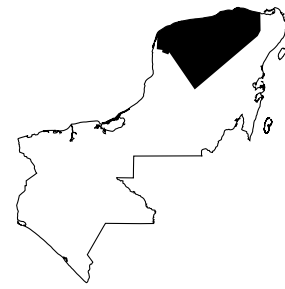


Yucatán State



Yucatán state sits at the northern tip of the peninsula, a thick slice of pie pointing southward. Chichén Itzá, one of the most famous Maya ruins, is the area's prime attraction; however, ruin hunters will not want to miss Uxmal, Ek' Balam, and the Ruta Puuc. Beautiful, enigmatic and sinister, these monuments still speak of Maya sacrifice to placate the sun gods. Walk among the structures for an hour or two and you'll want to appease those same gods. It can get *hot* here.

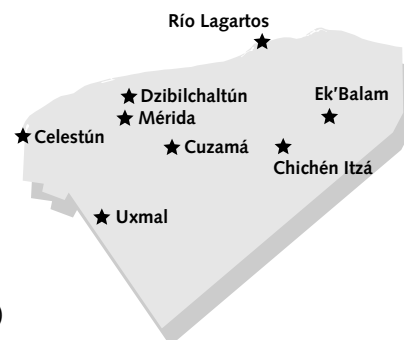
If ruins aren't your thing, you'll find natural beauty, giant ceiba trees, stark desert, untouched villages, and the region's capital, Mérida: a bustling, modern metropolis with a nice mix of youthful energy and old colonial charm. Valladolid is roughly between Cancún and Mérida. It has swimmable, otherworldly cenotes, yummy restaurants, and makes a great hub for day trips to the area's many wonders. Ruined henequen haciendas throughout the region speak of bygone plantation days; the ubiquitous churches tell tales of colonization and missionary zeal.

On the local roads you'll pass villagers on pedibikes, cutting firewood or hunting birds, see ancient churches whose histories have been lost, and find henequen fields still owned by *ejidos* (communes). The people, mostly of Maya descent, are shy but helpful; most are curious about strangers and will be happy to help answer questions, though English speakers are few.

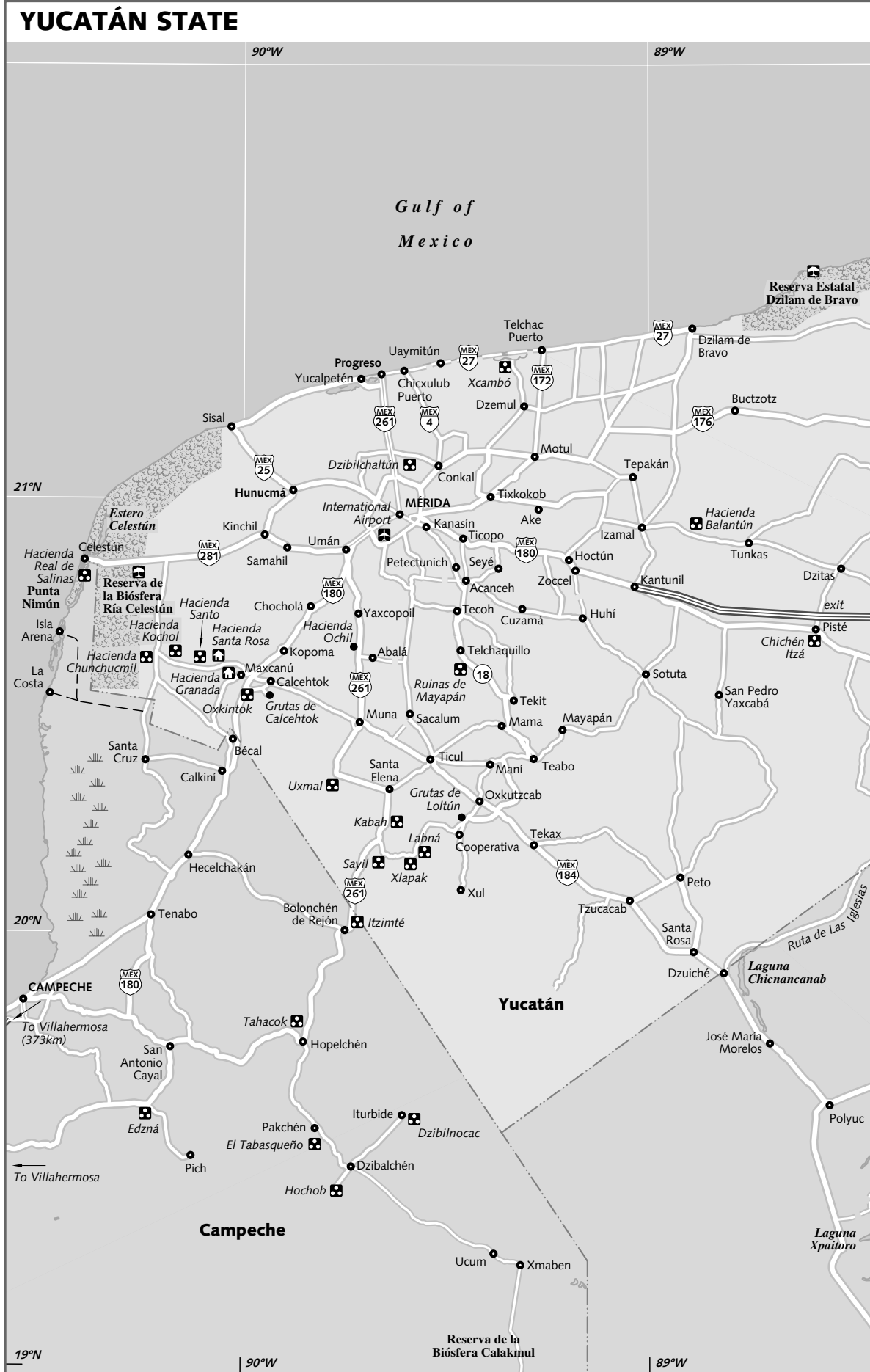
Plenty of tourists never make it beyond Cancún, which is a shame: Yucatán state is steeped in history and is markedly less touristy than the Riviera Maya. Even the beach locations of Progreso and Celestún have far more locals visiting and are much more low key. The beaches offer fantastic sunbathing, and nearby lagoons are excellent for birders to see unusual red flamingos, roseate spoonbills, storks and many more. Prices in the state are much lower than in Cancún, and decent roads and frequent buses make getting here easy.

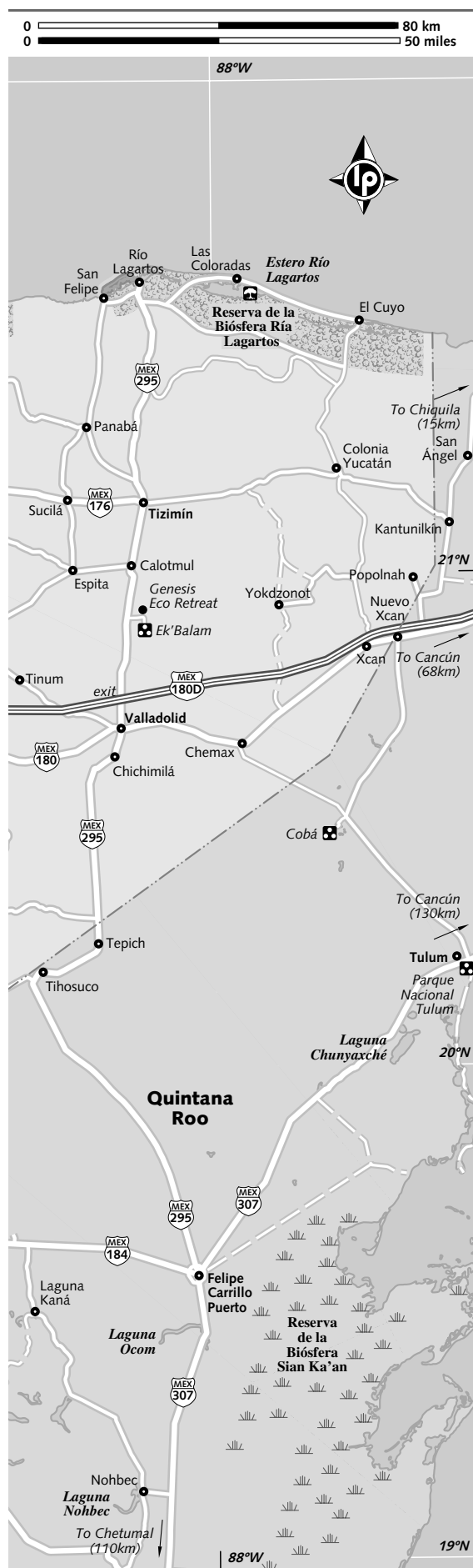
HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at **Mérida** (p153), a city rich in beautiful colonial architecture and history
- Discover mysteries in the great Toltec-Maya ceremonial centers of **Chichén Itzá** (p191) and **Dzibilchaltún** (p187)
- Hunt for flamingos and crocodiles amongst the mangroves of **Reserva de la Biósfera Ría Celestún** (p184) or **Río Lagartos** (p204)
- See amazingly preserved façades in **Ek' Balam** (p202) and the superb ornamentation of **Uxmal** (p172)
- Ride a horse-drawn train cart and stop at swimmable cenotes in **Cuzamá** (p180)



YUCATÁN STATE





MÉRIDA

☎ 999 / pop 920,000

For those arriving via Cancún and heading southward through the rest of Mexico, Mérida offers the first glimpse of what's to come: beautiful Spanish-colonial buildings line the narrow streets, the markets offer a cornucopia of fruits and vegetables, and restaurants offer cheap, delicious Mexican, fusion or Yucatecan food. Numerous parks and plazas make it prettier than many other Mexican cities of a similar size. Excellent museums make it easy to fill up an afternoon, and its central location allows day trips and tours to beaches, ruins, jungles, cenotes, and more. A number of inexpensive hostels and hotels make lengthy stays possible.

The downsides here are the sweltering heat, pollution and traffic, and over-energetic hawkers selling everything from hammocks to shot glasses, often at inflated prices.

HISTORY

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

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

During the War of the Castes (see p32), only Mérida and Campeche were able to hold out against the rebel forces. On the brink of surrender, the ruling class in Mérida was saved by reinforcements sent from central Mexico in exchange for Mérida's agreement to take orders from Mexico City. Although Yucatán is certainly part of Mexico, there is still a strong feeling in Mérida and other parts of the state that the local people stand a breed apart.

Mérida today is the peninsula's center of commerce, a bustling city that has benefited greatly from the *maquiladoras* (assembly plants) that opened in the 1980s and 1990s and the tourism industry industry that picked up during those decades.

ORIENTATION

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

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

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

INFORMATION

Bookstores

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

Emergency

Emergency (☎ 066)

Fire (☎ 924-9242)

Police (☎ 925-2034)

Red Cross (☎ 924-9813)

Tourism Police (☎ 930-3200 ext 40062)

Internet Access

Most Internet places around town charge US\$1 per hour and allow use in smaller increments of time. The following have good connections and air-con.

Cibercafé Santa Lucía (cnr Calles 55 & 62; 🕒 8am-1am) Has free coffee while you surf and is one of the few stores to sell the delicious Mexican Jarritos-brand sodas.

Cybernet (Calle 57A btwn Calles 58 & 60; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Sat) Has several terminals and is conveniently located.

Internet Resources

www.maps-of-mexico.com/merida_mexico_maps.shtml (Interactive maps.)

www.merida.gob.mx (Mérida's government site; in Spanish only.)

www.Yucatántoday.com (Excellent source of info about the state of Yucatán.)

Laundry

Most upmarket hotels offer overnight a laundry service.

Lavandería La Fe (☎ 924-4531; Calle 64 btwn Calles 55 & 57; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) Charges US\$4 per 3kg load (less for smaller loads) to wash and dry.

Medical Services

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 924-9813)

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

Money

Banks and ATMs are scattered throughout the city. There is a cluster of both along Calle 65 between Calles 60 and 62, one block south of the Plaza Grande. Most are open 9am to 4pm Monday to Friday, and some are also open 9am to 1pm or 2pm on Saturday.

Casas de cambio (exchange houses) offer faster service and longer hours than banks, but often with poorer rates.

Cambistas Peninsulares (Calle 60 btwn Calles 55 & 57)

Central Cambiaria (Calle 65 btwn Calles 62 & 60)

Money Marketing (Parque Hidalgo) In the Gran Hotel.

Post

At the time of writing, the **main post office** (☎ 921-2561; Calle 65 btwn Calles 56 & 56A; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, for stamps only 9am-1pm Sat) was just north of the market, but it is slated to become a museum, with the new post office to be located on Calle 53.

There are **postal service booths** (🕒 Mon-Fri) at the airport and CAME (pronounced ka-meh) bus terminal.

Telephone

Card phones can be found throughout the city, and Internet cafés also offer VOIP-based phone services.

Toilets

In the CAME bus terminal there are pay toilets (US\$0.30). Curiously, in the market on Calle 70, there is a pay toilet that charges US\$0.30 for 'number 1' and US\$0.60 for 'number 2.' No word what happens if you change your mind in midablution.

Many Internet cafés have a small toilet that paying customers can use. Bring your own toilet paper, and be sure all used paper is put in the trash can, not flushed.

Tourist Information

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

City tourist office (☎ 942-0000 ext 80119; Calle 62 on Plaza Grande; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) Just south of the main entrance to the Palacio Municipal, it is staffed with helpful English speakers who provide probably the best city information of the three offices, and can give hotel and shopping recommendations.

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

Tourist Information Center (☎ 924-9290; cnr Calles 60 & 57A; ☎ 8am-9pm) Less than two blocks north of the state tourist office, on the southwest edge of the Teatro Peón Contreras, is this office used for training tourism students. The verbal information is so-so, but it has a good supply of brochures, maps of downtown Mérida and the peninsula, and a list of hotels. There's always an English-speaker on hand, and sometimes a speaker of Italian or French.

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

Travel Agencies

Nómadas Travel (☎ 948-1187; www.nomadastravel.com.mx; Prolongación Paseo de Montejo No 370, Colonia Benito Juárez Norte) It's out of the way in the north of town, but Nómadas Travel books flights, selling both SATA (student discount) and IATA (regular) tickets. You can also

make itinerary changes and buy the ISIC (International Student Identity Card) and ITIC (for teachers), and get help with ISIS (student insurance) matters.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Guard against pickpockets, bag-snatchers and bag-slashers in the market 70 district and in any crowd, but outright muggings are very rare. Much more scary are the buses that travel at breakneck speed along the narrow streets; sidewalks are often narrow and crowded.

Hawkers are annoying but generally harmless. Report the more obnoxious ones to Mérida's **Policía Turística** (Tourist Police; ☎ 925-2555 ext 260), who wear brown-and-white uniforms; during the day you can almost always find an officer at the Palacio de Gobierno or elsewhere on the Plaza Grande.

SIGHTS

Plaza Grande

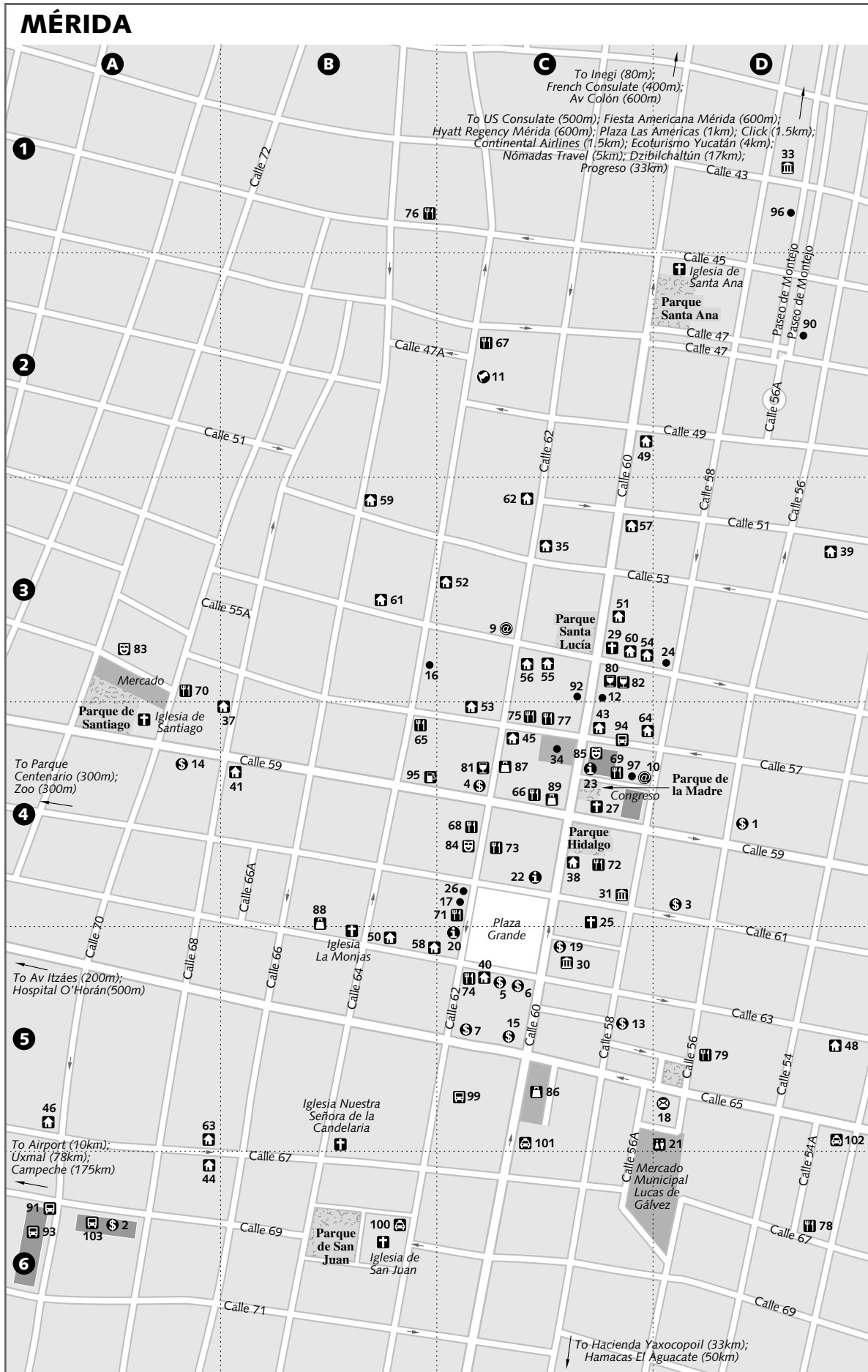
'El Centro' is one of the nicest plazas in Mexico. Huge laurel trees shade the park's benches and wide sidewalks, and it is surrounded by a bustle of pedestrians who shop or sip coffee at the many open-air cafés. It was the religious and social center of ancient T'ho; under the Spanish it was the Plaza de Armas, the parade ground, laid out by Francisco de Montejo the Younger. A ceremony is held daily marking the raising and lowering of the Mexican flag. On Sunday hundreds of *Méridanos* take their *paseo* (stroll) here.

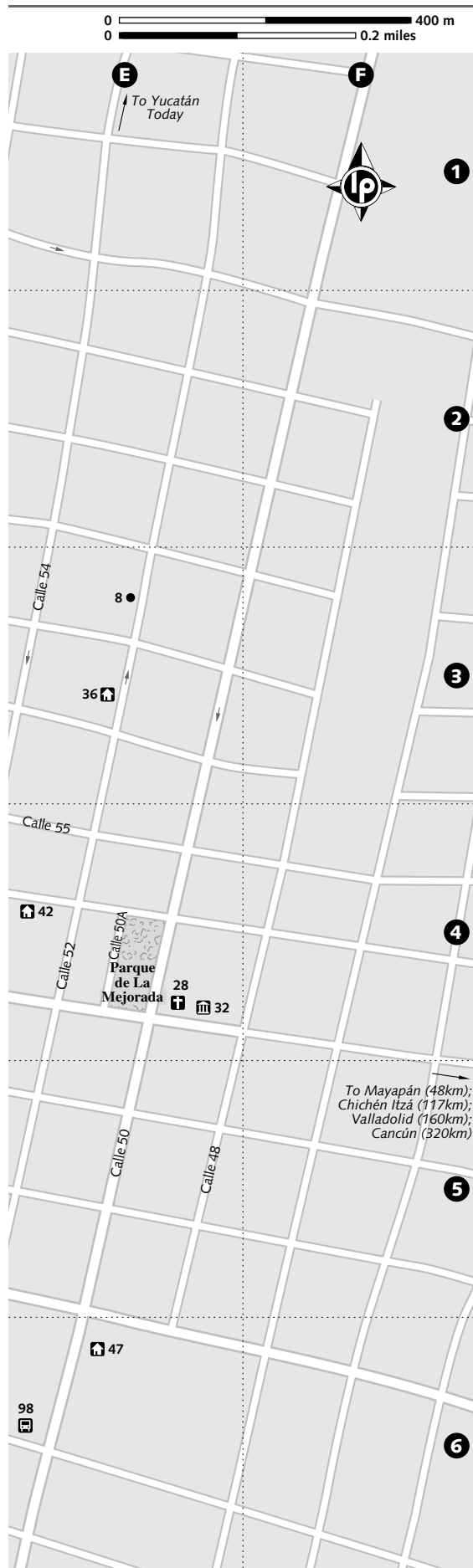
CATEDRAL DE SAN ILDEFONSO

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

In the small chapel to the left of the altar is Mérida's most famous religious artifact,

YUCATÁN STATE





a statue called **Cristo de las Ampollas** (Christ of the Blisters). Local legend says the statue was carved from a tree that was hit by lightning and burned for an entire night without charring. It is also said to be the only object to have survived the fiery destruction of the church in the town of Ichmul (though it was blackened and blistered from the heat). The statue was moved to the Mérida's cathedral in 1645.

