaurant. Rooms have fridges, but are a bit small and musty for the price.

Holiday Inn Chetumal Puerta Maya (☎ 835-0400; www.holiday-inn.com/chetumalmex; Av Héroes 171; d US\$130, ste US\$169-353; (♿)) The best in town, with comfortable rooms that overlook a small courtyard, a swimming pool set amid tropical gardens, and a restaurant and bar. The Maya sun mirror in the lobby adds interesting flair.

Eating & Drinking

Panadería y Pastelería La Invencible (☎ 832-0685; Calle Carmen Ochoa de Merino; breads US\$1-4 (☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat) West of Avenida Héroes, this bakery produces excellent pastries of a quality well above the usual Mexican standard.

Barrios (cnr Othón P Blanco & Independencia; mains US\$1-5; (☎) 8am-2pm Mon-Sat) Great little eatery with Mexican favorites such as *salbutes* or *quesadillas* and *cebada*, a refreshing barley drink.

Café-Restaurant Los Milagros (☎ 832-4433; Calle Ignacio Zaragoza btwn Avs 5 de Mayo & Héroes; breakfast US\$2.50-7, mains US\$4-6; (☎) 7:30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 7:30am-1pm Sun) Serves great espresso and food indoors and outdoors. A favorite with Chetumal's student and intellectual set, it's also a place to play chess or dominoes, chat, or observe a local radio program being broadcast from one of the tables.

Espresso Café (☎ 832-5752; cnr 22 de Enero & Av Miguel Hidalgo; breakfast US\$2.50-3.50, sandwiches US\$3-4.50, mains US\$6-8.50; (☎) 8am-midnight) Facing the bay, it has an upscale ambience and a good

selection of omelets and other breakfasts; the *huevos chetumaleños* (eggs, cheese, *chaya* – a spinach-like vegetable, tomato and onion, US\$4.50) are excellent. A full range of coffee rounds out the morning meal. Among the other offerings are sandwiches, great smoothies, salads and various cuts of meat. It can get smoky at times, as smoking is allowed.

Restaurant Pantoja (☎ 832-3957; cnr Av Mahatma Gandhi & 16 de Septiembre; mains US\$3-7; (☎) 7am-7pm) A popular, family-run restaurant serving breakfasts, enchiladas and a variety of meat dishes. It offers a US\$4 *menu del día*. Fan-cooled, it gets a bit warm in the pm.

El Taquito de Don Julio (Plutarco Elías Calles 220; tacos US\$0.80-1.20, mains US\$7; (☎) noon-5pm & 7pm-1am Mon-Sat) This is an airy, simple dining room and a good spot for night owls. The small tacos cost slightly more with cheese; other menu offerings include cheap snacks, *tortas* and vegetarian brochettes (US\$3.50).

El Fenicio (cnr Av Héroes & Calle Ignacio Zaragoza; mains US\$3.50-8; (☎) 24hr) Come here at 11pm and you'll feel like you've stepped into a Hopper painting: the yellow light, the few solitary diners hunched over a meal. The food, a selection of mainly Mexican fare, is tasty and served promptly. Flan and decent American-style coffee are a tasty way to finish the day.

Pollo Brujo (☎ 837-4747; Av Álvaro Obregón 208; (☎) 10am-10pm) West of Hotel María Dolores. A roasted half chicken costs US\$3.60, a whole one US\$7.20; take it with you or dine in the air-con salon. Service is with a snarl.

Sergio's Pizzas (☎ 832-2991; cnr Avs Álvaro Obregón & 5 de Mayo; pizza US\$4.50-17, mains US\$6-16) A well air-conditioned place serving pizzas and cold beer in frosted mugs, plus Mexican and continental dishes, steaks and seafood, complemented by an extensive wine list.

Costa Azul (☎ 129-2002; Calle Ignacio Zaragoza 166; mains US\$6-12; (☎) 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.

