

Directory

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ACCOMMODATIONS

Hurricane Wilma had a devastating effect on Cancún's beachside hotel zone, although the city center was largely unscathed. Other hard-hit Caribbean coastal destinations included Isla Holbox, Puerto Morelos and, to a lesser extent, Playa del Carmen. As of mid-2006, some hotels had reopened while others were still rebuilding.

Accommodations in Yucatán range from hammocks and cabanas to hotels of every imaginable standard to world-class luxury resorts. This book divides accommodations into three price ranges: budget (where a typical room for two people costs under

US\$40), midrange (US\$40 to \$90) and top end (above US\$90).

Budget accommodations include camping grounds, hammocks, palm-thatched cabanas, backpacker hostels, guesthouses and economical hotels. Recommended accommodations will be without frills but generally clean. Hotel rooms, even in the budget range, usually have a private bathroom containing hot shower, WC and washbasin. (In this book rooms are assumed to have private bathroom unless otherwise stated.)

Midrange accommodations are chiefly hotels. In some areas of Mexico US\$35 can get you a cozy, attractively decorated room in a friendly small hotel. Many of the country's most appealing and memorable lodgings are in the midrange bracket – small or medium-sized hotels, well cared for, with a friendly atmosphere and personal attention from staff. In some areas you'll also find apartments, bungalows and more comfortable cabanas in this price range.

Top-end hotels run from classy international hotels in cities to deluxe coastal resorts and luxurious smaller establishments catering to travelers with a taste for comfort and beautiful design, and the funds to pay for them.

Room prices given in this book are high-season prices unless otherwise stated. In the Yucatán, high season runs from Christmas right through to Easter, plus most of July and August. Outside the peak seasons, many midrange and top-end establishments in tourist destinations cut their room prices by 10% to 40%. They may also have special offers and low weekend rates. Budget accommodations are more likely to keep the same rates all year.

In this book we use 'single' (abbreviated 's') to mean a room for one person, and 'double' ('d') to mean a room for two people. Mexicans sometimes use the phrase *cuarto sencillo* (literally, single room) to mean a room with one bed, which is often a *cama matrimonial* (double bed). Sometimes one person can occupy such a room for a lower price than two people. A *cuarto doble* often

PRACTICALITIES

- Mexico's only English-language daily is the *Herald*, an international edition of the *Miami Herald*, with a Mexico insert. It's available in some upmarket hotels in Mérida and Cancún and at some Sanborns stores.
- Mérida's *El Diario de Yucatán* (www.yucatan.com.mx in Spanish) is one of the country's most respected newspapers.
- Local TV is dominated by Televisa, which runs four of the six national channels; TV Azteca has the other two. A growing number of viewers have multichannel cable or satellite systems such as Cablevision or Sky TV.
- Electrical current is 110V, 60Hz, and most plugs have two flat prongs, just like in the USA and Canada.
- Mexicans use the metric system for weights and measures.
- DVDs are encoded for Zone 4, the same as for Australia and New Zealand, though most use the NTSC image registration system, which makes them incompatible with the PAL system used in most of Western Europe and Australia. Many DVDs sold in Mexico are illegal copies.

means a room with two beds, which may both be *camas matrimoniales*.

In popular destinations, at busy times it's best to reserve a room in advance, or seek a room early in the day. Many places take reservations through their websites or by email. If a place is not booked out, a simple phone call earlier in the day, saying what time you'll arrive, is usually sufficient. A few places are reluctant to take reservations, but don't worry: you should end up with a room somewhere.

Accommodations prices are subject to two taxes: IVA (*impuesto de valor agregado*, or value-added tax; 15%) and ISH (*Impuesto sobre hospedaje*, or lodging tax; 2% in most states). Many budget and some midrange establishments only charge these taxes if you require a receipt. Generally, though, IVA and ISH are included in quoted prices. In top-end hotels a price may often be given as, say, 'US\$100 *más impuestos*' (US\$100 plus taxes), in which case you must add 17% to the figure. When in doubt, you can ask '*¿Están incluidos los impuestos?*' (Are taxes included?). Prices given in this book are those you are most likely to be charged at each place, around high season unless stated otherwise, with or without the taxes according to the establishment's policy.

Apartments & B&Bs

In some places you can find *departamentos* (apartments) for tourists with fully equipped kitchens. Some are very comfort-

able and they can be good value for three or four people. Tourist offices and advertisements in local newspapers (especially English-language papers) are good sources of information.

In Yucatán B&Bs are generally upmarket guesthouses, often aimed at foreign tourists; they are usually comfortable and enjoyable places to stay.

Camping & Trailer Parks

Most organized campgrounds are actually trailer parks set up for people with camper vans and trailers (caravans) but are open to tent campers at lower rates. They're most common along the coast. Some are very basic, others quite luxurious. Expect to pay about US\$5 to pitch a tent for two, and US\$10 to US\$20 for two people with a vehicle, using full facilities.

Some restaurants and guesthouses in beach spots or country areas will let you pitch a tent on their patch for a couple of dollars per person.

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.

Casas de Huéspedes & Posadas

Inexpensive and congenial accommodations are often to be found at a *casa de huéspedes*, a home converted into simple guest lodgings. Good *casas de huéspedes* are usually family-run, with a relaxed, friendly atmosphere.

Many *posadas* (inns) are like *casas de huéspedes*; others are small hotels.

Hammocks & Cabanas

You'll find hammocks and cabanas available mainly in low-key beach spots such as Tulum. A hammock can be a very comfortable place to sleep in hot areas (but mosquito repellent often comes in handy). You can rent a hammock and a place to hang it – usually under a palm roof outside a small guesthouse or beach restaurant – for US\$6 to US\$12. With your own hammock, the cost comes down a bit. It's easy enough to buy hammocks in the Yucatán (see p168); Mérida specializes in them, and you'll find hammocks for sale all along the Maya Riviera.

Cabanas are usually huts – of wood, brick, adobe and stone – with a palm-thatched roof. Some have dirt floors and nothing inside but a bed; others are deluxe, with electric light, mosquito nets, fans, fridge, bar and décor. Prices for simple cabanas range from US\$10 to US\$35. On the Caribbean some luxury cabanas can cost over US\$100.

Hostels

Hostels exist in many of the towns and cities where backpackers congregate. They provide dorm accommodations, (for US\$5 to US\$12 per person), plus communal kitchens, bathrooms, living space and sometimes some private rooms. Standards of hygiene and security vary, but aside from being cheap, hostels are generally relaxed, and good places to meet other travelers. **HostelWorld** (www.hostelworld.com) has listings.

A dozen hostels are members of Mexico's HI affiliate, **Hostelling International Mexico** (www.hostellingmexico.com). If you are a HI member, you get a dollar or two off the nightly rates at these places.

Hotels

Mexico specializes in good midrange hotels where two people can get a comfortable room with private bathroom, TV and

often air-con for US\$40 to US\$90. Often the hotel also has a restaurant and bar. Among the most charming lodgings, in both the midrange and top-end brackets, are the many old mansions, inns and even convents, turned into hotels. These can be wonderfully atmospheric, with fountains gurgling in flower-bedecked stone courtyards. Some are a bit spartan; others have modern comforts and, consequently, are more expensive.

Nearly every town has its cheap hotels, though substantially fewer are found on the Yucatán Peninsula than in other regions of Mexico. There are clean, friendly, secure ones, and there are dark, dirty, smelly ones where you may not feel your belongings are safe. Expect to pay up to US\$35 for a decent double room with private shower and hot water, more in Cancún, Cozumel or Playa del Carmen, and perhaps if you arrive during a popular time.

Yucatán has plenty of large, modern luxury hotels, too, particularly in the coastal resorts and in some former haciendas south of Mérida. They offer the expected levels of luxury – with pools, gyms, bars, restaurants and so on – at prices that are sometimes agreeably modest (and sometimes not!). If you like to stay in luxury but also enjoy saving some money, look for a locally owned hotel.

Fortunately for families and small groups of travelers, many hotels in all price ranges have rooms for three, four or five people that cost not much more than a double.

ACTIVITIES

There's absolutely no shortage of things to do on the Yucatán Peninsula: some of the best scuba diving and snorkeling in the world is available here, beach lovers will find plenty of powdery white sand on which to sunbathe and the ancient Maya cities that dot the landscape of the Yucatán are a thrill to explore.

Good sources on active tourism in Mexico include **Amtave** (Mexican Association of Adventure Travel & Ecotourism; ☎ 55-5688-3883, 800-654-4452; www.amtave.org), based in Mexico City with 60 member organizations and companies around the country, and the websites www.gorp.com, www.planeta.com and www.mexonline.com.

For more details on the major activities, check the cross-references below and also the destination chapters of this book.

- bird- and wildlife-watching (see p56)
- cycling (p56)
- diving and snorkeling (p52)
- fishing (p57)
- hiking (p55)
- kayaking (p54)
- kiteboarding and windsurfing (p55)
- ziplining (p57)

BUSINESS HOURS

The siesta tradition wisely lives on in this hot climate, with shops generally open from 9am to 2pm, then reopening from 4pm to 7pm Monday to Saturday. Some may not be open on Saturday afternoon. Shops in malls and coastal resort towns often open on Sunday. Supermarkets and department stores usually open from 9am or 10am to 10pm daily.

Government offices have similar Monday to Friday hours to shops, with a greater likelihood of having the 2pm to 4pm lunch break. Tourism-related offices usually open on Saturday, too, from at least 9am to 1pm.


Banks are normally open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday, and some from 9am to 1pm Saturday. In smaller towns they may close earlier or not open on Saturday. *Casas de cambio* (money-exchange offices) are usually open from 9am to 7pm daily, often with even longer hours in coastal resorts. Post offices typically open from 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday, and 9am to 1pm Saturday.

In this book we only spell out opening hours where they do not fit the above parameters. See inside the front cover for further typical opening hours.

Most museums have one closing day a week, typically Monday. On Sunday, nearly all archaeological sites and museums are free for Mexican nationals, and the major ones can get very crowded.

CHILDREN

Snorkeling in caves, playing on the beach, hiking in the jungle...kids will find plenty of ways to keep busy in the Yucatán. And as elsewhere in Mexico, children take center stage – with few exceptions, children are welcome at all kinds of hotels and in virtu-

ally every café and restaurant. In this book you'll find especially child-friendly places identified with the  icon.

Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* has lots of practical advice on the subject, drawn from firsthand experience.

For details on documents required for under-18 travelers, see p269.

Practicalities

Cots for hotel rooms and high chairs for restaurants are available mainly in mid-range and top-end establishments. If you want a rental car with a child safety seat, the major international rental firms are the most reliable providers. You will probably have to pay a few dollars extra per day.

It's usually not hard to find an inexpensive baby-sitter – ask at your hotel. Diapers (nappies) are widely available, but if you depend on some particular cream, lotion, baby food or medicine, bring it with you. Public breast-feeding is not common and, when done, is done discreetly.

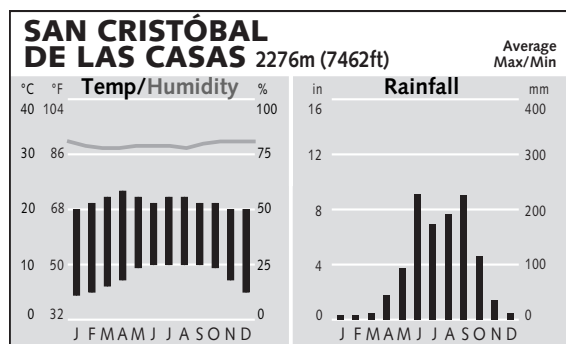
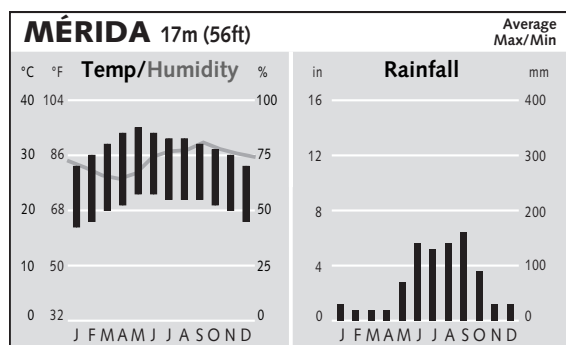
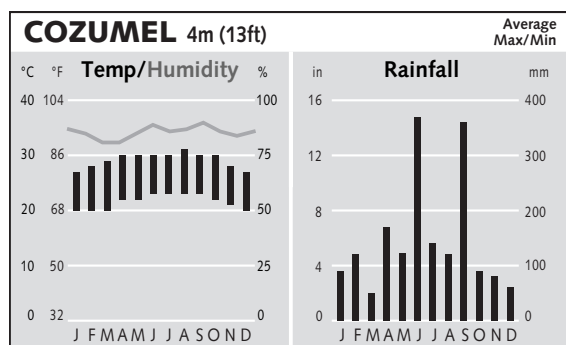
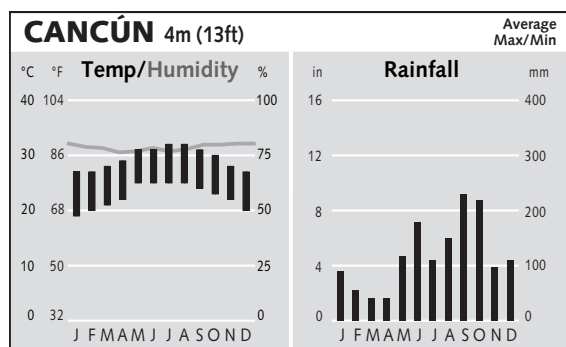
Sights & Activities

Apart from the obvious beaches and swimming pools, you'll find excellent special attractions such as amusement parks, water parks, zoos, aquariums and other fun places on the peninsula.

Kids can also enjoy activities such as snorkeling, riding bicycles and boats, and watching wildlife (see from p52). Many kids will stay happy for under US\$1 an hour at Mexico's myriad Internet cafés, and archaeological sites can be fun if they're into climbing pyramids and exploring tunnels (but some kids aren't).

CLIMATE CHARTS

Hot, sunny and humid days are the norm for much of the year in the Yucatán, although the season of *nortes* (storms bringing wind and rain from the north) lowers temperatures a bit from November through February or March. During the rainy season, which runs from May through October, you can expect heavy rains for an hour or two most afternoons, but generally clear weather otherwise. The hurricane season lasts from June to November, with most of the activity from mid-August to mid-September. For tips on the best seasons to travel, see p17.



COURSES

Taking classes can be a great way to meet people and get an inside angle on local life as well as study the language or culture. Mexican universities and colleges often offer tuition. For long-term study in Mexico you'll need a student visa; contact a Mexican consulate for details. A good US source on study possibilities in Mexico is the **Council on International Educational Exchange** (www.ciee.org). There are also helpful

links on the website of **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com).

Mérida, with its abundance of cultural activities and central location, makes a great place to study Spanish. Among the schools there, **Centro de Idiomas del Sureste** (CIS; ☎ 999-923-0954; www.cisyucatan.com.mx) stands out. It has three locations in Mérida and offers small total-immersion classes (ie taught entirely in Spanish). Thirty hours of instruction including a two-week homestay in a local household and three meals a day costs about US\$730. Other plans are available.

Also in Mérida is the **Institute of Modern Spanish** (IMS; ☎ 999-911-0790, in the USA 877-463-7432; www.modernspanish.com), which also offers a host of instruction and housing options. At the time of writing IMS was offering 20 hours of instruction with homestay and meals for US\$300.

In Cancún **El Bosque del Caribe** (☎ 998-884-1065; www.cancun-language.com.mx) has classes starting weekly and a variety of housing options from homestays and dorms to beach apartments. It also has a special 30-hour program for German speakers and an Executive program (each US\$240).

CUSTOMS

Visitors are allowed to bring into Mexico duty-free items for personal use such as clothing; a camera and video camera; up to 12 rolls of film or videotapes; a cellular phone; a laptop computer; a portable radio or CD player; medicine for personal use, with prescription in the case of psychotropic drugs; 3L of wine, beer or liquor (adults only); 400 cigarettes (adults); and US\$300 worth of other goods (US\$50 if arriving by land).

The normal routine when you enter Mexico is to complete a customs declaration form (which lists duty-free allowances), and 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

Despite often alarming media reports and official warnings for Mexico in general, the Yucatán Peninsula remains a safe place to travel, and with just a few precautions you can minimize the risk of encountering problems.

Enjoy yourself in the ocean, but beware of undertows and riptides on any beach. Lone women, and even pairs of women, should be cautious about going to remote beach spots.

Foreign affairs departments can supply a variety of useful data about travel to Mexico:

Australia (☎ 1300-139-281; www.dfat.gov.au)

Canada (☎ 800-267-6788; www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca)

UK (☎ 0845-850-2829; www.fco.gov.uk)

USA (☎ 888-407-4747; www.travel.state.gov)

Theft & Robbery

As a rule, Mexicans are extremely honest and are unlikely to steal anything from you. However, the rare individual may target tourists likely to be carrying cash or valuables. Thus, pocket-picking and bag-snatching remain minor risks in crowded buses and bus stations, airports, markets or anywhere frequented by large numbers of tourists.

Mugging is less common than purse-snatching, but more serious: resistance may be met with violence (do *not* resist). Usually these robbers will not harm you: they just want your money, fast.

To minimize the chances of being a victim, adhere to the following:

- Don't go where there are few other people; this includes camping in secluded places.
- Don't leave any valuables unattended while you swim. Run-and-grab thefts by people lurking in the woods are a common occurrence on the Caribbean coast.
- Leave most of your money, important documents and smaller valuables in a sealed, signed envelope in your hotel's safe, unless you have immediate need of these items. Virtually all hotels, except the very cheapest, provide safekeeping for guests' valuables.
- Leave valuables in a locked suitcase or backpack in your hotel room, or a locker in a hostel dorm, rather than carry them on the street.
- Carry only a small amount of money – enough for an outing – in a pocket. If you have to carry valuables, keep them hidden – preferably in a money belt, shoulder wallet or pouch underneath your clothing.

HIGHWAY ROBBERY

Though it's rare on the Yucatán Peninsula, bandits occasionally hold up buses and other vehicles on intercity routes, especially at night, taking luggage or valuables. Sometimes buses are robbed by people who board as passengers. Roads linking the peninsula with Chiapas state, particularly Hwy 199 between Palenque and Ocosingo, are sometimes the scene of such robberies. These routes are also notorious for frequent thefts from luggage on 2nd-class buses, whose many stops and sometimes-crowded conditions (and sleepy passengers) afford miscreants the opportunity to unzip or slash open bags.

The best way to avoid highway robbery is to travel by day, preferably by toll highway. Deluxe and 1st-class buses use toll highways, where they exist; 2nd-class buses do not.

- Don't keep money, credit or debit cards, wallets or bags in open view any longer than you have to. At ticket counters, keep a hand or foot on your bag at all times.
- Use ATMs only during working hours and choose ones in secure locations, not those open to the street.
- Do not leave anything valuable-looking in a parked vehicle.
- Be careful about accepting drinks from overly social characters in bars, especially in tourist-heavy zones; there have been cases of drugging followed by robbery and assault.
- Be wary of attempts at credit card fraud. One method is when the cashier swipes your card twice (once for the transaction and once for nefarious purposes). Keep your card in sight at all times.

DISABLED TRAVELERS

Lodgings on the Yucatán Peninsula are generally not disabled-friendly, though some hotels and restaurants (mostly towards the top end of the market) and some public buildings now provide wheelchair access. The absence of institutionalized facilities is largely compensated for, however, by Mexicans' accommodating attitudes toward others, and special arrangements are gladly improvised.

Mobility is easiest in the major tourist resorts and the more expensive hotels. Bus transportation can be difficult; flying or taking a taxi is easier.

Mobility International USA (in the USA ☎ 541-343-1284; www.miusa.org) advises disabled travelers on mobility issues. Its website includes international databases of exchange programs and disability organizations with several Mexican organizations listed.

In the UK, **Radar** (☎ 020-7250-3222; www.radar.org.uk) is run by and for disabled people. Its excellent website has links to good travel-specific sites.

Two further sources for disabled travelers are **MossRehab ResourceNet** (www.mossresourcenet.org) and **Access-able Travel Source** (www.access-able.com).