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

AROUND THE CATHEDRAL

South of the cathedral, housed in the former archbishop's palace, is the **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Ateneo de Yucatán** (Macay; ☎ 928-3236; Calle 60 btwn Calles 61 & 63; admission free; 🕒 10am-6pm Wed-Mon, enter before 5pm). This attractive museum holds permanent exhibits of Yucatán's most famous painters and sculptors, changing exhibits of local arts and crafts, and a cafeteria.

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

Across the square from the cathedral is Mérida's **Palacio Municipal** (City Hall). Originally built in 1542, it was twice refurbished, in the 1730s and the 1850s. Adjoining it is the **Olimpo**, Mérida's municipal cultural center. Attempts to create a modern exterior for the building were halted by government

INFORMATION		Museo Regional de Antropología (Palacio Cantón)..... 33 D1	Main St..... 72 C4
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Bancomer (ATM).....	3 D4		Pop Cafetería..... 75 C4
Bancomer ATM.....	4 C4		Restaurant Kantún..... 76 B1
Bancomer ATM.....	5 C5	SLEEPING	Restaurante Pórtico del Peregrino..... 77 C4
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Lavandería La Fe.....	16 B3	Hotel D'Champs..... 46 A5	Cines Rex..... 83 A3
Librería Dante.....	17 C4	Hotel del Mayab..... 47 E6	Teatro Mérida..... 84 C4
Librería Dante.....(see 89)		Hotel Dolores Alba..... 48 D5	Teatro Peón Contreras..... 85 C4
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		La Flor de Santiago..... 70 A3	
		La Vía Olimpio..... 71 C4	

order, to preserve the colonial character of the plaza. The ultramodern interior serves as a venue for music and dance performances (see p167) as well as other exhibitions. Schedules for performances and frequent film showings are posted outside.

On the north side of the plaza, the **Palacio de Gobierno** (admission free; ☎ 8am-10pm) houses the state of Yucatán's executive government offices (and one of its tourist information centers). It was built in 1892 on the site of the palace of the colonial governors. Be sure to have a look inside at the murals painted by local artist Fernando Castro Pacheco. Completed in 1978, they were 25 years in the making and portray a symbolic history of the Maya and their interaction with the Spaniards.

Museo de la Ciudad

The **city museum** (☎ 923-6869; Calle 61 btwn Calles 58 & 60; admission free; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat & Sun) is small but worthwhile visiting, with artifacts, exhibits and good photos of the city and region. Signs in English explain such subjects as Maya traditions, history and the process of henequen (sisal) production (for more on henequen, see p187).

Calle 60

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

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

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

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

Paseo de Montejo

The Paseo de Montejo, which runs parallel to Calles 56 and 58, was an attempt by Mérida's 19th-century city planners to create a wide boulevard similar to the Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City or the Champs Élysées in Paris. Though more modest than

its predecessors, the Paseo de Montejo is still a beautiful swath of green, relatively open space in an urban conglomeration of stone and concrete.

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

Museo Regional de Antropología

The great white Palacio Cantón houses the **Regional Anthropology Museum of the Yucatán** (☎ 923-0557; cnr Paseo de Montejo & Calle 43; admission US\$3.30; ☎ 8am-8pm Tue-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun). Construction of the mansion lasted from 1909 to 1911, and its owner, General Francisco Cantón Rosado (1833-1917), lived here for only six years before his death. The palace's splendor and pretension make it a fitting symbol of the grand aspirations of Mérida's elite during the last years of the *porfiriato*, the period from 1876 to 1911 when Porfirio Díaz held despotic sway over Mexico.

The museum covers the peninsula's history since the age of mastodons. Exhibits on Maya culture include explanations (many in Spanish only) of such cosmetic practices

SIGNS O' THE TIMES

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

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

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

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

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

as forehead-flattening (done to beautify babies) causing eyes to cross and sharpening teeth and implanting them with tiny jewels. If you plan to visit archaeological sites near Mérida, you can study the exhibits here – some with plans and photographs – covering the great Maya cities of Mayapán, Uxmal and Chichén Itzá, as well as lesser-known sites such as the marvelous Ek' Balam. There's also a good bookstore with many archaeological titles.

Parque Centenario

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

Museo Nacional de Arte Popular

The **National Museum of Popular Art** (Calle 59 btwn Calles 48 & 50; admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat) is six blocks east of the Plaza Grande and holds displays of the best of local arts and crafts. It will satisfy your curiosity about the embroidering of colorful *huipiles* (embroidered tunics), carving of ceremonial masks, weaving of hammocks and hats, turning of pottery and construction of musical instruments.

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

TOURS

City Tours

The **city tourist office** (☎ 928-2020 ext 833; Calle 62 on Plaza Grande) offers free daily guided walking tours of the historic center (sometimes in English), focusing on Plaza Grande. Tours depart at 9:30am from in front of the Palacio Municipal.

Transportadora Turística Carnaval (☎ 927-6119) conducts two-hour guided tours of Mérida in English and Spanish on its Paseo Turístico bus (US\$7.50) departing from Parque Santa Lucía (on the corner of Calles 55 and

60) at 10am, 1pm, 4pm and 7pm Monday to Saturday, and 10am and 1pm Sunday. You can buy your tickets ahead of time at nearby Hotel Santa Lucía, among other places.

Regional Tours

Gaia Maya (☎ 928-8707; gaia-maya-tours@hotmail.com; Calle 62 No 407; half day US\$28, whole day US\$50) is a youth-oriented startup that offers original packages at very reasonable rates, in English, Spanish or French. Half day tours either go to Xcambó and San Crisanto, or to Izamal; a whole day tour includes both. The focus is on history and ecology and low-impact ecotourism.

Turitramérica (☎ /fax 924-1199; www.turitramérica.com.mx; cnr Calles 55 & 58) is one of the largest of the many agencies offering group tours to sites around Mérida. Some of its offerings include Celestún with flamingo tour (US\$40 per person), Chichén Itzá (US\$30; with drop-off in Cancún US\$40), Uxmal and Kabah (US\$30), Uxmal sound-and-light show (US\$30), Ruta Puuc (US\$28) and Izamal (US\$28). Most tours include transportation, guide and lunch.

The owners of reputable **Ecoturismo Yucatán** (☎ 920-2772; www.ecoyuc.com; Calle 3 No 235) are passionate about both sharing and protecting the state's natural treasures. Trips focus on archaeology, birding, natural history, biking and kayaking. One-day excursions cost US\$50; 10-day jungle tours US\$1400.

Many hotels will book these tours, as will **Nómadas Youth Hostel** (☎ /fax 924-5223; www.nomadastravel.com; Calle 62 No 433), which also arranges a variety of other tours, from do-it-yourself trips in your rented car or on public transportation (with written instructions) to nearly all-inclusive (some meals) trips in private buses. Many tours include lodging at other hostels as well as insurance. Nómadas will help to match up travelers into groups for sharing cars and such.

ATS buses conduct a day tour to Uxmal, Kabah, and the Ruta Puuc sites, beginning from the Terminal de Segunda Clase in Mérida at 8am. See p175 for details.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

For most of February the Universidad de Yucatán celebrates its anniversary with free performances by the Ballet Folklórico, concerts of Afro-Cuban music and

GOT BUGS?

These little critters aren't just inventions of a child's lullaby: they're real, and just like vampires, they come out at night because they 'vaaaant to saaaack your bluuuud.' The good news is that, unlike mosquitoes, bedbugs are not known to carry or transmit any diseases so don't panic if you do end up being the host (pun intended) for some uninvited dinner guests. When you do get bitten, the bites look a bit like poison ivy, and are often on the wrists and ankles, sometimes with three or four all spaced together in a line.

Minimize your chances at a hotel by asking to see a room first and looking closely for any (or all) of these three warning signs:

- Dirty smearing or smudgemarks near the walls or on the sheets. Just like swatting a mosquito, killing a bedbug leaves a mark.
- Small grains of black sand in any cracks or crevices. Yep, you guessed it: bedbug poop.
- The buggies themselves. Newly hatched bedbugs appear almost translucent and are smaller than a sugar ant, just a bit larger than a comma on a printed page. Full grown, they become charcoal grey and look like armored lady bugs.

The bad news is that shelling out money doesn't mean you can escape. Pest-control companies in the USA have said even upmarket hotels can have infestations. The good news is that at the time of research, all of the places listed in this guide passed the bedbug check. To minimize the chances of spreading the critters, keep your backpack or luggage away from the bed at all times, and don't leave your clothes lying around. If you purchase a hammock, keep it outside for a week or two and let the UV light do its sanitizing before bringing the thing inside.

son (Mexican folk music that blends elements of indigenous, Spanish and African musical styles) and other manifestations of Yucatán's cultural roots.

Prior to Lent, in February or March, **Carnaval** features colorful costumes and non-stop festivities. It is celebrated with greater vigor in Mérida than anywhere else in Yucatán state.

The **Festival de Trova Yucateca** is held in March. This festival celebrates *trovas*, romantic songs. For more on *trovas* see p40.

Semana Santa (Holy Week) is a major celebration in Mérida. The main feature of the celebrations is the city's Passion Plays.

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

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

SLEEPING

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

When business is slow many places will offer discounts, some without being asked (it never hurts to ask for a *descuento* if they don't, but don't be cruel). If you're arriving at the CAME (1st-class) bus terminal, check at the tourism desk for flyers offering hotel discounts.

Budget

Budget places change their names frequently. Rooms in this category have fans unless otherwise noted; spending the extra money for air-con is well worth it in the hotter months. Some places have mosquito nets. If you pick a place near the bus terminal ask for a room toward the back, as those on the street are teeth-jarringly noisy. Many dirt-cheap places don't have toilet seats.

Hostel Zocalo (☎ 924-5223; www.nomadastravel.com; Calle 63 No 508; hammock hooks, no breakfast US\$4, dm US\$7, s/d US\$10/18; 📺) Great location and a beautiful old colonial building make this hostel unique. Its owners are lovingly restoring it by hand. It has a laundry, and a simple breakfast is included. The hosts are a wealth of information about the area.

Nómadas Youth Hostel (☎ /fax 924-5223, 800-800-2625; www.nomadastravel.com; Calle 62 No 433 at Calle 51; hammocks with mosquito net or tents with air mattress US\$6, dm US\$7.80, s or d with/without bathroom US\$22/18; 📺) Has mixed and women's dorms and private rooms. All rates include breakfast, and guests have use of a fully equipped kitchen with fridge and purified water, 24-hour hot showers and hand-laundry facilities. Basic foods are provided on an honor system, though the morning bread and coffee are rationed to three slices and one cup respectively. Luggage lockers are free while you stay, US\$1 a day while you travel. Bring mosquito repellent and earplugs, as the front rooms can get traffic noise.

Hostal del Peregrino (☎ 924-5491; www.hostaldelperegrino.com; Calle 51 No 488; dm \$12, d \$30) On a quiet street, it's earthy, homey and tasteful and has a terrace bar. Breakfast is included in the price.

Alvarez Family Guest House (☎ 924-3060; casa.alvarez@hotmail.com; Calle 62 No 448 btwn Calles 51 & 53; d incl breakfast US\$20; 📺) Impeccably clean and in a family's home, this 'hostel plus' offers a friendly, one-of-the-family ambiance, nice showers, spotless baths, laundry, and parking. The make-your-own style breakfast is a great way to meet other travelers, though it can be a bit cramped if everyone's eating at once. The guesthouse is full of beautiful antiques, including an old cylinder-style gramophone player, which Enrique, the ever-accommodating owner, may demonstrate on request.

Hotel Casa Becil (☎ 924-6764; hotelcasabecil@yahoo.com.mx; Calle 67 No 550C btwn Calles 66 & 68; s/d/tr US\$15/18/26) Almost a hostel but not quite, the Casa Becil's friendly owner calls it a 'BBC,' for breakfast, bed, and coffee. The place offers very inexpensive, clean rooms with a fully equipped kitchen downstairs, an intimate courtyard, a sun deck, beautiful tile floors, left-luggage service, book exchange, tours, and more. The rooms are breezy, without a hint of stuffiness, and the owner speaks excellent English.

Hotel y Restaurant San José (☎ 928-6657; Calle 63 btwn Calles 62 & 64; s/d/tr/q with shared bathroom US\$10/11/12/13, with bathroom US\$13/15/17/19) It's located in a cool old building with faded charm about 30m west of the Plaza Grande. It has 30 clean, good-sized rooms, set well off the street. The doubles, with two decent beds, have good bathrooms. The place offers value and is a favorite with visiting Mennonites.

Casa Ana B&B (☎ 924-0005; www.casaana.com; Calle 52 No 469 btwn Calles 53 & 51; r US\$30-45; 📺) The Cuban owners have beautiful art on the walls and the pool has a natural bottom. Though out of the way, the Casa Ana is an intimate escape and features a cosy jungle replete with Cuban tobacco plants (apparently attempts to roll cigars have failed). The rooms are spotless, with clean sheets, Mexican hammocks, and (whew) nice mosquito screens. Air-con is available at an extra charge.

Hotel Aragón (☎ /fax 924-0242; www.hotelaragon.com; Calle 57 No 474 btwn Calles 52 & 54; d/tr US\$32/37; 📺) Offers 18 very clean rooms with air-con on three floors overlooking a charming little courtyard with a curiously narrow swimming pool. Room rates include a continental breakfast and purified water; and free tea and coffee are available 24 hours.

Hotel Trinidad Galería (☎ 923-2463; fax 924-2319; www.hoteltrinidadgaleria.com; Calle 60 No 456 near Calle 51; s/d US\$32/37; 📺) You will either love this wacky place or find it disquieting: it's a maze of rooms and corridors filled (almost overflowing!) with wild paintings and sculptures. The rooms vary considerably: some are dark and musty, while others offer well-vented bathrooms with good mosquito screens; all have original works of art and interesting posted rules, which include: 'All deaths will be reported to the authorities.' The art is the main reason to come here, a refreshing change from the usual framed poster. It has a bar, a swimming pool, an art gallery, and a fountain in the lobby that when we visited had several turtles swimming around.

Hotel Montejo (☎ 928-0390; fax 924-2692; www.hotelmontejo.com; Calle 57 btwn Calles 62 & 64; s/d US\$28/35, s/d/t with air-con US\$35/41/47; 📺) This is an eclectic, one-of-a-kind hotel with a central courtyard loaded with 400-year-old stone columns. Its big, clean rooms with

classic colonial doors and tiled bathrooms are distributed around the courtyard on two floors. The Montejo's bar-restaurant serves Yucatecan and continental dishes. The pool is clean but a bit leaf-scattered.

Hotel Dolores Alba (☎ 928-5650, 800-849-5060; fax 928-3163; www.doloresalba.com; Calle 63 btwn Calles 52 & 54; s/d old US\$26, d/tr new US\$45/50; 🚰 🚿 📺 📺 📺) Rooms are on three floors (with an elevator) around two large courtyards. The old rooms have no air-con and no TV. Those in the new, modern wing are quite large, have good beds, air-con, TV, and face the lovely pool. The hotel has secure parking and is quiet, well managed and friendly.

Posada Toledo (☎ /fax 923-1690, 923-2256; hptoledo@prodigy.com.mx; Calle 58 No 487 at Calle 57; d with fan/air-con US\$34/40; 🚰 📺 📺) It's a colonial mansion offering US\$6 parking, small, somewhat modernized rooms arranged on two floors around the classic courtyard, and a dining room (breakfast only) straight out of the 19th century. The newer, upstairs rooms are larger than those on the ground floor.

Hotel Trinidad (☎ 923-2033; www.hotelestrinidad.com; Calle 62 No 464 btwn Calles 55 & 57; d with/without bathroom US\$32/22, ste US\$45; 🚰 📺) Occupies a colonial house and a newer wing, and has a variety of rooms, each with its own unique décor and charm. Some rooms have good kitchenettes, most have air-con, and there's even a rooftop Jacuzzi. The Trini has great common areas (including two courtyards, one with a lovely garden), a billiard table, a book exchange, a small café, luggage storage, 24-hour tea, and guests have use of the pool at the nearby Hotel Trinidad Galería. All rates include continental breakfast.

Hotel Santa Lucía (☎ /fax 928-2672, ☎ 928-2662; Calle 55 No 508 btwn Calles 60 & 62; s/d/tr US\$35/40/45; 🚰 📺) Across from the park of the same name, it is clean, secure and popular, and has an attractive lobby. The pool is small but clean, and the rooms have air-con, TV and phones. Rates include breakfast. Someone here really likes potted plants.

Hotel María José (☎ 928-1868; www.hotelmariajose.com.mx; Calle 64 btwn Calles 53 & 55; s/d/ste US\$38/43/51-59; 🚰 📺) This is a modern, lime-yellow place in an old but recently refurbished building. The 20 cheery, air-con rooms have decent beds and spotless bathrooms, and the hotel's restaurant serves three meals.

Hotel San Juan (☎ /fax 924-1742; Calle 55 No 497A; s/d/tr/q US\$34/40/46/50; 🚰 📺 📺) It offers a nice garden area that leads to a small pool. Rooms are clean and relatively quiet with phones, TV, and ageing air-con. You'll feel like you're being pressure-washed in the nice, hot showers.

Other options:

Hotel Los Arcos (☎ 924-9728; Calle 63 btwn Calles 62 & 64; s/d/tr US\$14/16/23; 📺) Clean and peach pink with frosting cake colors. It offers slightly dark rooms with OK bathrooms and beds, good screens, nice décor for the price and friendly management.

Hotel del Mayab (☎ 928-5174; fax 928-6047; Calle 50 No 536A btwn Calles 65 & 67; d/tr/q with fan US\$23/25/28, with air-con & TV US\$30/35/40; 🚰 📺 📺) This place is clean and low-key and offers off-street parking. Streetside rooms can be noisy, but interior rooms are quiet, and the hotel has a slightly murky swimming pool.

Posada del Ángel (☎ 923-2754; Calle 67 No 535 btwn Calles 66 & 68; s/d/tr/q with fan US\$18/25/32/39, with air-con US\$24/32/40/48; 🚰 📺) A neocolonial hotel three blocks northeast of Terminal CAME, it offers rooms with good beds and crisp, clean sheets; it's quieter here than at most other hotels in the area.

Midrange

Compared with many parts of the peninsula, many of Mérida's midrange places provide surprising levels of comfort for the price, and bargains are everywhere...on every street. Literally.

Luz en Yucatán (☎ 924-0035; www.luzenyucatan.com; Calle 55 btwn Calles 58 & 60; apt US\$35-70; 🚰 📺) The Luz has a welcoming and homey atmosphere, with abundant local Mexican art and crafts. Furnishings are attractive and comfortable, and hammocks hang in the rooms and garden. The seven apartments also rent by the week or month; the larger ones have air-con. Five apartments have full kitchenettes; guests in the other two share a kitchen, and all have use of the small pool and some excellent common spaces, including the large dining room downstairs. The Luz also offers massage, facials, manicures, pedicures, and classes in Spanish language, salsa dancing and yoga.

Hotel Medio Mundo (☎ /fax 924-5472; www.hotelmediomundo.com; Calle 55 No 533 btwn Calles 64 & 66; d/tr with fan US\$55/75, r/ste with air-con US\$50/75; 🚰 📺) This former private residence has been completely remodeled and painted in lovely colors. Its 12 ample, simply furnished rooms have super-comfortable beds (one

king or two queens), tile floors, beautiful tile sinks, great bathrooms and plenty of natural light. One of the two courtyards has a small swimming pool, the other a fountain. The well-traveled, charming hosts prepare large, delicious 'Continental Plus' breakfasts (US\$8) and make their guests feel like part of the family.

Gran Hotel (☎ 924-7730; fax 924-7622; www.granhoteldemerida.com.mx; Calle 60 No 496 btwn Calles 59 & 61; s/d US\$61/66; tr & q US\$71-95; 🚽) This was indeed a grand hotel when built in 1901; it's a bit faded now but retains many elegant and delightful decorative flourishes. The 28 rooms have air-con and period furnishings; some overlook Parque Hidalgo. The bathroom in the master suite has its own rocking chair. 'Touch under your own risk' the antiques in the lobby.

Hotel D'Champs (☎ 924-8655, 800-849-0934; fax 923-6024; Calle 70 No 543 at Calle 67; d US\$60; 🚽 📺 📺) Just a block from the two main bus terminals, this place is in a classy old building with a modernized olive-green interior. It has a massive open courtyard with a pool and trees, a restaurant and 90 decent-sized rooms with TV, air-con and phones. WAN and Internet hookups are a recent addition.

Casa Mexilio (☎ /fax 928-2505, in USA ☎ 800-538-6802; www.casamexilio.com; Calle 68 No 495 btwn Calles 57 & 59; r US\$47-120; 🚽 📺) It occupies a well-preserved, historic house with a maze of quiet, beautifully appointed rooms (some with fan, some air-con), a small bar and a postage-stamp sized pool with Jacuzzi. All room rates include a full breakfast in the period dining room, and the hotel serves dinner as well.

Hotel Colonial (☎ 923-6444; fax 928-3961, in USA 888-886-2982; www.hotelcolonial.com.mx; Calle 62 No 476 btwn Calles 57 & 59; s or d/tr US\$70/80; 🚽 📺) The Colonial features 73 comfortable rooms with air-con in a fairly modern building with a small clover-shaped pool and perhaps Mexico's smallest bar. 'Promocion' (Promotion) rates can drop the prices by up to US\$15. The restaurant actually has a real posted nonsmoking section for those who don't like tar with their food.