Euro Buffet (Othón P Blanco btwn Avs Benito Juárez & Héroes; (☎) 11am-5pm Mon-Fri) Offering build-your-own salads and a buffet-style selection of mains, Euro Buffet is a good choice for vegetarians. However, it is not strictly vegetarian; some dishes may have meat, so ask if in doubt. Priced by the kilo, a good sized plate can be yours for US\$9.

Across from the Holiday Inn is the Mercado Ignacio Manuel Altamirano and its row of small, simple eateries serving inexpensive meals. Similar is the upstairs area in the **Nuevo Mercado Lázaro Cárdenas** (Calzada Veracruz).

Supermercado San Francisco de Asís, just east of the bus terminal, has a wide selection of groceries, and is a full department store besides.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Chetumal's small airport is less than 2km northwest of the city center along Avenida Obregón.

Aviaca (☎ 832-7765, airport 832-7787; cnr Lázaro Cárdenas & Av 5 de Mayo) flies to Mexico City once a day Sunday to Friday.

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

BUS

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

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** (Calzada Veracruz at Confederación Nacional Campesina, also called Segundo Circuito), about 10 blocks north of Avenida Primo de Verdad. From this market, most 1st-class Belize-bound buses continue to the long-distance terminal and depart from there 15 minutes later; the 2nd-class buses don't. Tickets can be purchased on board the buses or (1st-class only) at the main terminal. There's usually a Belizean driver who can give information (in English and Spanish) at the café on the corner of the market parking lot.

The **minibus terminal** (cnr Avs Primo de Verdad & Miguel Hidalgo) has services to Bacalar and

other nearby destinations. Departures listed in the table are from the main terminal unless otherwise noted.

TAXI

Gibson Taxi Service (gibsoncompany2003@yahoo.com) charges US\$25/40 to the border/Corozal. Run by a father-daughter team, they are friendly, helpful and (because they're from Belize) English speaking. Though pricier than a bus, their taxi can wait for you and they can assist with border problems if you encounter corrupt guards (see the boxed text, p149).

Getting Around

From anywhere in town taxis charge a flat fare of US\$1.50 to the bus station. Getting a taxi at the ADO station is US\$2. Walking outside and flagging one down from the street will save you US\$0.50.

Taxis from the stand at the bus terminal charge US\$0.90 to US\$1 to the center (agree on the price before getting in, as some will try to charge per person). If you can't get a fair price, walk to the street (Avenida Insurgentes), turn left (east), and walk a little over a block to the traffic circle at Avenida Héroes to hail a taxi. From here you can also catch the cheapest ride to the center (US\$0.20 per person) in an eastbound ('Santa María' or 'Calderitas') *combi* (van). The route will be circuitous. To reach the terminal from the center, head for the *combi* and taxi stands on Avenida Belice behind the Museo de la Cultura Maya. If you're traveling by *combi*, ask to be dropped off at the *glorieta* (traffic circle) at Avenida Insurgentes. Head left (west) to reach the terminal. You can reach the immigration office via the same *combis*; it's 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** (☎ 8am-5pm). At the time of research, one admission ticket got you into both, and tourists were also free on Sunday (this may vary based on the person collecting the fee). As at most Maya sites charging an entry fee, the use of a video camera requires you to pay an extra US\$3 at the first site visited, which gives you a slip you can use all day, at as many sites as you can reach.