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. Reduced prices for buses, museums, archaeological sites and so on are usually only for those with Mexican education credentials, but the aforementioned cards will sometimes get you a reduction. The ISIC card may also get you discounts in a few hostel-type accommodations.

The Hostelling International (HI) card will save you about US\$1 in affiliated hostels in the Yucatán.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

It's important to understand what your own embassy – the embassy of the country of which you are a citizen – can and can't do to help you if you get into trouble. Generally speaking, it won't be much help in emergencies if the trouble you're in is remotely your own fault. Remember that you are bound by the laws of the country you are in.

In genuine emergencies you might get some assistance, such as a list of lawyers, but only if other channels have been exhausted.

Mexican Embassies & Consulates

Unless otherwise noted, details are for embassies or their consular sections. Updated details can be found at www.sre.gob.mx

/representaciones. Some embassy and consulate websites are very useful sources of information on visas and similar matters.

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

Belize (☎ 223-01-93; www.sre.gob.mx/belice; Ring Rd No 3, Belmopan)

Canada Ottawa (☎ 613-233-8988; www.embamexcan.com; 45 O'Connor St, Suite 1000, ON K1P 1A4); Montreal (☎ 514-288-2502; www.consulmex.qc.ca; 2055 rue Peel, bureau 1000, QC H3A 1V4); Toronto (☎ 416-368-2875; www.consulmex.com; 199 Bay St, Suite 4440 Commerce Court West, ON M5L 1E9); Vancouver (☎ 604-684-3547; www.consulmexvan.com; 710-1177 West Hastings St, BC V6E 2K3)

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

Germany Berlin (☎ 030-269-323; www.embamex.de; Klingelhöferstrasse 3, 10785); Frankfurt-am-Main (☎ 069-299-8750; www.consulmexfrankfurt.org; Taunusanlage 21, 60325)

Guatemala Guatemala City (☎ 2420-3400; www.sre.gob.mx/guatemala; 2a Av 7-57, Zona 10); Ciudad Tecún Umán (☎ 7776-8181; comexteu@terra.com.gt; 3A Av 4-74, Zona 1); Quetzaltenango (☎ 7767-5542; mexicoq@yahoo.com.mx; 21A Av 8-64, Zona 3)

Ireland (☎ 01-260-0699; www.sre.gob.mx/irlanda; 43 Ailesbury Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4)

Italy (☎ 06-44-1151; www.sre.gob.mx/italia; Via Lazzaro Spallanzani 16, Rome, 00161)

Japan (☎ 3-3580-1131; www.sre.gob.mx/japon; 2-15-1 Nagata-Cho, Chiyoda-Ku, Tokyo, 100-0014)

Netherlands (☎ 070-360-2900; www.embamex-nl.com; Nassauplein 28, The Hague, 2585EC)

New Zealand (☎ 04-472-0555; www.mexico.org.nz; Level 8, 111 Customhouse Quay, Wellington)

Spain Madrid (☎ 91-369-2814; www.embamex.es; Carrera de San Jerónimo 46, 28014); Barcelona (☎ 93-201-1822; www.sre.gob.mx/barcelona; Paseo de la Bonanova 55, 08017)

UK (☎ 020-7235-6393; www.embamex.co.uk; 8 Halkin St, London, SW1X 7DW)

USA (☎ 202-728-1600; www.embassyofmexico.org; 1911 Pennsylvania Ave, Washington, DC, NW 20006) Also provides a list of consular services in many other US cities.

Embassies & Consulates in Mexico

Many embassies or their consular sections are in Mexico City; Cancún is home to several consulates, and there are some diplomatic outposts in Mérida as well.

Australia (☎ 55-1101-2200; www.mexico.embassy.gov.au; Rubén Darío 55, Polanco, Mexico City)

Belize Mexico City (☎ 55-5520-1274; embelize@prodigy.net.mx; Bernardo de Gálvez 215, Lomas de Chapultepec);

Cancún (☎ 998-887-8417; Av Nader 34, 1st fl); Chetumal (☎ 983-832-1803; Av Armada de México 91, Colonia Campestre)

Canada Mexico City (☎ 55-5724-7900; www.canada.org.mx; Schiller 529, Polanco); Cancún (☎ 998-883-3360; Plaza Caracol II, 3rd fl, Local 330, Blvd Kukulcán Km 8.5, Zona Hotelera)

Cuba Mexico City (☎ 55-5280-5591; www.embacuba.com.mx; Av Presidente Masaryk 554, Polanco); Cancún (☎ 998-884-3423; Pecari 17); Mérida (☎ 999-944-4215; Calle 1-D No 32, Colonia Campestre)

France embassy in Mexico City (☎ 55-9171-9700; www.francia.org.mx; Campos Eliseos 339, Polanco); consulate in Mexico City (☎ 55-9171-9840; Lafontaine 32, Polanco); Cancún (☎ 998-267-9722; Fonatur lote 1-1a, MZ 12 SM 50, Fraccionamiento Los Alamos II); Mérida (☎ 999-925-2886; Calle 33B No 528)

Germany Mexico City (☎ 55-5283-2200; www.mexiko.diplo.de; Lord Byron 737, Polanco); Cancún (☎ 998-884-1898; Punta Conoco 36, SM24)

Guatemala Mexico City (☎ 55-5540-7520; embaguateamx@minex.gob.gt; Av Explanada 1025, Lomas de Chapultepec); Cancún (☎ 998-883-8296; Edificio Barcelona, Av Nader 148)

Ireland (☎ 55-5520-5803; embajada@irlanda.org.mx; Cerrada Blvd Ávila Camacho 76, 3rd fl, Lomas de Chapultepec, Mexico City)

Italy Mexico City (☎ 55-5596-3655; www.embitalia.org.mx; Paseo de las Palmas 1994, Lomas de Chapultepec); Cancún (☎ 998-884-1261; Alcatrazes 39, SM22)

Japan (☎ 55-5211-0028; www.mx.emb-japan.go.jp; Paseo de la Reforma 395, Lomas de Chapultepec, Mexico City)

Netherlands Mexico City (☎ 55-5258-9921; www.paisesbajos.com.mx; Av Vasco de Quiroga 3000, 7th fl, Santa Fe); Cancún (☎ 998-886-0074; Martinair, Planta Alta, Terminal 2, Aeropuerto Cancún); Mérida (☎ 999-924-3122; Calle 64 No 418)

New Zealand (☎ 55-5283-9460; kiwimexico@compuserve.com.mx; Balmes 8, Level 4, Los Morales, Mexico City)

Spain Mexico City (☎ 55-5280-4383; www.mae.es/embajadas/mexico/es/home; Galileo 114, Polanco); Cancún (☎ 998-848-9918; Edificio Oasis, cnr Blvd Kukulcán & Cenzontle, Zona Hotelera)

UK Mexico City (☎ 55-5242-8500; www.embajada.britanica.com.mx; Río Lerma 71, Colonia Cuauhtémoc); Cancún (☎ 998-881-0100; The Royal Sands, Blvd Kukulcán Km 13.5, Zona Hotelera)

USA Mexico City (☎ 55-5080-2000; mexico.usembassy.gov; Paseo de la Reforma 305); Cancún (☎ 998-883-0272; 2o Nivel No 320-323, Plaza Caracol Dos, Blvd Kukulcán, Zona Hotelera); Mérida (☎ 999-925-5011; Paseo de Montejo 453)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Mexico's frequent fiestas are highly colorful affairs that often go on for several days and add a great deal of spice to everyday life. In addition to the major national festivals listed below, each town has many local saint's days, regional festivals and so on (see destination chapters for information on these). There's also a national public holiday just about every month (see p260), often the occasion for yet further merriment.

January

Día de los Reyes Magos (Three Kings' Day or Epiphany; January 6) This is the day when Mexican children traditionally receive gifts, rather than at Christmas (but some get two loads of presents!) A good place to be at this time is Tizimin (p203).

February/March

Día de la Candelaria (Candlemas; February 2) Commemorates the presentation of Jesus in the temple 40 days after his birth; celebrated with processions, bullfights and dancing in many towns.

Carnaval (late February or early March) A big bash preceding the 40-day penance of Lent, Carnaval takes place during the week or so before Ash Wednesday (which falls 46 days before Easter Sunday). It's festively celebrated in Mérida, Campeche, Ciudad del Carmen and Chetumal with parades, music, food, drink, dancing, fireworks and fun.

March/April

Semana Santa (Holy/Easter Week; starts on Palm Sunday – Domingo de Ramos) Throughout the week, solemn processions move through the streets. On Good Friday (Viernes Santo) there are dramatic re-enactments of the Passion Play, with locals taking the role of penitents following their savior through the Stations of the Cross.

September

Día de la Independencia (Independence Day; September 16) The anniversary of the start of Mexico's War of Independence in 1810 provokes an upsurge of patriotic feeling every year: on the evening of the 15th, the words of Padre Miguel Hidalgo's famous call to rebellion, the Grito de Dolores, are repeated from the balcony of every town hall in the land, usually followed by fireworks.

November

Día de Todos los Santos (All Saints' Day; November 1) & **Día de los Muertos** (Day of the Dead; November 2) In Mexico's most characteristic fiesta, the souls of the dead are believed to return to earth. Families build altars in their homes and visit graveyards to commune with their dead, taking garlands and gifts. A happy atmosphere prevails.

LOCAL FIESTAS

In addition to national celebrations, every town and city on the Yucatán Peninsula holds its own fiestas, often in honor of its patron saint. Street parades of holy images, special costumes, fireworks, dancing, lots of music and plenty of drinking are all part of the colorful scene. Sometimes bloodless bullfights are on the program as well, or the *Danza de la Cabeza de Cochino*. This dance, rooted in Maya tradition, takes place around an altar holding a pig's head decorated with offerings of flowers, ribbons, bread, liquor and cigarettes. A likely time to catch it is at the *Fiesta de la Inmaculada Concepción*. Though Yucatecans also celebrate the Festival of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, with the rest of the Catholic world, many towns on the peninsula hold nine days of devotions leading up to the last Sunday in January when the pig is ritually slaughtered and put to cooking.