Hotel Maison Lafitte (☎ 928-1243; www.maisonlafitte.com.mx; Calle 60 No 472; s/d/tr \$70/75/80; 📺) The Maison Lafitte offers a full buffet breakfast in the rate, has friendly staff, and a nice location – central but still away from

it all. The building was once an old colonial house and has a lush garden and a clean, well-lit pool. The sit-down showers are a fun luxury.

Los Arcos Bed & Breakfast (☎ 928-0214; www.losarcosmerida.com; Calle 66 btwn Calles 49 & 53; d/tw US\$75/95; 📺 📺) The Los Arcos is a lovely, gay-friendly B&B with two guestrooms at the end of a drop-dead-gorgeous garden and pool area. Parrots, chihuahuas, a Jacuzzi, and palm trees add to the décor. Rooms have an eclectic assortment of art and antiques, excellent beds and bathrooms, and come stocked with CD players, bathrobes and sarongs. The American owners are very accommodating and have filled the elegant main house with an incredible collection of antiques and *objets d'art* from around the globe. All guests have access to the Internet and a huge CD library. Room rates include a full, hot breakfast.

Hotel Ambassador (☎ 924-2100; fax 924-2701; www.ambassadormerida.com; Calle 59 No 546; d/tr/ste US\$61/66/70; 📺) It offers 100 comfortable, modern rooms with satellite TV and mini-bars. The multistory building also has a pool, a courtyard, a travel agency and car-rental outfit, but it's a little institutional compared to the boutique alternatives. Try asking for a discount.

Top End

During nonpeak times, walk-in rates may be cheaper than booking in advance. Ask about *promociones* or – even better – look through local newspapers and handouts for special rates. High-end hotels are less likely to be full, compared with other hotels.

Hotel Los Aluxes (☎ 924-2199, 800-712-0444; fax 923-3858; www.aluxes.com.mx; cnr Calles 60 & 49; d US\$100; 📺 📺 📺) The Los Aluxes is a very modern and comfortable hotel with 109 rooms, a pool, restaurant and nightclub; it's popular with tour groups. Parents will appreciate the baby-sitting service and kids' games area. A new Internet café and a decent bar round it off.

Hotel Casa del Balam (☎ 924-2150, in USA or Mexico 800-624-8451; fax 924-5011; www.yucatanadventure.com.mx; Calle 60 No 488; d US\$129; 🚽 📺) This place is centrally located and has a great pool and large, quiet rooms with powerful central air-con. The Balam often offers hefty discounts during quiet times.

Fiesta Americana Mérida (☎ 942-1111, 800-504-500, in the USA 800-343-7821; fax 942-1112; Calle 56A No 451; d from US\$180) An enormous, modern neocolonial hotel, it boasts luxurious, marble-floored rooms with safes, coffee-makers, hairdryers and minibars. Also on offer are a gym, tennis court and spa, and a complex below the hotel houses shops, travel agencies, airline offices and restaurants. Though the official address doesn't indicate it, the hotel occupies a large stretch of Avenida Colón just off swanky Paseo de Montejo, north of the colonial center.

Hyatt Regency Mérida (☎ 942-0202; fax 925-7002; www.hyatt.com; Av Colón 344; d from US\$170; 📶) Not far from the Fiesta Americana. The 17-story Hyatt is Mérida's most expensive hotel, offering 300 rooms, tennis courts, a gym and steam bath, and a great pool with swim-up bar.

EATING

As in other touristed areas of the Yucatán Peninsula, many restaurants in Mérida have begun adding a service charge (usually 10%) to the bill. Check the menu carefully before you order to see if this is official policy, and put your money where their mouth is by avoiding places where the waiters approach you with discounts or deals. Usually that's the start of an unpleasant dinner, and many diners regret being sucked in.

Budget

Mercado Municipal Lucas de Gálvez (cnr Calles 56A & 67) Mérida's least-expensive eateries are in the Mercado Municipal Lucas de Gálvez; most are open from early morning until early evening. Upstairs joints have tables and chairs and more varied menus; main-course platters of beef, fish or chicken go for as little as US\$1.20. Look for *recados* (spice pastes). Downstairs at the north end are some cheap *taquerías* (taco joints), where you sit on a stool at a narrow counter, while near the south end are *coctelerías* serving shrimp, octopus and conch cocktails and ceviche starting at around US\$2.

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

For good, cheap breakfasts, try a selection of *panes dulce* (sweet rolls and breads) from one of Mérida's several bakeries, such as **Panificadora Montejo** (Calle 62) on the corner of the main plaza. A full bag of goodies usually costs no more than US\$2.50.

La Flor de Santiago (☎ 928-5591; Calle 70 btwn Calles 57 & 59; mains US\$2-5; ☎ 7am-11pm) It offers a cafeteria-style ambiance in a place with high ceilings and giant paintings on the walls. Chiapas coffee is served in incongruous, chipped Willow-ware cups, with crooning tunes of yesteryear playing in the background. The guacamole is near perfect, and there is a wide selection of Mexican comfort foods, such as chicken tamales or turkey soup. A Saturday or Sunday breakfast buffet costs US\$4.50. It's all good, and the friendly, no-nonsense waiters are obliging.

Capuchino (☎ 924-3009; cnr Calle 47 & 66; cake slice US\$2; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Don't let the name fool you, there's not a drop of coffee here. Instead, this 20-year-old institution offers cheesecakes, whole or by the slice, in an array of funky flavors that may include peach or even Kahlua. Stop by when that sweet tooth gets the better of you.

El Trapiche (☎ 928-1231; Calle 62 No 491 btwn 59 & 61; mains US\$1.60-5; ☎ 8am-midnight) A great place close to El Centro, El Trapiche has cheap Mexican eats in a casual environment that includes passing visits by just about every peddler around. As you eat, you can stock up on Cuban cigars or Chiapas belts or jewelry. If you don't want to buy anything and just want to eat, choose a table in the back near the fountain. Pitchers of *agua de melon* (cantaloupe blended with water and a touch of sugar) cost only US\$3.50, a fantastic deal.

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

Midrange

Il Caffé Italiano (☎ 928-0093; Calle 57A btwn Calles 58 & 60; mains US\$7-13; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Sat) It's an Italian-style café with nice espressos, good mains, and very interesting desserts: the strawberries with balsamic vinegar and ice cream is something completely different. The lattes are as fun to watch being made as to drink, it's quite a performance.

La Vía Olimpo (☎ 923-5843; Calle 62 btwn Calles 61 & 63; breakfast US\$5, mains US\$4-12; 🕒 7am-11pm) An upscale and trendy restaurant-café on the west side of the Plaza Grande. Among the choices are salads, sandwiches, steaks and breakfasts.

Pop Cafetería (☎ 928-6163; Calle 57 btwn Calles 60 & 62; breakfast US\$2.60-4.50, mains US\$3.50-9; 🕒 7am-midnight Mon-Sat, 8am-midnight Sun) It may be plain to look at, but the air-con works a treat. The restaurant serves up cheap breakfast combinations and a good variety of Mexican dishes; try the chicken in dark, rich *mole* (US\$4.50).

Main Street (☎ 923-6850; Calle 60 btwn Calles 59 & 61; breakfast US\$3.50-6, mains US\$8-13; 🕒 7am-11pm) On the edge of Parque Hidalgo, it serves generous, reasonably priced breakfasts, as well as ample portions of pasta and other dishes, including mediocre pizza. The outdoor tables offer prime people-watching opportunities, and guarantee you'll be targeted by hammock vendors.

Amaro (☎ 928-2451; www.restauranteamaro.com; Calle 59 btwn Calles 60 & 62; mains US\$5-9; 🕒 11am-1am, or 11pm if it's slow) The Amaro is a romantic dining spot, especially at night, when there's usually a duo performing ballads. It is set in the courtyard of the house in which Andrés Quintana Roo – poet, statesman and drafter of Mexico's Declaration of Independence – was born in 1787. The service and food are good (but check your bill carefully), and the menu includes Yucatecan dishes and a variety of vegetarian plates, as well as some continental dishes, crepes and pizzas.

Pane e Vino (☎ 928-6228; Calle 62 btwn Calles 59 & 61; mains US\$7-10; 🕒 6pm-midnight Tue-Sun) It's an Italian-run place serving tasty antipasti and salads (with olive oil and balsamic vinegar if you wish), lasagna, fish, meat and a selection of respectable wines by the glass or bottle. The star attractions are the fresh handmade pastas, which vary daily and usually include gnocchi, ravioli, and fettuccine. The scanty glasses of wine are the only real disappointment.

Restaurante Kantún (☎ 923-4493; Calle 45 btwn Calles 64 & 66; mains US\$6-14; 🕒 noon-7pm) The Kantún serves some of the best seafood in town. Main dishes are all prepared to order and delicately seasoned or sauced; try the *filete Normanda*, a fillet stuffed with smoked oysters and topped with anchovies (US\$9).

There are a few meat offerings for nonfishy types. The service is friendly and attentive, if almost formal at times. The family that runs the place lives next door and may open up in the evening if you phone before coming over.

Top End

Restaurante Pórtico del Peregrino (☎ 928-6163; Calle 57 btwn Calles 60 & 62; mains US\$8-14; 🕒 noon-midnight) Several pleasant, traditional-style dining rooms (some with air-con) surrounding a small courtyard. Yucatecan dishes such as *pollo pibil* (chicken flavored with *achiote* sauce, wrapped in banana leaves) are its forte, but you'll find many international dishes and a broad range of seafood and steaks as well. *Mole poblano*, a chocolate and chili sauce, is a house specialty as is *queso relleno* (Dutch cheese stuffed with spiced ground beef).

Alberto's Continental Patio (☎ 928-5367; nr Calles 64 & 57; mains US\$7-16, set dinners US\$24-28; 🕒 1pm-11pm Mon-Sat, 6pm-11pm Sun) Alberto's offers yet more colonial-courtyard (as well as indoor) dining. The setting is extremely atmospheric, chock-a-block with religious artifacts, Maya ceramic figures and greenery, with cards in several languages describing the history of the house. Middle Eastern dishes such as hummus, babaganoush and tabbouleh are served with pita bread, and can be a welcome change from Mexican food. The steaks, poultry and seafood are also good, as is the service. Tipplers will appreciate the fine brandy selection. Mmmm!

DRINKING

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

KY60 (Calle 60 btwn Calles 57 & 55; no cover; 🕒 9pm-3am) Despite the men-wearing-construction-outfits Village People vibe, this is not a gay bar. It's got nice pool tables and is popular with guys and gals, gays and straights, locals and tourists, probably because of its reasonably priced beers, which seem to be a universal attraction.

People not needing something alcoholic can try:

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

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

ENTERTAINMENT

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

The **Centro Cultural Olimpo** (☎ 928-2020 ext 477; cnr Calles 62 & 61) has something on nearly every night, from films to concerts to art installations.

Mérida has several cinemas, most of which show first-run Hollywood fare in English, with Spanish subtitles (ask *¿inglés?* if you need to be sure), as well as other foreign films and Mexican offerings. Cinema tickets cost about US\$4.50 for evening shows, US\$2.50 for matinees. Try **Cines Rex** (Calle 57 btwn Calles 70 & 72), located on the north side of Parque de Santiago's market. It's a modern twin theater showing first-run films. **Teatro Mérida** (Calle 62 btwn Calles 59 & 61) often shows classic Hollywood and international flicks.

Azul Picante (☎ 923-2279; Calle 60 btwn Calles 57 & 55; US\$3 cover; 🕒 10pm-3:30am) is one of a cluster of bars on this block that have music and dancing, with a live nine-piece salsa band most nights. The crowd is fairly young, with a mix of locals and visitors.

SHOPPING

Mérida is a fine place for buying Yucatecan handicrafts. Purchases to consider include guayaberas and traditional Maya clothing such as the colorful, embroidered *huipiles*, panama hats and of course the wonderfully comfortable Yucatecan hammocks (see p168).

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

Mérida's main market, **Mercado Municipal Lucas de Gálvez** (cnr Calles 56A & 67), will evolve and change as a new building is built out the back, but whatever happens, the surrounding streets are all part of the large market district, lined with shops selling everything one might want. Watch for pick-pockets, purse-snatchers and bag-slashers. The crush of people around Christmas and other busy periods can be intense.

Handicrafts

Casa de las Artesanías (☎ 928-6676; Calle 63 btwn Calles 64 & 66; 🕒 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) One place to start looking for handicrafts is this government-supported market for local artisans selling just about everything: earthenware, textiles, wicker baskets, sandals, vases, ceramic dolls, wind chimes, purses and pouches, figurines of Maya deities and bottles of locally made liqueurs. Prices are fixed and a bit high.

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

Miniaturas (☎ 928-6503; Calle 59 btwn Calles 60 & 62; 🕒 10am-2pm & 4-8pm) Here you'll find lots of small Día de los Muertos tableaux, tinwork and figurines of every sort, from ceramics to toy soldiers. They all have one thing in common: they're easy to pack! The store is definitely fun to browse and prices are fixed at a fair rate so you needn't worry about bargaining. Its hours are *'más o menos'* ('more or less'), according to the sign.

Clothing & Panama Hats

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

The Campeche town of Bécál is the center of the hat-weaving trade (see p222), but you can buy good examples of the hatmaker's art in Mérida.

Prices range from a few dollars for a hat of basic quality to US\$80 or more for top quality. The Casa de las Artesanías has only very low-quality examples; the Bazar García Rejón is a much better bet.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

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

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

YUCATECAN HAMMOCKS: THE ONLY WAY TO SLEEP

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

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

Hammocks come in several widths (each shop seems to have slightly different names and numbers for them), and though much is made of the quantity of pairs of end strings they possess, a better gauge of a hammock's size and quality is its weight. The heavier the better. A *sencilla* (for one person) should be about 500g and cost about US\$12. The *doble* is about 700g to 800g and costs roughly US\$15 to US\$17. Next comes the *matrimonial* at 1100g (US\$20), and *familiar* (up to about 1500g, US\$27). They go beyond this, to extra, king and other designations. *De croché* (very tightly woven) hammocks can take several weeks to produce and cost double or triple the prices given here.

When selecting a hammock, you must check to be sure that you're really getting the width you're paying for. Because they fold up small and the larger hammocks are more comfortable, consider the bigger sizes. A good store will let you do more than just look; if you ask '*¿puedo probar?*' they'll string it up and let you have a lie-down. Check carefully for pulled threads and the overall evenness of the weave.

Never hang your hammock directly by its loops as they will eventually wear through, so be sure to purchase *brasas* (connecting ropes) and *eses* (S-hooks). Many stores can also sell mosquito netting for an additional US\$15. And before you leave, ask them to show you how to fold it – only fishing line takes longer to untangle.

During your first few hours in Mérida you will be approached on the street by hammock peddlers. They may quote very low prices, but street-sold hammocks are usually mediocre at best. Check the hammock very carefully. You can look like a pro by counting the runner threads at the edges: a good hammock has at least 10 on each side.

You can save yourself a lot of trouble by shopping at a hammock store with a good reputation. Getting away from the heavily touristed areas helps. In Mérida, **Hamacas El Aguacate** (☎ 928-6469; cnr Calles 58 & 73) has quality hammocks and decent prices, and there's absolutely no hard sell. In Quintana Roo, check out Puerto Morelos' **artisans market** (p97), where high-quality Tixkokob hammocks are sold.

Some of the best (and best-priced) hammocks are produced in prisons, but a less-depressing excursion is to venture out to the nearby village of Tixkokob to watch hammocks being woven. Sharpies here are on the lookout for tourists and you need to use the same caution in buying that you would in downtown Mérida. The senora at **Hamacas El Gallito** (☎ 999-996-5612; cnr Calles 21 & 14; ☎ 10am-8pm) is very helpful, though she doesn't speak English. A bus runs regularly from the Progreso bus station in Mérida, Calle 62 No 524, between Calles 65 and 67.

Aeroméxico (at airport ☎ 920-1260, at Hotel Fiesta Americana 237-1786) Flies to Mexico City, Los Angeles and Miami.

Aviacsa (☎ 800-006-2200, at airport 946-1850, at Hotel Fiesta Americana 925-6890) Flies to Mexico City.

Click (☎ 928-6790; Paseo de Montejo 500B) Flies between Mérida and Cancún, Veracruz and Villahermosa, with connections to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Havana and other destinations.

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

Delta (☎ 800-123-4710; reservations toll free in USA; www.delta.com)

Mexicana (☎ 924-6910; Paseo de Montejo 493) Nonstop flights to Mexico City.

Bus

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

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

Hotel Fiesta Americana (Av Colón near Calle 56A) A small 1st-class terminal on the west side of the hotel complex servicing guests of the luxury hotels on Avenida Colón, north of the center. ADO GL and Super Expresso services run between here and Cancún, Campeche, Chetumal and Playa del Carmen.

Parque de San Juan (Calle 69 btwn Calles 62 & 64) From all around the square and church, vans and *combis* (vans or minibuses) depart for Dzibilchaltún Ruinas, Muna, Oxkutzcab, Tekax, Ticul and other points.

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

Terminal CAME (reservations ☎ 924-8391; Calle 70 btwn Calles 69 & 71) Sometimes referred to as the 'Terminal de Primera Clase,' Mérida's main terminal has (mostly 1st-class) buses to points around the Yucatán Peninsula and places such as Campeche, Mexico City, Palenque, San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Villahermosa. Lines include ADO, Altos (providing *directo económico*

service, with air-con and few stops, but no bathroom and the deluxe lines ADO GL, Maya de Oro, UNO and Super Expresso. CAME has card phones and an ATM and runs counters for tourist, bus and hotel information. The baggage check is open 6am to midnight daily and charges US\$0.50 for storage from 6am to noon, US\$1 for all day.

Terminal de Segunda Clase (Calle 69) Also known as Terminal 69 (Sesenta y Nueve) or simply Terminal de Autobuses, this terminal is located just around the corner from CAME. ADO, Mayab, Oriente, Sur, and TRT run mostly 2nd-class buses to points in the state and around the peninsula. The terminal has a luggage checkroom (☎ 7am-11pm; US\$0.40 to US\$1.10 per bag per hour).

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

Car

The most flexible way to tour the many archaeological sites around Mérida is by rental car, especially if you have two or more people to share costs. Assume you will pay a total of US\$45 to US\$65 per day (tax, insurance and gas included) for short-term rental of a cheap car, usually a bottom-of-the-line Volkswagen or Nissan. Getting around Mérida's sprawling tangle of one-way streets and careening buses is better done on foot or on a careening bus, though.

México Rent A Car (☎ 923-3637; mexicorentacar@hotmail.com; Calle 57A btwn Calles 58 & 60; ☎ 8am-12:30pm & 6-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-12:30pm Sun) offers rates the big-name agencies often can't touch, especially if you're paying cash. In low season it's sometimes possible to get a vehicle for as little as US\$30 a day, and long-term rentals can bring prices lower than that, even on higher-quality cars.

Several other agencies have branches at the airport as well as on Calle 60 between Calles 55 and 57, including **Budget** (☎ 928-6759, 800-712-0324), **Avis** (☎ 925-2525) and **Hertz** (☎ 924-2834, 800-709-5000). All rent for about US\$50 a day.

See p82 for details of the expensive toll highway between Mérida and Cancún.

BUS SERVICES FROM MÉRIDA

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Campeche (short route)	US\$10-13	2½-3½hr	hourly ADO buses, 3 ADO GL buses, ATS 2nd-class bus every 30 mins to 7:15pm
Campeche (via Uxmal)	US\$7.80	4hr	5 2nd-class Sur buses between 6:05am and 5:05pm
Cancún	US\$14-35	4-6hr	16 2nd-class Oriente buses, 20 deluxe Super Expresso buses and many other buses
Celestún	US\$3.40	2hr	15 2nd-class Occidente buses from Terminal Noreste
Chetumal	US\$17-22	6-8hr	5 ADO buses from Terminal CAME, 5 2nd-class Mayab buses, 3 super-deluxe Caribe Express buses from Terminal de Segunda Clase
Chichén Itzá	US\$5.20-6.20	1¾-2½hr	3 Super Expresso and hourly 2nd-class Oriente Cancún-bound buses stop at Chichén Itzá or nearby Pisté
Cobá	US\$9.40-10.60	3½-4hr	Oriente bus at 5:20am
Escárcega	US\$14-16.60	5-5½hr	4 ATS, many 2nd-class Sur buses
Felipe Carrillo Puerto	US\$13-25	5½-6hr	8 Mayab, 2 ATS buses
Izamal	US\$2.60	1½hr	frequent 2nd-class Oriente buses from Terminal Noreste
Mayapán Ruinas	US\$1.50	1½hr	15 LUS buses between 5:30am & 8pm from Noreste terminal, continuing to Oxkutzcab
Mexico City (Norte)	US\$92	19hr	ADO bus at midnight
Mexico City (TAPO)	US\$92-107	20hr	4 ADO buses between 10am and 9:15pm, ADO GL buses at 2pm and 5:30pm
Palenque	US\$23-30	8-9hr	1 deluxe Maya de Oro bus at 9:30pm, 3 ADO buses, 1 UNO bus at 7:15pm
Playa del Carmen	US\$14.50-20	4½-8hr	10 deluxe Super Expresso buses, 1 ADO GL bus at 1:30pm, numerous Mayab buses
Progreso	US\$1.20	1hr	frequent buses 5:30am to 10pm from the Progreso bus terminal, shared taxis (some with air-con) from a parking lot on Calle 60 between Calles 65 and 67
Río Lagartos	US\$5.70-7	3-4hr	3 1st- and 2nd-class Noreste buses from 9am
Ticul	US\$3.70-4.20	1¾hr	frequent Mayab buses, some TRP buses; frequent cheaper and quicker <i>combis</i> from Parque de San Juan from 5am to 10pm
Tizimín	US\$7-8	2½-4hr	6 1st- and 2nd-class Noreste
Tulum	US\$11.30-17	4hr	Super Expresso bus at 6:30am, 11am and 1pm; there is 2nd-class service to Tulum, but it takes much longer
Valladolid	US\$7-11	2½-3½hr	hourly buses, including Super Expresso, 2nd-class Oriente and ATS
Villahermosa	US\$27-63	8-9hr	11 ADO buses, direct superdeluxe UNO bus at 9:30pm and 11pm, direct ADO GL buses at 5:30pm and 12:15am

GETTING AROUND**To/From the Airport**

Bus 79 (Aviación) travels between the airport and the city center every 15 to 30 minutes until 9pm, with occasional service until 11pm. The half-hour trip (US\$0.40) is via a roundabout route; the best place to catch the bus to the airport is on Calle 70, south of Calle 69, near Terminal CAME.

