

Mexico's Yucatán & Chiapas

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Maya ruins** Explore millennium-old ruins: Chichén Itzá (p44) is the best known, but Palenque (p57), Yaxchilán (p62) or Toniná (p62) offer more intimate encounters with hidden chambers (and monkeys)
- **Tulum** Long stretches of white-sand beaches, and its own namesake ruins, but no longer a quiet backpacker hub, it still has cheap sleeps and plenty of space (p53)
- **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** Pull on a sweater and sip fresh espresso in the cool, mountainous 'Zapatista capital,' one of the Americas' finest colonial-era towns (p62)
- **Mérida** Put your best salsa foot forward during the more-than-lively, street-spilling week-end fair in this Spanish-colonial wonder near to Maya ruins and flamingos (p45)
- **Off the Beaten Track** Untouched and out-of-the-way fishing village Punta Allen (p56) is within a protected reserve and offers snorkel trips to dolphin hangouts

FAST FACTS

- **Area** Quintana Roo (50,212 sq km); Yucatán state (38,212 sq km); Chiapas (74,211 sq km); 162,635 sq km in total
- **ATMs** Plentiful, using Cirrus and Plus systems
- **Budget** US\$40-50 per day
- **Capital** Mexico City
- **Costs** Budget room US\$15-30, 3hr bus ride US\$14, set lunch US\$4.50
- **Country Code** ☎ 52
- **Electricity** 110V AC, 60 Hz (same as the USA)
- **Famous for** Maya ruins, white sand and turquoise water, Zapatistas, tacos, hammocks
- **Head of State** Presidente Felipe Calderón
- **Languages** Spanish & two dozen Maya languages
- **Money** US\$1 roughly = M\$11 (pesos)
- **Phrases** ¿Mande? (come again?), chingadera (f***ed-up situation)
- **Population** 6.9 million (Yucatán, Quintana Roo & Chiapas states)
- **Time** GMT plus 6 hours; GMT minus 5 hours during daylight saving time
- **Traveler's Checks** Cashed at banks & *casas de cambio* (1-3% commission)
- **Visas** Not required for residents of USA, Canada, EU, Australia, New Zealand & some other countries



TRAVEL HINTS

Second-class buses save you 20% over 1st-class buses. If you don't like overnight buses, there's a lone day bus between Mérida and Palenque.

OVERLAND ROUTES

From Guatemala it's easy to loop into Mexico – from Quetzaltenango to San Cristóbal de Las Casas, then back to Tikal via Palenque, or into Belize from Chetumal, south of Tulum.

Mexico's southeast is made up of very different neighbors: the Yucatán Peninsula is home to a flat limestone shelf and beaches, Chiapas has mountains, forests and brisk temperatures. Both have fabulous Maya ruins. It makes for great travel. Despite the Yucatán's cruise-ship hubbub, it's more than tempting to work into your itinerary a few days of lazing on perfect beaches away from the tourist scene. The reefs off Cozumel provide among the world's finest dives, and cheap beachside hostels or cabañas can be found in Tulum, Playa del Carmen and Isla Mujeres. Inland, lively Mérida is the most *Mexican* town in the area, with scores of day-trip potential (including Maya ruins and Gulf of Mexico beaches and flamingos).

West of the Yucatán, Chiapas is worth the effort to see ruins mingling with hills and jungle and Maya communities living traditional lives in lofty places where you'll need a sweater in August. The ruins at Palenque are wonderful, but laid-back San Cristóbal de Las Casas is the best place to take in Chiapas. The town is a colonial marvel with indie-house movie theaters, fresh Chiapas coffee and four or five days' worth of day trips.

CURRENT EVENTS

In 2005 two hurricanes slammed into Mexico's south. Hurricane Wilma took its time passing the Yucatán's resort areas, bringing 150km/h gusts that bent trees, closed docks and wrecked businesses. Hurricane Stan was worse for Chiapas, where flimsy homes in mountain villages washed away as rivers rose. Since, much of the Yucatán has rebounded 100%, though Chiapas has had a harder time. One resident told us, 'All the funding went to Cancún and the resorts. We got nothing.'

Meanwhile, with corn (much of which comes from the USA) increasingly being used to create ethanol, corn flour prices – thus the all-important tortilla price – jumped by 400% in early 2007, and tens of thousands took to the streets in protest.

HISTORY

The Maya set up many city-states across the broad south of Mexico, though the population and activity had declined before the Spanish arrived. For more on Maya history, see p24. A couple of Spaniards – Diego de Mazariegos in present-day Chiapas, and Francisco de Montejo in the Yucatán – had the area under Spanish control by the mid 16th century. Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821, and pulled in Chiapas from the United Provinces of Central America in 1824.

Long oppressed by Spaniards and criollos (Latin Americans of Spanish lineage), the Maya rose in the War of the Castes in 1847, leading to destroyed churches and many massacres. The brimming sense of inequality didn't settle with peace in 1901. As Nafta (the North American Free Trade Agreement) kicked into effect in 1994, the mainly Maya Zapatistas stormed San Cristóbal de Las Casas; their struggle has quietened in recent

years, now that they run seven autonomous zones (called *caricoles*, or snails) outside San Cristóbal. But it's not over.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Cancún's international airport is the major entry point to the region, with daily direct flights to many US cities as well as US\$300 round-trip flights (including visa) to Cuba. Other than a direct flight to Flores (Guatemala), Cancún is less useful for flying into Central or South America, with many southward flights routed through Mexico City, Miami or Dallas. See p41 for details of flights and airlines in Cancún. Cozumel, Mérida and Chetumal have international airports with less frequent services.

Boat & Bus

Mexico borders Guatemala and Belize to the south, and there are an array of border crossings between them.

From the Yucatán, travelers can connect to buses to Belize (or on to Flores, Guatemala) via Chetumal (p56), just north of Corozal, Belize.

From Chiapas, there are three major border crossings to Guatemala. Southeast of Palenque,

DEPARTURE TAX

A departure tax equivalent to about US\$23 is levied on international flights from Mexico. It's usually included in the price of your ticket, but if it isn't, you must pay in cash during airport check-in.

at Frontera Corozal, it's possible to boat over to Bethel and get a bus; tour packages ease the uncertainties of this journey (p61). South of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the best way into Guatemala is at Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, near La Mesilla, Guatemala (p69). Another option is crossing into Guatemala from the Mexican border town of Tapachula, further southwest.

GETTING AROUND

Air

The most 'tempting' regional flight is Cancún–Tuxtla Gutiérrez (near San Cristóbal de Las Casas) for a whopping US\$280 one way via Mexico City, which saves you the possibility of an overnight bus to Chiapas.

All domestic flights get two taxes tacked on: a 15% consumer tax and a US\$8.50 airport tax.

Boat

Ferry services connect Cancún with Isla Mujeres and Playa del Carmen with Cozumel. Ferries also go to Isla Holbox from north of Cancún. Most visitors to Yaxchilán go by boat.

Bus

Mexico's bus system is luxurious, with frequent services, compared to much of Central America's; many buses have air-con, toilets, reserved seating and movies. And you pay for it – prices have gone up by 25% in the past few years, so brace yourself to pay US\$50 to get from Cancún to Palenque.

Buses in the Yucatán rarely fill, but try to reserve ahead for night buses between the Yucatán and Chiapas. You can book some 1st-class buses through **Ticket Bus** (in Mexico ☎ 1800 702 8000; www.ticketbus.com.mx).

In some cases 2nd-class buses are 15% to 20% cheaper, and many are almost as nice as 1st-class. Price ranges in this chapter include 2nd-class buses, and 1st-class and 'deluxe' services such as UNO. There are many bus companies; shop around for the one that suits you.

Note: there have been occasional highway robberies on overnight buses over the years. You can store bags in the secure luggage hold.

Car & Motorcycle

To rent a car or scooter you'll need to show a valid driver's license (your country's license is OK) and a major credit card.

Colectivo

Many locals prefer piling into suburban vans or VW colectivos (shared taxis or minibuses), which travel on shorter routes. They cost about the same as a 2nd-class bus but colectivos go frequently.

THE YUCATÁN

Those who say there's no street cred or authenticity in the Yucatán haven't spent much time away from the Playa del Carmen and Cancún ped malls with 'one tequila, two tequila, three tequila...floor' T-shirt shops. Stretching like a giant, flat limestone thumb between the turquoise Caribbean and murky Gulf of Mexico, the broad Yucatán overflows with local culture.

Yucatán state has Mexico's highest concentration of indigenous people (about 60%). Inland and steamy Mérida is a lively colonial-era city built with stones from Maya pyramids; its weekend-long party is worth shifting your itinerary to experience. Maya ruins, such as Tulum and Chichén Itzá, get most visitors, while early-morning arrivals at Cobá or Dzibichaltún often get the pyramids to themselves. Beach-wise, you can find expanses of sand to yourself in Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an, south of Tulum, which is still one of the area's most backpacker-oriented laid-back bases.

CANCÚN

☎ 998 / pop 700,000

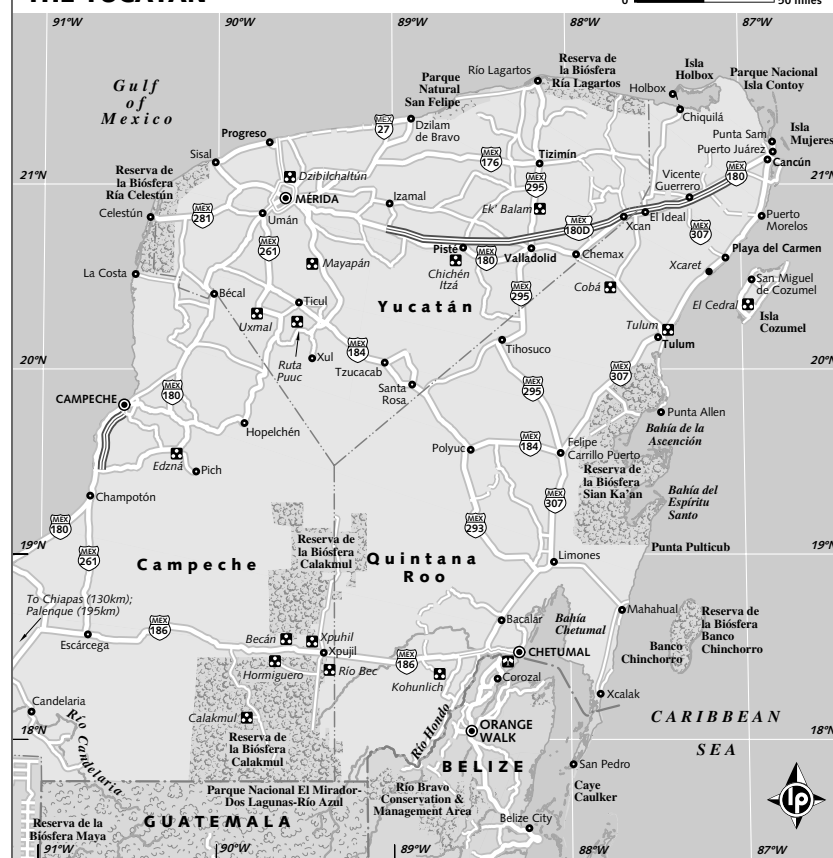
Overdeveloped, inauthentic, expensive and (other than the beaches) rather ugly: it's easy to not like Cancún. Built for mass tourism – very successfully – in the 1970s, Cancún certainly doesn't lack for white-sand beachfront on the blissfully turquoise Caribbean. It's fine to stop here for a day – though Isla Mujeres offshore is a more relaxed base – plus its center has its moments.

Enduring Cancún means following the locals: stay and eat in town, take the local bus out with packed lunch to hop onto the resorts' beaches, and return for drinks in town.

Orientation

Cancún's Zona Hotelera, home to the resorts and beaches, is set along Blvd Kukulcán, which curves around a curved sandy spit (actually an island). Ciudad Cancún, just west,

THE YUCATÁN



is home to *el centro* (downtown), on and around Av Tulum between the bus station and Av Cobá. The airport is 16km south of downtown. All sites are in downtown unless otherwise specified.

Information

EMERGENCY

Call ☎ 060.

IMMIGRATION

Immigration office (☎ 884 1655; Av Nader 1 at Av Uxmal; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés downtown range from US\$0.90 to \$1.20 per hour.

La Taberna Ciberb@r (Av Yaxchilán 23; ☎) Restaurant-bar with internet area and wi-fi.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Centro de IMSS Hospital (☎ 884 1108; Av Cobá; ☎ 24hr)
Hospital Americano (☎ 884 6133; Viento 15 at Av Tulum; ☎ 24hr) English-speaking doctors, south of downtown.

MONEY

There are several banks with ATMs on Av Tulum, between Avs Cobá and Uxmal, as well as at the airport.

POST

Post Office (cnr Avs Xel-Há & Sunyaxchén) Located west of downtown.

GETTING INTO TOWN

From the Airport

The 'shuttle bus station' is at the far end of the domestic terminal (exit the airport – from international or domestic – and walk right to the end of the building), where ADO buses leave every half hour for the main bus terminal in downtown Cancún (US\$3.50, 20 minutes). Also, hourly shuttles go to Playa del Carmen (US\$8, one hour) from 10:30am to 8:45pm.

Don't fall for the inflated 'shuttle' rates advertised inside the international terminal.

From the Bus Station

Cancún's **bus terminal** (cnr Avs Uxmal & Tulum) is within walkable distance from all accommodations listed for Cancún.

TELEPHONE

Telmex pay phones are easily found. The *casa telefónica* (call station) behind the bus terminal makes domestic calls for US\$0.20 per minute, US\$0.15 to the USA, US\$0.25 to Canada, US\$0.40 to Central America and US\$0.60 to Western Europe.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Cancún Convention & Visitors Bureau (☎ 887 3379; Av Cobá btwn Avs Tulum & Náder; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) English-speaking staff are nice, but will only point you to the free glossy *Map @migo*.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Nómadas Travel (☎ 892 2320; Av Cobá 5; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Travel agency offers student discounts, arranges Cuba flights (about US\$300 return).

Sights & Activities

BEACHES & WATER ACTIVITIES

The resort-packed **Zona Hotelera**, east of the city center, has all the beaches. You won't find any solitude, but the water is gorgeous. By Mexican law, you can plop yourself in front of any luxury hotel for the day (all nonmilitary beachfront is for public use). The only catch is getting to them. About a dozen blue-and-white '*Acceso a playa*' signs on the main road mark legal access points. Or you can discreetly walk through a hotel lobby to the beach.

From downtown, frequent buses head out along Blvd Kukulcán to the zone. Up to Km 9 you pass along shallower and calmer beaches facing north (and Isla Mujeres). The better ones begin at Playa Tortugas (Km 6) and Playa Caracol (Km 8.5), near Punta Cancún, where the boulevard curves southward for 13km. The undertow can be dangerous along this long east-facing stretch – watch for flags that

indicate conditions (blue: safe; yellow: caution; red: danger). Access points include Playa Chac-Mool across from Señor Frog's (Km 9.8), Playa Marlin at Kukulcán Plaza (Km 12), Playa Ballenas (Km 14) and Playa Delfines (Km 17.5), near a bluff and popular with locals.

Many resorts run snorkeling trips for about US\$30, including gear. For diving, try **Scuba Cancún** (☎ 849 7508; www.scubacancun.com.mx; Blvd Kukulcán Km 5), a family-owned, PADI-certified operation with many years of experience. Two-tank dives with equipment cost US\$68, a one-day resort course is US\$88, and a full PADI-certification course is US\$299.

MAYA SITES

The Zona Hotelera has a few ho-hum Maya sites. The biggest, **Zona Arqueológica El Rey** (Blvd Kukulcán Km 18.5; admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-5pm) is more about seeing the 500 iguanas that live around the 47 short structures dating from AD 1200 (the best lizard viewing is from 1pm to 2pm).

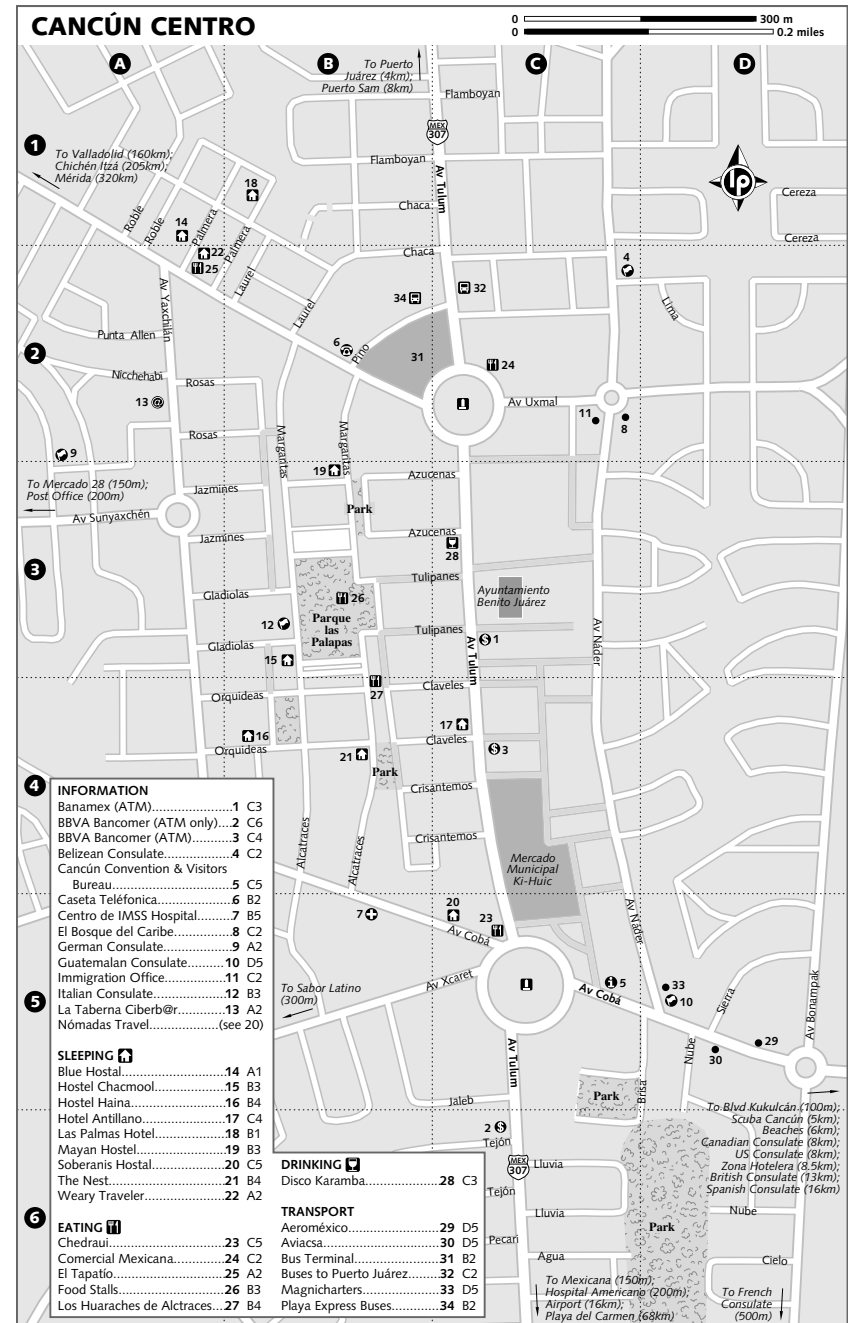
DOWNTOWN

That downtown's hidden-away central **Parque las Palapas**, west of Av Tulum via the pedestrian Tulpanes streets, is fading a little doesn't take away from its many cult fans or local adoration. Head over in the evening to see what events or bands are set up and grab tacos for cheap. Nearby Tulpanes has some nightlife too.