Other lively patron saint festivals and Yucatán-specific celebrations are mentioned in the destination chapters. Some Maya festivals are also described on p11.

December

Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe; December 12) A week or more of celebrations throughout Mexico leads up to the day in honor of the Virgin who appeared to an indigenous Mexican, Juan Diego, in 1531, and has since become Mexico's religious patron. Children are taken to church dressed as little Juan Diegos or indigenous girls.

Posadas (December 16-24) Nine nights of candlelit parades reenact the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. More important in small towns than cities.

Día de Navidad (December 25) Christmas is traditionally celebrated with a feast in the early hours of December 25, after midnight mass.

FOOD

Some Eating sections of this book are divided into budget, midrange and top-end categories. We define a midrange restaurant as one where a main dish at lunch or dinner costs between US\$6 and US\$12. Budget and top-end places are, respectively, less than US\$6 and over US\$12.

Typical restaurant hours are 7am to between 10pm and midnight. If a restaurant has a closing day, it's usually Sunday, Monday or Tuesday. Cafés typically open from 8am to 10pm daily. Bars too are normally open daily, but each seems to have its own hours. For a full introduction to Yucatán's distinctive cuisine, see p59.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Mexico is more broad-minded about sexuality than you might expect. Gays and lesbians rarely attract open discrimination or violence. Discrimination based on sexual orientation has been illegal since 1999 and can be punished with up to three years in

prison. Gay men have a more public profile than lesbians. Cancún has a fairly active gay scene, and there are a number of gay-friendly accommodations in Mérida.

The **International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association** (www.iglta.org) provides information on the major travel providers in the gay sector. US-based **Arco Iris Tours** (☎ 800-765-4370; www.arcoiristours.com) specializes in gay travel to Mexico and organizes an annual International Gay Festival in Cancún.

A detailed Mexico gay travel guide and articles are available at **Out&About** (www.gay.com/travel/outandabout). Another good source of information is the **Gay Mexico Network** (www.gaymexico.net). It offers information on gay-friendly hotels and tours in Mexico, and publishes a newsletter offering discounted rooms in gay-friendly accommodations.

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. Transportation and tourist accommodations are heavily booked at these times. Banks, post offices, government offices and many shops throughout Mexico are closed on the following national holidays:

Año Nuevo (New Year's Day) January 1

Día de la Constitución (Constitution Day) February 5

Día de la Bandera (Day of the National Flag)

February 24

Día de Nacimiento de Benito Juárez (Anniversary of Benito Juárez' birth) March 21

Día del Trabajo (Labor Day) May 1

Cinco de Mayo (Anniversary of Mexico's victory over the French at Puebla) May 5

Día de la Independencia (Independence Day)

September 16

Día de la Raza (Columbus' discovery of the New World)

October 12

Día de la Revolución (Revolution Day) November 20**Día de Navidad** (Christmas Day) December 25

At Easter, businesses usually close from Good Friday (Viernes Santo) to Easter Sunday (Domingo de Resurrección). Many offices and businesses close during major national festivals (see p259).

INSURANCE


A travel insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is a good idea. Some policies specifically exclude dangerous activities such as scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking.

For further information on medical insurance, see p281. Worldwide cover to travelers from over 44 countries is available online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

For information on motor insurance see p274.

INTERNET ACCESS

Cybercafés (which charge about US\$1.50 to US\$2 per hour) and Web-based email are common in the Yucatán. A number of cybercafés are equipped with CD burners, webcams, headphones and so on. Few have card readers, so bring your own or the camera-to-USB cable if you plan on burning photos to CD along the way.

Quite a few accommodations provide Internet access of some kind (shown as  in this book). Facilities vary from a couple of

computers in the lobby, for which you may or may not have to pay, to well-equipped business centers or wi-fi access (*Internet inalámbrico*).

You may also be able to connect your own laptop or hand-held to the Internet through the telephone socket in your room. Be aware that your modem may not work once you leave your home country. The safest option is to buy a reputable 'global' modem before you leave home. For lots of useful stuff on connecting to the Internet while traveling, visit www.kropla.com.

LEGAL MATTERS**Mexican Law**

Mexican law presumes an accused person is guilty until proven innocent.

The minimum jail sentence for possession of more than a token amount of any narcotic, including marijuana and amphetamines, is 10 months. See the boxed text, p99 for details on recent changes to Mexico's drug laws. As in most other countries, the purchase of controlled medication requires a doctor's prescription.

Road travelers should expect occasional police or military checkpoints. They are normally looking for drugs, weapons or illegal migrants.


See p274 for information on the legal aspects of road accidents.

While the age of marriage is 12, sex with someone under 18 is illegal if their consent was obtained by deception, such as a false promise of marriage.

Useful warnings on Mexican law are found on the **US Department of State website** (www.travel.state.gov).

GETTING LEGAL HELP

If arrested, you have the right to notify your embassy or consulate. However, what consular staff can do for you is limited; see p258 for details. The longest a person can be detained by police without a specific accusation is 72 hours.

Tourist offices, especially state-run branches, can often help you with legal problems such as complaints or reporting crimes, police seeking bribes (see p280), or lost articles. The national tourism ministry, **Sectur** ( 078, 800-987-8224), offers 24-hour phone advice.

If you are the victim of a crime, you may feel there is little to gain by going to the police, unless you need a statement to present to your insurance company. If you go to the police and your Spanish is poor, take a more fluent speaker. Also take your passport and tourist card, if you still have them. If you just want to report a theft for the purposes of an insurance claim, say you want to '*poner una acta de un robo*' (make a record of a robbery). This should make it clear that you merely want a piece of paper and you should get it without too much trouble.

MAPS

Free city and regional maps of varying quality are given away by tourist offices around the peninsula.

Quality regional maps include the highly detailed **ITMB** (www.itmb.com) 1:500,000 *Yucatán Peninsula Travel Map* and the sketchier **Guía Roji** (www.guiaroji.com.mx) 1:1,000,000 scale *Maya World* showing all of the peninsula and parts of Tabasco and Chiapas.

Guía Roji also publishes maps of each Mexican state (US\$4) and an annually updated national road atlas called *Por las Carreteras de México* (US\$15) containing 42 highway maps and 43 city maps plus current toll rates and toll booth locations. It's widely available throughout Mexico and can be bought from Internet booksellers. Also useful are Quimera publisher's regional road maps.

Riviera Maya, Cancún, Cozumel and *Playa del Carmen*, four foldout maps published by the American couple behind **Can-Do Maps** (www.cancunmap.com), are extremely well done and are updated annually. In addition to containing multiple insert maps, they also have a useful index for restaurants, hotels and attractions.

A good Internet source is **Maps of Mexico** (www.maps-of-mexico.com), with detailed maps of all the states.

Inegi (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática; ☎ 800-490-4200; www.inegi.gob.mx) publishes a large-scale map series covering all of Mexico at 1:50,000 and 1:250,000, plus state maps at 1:700,000. Most of these maps have been updated within the past decade, and they are well worth having if you plan to do any hiking or back-country exploring. Inegi's Centros de Información in the peninsula's principal cities sell these maps for US\$4 to US\$6 each. Its addresses:

Campeche (☎ 981-811-1530; Calle 8 x 63, Planta Baja, Edificio Lavalle)

Cancún (☎ 998-884-4099, ext 7943; Av Tankah 70, cnr Ciruela)

Chetumal (☎ 983-832-2733; cnr Avs Carmen Ochoa de Merino & Independencia)

Mérida (☎ 999-942-1794; Calle 60 No 378, btwn Calles 39 & 41)

MONEY

Mexico's currency is the peso, usually denoted by the 'M\$' sign. Prices quoted in US dollars are written 'US\$5' to avoid misunderstanding. The peso is divided into 100

centavos. Coins come in denominations of 20 and 50 centavos and one, two, five and 10 pesos; notes in 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500 (and occasionally 1000) pesos.

Since the peso's exchange value is sometimes unstable, in this book we give prices in US dollar equivalents. For exchange rates, see inside the front cover. For information on costs, see p18.

The most convenient form of money is a major international credit card or debit card – preferably two if you've got them. Visa, MasterCard and American Express cards can be used to obtain cash easily from ATMs in Mexico, and are accepted for payment by most airlines, car-rental companies, travel agents, many upmarket hotels, and some restaurants and shops. Occasionally there's a surcharge for paying by card. Making a purchase by credit card normally gives you a more favorable rate than exchanging money at a bank, but you'll normally have to pay your card issuer a 'foreign exchange' transaction fee of around 2.5%.

As a backup to credit or debit cards, it's a good idea to take some traveler's checks (*cheques de viajero*) and a little cash. US dollars are by far the most easily exchangeable foreign currency in Mexico (and indeed are common for payment in Cancún and other heavily touristed zones, though the exchange rate is rarely favorable). Euros, British pounds and Canadian dollars, in cash or traveler's checks, are accepted by most banks and some *casas de cambio* (money-exchange houses), but acceptance is less certain outside the main cities and tourist centers. American Express traveler's checks are recognized almost everywhere.

For tips on keeping your money safe, see p257.

ATMs

ATMs (*caja permanente* or *cajero automático* in Spanish) are plentiful in Yucatán, and are the easiest source of cash. You can use major credit cards and some bank cards, such as those on the Cirrus and Plus systems, to withdraw pesos from ATMs. The exchange rate that banks use for ATM withdrawals is normally better than the 'tourist rate' – though that advantage may be negated by handling fees, interest charges and other methods that banks have of taking your money.

Banks & Casas de Cambio

You can exchange money in banks or at *casas de cambio*, which are often single-window kiosks. Banks go through a more time-consuming procedure than *casas de cambio* and usually have shorter hours. *Casas de cambio* can easily be found in just about every large or medium-size town and in many smaller ones. They're quick and often open evenings or weekends, but be aware that some don't accept traveler's checks.

Currency-exchange rates vary from one bank or *casa de cambio* to another; and there is often a better rate offered for *efectivo* (cash) than for traveler's checks. After hours or on weekends, hotels may exchange currency, though their rates tend to be unfavorable.