Transporte Terrestre (☎ 946-1529) provides speedy service between the airport and the

center, charging US\$10 per carload (same price for hotel pick-up). A taxi from the center to the airport should cost about US\$6 (but it's hard to get this price *from* the airport, so walk out to the main street and flag one down or else prepare to pay US\$15).

Bus

Most parts of Mérida that you'll want to visit are within five or six blocks of the Plaza Grande and are thus accessible on

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

City buses are cheap at US\$0.40, but routes can be confusing. Most start in suburban neighborhoods, skirt the city center, and terminate in another distant suburban neighborhood. To travel between the Plaza Grande and the upscale neighborhoods to the north along Paseo de Montejo, catch the Ruta 10 on Calle 57 between Calles 58 and 60, a block north of the Parque Hidalgo, or catch a 'Tecnológico,' 'Hyatt' or 'Montejo' bus on Calle 60 and get out at Avenida Colón. To return to the city center, catch any bus heading south on Paseo de Montejo displaying the same signs and/or 'Centro.' Many will let you off on Calle 58 north of Calle 61.

Taxi

Taxis in Mérida are not metered. Rates are fixed, with a US\$3 minimum fare, which will get you from the bus terminals to all downtown hotels. Most rides within city limits do not exceed US\$6. Taxi stands can be found at most of the barrio parks, or dial ☎ 928-5322 or ☎ 923-1221; service is available 24 hours (dispatch fees are an extra US\$1 to US\$2).

SOUTH OF MÉRIDA

South of the city you'll find old henequen plantations, some still used for cultivating leaves, others crumbling in spectacular decay. It's hot as hell around here, dangerously so: be sure to bring extra water and consider donating some to a thirsty dog or two. In the villages, you'll see glimpses of Maya life that haven't changed much: women still wear *huipiles*; men still bike out to cut firewood or shoot a pheasant for dinner. The smell of tortillas mixes with the citrus like smell of desert plants. It's a stark landscape, but many – tourists and locals – find it extremely beautiful.

HACIENDA YAXCOPOIL

Hacienda Yaxcopoil (☎ 999-910-4469; Hwy 261; admission US\$5; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) is 33km southwest of central Mérida. A vast estate that grew and processed henequen, its numerous French Renaissance-style

buildings have undergone picturesque restorations and turned into a museum of the 17th century. It offers some excellent glimpses at the (now defunct) giant rasping machines that turned the leaves into fiber. Frequent buses pass Yaxcopoil running between Mérida and Ticul, but it's easiest to drive there.

HACIENDA OCHIL

This **hacienda** (☎ 999-950-1275; Hwy 261 Km 176; admission US\$2; ☎ 9am-6pm) lies about 44km south of Mérida and provides a fascinating, though basic, look at how henequen was grown and processed. From the parking lot follow the 'truck' tracks – used by the small wheeled carts to haul material to and from the processing plant – to the right around the parklike, restored portion of the hacienda. You'll pass workshops where you might see locals fashioning handicrafts for sale and a small henequen museum with exhibits illustrating the cultivating, harvesting and processing of the plant. These include pieces of machinery and photos of hacienda life. Iguanas abound.

The *casa de máquinas* (machine house) and smokestack still stand, and Ochil also has a **restaurant** (mains US\$8-10), bar, a small cenote and a henequen patch. Mayab runs 2nd-class buses between Mérida and Muna that will drop you at Ochil's parking lot (US\$2.50, one hour).

GRUTAS DE CALCEHTOK

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

The opening of the main entrance is an impressive 30m in diameter and 40m deep, ringed by vegetation often buzzing with bees. It's about 1m deep in bat guano at

PYRAMID SCHEME

It's tempting to skirt the (often unpoliced) signs that prohibit climbing, but please climb only where climbing is allowed. You should always wear snug footwear with good traction when you climb.

Be careful, and if you're worried about heights give this sure-fire technique a try: zigzag up the steps, making diagonal passes to either side of the stairway. This is an especially useful method if your feet are too large for the shallow steps. It works well on the descent, also, as it prevents you from looking straight down (a view that can be quite vertiginous and unnerving).

Once you master this style, you'll never descend again using the embarrassing sit-and-bump-down-on-your-butt method, or the painful trip-and-fall-to-your-near-death method, which is why most of the pyramids are closed to climbing.

the bottom (some visitors wear dust masks to avoid infection from a fungus on the guano). There's nothing to stop you from exploring on your own (and possibly getting lost), but you'd be wise to employ one of the six guides, all members of the Cuy family, whose great grandfather rediscovered the caves in 1840. They carry lanterns and flashlights.

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

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

OXKINTOK

Archaeologists have been excited about the ruins of **Oxkintok** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-5pm) for several years. Inscriptions found at the site contain some of the oldest known dates in the Yucatán, and indicate the city was inhabited from the pre-Classic to the post-Classic period (300 BC to AD 1500), reaching its greatest importance between AD 475 and 860.

Three main groups of the approximately 8-sq-km site have been restored thus far, all near the site entrance. Though much of the rebuilding work looks like it was done with rubble, you can see examples of Oxkintok, Proto-Puuc and Puuc architecture. The highest structure (15m) is Ma-1, **La Pirámide**, in the Ah-May group, which provides good views of the area. Probably

the most interesting structure is **Palacio Chich** (Estructura Ca-7), in the Ah-Canul group, for its original stonework and the two columns in front carved with human figures in elaborate dress. Recently researchers discovered a labyrinth beneath La Pirámide, which unfortunately is closed to the public. You can see the blocked off entrance quite clearly from the (facing the front) right side, about halfway up.

The ruins are reached by road by taking a west-leading fork off the road to the Grutas de Calcehtok; for information on getting to the Grutas de Calcehtok, see p171.

UXMAL

Pronounced oosh-mahl, **Uxmal** (admission US\$9.50 Mon-Sat, US\$5 Sun & holidays, guides US\$40; ☎ 8am-5pm) is one impressive set of ruins, easily ranking among the top Maya archaeological sites. It is a large site with some fascinating structures in good condition and bearing a riot of ornamentation. Adding to its appeal is Uxmal's setting in the hilly Puuc region, which lent its name to the architectural patterns in this area. *Puuc* means 'hills,' and these, rising up to about 100m, are the first relief from the flatness of the northern and western portions of the peninsula.

History

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

That a sizable population flourished in this dry area is yet more testimony to the engineering skills of the Maya, who built a series of reservoirs and *chultunes* (Maya

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

The scarcity of water in the region meant that Chac, the rain god or sky serpent, carried a lot of weight here. His image is ubiquitous at the site in the form of stucco masks protruding from façades and cornices. There is much speculation as to why Uxmal was abandoned in about AD 900; a severe drought may have forced the inhabitants to relocate.

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

Information

Parking costs US\$1 per car; unlike Chichén Itzá, you have to pay this fee again if you leave and want to return for the light show. The site is entered through the modern Unidad Uxmal building, which holds an air-conditioned restaurant, a small museum, shops selling souvenirs and crafts, an auditorium, bathrooms, an ATM and a left-luggage facility. Also here is Librería Dante, a bookstore that stocks an excellent selection of travel and archaeological guides and general-interest books on Mexico in English, Spanish, German and French; the imported books are very expensive.

The price of admission, if you retain the wristband-ticket, includes a 45-minute sound-and-light show, beginning nightly at 8pm in summer and 7pm in winter. It's in Spanish, but you can rent devices for listening to English, French, German or Italian translations (beamed via infrared) for US\$3. Specify the language you need or it may not be broadcast. The cost for the show only is US\$5, which can count toward the next day's admission if you keep the receipt.

Sights

CASA DEL ADIVINO

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

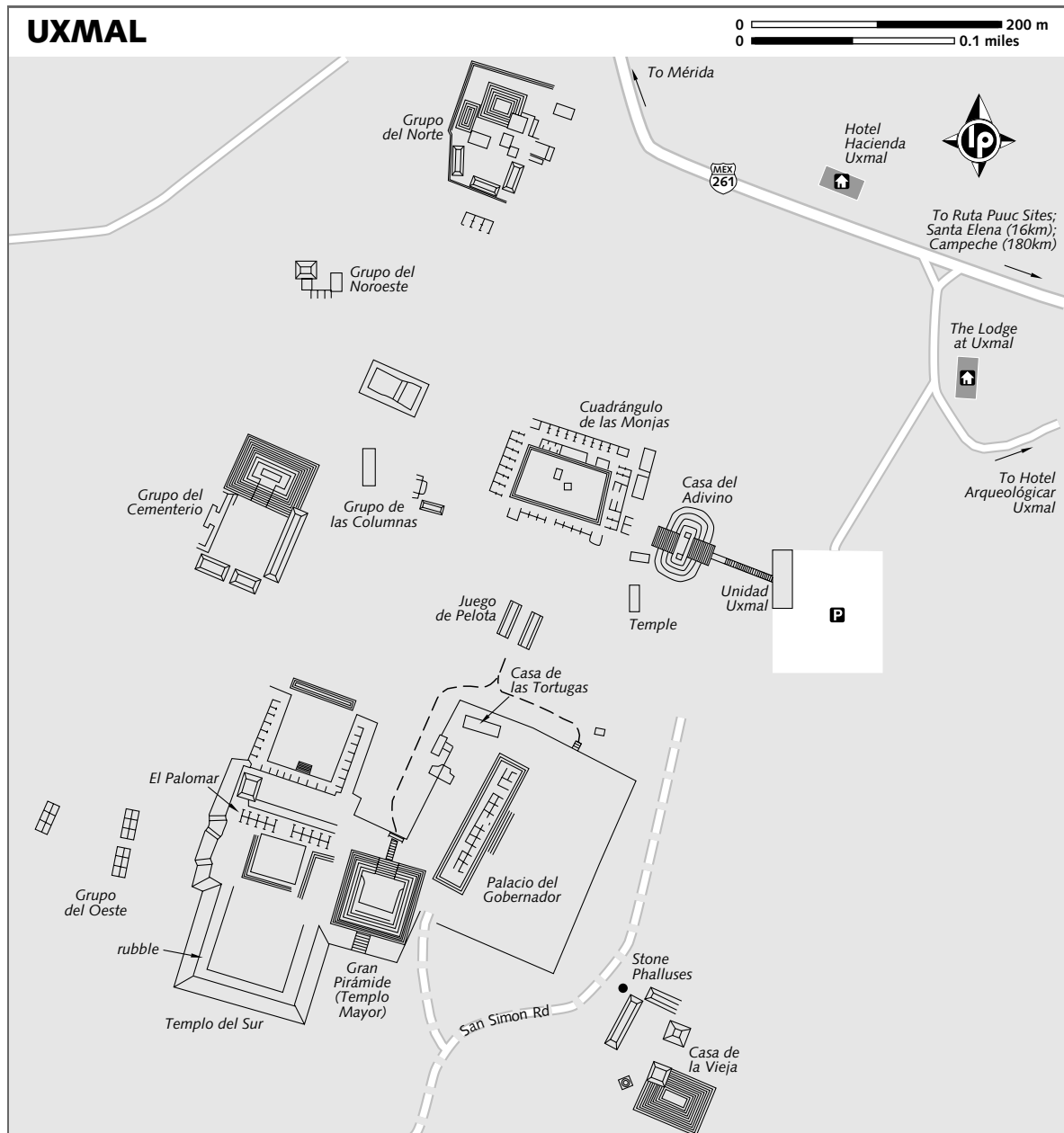
Climbing the temple was not allowed when we visited.

CUADRÁNGULO DE LAS MONJAS

The 74-room, sprawling Nuns' Quadrangle is directly west of the Casa del Adivino. Archaeologists guess variously that it was a military academy, royal school or palace complex. The long-nosed face of Chac appears everywhere on the façades of the four separate temples that form the quadrangle. The northern temple, grandest of the four, was built first, followed by the southern, then the eastern and then the western.

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

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



with skulls in the center of its plaza), then head for the stairs and terrace.

CASA DE LAS TORTUGAS

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

The frieze of short columns, or 'rolled mats,' that runs around the temple below the turtles is characteristic of the Puuc style. On the west side of the building a vault has collapsed, affording a good view of the corbeled arch that supported it.

PALACIO DEL GOBERNADOR

The Governor's Palace, with its magnificent façade nearly 100m long, has been called 'the finest structure at Uxmal and the culmination of the Puuc style' by Mayanist Michael D Coe. The buildings have walls filled with rubble, faced with cement and then covered in a thin veneer of limestone squares; the lower part of the façade is plain, the upper part festooned with stylized Chac faces and geometric designs, often latticelike or fretted. Other elements of Puuc style are decorated cornices, rows of half-columns (as in the House of the Turtles) and round columns in doorways (as in the palace at Sayil). Stones forming the corbeled vaults in Puuc style are shaped somewhat like boots.

GRAN PIRÁMIDE

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

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

EL PALOMAR

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

CASA DE LA VIEJA

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

Tours

ATS buses depart Mérida's Terminal de Segunda Clase at 8am on a whirlwind excursion to the Ruta Puuc sites (see p177) plus Kabah and Uxmal, heading back from Uxmal's parking lot at 2:30pm. This 'tour' is transportation only; you pay all other costs. The time spent at each site is enough to get only a brief acquaintance, though some say the two hours at Uxmal is sufficient, if barely. The cost is US\$10 for the whole deal,

or US\$6 if you want to be dropped off only at Uxmal in the morning and picked up in the afternoon.

Other organized tours of Uxmal and other sites can be arranged in Mérida. See p160 for more details.

Sleeping & Eating

There is no town at Uxmal, only several top-end hotels. Cheaper lodgings can be found in Santa Elena (p176), 16km away, or in Ticul (see p181), 30km to the east.

Hotel Villas Arqueológicas Uxmal (☎/fax 997-974-6020, 800-514-8244, in the USA 800-258-2633; villauxmccrec01@clubmed.com; d US\$82; 🍷 🍴) This is an attractive Club Med–run hotel not far from the ruins entrance. It has a swimming pool, tennis courts, a restaurant and guestrooms with air-con.

Hotel Hacienda Uxmal (☎ 997-976-2012, in the USA 800-235-4079; www.mayaland.com; d with air-con May-Oct US\$138, Nov-Apr US\$148, ste US\$285-345; 🍷 🍴) This Mayaland Resort is 500m from the ruins. It housed the archaeologists who explored and restored Uxmal. Wide, tiled verandas, high ceilings, great bathrooms and a beautiful swimming pool make this a very comfortable place to stay.

The Lodge at Uxmal (☎ 997-976-2010, in the USA 800-235-4079; www.mayaland.com; s/d May-Oct US\$183-279, Nov-Apr US\$266-334; 🍷 🍴) Mayaland Resort's lodge is Uxmal's newest and most luxurious hotel. Rooms have two queens or one king bed, a minibar, coffeemaker and great bathrooms. Some have stained-glass windows and other pretty touches. The hotel offers meal plans and has two pools and a restaurant-bar. Walk-in rates are sometimes lower than the official rates quoted here. It's just opposite the entrance to the archaeological site.

Getting There & Away

Uxmal is 80km from Mérida. Most buses plying the inland route between Mérida and Campeche will drop you off at Uxmal, Santa Elena, Kabah or the Ruta Puuc turnoff. But when you want to leave, passing buses may be full (especially on Saturday and Monday).

If you're going from Uxmal to Ticul, first take a northbound bus to Muna (US\$0.50, 20 minutes) then catch one of the frequent buses from there to Ticul (US\$0.80, 30 minutes).

SANTA ELENA

The nearest town to Uxmal is Santa Elena, which has a small **museum** (☎ 8am-7pm; admission US\$1) dedicated to a gruesome find: 18th-century child mummies found buried beneath the adjoining cathedral, and some henequen-related exhibits, including barks used for dye. If time permits, try asking if you can take in the view from the roof of the cathedral.

Bungalows Sacbé (☎ 985-858-1281; sacbun.galow@hotmail.com; d US\$25-28) There's a nice garden here and friendly iguanas roaming the premises. All rooms have fans, good screens and good beds. The Sacbé is also convenient to the Ruta Puuc ruins, and the friendly owners speak French, English and Spanish, and serve good, cheap breakfasts and dinners (with vegetarian options). To get here, ask the bus driver to drop you off at the *campo de béisbol* (baseball field) *de Santa Elena*. It's about 200m south of the town's southern entrance. Each room has an excellent book with information about local activities (including the ruins), and even lists of birds you're likely to see during your stay.

Flycatcher Inn (www.flycatcherinn.com; d US\$40-60, ste US\$70) It features four squeaky-clean rooms and an enormous master suite. All have terraces, supercomfy imported beds (two queens in doubles, a king in the suite) plus hammocks, excellent screenage and great bathrooms – those in the suites are done in marble quarried from nearby Ticul. Breakfast, included in the room rates, consists of homemade breads, tropical fruit and tea or coffee. The owners, a local Maya and his American wife, have kept most of the five hectares of land around the inn undeveloped, and a number of bird and animal species can be seen here, including the flycatchers that gave their name to the place. The inn's driveway is less than 100m north of Santa Elena's southern entrance; there's a bus stop just across the highway from it, near Restaurant El Chac-Mool.

Restaurant El Chac-Mool (☎ 999-996-2025; mains US\$5-8; ☎ 8am-9pm) On Hwy 261 at the southern entrance to Santa Elena, this is a friendly place serving Yucatecan food that includes a hearty vegetarian plate of rice, beans, and fried bananas. A new 2nd-floor seating area was scheduled to open by the time this book goes to print.

Santa Elena is 16km southeast of Uxmal and 8km north of Kabah – for details of bus services from Uxmal, see p175; from Ticul, see p182.

KABAH

These **ruins** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-5pm), 23km southeast of Uxmal, are right astride Hwy 261. The guard shack-souvenir shop/office (selling snacks and cold drinks) and the bulk of the restored ruins are on the east side of the highway.

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

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



book. One is headless and the other wears a jaguar mask atop his head. Two more *atlantes* stand in a storage shed near the office, though when we were there it looked like they were about to be packed up and shipped off to a museum.

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

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

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

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

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

Getting There & Away

Kabah is 104km from Mérida. See p175 for details on transport, and p175 for details on tours. However, Kabah gets particularly short shrift – about 25 minutes – from the ATS excursion bus.

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

RUTA PUUC

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

See p175 and p182 for details on catching the ATS excursion bus, the only regularly scheduled public transport on the route. During the busy winter season it's often possible to hitch rides from one site to the next, the best way to appreciate the sites is by rented car or taxi, especially if you plan on taking time at each site.

Sayil

The ruins of **Sayil** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-5pm) are 4.5km from the junction of the Ruta Puuc with Hwy 261.

Sayil is best known for **El Palacio**, the huge three-tiered building with a façade some 85m long and reminiscent of the Minoan palace on Crete. The distinctive columns of Puuc architecture are used here over and over, either as supports for the lintels, as decoration between doorways, and as a frieze above them, alternating with huge stylized Chac masks and 'descending gods.' Ascending the *palacio* beyond its first level is not allowed.

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

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

Xlapak

From the entrance gate at Sayil, it's 6km east to the entrance gate at **Xlapak** (shla-pak; admission US\$2.40; ☎ 8am-5pm). The name means 'Old Walls' in Maya and was a general term among local people for ancient ruins.

The ornate **palacio** at Xlapak is quite a bit smaller than those at Kabah and Sayil, measuring only about 20m in length. It's decorated with the inevitable Chac masks,

columns and colonnettes and fretted geometric latticework of the Puuc style. The building is interesting and on a bit of a lean. Plenty of mot-mots brighten up the surrounding forests.

Labná

If you're short on time, **Labná** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-5pm) is the Ruta Puuc site not to miss. Its setting on a flat, open area is striking, and if no-one has been through before you for a while, at each doorway you approach you're likely to startle groups of long-tailed mot-mots into flight. Between the birds and the vegetation growing atop the *palacio*, you can almost imagine yourself one of the first people to see the site in centuries. OK, you may need to squint a bit to ignore the trimmed grass.

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

EL PALACIO

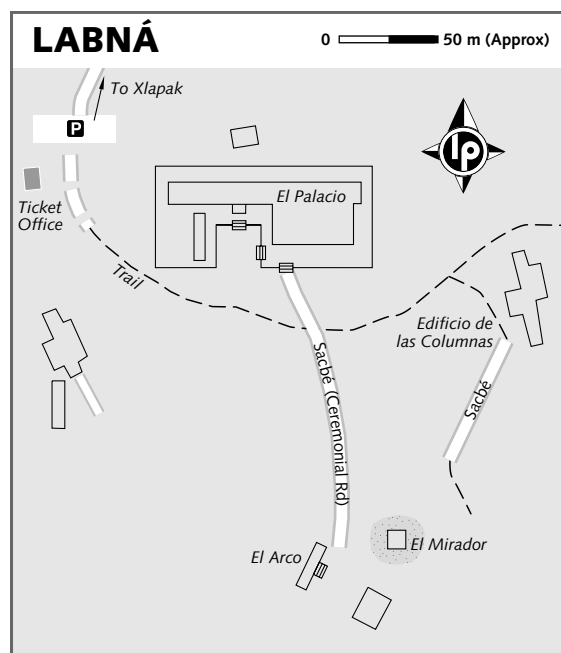
The first building you come to at Labná is one of the longest in the Puuc region, and much of its interesting decorative carving is in good shape. On the west corner of the main structure's façade, straight in from the big tree near the center of the complex, is a serpent's head with a human face peering out from between its jaws, the symbol of the planet Venus. Toward the hill from this is an impressive Chac mask, and nearby is the lower half of a human figure (possibly a ballplayer) in loincloth and leggings.