BUS SERVICES FROM CHETUMAL

Destination	Cost	Duration	Departures
Bacalar	US\$1.80-2.10	45min	hourly minibuses from minibus terminal; many Mayab buses from main terminal
Belize City, Belize	US\$7-8	3-4hr	18 1st- & 2nd-class Novelos & Northern buses depart from Nuevo Mercado btwn 4:30am & 6:30pm, some depart main terminal 15min later
Campeche	US\$16-23	6½-9hr	1 ADO bus at noon, TRT buses at 4:15am & 2:15pm
Cancún	US\$15-20	5½-6½hr	many buses
Corozal, Belize	US\$2-3	1hr with border formalities	18 1st- & 2nd-class Venus & other buses depart Nuevo Mercado btwn 4:30am & 6:30pm, some depart main terminal 15min later
Escárcega	US\$12-15	4-6hr	5 buses btwn 4:15am & 10:30pm
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	US\$5.60-8	2-3hr	many buses
Flores, Guatemala (for Tikal)	US\$21-5	8hr	5 Servicio San Juan, Linea Dorado & Mundo Maya buses btwn 6:20am & 2:30pm
Mahahual	US\$4	4hr	2nd-class buses at 4am, 6am & 3:15pm
Merída	US\$17-29	6-8hr	8 Omnitur del Caribe & Super Expreso buses, 3 Mayab buses
Orange Walk, Belize	US\$3-4.50	2¼hr	18 1st- & 2nd-class Novelos & Northern buses depart Nuevo Mercado btwn 4:30am & 6:30pm, some depart main terminal 15min later
Palenque	US\$19-32,	7-8hr	4 Altos & Colón buses
Playa del Carmen	US\$13-16.50	4½-6hr	many buses
Ticul	US\$14.50	6hr	6 Mayab buses
Tulum	US\$11-13.40,	3½-4hr	many buses
Valladolid	US\$13,	6hr	6 Mayab buses
Veracruz	US\$59	16hr	2 ADO buses
Villahermosa	US\$32	7-9hr	5 ADO buses
Xcalak	US\$5	5hr	2nd-class buses at 4am, 6am & 3:15pm
Xpujil	US\$5-7	2-3hr	9 buses btwn 4:15am & 10:30pm

Sights**DZIBANCHÉ**

Though it's a chore to get to, this **site** (admission US\$3.50, Sun free) is definitely worth a visit for its secluded, semiwild nature and forest setting (plus some cool temples). 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. The site itself is only partially cleared of brush, and contains many trees, some bearing Spanish moss, bromeliads, cacti or a combination of same. These and the flocks of parrots that fly around screeching add to the charm; if you're quiet, you may see agoutis foraging.

The first restored structure you come to is Edificio 6, the Palacio de los Dinteles (Palace of the Lintels), which gave the site its name. This is a perfect spot to orient yourself for the rest of the site: facing the *palacio's* steps, you are looking east. It's a pyramid topped by a temple with two vaulted galleries; the base dates from the early Classic period (AD 300-600), while the temple is from the late Classic period (AD 600-900). Climb the steps and stand directly under the original lintel on the right (south) side of the temple. Looking up you can see a Maya calendrical inscription with the date working out to AD 733. This is some old wood.

TINY TRAIL-BLAZERS

The many small trails you'll see crisscrossing the cleared areas in many of the ruins baffle observant visitors. What made them? A rodent? To get the answer right you have to think tiny: ants.

Leaf-cutter ants, to be specific. Sometimes marching up to several kilometers from their colony, leaf-cutter ants walk in single file along predetermined routes, often wearing down a pathway over a period of months or years. Patient observers can often see the tiny landscapers at work, carrying fingernail-sized clippings back home.

Though they can bite if molested, these ants are generally harmless and should be left in peace to do their work. In Cobá (p127) there are several ant trails that run in perfect parallel along the *sacbeob* (stone-paved avenues), as if the Maya had created ant-only lanes alongside their own.

On descending, head to your left (south) and thread between a mound on the right and a low, mostly restored, stepped structure on the left. This structure is Edificio 16, Palacio de los Tucanes; in the center from the side you first approach on are the visible remains of posts that bore a mask. But the path brings you into Plaza Gann. Circling it counterclockwise takes you past Edificio 14 (stuck onto the north side of a larger building), decorated at the base with *tamborcillos* (little drums), in late Classic Río Bec style – look up the dirt hill to see them. The larger building to the south is Edificio 13, Templo de los Cautivos, so named for the carvings in its steps of captives submitting to whatever captives submitted to in those days. This seems to be the dominant (if you'll pardon the pun) theme in most Maya stelae.

On the east side of the plaza is Dzibanché's highest structure, the Templo de los Cormoranes (Cormorants; Edificio 2), whose upper structure has been restored, while the lower part remains covered in greenery. A vaulted passage beckons halfway up, but at last pass it was forbidden to climb the temple.