International Transfers

Should you need money wired to you in Mexico, an easy and quick method is the 'Dinero en Minutos' (Money in Minutes) service of **Western Union** (in the USA ☎ 800-325-6000; www.westernunion.com). The service is offered by thousands of bank branches and other businesses around Mexico, identified by black-and-yellow signs proclaiming 'Western Union Dinero en Minutos.' Your sender pays the money online or at a Western Union branch, along with a fee, and gives the details on who is to receive it and where. When you pick it up, take along photo identification. Sending US\$500 online from California to Mexico, for example, costs US\$14.99. Western Union has offices worldwide.

US post offices (☎ 888-368-4669; www.usps.com) offer reasonably cheap money transfers to branches of Bancomer bank in Mexico. The service is called *Dinero Seguro*.

Taxes

Mexico's value-added tax (IVA) is levied at 15%. By law the tax must be included in prices quoted to you and should not be added afterward. Signs in shops and notices on restaurant menus often state 'IVA incluido.' Occasionally they state instead that IVA must be added to the quoted prices.

Hotel rooms are also subject to the lodging tax (ISH). Each Mexican state sets its own rate, but in most it's 2%.

Tipping & Bargaining

In general, employees of small, cheap restaurants don't expect much in the way of tips while those in resorts frequented by foreigners (such as in Cancún and Cozumel) expect you to be lavish in your largesse. At the latter, tipping is up to US levels of 15% or 20%; elsewhere 10% is usually plenty. If you stay a few days in one place, you should leave up to 10% of your room costs for the people who have kept your room clean (assuming they have). A porter in a midrange hotel would be happy with US\$1 per bag. Car parking attendants expect a tip of US\$0.20 to US\$0.50, and the same is standard for gas station attendants. Baggers in supermarkets are usually tipped a peso or two.

Room rates are pretty inflexible, though it can be worth asking if any discounts are available, especially if it's low season or you are going to stay a few nights. In markets bargaining is the rule. You can also sometimes bargain with drivers of unmetered taxis.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Film & Equipment

Camera and film-processing shops, pharmacies and hotels sell film. Most types of film are available in larger cities and resorts, though slide film tends to be rarer outside Cancún (where several varieties of Fuji slide film are sold downtown at decent prices), and usually limited to Agfachrome and Kodak's Ektachrome.

Film on sale at low prices may be outdated. If the date on the box is obscured by a price sticker, look under the sticker. Avoid film from sun-exposed shop windows. Print processing (*revelando*) costs under US\$0.20 per photo; it's almost always done in one hour and quality is usually good.

Most cybercafés can burn your images onto a CD for US\$2 or so.

Video cameras and tapes are widely available at photo supply stores in the largest cities and in towns that receive many tourists. Prices are significantly higher than you may be used to in North America or Europe. Videotapes on sale in Mexico (like the rest of the Americas and Japan) nearly all use the NTSC image registration system. This is incompatible with the PAL system common to most of Western Europe and Australia, and the Secam system used in France.

If your camera breaks down, you'll be able to find a repair shop in most sizable towns, and prices will be agreeably low.

For more information on taking travel photographs, check out Lonely Planet's *Travel Photography*.

Photographing People & Places

It is illegal to take pictures in Mexican airports and of police stations and penal institutions. Use of a tripod at most ruins sites requires a special (expensive) permit obtainable only in Mexico City.

Be forewarned that a fee for use of video cameras is charged at many ruins and other attractions. At most Maya sites charging an entry fee, you need to pay an extra US\$3 at the first site visited, which gives you a slip you can use all day, at any site you visit.

In general, Yucatecans enjoy having their pictures taken and will be happy to pose for your camera – if you ask. Increasingly, you may be asked to pay for the photo. This is especially true in areas that see heavy tourist traffic.

If local people make any sign of being offended by your desire to photograph them, you should put your camera away and apologize immediately, both out of decency and for your own safety. This is especially so in Chiapas state (see p245). Also, many police officers and soldiers do not like having their pictures taken.

POST

An airmail letter or postcard weighing up to 20g costs US\$1 to send to the USA or Canada, US\$1.25 to Europe or South America, and US\$1.40 to the rest of the world. Items weighing between 20g and 50g cost US\$1.75, US\$2 and US\$2.25, respectively. *Certificado* (registered) service costs an extra US\$2. Mark airmail items 'Vía Aérea.'

Delivery times are elastic (inbound and outbound). An airmail letter from Mexico to the USA or Canada (or vice-versa) should take between four and 14 days. Mail to or from Europe may take between one and three weeks, to Australasia two to three weeks.

Post offices (*oficinas de correos*) are typically open from 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday, and 9am to 1pm Saturday.

You can receive letters and packages care of a post office if they're addressed to the post office's *lista de correos* (mail list), as follows:

Kate REID (last name in capitals and underlined)
Lista de Correos
Cozumel
Quintana Roo 77609 (post code)
MEXICO

When the letter reaches the post office, the name of the addressee is placed on an alphabetical list, which is updated daily and often pinned up on the wall. To claim your mail, present your passport or other identification. There's no charge, but many post offices only hold *lista* mail for 10 days before returning it to the sender. If you think you're going to pick mail up more than 10 days after it has arrived, have it sent to *Poste Restante*, instead of *Lista de Correos*. *Poste restante* may hold mail for up to a month, though no list of what has been received is posted up.

If you're sending a package internationally from Mexico, be prepared to open it for customs inspection; take packing materials with you to the post office and don't seal it till you get there.

For assured and speedy delivery, you can use one of the more expensive international courier services, such as **UPS** (☎ 800-902-9200; www.ups.com), **FedEx** (☎ 800-900-1100; www.fedex.com) or Mexico's **Estafeta** (☎ 800-903-3500; www.estafeta.com). Packages up to 500g cost about US\$30 to the USA or Canada, and US\$40 to Europe.

SHOPPING

Yucatán travelers will find plenty of wonderful regional handicrafts made predominantly by indigenous people, including hats, hammocks, embroidered clothing and textiles, jewelry and ceramic items. You can buy these *artesanías* in the villages where they are produced, or in stores and markets in larger cities. *Artesanías* stores in cities will give you a good overview of what's available and a basis for price comparisons. Traveling out to craft-making villages gives you a chance to see artisans at work, and if you buy there you'll know that more of your money is likely to go to the artisans themselves and less to entrepreneurs.

Prices for handicrafts sold in shops are generally non-negotiable, while in markets bargaining is the rule.

Refunds of the 15% IVA tax on some purchases were due to be available from July 2006 for tourists who arrived in Mexico by plane or cruise ship. Under the scheme, goods worth at least M\$1200 (approximately US\$110) from any one store would qualify for the refund, on presentation of receipts with the shop's tax number (*Registro Federal de Causantes*) when the tourist leaves Mexico.

Guayaberas

Guayaberas – light, elegant shirts with four square pockets that are standard businesswear for men in southeast Mexico – originally hail from Yucatán. The best guayaberas can be purchased in Mérida; see p167 for details.

Hammocks

Yucatecan hammocks are renowned for their quality and durability. There are many hammock stores in Mérida, or bargain with sellers ready to do so in the plazas and along the beach, particularly along the Riviera Maya and Isla Holbox, where many residents weave and sell them. See p168 for more on hammocks.

Hats

Attractive and comfortable panama hats, called *jipijapas*, are woven from locally grown palm fibers in Bécál (see p222) in Campeche state. For more about the hats, see p222.

Huipiles

Proudly sported by Yucatecan women across the social spectrum, the *huipil* is an instantly recognizable white dress with brightly colored flower embroidery around the yoke and near the bottom of the dress. For more information about *huipiles*, see p41.

Pottery & Other Items

Earthenware pots of varying quality can be found across the peninsula. Among the most interesting are those crafted in Ticul, in Yucatán state, where pottery-making predates the Spanish Conquest by hundreds of years. Ticul is equally noted for its fine reproductions of archaeological pieces.

Also widely available in the region are handmade blankets, leather goods, decorative cloth, wicker baskets, brilliantly painted gourds and lots of amber jewelry. Filigreed silver baubles are often a good buy in the Yucatán as well.

Edible and drinkable products worth taking back with you include honey, a substance that has been produced by Maya beekeepers for centuries, and a special kind of tequila made from the henequen plant that is produced near Izamal.

SOLO TRAVELERS

A single room normally costs a little less than a double room, but budget travelers can cut accommodation costs by staying in Mexico's increasing number of hostels. Hostels have the additional advantage of providing ready-made company, and often a lot of fun and helpful travel tips. It's often easy to pair up with others at a hostel as there's a steady stream of people following much similar routes. In well-touristed places, notice boards advertise for traveling companions, flatmates, volunteer workers and so on.

Solo travelers should be especially watchful of their luggage when on the road and should stay in places with good security for their valuables. One big drag of traveling alone can be when you want to take a quick dip in the ocean – you're stuck with your possessions and there's no-one to watch out for them.

Traveling alone, though, can be a very good way of getting into the local culture and it definitely improves your Spanish skills as Mexicans are very sociable. Single women can also check out the advice, p269.

TELEPHONE & FAX

Local calls are cheap; international calls can be expensive, but needn't be if you call from the right place at the right time. Mexico is well provided with fairly easy-to-use public card phones. *Locutorios* and *casetas de teléfono* (call offices where an on-the-spot operator connects the call for you) are quite widespread and can be cheaper than card phones. A third option is to call from your hotel, but hotels charge what they like for this service. It's nearly always cheaper to go elsewhere.

Calling (Phone) Cards

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, 001-800-462-4240)

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

BT Chargecard (☎ 01-800-123-02-44)

MCI (☎ 001-800-674-7000)

Sprint (☎ 001-800-877-8000)

Warning: if you get an operator who asks for your credit card instead of your calling-card number, or says the service is unavailable, hang up. There have been scams in which calls are rerouted to super expensive credit-card phone services.

Cell Phones

Like other Mexican phone numbers, every cell (cellular, mobile) phone number has an area code (usually the code of the city where the phone was bought). When calling a cell phone from that same city, you usually need to dial ☎ 044, followed by the area code and number. When calling from other cities, dial ☎ 01 (the normal long-distance prefix), followed by the area code and number. The owner of the phone receiving the call has to pay a small amount as well as the caller.