Several blocks west, **Mercado 28** is a bustling little market with cheap food, *artesanías* (handicrafts) and black-magic shops.

Courses

El Bosque del Caribe (☎ 884 1065; www.cancun-lan-guage.com.mx; Av Náder 52) offers Spanish-language courses in groups; a 15-hour week costs US\$135.



Sleeping

Cancún's cheap lodgings are nearly all downtown, most within a few blocks of the bus terminal. The cheapest hotels in the Zona Hotelera start at US\$100 per night. Prices listed here are for high season (July and August, at Christmas and around Semana Santa); some prices drop off-season. Options can get tight in March, when university students pour into town.

HOSTELS

Blue Hostel (☎ 892 4673; www.bluehostal.com; Palmera 1-3; dm US\$10, r with/without air con US\$30/25; 🏠 📺) Stark minimalism works. The hostel, with clean white and blue rooms, is airier than the Weary Traveler across the street, and the rooftop deck – with Jacuzzi! – is louder. Private rooms are tucked into tight corners. It's probably not for early sleepers.

Weary Traveler (☎ 887 0191; www.mexicohostels.com.mx; Palmera 30; dm/r incl breakfast US\$10/35; 🏠 📺) This is a cramped hostel with fan-cooled rooms, DIY laundry, lockers and rooftop kitchen-sitting area. The entrance is around the corner on Av Uxmal.

Mayan Hostel (☎ 892 0103; www.cancunhostel.com; Margaritas 17; dm/r US\$11/35; 🏠 📺) Decorated like a tree house, this pleasant hostel is friendly and with plenty of ramble room for Cancún's usual in-and-out hostels. There are two thatched-roof dorms and a private room with air-con, plus a large rooftop terrace with potted plants and tables and chairs.

Hostal Haina (☎ 898 2081; Orquideas 13; dm/r incl breakfast US\$11/39; 🏠 📺) The Haina is an inn-like hostel, more laid-back than party places such as the Chacmool. The private rooms have bathrooms. The hostel has a nice little garden in back, small TV room up front with internet (US\$1 per hour), plus a kitchen.

Nest (☎ 884 8967; www.hostalalcatraces.com; 49 Alcatraces; dm incl breakfast US\$11.50-14; 🏠 📺) This family-run, gold-colored villa is on a leafy corner; it has two four-bunk dorms and one with 12 beds.

Hostal Chacmool (☎ 887 5873; www.chacmool.com.mx; Gladiolas 18; dm incl breakfast US\$15, r with/without bath-room US\$40/35; 🏠 📺) Boxy and bare-bone, the Chacmool has lots of energy on its terrace (and funk bands), overlooking central Parque Las Palapas. It's a little overpriced, but not bad.

HOTELS

Both of the following have dorm rooms too.

Las Palmas Hotel (☎ 884 2513; hotelpalmascancun@hotmail.com; Palmera 43; dm incl breakfast US\$10, d without/with

SPLURGE

Hotel Antillano (☎ 884 1132, 800 288 7000; www.hotelantillano.com; Claveles; s/d/q US\$66/77/99; 🏠 📺 📺) With money to blow, but not Zona Hotelera-type money, the friendly and retro-stylish Antillano is the center's best US\$60-or-so deal. Very air-conditioned rooms look over a courtyard pool.

air-con US\$25/30; 🏠 📺) A great choice near the bus station, Las Palmas is a friendly, family-run hotel with air-con or fan-cooled rooms with TV and private bathroom; a couple of rooms have been converted into dorms.

Soberanis Hostel (☎ 884 4564, 800 101 0101; www.soberanis.com.mx; Av Cobá 5; dm/d incl breakfast US\$12/55; 🏠 📺) At the south end of the center, the Soberanis feels all about business at times, with perfectly fine, but perfectly charmless, standard rooms. It's clean and safe (there's a safe in the closet).

Eating

There's fun eating to be had downtown – away from the Zona Hotelera's beach clubs, which are more geared to sell T-shirts than prepare food. Start with the food stalls at the Parque Las Palapas, popular with locals for US\$3 breakfasts, *comida corrida* (set meal; US\$3 to US\$3.50) at lunch and US\$1 tacos and US\$2 quesadillas at night. For those itching for sit-down stuff, nearby Av Yaxchilán is lined with good options.

Los Huaraches de Alcatraces (Alcatraces 31; huaraches US\$2.80; 🕒 8:30am-6pm Tue-Sun) Located at the southeastern end of Parque Las Palapas, this self-service place makes ready-made quesadillas (US\$2) – including mushroom ones, and *huaraches* (oval tortillas covered in white cheese, green-pepper sauce and choice of meat topping).

El Tapatio (Av Uxmal 30; set meals US\$5.50; 🕒 8am-1am Mon-Sat, 9am-11:30pm Sun) This Jalisco-styled restaurant churns out some serious pitcher-sized smoothies and shakes (about US\$2.50), and superb set meals.

Comercial Mexicana (cnr Avs Tulum & Uxmal; 🕒 7am-midnight) and **Chedraui** (cnr Avs Tulum & Cobá; 🕒 7am-midnight) are two giant supermarkets in the downtown area.

It can be tough to eat in the Zona Hotelera for under US\$10. Places such as **Señor Frog's** (Bldv Kukulcán Km 9.8; dishes US\$9.50-26; 🕒 noon-2am) is

to Mexican cuisine what the Hard Rock Café is to Jimi Hendrix.

Drinking & Nightlife DISCOS

Discos are generally mellower downtown. In addition to the following, Av Yaxchilán is a good place to find alcohol or mystic rhythms. Many clubs at the Zona Hotelera are loud, booze-oriented places where MCs urge women to display body parts and often charge around US\$10 or US\$15 for admission (including a drink). Most clubs don't open until 10pm and pep up around midnight. Some options include the following:

City Beach Club (☎ 883 2452; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9)

Popular disco on the beach.

Dady'O (☎ 800 234 9797; Blvd Kukulcán Km 9) Five levels of dancing with a fake cave and laser beams.

Hostal Chacmool Terraza (cnr Alcatraces & Gladiolas) The downtown hostel's terrace hosts funk shows, and is a pretty good spot to sit and sip.

Sabor Latino (☎ 892 1916; cnr Avs Xcaret & Tankah; 🕒 closed Sun-Tue in low season) Long live salsa, and other tropical styles, in this lively spot southwest of downtown.

GAY & LESBIAN VENUES

The sizable gay scene awakes only well after sunset. Lesbian couples often frequent clubs including the downtown **Disco Karamba** (☎ 884 0032; cnr Azucenas & Av Tulum), above Ristorante Casa Italiana. The Karamba has live music and cheap drinks.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Cancún's **international airport** (☎ 848 7200) is busy, with many direct international flights coming in daily. There's an ATM in the arrival hall.

Aviacsa flies via Mexico City to Tuxtla Gutierrez, near San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Chiapas, for about US\$280 one way. Flights to Mexico City, on Aviacsa or Magnicharters, are about US\$160 one way. Aviacsa also flies to Flores (US\$199 one way) and on to Guatemala City.

Aerocaribe and Cubana have daily flights to Havana, Cuba (US\$300 return).

US discount airline **Jet Blue** (www.jetblue.com) connects Cancún with New York City and Boston. One of several Mexican discount airlines is **VivaAerobus** (www.vivaerobus.com) with cheap one-ways to Monterrey.

The following airlines are represented in Cancún:

Aeroméxico (☎ 886 0003; Av Cobá 80)

American Airlines (☎ 886 0163; Airport)

Aviacsa (☎ 887 4211; www.aviacsa.com; Av Cobá 37)

Continental (☎ 886 0040; Airport)

Copa (☎ 886 0652; Airport)

Cubana (☎ 886 0192; Airport)

Delta (☎ 800 123 4710, 886 0367; Airport)

Grupo Taca (☎ 887 4110; Airport)

Magnicharters (☎ 884 0600; Av Náder 94)

Mexicana (☎ 886 0068; Av Tulum 269) South of the center.

Northwest (☎ 886 0646; Airport)

United (☎ 800 003 0777; Airport)

BOAT

See p43 for information on ferries to Isla Mujeres.

BUS

Cancún's modern **bus terminal** (☎ 884 5542; cnr Avs Uxmal & Tulum) is within walking distance of all downtown hotels. You can leave small/big bags with an attendant upstairs for US\$0.40/0.80 per hour.

Following are some of the major routes serviced daily:

Chetumal US\$17-21; 6hr; many buses

Chichén Itzá US\$14; 3hr; hourly (cheaper 2nd-class buses take 4½hr)

Chiquila (en route for Isla Holbox) US\$7; 3½hr; at 7:50am, 12:40pm, 1:45pm daily

Mérida US\$19-25; 4-6hr; many buses

Mexico City (TAPO or Terminal Norte) US\$106-125;

22-24hr; 4 per day

Palenque US\$49-57; 13hr; 5 per day 2:15-8:30pm

Playa del Carmen US\$3.40-4.80; 1hr; buses every 10min; many Playa Express & Mayab buses. (For service from the airport, see p38.)

San Cristóbal de Las Casas US\$72; 17-18hr; 4 per day

Tulum US\$5.40; 2½hr; many buses

Valladolid US\$7.80-11; 2-3hr; many buses

Across from the bus terminal, a few doors from Av Tulum, is the mini **Playa Express terminal** (Pino), where air-conditioned buses leave regularly for Playa del Carmen (US\$3.20) from 4am to 10pm.

Getting Around

Shuttles to the Cancún airport leave from the bus terminal every 20 to 40 minutes from 4:30am to 11:30pm. To reach the Zona Hotelera from downtown, catch any bus marked

EXPLORE MORE AROUND CANCÚN

In the eternal hunt for paradise in the white sand, here are a couple other options, reached from Cancún:

- The water up on the Gulf of Mexico is murkier, but many swear by sticking off the radar. On **Isla Holbox** there are no hostels, but there are US\$25 beach houses. Buses from Cancún go to the ferry at Chiquila three times daily.
- Just 33km south of Cancún is the laid-back fishing village of **Puerto Morelos** with midrange accommodations and far fewer tourists.

'R1,' 'R2,' 'Hoteles' or 'Zona Hotelera' as it travels along Av Tulum toward Av Cobá, then eastward on Av Cobá. The one-way fare is US\$0.65.

See opposite for information on reaching Puerto Juárez for the ferry service to Isla Mujeres.

Cancún's taxis do not have meters. Fares are supposedly set (a ride to Blvd Kukulkán Km 4 is US\$9, to Km 8 is US\$11; around downtown is about US\$2.50), but agree on a price before getting in.

If you're thinking of renting a car, check the big guys (Avis, Dollar, Hertz, Alamo) online; web reservations for the following day are often cheaper than what you'll find in an office. If you must rent locally, it's about US\$15 per day cheaper at Playa del Carmen.

ISLA MUJERES

☎ 998 / pop 13,500

Cynics say Mujeres' sun has set, but the wee 12km-long island – a long-time backpacker base – is still the saving grace for Cancún's over-developed beachfronts and high-end resorts. True, many day-trippers pour off the 25-minute boats for a day of beach, two-for-one beer specials and a snorkel trip. Wait till dark – when they leave – and the north-end town comes more to life, with locals chatting in front of wooden Caribbean-style homes and pedestrian strip Hidalgo braces itself for an evening of drinks and music.

How the 'Island of Women' got its name is debated: some say pirates kept their ladies here, others link it to the conquistadors' discovery of clay figurines of Ixchel (the Maya goddess of moon and fertility), one of which was found at the small ruin on the island's south end.

In October 2005, Hurricane Wilma hit Isla Mujeres hard, but the island got back on its

feet quickly. Said a local expat, 'We knew it was coming and got ready. The day after we were all up and cleaning the streets.' Most businesses have reopened.

Orientation & Information

All ferries arrive at the north end of Isla Mujeres in the heart of the compact town, which is made up of a simple grid system. It's easy to find what you need. Av Rueda Medina lies parallel to water and loops around the island. Parallel to and inland from Av Rueda Medina is Calles Juárez, then ped-strip Hidalgo and Guerrero just north.

Addresses on the island rarely use house numbers.

Beat (Guerrero btwn Morelos & Madero; per hr US\$1.50) Internet access.

Cosmic Cosas (cnr Guerrero & Matamoros) Used books store in Mañanas restaurant.

HSBC (Av Rueda Medina) ATM across from the ferry dock.

Immigration office (☎ 877 0189; Av Rueda Medina btwn Morelos & Madero; ☹ closed Sun)

Medical Center (Guerrero btwn Morelos & Madero)

Tourist office (☎ 877 0703; www.isla-mujeres-mexico.com; Av Rueda Medina btwn Morelos & Madero; ☹ Mon-Fri) Grab the free island map.

Sights

If you want a break from the water, bus or bike to the **Isla Mujeres Tortugranja** (☎ 877 0595; Carr Sac Bajo Km 5; admission US\$3.20; ☹ 9am-5pm), south of town. The turtle farm has pools and protected shores for turtles and their eggs. You'll see several hundred sea turtles ranging from palm-sized to 300kg giants. From the bus stop, follow the sign to the right.

The dramatic **Punta Sur** (admission US\$5.40), at the southern tip of the island (8km from town), is lovely but has been tackified with cartoonish figures put alongside a severely worn Maya ruin.

Activities

BEACHES & SWIMMING

The best swimming on the island is conveniently located in town at **Playa Norte** (North Beach; northwest if you want to get technical). The water is clear, calm and shallow – you can walk out a long way without getting your sombrero wet. Several beach bar-restaurants let you sit in their chairs if you buy food or drink. 'Two-fer' beer specials are US\$2.50.

About 7km south of town, skip the touristy nature park of **Playa Garrafón** and opt for its northerly neighbor **Hotel Garrafón de Castilla** (☎ 877 0107; admission US\$4; ☹ 9am-5pm). It has a roped-off swimming area with clear water and colorful fish. Snorkel gear is US\$7. Taxis from town cost US\$4.40.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Good reef and shark-cave dives are near the island – the best just to the southwest. El Frio (or Ultrafreeze) is a popular nonreef dive to a sunken boat in unusually cool water. Snorkelers should make sure their trips get to Manchones reef (best in the morning), and not just the reefs near the ferry docks. Renting snorkel gear is about US\$10.

The following dive shops are among the many:

Cruise Divers (☎ 877 1190; Av Rueda Medina btwn Abasolo & Matamoros) Snorkel trips to Manchones are US\$20 per person, one-/two-tank dives are US\$45/55.

Sea Hawk Divers (☎ 877 1233; abarran@prodigy.net.mx; Carlos Lazo, north of Guerrero btwn Matamoros & López Mateos) Snorkel tours US\$25, one-/two-tank dives US\$35/50, PADI-certification course US\$320.

The **Fishermen's Cooperative Booth** (Av Rueda Medina at Madero), near the dock, offers three-hour snorkel tours. Some visitors love it, but we've received a couple of complaints from women about harassment from some guides.

Sleeping

Between mid-December and March, many places are booked by midday. If planning to linger longer, watch for 'rooms for rent' signs.

Poc-Na Hostel (☎ 877 0090; www.pocna.com, info@pocna.com; cnr Matamoros & Carlos Lazo; campsites per person US\$6, dm US\$9-10, r US\$24-32; ☹ ☹) The Yucatán's best beach-side hostel (there are only a couple of candidates) occupies an almost Cubist-style complex on its own big beach – on a slightly rougher north coast – the sand-floor courtyard and central *palapa*-topped (palm-leaved

roof) restaurant is a great hangout area. Staff rent bikes and serve drinks and meals. There are coed and women's dorms, plus a camping area. Reserve by email only.

Urban Hostel (☎ 202 4367; cnr Hidalgo & Matamoros; dm/r US\$10/20) The Urban, a back-up hostel on the ped crawl, is a bit of a fan-cooled sweatbox room-wise, but lovingly run and has a bonus roof deck. The owners are pondering a 'hammock hotel' up top.

Hotel Carmelina (☎ 877 0006; Guerrero btwn Madero & Abasolo; s/d US\$27/37) Family run, it's a motor hotel-style spot with purple-and-white scheme and some knick-knacks on the walls of the 29 clean, fan-cooled rooms.

Hotel Marcanito (☎ 877 0111; Abasolo btwn Juárez & Hidalgo; r US\$35) The Marcanito is a simple hotel with clean, but small, rooms half a block from the ped strip. Upstairs front rooms get cross ventilation.

Eating

The ped mall Hidalgo reigns as the eating ghetto of Mujeres, with many open-air (and loud-late) restaurants to choose from.

El Paisano (Juárez btwn Abasolo & Matamoros) Get local in the heart of town. Blue-painted floor and murals overlook the fresh *tortas* (US\$2) and fish tacos (US\$3.60 for three).

Mercado municipal (Guerrero btwn Matamoros & López Mateos; set breakfasts/meals US\$2.50/4.50) Four covered stalls in this small market have nice sit-down tables for good-value meals.

Mañana (cnr Matamoros & Guerrero; dishes US\$3-8) A colorful, traveler-oriented place with sidewalk stools, and sunburst walls inside, it's a great setting to eat up veggie burgers with fries (US\$7) or set breakfasts (from US\$3).

Restaurant Velazquez (Av Rueda Medina at Matamoros; seafood US\$5-10) A family-run shack restaurant on the sand by the fishing docks, Velazquez churns out tasty filets and ceviche. Fresh red snapper is US\$5.

Nightlife

Many restaurants double as bars (and vice versa), particularly along the lively walkway Hidalgo. **La Peña** (Guerrero btwn Bravo & Morelos), overlooking the water from north of the town plaza, is a fun spot with live music.

Getting There & Away

The best way to reach Isla Mujeres is from Puerto Juárez, 4km north of central Cancún, with the most frequent, earliest and latest

service to/from the island. Enclosed boats zoom half hourly to the island (US\$3.50, 25 minutes) from 5am to 11:30pm, and return to Cancún from 5:30am to midnight.

It's also possible to ferry from Punta Sam, about 4km north of Puerto Juárez; service is less regular. More expensive ferries serve day-trippers from three points in the Zona Hotelera, such as the Embarcadero (Blvd Kukulcán Km 4). Boats go four times daily (one-way/return US\$10/15).

From Cancún, you can reach Puerto Juárez (or Punta Sam) by any bus heading north on Av Tulum that displays those destinations or 'Ruta 13' (US\$0.40). 'R1' buses marked 'Puerto Juárez' make the trip too (US\$0.65). A taxi from the bus terminal to Punta Juárez is about US\$3.