Exit the plaza by climbing the stone steps to the north of Edificio 2, noting the imposing *copó* tree (source of the fragrant copal incense) on your left growing out of the corner of the Palacio Norte. At the top of the stairs is Plaza del Xibalbá (Plaza of the Underworld), though it's higher than Plaza Gann.

Opposite Palacio Norte is, of course, Palacio Sur, and you can now see more of Edificio 2, but the most notable building is across the plaza: Edificio 1, the Templo del Buho (Temple of the Owl). It had an inner chamber with a stairway leading down to another chamber, in which were found the remains of a Very Important Person-

age (VIP) and burial offerings. The nearly 360-degree views from the very top of the temple (it's a bit dicey, so be careful) are quite impressive. You can see Grupo Lamay to the west and may spot Kinich-Ná, more than 2km to the northwest.

Kinich-Ná

Part of Dzibanché but well removed from the main site, Kinich-Ná consists of one building. But what a building: the megalithic Acrópolis held at least five temples on three levels, and a couple more dead VIPs with offerings. The site's name derives from the frieze of the Maya sun god once found at the top of the structure. It's an easy drive of 2km along a narrow but good road leading north from near Dzibanché's visitors center.

KOHUNLICH

The most accessible of the corridor's ruins has nearly 200 mounds still covered in vegetation. The surrounding jungle is thick and worthy of a visit just to feel like you're stepping back into the Jurassic age. The **archaeological site** (admission US\$4, Sun free) itself has been cleared selectively and is now a delightful forest park and very compact. Drinks are sometimes sold at the site, and it has toilets.

The ruins, dating from both the late pre-Classic (AD 100–200) and the early Classic (AD 300–600) periods, are famous for the great **Templo de los Mascarones** (Temple of the Masks), a pyramidlike structure with a central stairway flanked by huge, 3m-high stucco masks of the sun god. The thick lips and prominent features are reminiscent of Olmec sculpture. Of the eight original masks, only two are relatively intact following the ravages of archaeological looters.

The masks themselves are impressive, but you can only see them from close up because the large thatch coverings that have been erected to protect them from further weathering obscure the view. Try to imagine what the pyramid and its red masks must have looked like in the old days as the Maya approached them across the sunken courtyard at the front.

A few hundred meters southwest of Plaza Merwin are the **27 Escalones** (27 Steps), the remains of an extensive residential area, with photogenic trees growing out of the steps themselves.

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

Getting There & Away

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

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

At the time of writing, there was no public transportation running directly to either of the sites. They're best visited by car,

NO-MAN'S LAND

'No-Man's Land' is the strip of territory after the Mexican exit but before you've crossed into Belize. Many tourists head to Chetumal expecting to make a quick zip across the border and back to renew their tourist card. While most tourists cross without problem, the occasional unscrupulous official will invent an excuse to not let you through even though that is perfectly legitimate.

Often they'll say there's a 'Minimum 72-hour stay in Belize.' (There isn't.) Or they'll claim that you need a Mexican re-entry stamp for them to let you through. (You don't.) Sometimes they'll say that Belize doesn't welcome day trips, as 'tourists don't spend enough money in their country.' (The Belizean Consulate says trips, even day trips, across the border are perfectly fine, as do the Mexican officials.)

If a guard decides to single you out, there's not a lot you can do other than pay up or beg your way back into Mexico and try again.