If you want to use a cell phone in Mexico, one option for short visits is to get an international plan for your own phone, which will enable you to call home. You can also buy a Mexican cell phone for as little as US\$30 to US\$60 including some air time. The most widespread cellular phone system in Mexico is **Telcel** (www.telcel.com), with coverage almost everywhere that has a significant population. Amigo cards, for recharging Telcel phones, are widely available from newsstands and minimarts. Other companies are **Unefon** (www.unefon.com.mx), with coverage mainly in the major cities; **Iusacell** (www.iusacell.com.mx); and **Movistar** (www.telefonicomovistar.com.mx). If you already have a Movistar phone from another country, you can put a Mexican Movistar SIM card into it.

For further information, contact your service provider or visit www.kropla.com or www.gsmcoverage.co.uk, which has coverage maps, lists of roaming partners and links to phone companies' websites.

Collect Calls

A *llamada por cobrar* (collect call) can cost the receiving party much more than if they call you, so you may prefer to pay for a quick call to the other party to ask them to call you back. If you do need to make a collect call, you can do so from card phones without a card. Call an operator at ☎ 020 for domestic calls, or ☎ 090 for international calls, or use a 'home country direct' service through which you make an international collect call via an operator in the country you're calling. The Mexican term for 'home country direct' is *país directo*: but don't count on Mexican international operators knowing the access codes for all countries.

Some telephone *casetas* and hotels will make collect calls for you, but they usually charge for the service.

Fax

Public fax service is offered in many Mexican towns by the public *telégrafos* (telegraph) office or the companies Telecomm and Computel. Also look for 'Fax' or '*Fax Público*' signs on shops, businesses and telephone *casetas*, and in bus stations and airports. Typically you will pay around US\$1 per page to the USA or Canada.

Locutorios & Casetas de Teléfono

Costs in *casetas* and *locutorios* are often lower than those for Telmex card phones, and their advantages are that they eliminate street noise and you don't need a phone card to use them. They often have a phone symbol outside, or signs saying '*teléfono*,' '*Lada*' or '*Larga Distancia*.'

Prefixes & Codes

To call a town or city in Mexico other than the one you're in, you need to dial the long-distance prefix (☎ 01), followed by the area code (two digits for Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey; three digits for everywhere else) and then the local number. For example, to make a call from Cancun to Mérida, dial ☎ 01, then the Mérida area code ☎ 999, then the seven-digit local number. You'll find area codes listed under city and town headings throughout this book.

To make international calls, you need to dial the international prefix ☎ 00, followed

by the country code, area code and local number. For example, to call New York City, dial ☎00, then the US country code ☎1, the New York City area code ☎212, then the local number.

To call a number in Mexico from another country, dial your international access code, then the Mexico country code ☎52, then the area code and number.

Public Card Phones

These are common in towns and cities: you'll usually find some at airports, bus stations and around the main plazas. Easily the most common, and most reliable on costs, are those marked with the name of the country's biggest phone company, Telmex. To use a Telmex card phone you need a phone card known as a *tarjeta Ladatel*. These are sold at kiosks and shops everywhere – look for the blue-and-yellow signs that read 'De venta aquí Ladatel.' The cards come in denominations of M\$30 (about US\$2.80), M\$50 (US\$4.80) and M\$100.

Calls from Telmex card phones cost US\$0.10 per minute for local calls; US\$0.40 per minute long-distance within Mexico; US\$0.50 per minute to the USA or Canada; US\$1 per minute to Central America; US\$2 per minute to Europe, Alaska or South America; and US\$2.50 per minute to Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand or Asia.

In some parts of Mexico frequented by foreign tourists, you may notice a variety of phones that advertise that they accept credit cards or that you can make easy collect calls to the USA on them. While some of these phones may be a fair value, there are others on which very high rates are charged. Be 100% sure about what you'll pay before making a call on a non-Telmex phone.

Toll-Free & Operator Numbers

Mexican toll-free numbers (☎800 followed by seven digits) always require the ☎01 prefix. You can call most of these and the ☎060 and ☎080 emergency numbers from Telmex pay phones without inserting a phone card.

Most US and Canadian toll-free numbers are ☎800 or ☎888 followed by seven digits. These can be reached from Mexico, by dialing ☎001 then replacing the prefix with ☎880, but there is a charge for the call.

For a Mexican domestic operator, dial ☎020; for an international operator, dial ☎090. For Mexican directory information, dial ☎040.

To access the Mexican yellow pages online, go to www.seccionamarilla.com.mx.

TIME

The entire Yucatán Peninsula observes the Hora del Centro, which is the same as US Central Time – GMT minus six hours in winter, and GMT minus five hours during daylight saving. Daylight saving time (*horario de verano*, summer time) runs from the first Sunday in April to the last Sunday in October. Clocks go forward one hour in April and back one hour in October.

The fabled relaxed Mexican attitude toward time and urgency – *mañana, mañana* – is still practiced, especially outside the big cities. Most Mexicans value *simpatía* (congeniality) over promptness. If something is really worth doing, it gets done.

TOILETS

Public toilets are rare, so take advantage of facilities in places such as hotels, restaurants, bus terminals and museums; a fee of about US\$0.20 may be charged. It's fairly common for toilets in budget hotels and restaurants to lack seats. When out and about, carry some toilet paper with you because it often won't be provided. If there's a bin beside the toilet, put soiled paper in it because the drains can't cope otherwise.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Just about every town of interest to tourists in the Yucatán has a state or municipal tourist office. They are generally helpful with maps, brochures and questions, and often some staff members speak English.

You can call the Mexico City office of the national tourism ministry **Sectur** (☎55-5250-0123/51, 800-903-9200; in the USA & Canada 1-800-446-3942, 1-800-482-9832, in Europe 00-800-1111-2266; www.visitmexico.com) at any time – 24 hours a day, seven days a week – for information or help in English or Spanish.

Here are the contact details for the head tourism offices of each state covered in this book:

Campeche (☎981-811-9229, 800-900-2267; www.campechetravel.com)

Chiapas (☎ 961-602-5127, 800-280-3500; www.turismochiapas.gob.mx)

Quintana Roo (☎ 983-835-0860; sedetur.qroo.gob.mx in Spanish)

Tabasco (☎ 993-316-3633, 800-216-0842; www.visitetabasco.com)

Yucatán (☎ 999-930-3760; www.mayayucatan.com)

VISAS

Every tourist must have an easily obtainable Mexican government tourist card (below). Some nationalities also need to obtain visas. Because the regulations sometimes change, it's wise to confirm them with a Mexican embassy or consulate before you go (see p258). **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com) has links to updated visa information.

Citizens of the USA, Canada, EU countries, Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Norway and Switzerland are among those who do not require visas to enter Mexico as tourists. The list changes from time to time; check well ahead of travel. Visa procedures, for those who need them, can take several weeks and you may be required to apply in your country of residence or citizenship.

For information on passport requirements, see p271. Non-US citizens passing (even in transit) through the USA on the way to or from Mexico, or visiting Mexico from the USA, should also check the passport and visa requirements for the USA.

Tourist Card & Tourist Fee

The Mexican tourist card – officially the *forma migratoria para turista* (FMT) – is a brief card document that you must fill out and get stamped by Mexican immigration when you enter Mexico and keep till you leave. It's available at official border crossings, international airports and ports, and often from airlines, travel agencies and Mexican consulates. At the US–Mexico border you won't usually be given one automatically – you have to ask for it.

At many US–Mexico border crossings you don't have to get the card stamped at the border itself, as Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM, National Immigration Institute) has control points on the highways where it's also possible to do it. But it's preferable to get it done at the border itself, in case there are complications elsewhere.

A tourist card only permits you to engage in what are considered to be tourist activities (including sports, health, artistic and cultural activities). If the purpose of your visit is to work (even as a volunteer), to report or to study, or to participate in humanitarian aid or human-rights observation, you may well need a visa. Check with a Mexican embassy or consulate (p258).

The maximum possible stay is 180 days for most nationalities (90 days for Australians, Austrians, Israelis and Italians, among others), but immigration officers will often put a much lower number (as little as 15 or 30 days in some cases) unless you tell them specifically that you need, say, 90 or 180 days. It's advisable to ask for more days than you think you'll need.

Though the tourist card itself is issued free of charge, a tourist fee of about US\$20, called the *derecho para no inmigrante* (DNI, nonimmigrant fee), will need to be paid before you leave the country. If you enter Mexico by air, however, the fee is included in your airfare. If you enter by land, you must pay the fee at a bank in Mexico at any time before you reenter the frontier zone on your way out of Mexico (or before you check in at an airport to fly out of Mexico). Most Mexican border posts have on-the-spot bank offices where you can pay the DNI fee. When you pay at a bank, your tourist card will be stamped to prove that you have paid.

Look after your tourist card because it may be checked when you leave the country. You can be fined US\$42 for not having it.

EXTENSIONS & LOST CARDS

If the number of days given on your tourist card is less than the maximum for your nationality (90 or 180 days in most cases), its validity may be extended one or more times, up to the maximum. To get a card extended you have to apply to the INM, which has offices in many towns and cities (see www.inm.gob.mx for a list, under Servicios Migratorios/Oficinas y horarios de atención). The procedure costs around US\$20 and takes up to three hours. You'll need your passport, tourist card, photocopies of the important pages of these documents, and, at some offices, evidence of

'sufficient funds.' A major credit card is usually OK for the latter, or an amount in traveler's checks anywhere from US\$100 to US\$1000 depending on the office.

Most INM offices will not extend a card until a few days before it is due to expire; don't bother trying earlier.

If you lose your card or need further information, contact your nearest tourist office, or the **Sectur tourist office** (☎ 55-5250-0123, 800-903-9200) in Mexico City, or your embassy or consulate. Any of these should be able to give you an official note to take to your local INM office, which will issue a duplicate for US\$42.

Under-18 Travelers

To conform with regulations aimed at preventing international child abduction, minors (people under 18) traveling to Mexico without one or both of their parents may need to carry a notarized consent form signed by the absent parent or parents, giving permission for the young traveler to make the international journey. Though Mexico does not specifically require this documentation, airlines flying to Mexico may refuse to board passengers without it. In the case of divorced parents, a custody document may be required. If one or both parents are dead, or the traveler has only one legal parent, a death certificate or notarized statement of the situation may be required.