Getting Around

Most people get around by bike, moped or – hilariously – four-seat golf carts. Standardized prices at the many rental places are loosely adhered to; bargain. **Ppe's Moto Rent** (☎ 877 0019; Hidalgo btwn Abasolo & Matamoros) is typical, with US\$25 mopeds and US\$55 golf carts.

Poc-Na Hostel rents bikes for US\$10 a day.

A local bus occasionally runs down half of the island – stopping near Tortugranja. Taxis linger at the dock.

VALLODOLID

☎ 985 / pop 38,000

Yucatán's oldest colonial-era city, Valladolid is a refreshing nod to laid-back, friendly authenticity – plus cheap prices – for those coming from modern beach towns. One-story, hacienda-style Spanish homes and one or two 16th-century churches line cobbled streets that are fun to wander about. Its super hostel makes a good base to explore nearby Chichén Itzá.

Like all good Spanish copycats, it's built on a grid around the central Parque Central, where you'll find ATMs, internet and a tourist information office.

Contact **Linguistic Center Yucatán** (☎ 856 1798; www.playacarguide.com/lcy.htm; Calle 43, No 203A btwn Calles 44 & 42) if you're interested in studying Spanish.

Sights

Cenote Dzitnup (Xkekén; admission US\$2; ☎ 7am-6pm), 7km west, is one of the area's more attractive cenotes, with stalactites dangling over your dip. Taxi out or rent a bike; go west on Calle

39 to the Mérida highway, and watch for the sign. A **bike-rental shop** (Calle 44 btwn Calles 39 & 41; per hr US\$0.70; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) is a block west of Parque Central.

It's possible to take a colectivo (about US\$25 return) or taxi (US\$35) to **Ek-Balam** ruins, about 25km north, where you can rapel into a cenote for US\$10.

Sleeping & Eating

La Candelaria (☎ 856 2267; candelaria_hostel@hotmail.com; Calle 35 No 201F, at Calle 44; dm with/without HI card US\$8/8.80, r from US\$18/19.50) Converted from an old nunnery, the wonderful Candelaria has a remarkable well-groomed garden with half-covered kitchen. From the bus station, walk east on Calle 39, then left on Calle 44.

Hotel Zaci (☎ 856 2167; www.hotelzaci.com; Calle 44, No 191; r from US\$25; ☎ ☎) The Zaci is a friendly, colonial-style hotel, with a nice pool.

The cheap-and-tasty food at **Bazar Municipal** (Plaza Grande, cnr Calles 39 & 40; set meals US\$2.50; ☎ 7am-10pm) is made by neighboring stalls, all sharing nice tables overlooking the plaza.

Getting There & Away

The main **bus station** (nr Calles 39 & 46) is two blocks west of the plaza. Frequent buses go to Cancún (US\$7.40 to US\$11, two hours), Mérida (US\$7.40 to US\$11, two hours) and Chichén Itzá (US\$2 to US\$3.60, 45 minutes).

Just outside the station, on Calle 46, are colectivos that regularly go to Pisté (US\$2), near Chichén Itzá (sometimes continuing to the ruins).

CHICHÉN ITZÁ

If carvings of decapitated skulls and heart-eating eagles, or body-filled cenotes and nine-level pyramids, don't satisfy you, then come for the acoustics of a Pink Floyd show, as regular clapping echoes attest. Chichén Itzá is one of Mexico's most famed archaeological sights.

The temples were closed for climbing in 2006 (after a woman fell to her death).

The **site** (admission US\$9.50, night show US\$3; ☎ 8am-5 or 6pm, night show 7pm winter, 8pm summer), 41km west of Valladolid, was a modest late-Classical town before war-torn Toltecs from Tula, in central Mexico, conquered it in AD 987. An unlikely harmony followed, with experienced Maya architects masterfully adhering to the imagery of the Toltec feathered-serpent cult of Quetzalcóatl (Kukulcán in Maya).

The city was abandoned around 1224.

YUCATÁN'S BEST MAYA SITES

For Architecture

- Chichén Itzá (opposite)
- Uxmal (p48)

For Views

- Toniná (p62)
- Cobá (p55)
- Chinkultic (p70)

For Overall 'Experience'

- Palenque (p57)
- Yaxchilán (p62)

Exploring the Site

About 100m beyond the gate, you'll enter the Great Plaza. In the middle, the imposing **El Castillo** (The Castle) pyramid is designed to represent the Maya calendar in stone and is famous for the moving serpent illusion on its staircase, visible during the spring and autumn equinoxes. Inside the pyramid is a pre-Toltec pyramid with a red jaguar throne, reached by a sweat-box chamber – now closed.

Just northeast (back to the left as you enter the plaza) is Gran Juego de Pelota, the biggest **ball court** in Mesoamerica. The acoustics are terrific: try chatting with a friend on opposite sides.

Across the plaza from El Castillo is a 300m path north to **Cenote Sagrado** (Sacred Cenote), where some 50 skeletons have been found.

Back in the plaza, on the eastern end, stands the impressive **Templo de los Guerreros**, with a *chacmool* (Maya sacrificial stone) looking over the warrior-carved columns. Behind is the shady **Grupo de las Mil Columnas** (Group of the Thousand Columns). Beyond, a path leads through the forest past the **Mercado**, with a sunken courtyard rimmed by columns and a lone palm out of step.

The path leads past a replica of a traditional home, then another goes a few hundred meters south to the unusual **Caracol** (Snail), once used as an observatory (and a rare building you can climb). Just beyond is the **Edificio de las Monjas** (Nunnery).

Your entrance fee allows you to return to see the nightly **light-and-sound show**.

Getting There & Away

Direct 'Chichén Itzá' buses stop at the ruins' parking lot (at the western entrance); the gift store sells tickets to Valladolid (US\$2 to US\$3.60, frequent), Cancún (US\$9.40 to US\$14.20) Mérida (US\$5.40 to US\$8), Playa del Carmen (US\$18, two afternoon buses) and Tulum (US\$10.40, one afternoon bus). The site has a luggage-storage room if you're in transit. No buses leave here after 5pm. After this time, walk or taxi to the Pisté town, 2.5km west, where later buses and colectivos stop and go.

MÉRIDA

☎ 999 / pop 793,000

Not on the beach and not caring, Mérida is the Yucatán's most Mexican town – with Conquest-era buildings made from Maya pyramids and a weekend fair of all-day dancing, music and open-air tacos that makes 'festive' a too-small word. It's a great place to make day trips – to superb Maya ruins (such as Uxmal), cenotes, flamingo reserves and, yes, beaches.

Founded by Francisco de Montejo the Younger in 1540, Mérida was built atop the Maya town of T'hó.

Orientation & Information

Mérida's sequentially numbered grid makes finding your way easy. Even-numbered streets run north-south; odd-numbered streets run east-west. The Plaza Grande – between Calles 60 and 62, and 63 and 61 – is a 10-minute walk north from the few bus stations.

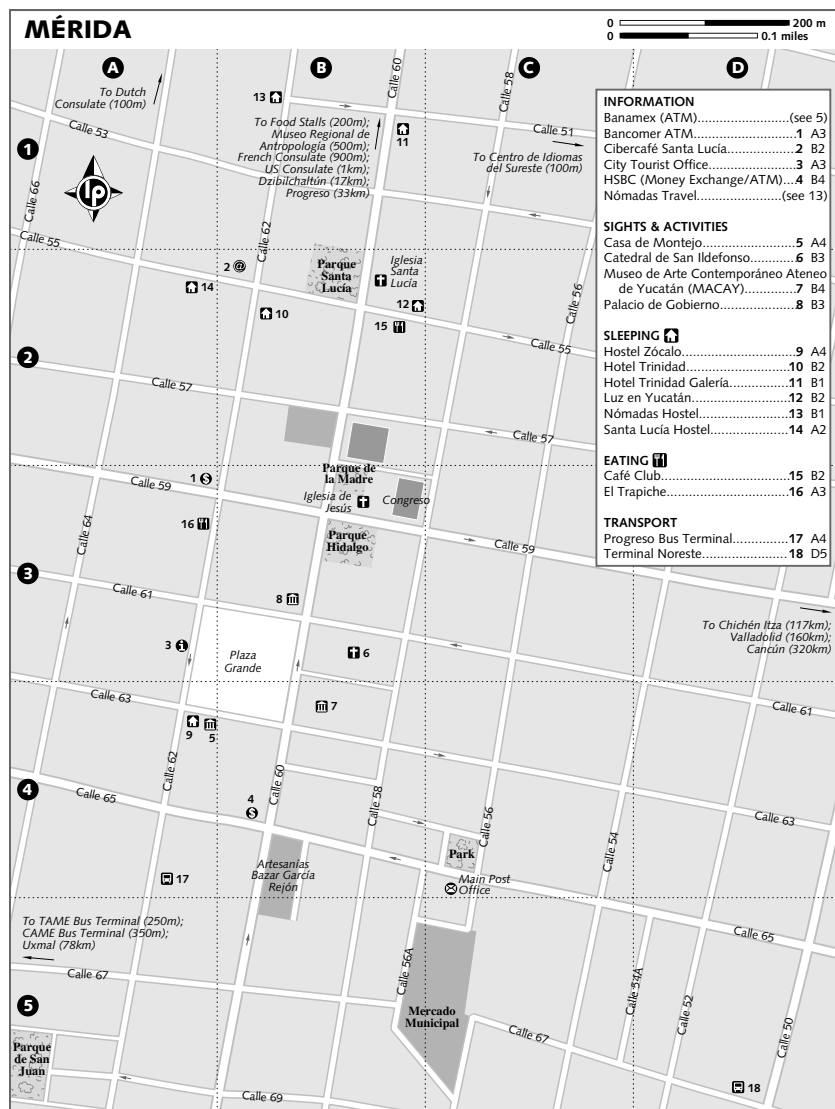
Banks and ATMs are easy to find in the center. **Cibercafé Santa Lucía** (nr Calles 55 & 62; per hr US\$1.20; ☎ 8am-1am) can also help with calls to the USA/elsewhere (US\$0.40/0.50 a minute).

You'll find several travel agencies along Calles 60 and 62, north of the plaza. Best is Nómadas Travel (at Nómadas Hostel), which offers student discounts, arranges cenote tours and has great handouts on DIY day trips.

There are a few information centers in town; drop by the **City Tourist Office** (☎ 924 0000 ext 80119; Calle 62, Palacio Municipal; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun) for its 9:30am walking tour (Monday to Saturday).

Sights

Try to be in Mérida for the all-day fair every Saturday and Sunday. For sights near to Mérida, see the boxed text, p48.



The **Plaza Grande** (or *zócalo*) is rimmed by Mérida's most historic buildings, most built from disassembled Maya pyramids. Most obvious are the 42m towers of the **Catedral de San Ildefonso** (Mesoamerica's oldest cathedral; 1598) – much of its interior was destroyed during the Mexican Revolution (1910–29). Next door is the worthwhile **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo**

Arene de Yucatán (Macay; ☎ 928 3191; Calle 60; admission free; ☎ 10am–6pm Wed–Sun), with rooms highlighting local artist Fernando Castro Pacheco.

At the south of the square, you can walk into the courtyard of the home of the founding conquistadors at the **Casa de Montejo** (1549; Calle 63), now a Banamex bank. Also go past the armed guards at the **Palacio del Gobierno** (1892; Calle 61),

facing the plaza's northeast corner, to see Pacheco's impressive wall-sized murals upstairs.

Nine blocks north of the plaza, on ritzy Paseo de Montejo, the great **Museo Regional de Antropología** (nr Montejo & Calle 43; admission US\$3.70; ☎ 8am–8pm Tue–Sat, 8am–2pm Sun), in the ornate Palacio Canton, explains why the Maya deformed their children's skulls, and displays jewelry, carvings and artifacts (with English subtitles).

Several blocks south of the plaza, the sprawling **Mercado Municipal** (btwn Calles 56 & 56a, south of Calle 65) is a fascinating area to wander about.

Sleeping

Santa Lucia Hostel (☎ 928 9070; www.hostalstaluca.com; Calle 55 No 512; dm US\$7.50, r with/without bathroom US\$23/20; ☎ ☎) The Santa Lucia is one of several nice hostel-in-a-historic building options, coming with a small courtyard and, hey, air-con.

Nómadas Hostel (☎ 924 5223; www.nomadastravel.com; Calle 62 No 433; hammock & dm US\$8.50, r with/without bathroom US\$23/18; ☎) This is a very well-run hostel that keeps quiet after 11pm, with a lovely open courtyard, great travel tips, free salsa lessons and mixed and single-sex dorms. There's plenty of space for a tent or hammock in the back. You get a free toast-and-coffee breakfast.

Hostel Zócalo (☎ 930 9562; hostel_zocalo@yahoo.com.mx; Calle 63 No 508; dm/\$/d US\$9/13/21) Set in a museumlike building next to the Casa de Montejo, the grand 1st-floor hostel has high ceilings, kitchen and free breakfast. All rooms have shared bathrooms.

Hotel Trinidad (☎ 923 2033; www.hotelestrinidad.com; Calle 62 No 464; r US\$22–45; ☎ ☎) Lush courtyards and a sense of fun give this hotel a bump in quality over a hostel. Most rooms have private bathroom, there's a communal kitchen, and guests can use the pool in their nearby **Hotel Trinidad Galería** (☎ 923 2463; nr Calles 51 & 60).

Eating

At Parque Santa Ana, **food stalls** (nr Calles 60 & 47; ☎ 6am–2pm) serve cheap eggs and tacos.

El Trapiche (Calle 62 btwn Calles 59 & 61; sandwiches & mains US\$1.80–\$4.50) This colorful two-room eatery offers pastas and Yucatecan specialties.

Café Club (Calle 55 No 496; set breakfasts US\$3–6; ☎ 7am–5pm Mon–Sat) It's a pleasant café that draws locals for coffee and set breakfast deals. A veggie sandwich costs US\$1.80.

Getting There & Away

Mérida's bus stations, all south of the plaza, include the following:

SPLURGE

Luz en Yucatán (☎ 924 0035; www.luzenyucatan.com; Calle 55 No 499; r US\$35–80; ☎ ☎) Made from a late 16th-century convent behind Santa Lucia Cathedral, the Luz is an inspired 10-room spot with many large, well-furnished colonial-era-meets-modern rooms and a pool in back.

CAME Bus Terminal (Calle 70 btwn Calles 69 & 70) Buses to Cancún (US\$21–23.50, four hours, frequent), Chetumal (US\$22, six hours, four daily), Mexico City (US\$91–107, 22 hours, six daily), Palenque (US\$32, nine hours, three or four daily), Playa del Carmen (US\$25.40, 5½ hours, eight daily), San Cristóbal de Las Casas (US\$41, 13 hours, one daily) and Tulum (US\$16.30, four hours, three daily).

Progreso Bus Terminal (Calle 62 btwn Calles 65 & 67) Buses go regularly to Progreso (US\$1.30, one hour) and Dzibilchaltún (US\$0.70, 45 minutes).

TAME Bus Terminal (nr Calle 69 & 68) Buses go to Uxmal (US\$3.50, 1½ hours, eight daily) and on the Ruta Puuc (US\$12 return) at 8am daily.

Terminal Noreste (Calle 67 btwn Calles 52 & 50) Buses to Chichén Itzá (US\$5.20–7.20, two hours), Izamal (US\$3, 90 minutes) and Valladolid (US\$7.60–11.60, two to three hours).

PLAYA DEL CARMEN

☎ 984 / pop 60,000

This long, beachside town is definitely booming. Just over a decade ago, it was a mere out-of-the-way fishing village seen only for its ferry service to Cozumel. Now it keeps a firm grip as the 'Riviera Maya' hub, with direct buses from Cancún airport (68km north) and a cruise-ship stop.

It's easy to enjoy and loathe the pet-iguana souvenir stands along Quinta Av, but the glimmer of nearby turquoise water, white sand and fine open-air restaurants makes it fun for a couple days.

And unlike Cancún, it's more thoughtfully developed – with zoning restrictions keeping new resorts from shooting up a dozen stories.

Orientation & Information

Most visitors arrive at the older (Centro) bus station at the southern end of Quinta Av; its northern reaches are sometimes called 'Little Italy' due to the number of Italians out there. See www.playamayaneews.com or www.playainfo.com for information on the region.

Centro del Salud (☎ 873 0493; 15 Av near Av Juárez) Mérida's main hospital.

Cibernet (Calle 8; per hr US\$1.50) Internet café near Quinta Av.

Dr Mario Abarca (☎ 804 3433; Av 10 btwn Av Juárez & Calle 2; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat) Very nice English-speaking doctor receives calls 24 hours a day.

El Point (10 Av btwn Calles 2 & 4; per hr US\$2;

☎ 8am-2am) Internet access and international calls.

Emergency (☎ 066)

Lavandería Giracaribe (10 Av btwn Calles 12 & 14;

☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat) Drop-off laundry service.

Left luggage (Terminal del Centro, cnr Av

Juárez & Quinta Av) Lockers upstairs cost US\$5 for 24 hours.

Tourist office (☎ 873 2804; cnr Av Juárez & 15 Av;

☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) English-speaking staff and brochures, near the post office.

Tourist police kiosks (☎ 873 0291) Main Plaza

(cnr Av Juárez & Quinta Av); Calle 14 (Quinta Av & Calle 14)

Sights & Activities

BEACHES

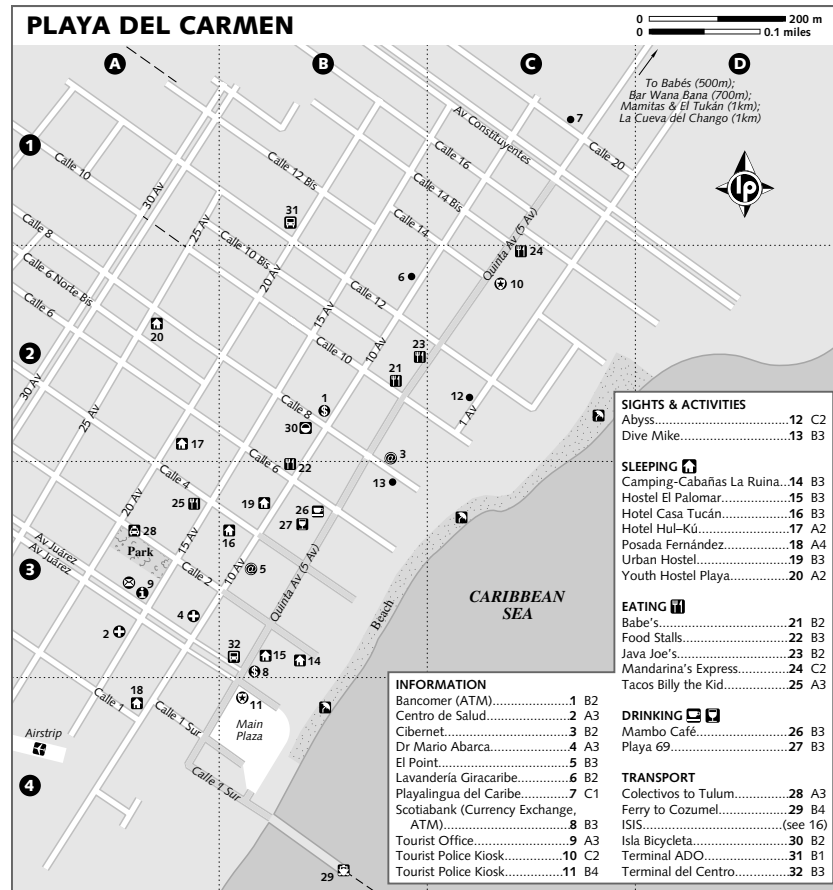
Miles of white-sand beaches stretch out from busy Playa, but finding a spot with elbow room is harder than it used to be. Locals flood the beach on Sunday, the only day the cruise ships aren't at port. Anything near the town center is pretty much packed – the area around the Cozumel ferry isn't crowded with hotels at least. Some like the beach clubs further north, such as **Mamitas** (north of Constituyentes, access via Calle 28), which can be busy, but it's not a bad spot actually, with a broader beach, a good restaurant, thatch umbrellas, lounge chairs (US\$2 to use), and a pool. The similar **El Tukan** is next door. Five more minutes' walk north are undeveloped stretches (for the time being) backed by a wire fence.