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

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

EL ARCO

Labná is best known for its magnificent arch, once part of a building that separated two quadrangular courtyards. It now appears to be a gate joining two small pla-



zas. The corbeled structure, 3m wide and 6m high, is well preserved, and the reliefs decorating its upper façade are exuberantly Puuc in style.

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

EL MIRADOR

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

GRUTAS DE LOLTÚN

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

The **Grutas de Loltún** (Loltún Caverns; admission US\$5, parking US\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm), one of the largest dry-cave systems on the Yucatán Peninsula, provided a treasure trove of data for archaeologists studying the Maya. Carbon dating of artifacts found here reveals that the caves were used by humans 2200 years

ago. Chest-high murals of hands, faces, animals and geometric motifs were apparent as recently as 20 years ago, but so many people have touched them that scarcely a trace remains, though some handprints have been restored. A few pots are displayed in a niche, and an impressive bas-relief, El Guerrero, guards the entrance. Other than that, you'll mostly see floodlit limestone formations, or the poorly aimed floodlights shining into your eyes.

To explore the labyrinth, you must take a scheduled guided tour at 9:30am, 11am, 12:30pm, 2pm, 3pm or 4pm, but they may depart early if enough people are waiting, or switch to English if the group warrants it (tours are usually in Spanish). The services of the guides are included in the admission price, though they expect a small tip afterwards. Tours last about one hour and 20 minutes, with lots of lengthy stops. Some guides' presentations are long on legends (and jokes about disappearing mothers-in-law) and short on geological and historical information.

When we last visited, the restaurant near the cave exit was not operating, but food was available at the *parador turístico* across the highway from the caves' parking lot. A tiny shop near the entrance sells snacks, water and beer.

Getting There & Away

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

There is a bus service to Oxkutzcab (osh-kootz-kahb; US\$3.50, three hours) via Ticul, with departures at 5:30am, 6:30am, 7:30am, 9:30am and 11am, from the Noreste Terminal in Mérida. Loltún is 7km southwest of Oxkutzcab, and there is usually some transportation along the road. *Camionetas* (pickups) and *camiones* (trucks) charge about US\$1 for a ride

A taxi from Oxkutzcab may cost US\$10 or so, one way.

RUINAS DE MAYAPÁN

These **ruins** (admission US\$2.40; ☎ 8am-5pm) are some 50km southeast of Mérida, on Hwy 18. Though far less impressive than many Maya sites, Mayapán is historically significant, its main attractions are clustered in a compact core, and visitors usually have

the place to themselves. It is one of few sites where you can ascend to the top of the pyramid for a nice view.

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

History

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

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

But struggles for power continued in the region until 1542, when Francisco de Montejo the Younger conquered T'ho and established Mérida. At that point the current lord of Maní and ruler of the Xiú people, Ah Kukum Xiú, proposed to Montejo a military alliance against the Cocomes, his ancient rivals. Montejo accepted, and Xiú was baptized as a Christian, taking the name Francisco de Montejo Xiú. The Cocomes were defeated and – too late – the Xiú rulers realized that they had signed the death warrant of Maya independence.

Exploring the Site

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

Among the structures that have been restored is the **Castillo de Kukulcán**, a climbable pyramid with fresco fragments around its

base and, at its rear side, friezes depicting decapitated warriors. The reddish color is still faintly visible. The **Templo Redondo** (Round Temple) is vaguely reminiscent of El Caracol at Chichén Itzá. Close by is Itzmal Chen, a cenote that was a major Maya religious sanctuary. Excavation and restoration continue at the site.

Getting There & Away

The Ruinas de Mayapán are just off Hwy 18, a few kilometers southwest of the town of Telchaquillo. LUS runs hourly 2nd-class buses between 5:30am and 8pm from the Noreste terminal in Mérida (US\$1.30 each way, 1½ hours) that will let you off near the entrance to the ruins, and pick you up on your way back. Again, you may want to consider renting a car to get here.

CUZAMÁ

The trip to this **site** (🕒 9am-5pm; for horse, driver, & up to 4 people US\$13) ends in a horse-drawn carriage ride to three beautiful cenotes, each deep within what once was a powerful henequen hacienda. The fun, horse-drawn ride will jar your fillings loose while showing you nice scenes of the surrounding, overgrown agave fields. Iguana sightings are a sure bet here, but keen eyes can also see vultures or caracaras, as well as other birds, lizards, and the occasional rabbit or two. One of the cenotes is featured in much of Yucatán's tourist literature, and all three are spectacular, with rope like roots, sunlight filtering through shafts, and crystal clear, deep-blue water. Though you may find yourself sharing a dip with other bathers, it's more likely that the drivers will time the trip so that you have most of the swimming to yourself. Several have steep stairways or ladders that are often slippery, so use caution at all times.

To get there by car, take Hwy 180 toward Cancún until you get to a turn off for Ticopo on the right; after Akankeh, bear left to reach Cuzamá. The narrow rural roads have clear signs, but be careful of kids, dogs, livestock, and sun-drunk iguanas...all will be on the road at some point. Shared vans leave for Cuzamá (US\$3 round trip, two hours) from Mérida's Parque de San Juan. If you use the vans, you'll need to take a pedicab from the van stop to Chuncanun, an additional US\$1.

TICUL

☎ 997 / pop 32,282

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

Orientation & Information

Ticul's main street is Calle 23, sometimes called 'Calle Principal', starting from the highway and going past the market to the main plaza, Plaza Mayor. A **post office** (🕒 8am-2:30pm Mon-Fri) faces the plaza, as do two banks with ATMs. Telmex has an office here.

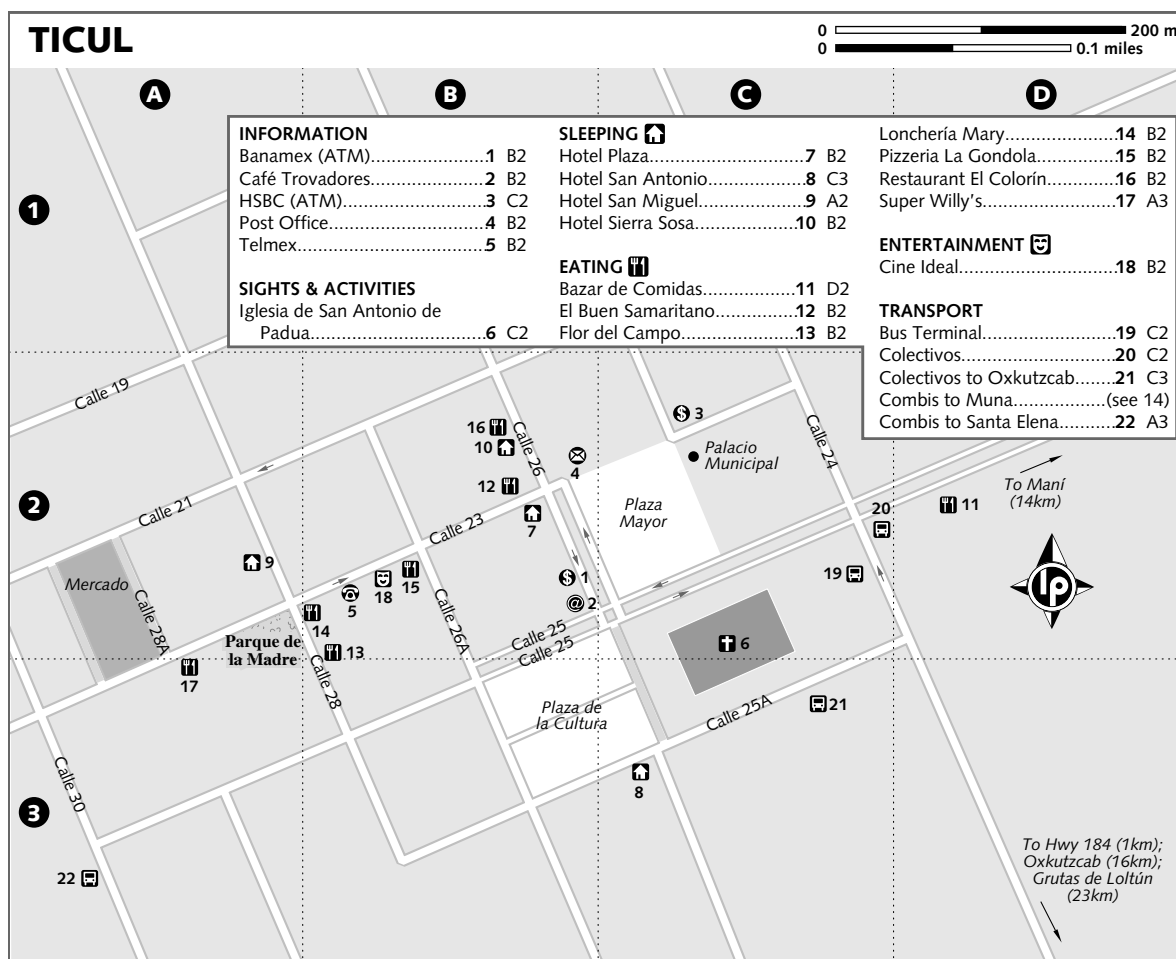
Several Internet cafés are dotted around near the town center; when one goes under, a new one appears nearby. **Café Trovadores** (Internet per hr US\$1.20, coffee US\$2; 🕒 9am-9pm) has a few computers, coffee and pastries. At the time of research, the only cinema in town was closed, though locals expected it to reopen.

Sights & Activities

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

Catercorner to the Plaza Mayor is the recently built Plaza de la Cultura, which is all cement and stone but nevertheless an agreeable place to take the evening breeze, enjoy the view of the church and greet passing townspeople.

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



Sleeping

Hotel San Miguel (Calle 28 No 295D; s/d US\$10/13; **P**) Near the market, the friendly management offers worn, simple rooms (some musty) with fans and bathrooms. The hotel was being remodeled when we were there.

Hotel Sierra Sosa (☎ /fax 972-0008; Calle 26 No 199A; s US\$15, d/tw US\$15/17, air-con extra US\$5; **P**) The Sierra Sosa is just northwest of the plaza. It's friendly and a bit rundown, but has good beds and OK bathrooms.

Hotel San Antonio (☎ 972-1983; cnr Calles 25A & 26; s US\$26, d/tw US\$30/35; **P**) A clean lobby with TV and shiny tiled floors sets a good impression that is confirmed by decent beds; some rooms have great views of the square. The hotel lacks character, but here in Ticul, that's kind of reassuring. All rooms have TV, phones, clean bathrooms – there's also off-street parking and a pleasant restaurant.

Hotel Plaza (☎ 972-0484; www.hotelplazayucatan.com; cnr Calles 23 & 26; d/tr with fan US\$30/40, with air-con US\$34/44; **P**) Spacious rooms with white-tile floors, firm beds, and small but fun balconies make this a nice choice. The old

building adds character, though the street-facing rooms are sometimes noisy. You could eat off the bathroom floors. Laundry service, phone, and pick-up/drop-off in Mérida are additional reasons to consider staying here.

Eating

Restaurant El Colorín (☎ 972-0094; Calle 26 No 199B; set meal US\$3.50; ☎ 7am-9pm) A cheap restaurant, half a block northwest of the plaza, it offers homemade meals.

Lonchería Mary (Calle 23; mains US\$4-6; ☎ 9am-10pm) This is a clean, family-run place offering hamburgers, excellent tamales, and odd things such as macaroni and cheese.

Pizzeria La Gondola (☎ 972-0112; Calle 23 No 208; mains US\$4-7; ☎ 8am-1pm, 5pm-11pm) A clean place on the corner that's open late, it has sandwiches and slightly pricey pizzas with the usual plethora of toppings. 'Order by number' options make it easy for non-Spanish speakers to get exactly what they want.

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

Flor del Campo (☎ 972-1875; juice US\$0.80-1.50; 🕒 6:30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 6:30am-3pm Sun) Juice up for the day at this tiny place, which just has chilled juices (no smoothies). You can get a bottle or a bag. Getting one is like sipping a part of the rainbow.

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

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

Getting There & Away

BUS, COLECTIVO & TAXI

Ticul's 24-hour **bus terminal** (Calle 24) is behind the massive church. Mayab runs frequent 2nd-class buses between Mérida and Ticul (US\$3.70, 1½ hours) from 4:30am to 9pm. Mayab and ADO run 11 buses to Felipe Carrillo Puerto (US\$10, four hours), frequent ones to Oxkutzcab (US\$0.70 to US\$1) and five a day to Chetumal (US\$15, six hours). There are also eight Mayab buses to Cancún daily (US\$21, six hours), three of which also serve Tulum (US\$15) and Playa del Carmen (US\$17). ADO and Super Expresso have less frequent 2nd- and 1st-class services, respectively, to some of these destinations.

Colectivo vans go direct to Mérida's Parque de San Juan (US\$3, 1½ hours) from their shiny new **terminal** (cnr Calles 24 & 25) as soon as they're full between 5am and 7:30pm. *Combis* for Oxkutzcab (US\$0.80, 30 minutes) leave from Calle 25A on the south side of the church between 7am and 8:30pm.

Colectivos to Santa Elena (US\$0.80), between Uxmal and Kabah, depart from Calle 30 between 6:15am and 7:30pm. They take Hwy 02 and drop you in Santa Elena to catch another bus northwest to Uxmal (15km) or south to Kabah (3.5km).

You can take a *combi* or bus to Muna (US\$0.90) from in front of Lonchería Mary on Calle 23 near Calle 28, and then south to Uxmal. Ruta Puuc-bound travelers can catch a 6:30am bus from Ticul to Muna and

pick up the ATS tour bus (US\$5) for Labná, Sayil, Xlapak, Kabah and Uxmal at 9am on its way from Mérida. It returns to Muna at 3pm. Any of the buses leaving Ticul before 8am for Muna (or Mérida) will get you to Muna in time to catch the ATS Ruta Puuc bus. Another way would be to catch a *colectivo* from Ticul to Santa Elena then walk a few blocks to Hwy 261, cross it, and wait for the Ruta Puuc bus to come by at about 9:30am.

Alternatively, for US\$50 you can get a taxi in Ticul that will stop at the Grutas de Loltún, Labná, Sayil, Xlapak, Kabah, and Uxmal and wait for you while you see each place. If you wish to stay at Uxmal for the 7pm sound-and-light show, the cost is US\$70.

CAR

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

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

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

TICUL TO TIHOSUCO

The route from Ticul to Tihosuco, in Quintana Roo, is seldom traveled by tourists. Some might say, 'There's nothing to see.' But others will welcome the opportunity to travel through farmland and jungle and see glimpses of Maya life that have remained the same for centuries. Indeed, the Maya in these parts entered the 21st century continuing to honor the gods of rain, wind and agriculture, and to hold religious ceremonies in their fields presided over by a wise man, just as their ancestors had done before them. Contemporary Maya prefer hammocks to beds, just like their ancestors.

The homes of today's rural Maya are still rectangular-shaped, wood-framed huts with lean-to roofs of palm. The walls are made of bamboo poles or branches, and the spaces between the poles are often filled with mud to keep pests out. Part of the route is called the Ruta de las Iglesias (Route of the Churches), as each of these tiny villages has a cathedral or church, many in beautiful disrepair. Stop for a look and you'll be surrounded by children who want to tell you as much as they know about their church or their home. Prepare to hear mainly Maya, though many people speak Spanish as well.

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

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

Oxkutzcab

Located 16km southeast of Ticul, Oxkutzcab is renowned for its daily produce market and colonial church. Markets were the principal means of trade for the ancient Maya, and the peninsula's indigenous people still travel from the countryside to central communities to exchange produce at stalls beside a main square. Oxkutzcab is such a community.

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

The church is remarkable mostly for its ornamental façade, at the center of which is a stone statue of St Francis, the mission patron. Two large belfries flank the statue of the saint, and worn statues of friars stand between the bell openings. The

church, which was constructed at a snail's pace from 1640 to 1693, is also remarkable for its magnificent altarpiece. Indeed, it's one of only a few baroque altarpieces in the Yucatán to survive the revolts that have occurred since its construction. Among the many finely detailed features of the altarpiece are six relief panels that illustrate the main events in the lives of Christ and the Virgin. Images of friars and saints surround the Virgin, and tokens of thanks appear at the foot of the shrine.

A mural in the plaza across from the market depicts inquisitor Friar Diego de Landa burning idols and codices while Maya cling to his hassock, vainly pleading for him to stop. This burning took place in Maní, 8km to the north, in 1562 (see p31).

Tekax

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

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

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

Certainly not 'borrowed' from the Maya are the Moorish belfries at the front corners of the building, and a framed relief of the Franciscan coat of arms situated atop an elaborately decorated doorway. Inside, only the simply carved scalloped basins are original; everything else that could have been destroyed or removed with ease is gone.

Tihosuco

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

During many of those attacks, the Spaniards retreated to the heavily fortified 17th-century church at the center of town, which for much of its life served as both a house of God and an arsenal and stronghold. At one time it was quite beautiful, with ornamental details throughout and a colonnaded façade that was pure artwork.

But the town and church fell to rebel hands in 1866 following a long siege, and much of the magnificent building was gutted. Today, one-third of the curved roof is gone, as is more than half of the façade. What remains of the once-great church is still worth investigating if time permits, though; it's quite impressive even with the roof missing. Services are still held inside, as in many other roofless churches in the region.

Also in Tihosuco, housed in an 18th-century building one block straight ahead of the church, is the **Museo de la Guerra de Castas** (Museum of the War of the Castes; admission US\$0.50, free Sunday; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). It does a good job of detailing the more than three centuries of oppression suffered by the Maya on the peninsula, and their several uprisings against it. The descriptions of social and economic divisions in the Yucatán region supply a broader context. Only a couple of explanations are translated into English, but the dioramas, paintings, photos and artifacts (including various weapons and a collection of old coins and bills) are interesting all the same. The grounds also hold a botanical garden with a variety of medicinal plants, and you can buy products made from them, as well as honey and some postcards.

From Tihosuco, it's a fast ride up Hwy 295 to Valladolid (p198). Along the way you can expect the usual traffic stop and questions by military personnel as you cross the border back into Yucatán state. Going the other way, Hwy 295 goes to Felipe Carrillo Puerto (p132).

WEST & NORTH OF MÉRIDA

CELESTÚN

📍 988 / pop 6,400

West of Mérida, Celestún is a sun-bleached, sleepy fishing town, quiet, with a pretty square where just about nothing happens and that's the way people like it. The town lies in the middle of the Reserva de la Biósfera Ría Celestún, a wildlife sanctuary abounding in resident and migratory waterfowl, with flamingos as the star attraction. It makes a good beach-and-bird day trip from Mérida, and it's also a great place to kick back and do nothing for a few days, especially if you've become road-weary. Fishing boats dot the appealing white-sand beach that stretches to the north for kilometers, and afternoon breezes cool the town on most days.

Though the winds can kick up sand and roil the sea, making the already none-too-clear water unpleasant for swimming, they are less intense than in Progreso. Celestún is sheltered by the peninsula's southward curve, resulting in an abundance of marine life. It's a fine place to watch the sun set into the sea. All you need to know is that Calle 11 is the road into town (it comes due west from Mérida), ending at Calle 12, the road paralleling the beach along which lie most of the restaurants and hotels.

Don't plan on using high-speed Internet here. It's currently dial-up only. At the time of research, plans were underway to install an ATM in the plaza, but it might not hurt to stock up on cash before you come.

Sights & Activities

RESERVA DE LA BIÓSFERA RÍA CELESTÚN

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

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

Tours

In Celestún, you can hire a boat for bird-watching either from the bridge on the highway into town (about 1.5km inland) or from the beach itself. Boats depart from outside Restaurant Celestún, at the foot of Calle 11. The restaurant's beachfront *palapa* is a pleasant place to wait for a group to accumulate, rather than the tiny *palapa* at the boats themselves. Otherwise, Turi-transmérida in Mérida organizes flamingo tours (see p160).

Unfortunately, hiring a boat can be a frustrating experience, and a lesson in false expectations. Knowing what to expect will save you some frustration: First, operators tend to try to collect as many people as possible, often telling one couple 'Sure, the tour will leave at 8:30,' and another couple 'We'll wait for you until 9am.' Prices are often quoted assuming eight passengers, but if only four or six people show up that means the quoted price rises, often to the irritation of people who've waited 30 minutes to an hour. You can solve this problem by coming up with a group of eight on your own.

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

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

Currently, a boat from the beach costs US\$120 to operate, so the per person cost for eight people ends up US\$15 per passenger.

With six it will be US\$20. If it's just you and a friend, try asking for US\$100 for the boat, and if you go early in the morning you'll have a better chance to get close to the birds. Remember that trips happen on Mexican time and you'll enjoy it a lot more.

Tours from the bridge, where there is a parking lot, ticket booth, and a place to wait for fellow passengers, are slightly cheaper and last about 1¼ hours. For US\$40 per boat (maximum six passengers) plus US\$10 per passenger, you get to see the flamingos, mangrove tunnel and spring. It's also possible to add a trip from the bridge south to the 'petrified forest,' for an additional US\$10 per passenger, a total time of about 2½ hours.

With either the bridge or beach option, your captain may or may not speak English. An English-speaking guide can be hired at the bridge for about US\$30 for the short tour; this reduces the maximum possible number of passengers, of course. Bring snacks, water and sunscreen for the longer tours. There is no bank in town, and neither credit cards nor traveler's checks are accepted by the tour operators.