These rules are aimed primarily at visitors from the USA and Canada but may also apply to people from elsewhere. Procedures vary from country to country; contact your country's foreign affairs department and/or a Mexican consulate to find out exactly what you need to do. Forms for the purposes required are usually available from these authorities.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Women can have a great time in Mexico, traveling with companions or traveling solo, but in this land that invented machismo, some concessions have to be made to local custom. Gender equalization has come a long way in a few decades, and Mexicans are generally a very polite people, but they remain, by and large, great believers in the difference (rather than the equality) between the sexes.

Lone women can expect a few catcalls and attempts to chat them up. Often you can discourage unwanted attention by avoiding eye contact (wear sunglasses), dressing modestly, moving confidently and speaking coolly but politely if you feel that you must respond. Wearing a wedding ring can prove helpful too. Don't put yourself in peril by doing things that Mexican women would not do, such as challenging a man's masculinity, drinking alone in a cantina, hitchhiking or going alone to isolated places. Keep a clear head.

In beach resorts many Mexican women dress in shorts, skimpy tops or dresses, and swimsuits of all sizes, though others bow to modesty and swim in shorts and a T-shirt. On the streets of cities and towns you'll notice that women cover up and don't display too much leg or even their shoulders. The bare, pierced-belly look so popular in the West is not common.

Lone women, and even pairs of women, should be cautious about going to remote beach spots.

On local transportation it's best to don long or mid-calf-length trousers and a top that meets the top of your pants, with sleeves of some sort. That way you'll feel most comfortable, and you also have the benefit of keeping your valuables out of sight with ease.

Most of all, appear self-assured.

WORK

Mexicans themselves need jobs, and people who enter Mexico as tourists are not legally allowed to take employment. The many expats working in Mexico have usually been posted there by their companies or organizations with all the necessary papers.

English-speakers (and a few German or French speakers) may find teaching jobs in language schools, *preparatorias* (high schools) or universities, or can offer personal tutoring. The pay is low, but you can live on it.

A foreigner working in Mexico normally needs a permit or government license, but a school will often pay a foreign teacher in the form of a *beca* (scholarship), and thus circumvent the law, or the school's administration will procure the appropriate papers.

Apart from teaching, you might find a little bar or restaurant work in tourist areas. It's likely to be part-time and short-term.

Jobs Abroad (www.jobsabroad.com) posts paid and unpaid job openings in Mexico. **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com) has several useful links.

Volunteer Work

Many opportunities exist for short- or longer-term unpaid work (or work that you pay to do) in Mexico. Projects range from sea turtle conservation to human-rights observation to work with abused children.

AmeriSpan (www.amerispan.com) Offers volunteer opportunities in environmental education and other areas.

Global Exchange (www.globalexchange.org) Needs Spanish-speaking volunteer human-rights observers to live for six to eight weeks in peace camps in Chiapas villages threatened by violence.

Pronatura (<http://english.pronatura-ppy.org.mx>) An environmental NGO that seeks volunteers to work with sea-turtle nesting areas in the Yucatán and in other projects.

Sipaz (www.sipaz.org) An international peace group, Sipaz needs Spanish-speaking volunteers to work for a year or more in Chiapas.

Vive Mexico (www.vivemexico.org) NGO that coordinates international social, ecological and cultural work camps in Mexico.

Volunteer Abroad (www.volunteerabroad.com) Has a very wide range of volunteer openings in Mexico.

The **Council on International Educational Exchange** (www.ciee.org), the **Alliance of European Voluntary Service Organisations** (www.alliance-net.org) and Unesco's **Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service** (www.unesco.org/ccivs) all have further information on volunteer programs in Mexico.

Transportation

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

ENTERING THE COUNTRY

Mexican immigration officers usually won't keep you waiting any longer than it takes to flick through your passport and enter your length of stay on your tourist card (p268). Stay patient and polite, even if the procedure takes some time to complete. Anyone traveling to Mexico via the USA should be sure to check US visa and passport requirements.

Flights, tours and train tickets can all be booked online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

Passport

Though it's not recommended, US and Canadian tourists can, at the time of writing, enter Mexico without a passport until 2007 if they have official photo identification, such as a driver's license, plus some proof of their citizenship such as an original birth certificate. But this is mooted for change for Americans, and for Canadians passing through the USA, due to new US regulations called the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative. These regulations are expected to require all air and sea travelers entering the USA from Mexico or Canada from

December 31, 2006 to carry passports, and the same to apply to land travelers from December 31, 2007. Accordingly, after this date, travelers won't be able to return to the US from Mexico (or to enter the US from Canada) without a passport. For full details, visit the **US State Department website** (www.travel.state.gov).

In any case it's much better to have a passport because officials of all countries prefer them and may delay people who have other documents. In Mexico you will often need your passport if you change money or you may be asked to show it when you check into a hotel.

Those required to have a passport should make sure it is valid for at least six months after arriving in Mexico. Before you leave, get photocopies of the main page of your passport as well as your visa and airline tickets in the event the originals are lost or stolen.

For information on Mexican visa requirements and the tourist card, see p268. Travelers under 18 who are not accompanied by both their parents may need special documentation (see p269).

AIR

Most visitors to the Yucatán arrive by air. Air routes are structured so that virtually all international flights into the region pass through a handful of 'hub' cities: Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Miami or New York.

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works, and be aware of the security requirements for international travel, especially if traveling via the USA. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

Airports & Airlines

The majority of flights into the peninsula arrive at busy **Aeropuerto Internacional de Cancún** (airport code CUN; ☎ 998-886-0340; www.cancun-airport.com). The region's other gateways are **Cozumel airport** (CZM; ☎ 987-872-4916; www.asur.com.mx); **Chetumal** (CTM; ☎ 983-832-0898), **Mérida** (MID; ☎ 999-946-1530; www.asur.com.mx), and **Campeche** (CPE).

Mexico's two flag airlines are Mexicana and Aeroméxico. Formerly state-controlled, Mexicana was bought by Grupo Posadas, Mexico's biggest hotel company, in 2005, and at the time of writing the government hoped to sell off Aeroméxico in 2006. Their safety records are comparable to major US and European airlines.

AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM YUCATÁN

Aeroméxico (code AM; ☎ 800-021-4000; www.aero-mexico.com; hub Mexico City) Campeche (☎ 981-816-5678); Cancún (☎ 998-287-1822); Mérida (☎ 999-946-1400)

Alaska Airlines (code AS; ☎ 800-252-7522; www.alaskaair.com; hub Seattle)

America West (code HP; ☎ 800-235-9292; www.americawest.com; hub Phoenix)

American Airlines (code AA; ☎ 800-904-6000; www.aa.com; hub Dallas)

ATA (code ATA; ☎ 800-883-5228; www.ata.com; hub Chicago)

Aviacsa (code 6A; ☎ 800-006-2200; www.aviacsa.com; hub Mexico City)

Click Mexicana (code QA; ☎ 800-122-5425; www.clickmx.com; hub Cancún & Mexico City)

Continental Airlines (code CO; ☎ 800-900-5000; www.continental.com; hub Houston)

Cubana (code CU; ☎ 52-5250-6355; www.cubana.co.cu; hub Havana)

Delta Airlines (code DL; ☎ 800-123-4710; www.delta.com; hub Atlanta)

Frontier Airlines (code F9; in the USA ☎ 800-432-1359; www.frontierairlines.com; hub Denver)

LTU (code LT; in Germany ☎ 211-9418-333; www.ltu.de; hub Dusseldorf)

Mexicana de Aviación (code MX; ☎ 800-509-8960; www.mexicana.com; hub Mexico City)

DEPARTURE TAX

A departure tax equivalent to about US\$25 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. Ask your travel agent in advance.

TACA Airlines (code TA; ☎ 800-400-8222; www.taca.com; hub San Salvador)

US Airways (code US; ☎ 800-235-9292; www.usairways.com; hub Philadelphia)

Tickets

The cost of flying to Yucatán is usually higher around Christmas and New Year, and during July and August. Also, weekends can be more costly than weekdays. During US spring break (roughly mid-March to mid-April) Cancún attracts swarms of college students and inexpensive fares vanish months in advance. In addition to websites and ticket agents such as those recommended following, it's often worth checking the airlines' own websites for special deals. Newspapers, magazines and websites serving Mexican communities in other countries are also good sources. **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com) has good links, too.

On flights to and within Mexico, children under two generally travel for 10% of the adult fare, as long as they do not occupy a seat, and those aged two to 11 normally pay 67%.

If Yucatán is part of a trip encompassing other countries, the best ticket for you may be an open jaw (where you fly into one place and out of another, covering the intervening distance by land), or a round-the-world ticket (these can cost as little as UK£900, A\$2100 or US\$1700), or a Circle Pacific ticket, which uses a combination of airlines to circle the Pacific. **Airtreks** (www.airtreks.com) is one good source for multistop tickets.

International online booking agencies worth a look include **Cheaptickets** (www.cheaptickets.com) and, for students and travelers under the age of 26, **STA Travel** (www.statravel.com).

Asia

From Asia you normally have to make a connection in the USA or Canada (often Los Angeles, San Francisco or Vancouver), and maybe one in Asia as well. From more westerly Asian points such as Bangkok, routes via Europe are also an option.

No 1 Travel (☎ 03-3205-6073; www.no1-travel.com) Good Japanese option.

STA Travel Bangkok (☎ 2237-9400; www.statravel.co.th); Singapore (☎ 6737-7188; www.statravel.com.sg); Hong Kong (☎ 2736-1618; www.statravel.com.hk); Tokyo (☎ 03-5391-2922; www.statravel.co.jp) STA proliferates in Asia.

Australia & New Zealand

The cheapest routes are usually via the USA (normally Los Angeles). You're normally looking at A\$2300 or NZ\$2300 or more, round trip (plus several hundred dollars extra at high season).

The following are well-known agents for cheap fares, with branches throughout both countries:

Flight Centre Australia (☎ 133-133; www.flightcentre.com.au); New Zealand (☎ 0800-243-544; www.flightcentre.co.nz)

STA Travel Australia (☎ 1300-733-035; www.statravel.com.au); New Zealand (☎ 0508-782-872; www.statravel.co.nz)

For online fares try www.travel.com.au or www.zuji.com from Australia, and www.travel.co.nz or www.zuji.co.nz from New Zealand.