Topless bathing is permitted. Note that run-and-grab thefts can happen, and there

EXPLORE MORE FROM MÉRIDA

Mérida may be inland, but it's near such juicy stuff you can easily spend a week in the area. See p47 for transport details. Ask at Nómadas Travel in Mérida (p45) about cenote tours. The day-long **Ruta Puuc bus** (book at TAME bus station; about US\$34 incl entry fees) visits five sights, including Uxmal, the superb Labná, Xlapak, Sayil and Kabah. Stops at most are quick – about 30 minutes – but you get two hours at Uxmal. Avoid weekends when the bus may be packed.

- The top day out is to **Uxmal** (admission US\$9.50; ☎ 8am-5pm), sprawling Maya ruins that flourished from AD 600–900. It's intricate, *puuc*-style architecture includes many fanciful carvings (such as the ever-present rain god *chac*), plus iguanas as big as bulldogs. There's a sound-and-light show included in the price (8pm summer, 7pm winter). Uxmal can be reached by bus from Mérida several times a day.
- About 17km north of Mérida, the quieter Maya site of **Dzibilchaltún** (admission US\$6.30; ☎ 9am-5pm) features interesting structures at either end of a 1km-long *sacbé* (road), including 130m-long Estructura 44 facing a 16th-century Spanish chapel in ruins and the squat Templo de las Siete Muñecas (Temple of the Seven Dolls), which glows on the equinoxes. There's also an open-air cenote you can swim in. Ask the bus driver to drop you off by the ruins, where it's a 1km straight walk.
- The lovely little 'yellow town' of **Izamal**, 90 minutes drive northeast of Mérida, is worth a lazy part of a day to see its (yellow) Convento de San Antonio de Padua (1562) and to climb the region's largest pyramid, the rather overgrown **Kinich-Kamó**, a few blocks north.
- About 33km north of Mérida, **Progreso** is the go-to, quick-beach-fix for *meridanos*. There's a nice white-sand beach and a 7km wharf to see, but the water ain't the Caribbean and it gets windy in the afternoons. Add flamingos to a beach, and **Celestún** – set in a 591-sq-km nature reserve – makes a fun day trip March to September, when flamingos come in droves. It's tricky to arrange on your own, as a visit requires a US\$120 boat ride. Travel agents in Mérida organize trips for about US\$40 or US\$45.
- Break up the long Mérida–Palenque journey in the colonial-era city of **Campeche**, which has a nice waterfront, a Maya museum and is near bicycle trips, waterfalls and the Xpujil ruins. The **Monkey Hostel** (☎ 981-811 6500; www.hostalcampeche.com; cnr Calles 10 & 57; dm US\$8.50) is good for central dorms.



have been reports of sexual assault too. Increased numbers of strolling tourist police have helped cut back incidents.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Mexico's best diving is offshore between Playa and Cozumel. Most serious divers head to Cozumel, though one local diver claims, 'We have more fish' (not necessarily true).

There are several dozen dive operators in town, offering one-/two-tank dives for about US\$40/60 and cenote dives from US\$100. PADI-certification courses are about US\$350.

Reef snorkel tours with snacks and gear run US\$20 to US\$35; cenote trips are about US\$50.

A couple of good shops include **Abyss** (☎ 873 2164; www.abysdiveshop.com; Calle 12), which has a 90-minute snorkel tour (US\$20), and **Dive Mike** (☎ 803 1228; www.divemike.com; Calle 8).

Courses

Playa has a few Spanish-language schools. **Playalingua del Caribe** (☎ 873 3876; www.playalingua.com; Calle 20 btwn Avs 5 & 10) has great facilities (including a swimming pool!); five four-hour days in groups costs US\$185.

Sleeping

Playa del Carmen has more than 200 places to stay. High-season rates (listed here) generally run from around mid-December through March.

SPLURGE

Hotel Casa Tucán (☎ /fax 873 0283; www.casatucan.de; Calle 4 btwn 10 & 15 Avs; r US\$50; 🍷) This German-Texan-run hotel has won many fans for its well-decorated, fan-cooled rooms, great restaurant, and shady garden overlooking a deep pool. Most rooms are in a 'hotel' style building, but there are nice *palapa* (palm leaf-roofed) huts in back too.

Camping-Cabañas La Ruina (☎ 873 0405; Calle 2; campsite or hammock space per person US\$7, d US\$20, with bathroom US\$30-55) The rooms are a bit aged, the shady courtyard a bit roughshod – and you won't likely make new friends among the staff – but it's on the beach.

Urban Hostel (☎ 803 3378; Av 10; dm/r US\$10/20) 'Roll with it' might be the mantra for this rather un-urban communal-feeling hostel with tight covered sitting space and cubicle-style rooms.

Youth Hostel Playa (☎ 803 3277; www.hostelplaya.com; Av 25 & Calle 8; rooftop camping US\$5, dm/d US\$12/35) Several blocks from the beach, this nicely planned hostel has single-sex and coed dorms and private rooms facing a huge common area with hammocks and TV. There are mosquito nets, plenty of clean showers and bathrooms, and a well-stocked kitchen.

Hostel El Palomar (☎ 803 2606; www.elpalomarhostel.com; Quinta Av btwn Av Juárez & Calle 2; dm incl breakfast US\$12-13, d US\$38) A fine hostel right across from the old bus station on the ped crawl, Palomar has fan-cooled single-sex dorms that get a bit tight, but there's a great rooftop kitchen overlooking the water, big lockers and the double rooms are nicely decorated. You can pay US\$13 if you prefer to stay in the four-bed dorm.

Posada Fernández (☎ 873 0156; 10 Av near Calle 1; r with fan/air con US\$30/40; 🍷) It offers simple, clean private rooms just south of the old bus station.

Hotel Hul-Kú (☎ 873 0021; 20 Av btwn Calles 4 & 6; r US\$45; 🍷) Nice rooms and patio nooks overlook a small pool at this hotel.

Eating

Go see what grabs you on Quinta Av. There's a lot: US\$2 pizza slices, US\$4.50 set breakfasts, US\$6 Mexican mains. Some Playa restaurants add a service charge to the bill.

Things change just a block away from Quinta Av. Several **food stalls** (cnr 10 Av & Calle 6) serve cheap *comidas corridas*. **Tacos Billy the Kid** (cnr 15 Av & Calle 4; tacos/tortas US\$0.40/1.20) is packed with locals seeking excellent snacks.

Mandarina's Express (Quinta Av; pizza slices US\$1.60-2, mains US\$5-10.50; 🍷 6pm-midnight) Next to Mandarina's upscale pizzeria – and grand piano player – is an especially good takeaway slice stand.

Java Joe's (Quinta Av btwn Calles 10 & 12; bagels US\$3, sandwiches US\$4-6; 🍷 6:30am-10pm) Here you can sit on streetside stools and get your bagel fix fulfilled while waving across to nearby Starbuck's.

Babe's (Calle 10 btwn Quinta & 10 Avs; mains US\$4-10; 🍷 noon-11pm Mon-Sat) This is an inspired spot with sidewalk seats to enjoy a taco break with super Thai and Vietnamese salads. The superb mango salad with shrimp, noodles and fish sauce comes in two sizes. There's another Babe's location on Quinta Av between Calles 28 and 30.

La Cueva del Chango (Calle 38 off Quinta; mains US\$5-12) The 'Monkey Cave' is a tucked-away artsy place on the way to the water with Playa's best breakfasts, organic salads and sandwiches, and inspired dishes such as pistachio soup.

Nightlife

You can buy beer anywhere and sit on the beach. Much partying transpires of course on Quinta Av, with restaurants doubling as bars (and vice versa) and keeping late hours. Pick up a copy of *La Quinta* magazine (free) to see the latest listings.

Mambo Café (Calle 6; 🍷 closed Mon) is a salsa place with salsa classes at 9:30pm (US\$8); you'll need the skills once the bands hit the stage.

GAY & LESBIAN VENUES

Playa is the Yucatán's gay hub. There are two clubs, **Playa 69** (Quinta Av btwn Calles 4 & 6; www.playadelcarmen.com; 🍷 closed Mon), with a pink-and-black dance floor and dark corners, and **Bar Wana Bana** (Quinta Av btwn Calles 30 & 32).

Getting There & Away**BOAT**

Two ferries to Cozumel (US\$11, 35 minutes) leave side by side on the hour between 5am and 10pm. EkonoKlass (US\$4.50, one hour) makes four trips across in a smaller boat.

BUS

Playa has two bus terminals. The older one (and it looks new), **Terminal del Centro** (cnr Juárez & Quinta Avs), gets all the 2nd-class, and Cuncin and Tulum action. The newer one, **Terminal ADO** (☎ 803 0950; cnr 20 Av & Calle 12), a 10-minute walk away, connects Playa with Mexico City, Chetumal, Mérida and Chiapas.

Services run as follows:

Cancún US\$3.40; 1hr; depart every 10 min

Cancún International Airport US\$8; 1hr; hourly from 8am to 6pm

Chetumal US\$12-20; 5hr; many buses

Chichén Itzá US\$18; 3-4hr; bus at 8am

Mérida US\$25; 5hr; 10 per day from ADO

Mexico City US\$109; 24hr; 4 per day

Panexo US\$45-53; 12-13hr; 4 per day

San Cristóbal de Las Casas US\$57-68; 15-19hr; 4 per day

Tulum US\$2.20-3.40; 1hr; many buses

Valladolid US\$14; 3hr; 5 per day

COLECTIVO

Frequent shared vans head south to Tulum (US\$2.50, 45 minutes) from Calle 2 near 20 Av from 5am to 10pm, stopping anywhere along the highway on the way (not bad for cenote-hopping).

Getting Around

ISIS (☎ 879 3111; Hotel Casa Tucán, Calle 4) rents cars from US\$44 per day (including tax and insurance).

Isla Bicycleta (☎ 879 4992; www.playadelcarmenbikes.com; Calle 8; 🍷 9am-1pm, 3-6pm) rents good bikes for US\$80/12 per half/full-day.

COZUMEL

☎ 987 / pop 90,000

Tear-shaped and a little sad, the 647-sq-km island of Cozumel receives 6.5 million tourists a year, but only one in 30 actually stays the night. Most visitors are docked for the day from cruise ships. Locals are used to these big spenders and touts wander around. But these hurdles can be broken at first plunge (with air tank or snorkel) at the world-famous reefs offshore – better than Playa's, no doubt.

Hurricane Wilma all but closed up Cozumel until the cruise-ship docks reopened in early 2007; the reefs were largely unaffected.

The Maya first settled here around AD 300. Many indigenous rebels fleeing the War of the Castes resettled here in the mid-1800s. After a chewing-gum boom (and bust),

tourism became the island's savior, starting after Jacques Cousteau praised its underwater charms in 1961.

Orientation & Information

Ferries from Playa arrive at the Muelle Fiscal, the main dock right in San Miguel de Cozumel, the island's chief town, which sits more than midway up the island's west side. The airport is 2km northeast of town.

Bancomer (Av 5 Norte) Bank and ATM on east side of the plaza.

Cozumel International Clinic (☎ 872 1430; Calle 5 Sur 21-B) Hyperbaric chamber.

Crew Office (Av 5 btwn Calles Dr Adolfo Salas & 3 Sur; 🍷 10am-10pm) Internet access and telephone service.

Crux Roja (Red Cross; cnr Av 20 Sur & Calle Dr Adolfo Salas)

Express Lavandería (Calle Dr Adolfo Salas btwn 5 & 10 Avs Sur) Drop-off laundry service.

Post office (Calle 7 Sur at Av Rafael Melgar; 🍷 Mon-Fri)

Tourist office (☎ 869 0212; 🍷 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Upstairs in the main plaza (Plaza del Sol). Friendly staff hand out maps and can answer some questions. There's also an info booth by the pier.

Sights & Activities IN TOWN

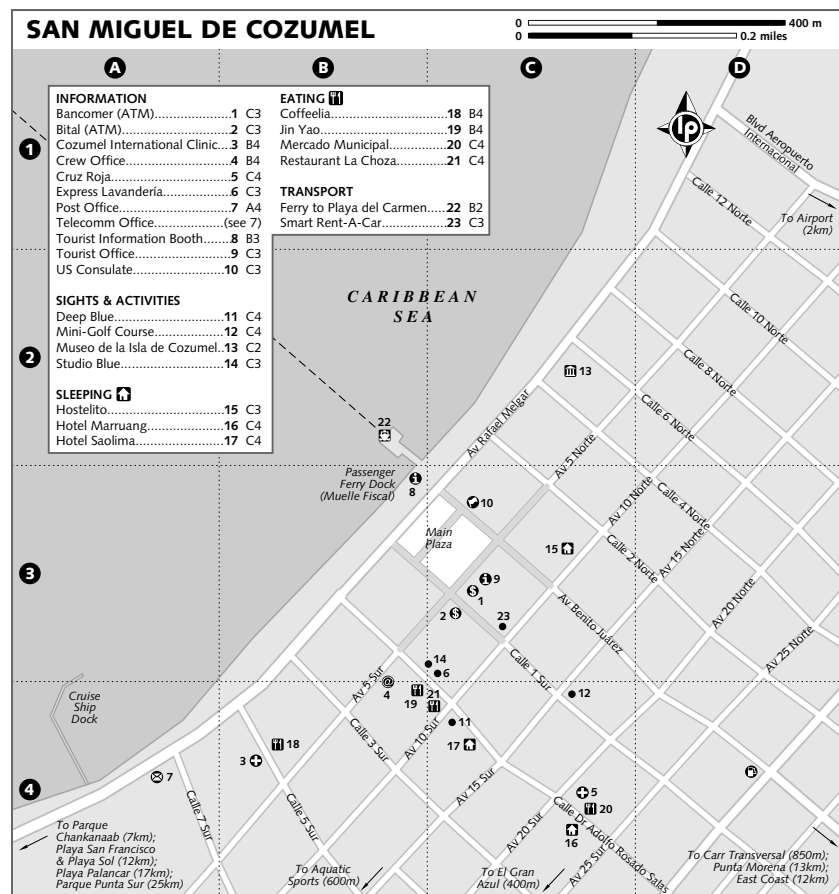
If it's raining, you won't be disappointed with the well-presented, four-room **Museo de la Isla de Cozumel** (Av Rafael Melgar btwn Calles 4 & 6 Norte; admission US\$3; 🍷 9am-5pm), with exhibits on coral, pirates and the old Cozumel basketball team (descriptions in English and Spanish).

The **Mini-Golf** (cnr Calle 1 Sur & Av 15 Sur; 18-hole game US\$6; 🍷 closes dusk) is a nice mini-golf course; you get walkie-talkies to buzz in beer orders.

DIVING

Great year-round visibility and more than 100 diving sites have made Cozumel one of the world's most popular diving destinations. Marine life is plentiful, including eagle rays, eels, barracudas, turtles and sharks. Popular dives (including some that can be snorkeled) include Santa Rosa Wall, Punta Sur Reef, Colombia Shallows and Palancar Reef (still great for snorkeling). Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling Cozumel* has more information.

Cozumel is also home to over 100 dive operations. Prices vary, but in general a two-tank dive runs US\$70 (equipment is US\$18 more), a one-day introductory course with a two-tank dive is US\$90 and a four-day PADI-certification course costs about US\$360.



Plan at least a day ahead for 9am dives or snorkeling trips.

A few recommended dive shops:

Aquatic Sports (☎ 872 0640; www.scubacozumel.com; Av 15 Sur & Calle 21 Sur)

Deep Blue (☎/fax 872 5653; www.deepbluecozumel.com; Av 10 Sur & Calle Dr Adolfo Salas)

Studio Blue (☎ 872 4414; Calle Dr Adolfo Salas 121) Gets good reports from readers.

SNORKELING

The best snorkeling sites are reached by boat. Touts on the dock will let you know about half-day trips for US\$25, but they don't reach the best spots at the south of the island (such as Palancar Reef or Colombia Shallows). Snorkel trips with diving operators run to

US\$45 or so; another option is renting a motorbike and going to Playa Palancar (where you can arrange a 90-minute snorkeling trip for US\$21).

EXPLORING THE ISLAND

Taxis are extortionately priced – try US\$20 one way to Playa Palancar, 17km south – and there's no public transportation. Consider renting a moped or car. In a rewarding day, with a moped, it's possible to take the following counterclockwise loop around the island. From town, follow Av Rafael Melgar south (as it becomes Costera Sur) to reach the calm west-side beaches, or go east on Av Benito Juárez to connect with the Carr Transversal (Cross Island Road) and the rougher east coast.

Down the West Side

Parque Chankanaab (admission US\$10), about 7km south of town, is a touristy snorkel spot that's not the island's best.

There are a few beach clubs about 5km further south at **Playa San Francisco** and **Playa Sol**. Nearby is the turnoff inland to **El Cedral**, a small town with a shack-sized Maya ruin.

It's worth stopping at **Playa Palancar**, about 17km south of town. There's free access to a calm beach, plus a restaurant, and snorkel trips to the reef run through most of the day. You can rent snorkel gear, kayaks and sailboats.

Sadly, the island's gorgeous southern tip is now only accessible by entering the overpriced **Parque Punta Sur** (admission US\$10), where you can see crocs around Laguna de Colombia, ride a pontoon boat, and visit a lighthouse.

Up the East Side

Facing open ocean, the surf here is rough (often dangerous), and the shoreline wind-whipped and beautiful. Far fewer visitors make it over here. Surfing is possible, but be cautious of the undertow: drownings occur. Pricey, but good, seafood can be found at restaurants scattered along the road.

About 4km north from the Parque Punta Sur turnoff, **Playa Bonita** (to the south of Punta Chiqueros) usually has calmer swimming conditions than beaches to the north. Off-shore rocks at **Playa Chen Río**, a few kilometers north, create a small protected area which is good for a dip. Further north, **Coconuts** (mains US\$6-12) is a Tex-Mex restaurant on a cliff.