BEACH & BIRDING

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

HACIENDA REAL DE SALINAS

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

The buildings are decaying in a most scenic way; you can still see shells in the wall mixed into the building material, as well as pieces of French roof tiles that served as ballast in ships on the way from Europe. Many intact tiles with the brickworks' name

and location, Marseille, are still visible in what's left of the roofs. The hacienda makes a good bicycle excursion from town. Coming south, go left at the Y junction, or turn right to reach El Lastre (The Ballast), a peninsula between the estuary and its western arm. Flamingos, white pelicans and other birds are sometimes seen here. If the water is high enough it's possible to ask your flamingo tour captain to try stopping here on the way back from the birds.

Sleeping

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

Hostel Ría Celestún (☎ 916-2597; hostelria.celestun@hotmail.com; cnr Calles 12 & 13; dm US\$6-7, s/d low season US\$8/10, high season US\$10/18; 📺) It offers a good cheap sleep, with single-sex or mixed fan-cooled dorms (slightly dusty), kitchen and laundry facilities, a courtyard and TV room for common areas, bicycle rentals, and Internet access. The staff are great sources of info about the area, and can provide directions for doing just about anything. Ask about bicycle tours of local sights, including the very interesting Hacienda Real de Salinas.

Hotel Sofía (in Mérida ☎ 999-990-7707; Calle 12; d/tr US\$12/20; 📺) This whitewashed place has nine spotless, well-maintained good-value rooms with fans and hammock hooks. It also has secure parking and the owners let guests use the (hand) laundry facilities. There's a discount if you stay more than a night.

Hotel María del Carmen (☎/fax 916-2170; cnr Calles 12 & 15; d with fan/air-con US\$25/30; 📺) This place has 14 clean and pleasant beachfront rooms tucked behind a picturesque maroon-colored false front; rooms on the upper floors have balconies facing the sea. Prices drop when things are slow. Fuchsia bougainvillea is having a colorful field-day along the walls.

Eco Hotel Flamingos Playa (☎ 916-2133, in Mérida 999-928-5708; drivan@sureste.com; Calle 12; d US\$40-50; 📺 📺) About three blocks north of Calle 11, it has decent rooms (sea views cost more) with air-con, fan, TV, purified water and very good bathrooms. It has tiles all over the place and a small beachside pool, restaurant and bar.

Eating

Celestún's specialties are crab, octopus, small shrimp from the lagoon and, of course, fresh fish. Service and décor vary, but the menu for the most part does not, and most places have outdoor areas on the beach. Eat early (by 7:30pm or so) on weeknights or you may find all seafood restaurants closed.

Prices vary, but expect to pay about US\$6 to US\$10 for either the catch of the day, delicious ceviche, or crab prepared in a variety of ways, and US\$4 for a conch, shrimp, crab or octopus cocktail.

La Playita (mains US\$5-10; 📺 10am-10pm) It's right on the (sometimes windy) beach with great views. Cheap seafood and ceviche are its main draw.

Restaurante Chivirico (cnr Calles 11 & 12; US\$5-15; 📺 10am-7:30pm) A large place with wicker chairs and a TV with Spanish soaps as its ambiance, the Chivirico has excellent seafood and is well worth a visit. The *ensalada de jaiba* (crab salad, US\$5) is delicious.

El Lobo (📺 7am-noon & 7pm-midnight Tue-Sun) A block inland on the southwest edge of the plaza, this is a tiny place with a rooftop terrace that overlooks the plaza and is one of the few places that's open late enough to hang out in at night. It's a popular spot for locals as well as tourists, and offers great breakfasts, excellent hotcakes, good espresso and cappuccino, pizzas and pastas.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Mérida head for Celestún (US\$4.60, two hours) 17 times daily between 5am and 8pm from the terminal on Calle 67 between Calles 50 and 52. The route terminates at Celestún's plaza, a block inland from Calle 12. Returning buses also run from 5am to 8pm.

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

RUINED HACIENDAS ROUTE

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

HENEQUEN: A SMELLY, BITTER HARVEST

Henequen (*Agave fourcroydes*), also called sisal, is a common plant in Yucatán and indeed in most of Mexico. Its stalk grows almost 2m high in the wild, about 1m high in cultivation, and has lance-shaped leaves up to 2m long and 10cm to 15cm wide, edged with thorns. The plant's evil-smelling flowers are borne on a central stalk, which grows straight up to heights of 6m. Agaves flower periodically but infrequently, some species only once every century.

A cultivated henequen plant yields about 25 leaves annually from the 5th to the 16th year after planting. The leaves are cut off by machete, taken to a factory and crushed between heavy rollers. The pulpy vegetable matter is scraped away to reveal fiber strands up to 1.5m in length, which are slightly stretchable and resistant to marine organisms.

Mostly around Izamal and en route from Mérida to Celestún, but also in several other locations, you pass through or near the henequen fields that gave rise to Yucatán's affluence in the 19th century, when workers toiled on the haciendas under what was basically a feudal system. Prosperity in these parts reached its height during WWI, when the demand for rope was great and synthetic fibers had not yet been invented.

Sometimes you can smell the grayish, spike-leaved henequen plants before you can see them, as they emit a putrid, excremental odor. Once planted, henequen can grow virtually untended for seven years. Thereafter, the plants are annually stripped for fiber. A plant may be productive for upwards of two decades.

These days great quantities of henequen are imported from Brazil and processed into rope and other products in the *maquiladoras* (assembly plants) of Yucatán state. Growing henequen on the peninsula is still economically viable, if barely; synthetic fibers and cheap imported henequen have greatly diminished the profits. The decline has been hard on the few Maya farm workers who still struggle to keep the defibering machines operating on a few former haciendas. The town of **Ake**, east of Mérida, has one of only three remaining working rasping machines.

the site. After here the road is in good shape (look for the covered Maya mounds as you drive away), and about every 5km passes another ruined hacienda all the way to Hacienda Granada, shortly before the road hits old Hwy 180. It's a fun toodle off the beaten path. Several buildings are pretty hard to see from the road, so you'll need to stop frequently to really give them their due. Plan on getting out of the car a few times along the way to look around.

You can have a look at most of the five haciendas (ask permission at Granada; the owner lives there). An exception is **Hacienda Santa Rosa** (☎ 999-910-4852; www.starwood.com/luxury; r US\$250-500), which has been marvelously restored as a luxury hotel. The 11 rooms show amazing variety; some have private walled gardens with bathtubs or plunge pools. It's very slow-paced and a good place to unwind, assuming you're comfortable dropping this sort of money.

DZIBILCHALTÚN

About 17km north of downtown Mérida (a 25 minute drive), **Dzibilchaltún** (Place of Inscribed Flat Stones; admission US\$6 Mon-Sat, US\$4 Sun & holidays;

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

Whether you come to strike a Y-shaped 'feel the pyramid power' pose, to snap a picture, or just to see what the fuss is about, it's pretty impressive – many who've seen both feel the sunrise here is more spectacular

than Chichén Itzá's famous snake (p192), and is well worth getting up at the crack of dawn to witness.

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

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

Parking costs US\$1. Minibuses and *colectivo* taxis depart frequently from Mérida's **Parque de San Juan** (Calle 69 btwn Calles 62 & 64) for the village of Dzibilchaltún Ruinas (US\$0.80, 30 minutes), a little over 1km from the museum.

PROGRESO

☎ 969 / pop 48,700

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

especially in the summer months. Even on spring weekdays it can be difficult to find a room with a view. Once or twice a week the streets flood with cruise-ship tourists, but the place can feel empty on off nights, a refreshing change.

There's also a strong evangelical presence here, so on Sunday prepare to see families in their finest clothes heading to church. You're as likely to be approached by people offering pamphlets (sometimes even in English) about redemption as by hammock sellers. One particularly memorable scene witnessed by us was of an elderly grandmother sitting at a table blasting Spanish Christian hard rock out across the plaza.

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

Internet cafés offering so-so access are sprinkled everywhere, especially around the bus terminal and Calles 29 and 78. Some stay open until 9pm, others as late as 1am, charging about US\$1.50 per hour.

Sleeping & Eating

All hotels and restaurants listed are no more than 11 blocks north and east of the bus terminal.

Hotel Miralmar (☎ 935-0552; Calle 27 No 124 at Calle 76; d/tw with fan US\$16/21, d with air-con US\$28; 📶) Four blocks inland, it has mostly good beds, decent bathrooms and good natural light. Rooms on the upper floor have better ventilation and baths, in curious prefab clover-shaped units.

Hotel Real del Mar (☎ 935-0798; d US\$22/34; 📶) This place features 15 rooms with air-con, and various configurations of beds and views. The décor is nice, with tiled floors, a small fountain, and a tropical green-and-yellow paint job.

Hotel Tropical Suites (☎ 935-1263; fax 935-3093; cnr malecón & Calle 70; d/tw with fan US\$25/30, with air-con US\$25/35; 📶) Across the street from Hotel Real del Mar, it's a seaside hotel with 21

tidy, non musty, smallish rooms, some with sea views. The 1st-floor rooms opening out on the street don't afford much privacy. A great location for beach bums.

Restaurant Mary Doly (Calle 25 btwn Calles 74 & 76; breakfast US\$1.50-3.50, mains US\$3.50-7; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Sat, 7am-5pm Sun) Near Hotel Miralmar, this is a homey place with good, cheap seafood, meat and breakfasts. The freshly squeezed orange juice is very refreshing.

Restaurant El Cordobes (☎ 935-2621; cnr Calles 80 & 31; mains US\$4.50-7.50; ☎ 6am-midnight daily) Also near Hotel Miralmar, this is on the north side of the plaza in a 100-year-old building with character. Weak 'American' coffee is served quickly, with a warm smile, and it's a perfect place to relax for a bit and look out on the main plaza.

Restaurant Los Pelicanos (☎ 935-5378; cnr Malecón & Calle 70; mains US\$4.50-10, special dishes US\$20; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Sat, 8am-8pm Sun) By Hotel Real del Mar, it has a shady terrace, sea views, a good menu and moderate prices, considering its location. It's usually very windy. Peaches and cream is a nice way to finish a meal.

Getting There & Away

Progreso is 33km north of Mérida along a fast four-lane highway that's basically a continuation of the Paseo de Montejo. The bus station (Calle 29, btwn Calles 80 & 82) has numerous Mérida-bound buses from 5:20am to 10pm. For bus information here from Mérida, see p169.

EAST OF PROGRESO

Heading east from Progreso, Hwy 27 parallels the coast for 70km, to Dzilam de Bravo, before turning inland. It's a beautiful drive, and you'll pass miles of mixed mangrove clumps and notice that on the right (south) the mud takes on a beautiful pink color. Not surprisingly, this area is named the Rose Lagoon. Heading east from Dezilam, the road continues a further 100km to hit the coast again at the charming fishing village of San Felipe (see p206).

On the seaward side (the north) of the Rose Lagoon things are less pretty: a lot of new time-shares and condos and hotels, plus numerous 'boat for sale' signs, a grim reminder that as the 'snowbirds' from the USA flock down to buy up the land, the locals have to find alternate ways to make

a living. The fishing communities are taking a devastating hit and will continue to as local prices rise. At the same time, there were plenty of businesses that went up too early, anticipating far more tourists would arrive; their cracked parking lots now overrun with weeds, and vines covering the 'Valet Parking' signs.

The most interesting bits of this area are relatively close to Progreso and are best explored by car. Keep an eye out for unpainted, unmarked *topes* (speed bumps), which make it easy to return your rental vehicle with a lot of extra play in the steering column.

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


The buildings thin out beyond Uaymitún, and about 16km east of it a road heads south from the coast some 3km across the bird-riddled lagoon to the turnoff for the ruins of Xcambó, which was a Maya salt-distribution center, though much of it has been reconstructed.

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

Continuing south on this road takes you back to civilization at Motul, from where you can head in any number of directions: east and south to Izamal, west and north to the Dzibilchaltún ruins, southwest to Tixkokob and its beautiful hammocks (p168), or west and south to Mérida via Conkal, whose Convento de San Francisco de Asís now houses the new **Museo de Arte Sacro** (admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun). This is a small but well-done museum of religious art and artifacts, including 18th- and 19th-century altarpieces and carvings of saints, good historical and archaeological exhibits detailing the foundation (and later restoration) of Yucatán's monasteries, and contemporary profane and religious artwork. Some of the latter is surprisingly racy. All labeling is in Spanish. Be sure to check out the architecture of the convent itself, including the *noría* (irrigation system) out back.

EASTERN YUCATÁN STATE


IZAMAL

 988 / pop 23,000

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

The Izamal of today is a quiet, colonial gem of a provincial town, nicknamed La Ciudad Amarilla (The Yellow City) for the traditional yellow that most buildings are painted. It is easily explored on foot. Horse-drawn carriages add to the city's charm. Making a trip here even easier is the excellent tourist map, available in several languages (English and Spanish are always available, but there's also French, German and even Japanese), describing various walking tours and locations where handicraft demonstrations take place. Gaia Maya (p160) do day trips to Izamal from Mérida.


Sights & Activities

When the Spaniards conquered Izamal, they destroyed the major Maya temple, the Ppapp-Hol-Chac pyramid, and in 1533 began to build from its stones one of the first monasteries in the Western Hemisphere. Work on **Convento de San Antonio de Padua** (admission free;  6am-8pm) was finished in 1561. Under the monastery's arcades, look for building stones with an unmistakable mazelike design; these were clearly taken from the earlier Maya temple.

The monastery's principal church is the **Santuario de la Virgen de Izamal**, approached by a ramp from the main square. The ramp leads into the **Atrium**, a huge arcaded courtyard in which the fiesta of the Virgin of Izamal takes place each August 15.


At some point, the 16th-century **frescoes** beside the entrance of the sanctuary were completely painted over. For years they lay

concealed under a thin layer of whitewash until a maintenance worker who was cleaning the walls discovered them recently. The church's original altarpiece was destroyed by a fire believed to have been started by a fallen candle. Its replacement, impressively gilded, was built in the 1940s. In the niches at the stations of the cross are some superb small figures.

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





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

Three of the town's original 12 Maya **pyramids** have been partially restored. The largest (and the 3rd largest in Yucatán) is the enormous **Kinich-Kakmó**, three blocks north of the monastery. You can climb it for free.

If you want a real jungle experience, ask at the **tourist center** ( 988-954-0009) for Esteban Abán, the jewelry maker, who offers guided trips to Ox-Huadz, an unexcavated ruin. You'll need to set things up at least a day in advance, depending on Abán's availability, but the trip offers great birding and Indiana Jones-style ruin-hunting. You'll need to be in relatively good shape.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Canto (Calle 31; r US\$13) In front of the monastery, it is dirt cheap and actually kind of dirty: the rooms are musty and the bathrooms aren't great. Tiny skylights and once-colorful murals help brighten the place up, and it is worth a peek for those who need to protect their pennies. Far at the back of the property is one of Izamal's pyramids. A restaurant at the front serves cheap meals.

Macan Ché ( /fax 954-0287; www.macanche.com; Calle 22 No 305; d US\$30-60;   ) It's about three long (yes, long!) blocks east of the

monastery (take Calle 31 toward Cancún and turn right on Calle 22). The charming hotel has a cluster of cottages and a small ‘cenote’ pool in a woodsy setting, with 12 pretty rooms in all. The most expensive has air-con and a kitchenette. Rates include a big breakfast. Free wireless and LAN (Local Area Network) for guests.

Restaurant Kinich-Kakmó (☎ 954-0489; www.sabordeizamal.com; Calle 27 btwn Calles 28 & 30; mains US\$8; 🕒 11:30am-5pm) Three blocks north of the monastery, this place is casual and extremely friendly, offering fan-cooled patio dining beside a garden. It specializes in traditional Yucatecan food, has some unusual items on the menu, such as delicious frozen, candied papaya garnished with (of all things!) cubes of cheese.

Several *loncherías* occupy spaces in the market on the monastery’s southwest side. As with anywhere in Yucatán, ask locals for a food or hotel recommendation. There’s lots to be discovered here.

Getting There & Away

Oriente operates frequent buses between Mérida and Izamal (US\$3, 1½ hours) from the 2nd-class terminal. There are buses from Valladolid (US\$4, two hours) as well. Coming from Chichén Itzá you must change buses at Hoctún. Izamal’s bus terminal is two short blocks west of the monastery.

Other bus services from Izamal include Tizimín (US\$5.50, 2½ hours) and Cancún (US\$10.20, six hours). Shared vans leave from Calle 31 a block north of Hotel Canto for Mérida (US\$2) and arrive in Mérida on the corner of Calles 67 and 50; if you have heavy luggage, ask if they can charge US\$3 for service door-to-door.

Drivers will find that it’s easy to park here: there are numerous spaces in and around the plaza. Sometimes a brown-shirted tourist policeman will even stop traffic while you enter and exit your space. He may also recommend a place (eatery, hotel, souvenir shop etc). Usually that’s a place you can safely avoid.

CHICHÉN ITZÁ

The most famous and best restored of the Yucatán Maya sites, **Chichén Itzá** (Mouth of the Well of the Itzáes; admission US\$9.50 Mon-Sat, US\$5 Sun & holidays; 🕒 8am-5:30pm winter, 8am-6pm summer) will impress even the most jaded visitor. Many

mysteries of the Maya astronomical calendar are made clear when one understands the design of the ‘time temples’ here. Other than a few minor passageways, climbing on the structures at the site was not allowed when we were there.

At the vernal and autumnal equinoxes (March 20 to 21 and September 21 to 22), the morning and afternoon sun produces a light-and-shadow illusion of the serpent ascending or descending the side of El Castillo’s staircase. The site is mobbed on these dates, however, making it difficult to see, and after the spectacle, parts of the site are sometimes closed to the public. The illusion is almost as good in the week preceding and following each equinox (and draws much smaller crowds), and is re-created nightly in the light-and-sound show year-round. Some find the spectacle fascinating, others think it’s over-rated. Either way, if you’re in the area around the equinox and you’ve got your own car it’s easy to wake up early for Dzibilchaltún’s fiery sunrise (see p187) and then make it to Chichén Itzá by mid-afternoon, catching both spectacles on the same day.

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

History

Most archaeologists agree that the first major settlement at Chichén Itzá, during the late Classic period, was pure Maya. In about the 9th century, the city was largely abandoned for reasons unknown. It was resettled around the late 10th century, and shortly thereafter it is believed to have been invaded by the Toltecs, who had migrated from their central highlands capital of Tula, north of Mexico City. Toltec culture was fused with that of the Maya, incorporating the cult of Quetzalcóatl (Kukulcán, in Maya). You will see images of both Chac-Mool, the Maya rain god, and Quetzalcóatl, the plumed serpent, throughout the city.

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

The warlike Toltecs contributed more than their architectural skills to the Maya. They elevated human sacrifice to a near obsession, and there are numerous carvings of the bloody ritual in Chichén demonstrating this. After a Maya leader moved his political capital to Mayapán while keeping Chichén as his religious capital, Chichén Itzá fell into decline. Why it was subsequently abandoned in the 14th century is a mystery, but the once-great city remained the site of Maya pilgrimages for many years.

Orientation

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

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

Information

The western entrance has a large parking lot and a big visitors center, the **Unidad de Servicios** (☎ 985-851-0124; ☎ 8am-9pm). Facilities include two bookstores with a good assortment of guides and maps, a restaurant serving decent if somewhat pricey food, a Banamex ATM, Telmex card phones, excellent free bathrooms and, around the corner from the ticket counter, a free *guarda-equipaje* (room for storing luggage) where you can leave your belongings while you explore the site.

As at most sites, filming with a video camera costs US\$3 extra, and tripods require a special permit from Mexico City. Hold on to your wristband ticket; it gives you in-and-out privileges and admission to that evening's sound-and-light show. Parking costs US\$1 and is also good all day. Explanatory plaques around the site are in Spanish, English and Maya.

The 45-minute sound-and-light show in Spanish begins at 8pm each evening in

summer and 7pm in winter. It costs US\$3 if you don't already have a ruins wristband, and it counts toward the admission price the following day. Devices for listening to English, French, German or Italian translations (beamed via infrared) rent for US\$3. Specify the language you need or it may not be broadcast.

Sights

EXPLORING THE RUINS

Unidad de Servicios

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

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

El Castillo

As you approach from the Unidad de Servicios into the site, El Castillo (also called the Pyramid of Kukulcán) rises before you in all its grandeur. The first temple here was pre-Toltec, built around AD 800, but the present 25m-high structure, built over the old one, has the plumed serpent sculpted along the stairways and Toltec warriors represented in the doorway carvings at the top of the temple. Unfortunately, thanks to a careless tourist falling in October, 2005, and despite George W Bush's appearance on the picturesque steps in March, 2006, the pyramid is currently closed to the public. A shame, as this pyramid is one of the most spectacular in all of Yucatán.