It's better to avoid being targeted. The following should help:

- Group up with other foreign travelers, even if you're heading separate ways.
- If you're on a bus, get toward the front of the line so that other people will be around to witness if you're being hassled.
- Get visas and other papers stamped at the Belize office in Chetumal prior to crossing.
- Don't disclose that you're intending a day trip, and look like you're heading through for a long time by bringing your whole backpack instead of a day pack.
- Even if you are not planning to return to Mexico, if you have more than a few days left on your tourist card you can have it prestamped for a re-entry by Mexican exit officials. This costs only US\$10 and is a good way to ensure a smooth crossing onward, as the Belize guards know you have the 'luxury' of returning to Mexico without needing a new card.
- Stay calm and be polite if you are not let through, and insist on speaking to a superior. Often the yellow-shirted guards are more understanding and helpful than the white-shirted officials behind the desk.
- Crossing back into Mexico, be sure to check that your Belize exit stamp is clear and easy to read, with the official's signature and the date written inside. An occasional trick is to hold the passport out of sight and stamp another piece of paper, then hand the closed, unstamped passport back to the unsuspecting traveler. Checking the stamp will save you heartache (and dinero!) at the Mexican border.

though Kohunlich could conceivably be reached by taking an early bus to the village of Francisco Villa near the turnoff, then either hitchhiking or walking the 8.5km to the site. To return by bus to Chetumal or head west to Xpujil or Escárcega you must hope to flag down a bus on the highway; not all buses will stop.

Taxis can be rented per hour in Chetumal for as little as US\$15; a group could pile in and split the cost.

Tour operators in Xpujil (see p233) offer trips to Kohunlich and Dzibanché for US\$75.

ZONA LIBRE

A bustling free-trade zone sprawling over 24 muddy hectares in a no-man's land between the borders of Belize and Mexico, the Zona Libre draws thousands of Mexicans seeking cheap liquor and cigarettes, knockoff clothing and CDs and other shiny things. Before Christmas time and at other busy shopping periods, up to 18,000 vehicles a day line up to enter the Zone, including charter buses from Mérida and even as far as Mexico City. Two casinos should draw even more people when they open.

East Indian, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and other merchants hawk 'Puwa' sportswear, 'Abidas' sneakers, T-shirts and some genuine-brand goods. About the only real bargains are on liquor and cigarettes, though if you look hard you can sometimes find fair hiking boots, trousers with zip-off legs and the like. Mountain-type bicycles with shocks and gears can be had for as little as US\$50. At that price, when it breaks you can just give it away.

Minibuses depart from their terminal in Chetumal at the corner of Avs Primo de Verdad and Hidalgo about every half hour between 6am and 9pm, charging US\$0.80 for the 20-minute trip. If traffic is bad at the border you can get off and walk over the bridge, then turn left; you can't miss it.

Walking back you may need to show your passport, but usually officials will just ask where you've been and wave you through.

SOUTH TO BELIZE & GUATEMALA

Corozal

☎ 501 / pop 8000

This fairly laid-back town, 18km south of the Mexico–Belize border, is an appropriate introduction to English-speaking Belize. It has several hotels and restaurants catering to a full range of budgets, and makes a fun visit, though it's markedly different than cosmopolitan Chetumal. There's a simple plaza in the center, a waterfront, and a lot of chickens running around. A Belize Bank with an ATM is at the plaza. Several radio stations offer a more cross-cultural selection of tunes than is available north of the border.

All these places are within a five-minute walk from the bus stop.

Corozal Guest House (☎ 422-0634; 6th Ave No 22; US\$45; ☒) 'Your Friendly Guest House' and indeed it is. Muslim owned, it's clean and simple, with spacious rooms, towels and soap.

Marvitor Guest House (☎ 623-7853; 2nd St No 16; US\$40-50) Airy rooms can harbor mosquitoes at night, but are clean and pretty, with pale teal paint and simple beds.

Both **Al's Cafe** (☎ 8am-3pm) and **Jo Mel In** (☎ 6:30am-3pm Mon-Sat) offer inexpensive Belizean meals.

Gilharry Bus service, across the street, has US\$2 rides to the Belize–Mexico border.

Buses run directly from Chetumal's market to Belize City via Corozal (US\$3) and Orange Walk (US\$6); all connect with buses to Melchor de Mencos in Guatemala. From there continue onward to Flores, the superb Maya site of Tikal and other points in Guatemala. There are also buses from Chetumal to Flores (Tikal is an hour beyond Flores). See p146 for details. Taxis will take you from Chetumal to the border for US\$5.

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