Punta Morena is the island's top surf spot. Shortly after is the turn back to town.

Sleeping

Hostelito (☎ 869 8157; www.hostelito.com; Av 10 Norte btwn Calles Juárez & 2 Norte; dm/r US\$12/35; ☎) Cozumel's only hostel is an inspired one with a giant ocean-blue dorm with 26 beds and bamboo décor – very clean. There are two private rooms, plans for a kitchen and wi-fi access.

Hotel Marruang (☎ 872 1678; Calle Dr Adolfo Salas 440; r US\$22) The Marruang is a hot-pink budget hotel that offers clean, fan-cooled rooms across from the Mercado Municipal.

Hotel Saolima (☎ 872 0886; Calle Dr Adolfo Salas 260 btwn Aves 15 & 10 Sur; r with fan/air con US\$25/30; ☎) It has 20 simple pink-and-white rooms.

Eating

Cheapest of all eating places are the appealing market *loncherías* (food stalls) at the **Mercado Municipal** (Calle Dr Adolfo Salas btwn Aves 20 & 25 Sur), which serve seafood, egg breakfasts and Indonesian (!) meals for US\$3 to US\$4.

Jin Yao (Calle Dr Adolfo Salas 198; dishes from US\$3.50) This take-out Chinese counter is particularly good if you need a noodle hit.

Coffeelia (Calle 5 Sur btwn Aves Rafael Melgar & 5 Sur; set breakfasts US\$4-6, snacks US\$2.50; ☎ 7:30am-11pm Mon-Fri, 1-11pm Sat) An old house turned arty hangout, it has fine food and good service, plus old *National Geographic* magazines to leaf through.

Restaurant La Choza (☎ 872 0958; cnr Calle Dr Adolfo Salas & Av 10 Sur; mains US\$8-14; ☎ 7am-10:30pm) A popular *palapa*-style restaurant, away from the main touristy crawl, it specializes in (very big) Mexican meals. Mariachis lurk.

Getting There & Around

Most international flights are routed through the USA or Mexico City.

A couple of ferry companies connect Playa del Carmen with Cozumel (see p50).

Taxis are very expensive. **Smart Rent-A-Car** (☎ 877 5651; cnr Av 10 & Calle 1 Sur) rents VW bugs from US\$38 per day, scooters for US\$25.

TULUM

☎ 984 / pop 10,000

Playa is for the partiers, Tulum is for the beach bums. For over a decade, Tulum has been a big-time backpacker Yucatán HQ, with sand-floor huts on wide stretches of white sand near the fairly compact namesake Maya ruins. Big spenders, like they do, have followed the backpacker-pioneers in droves in recent years; already the first major hotel has popped on the beach, and there's talk of another taking over cheapie hut spots in the future.

Orientation & Information

Spread-out Tulum has three parts: the rapidly developing town, where buses and colectivos pull in, the ruins (a couple kilometers north), and the 'zona hotelera' 3km east. The bus terminal is towards the south end of town. Toward the north along the main road is a useful landmark – a football field by the city hall in between two roundabouts.

Most services you'll need are in town. Half a block north and opposite the bus station is an English-speaking **doctor's office** (☎ 807 6666).

HSBC, another block up at city hall, has a 24-hour ATM and currency exchange. The Weary Traveler (see later) stores small/big bags for US\$1.50/3 per 24 hours.

Dangers & Annoyances

Lonely Planet has received many reports of snag-and-sprint incidents, as well as bags getting nicked from locked huts. If staying in one of the cheapie sand-floor huts near the ruins consider storing your valuables in town.

Tulum Ruins

Seeing Mexico's most-visited Maya site atop surf-splashed Caribbean cliffs, it's not hard to imagine a post-Classic Maya or two begging for a transfer here. These days the location of the relatively small roped-off **ruins** (admission US\$4.50; ☞ 8am-5pm) may be more impressive than the site itself. Many visitors charge through them as a dip on the beach awaits behind.

Tulum is believed to have been an important port town during its post-Classic heyday (AD 1200-1521). Named by the Spanish, Tulum is Maya for 'wall.' The site's original name was Zama, or 'Dawn' - watch the sunrise to realize why. Tulum was one of Mexico's last ancient cities to be abandoned, about 75 years after the Spanish conquest.

Colectivos (US\$1.50) and taxis (US\$4.50) go from town to the old entrance road at Crucero Ruinas, about 800m from the ticket booth. The ticket booth is also reached by foot or taxi from the beach road near the cabañas.

EXPLORING THE SITE

Past the ticket booth, you enter the compact rectangular site near its northwest corner. Heading east you pass the **Casa del Cenote** (House of the Cenote), named for the small pool at its southern base. Above, you can look over the site - set just south on a waterfront bluff is the **Templo del Dios del Viento** (Temple of the Wind God). Past it is the biggest site, **El Castillo** (The Castle), whose Toltec-style *kukulcanes* (plumed serpents) are evidence of the late post-Classic period. Just south are the steps down to the beach, and above are many cliffside vantage points for your camera.

West, roughly in the middle of the site, the interesting two-story **Templo de Las Pinturas** (Temple of the Paintings) features relief masks (and murals on its unapproachable inner wall).

Diving & Snorkeling

Cenote dives and snorkel trips are a bigger draw than Tulum's offshore reefs.

Cenote Dive Center (☞ 871 2232; www.cenotedive.com; Av Tulum) offers guided trips to Dos Ojos cenote (aka Hidden Worlds). It's US\$45/110 to snorkel/dive, including wetsuit and equipment.

Beach accommodations offer trips as well. Zazil Kin cabañas in the zona hotelera offers one-/two-tank dives (US\$40/60) and snorkeling trips (US\$25).

Sleeping IN TOWN

Hotel El Crucero (☞ 871 2610; www.el-crucero.com; Tulum Crucero; dm/r US\$10/30; ☞) This is a laid-back place off the highway at the entrance to ruins, with aged but fine rooms, about 1km walk from the beach.

Hostel Tulum (☞ 871 2089; Calle Jupiter 20; dm/r incl breakfast US\$11/36; ☞) Clinical but clean and big, the Tulum is across the highway, and just south, from the Weary Traveler.

Weary Traveler Hostel (☞ 871 2390; www.intulum.com; Av Tulum; dm US\$12) This welcoming hostel is the best cheapie in town. There are several dorms, each fan-cooled and with private bathrooms; in low season some are available as private rooms. The central courtyard has food - including US\$3 salad buffets.

Hotel Addy (☞ 871 2423; Calle Polar Ote 92; s/d US\$28/33) On a side street a few hundred meters north of the bus station, the Addy has enormous rooms with TV and fan.

ZONA HOTELERA

A few kilometers from town, Tulum's beachfront can feel like a deserted island. The cheapies generally don't take reservations; show up by 11am and see if something turns up. The best place to start is the bare-bone four-pack immediately south of the ruins (US\$4.50 by taxi); turn left a couple of kilometers from the access road. There are many more options - many midrange - extending 10km south from the access road.

Four choices near the ruins from south to north include:

Mar Caribe (cabañas from US\$20, camping or hammocks per person US\$5) Nice and simple, but on the beach access path; the higher-priced cabañas are on raised platforms.

Zazil Kin (cabañas_zazilkin@yahoo.com.mx; r US\$37-47)

Nicest and most popular of the four, with a dive center.

Santa Fe (camping or hammocks per person US\$5, cabañas US\$20) Primitive bungalow, barest of the four.

El Mirador (☞ 879 6019; savana@groo1.telmex.net.mx; hammock/bed in cabañas from US\$15/22) Grubbier but pleasant option.

Options heading south of the access road include:

Tribal Village (camping or hammocks US\$10, cabañas US\$25) Nice cement-floor cabañas in shady area facing rocky stretch of water.

Papaya Playa (www.papayaplaya.com; cabañas from US\$40) Good cement-floor cabañas on fine beach, 1km south of access road.

Zahra Hotel (☞ 984-801 0092; cabañas with/without bathroom from US\$45/35; ☞) Another 1km south, Zahra's cheapie Chan and Tunich cabañas are side by side with the upscale US\$200 rooms, with a nicely tucked-away beach just behind.

Cabaña Los Arrecifes (☞ 879 7307; www.losarrecifes.tulum.com; bungalows from US\$40) About 4km south, Arrecifes has pricier hotel-style rooms and 10 sand-floor cabañas and an excellent beachfront.

Eating

All the beach places have restaurants - you'll find (often) more memorable and friendly service in town, and many of the best options (French, Italian, Argentine) are between the two roundabouts (100m north of the bus station).

Diaz Taqueria (Av Tulum; three tacos US\$2.40) With red plastic chairs and no alcohol, this local favorite focuses on good tacos. There's a mushroom *gringa* (big taco with cheese) for US\$1.40.

San Francisco de Asís, at the beach turnoff, is the town's biggest supermarket.

Getting There & Around

The **bus terminal** (Av Tulum) won't sell tickets on long-distance buses to Cancún or Playa del Carmen until 30 minutes before departure. Buses leaving Tulum:

Cancún US\$5.40-7.20; 2hr; many buses

Chetumal US\$11.40-14.40; 3½-4hr; many buses

Chichén Itzá US\$10.40; 3½hr; at 9am & 2:30pm daily

Cobá US\$2.80; 30min; 4 per day 7am-6pm

Mérida US\$12.20-18.60; 4hr; many buses

Palenque US\$42.40; 15hr; 4.40pm & 6.10pm

Playa del Carmen US\$2.20-3.40; 1hr; many buses

Valladolid US\$5-6; 2hr; 7 per day

Shared vans leave for Playa del Carmen (US\$2.50) every 30 minutes from 5am to 10pm from the Terminal de Servicio Foraneo, about 250m north of the bus station. A 2pm van goes to Punta Allen (US\$15; two to three hours).

Taxi fares are fixed. There's a stand by the bus terminal with posted fares. It's US\$4.50 to many cabañas. Many places rent bicycles.

AROUND TULUM

About 4km west of Tulum is **Grand Cenote**, a fine spot to cool off with a swim en route to Cobá. You'll need to organize your own transport to get here.

Cobá

A Classic-era Maya city set deep in tropical jungle, the fascinating Cobá **ruins** (admission US\$3.70; ☞ 7am-5pm), 48km northwest of Tulum, are more linked with distant Tikal than Tulum or Chichén Itzá. Be at the gates when they open and you may not see another person for two hours.

Cobá was home to 55,000 Maya at its peak (between AD 800 and 1100). Many amazing regional *sacbé*s (stone-paved avenues) led here. The longest runs 100km to Yaxuna, near Chichén Itzá. The name - from the Maya word *koba* (believed to mean 'ruffled waters') - likely refers to the reedy, croc-filled lakes in the area.

A little Yucatec may help you with locals: try *¿bix a bel?* (literally: 'how is your road?,' used as 'what's up?').

El Bocadito (☞ 984 206 7070; r US\$15-25) has slightly scruffy fan-cooled rooms if you miss the 6pm bus to Tulum.

EXPLORING THE SITE

Only a few of the estimated 6500 structures have been excavated. The four principal groups are spaced apart. You can rent bikes for US\$3 after 8am. If you walk through the jungle trails, expect to stay a minimum of three hours at the site.

Approximately 100m along the main path is **Grupo Cobá**, with an enormous pyramid and corbelled-vault passages. After 500m, the road forks: the left leads to the Nohoch Mul pyramid, the right to Grupo Macanxoc. Either way passes the **Conjunto Pinturas** (Collection of Paintings), 100m further, which has a couple of stelae.

If conscious of time, skip **Grupo Macanxoc**, 500m away (which has a few eroded stelae depicting women from Tikal) and head northeast past the **Grupo Nohoch Mul** and continue to the right (east) to the semicircular Xaibé structure, the juncture of four *sacbé*s. To the north, past a couple of structures, you'll see

the 42m high **Nohoch Mul** (Big Mound), a half-excavated pyramid you can climb to look over the jungle canopy. It's a 1.5km, half-hour walk back to the entrance gate.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most buses serving Cobá stop at El Bocadito – a 10-minute walk (past the lake) from the ruins. Buses continue on to Valladolid and Chichén Itzá.

Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an

Beach resorts are inching closer to the 5000-sq-km Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a World Heritage site of protected jungle, marsh, mangrove and beachfront. It can be reached from the highway to Chetumal, south of Tulum, or better from the rough road south of Tulum's Zona Hotelera (the van to Punta Allen from Tulum goes through here, though most visitors go by their own wheels, usually 4WD vehicles). Only a portion of the biosphere can be visited – and very little if not on an organized tour. Tour companies in Tulum include the following:

CESiAk (☎ 987-71 2499; www.cesiak.org; Tulum Crucero) Offers full-day tours of the ecosystems, a look at Xlapak Maya ruins and a float down a fresh-water canal (US\$68). Also has bird-watching tours (US\$70) and kayak trips (US\$45).

Tucan Kin (☎ 01-800 702 4111; Weary Traveler Hostel, Av Tulum) Leads mostly walking tours of the biosphere from the highway (US\$40).

CESiAk runs 15 wonderful beachside **cabañas** (r with shared bathroom US\$78-100) about 11km south

of the Tulum Zona Hotelera access road. You could get here by the Punta Allen van and arrange tours here; there's a restaurant.

Punta Allen

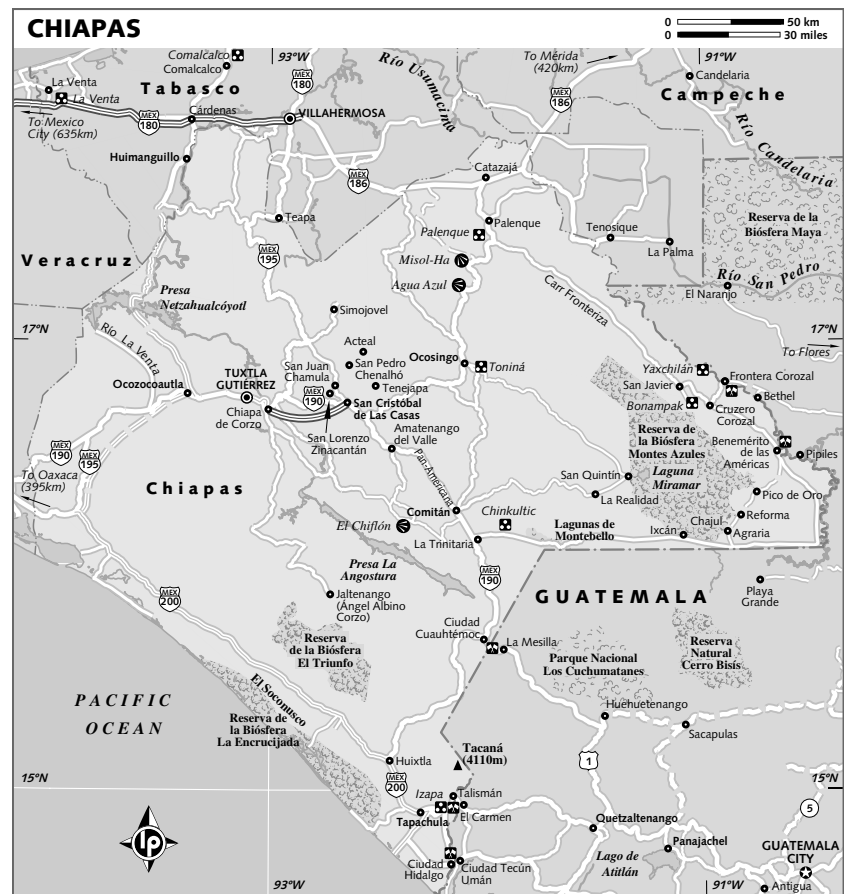
A magical spot, buried at the end of a scarred road deep in the Sian Ka'an (56km from Tulum), Punta Allen is a sand-road fishing village of 70 families and a few kooky expats. The beach is largely untouched – meaning washed-up seagrass stays there. Snorkeling trips to offshore coral reefs, with turtles and dolphins, are remarkable (about US\$120 per group).

A fun place to stay is **Posada Sirena** (☎ 984-877 8521; posadasirena@prodigy.net.mx; www.casasirena.com; cabañas US\$30-50) with four colorful rooms run by the 'mermaid of Punta Allen,' a transplanted Californian.

A van goes to Punta Allen from Tulum at 2pm daily and returns to Tulum at 5am daily; it's also possible to go by bus and boat from Felipe Carrillo Puerto, 95km south of Tulum.

CHIAPAS

Mexico's southernmost (and poorest) state is a wonderland of ruins, jungle, waterfalls and mountains, an area once part of Spanish-controlled 'Guatemala' and which feels, in comparison with the Yucatán, far more 'Central America' than 'Mexico.' Those waking up on overnight buses from the Yucatán usually start with the magical Maya city of Palenque



GETTING TO COROZAL, BELIZE

Visitors heading south to Belize must change buses in **Chetumal**, the capital of Quintana Roo state. It's a hmm-and-go type of place other than the remarkable **Museo de la Cultura Maya** (☎ 983-832 6838; cnr Avs de los Héroes & Gandhi; admission US\$5; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Thu & Sun, 9am-8pm Fri & Sat), simply the best museum on Maya culture. The comfortable **Hotel Ucum** (☎ 983-832 0711; Av Gandhi 167; d with fan/air-con US\$20/25; ♿ ♿ ♿) is nearby.

Chetumal's notable bus terminals are several blocks apart, both 2km north of the town's center. The **main bus terminal** (near Avs Insurgentes & Belice) has frequent connections to Palenque and up the coast. From here regular direct buses leave for Corozal/Orange Walk/Belize City for US\$2/3/6, and two buses go on to Flores, Guatemala (US\$40), leaving at 6:20am and 2:30pm. The Nuevo Mercado Lázaro Cárdenas has 2nd-class buses to Belize.

Note that those arriving from Palenque get here around 1am or 3am. Afternoon/evening buses go to Palenque, frequent buses head north toward Cancún.

Be prepared to show evidence of the payment of your 'nonimmigrant fee' (p73) to leave Mexico. See p240 for information on crossing into Mexico from Belize.

on the foothills of lush mountain jungle where you can sleep in hammocks and screened-in cabañas.