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

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

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

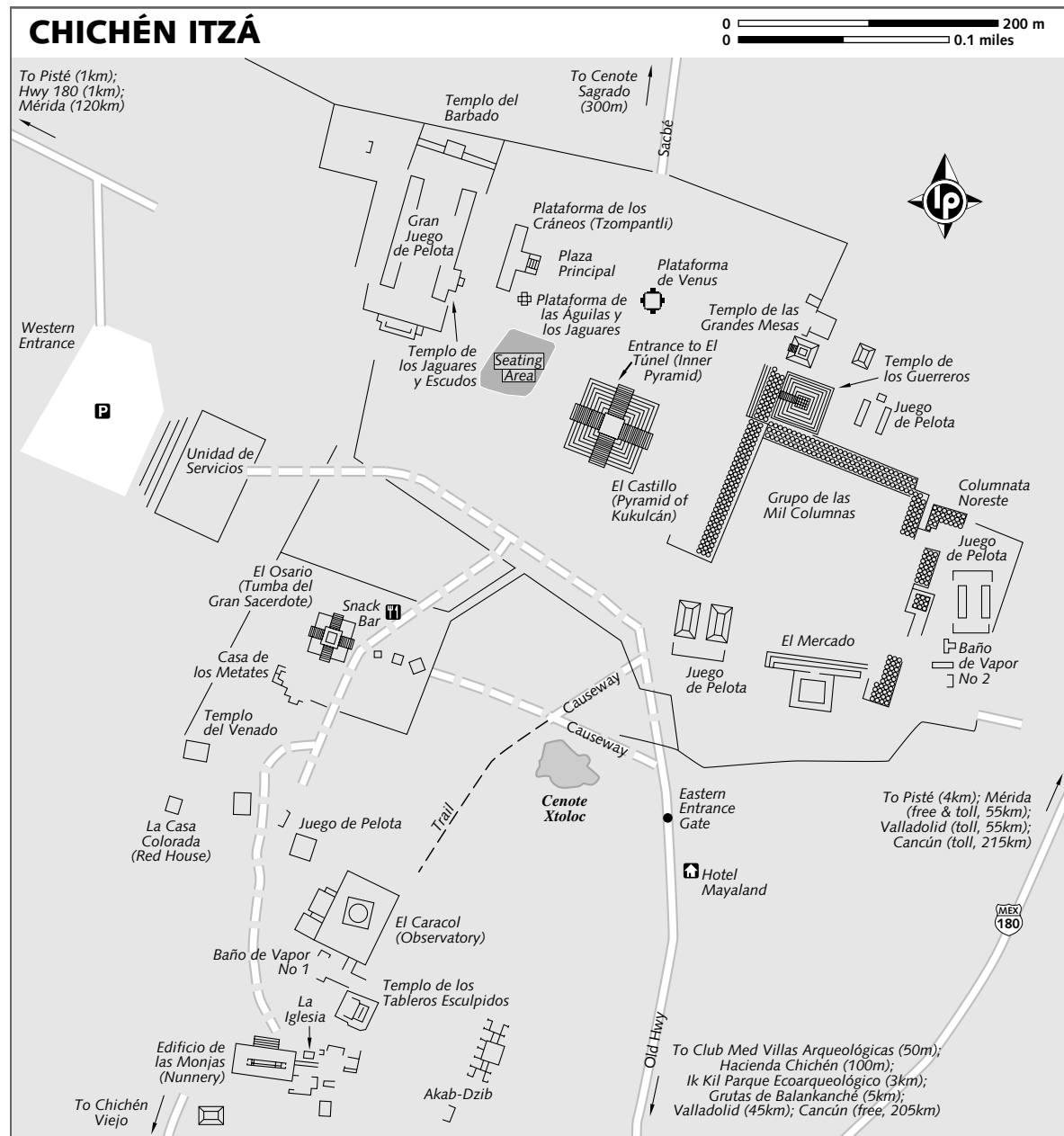
Gran Juego de Pelota

The great ball court, the largest and most impressive in Mexico, is only one of the

city's eight courts, indicative of the importance the games held here. The court, to the left of the Unidad de Servicios, is flanked by temples at either end and is bounded by towering parallel walls with stone rings cemented up high.

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

YUCATÁN STATE



and perhaps his teammates as well, were sacrificed.

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

Templo del Barbado & Templo de los Jaguares y Escudos

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

Plataforma de los Cráneos

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

Plataforma de las Águilas y los Jaguares

Adjacent to the *tzompantli*, the carvings on the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars depict those animals gruesomely grabbing human hearts in their claws. It is thought

that this platform was part of a temple dedicated to the military legions responsible for capturing sacrificial victims.

Cenote Sagrado

From the *tzompantli*, a 300m rough stone road runs north (a five-minute walk) to the huge sunken well that gave this city its name. The Sacred Cenote is an awesome natural well, some 60m in diameter and 35m deep. The walls between the summit and the water's surface are ensnared in tangled vines and other vegetation. There are ruins of a small steam bath next to the cenote, as well as a modern drinks stand (US\$1.20 for a small bottle of water) with toilets. See the boxed text below, for the historical details.

Grupo de las Mil Columnas

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

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

You can walk through the columns on its south side to reach the **Columnata Noreste**, notable for the 'big-nosed god' masks on

DREDGING CHICHÉN'S SACRED CENOTE

Around 1900 Edward Thompson, a Harvard professor and US consul to Yucatán, bought the hacienda that included Chichén Itzá for US\$75. No doubt intrigued by local stories of female virgins being sacrificed to the Maya deities by being thrown into the site's cenote, Thompson resolved to have the cenote dredged.

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

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

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

its façade. Some have been reassembled on the ground around the statue. Just to the south are the remains of the **Baño de Vapor** (Steam Bath or Sweat House) with an underground oven and drains for the water. The sweat houses were regularly used for ritual purification.

El Osario

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

El Caracol

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

Edificio de las Monjas & La Iglesia

Thought by archaeologists to have been a palace for Maya royalty, the so-called Edificio de las Monjas (Nunnery), with its myriad rooms, resembled a European convent to the conquistadors, hence their name for the building. The building's dimensions are imposing: its base is 60m long, 30m wide and 20m high. The construction is Maya rather than Toltec, although a Toltec sacrificial stone stands in front. A smaller adjoining building to the east, known as

La Iglesia (The Church), is covered almost entirely with carvings. Currently, on the far side at the back there are some passageways that are still open, leading a short way into the labyrinth inside. They are dank, slippery, smell of bat urine, and it's easy to twist an ankle, but Indiana Jones wannabes will think it's totally cool.

Akab-Dzib

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

Chichén Viejo

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

CENOTE IK KIL

About 3km east of the eastern entrance to Chichén Itzá is the turnoff for **Ik Kil Parque Ecoarqueológico** (☎ 985-858-1525; adult/child US\$6/3; ☒ 8am-6pm), whose cenote has been developed into an OK swimming spot. For anyone who's visited some of the other cenotes this will seem touristy, dirty and expensive; those who're heading back to Cancún or anyone with mobility difficulties will probably enjoy peeping, as it offers some idea of what makes cenotes so unusual and there are good stairs with some handrails.

In late 2002 two Japanese visitors were killed by falling rock when a section of the cenote, saturated by the heavy rains of Hurricane Isidore, collapsed.

Small cascades of water plunge from the high limestone roof, which is ringed by greenery. A good buffet lunch runs an extra US\$12 (beverages extra). Get your swim in by no later than 1pm to beat the tour groups. The grounds also hold five lovely **cabanas** (up to 8 people US\$100-200; ☒) with air-con and Jacuzzi.

GRUTAS DE BALANKANCHÉ

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

The turnoff for the **caverns** (admission Mon-Sat US\$5, Sun US\$2; ☎ ticket booth 9am-5pm) is 5km east of Chichén Itzá (about 5km southeast of Cenote Ik Kil) on the highway to Cancún. Second-class buses heading east from Pisté toward Valladolid and Cancún will drop you at the Balankanché road. The entrance to the caves is 350m north of the highway.

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

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

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

Sleeping

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

BUDGET

Pirámide Inn (☎ 985-851-0115; www.piramideinn.com; Calle 15A No 30; hammock or tent sites per person US\$4) An agreeable place on the west side of Pisté. Apart from its rooms (see opposite), you can pitch a tent or hang a hammock under a *palapa*, enjoy the inn's pool and watch satellite TV in the lobby. Campers have use of tepid showers, clean shared toilet facilities and a safe place to stow gear. Kitties scamper or drape themselves around the walkways. There's also a Maya-style sweat lodge.

Hotel Posada Maya (☎ 985-851-0211; Calle 8 btwn Calles 15 & 10; hammock sites with/without hammock US\$6/5, d/t/q US\$15/18/20) Just north of the highway (look for the sign), around the corner from the Oriente ticket office, it is a friendly place that offers clean, fan-cooled rooms with decent beds. However, poor screens and no toilets seats make it not for everyone. The restaurant offers cheap meals all day long.

Posada Olalde (☎ 985-851-0086; cnr Calles 6 & 17; s/d US\$20/25, bungalows US\$20) Two blocks south of the highway by Artesanías Guayacán, this is the best of Pisté's several *pensiones*. It has five clean, quiet and attractive rooms and four rustic but charming and decent-sized bungalows. Some toilets are missing seats. All accommodations are fan-cooled, and the friendly manager speaks Spanish and English, as well as some German and Maya.

Posada Poxil (☎ 985-851-0116; Calle 15A; hammock US\$15, s/d/tr US\$18/20/32; ☎) At the western end of Pisté, it has seven quiet rooms with good light and ventilation and fans, and an inexpensive restaurant serving big breakfasts (US\$3) and Yucatecan dishes. The pool has been 'under repair' for a number of years. The hot water is 'solar heated,' not a bit warmer than tepid.

Posada Chac-Mool (☎ 985-851-0270; Calle 15A; s/d/tr with fan US\$18/20/25, with air-con US\$30/35/40; ☎) Just east of Hotel Chichén Itzá and on the opposite (south) side of the highway in Pisté, it has fairly basic doubles with good screens. All are available with good air-con to augment the fans. Someone here loves potted plants.

MIDRANGE

All rooms in this category have air-con.

Pirámide Inn (☎ 985-851-0115; www.piramideinn.com; Calle 15A No 30; d US\$40; 🚶 🚽) Next to the eastern bus stop in Pisté. The 42 spacious rooms have good bathrooms and two OK double beds. The hotel also has a book exchange, a deep swimming pool and a Maya ruin on its gardened grounds, and a restaurant serving international and vegetarian cuisine. Here you're as close as you can stay to the archaeological zone's western entrance, though it's still a hike of about 3km. Animals are welcome.

Hotel Chichén Itzá (☎ 985-851-0022; fax 985-851-0023; www.mayaland.com; Calle 15A No 45; r fan only US\$30, d/tr/q high season US\$85/100/115, low season US\$65/80/95; 🚶 🚽) On the west side of Pisté, it has 42 pleasant rooms with tile floors and old-style brick-tile ceilings. Rooms in the upper range face the pool and the nicely landscaped grounds, and all have firm beds and minibars. Parents may bring two kids under 13 for free. Try asking for a discount. The restaurant serves a US\$10 buffet lunch from 11am to 5pm daily.

TOP END

All these hotels have air-con, swimming pools, restaurants, bars, well-kept tropical gardens, comfortable guestrooms and tour groups coming and going. They're close to the archaeological zone's eastern entrance.

Hotel Villas Arqueológicas (☎ 985-856-6000, in the USA 800-514-8244; www.clubmed.com; d/tr/ste US\$81/101/137; 🚶 🚽) A Club Med hotel, this is 300m from the east entrance. It is an exact clone of the villas at Cobá and Uxmal, a walled hacienda-style complex sporting a profusion of red floor tiles, a library with billiard table, and 40 smallish but comfortable rooms recently upgraded with nice touches of marble and tile. The restaurant serves a mix of Mexican and Yucatecan food, and there's a nice bar.

Hotel Mayaland (☎ 985-851-0100, in the USA 800-235-4079; www.mayaland.com; d/ste/royal ste US\$173/255/345; 🚶 🚽) Less than 100m from the ruins' entrance – from the lobby and front rooms you can look out at El Caracol. The hotel was built around 1923 and is the most gracious in Chichén's vicinity, with multiple pools and restaurants and vast, beautifully green grounds. Tiled

staircases make it pretty. The rooms and garden bungalows are very nicely built and well appointed, but when you're at El Caracol you'll wish the management hadn't cut an ugly swath through the unspoiled jungle just so their patrons could have a nicer view.

Hacienda Chichén (in Mérida ☎ 999-924-2150; in the USA 800-624-8451; www.haciendachichen.com; d US\$170-222; 🚶 🚽) About 300m from the ruins' entrance, this is on the grounds of a 16th-century estate. The hacienda's elegant main house and ruined walls make a great setting, and huge ceiba trees offer welcome shade. The archaeologists who excavated Chichén during the 1920s lived here in bungalows, which have been refurbished and augmented with new ones. The same outfit runs the Casa del Balam in Mérida, so if you phone, be sure to specify which location you're calling about.

Eating

The highway through Pisté is lined with more than 20 eateries, large and small. The cheapest are the market stalls on the main plaza opposite the large tree. Other places are ranged along the highway from the town square to the Pirámide Inn. Los Pájaros and Cocina Económica Chichén Itzá, facing each other on opposite sides of the highway, serve sandwiches, omelets, enchiladas and quesadillas for around US\$3.50, or a whole grilled chicken with salad, rice or soup for US\$5/7 take away/dine in.

Lonchería Sayil (mains US\$3; 🕒 7am-9pm) A touch west of Posada Chac-Mool, this is a very no-frills place serving a small range of Yucatecan dishes and a couple of other items.

Restaurant Hacienda Xaybe'h (☎ 985-851-0039; buffet lunch & dinner US\$11; 🕒 7:30am-6pm) Set a block back from the highway opposite Hotel Chichén Itzá, this is a large, rather fancy place with nice grounds. It's popular with tours and the food is a bit overpriced; the selection of salads makes it's a good option for vegetarians. Diners can use the swimming pool free of charge.

Xunan (☎ 851-0131; Calle Principal s/n; mains US\$4-9; 🕒 7am to 9pm) Service is a bit slow here, but this colorful eatery (at the front of a souvenir stand) offers good food at reasonable prices and is a nice change from the tourist buffets. Portions are generous.

Getting There & Away

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

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

At the time of research, 1st-class buses served Mérida (US\$8, 1¾ hours) at 2:25pm and 5pm, Cancún (US\$14, 2½ hours) at 4:30pm, and Tulum (US\$10, 2½ hours) at 8am and 4:30pm. The last two continued to Playa del Carmen (US\$14, 3½ hours).

Shared vans to Valladolid (US\$1.60, 40 minutes) pass through town regularly.

Getting Around

During Chichén Itzá's opening hours 1st and 2nd-class buses serve the ruins (check with the driver), and they will take passengers from town for about US\$0.60 when there's room. For a bit more, 2nd-class buses will also take you to the Cenote Ik Kil and the Grutas de Balankanché (be sure to specify your destination when buying your ticket). If you plan to see the ruins and then head directly to another city by 1st-class bus, buy your bus ticket in the Unidad de Servicios before hitting the ruins, for a better chance of getting a seat.

There is a taxi stand near the west end of town; the price to the ruins is US\$2.50. There are usually cabs at Chichén's parking lot.

VALLADOLID

☎ 985 / pop 56,700

Valladolid, with its quiet streets and sun-splashed, frosting-cake colored walls is one of Yucatán gems, well worth stopping for a day or a week. It makes a great hub for visits to Río Lagartos' flamingo colonies, Chichén Itzá, Ek' Balam, or any of the many nearby cenotes. Drivers will find the wide, one-way streets easier to navigate than in Cancún or hectic Mérida. In fact, the city is at that magic point where there's plenty to do, yet it

still feels small, manageable and affordable. Slow down for a day by renting a bicycle and toodle out to the nearby cenotes. Sit on a bench in one of the many squares and watch men play board games or kids chase pigeons. Buy a dollar's worth of fresh tortillas and let an afternoon pass lazily by.

History

Valladolid was once the Maya ceremonial center of Zací (sah-kee). The initial attempt at conquest in 1543 by Francisco de Montejo, nephew of Montejo the Elder, was thwarted by fierce resistance by the Maya, but the Elder's son – Montejo the Younger – ultimately took the town. The Spanish conquerors laid out a new city on the classic colonial plan.

During much of the colonial era, Valladolid's physical isolation from Mérida kept it relatively autonomous from royal rule. The Maya of the area suffered brutal exploitation, which continued after Mexican independence. Barred from entering many areas of the city, the Maya made Valladolid one of their first points of attack following the 1847 outbreak of the War of the Castes (see p32) in Tepich. After a two-month siege, the city's defenders were finally overcome. Many fled to the safety of Mérida; the rest were slaughtered.

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

Orientation & Information

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

Various banks (most with ATMs) near the center of town are generally open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 1pm Saturday. The main plaza has banks of Tel-mex card phones in each corner.

Speed Internet is available at numerous small cafés in and around the town center; all charge around US\$1 per hour and are open 9am-ish to as late as midnight. **Cyber Centro** (Calle 39; per hr US\$0.80), across from the bus terminal, has good ergonomics, and streams music at volumes that will absolutely assure you stay awake. **Phonet** (Calle 42 No 197; per hr US\$1; ☎ 7am-midnight) is an option at the plaza. The '7am' is definitely Mexican time.

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

Main post office (☎ 8:30am-3pm Mon-Fri) On the east side of the plaza.

Tourist office (☎ 856-1865; ☎ 9am-8:30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) On the east side of the plaza, it is frequently unattended and provides mediocre information, but you can pick up maps and enjoy the photographs of Valladolid on display.

Sights

TEMPLO DE SAN BERNARDINO & CONVENTO DE SISAL

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

You may have to knock on the church's left-hand door to gain admittance, or someone may approach and offer you a short tour in exchange for a gratuity. Either way, it's worth peeking inside. Its charming decoration includes beautiful rose-colored walls, arches, some recently uncovered 16th-century frescoes and a small image of the Virgin on the altar. These are about the only original items remaining; the grand wooden *retablo* (altarpiece) dates from the 19th century. The adjacent convent is often closed to the public; your best bets of gaining entrance to it are during the vacation periods of Easter Week, August and Christmas (December 14 to January 6). It's well worth a visit. The walled grounds hold a cenote with a vaulted dome built over it and a system of channels that once irrigated the large garden.

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

MUSEO DE SAN ROQUE

This church turned **museum** (Calle 41 btwn Calles 38 & 40; admission free; ☎ 9am-9pm) has models and exhibits relating the history of the city and the region. Other displays focus on various aspects of traditional Maya life, including religious offerings and ceremonies, masks and instruments, medicines, food, and handicrafts.

CENOTES

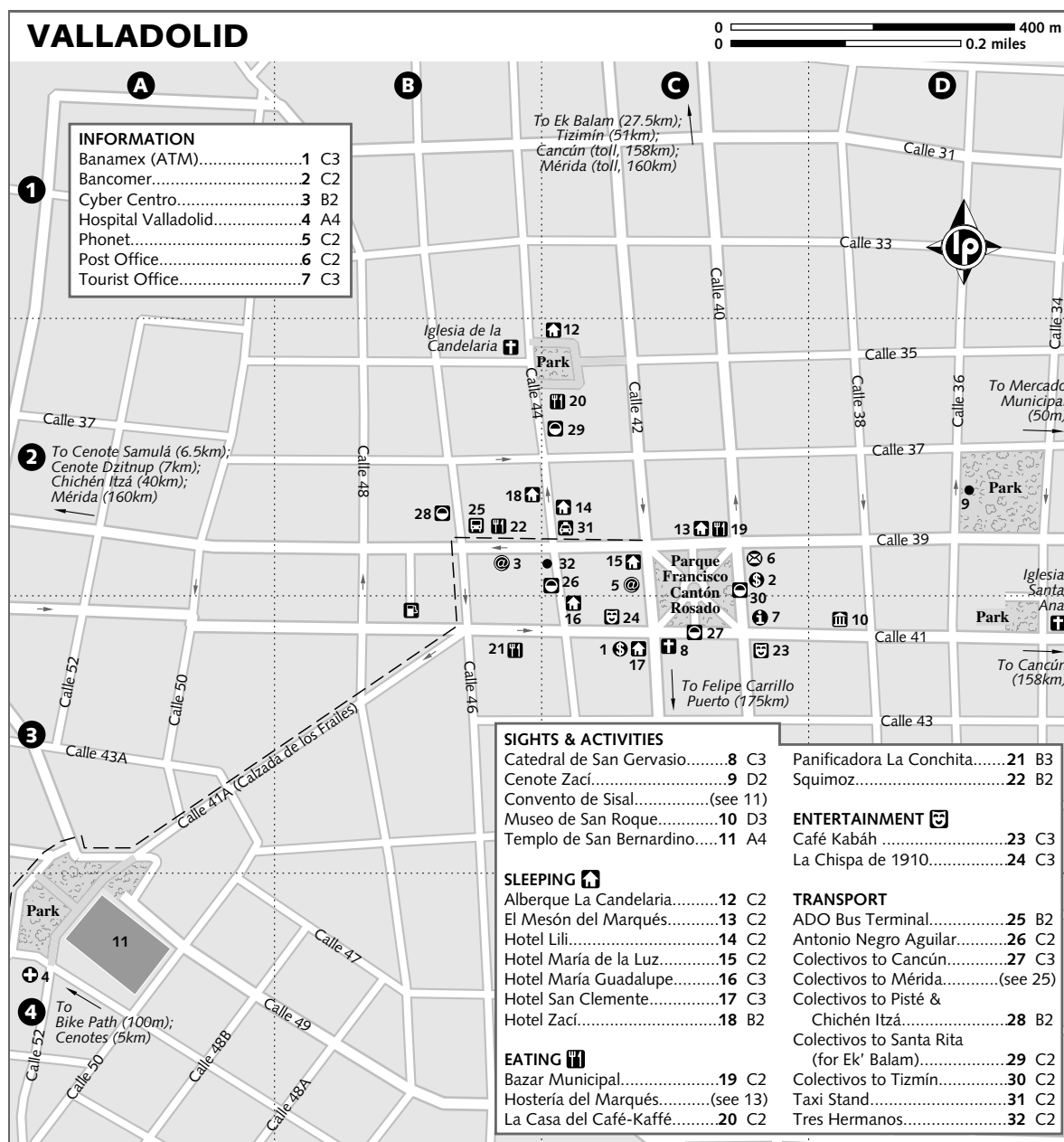
Among the region's several underground cenotes is **Cenote Zací** (Calle 36, enter from Calle 39; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 8am-6pm), set in a park that also holds traditional stone-walled thatched houses and a small zoo. People swim in Zací, though being mostly open it has some dust and algae. Look in the water for catfish or overhead for a bat or two.

A bit more enticing but less accessible is **Cenote Dzitnup** (Xkekén; adult/child US\$2.50/1.50; ☎ 8am-5pm), 7km west of the plaza. It's artificially lit and very swimmable, and a massive limestone formation dripping with stalactites hangs from its ceiling. Across the road about 100m closer to town is **Cenote Samulá** (adult/child US\$2.50/1.50; ☎ 8am-6pm), a lovely cavern pool with *álamo* roots stretching down many meters from the middle of the ceiling to drink from it. At last pass, Samulá was more appealing than Dzitnup, which was roughed up a bit by Hurricane Isidore. The *ejido* (indigenous communal landholding) that maintains both cenotes charges US\$3 for use of a video camera in either one.

Pedaling a rented bicycle (see p202) to the cenotes takes about 20 minutes. By bike from the center of town take Calle 41A (Calle de los Frailes), a street lined entirely with colonial architecture, which leads past the Templo de San Bernardino and the convent. Keep to the right of the park, then turn right on Calle 49. This opens into tree-lined Avenida de los Frailes and hits the old highway. Turn left onto the *ciclopista* (bike path) paralleling the road to Mérida. Turn left again at the sign for Dzitnup and continue for just under 2km; Samulá will be off this road to the right and Dzitnup a little further on the left.

Shared vans from in front of Hotel María Guadalupe (on Calle 44) go to Dzitnup for US\$1. Taxis from Valladolid's main plaza charge US\$10 for the round-trip excursion

YUCATÁN STATE



to Dzitnup and Samulá, with an hour's wait. You also can hop aboard a westbound bus; ask the driver to let you off at the Dzitnup turnoff, then walk the final 2km (20 to 30 minutes) to the site. Dzitnup has a restaurant and drinks stand. Otherwise, bring a picnic.

MERCADO MUNICIPAL

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

Sleeping

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

BUDGET

Alberque La Candelaria (☎ /fax 856-2267; fidery@chichen.com.mx; Calle 35 No 201F; dm with/without hostel card or ISIC US\$8/8.80, d US\$16/20; 📺) HI-affiliated Alberque La Candelaria is in a classic old house on the north side of the park across from Iglesia de la Candelaria. It has a fully equipped kitchen, self-service laundry area, a cable TV room, lockers, Internet access and a lush, serene back area presided over by a few proud lizards and a gecko or two. Astonishing but true, you can actually flush the toilet paper here; no need for that little

trash can on the side. The 36 dorm beds are in eight and 10-bed rooms (single-sex and mixed), and the four double rooms have shared bathrooms. The owners rent bicycles to guests for US\$1 an hour, arrange tours and provide loads of information on the area, both for sightseers and those seeking cultural insights. Note that sometimes the park square can be noisy, so bring earplugs if a festival is going on.

Hotel María Guadalupe (☎ 856-2068; hotelmariaguadalupe@hotmail.com; Calle 44 No 198A; d/tr US\$20/25) This airy, green hotel has eight simple and clean fan-cooled rooms, which though a bit dark are not musty. The beds should be getting new mattresses, and the management is friendly and provides purified water. Potted plants add cheer, and there's a nice common area upstairs to meet fellow travelers or sip something cold after a hot day.

Hotel Zací (☎ /fax 856-2167; Calle 44 No 191; s/d/tr/q with fan US\$23/32/40, with air-con US\$32/38/43; 🍷 🍷) Someone here really loves Calla lilies. The 50 rooms with mock-colonial décor are spread around a green courtyard. Some rooms are a bit musty, but they air out.

Hotel Lili (☎ 856-2163; Calle 44 No 192 btwn Calles 37 & 39; s/d/tr with fan US\$16/22/33, with air-con d/tr US\$30/36-38; 🍷) A great little find just around the corner from the main plaza, the Lili has fresh-smelling rooms with tile floors, spacious bathrooms, and rates that are discounted if you bring your own hammock.

MIDRANGE

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

Hotel San Clemente (☎ /fax 856-2208; www.hotelsanclemente.com.mx; Calle 42 No 206; s/d/tr/q US\$35/40/46/55; 🍷 🍷) Offers good value and boasts 64 rooms with air-con and décor nearly identical to the Zací's, minus the Calla lilies. It's on the corner of the plaza, across from the cathedral, and also has a pool and central courtyard.

Hotel María de la Luz (☎ /fax 856-2071; www.mariadelaluzhotel.com; Calle 42 No 193; d/tr/q US\$38/42/45; 🍷 🍷) At the northwest corner of the plaza, it offers good value for money with serviceable air-con rooms around an excellent pool. The restaurant puts on a buffet breakfast for US\$5, and has margaritas that (at least initially) pack a punch.

El Mesón del Marqués (☎ 856-2073; fax 856-2280; www.mesondelmarques.com; Calle 39 No 203; s/d/tr US\$51/62/72; 🍷 🍷) The most expensive hotel in town, this place seems to be constantly expanding behind its colonial façade. All rooms have air-con and are decently appointed, but the deluxe 'junior suites' in the older, rear wing are much nicer and offer far better value. The hotel has a charming old courtyard with a swimming pool and wi-fi. Just be sure you DO NOT touch the fruit!

Eating

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

La Casa del Café-Kaffé (☎ 856-2879; Calle 44; dishes US\$2-4.50; ☕ 8am-1pm & 6:30pm-2am) It's a café that serves organic coffee, espresso, cappuccino and other variations, as well as Chilean-style empanadas (baked, not fried; think pasties with minced meat and egg), hotcakes and egg dishes. It has indoor and outdoor seating on the pleasant Parque La Candelaria.

Hostería del Marqués (☎ 856-2073; Calle 39 No 203; mains US\$5-13; 🍷 7am-11pm) Probably the best restaurant in town for lunch and dinner, it is in Hotel El Mesón del Marqués. You can dine in the tranquil colonial courtyard with its bubbling fountain, or the air-con salon looking onto it. The restaurant also offers some vegetarian choices, and steaks priced by weight.

Squimoz (☎ 856-4156; Calle 39 No 219 btwn Calles 44 & 46; mains US\$2-5; ☕ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 7am-3pm Sun) A delightful little shop just a few doors east of the ADO terminal, Squimoz offers cakes, pastries, good espresso drinks, and has a nice rear courtyard. Its rich, creamy flan is some of Yucatán's best.

Valladolid has a few good bakeries, including **Panificadora La Conchita** (Calle 41 btwn Calles 44 & 46; breads US\$0.20-1; ☕ 7am-noon & 4-9pm).

Entertainment

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

La Chispa de 1910 (☎ 856-2668; Calle 41 No 201; 🕒 6pm-1am Mon-Thu, 5pm-3am Fri-Sun) This place is a bar-restaurant that often features live music.

Café Kabáh (Calle 41 No 202; drinks US\$1-4; 🕒 8am-1am) A good hangout for ice cream and coffee, with slightly pricey dinners on the menu as well.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Valladolid's main bus station is the convenient **ADO terminal** (cnr Calles 39 & 46). The principal services are Oriente, Mayab and Expresso (2nd class) and ADO and Super Expresso (1st class).

Cancún US\$7-11, two to three hours; many buses

Chetumal US\$13, six hours; five Mayab buses

Chichén Itzá/Pisté US\$2, 45 minutes; 14 Oriente Mérida-bound buses between 7:15am and 5:30pm, stop near ruins during opening hours

Chiquilá (for Isla Holbox) US\$6.60, 2½ hours; Oriente bus at 2:45am

Cobá US\$2-2.50, 45 minutes; four buses

Izamal US\$4, two hours; three buses at 12:45pm, 3:50pm, and 5pm.

Mérida US\$7-11, two to three hours; many buses

Playa del Carmen US\$7.40-13.30, 2½ to 3½ hours; eight buses

Tizimín US\$1.70, one hour; 12 buses

Tulum US\$4.50-5, two hours; six buses

COLECTIVOS

Often faster, more reliable and more comfortable than 2nd-class buses are the shared vans that leave for various points as soon as their seats are filled. Most operate from 7am or 8am to about 7pm. Direct services to Mérida (from Calle 39, US\$5) and Cancún (from in front of the cathedral, US\$6) take a little over two hours – confirm they're nonstop, though. *Colectivos* for Pisté and Chichén Itzá (US\$2, 40 minutes) leave across the road from the bus terminal, and for Tizimín from the east side of the plaza.

Getting Around

Bicycles are a great way to see the town and get out to the cenotes. **Tres Hermanos** (Calle 44 btwn Calles 39 & 41; 🕒 7:30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 7:30am-2pm Sun) and **Antonio Negro Aguilar** (☎ 856-2125; 🕒 7am-7pm) rent bikes for about US\$0.50 per hour. As always, check out any bike carefully before putting money down. If you want a motor behind your wheels, taxis charge US\$10 per hour.

EK' BALAM

The turnoff for this fascinating **archaeological site** (admission US\$2.40; 🕒 8am-5pm) is 17km north of Valladolid. Ek' Balam is another 10.5km east of this. There is usually someone at the site willing to act as a guide; tips are appreciated. Don't confuse them with the cenote tour touts, who offer a fun (but totally different) two-hour trip that includes biking, rappelling, and snorkeling for about US\$10 per person.

Vegetation still covers much of the area, but excavations and restoration continue to add to the sights, including an interesting ziggurat-like structure near the entrance, as well as a fine arch and a ball court.

Most impressive is the gargantuan **Acropolis**, whose well-restored base is 160m long and holds a 'gallery,' actually a series of separate chambers. Built atop the base is Ek' Balam's massive main pyramid, reaching a height of 32m and sporting a huge jaguar mouth with 360-degree dentition. Below the mouth are stucco skulls, while above and to the right sits an amazingly expressive figure. On the right side stand unusual winged human figures (some call them Maya angels), whose hands are poised in gestures looking for all the world like Hindu/Buddhist *mudras*. It's enough to make you wonder, either about connections between ancient civilizations or the artistic license taken by the restoration crew, though much of the plaster is supposed to be original.

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

Sleeping & Eating

There's really only one option in the tiny *pueblo* of Ek' Balam itself, but luckily, it's a good one.

Genesis Eco-Retreat (☎ 985-852-7980; www.genesisretreat.com; d US\$35-50; 📷 📧 📞) With colorfully named cabanas such as ‘Hobbit’ or ‘Yuya,’ the Genesis Eco-Retreat offers B&B intimacy in a quiet, animal-friendly setting. The pools are beautiful, with sculpted natural accents, and is a true eco-tel: gray water is used for landscaping, some rooms are naturally cooled, insects are naturally controlled (this author didn’t have to slap once), and there’s even an entire wall made out of plastic bottles. The place is postcard beautiful, with delicious meals. Animal lovers will appreciate the kind efforts Lee, the owner, has made to not only house stray dogs, but sponsor animal-related education programs in the community.

Getting There & Away

It’s possible to catch a *colectivo* from Calle 44 between Calles 35 and 37 in Valladolid for the village of Santa Rita (US\$1), a safe 2km walk from Ek’ Balam; you may even be able to get the driver to go the rest of the way for a just a little bit extra. The return service leaves Santa Rita at 3pm or 4pm. A round-trip taxi ride from Valladolid with an hour’s wait at the ruins will cost around US\$20.

TIZIMÍN

☎ 986 / pop 64,000

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

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

Two great colonial structures – **Parroquia Los Santos Reyes de Tizimín** (Church of the Three Wise Kings) and its former **Franciscan monastery** (the ex-convento) – are worth having a look while you’re waiting to make your bus connection. They’re on opposite

sides of Calle 51, reached by walking two blocks south on Calle 48, which itself is a block west of the bus terminals.

The church fronts Tizimín’s main plaza, the Parque Principal, which has a HBSC with ATM and currency exchange on its southwest side. **Bancomer** (cnr Calles 48 & 51), behind the church, also has an ATM. Internet cafés with dial-up or DSL connections have sprung up on the streets around the Parque Principal.

Sleeping & Eating

Posada María Antonia (☎ 863-2384; fax 863-2857; Calle 50 No 408; r with air-con US\$21; 📞) Just south of the church, it has 12 fairly basic rooms, each holding up to four people. Take a peek at the room first, as it’s likely the very basic bathrooms won’t have a toilet seat, and some rooms are a bit heavy on the air-freshener. You can place international calls at the reception desk.

Pizzería César’s (Calle 50; mains US\$5-10 steaks US\$12-18; 🕒 8am-midnight) A popular joint near the Posada María Antonia, it serves inexpensive pasta, sandwiches and burgers in addition to pizza and steak.

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

Getting There & Away

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

Cancún US\$8-9, three to 3½ hours; 15 Mayab and Noreste buses

Izamal US\$5.50, 2½ hours; Oriente bus at 5:30am, 11am and 4pm

Mérida US\$6.50-7.20, 2½ to 3½ hours; 1st-class Noreste buses at 2:30am, 5am and 4:30am; three Oriente buses at 5:30am, 11am and 4pm

Río Lagartos/San Felipe US\$2, one hour; six Noreste buses between 6am and 4:15pm; some buses continue 12km west to San Felipe (same price)

Valladolid US\$1.70, one hour; 16 Oriente buses between 5:30am and 7:30pm

Taxis to Río Lagartos or San Felipe charge about US\$20, and leave from outside both bus terminals. The drivers can be asked to wait for you for US\$10 per additional hour.

RÍO LAGARTOS

☎ 986 / pop 3060

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

The Maya knew the place as *Holkobén* and used it as a rest stop on their way to Las Coloradas, a shallow part of the vast estuary that stretches east almost to the border of Quintana Roo. There they extracted precious salt from the waters, a process that continues on a much vaster scale today. Spanish explorers mistook the narrowing of the *ría* (estuary) for a *río* (river) and the crocs for alligators, and the rest is history.

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

Flamingo, Shorebird & Wildlife Tours

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

To see the flamingos, you'll need to rent a boat and driver. Prices vary by boat, group size (maximum five) and destination. The lowest you can expect to pay is around US\$75. In addition, the reserve charges visitors a US\$2 admission fee (it's rumored to rise to US\$4). Plan on packing something to eat the night before, as most restaurants open long after you'll be on the water.

FLAMINGO ETIQUETTE

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

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

If time permits, seek out **Ismael Navarro** (☎ 862-0000; www.riolagartosexpeditions.com) or **Diego Núñez Martínez** (☎ 862-0452; diego2909@yahoo.com), two licensed guides with formal training as naturalists. They speak English, Spanish and Italian and are up to date on the area's fauna and flora, including the staggering number of bird species, for which they have books and the official Yucatán Peninsula checklist. They often help visiting scientists and are founts of knowledge on the area.

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

Festivals & Events

La Feria de Santiago, the patron saint festival of Río Lagartos, is held mid July. A bullfight (really bullplay) ring is erected in the middle of town during the weeklong event, and every afternoon anyone who wishes is able to enter it and play matador with a young bull. The animal is not killed or even injured, just made a little angry at times. Don't turn your back to it or it will knock you down.

Day one of the festival begins with a big dance that lasts all night. On day two, the bullplay sessions start; also on this day there's a procession that wends its way from the entrance of town to the bullfight ring, where a ceiba tree is planted in the center of the ring. During each of the remaining days the festivities begin with Mass at the town church followed by a procession; each procession is led by a guild (one day it's the ranchers, another day it's the fishermen, another day it's the farmers, and so on).

The fair begins the Saturday prior to July 25, Patron Saint Day, and lasts at least a week. If the Saturday before July 25 falls on July 23 or July 24, then the celebration actually begins two Saturdays before the 25th. The festival always lasts at least a week, but never more than nine days. Yes, it's confusing, and the residents of Río Lagartos don't always follow this rule.

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

What's remarkable about this is that virtually every boat in this fishing town goes to the sea site, and scores of fishermen sing en route to the honored site and pray there before a selected queen lays the gorgeous wreath in the water. For one minute after the wreath is placed in the water, there is a moment of total silence in honor of the lost fishermen. After the service, everyone heads back to town and celebrates with dancing, drinking and games. The queen dances with every fisherman to bring him good luck.

The boats, not incidentally, are heavily decorated on this day, and tourists are welcome to ride to the site for free. Just ask if you can go, and be friendly and respectful. At the sea service, keep your chatter to a minimum and simply observe. Doing so will encourage the fishermen to welcome tourists to join them year after year. A tip for their kindness, following the service, is always appreciated (US\$5 to US\$10 per visitor).

Sleeping & Eating

Most residents aren't sure of the town's street names, and signs are few. The road into town is the north-south Calle 10, which ends at the waterfront Calle 13.

Posada Leyli (☎ 862-0106; cnr Calles 14 & 11; s with/without bathroom US\$18/15, d with bathroom US\$25) This peach-colored place has six fan-cooled rooms with springy beds and hammock hooks. *La encargada* (the manager) often needs to be sought out; you can ask a neighbor or at the waterfront kiosks. Service is so-so, and no toilet seats will make some of you want to search elsewhere.

Isla Contoy co-op (☎ 862-0000; r US\$25-35) Has five simple, fan-cooled rooms, with hammock hooks or beds, and both hot and cold water.

Hotel Villas de Pescadores (☎ 862-0020; Calle 14 & Calle 9; d fan/air-con US\$40/50; ♿) This is two blocks north of the Leyli, near the water's edge, and offers 12 very clean rooms, each with good cross-ventilation (all face the estuary), two beds and a fan. Upstairs rooms have balconies, and there's a rickety spiral staircase leading up to a rooftop lookout tower where adventurous guests can (careful on those stairs!) watch the sun set or sip a relaxing beverage. Guests planning on an early morning flamingo trip can ask for breakfast to be prepared before they head off, an additional US\$3.50 to US\$6. The owner rents bicycles and canoes as well; if he's not around, ask for his neighbor, Benigno.

Restaurante-Bar Isla Contoy (Calle 19; mains US\$5-10; ☎ 8am-9pm) A popular eatery at the waterfront, this is a good place to meet other travelers and form groups for the boat tours. Lobster, at market price, is a delicious specialty.

Getting There & Away

Several Noreste buses run daily between Tizimín (US\$2.20, one hour), Mérida (US\$11, three to four hours) and San Felipe (US\$0.50, 20 minutes). Noreste and Mayab also serve Cancún (US\$12, three to four hours) three times daily.

EAST OF RÍO LAGARTOS

Hurricane Wilma wiped out stretches of the beachside road that used to connect Río Lagartos with El Cuyo; sections of it remain, and birders with binoculars, spotting

scopes, or large telephoto lenses can get nice sightings of various species (including flamingos) by toodling around, particularly east of Las Coloradas. If you do stop to observe wildlife, be as quiet as possible and remember that there are crocodiles in the shallows and venomous snakes; don't let that great Roseate Spoonbill photo opportunity send you to the hospital. Most of the bird life is shy, and you should try to avoid making flocks panic, which can cause injuries to the birds.

If you have a car, turning east at the junction about 2km south of Río Lagartos will lead you to some interesting sights. About 8km from the junction, on the south side of the road, is the beginning of a 1km interpretive trail to Petén Tucha (a *petén* is a hummock or rise often forming around a spring, and rich in diverse flora and fauna). You should register at the biosphere reserve's office near the junction before walking the trail.

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

The road turns to sand after Las Coloradas, but you can no longer go all the way to El Cuyo (also something of a local resort in summer). The area is rich in bird life, and the unique vegetation includes many century plants, an agave species that lives quietly for decades before a last hurrah of sending up a tall stalk with blossoms and then expiring. These are different from the henequen agaves that you see further south. If you're not in a 4WD drive with care and turn around long before you think you might get stuck; chances are you'll have to walk back to Las Coloradas if there's a problem.

You reach El Cuyo by heading back towards Tizimín and then turning left (east)

at the first paved road, heading toward Yoactún. Follow this through savanna-like grassy ranchland until you come to a T-junction at Colonia Yucatán. Head left (north) and you'll arrive in El Cuyo.

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

SAN FELIPE

☎ 986 / pop 1800

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

The beach, though not great, usually has *palapas* providing shade (when we visited, they and most of the mangroves' leaves were gone with the wind of Isidore). Lancheros charge US\$4 per boatload (round trip) to take passengers across, or US\$15 an hour for fishing trips.

At the corner of Calles 12 and 13 is a simple **shed** (Internet per hr US\$0.80) with five or six computers with dialup connections. It is run by a very kind young man with a health problem and this café helps him support himself. If you stay for a bit his relatives may come out to say hi and ask you where you're from. The short walk to the shed passes by the sand-washed houses and is well worth it.

Alternatively, try **Cyberbillar** (per hr US\$1; ☎ 3pm-10pm), which is near the bus termi-

nal, a smoky place popular with gaming school kids.

Hotel San Felipe de Jesús (☎ 862-2027; hotelsf@hotmail.com; d US\$29-35, tr US\$33-41) is a friendly, clean and cleverly constructed hotel at the edge of San Felipe's harbor. To get there, turn left at the water and proceed about 200m. Six of the 18 rooms are large and have private balconies and water views; balconies in the top-floor rooms are reached by their own staircases inside the room. All rooms have fans and enjoy good cross-

ventilation; the large upper ones are especially good bargains. The restaurant offers tasty seafood at low prices.

Six buses from Tizimín pass through Río Lagartos and continue to San Felipe (US\$2.20, 1½ hours) each way. The bus ride from Río Lagartos (US\$0.50) takes 20 minutes. You can take a taxi from Tizimín to San Felipe for US\$20, but you may need to arrange return pickup in advance or pay the driver an hourly rate to wait until you're ready to return.