Further up, way up, is the lovely Spanish colonial town of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the town masked Zapatista rebels put on the international map in the 1990s. Both serve as compelling bases for day trips to ruins rarely visited, waterfalls and fascinating Maya villages where a 'buenos días' sometimes gets a confused shrug.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

There's been isolated incidents of robberies on buses along the route from Palenque to San Cristóbal, but we haven't heard of any recently. Some visitors have been robbed

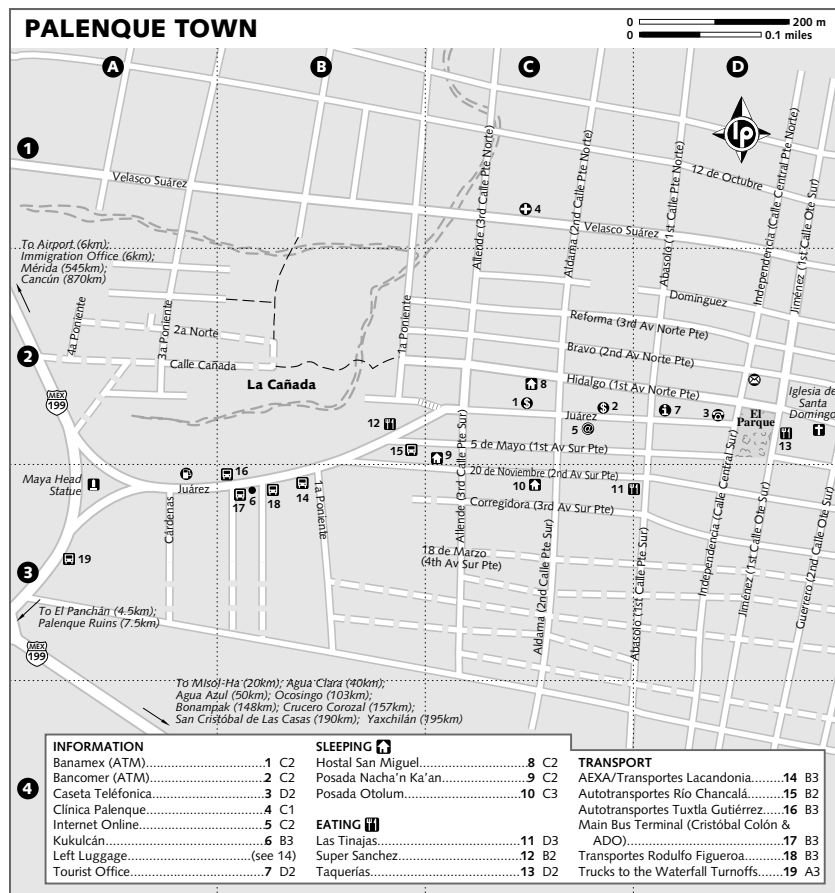
while walking on access roads to waterfalls outside Palenque.

PALENQUE

☎ 916 / pop 37,000

Ancient Palenque sits like a king on a throne of jungle where plains meet mountains. It ranks up with Tikal for the top Maya sites, and as far as personal exploration goes, that you can climb most temples (and swing in hammocks in the jungle overnight nearby) makes it incomparably more rewarding than Chichén Itzá.

A few kilometers east, the modern Palenque town is something like a fast-food town, made to get folks in and out, quickly and smoothly.



Orientation

Hwy 199 meets the town's active main street, Juárez, at the intersection with a statue of a big Maya head. From here Juárez heads east past the bus stations and 800m to the central square (El Parque).

Most town streets have two names, with a recently added numbering system that most businesses ignore (as do addresses that follow).

A little south of the big Maya head, the 7.5km road to the ruins and El Panchán turns off Hwy 199.

Information

IMMIGRATION

Immigration office (Hwy 199; ☎ 8am-2pm & 5-8pm) About 6km north of town; take a colectivo marked 'Playas.'

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Online (Juárez; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 7:30am-11pm)

LEFT LUGGAGE

Left luggage (Juárez; per hr US\$0.20; ☎ 7am-11pm) The café next to Transportes Lacandonia charges half the cost of the nearby ADO bus station.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Clinica Palenque (☎ 345 0273; Velasco Suárez 33; ☎ 8:30am-1:30pm & 5-8pm) Dr Alfonso Martínez speaks English.

MONEY

Bancomer (Juárez) It's about 1½ blocks west of El Parque.

TELEPHONE

Caseta telefónica (Juárez) At Posada Yax-Ha, a block west of El Parque, it receives international calls for US\$0.05 per minute. Calls to the USA/Europe/Australia cost US\$0.30/0.40/0.50 per minute.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (cnr Juárez & Abasolo; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) Small and not much help other than a few brochures and a town map.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Palenque's abundant travel agencies can get you to the ruins or to Guatemala. You can also book tours at El Panchán.

Kukulcán (☎ 345 1506; www.kukulcantravel.com; Juárez; ☎ 6am-9pm) Next to the ADO bus station, it offers reliable service with friendly English-speaking staff (and Palenque beer mugs!).

Palenque Ruins

The ancient **ruins** (admission US\$4.50; ☎ site 8am-4:45pm, museum 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) include some 500 excavated buildings (of 1453 found) spread over a sloping 15 sq km. From the turnoff on Hwy 199, just west of town, it's 6km to the museum.

There are entrances to the site from the museum (walking uphill as the everyday Maya would have done) and the main entrance, 1.5km further. Get here from Palenque by regular colectivo (marked 'Ruinas'; US\$1 one way) or taxi.

Guides (who speak Spanish, English, French or Italian) are available at the main entrance. A two-hour tour for up to seven people is US\$45.

Many tours combine a few hours at the ruins with visits to Agua Azul and other waterfalls in the mountains. Three hours is enough to whip through the ruins.

HISTORY

The Maya name of Palenque (Palisade in Spanish) is believed to have been Baak. It was first occupied around 100 BC and its prime time was around the 7th century AD (when the population was probably 8000), which was centered around the reign of K'inich Hanab Pakal (who died at the age of 80 in 683). Many of Palenque's plazas and buildings were built during the reigns of Pakal and his son and successor, Kan Balam (or Snake Jaguar). Most buildings were painted red, from dyes made from squashed insects.

Palenque didn't fare well in 8th-century combat with neighbor rival, Toniná (65km south). It was abandoned around 900 and sat hidden by jungle for centuries. In 1773, after hearing stories about stone palaces in the jungle from Maya hunters, a Spanish priest led a trip there. Others followed, excavations began. One occupant was Count de Waldeck who, in his 60s, lived atop a pyramid for two years (1831-33). A few years later, John L Stephens, an amateur archaeology enthusiast, wrote insightfully about the site. King Pakal's secret crypt was discovered in 1952 - one of the biggest finds in the Maya world.

LAS INSCRIPCIONES GROUP

Just after the main entrance, this group of four buildings stands side by side on your right. Last in line is the **Templo de las Inscripciones** (Temple of the Inscriptions; closed to entry), Palenque's tallest building - an eight-level temple with stairs rising 25m. The roof comb at the top is a reconstruction. Inside is Pakal's tomb. His skeleton and jade mask were moved to Mexico City (where the mask was stolen in 1985), but the giant sarcophagus lid remains. The remarkably carved slab has glyphs recounting Pakal's reign, though its full meaning is debated.

Behind the temple, a path leads through the jungle to **Templo del Bello Relieve** (Temple of the Beautiful Relief); you'll need a flashlight to see anything inside.

EL PALACIO

At the end of the lawn, diagonally opposite from the Templo de las Inscripciones, the **Palace** is a big, fun, complex structure with a maze of corridors and vaulted galleries set around four courtyards.

Rising from the southwestern courtyard, the tower (believed to be an observatory) was re-created in 1955. The u-shaped stones below are Maya toilets, guides claim. Within the southern halls, there are stone beds where royals slept. Along the eastside pillars, look for Spaniard vandals' names, carved in the 18th century.

LAS CRUCES GROUP

Just southeast of El Palacio, on a slight hill, stands this interesting group, all dedicated to Pakal's son, Kan Balam. Entering the plaza, the **Templo de la Cruz Foliada** (Temple of the Foliated Cross) is straight ahead, shrouded in jungle

with an impressive mountain backdrop. To the left (north), the biggest of the three is **Templo de la Cruz** (Temple of the Cross); on the plaza's west side, the **Templo de la Sol** (Temple of the Sun) has Palenque's best-preserved roof comb – some argue (weakly) it shows an Asian influence.

Carvings atop each so Kan Balam (big guy) and Pakal (little one) on either side of a central object: corn, cross (for the ceiba tree, not Jesus) and the Jaguar God.

OTHER GROUPS

These groups see far fewer visitors.

On the south side of Las Cruces, a path leads into the jungle to the shaded **Acropolis Sur**, which was closed indefinitely at research time.

Back in the sun and north of El Palacio is **Grupo Norte's** strip of temples. On the western side, the **Templo del Conde** (Temple of the Count) is the place where the Count de Waldeck made his home for a couple of years.

Past the stream to the east, a fork to the right leads to the overgrown **Grupo C**. Heading to the exit, the path goes along the stream past more wildly overgrown ruins – some are very interesting to walk around. **Grupos 1 and 2** are slightly back up the hill past the bridge. Along the way is a waterfall and inviting pools of clear cool water (no swimming here though). The path ends on the road, near the **museum** (with English subtitles), which is well worth a look.

Sleeping IN TOWN

Palenque town has plenty of 10- to 15-room jobbies. Juárez has many, but it's quieter on the backstreets.

Posada Nacha'n Ka'an (☎ 345 4737; 20 de Noviembre 25; dm/s/d US\$7/15/18) It has well-kept but basic rooms run by a sweet family – dad speaks English and is prone to chatting. The big rooftop dorm has lots of space and a (needed) breeze. There's a communal closet to lock up bags. Rooms have bathroom, TV and fan. The family runs a small café with US\$2.50 breakfasts.

Hostal San Miguel (☎ 345 0152; Hidalgo 43; r US\$15) The San Miguel is cuter outside than in, but it has fine rooms with a fan and private bathroom.

Posada Otolum (☎ 916 101 7560; 20 de Noviembre No 77; s/d US\$15/20) The Otolum is a colorful place with small but nice fan-cooled rooms with TVs.

EL PANCHÁN

Stay out here if you can. Set in dense jungle, 4.5km from town on the road to the ruins, El Panchán has five places offering basic cabañas, campsites or posts to tie a hammock. Many travelers who expect to stay a night leave a week later.

In high season, finding a vacant cabaña can be tough in the afternoon. Phones often don't work, and email addresses are rarely checked (seemingly). So stay in town if you arrive after dark. A 'Ruinas' colectivo gets you to El Panchán.

Rakshita's (camping & hammocks US\$2, dm/s/d US\$7/10/15) Shoddy new-age atmosphere with lots of space, murals on cabañas, and an eternally empty 'pool.' It's US\$2 extra to rent hammocks.

Chato's Cabanas (☎ 348 0520; el_panchan@yahoo.com.mx; camping & hammocks US\$3, s/d US\$13/18) Handles reservations for a couple of cabaña outfits.

Jungle Palace (camping & hammocks US\$3, s/d US\$10/12, tr with bathroom US\$25) Nice spot along a stream.

Margarita & Ed Cabanas (☎ 341 0963 rarely answered; r from US\$17; 📶) Less scenic, but definitely the nicest cabañas, all with fans. The 'hotel'-style rooms have air-con.

Eating

In town, tourist-oriented cafés are abundant along Juárez and around El Parque. The *taquerías*, on the east side of El Parque, are great spots to sit, eat and watch the scene.

Las Tinajas (cnr 20 de Noviembre & Abasolo; set breakfasts US\$2.80-3.70, dishes US\$6-7; 🕒 7am-11pm) A friendly and breezy spot on a side street, it attracts locals and travelers. The food is quite good, but the tasty *rabalo* fish is priced by size and staff will bring you the biggest one.

Don Mucho's (mains US\$3.50-8, breakfast US\$1.50-3.50; 🕒 7:30am-midnight) The main eating spot in El Panchán is surprisingly good and amazingly not overpriced. There's live music at 8:30pm.

Super Sanchez (Juárez) This grocery store is located a couple blocks east of Palenque's bus terminals.

Getting There & Away

Buses serving Palenque sometimes get a bad rap for theft. Keep an eye on your gear.

Several bus terminals are on Juárez, a few blocks east of Hwy 199. The main **ADO bus terminal** (☎ 345 1344) has services to Cancún (US\$49.60, 13 hours), Chetumal (US\$28.60, 7½ hours, two night buses), Mérida (US\$31.60, nine

hours, two daily), Mexico City (US\$67.20, 16 hours, three daily), San Cristóbal de Las Casas (US\$12, 4½ hours) and Tulum (US\$42.40, 11 hours, two night buses).

A far better deal, on fine buses, for San Cristóbal is via **AEXA/Transportes Lancandonia** (☎ 345 2630), which sends five or so daily buses (via Ocosingo) for US\$7.50. Also, Ruta Maya has cheaper buses to Tulum (US\$25) and Cancún (US\$30).

Autotransportes Río Chancalá (☎ 341 3356; 5 de Mayo 120) sends frequent vans to Cruzero Corozal (US\$5, 2½ hours), a 16km taxi ride from Frontera Corozal and boats to Guatemala. (Some colectivos go direct to Frontera Corozal; ask.)

See below for information on getting to Bonampak, Yaxchilán and the popular waterfalls west of town: Agua Azul and Miso-Ha.

Getting Around

Colectivos to El Panchán and the ruins (US\$1 one-way) run every 15 minutes from 6am to 6pm. Catch one heading west on Juárez, across from the main bus terminal.

Taxis charge about US\$4 to El Panchán, US\$5 to the ruins.

AROUND PALENQUE

Often tours offered by travel agencies are as cheap as going on your own, and make getting to places much easier.

Waterfalls

There are a couple of dandies off the mountainous Hwy 199 heading south to San

Cristóbal, each known for amazing colors (best in spring) and fine swimming areas. Most impressive is **Agua Azul** (60km south, 4.5km off highway), with a 1km walk up to the best swimming spots in the blue water. **Miso-Ha** (20km south of Palenque, 1.5km off the highway) has a big pool below a 35m drop, plus nearby cabins. The water gets chocolatey after rain.

Organized day trips with an hour at Miso-Ha and three at Agua Azul cost US\$10, not including admission (US\$1 each). Ocosingo-bound trucks stop at the Hwy 199 turnoffs to the falls (about US\$3 one way, from 6am to 6pm), but there have been several reports of machete-armed thieves robbing tourists on the walk to the falls (particularly at Agua Clara, another falls in the area). Sometimes trucks are available to reach the falls for US\$2 or so.

Maya Ruins

Southeast of Palenque – en route to Flores, Guatemala – are a couple of very big-deal Maya sites: Bonampak and Yaxchilán. An organized day trip to see both (including admission, transportation and lunch) is about US\$50; a two-day trip combining a visit with an overnigher in a Lacandon village is US\$80. It's also possible to see them en route to Tikal, Guatemala (see below).

Visiting them without a tour will cost more and may mean overnight stays, some waits and long walks on access roads; you can access both by the Crucero Corozal colectivo from Palenque.

GETTING TO FLORES, GUATEMALA

The trip between Palenque and Flores (near Tikal) is easiest on a full-transportation package (two buses and boat) from a Palenque travel agency. The eight-hour trip costs about US\$35 per person, leaving typically at 6am. A worthwhile option that most agencies pawn includes visiting the remarkable Maya sites of Yaxchilán and Bonampak; the two-day trip (including a night in a Lacandon village) finishes in Flores, and costs about US\$90.

If you do the trip on your own, be prepared for waits. From Palenque, take a colectivo to **Crucero Corozal**, 16km from **Frontera Corozal** (which you reach by taxi), where boats cross the Río Usumacinta to Bethel, Guatemala, where you can find chicken buses to Flores. The boat costs about US\$80; we've heard some travelers weren't allowed to wait for fellow travelers to share the costs.

Another adventurous way to cross is busing from Palenque to **Tenosique, Guatemala**, then catching a van to El Ceibo (US\$3, 1½ hours), where it's possible to find a boat going to El Naranjo (US\$30; about three hours). Then you catch a bus to Flores (at least six hours). Note: Mexico has no immigration at this border – handle this in Palenque before you set out.

See p202 for details on crossing this border from Guatemala.

BONAMPÁK

A small site, 148km from Palenque, **Bonampák** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-4pm) is famed for its brightly colored, narrative (and unfinished) murals set in three rooms midway up the tall acropolis. In the middle room, scenes of torture and sacrifice are shown; note the decapitated head and blood squirting from a captive's fingers just above and left of the door, behind you as you enter.

The gate site is 3km from the San Javier junction on the highway. At the gate you can catch a shuttle (about US\$5) for the 9km trip to the ruins.

Nearby is an amazing Lacandon village, inhabited by the only unconquered group of Maya.

YAXCHILÁN

Set far from roads on the banks of the Río Usumacinta, **Yaxchilán** (admission US\$3.80; ☎ 8am-4:45pm), 195km from Palenque (road and river), is reached by boat from Frontera Corozal. Many of its carvings now reside in the British Museum, but its jungle setting, ornate facades, roof combs and *loud* howler monkeys make for a memorable visit.

Heading west past the entrance, shortly after the Pequeña Acropolis turnoff, the path forks; go right for a dramatic entrance to the long Gran Plaza, lined with buildings and lintels. Up a steep stairway to the southwest is Edificio 33, the site's most impressive building. Behind a path leads further up to the southwest to the more remote Edificios 39, 40 and 41 – you'll need 30 minutes at least for this. You can return to the boats by the Pequeña Acropolis. Tour groups get just two hours here.

From Frontera Corozal, you can boat here for about US\$60 for up to three people, US\$120 for 10.

TONINÁ

Even the hardened sometimes start to feel queasy on the tortuous road twisting and turning its way up from Palenque to San Cristóbal. Although most travelers skip it, there's a superb halfway rest point near friendly **Ocosingo**, where you can take in the Maya site of **Toniná** (admission US\$3.80; ☎ 9am-5pm) in about four hours, then continue your trip. The massive hillside temple complex is fun to walk around, with hidden chambers leading up to a 70m pyramid overlooking the lovely ranchland outside Ocosingo. The ride 16km east from

town passes an army base outside a Zapatista territory, as marked with a handwritten sign.

To reach the site from the destination bus station, walk a couple of blocks west (uphill), then south (at the 'centro' sign) toward the market (about four blocks downhill). Combis run half-hourly (or so) from the west side of the market to the site (US\$1 each way). There are also taxis around, but a ride is about US\$10.

You can find a hotel and ATM on Ocaingo's plaza, half way down to the market.

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

☎ 967 / pop 130,000

Set in the cool broad Jovel valley, San Cristóbal is a Spanish-colonial wonder – with low-lying haciendas fit snug on tight sidewalks and cobbled streets – but everything else about the area is richly embedded in the world of the modern Maya. The town, made famous when Zapatistas took control (briefly) in 1994, is surrounded by Maya villages in the hills where traditions live full force. Day trips nearby, plus the town's excellent coffee, arthouse films and lively markets, make it hard to stay less than a week.

Founded as San Cristóbal in 1528, its extended name honors Bartolomé de Las Casas, who was appointed bishop of Chiapas in 1545 and became an outspoken defender of the indigenous. For more details of the the Zapatista rebellion staged here; see opposite.

At 2100m, it gets chilly here all year.

Orientation

Plaza 31 de Marzo (but everyone calls it *zócalo*) is the heart of the town, north of the bus terminals (where the Pan-Americana cuts through the southern reaches of town) on Insurgentes.

Extending east of the *zócalo*, Real de Guadalupe and Madero comprise something of a tourist zone, with many cafés and guest-houses. Along the *zócalo*'s western side, 20 de Noviembre (to north) and Hidalgo (to south) have been transformed into a pedestrian mall, quite a hit with locals.

Information**BOOKSTORES**

There are many places to find books along Real de Guadalupe.

La Pared (Hidalgo 2; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Tue-Sat, 2-7pm Sun) The sweet Floridian owner offers a big selection of English-language novels and guidebooks.

ZAPATISTAS!

Cult heroes of Chiapas and the world, the left-wing peasant group of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) fight for indigenous rights in one of Mexico's poorest states. More than one in four people in Chiapas are Maya, but hold few cards in how their land is used. The Zapatistas splashed onto international news on January 1, 1994, when they protested the first day by Nafta by storming and briefly occupying San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Most wore handmade uniforms and all wore masks – a people who had been invisible and muted by centuries, suddenly found their identity by hiding it.

The Zapatistas quickly made an impact: Benetton offered an ad deal (declined), Oliver Stone trolled for film fodder (never materialized), the USA poured over half a billion dollars in military aid (for the Mexican army) and an advisor to a US company called for the Zapatistas to be 'eliminated.'

The always-masked Zapatista founder – the pipe-smoking Subcomandante Marcos – has been a colorful and unusual leader. He apologized to startled tourists after occupying San Cristóbal ('we apologize...but this is a revolution'), wrote a children's book with gods preoccupied with sex and tobacco (*The Story of Colors*), and succeeded in what other socialist revolutionaries such as Che Guevara and Fidel Castro failed: integrating into the indigenous life. Rather than push Marxist and class doctrines, he shifted to focus on indigenous rights, and left room for religion. When the Zapatistas spoke to the Mexican Congress in 2001 – after president Vicente Fox boasted he could solve the problem in '15 minutes' – it was not Marcos who took the podium, but a Maya woman called Comandanta Esther.

Many find it surprising that the Zapatistas don't want to overthrow the government. As Marcos says, 'We are indigenous people and we are Mexicans. And we want to be both.' The chief crux of Zapatista demands has been to release Zapatista prisoners, close seven Mexican military bases in the area and to recognize the San Andrés Accords, which granted Chiapas more power in how indigenous land was used; the government approved the act in 1996, but it never came into effect. Meanwhile, Zapatista life continues, particularly in seven autonomous zones called *caricoles* (snails).

Critics of the Zapatistas often point out the many cases of Zapatistas seizing ranchland from the wealthy in the area around Ocosingo, including an instance of forcing out the US owners of a Zapatist-sympathetic ranch-hotel.

In recent years, the government seems content to ignore the movement, and the tactic has been more effective than the paramilitary raids of the mid '90s that lead to the Acteal massacre (where 43 were killed). The movement has faded from international press and some locals in San Cristóbal even murmur how some Zapatista leaders have defected, taking grant money to build big homes. But Marcos has kept busy, after a nationwide 2006 motorcycle tour he published a thriller novel *The Uncomfortable Dead*, written with Mexican author Paco Ignacio Taibo II.

Reading Up

It's less fashionable to write about the Zapatistas these days, so the best books are a little dated. A couple of good ones are *The Zapatista Reader*, edited by Tom Hayden, and *Rebellion in Chiapas: An Historical Reader*, edited by John Womack. **Global Exchange** (www.globalexchange.com) has many articles and even 'reality tours' to Chiapas. Official Zapatista websites include zeztainternacional.org and enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx.

IMMIGRATION

Immigration office (Instituto Nacional de Migración; ☎ 678 6594; Diagonal El Centenario 30; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Fri) This office is situated about 1.2km to the west of the main bus station along the Pan-Americana Hwy.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet-café rates range from US\$0.50 to US\$1 per hour. There's wi-fi access at La Selva café (see later).

Los Faroles (Real de Guadalupe 33; per hr US\$0.50; ☎ 9:30am-10pm)

**LAUNDRY**

Lavendaría (5B Belisario Domínguez; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) Same-day service, about US\$3.

LEFT LUGGAGE

Across from the OCC bus station's left luggage (per hr US\$0.40), **El Paso** (Insurgentes 79C; per 24hr US\$2) is cheaper for long-term storage.

MEDICAL SERVICES

General Hospital (☎ 678 0770; Insurgentes)

MONEY

Banamex (☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) On the *zócalo*; has ATM and currency exchange.

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POST

Post Office (Madero)

TELEPHONE

El Locutorio (Belisario Domínguez, near Real de Guadalupe; ☎ 8am-10pm) Make calls to the USA or Canada (US\$0.20 per minute), Europe (from US\$0.30). There's another location at Crescencio Rosas at Cuauhtémoc.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal tourist office (☎ 678 0665; turismo_municipalidad@yahoo.com.mx; ☎ 8am-8pm) English-speaking staff run two booths in the *zócalo*. **Sedetur** (☎ 678 6570; Hidalgo 1B, 1st fl; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) Hidden-away office with plenty of brochures and maps.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Most travel agencies in town are located along Real de Guadalupe, and offer similar services (including day trips, horseback riding, and useful ticket deals to Guatemala). Compare their prices. All are open roughly from 8am to 9 or 10pm daily. A few good ones are listed here:

Otisa (☎ 678 1933; otisa@otisatravel.com; Real de Guadalupe 3C)

Trotamundos (☎ 678 7021; trota_chis@hotmail.com; Real de Guadalupe 26C)

Viajes Chincultik (☎ 678 0957; Real de Guadalupe 34) At Posada Margarita.

Sights & Activities**MAYA MEDICINE DEVELOPMENT CENTER**

Do visit the terrific **Centro de Desarrollo de la Medicina Maya** (☎ 678 5438; www.laneta.apc.org/omiec; Av Salomón González Blanco 10; admission US\$2; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun), one of the best museums of Maya culture anywhere. Its four thematic rooms illustrate how herbs, prayers, candles and skunk urine (!) have helped ease the ills of Maya for generations. A booklet (in English, French, German and Italian) explains the exhibits.

There's a graphic 12-minute video (in Spanish) on the unique way Maya women give birth. In the back building, various herbal medicines are for sale – a shampoo to fight balding is US\$3.

To get there, walk 1km north of Santo Domingo. It's US\$1.50 by taxi.

NA BOLOM

This gorgeous 19th-century colonial **museum** (☎ 678 1418; www.nabolom.org; Guerrero 33; admission US\$3.25, with 2hr tour in English & Spanish at 11:30am & 4:30pm US\$4.30; ☎ 10am-5pm) is the former hacienda of Swiss anthropologist-photographer Gertrude (Trudy) DUBY-BLOM, who died in 1993. Trudy and her Danish husband, Frans Blom, devoted much of their lives trying to preserve the cultures of the indigenous people in Chiapas, and their organization is still very active.

Tours are worth the extra US\$1 for the guides' insight of regional groups (particularly the Lacandones). The house is also a hotel and restaurant (reserve ahead for the US\$12 dinners).

TEMPLO DE SANTO DOMINGO & AROUND San Cristóbal's prettiest church, **Templo de Santo Domingo** (20 de Noviembre), is open for a peek, but its finest asset is its ornate western facade. Surrounding it is the town's best souvenir **market** where many Maya vendors sell textiles, leather goods, and Zapatista dolls and T-shirts. Just north, the **Sna Jolobil showroom** (☎ 9am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat) is a cooperative of 800 weavers from around the region; detailed textiles are organized by pueblo, providing a good way to gauge the diversity in styles.

Don't miss having a looksee through the bustling **Mercado Municipal**, sprawling in the side streets to the northeast. You may only make it to San Juan Chamula, but villagers from all the Maya towns come in to hawk produce, wool and hairy piglets here.

OTHER SIGHTS

There are two hills with churches to check out. **Cerro de Guadalupe**, at the eastern end of Real de Guadalupe, offers the better views (and the squeakier floored church, Iglesia de Guadalupe). Southwest of the *zócalo*, and covered by forest, is the **Cerro de San Cristóbal**, with the Iglesia de San Cristóbal at the top.

Pleasant **Templo del Carmen** (Hidalgo; ☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Sat) is south of the *zócalo*.

The decrepit steps off Dr Navarro are begging for a name: perhaps the **Coletto Steps**? Take them up to Comitán to see nearby **Iglesia de Cerrolito** and walk downhill to Na Bolom.

Tours

It's possible to take tours to local sights and villages, including San Juan Chamula, or to go on cycling tours around the countryside. See p68 for more details.

Courses

San Cristóbal has a handful of good Spanish-language schools. The best:

Instituto Jovel (☎ /fax 678 4069; www.institutojovel.com; Madero 45) Private classes (three hours per day) plus homestay is US\$235 per week, plus registration fee.

Sol Maya (☎ 674 6720; www.solmaya.org; Hermanos Domínguez 25A) Two ex-Jovel teachers set up this school off the steps up Cerro de San Cristóbal – probably the city's

best views. Courses are US\$120 per week. It offers coffee-farm tours on request.

Volunteering

Habitat Para La Humanidad (Habitat for Humanity; ☎ 678 9003; Real de Mexicanos 26A; ☎ 9am-noon & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) takes volunteers to help build houses in a few area communities.

Xojobal Melel (☎ 678 1958; www.melelxojobal.org.mx) needs volunteers to help mostly Maya children with various educational activities.

Festivals

Feria de la Primavera y de la Paz (Spring and Peace Fair) is a week-long splash (with bullfights) after Easter Sunday; in late October is **Festival Cervantino Barroco**, with many cultural events. Also, follow the frequently heard fireworks that signal one of the 20-some neighborhoods' saint-based festivals.

Sleeping

Some hotels boost prices July to August, and around Christmas and Semana Santa, but generally not these lower-priced ones.

HOSTELS

Posada Doña Rosita (☎ 678 0923; Ejército Nacional 13; dm incl breakfast US\$4, d with/without bathroom US\$14/10) This posada has quite basic rooms in the homey setting of a friendly señora who practices natural medicine. There are a couple of other posadas on the block with more comfort.

Backpackers Hostel (☎ 674 0525; www.backpackershostel.com.mx; Real de Mexicanos 16; dm US\$5-6, s/d incl breakfast US\$15/20; ☎) It's an excellent hacienda-style hostel with four- and 10-bunk dorms and five private rooms (each with bathroom) wrapped around a grassy courtyard. One dorm is for women only. There's free internet, plus table football and a nightly bonfire.

La Casa de José (☎ 674 7667; lacasadejose2004@yahoo.com.mx; Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez 32A; dm/s/d incl breakfast US\$5/12/17; ☎) A bit closer to bus station, José keeps a well-kept hostel.

Hostal Los Camellos (☎ 967 116 0097; www.loscamellos.over-blog.com; Real de Guadalupe 110; dm US\$6, s/d US\$10/16, with bathroom US\$13/20) The Kathmandulet-it-be groove is on high at this friendly hostel with open patios and colorful rooms. Some dorms have private bathroom.

Posada Mexico (☎ 678 0014; posadamexico@hotmail.com; Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez 12; dm US\$8, r with/without bathroom US\$26/22) The most-popular hostel in San Cristóbal gets a 'wow' at first look, with an

immaculate TV room (with bean-bag chairs, bar and pool table) and mountain views from the garden. The dorms are a bit tight (one is women-only), and the 11 (slightly overpriced) rooms fill quickly.

GUESTHOUSES

Posada Casa Real (☎ 678 1303; Real de Guadalupe 51; r per person US\$7) A colorful but aged posada where all rooms have shared bathroom.

Posada San Agustín (☎ 678 1816; Ejército Nacional 7; s/d US\$15/20) An inviting, family-run guesthouse, it has 15 nicely decorated rooms, plenty of hot water and a view up top.

Posada Los Morales (☎ 678 1472; Allende 17; d/tr US\$17/22) Made-over recently, this 23-room guesthouse scales the side of the Cerro de San Cristóbal, with nice views and – *sacre bleu!* – fireplaces, perfect for those chilly nights.

Hotel Posada Jovel (☎ 678 1734; www.mundochiapas.com/hotelposadajovel; Paniagua 27; d from US\$30; ☎) This neat minisplurge is a two-part hotel-posada on either side of the street; higher-priced rooms surround a garden.

Posada Margarita (☎ 678 0957; Real de Guadalupe 34; s/d US\$35/45) The Margarita, a recently renovated, longtime go-to, is pricey but nice with TVs and wood-beam ceilings.

Eating

EAST OF THE ZÓCALO

Real de Guadalupe is lined with options; Madero has some cheapie family spots.

La Pera (MA Flores 23; mains \$2.50-8; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Sat) This artsy place, with jovial students huddled around candle-lit tables on wooden floors, serves a mix of well-prepared Mexican and Italian food, plus sandwiches and salads.

TierrAdentro (Real de Guadalupe 24; set breakfasts US\$2.80-3.80; ☎ 8am-11pm; ☎) It has a sun-roofed-covered patio and comes with wi-fi access, good coffee and food all day.

El Gato Gordo (Real de Guadalupe 20; dishes US\$3-4.50; ☎ 1-11pm Wed-Mon) Decorated like a bong shop, the popular Fat Cat is best known for its US\$2.80 vegetarian deal.

La Casa del Pan (Dr Navarro 10; mains US\$3-6; ☎ closed Mon) This parent of the Real de Guadalupe outlet (following) is more inviting. The pizza, *fajitas*, *chile rellenos* and a US\$7 set meal are all veggie, all organic. It makes packed lunches too.

La Casa del Pan Papalotl (Real de Guadalupe 55; buffet US\$6; ☎ 9am-10pm) Come for the knockout vegetarian buffet (from 2pm to 5pm) – with desserts and fresh organic dishes.

Super Mas (Real de Guadalupe 22) A big grocery store.

SOUTH OF THE ZÓCALO

Food stalls (Insurgentes; dishes US\$1.50-2.50) These open-air stalls, next to the Templo de San Francisco, serve *comidas economicas* (cheap set meals).

Madre Tierra (Insurgentes 19; set breakfasts US\$2.20-5.80, mains \$2.50-5) San Cristóbal's best breakfast place – and excellent for its pizza, spinach cannelloni and sandwiches too – the cozy Madre Tierra has inside tables and six tables in a courtyard. There's also a good bakery with fresh bread, brownies and pizza slices.

Drinking

Chiapas is coffee country – the Altura variety is the best; here are a couple of cafés that brew beans bought direct from the coffee farmers. **Café Museo Café** (MA Flores 10; ☎ 9am-9:30pm) Café and small museum fun by cooperative of 15,000 farmers. **La Selva** (Rosas 9; ☎ 9am-11:30pm; ☎) Roomy, with wi-fi access.

Booze flows all over town – though most options are on and around Real de Guadalupe. Here are a few diverse standouts.

Bar Revolución (20 de Noviembre & 1 de Marzo; ☎ noon-11:30pm Mon-Sat) A great corner bar with a jazz, rock or reggae band playing and Emiliano Zapata murals. The music starts at 9pm, and local hipsterfolk and travelers often fill the place.

Latino's (Madero 23; ☎ 8pm-3am Mon-Sat) This loud and bright dance spot draws Coletto *salseros*. Has a US\$1.50 cover Thursday to Saturday.

Los Amigos (Honduras 4; ☎ 9am-8pm) It's a fun but unrowdy cantina that's popular with snacking families.

Entertainment

San Cristóbal is a movie town, with several places playing heaps of interesting arthouse films (including many Zapatista documentaries with English subtitles). Admission is US\$2 per film.

Cineclub La Ventana (☎ 678 4297; Insurgentes 19)

El Puente (☎ 678 3723; Real de Guadalupe 55)

Kinoki (☎ 678 0495; 1 de Marzo 22) Best for indie films, with a laid-back lounge.

Shopping

Nemizapata (Real de Guadalupe 45; ☎ 9:30am-8:30pm Mon-Sat) is a colorful Zapatista-run store with Zapatista art, T-shirts and organic coffee.

Getting There & Away

Tuxtla Gutiérrez airport is 85km north. **Mexicana** (☎ 678 9309; Belisario Domínguez 2B) sells tickets for Mexico City and Cancún (US\$280, via Mexico City).

Long-distance buses leave from several terminals on the Pan-Americana, near the corner of Insurgentes, where you'll find the **OCC Bus Terminal** (☎ 678 0291) for 1st-class buses (OCC is the cheapest). You can also buy tickets for these at **Ticket Bus** (☎ 678 8503; Real de Guadalupe 5; ☎ 7am-11pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) in the center.

Across the highway, **AEXA** (☎ 678 6178) has cheaper, perfectly good 2nd-class services to Palenque. Further west, Transportes Lacandonia (TL) has dodgier 2nd-class services.

Daily departures include:
Cancún US\$61-72 (OCC); US\$30 (TL); 18hr; 4 daily
Ciudad Cuauhtémoc US\$10 (OCC); 3½hr; 4 daily
Comitán US\$3 (OCC); 2hr; frequent buses
Mérida US\$45 (OCC); 14hr; 1 night bus daily
Mexico City US\$77-91 (OCC); US\$30 (TL); 19hr; 10 daily
Palenque US\$8.20-13 (OCC); US\$7.50 (AEXA); 4½-5hr; frequent buses

Shared vans leave from various spots nearby to Tuxtla Gutiérrez (stopping at Chiapa de Corzo if you request) and to Comitán (US\$2.50 to US\$3.50, from 4am to 9pm or so).

For details on getting to Maya hill towns (such as San Juan Chamula), see opposite.

AROUND SAN CRISTÓBAL

Many travelers visit the following sights on a guided tour from San Cristóbal.

Maya Villages

It is hard to find more memorable experiences in this world than taking in (respectfully!) a glimpse of Tzotzil or Tzeltal life in the Maya villages in the hills outside San Cristóbal. The traditions of the past mingle exotically with the modern world – farmers in sheep-fur vests and women in multicolored tunics and thick black-wool skirts bringing Pepsi and chickens into Catholic churches that have pine-needle floors – but it has fostered a 'zoolike' mentality for some visitors.

Do *not* take photos inside any church or of any person without permission; it's believed to steal spirits. Be careful not to step on candles on the floor. And try not to stand and stare at those in worship. But feel free to say 'hello' outside churches – like anywhere, locals are happy to talk about their lives to those earnestly interested. In 2005 a tourist who photographed someone without permission, got punched out in Chamula.

TOURS

It's absolutely worth going with a knowledgeable guide who can describe the fascinating background. Respectful agencies around town book tours to visit the Tzotzil pueblo of San Juan Chamula, 10km north, and nearby San

LOCAL VOICES: CHAMULA CHAT

San Juan Chamula is the area's most visited Maya village, as many as 300 people come daily. We talked with 45-year-old Pedro, who checks tickets at the church.

- **Does that sheep-fur tunic [an itchy black-haired chuj] you're wearing have any special significance?** Oh, no. It was just cold this morning so I put this on. People know where I'm from when I wear it – it's the common clothing of Chamula. So I like it.
- **Why do you think there's so much interest in your village?** Tourists come to visit to see ceremonies they don't have – like drinking fizzy drinks and killing chickens in the church.
- **Is tourism good or bad for the village?** The village gets some money for the church from the tickets, so it's good.
- **Some visitors anger locals though, don't they?** Some, yes. The most important thing is not taking photographs in the church – we tell them, but still they do. Ah, many times! This steals the spirits of the saints. It's part of our beliefs.
- **Have you traveled?** No, only to Cancún to work. It's beautiful, but the police wouldn't let me sell my *artesanías*.
- **Any future travel plans?** I want to go to the USA, just to see it. Do you have space to take me?

As told to Robert Reid

GETTING TO THE GUATEMALA HIGHLANDS

There's two ways to reach Guatemala via the convenient **Ciudad Cuauhtémoc–La Mesilla** border: DIY bus rides or by a shuttle service offered daily. Several travel agencies in San Cristóbal offer the 'shuttle' service at 7:30am daily to either near Quetzaltenango (US\$28, eight hours), Panajachel (US\$28, eight hours) or Antigua (US\$38, 11 hours). This saves a taxi/colectivo ride across the border and offers hotel pick-up. It goes on demand and is not direct; you'll catch a shuttle to the border, then another will be waiting for you on the other side of the border.

Going on your own, though, saves 50%. Catch a bus to Ciudad Cuauhtémoc and pass through Mexican immigration. Colectivos (about US\$0.80) make the 4km trip to Guatemalan immigration; be sure to get your passport stamped at both. In La Mesilla, many 'chicken buses' leave throughout the day. Some travelers swear by the 'shuttle,' though.

For the reverse trip, see p152. There's also an alternate crossing via Tapachula, Mexico.

Lorenzo Zinacantán, plus some other towns, for US\$13 to US\$16. A terrific option are the 4½-hour trips (in English) with **Alex & Raul** (☎ 967 678 3741; US\$13), who lead small groups that leave at 9:30am daily from the black cross on the west side of the San Cristóbal cathedral by the *zócalo*; just show up. They can arrange tours to Tenejapa on Thursday and Sunday (\$15 per person, minimum four). **Los Pingüinos** (☎ 967 678 0202; Ecuador 88; ☎ 10am-2:30pm, 3:30-7pm Mon-Sat) rents bicycles and leads good tours, including one to Chemula, from about US\$25.

TOWNS

San Juan Chamula, by far the area's most popular destination, is a conservative and fiercely independent Tzotzil community where polygamy is active. Chamula has a big Sunday market and a colorful church (admission US\$1.50 paid in the town hall nearby) with a pine needle-covered floor, hundreds of lit candles, and worshippers drinking soda to usurp evil spirits. Feel free to try out some Tzotzil: *k'usi aw otan* (hello) or *licalto* (so long). **San Lorenzo Zinacantán** is another Tzotzil village and is known for flowers, floral textiles, and a festival around August 10.

Other towns in the area see fewer visitors. **Tenejapa**, 25km northeast, has a small museum and many woven items for sale (Thursday is market day). **Amatenango del Valle**, 37km southeast (take a Comitán-bound van from the Pan-Americana) is famed for its *animalito* pottery.

Colectivos go direct to these towns (from 6am to 6pm) from San Cristóbal (see Map p64 for departure points).

Other Sights

Organized day trips take in many of these sites, but going on your own allows you to add on a couple of worthy and less-visited sites.

CANYONS & JAGUARS

A super day trip – and a break from the mountain chill – is a 'two-fer' to the grubby colonial town of Chiapa de Corzo (60km northwest), where 1½-hour **boat trips** (US\$10; ☎ 9am-4:30pm) drift through stunning, kilometer-high **Cañón del Sumidero**, with lots of monkeys and crocodiles to spot. From San Cristóbal, get on a Tuxtla-bound colectivo to the Chiapa de Corzo turnoff (US\$3.50, 45 minutes), then hop on a centro-bound combi (US\$0.40); boats are two blocks south of the plaza.

Afterwards take a combi to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas' modern capital, which is home to the remarkable **Zoomat** (☎ 961-614 4765; admission US\$2; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Tue-Sun), a zoo with a jungle setting so real it can unnerve visitors and certain guidebook researchers. From Tuxtla's center (a couple of blocks northwest of the combi depot), take a marked colectivo. Get to Tuxtla (US\$0.90, 25 minutes) from Chiapa de Corzo in a 'Chiapa-Tuxtla' combi; the vans back to San Cristóbal can be found at 2a Av Sur Oriente at 4a Calle Oriente Sur (a couple of blocks east of the combi depot).

San Cristóbal's travel agencies offer half-day tours of the canyon (only) for US\$15.

COMITÁN & AROUND

Few visitors stop in Comitán (90km southeast of San Cristóbal) so they miss its darling little colonial center, where there are a couple of museums, a sculpture-filled plaza, promenade eating spots, and a helpful **tourist information center** (☎ 963 632 4047; ☎ 8:30-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat), on the plaza. The center is 10 blocks north of the bus station (US\$1.80 by taxi).

A nice sleeping spot is **Posada La Flores** (☎ 963 632 3334; 1a Av Pte Nte 17; s/d from US\$8/13), northwest of the plaza.

There's plenty to do around Comitán. About 40km southwest, mighty **El Chiflón** is a 70m waterfall that splashes visitors after a 1.3km walk up. Vans go to the falls (US\$2, 45 minutes) half-hourly from a block east of Comitán's OCC bus station on Blvd Domínguez Sur.

About 45km southeast of Comitán is the turnoff for the oft-overlooked **Chinkultic ruins** (admission US\$3; ☞ 10am-4pm), which requires a 2km walk. There's a steep walk up to the 'acropolis' overlooking a cenote. Often no-one is there.

The remarkably colored network of **Lagunas de Montebello** (8km from the Chinkultic turnoff) draw many visitors to 'ooh' at. The national park has two parts; the most popular is at Bosque Azul, where you can ride horses (about US\$5), hike on a 2.5km loop, see lakes colored emerald and green, and hike to Grutas San Rafael del Arco (worth it – the river breaks through a wall of rock).

Combis go to Lagunas de Montebello (US\$2.50, one hour) from 2a Av Pte Sur 23 (a few blocks south of Comitán's plaza).

San Cristóbal's agencies offer day trips of El Chiflón and Lagos de Montebello (missing Chinkultic or Comitán) for about US\$23.

MEXICO DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

If you're dorming it, a bunk is US\$10 to US\$12; if you go 'private,' Yucatán rates (around US\$30 or US\$40 for a double) are higher than in Chiapas (about US\$15 or US\$20). You'll need a towel and soap for many cheap stays; most hostels provide sheets, but many lack mosquito nets (but not mosquitoes). Some places on the beach and in Palenque charge US\$5 to US\$7 for a space for a tent or hammock.

Prices in this chapter are for high season, generally mid-December through February,

BOOK ACCOMMODATIONS ONLINE

For more accommodations reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

plus Semana Santa and, sometimes, summer (July and August).

ACTIVITIES

Diving the Yucatán is a big highlight, with super reefs off Cozumel (p51), but also near Isla Mujeres (p42) and Punta Allen (p56). Also fun is snorkeling or diving in cenotes between Playa del Carmen and Tulum. You can rappel into one at Ek-Balam (p44). There are kayak trips at the Reserva de la Biósfera Sian Ka'an (p56). In the highlands, you can arrange good bike trips from San Cristóbal de Las Casas (p62).

BOOKS

If you're venturing north to Oaxaca, Mexico City or further inland on the Yucatán Peninsula, pick up Lonely Planet's *Mexico* or *Yucatán*, or *Mexico City*.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most stores geared to locals (not tourists) are open from 9am to 7pm, with an hour or two off for lunch, Monday to Saturday. Tourist-related businesses usually don't take a break for siesta (this includes tourist offices).

CLIMATE

It's always hot in the Yucatán and around Palenque. Wet season, from May to October, makes the air sticky and hot. Hurricane season runs chiefly July to September. In the Chiapas highlands, temperatures cool considerably, hovering between 10°C and low 20°C all year.

CUSTOMS

The normal routine when you enter Mexico by air is to complete a customs declaration form (which lists duty-free allowances), then place it in a machine. If the machine shows a green light, you pass without inspection. If a red light shows, your baggage will be searched.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Incidents of theft and sexual assault on Yucatán beaches aren't unknown. The beach towns of Cancún, Cozumel and Playa del Carmen have tourist police strolling on beaches to help deter would-be crimes. The political situation in Chiapas, meanwhile, has simmered in recent years, but remains uncertain. There are a few military checkpoints, particularly near the Guatemala border. Military bases are located near (the presently quiet) Zapatista-run autonomous zones in the hills north of San Cristóbal.

Always count your change carefully, as short-changing (and overcharging) occurs, particularly in the Yucatán.

DISCOUNT CARDS

The ISIC student card, the IYTC card for travelers under 26, and ITIC card for teachers can help you obtain reduced-price air tickets to or from Mexico at student- and youth-oriented travel agencies. Hostels affiliated with the Hostelling International (HI) saves about US\$1 per night.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Mexico

Many countries have a consulate in Cancún; exceptions include Australia, New Zealand and Central American countries other than Belize.

Australia (☎ 551-101 2265; www.mexico.embassy.gov.au; Rubén Darío 55, Polanco, Mexico City)

Belize (☎ 887 8417; Av Nader 34, 1st fl, Cancún) Enter via Lima.

Canada (☎ 998-883 3360; Plaza Caracol II No 330, Blvd Kukulcán Km 8.5, Zona Hotelera, Cancún)

France Cancún (☎ 998-267 9722; Calle Pirgo 24); Mérida (☎ 999-944 4215; Calle 33D No 528)

Germany (☎ 998-884 5333; Punta Conoco No 36, Cancún)

Guatemala Cancún (☎ 998-883 8296; Av Nader 148)

Italy (☎ 998-884 1261; Alcatrazes No 39, Cancún)

Netherlands (☎ 998-886 0134; Mexicana Terminal 2, Cancún Airport, Cancún)

New Zealand (☎ 555-283 9460; kiwimexico@compute.com.mx; Balmes 8, Los Morales, Mexico City)

Spain (☎ 998-848 9900; Edificio Oásis, Blvd Kukulcán Km 16.5, Zona Hotelera, Cancún)

UK (☎ 998-881 0100; The Royal Sands, Blvd Kukulcán Km 13.5, Zona Hotelera, Cancún)

USA Cancún (☎ 998-883 0272; Plaza Caracol II, 2nd fl, No 320-323, Blvd Kukulcán Km 8.5, Zona Hotelera); Cozumel (☎ 987-872 4574; Villa Mar Mall, Main Plaza btwn Avs 5 & Melgar); Mérida (☎ 999-925 5011; Paseo de Montejo 453)

Mexican Embassies & Consulates Abroad

The following is a list of Mexican embassies and consulates outside Central America.

Australia (☎ 02-6273 3963; www.mexico.org.au; 14 Perth Ave, Yarralumla, Canberra, ACT 2600)

Canada (☎ 613-233-8988; www.embamexcan.com; 45 O'Connor St, Suite 1500, Ottawa, ON K1P 1A4)

France (☎ 01 53 70 27 70; www.sre.gob.mx/francia; 9 rue de Longchamp, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-269 3230; www.embamex.de; Klingelhofstraße 3, 10785 Berlin)

UK (☎ 020-7235 6393; www.sre.gob.mx/reinounido; 8 Halkin St, London SW1X 7DW)

USA embassy (☎ 202-728-1600; www.embassyofmexico.org; 1911 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Washington, DC 20006); consulate New York (☎ 212-217-6400; 27 E 39 St); consulate San Francisco (☎ 415-354-1700; 532 Folsom St)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

During most festivals, banks and government offices close their doors to join the party. Big events include **Día de los Reyes Magos** (Three Kings' Day; January 6), **Carnaval** (late February or early March); **Semana Santa** (Easter Week), **Día de los Muertos** (Day of the Dead; November 2) and **Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe** (Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe; December 12).

FOOD

Look out for 'comidas corridas' or 'comidas economicas.' These basic set meals, served for lunch (and into the afternoon), are widespread and cheap (US\$3 to US\$4.50). They usually come as soup, a meat dish with rice, a drink and dessert. Restaurants tend to keep long hours – often 7am to 10pm or midnight daily.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Cancún and Playa del Carmen are the biggest destinations. In May, the five-day Cancún International Gay Festival is parade-free but includes many events.

Here are a few websites with gay-friendly listings and other useful tips:

www.aquestamos.com Contains Cancún listings.

www.gay.com In-depth 'guides' to Cancún, Playa del Carmen and Mérida.

www.gaymexico.net Cancún link includes info on a gay parade.

HOLIDAYS

The chief holiday periods are Christmas to New Year, Semana Santa (the week leading up to Easter and up to a week afterwards) and mid-July to mid-August. Others include Día de la Constitución (Constitution Day; February 5), Día del Trabajo (Labor Day; May 1), Cinco de Mayo (May 5), Día de la Independencia (Independence Day; September 16) and Día de la Raza (Columbus Day; October 12).

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are easy to find anywhere in places listed in this chapter other than Punta Allen and the far-flung ruins. It costs about US\$1.50 to US\$2 per hour to get behind a machine.

LEGAL MATTERS

Mexican law presumes an accused person is guilty until proven innocent. If you're arrested, you have the right to notify your embassy or consulate. Also, the national tourism ministry **Sectur** (☎ 078, 800 987 8224) offers 24-hour phone advice.

Police or military checkpoints are normally looking for drugs, weapons or illegal migrants.

MAPS

Guía Roji publishes a useful map called *Mundo Maya* (US\$6) that covers the Yucatán and Chiapas. Look for it in gas stations and convenience stores.

MONEY

The Mexican peso (M\$) is divided into 100 centavos. Nearly all prices in this chapter are in US dollars (US\$). At research time M\$10.80 was equal to the US dollar.

The best way to get pesos in Mexico is from widely available ATMs (*cajeros automáticos*), which use the Cirrus and Plus systems. You can cash money or traveler's checks at banks or at many *casas de cambio* (exchange houses). It's generally possible to change Canadian dollars, euros and British pounds.

Not many cheap accommodations or restaurants accept credit cards, but most travel agencies selling air tickets do.

Costs are higher in Yucatán than in Chiapas. At most restaurants, a 10% tip is expected; some resort towns expect US levels of 15%.

Exchange Rates

The table shows currency exchange rates at the time this book went to press.

Country	Unit	Pesos (M\$)
Australia	A\$1	9.20
Canada	C\$1	10.10
euro zone	€1	14.60
Japan	¥100	8.80
New Zealand	NZ\$1	8.30
UK	£1	21.70
USA	US\$1	10.80

POST

Post offices are typically open Monday to Friday, and Saturday morning. Post offices will hold letters for you as *lista de correos* (up to 10 days) or *poste restante* (longer).

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Tourists wreak havoc on coral reefs off the Yucatán shore. Some highly promoted Disneyfied beach parks, such as Xcaret (not included here), receive criticism for their dolphin shows and damage to the ecosystems.

Maya communities remain richly traditional. Be careful when visiting such communities; *never* photograph unless you have permission as it's deeply offensive, nor should you photograph objects such as saints in churches, which are regarded as sacred by the Maya.

Try to buy products – hammocks, handicrafts, coffee – directly from the source, or from shops that represent them. We've tried to flag some.

STUDYING

Spanish-language schools are more expensive in Mexico than in the rest of Central America. San Cristóbal de Las Casas (p66) has the most-developed language-school scene, but there are also schools available in Cancún (p38), Valladolid (p44) and also in Playa del Carmen (p49).

TELEPHONE

Local phone calls are cheap, but domestic long-distance and international calls can be expensive unless you call from a *caseta telefónica* (or *locutorio*), which offer international calls from US\$0.30 or US\$0.40 per minute.

Area codes are three digits, local numbers are seven digits. To make calls to/from Mexico:

Calling Mexico from abroad Dial your international access code, then ☎ 52 (Mexico's country code), followed by the area code and seven-digit number.

Calling abroad from Mexico Dial ☎ 00, followed by country code, area code and number.

Calling long-distance in Mexico Dial ☎ 01, followed by the three-digit area code and local number.

Collect calls are very costly. To make one, dial ☎ 090 for an international operator.

WARNING

We always hear from travelers paying dozens of dollars for short calls using a credit card. Simply don't use credit-card phones; many are scams, charging as much as US\$30 for the first minute.

Cell Phones

The most widespread cellular phone system in Mexico is **Telcel** (www.telcel.com). Amigo cards, for recharging Telcel phones, are widely available.

Phonecards

To use a Telmex card phone, get the card called *tarjeta Ladatel* from convenience stores, sold in various denominations. It's US\$0.10 per minute for local calls, US\$0.40 for national calls and US\$0.50 for the USA. Other international calls are much more expensive.

Some phone (or calling) cards from other countries can be used for making phone calls from Mexico by dialing special access numbers:

AT&T (☎ 01 800 288-2872, 01 800 462-4240)

Bell Canada (☎ 01 800 123-0200, 01 800 021-1994)

BT Chargecard (☎ 01 800 123-0244)

MCI (☎ 01 800 674-7000)

Sprint (☎ 01 800 877-8000)

TOILETS

These vary, but are generally never horrendous. And you pay for what you get (usually US\$0.20 or US\$0.30 a tinkle). Bus stations often keep quite clean ones.

TOURIST INFORMATION

'Tourist information' in many places means handing out brochures (and maybe plugging tours). Municipal- and state-run tourist offices are set up in most towns; some have English-speaking staff, which vary in usefulness.

State-run websites include

Chiapas (www.turismochiapas.gob.mx)

Quintana Roo (sedetur.qroo.gob.mx in Spanish)

Yucatán (www.mayayucatan.com)

VISAS & DOCUMENTS

Citizens of many countries (including the USA, Canada, EU countries, Australia, New Zealand and Japan) are among those who do not presently require visas to enter Mexico as tourists. The list does change; check with a Mexican embassy or consulate.

When entering Mexico, all tourists must obtain a tourist card (Forma Migratoria

PAID YOUR 'NONIMMIGRANT FEE' YET?

All visitors to Mexico must pay a 'nonimmigrant fee' (*derecho para no inmigrante*; DNI) of around US\$20. It's automatically included with outbound air tickets, but if you go by land, you must pay the fee at a bank (see the list on the card). The bank will stamp your card 'paid,' and you'll need to give it to immigration upon exiting Mexico. Most borders have banks handy, but paying beforehand saves time – and possibly a trip back to a town bank.

When leaving Mexico, if you're planning to return soon, tell immigration, who sometimes allow visitors to keep tourist cards for US\$10.

para Turista; FMT) from Mexican immigration. Officers will write in the length of your stay; although the maximum is 180 days for most nationalities (Australians' max is 90), let the officer know how long you want to stay, as he/she sometimes puts in fewer than the maximum. If that happens, it can be extended – to the maximum – at an immigration office for free, or extended beyond the maximum for about US\$20. If you lose the card you'll (supposedly) have to pay a fine of about US\$45.

Travelers under 18 are sometimes required to show notarized consent forms from their parents! Officials are less likely to ask than airline staff when boarding. If you're under 18, check with a Mexican consulate before you go.

VOLUNTEERING

Habitat for Humanity or Na Bolom in San Cristóbal de Las Casas (p66) run projects in Chiapas.

Centro Ecológico Akumal (www.ceakumal.org) accepts volunteers in its efforts to preserve the environment in the heart of resort country in the Yucatán.

Also see p733 for organizations that arrange projects from outside the region.

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