Canada

Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver all have direct flights to Mexico, though better deals are often available with a change of flight in the US. Round-trip fares from Toronto start around C\$900 to Cancún. **Travel Cuts** (☎ 800-667-2887; www.travelcuts.com) is Canada's national student-travel agency. For online bookings try www.kayak.com, www.expedia.ca and www.travelocity.ca.

Central & South America & Cuba

There are direct flights to Cancún from Guatemala City and Flores (Guatemala), Havana, Panama City and São Paulo. The Havana–Cancún flights continue to Mérida. Round-trip fares start around US\$500 from Guatemala City and US\$800 to US\$1000 from South America.

US visitors heading to Cuba should ensure they get their entry stamp on a piece of paper (and not in their passports); otherwise the US authorities will not be impressed.

Recommended ticket agencies include the following:

ASATEJ (☎ 011-4114-7595; www.asatej.com) In Argentina.

IVI Tours (☎ 0212-993-6082; www.ividiomas.com) In Venezuela.

Student Travel Bureau (☎ 3038-1555; www.stb.com.br) In Brazil.

Viajo.com (www.viajo.com) Online and phone bookings from several countries.

Europe

There are few direct flights to Cancún; airlines that do so include Aeroméxico, Jetair and LTU. One alternative is to fly to Mexico City; another is to change planes in the USA or Canada.

Round-trip fares to Cancún start around €600 to €700. The two budget airlines (LTU from Dusseldorf and Jetair from Brussels) can save you a couple of hundred euros if you chose your dates carefully.

For online bookings throughout Europe, try www.opodo.com or www.ebookers.com.

IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE

France

Nouvelles Frontières (☎ 08-25-00-07-47; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr)

OTU Voyages (☎ 01-55-82-32-32; www.otu.fr) A student and youth travel specialist.

Voyageurs du Monde (☎ 08-92-68-83-63; www.vdm.com)

Germany

Expedia (www.expedia.de)

Just Travel (☎ 089-747-3330; www.justtravel.de)

STA Travel (☎ 069-743-032-92; www.statravel.de) For travelers aged under 26.

Other Countries

Airfair (☎ 070-307-6110; www.airfair.nl) Dutch.

CTS Viaggi (☎ 199-501-150; www.cts.it) Italian specialist in student and youth travel.

eDreams (☎ 902-887-107; www.edreams.es) Spanish.

Kilroy Travels (www.kilroytravels.com) Covers Scandinavia.

Rumbo (☎ 902-123-999; www.rumbo.es) Spanish.

IN THE UK

Flight advertisements appear in the travel pages of the weekend broadsheet newspapers, in *Time Out*, the *Evening Standard* and free online magazine *TNT* (www.tntmagazine.com).

An excellent place to start your inquiries is **Journey Latin America** (☎ 020-8747-3108; www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk), which offers a variety of tours as well as flights. Other recommended agencies include the following:

Flight Centre (☎ 0800-5877-0058; flightcentre.co.uk)

Flightbookers (☎ 0800-082-3000; www.ebookers.com)

STA Travel (☎ 0870-163-0026; www.statravel.co.uk)

For travelers under the age of 26.

Trailfinders (☎ 0845-058-5858; www.trailfinders.co.uk)

Travelbag (☎ 0800-082-5000; www.travelbag.com)

The USA

From the USA you can fly to airports on the Yucatán Peninsula nonstop or with just one stop from several US cities. If you're lucky you can get round-trip fares to Cancún for as low as US\$250. If you're not so lucky, 'budget' operators can cost as much as other airlines. For current bargain offers, check **Airfare Watchdog** (www.airfarewatchdog.com). Some typical discounted low-season fares to Cancún include: Chicago (US\$350), Los Angeles (US\$400), Miami (US\$350) and New York (US\$450). In high season you may have to pay an additional US\$100 to US\$200.

San Francisco is the ticket consolidator (discounter) capital of the USA, but good deals can also be found in other big cities. The following agencies are recommended for online bookings. They offer competitive fares year-round, if you book ahead.

- www.cheaptickets.com
- www.expedia.com
- www.kayak.com
- www.lowestfare.com
- www.orbitz.com
- www.sta.com (for students and travelers under 26)
- www.travelocity.com

LAND

Border Crossings

Mexico can be entered from the USA at around 40 official road crossing points.

Crossing the Mexico–Belize border at the southern tip of Quintana Roo is easy for most tourists. Although there have been isolated reports of authorities requiring a minimum 72 hour stay in Belize, official word is that day visitors are welcome, and there are no special fees for such a visit.

An old bridge on the Río Hondo at the town of Subteniente López, 8km southwest of Chetumal, marks the official crossing point.

At the time of writing, each person leaving Belize for Mexico needed to pay a departure tax of US\$10 and an 'environment tax' of US\$3.75 at the border. An additional US\$4.25 is charged for fumigation of private vehicles. All fees must be paid in cash (in Belizean or US currency), and officials usually won't have change for US currency. For Mexican entry requirements, see p268.

Bus

Buses run between Chetumal (Quintana Roo) and Belize City (US\$5 to US\$7, four hours). **Novelo's Bus Line** (in Belize City ☎ 227-2025) runs around 20 buses a day on this route passing through the Belizean towns of Corozal and Orange Walk.

There are a few daily buses between Flores, Guatemala, and Chetumal (US\$25, seven to eight hours), via Belize City, run by **Línea Dorada** (in Flores ☎ 7926-0070) and **San Juan Travel** (in Flores ☎ 7926-0041).

Car & Motorcycle

Driving a car into Mexico is most useful for travelers who:

- like to get off the beaten track
- have surfboards, kayaks, diving equipment or other cumbersome luggage
- will be traveling with at least one companion.

You can check the full requirements for bringing a vehicle into Mexico with the **American Automobile Association** (AAA; www.aaa.com), **Sanborn's** (☎ 800-222-0158; www.sanbornsinsurance.com), a Mexican consulate or Mexican tourist information (in the USA & Canada ☎ 800-446-3942, 800-482-9832).

For information on driving and motorcycling around the Yucatán, see p277.

INSURANCE

It is very foolish to drive in Mexico without Mexican liability insurance. If you are involved in an accident, you can be jailed and have your vehicle impounded while responsibility and restitution is assessed.

RIVER

From Flores, Guatemala you can also take the Río Usumacinta route to Palenque or Yaxchilán, in Chiapas, Mexico. Several daily 2nd-class buses run from Flores to Bethel (US\$4, four hours), on the Guatemalan bank of the Usumacinta. The 40-minute boat trip from Bethel to Frontera Corozal, Mexico, costs US\$7 to US\$11 per person; an alternative is to take a bus from Flores that continues through Bethel to La Técnica (US\$5, five hours), from which it's only a US\$1, five-minute river crossing to Frontera Corozal. Vans run from Frontera Corozal to Palenque (US\$6, three hours, 10 daily). From Frontera Corozal, it's well

worth first detouring to the outstanding Maya ruins at Yaxchilán. Travel agencies in Palenque and Flores offer bus-boat-bus packages between the two places from around US\$40.

SEA

The cruise ship-vehicle ferry between Tampa (Florida) and Progreso, in Yucatán state, is no longer operating.

If you'd like to combine snatches of Mexico with a life of ease on the high seas, take a cruise! Caribbean Mexico is a very popular cruise destination, usually in combination with other Caribbean stops and/or Key West, Florida. Cozumel island is easily the busiest cruise stop in Mexico. Mexico's other Caribbean cruise ports are Costa Maya, Puerto Morelos and the new Calica, just south of Playa del Carmen. Progreso, on the Yucatán's north coast, is also popular.

A Caribbean cruise from ports in the southeastern USA can cost well under US\$1000 per person for 10 days.

Following are some of the cruise lines visiting Mexico, with US phone numbers:

Carnival Cruise Lines (☎ 888-227-6482; www.carnival.com)

Crystal Cruises (☎ 800-804-1500; www.crystalcruises.com)

Holland America Line (☎ 877-724-5425; www.hollandamerica.com)

Norwegian Cruise Lines (☎ 800-327-7030; www.ncl.com)

P&O Cruises (☎ 415-382-8900; www.pocruises.com)

Princess Cruises (☎ 800-774-6237; www.princess.com)

Royal Caribbean International (☎ 800-398-9813; www.royalcaribbean.com)

GETTING AROUND

AIR

Airlines in Yucatán

Flights from other parts of Mexico arrive at the airports of Campeche, Mérida, Cancún, Cozumel, Playa del Carmen, Ciudad del Carmen and Chetumal. Another useful gateway for the region is Tuxtla Gutiérrez, which services San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Chiapas. For details, see the Getting There & Away sections of those cities.

Aeroméxico and Mexicana are the country's two major airlines. There are also numerous smaller ones, often cheaper and

DOMESTIC DEPARTURE TAX

There are two taxes on domestic flights: IVA, the value-added tax (15%), and TUA, an airport tax of about US\$8.50. In Mexico, the taxes are normally included in quoted fares and paid when you buy the ticket. If you bought the ticket outside of Mexico, though, you will have to pay the TUA when you check-in in Mexico.

providing service between provincial cities. The US Federal Aviation Administration considers Mexico to be in compliance with international aviation safety standards.

AIRLINES FLYING WITHIN YUCATÁN

Each of the following has domestic flights into Yucatán.

Aeromar (code BQ; ☎ 800-237-6627; www.aeromar.com.mx) Also services Central Mexico, west, northeast, Gulf coast.

Aeroméxico (code AM; ☎ 800-021-4000; www.aeromexico.com) Over 50 cities nationwide.

Aviacsa (code 6A; ☎ 800-006-2200; www.aviacsa.com) Services 20 cities around the country.

Click Mexicana (code QA; ☎ 800-122-5425 www.clickmx.com) Connections to Veracruz, Guadalajara, Toluca and other cities around the country.

Interjet (☎ 800-011-2345; www.interjet.com.mx) Services to Toluca, Guadalajara, Monterrey.

Líneas Aéreas Azteca (☎ 800-229-8322; www.aazteca.com.mx; Cancún) Mexico City, Oaxaca, north, west.

Magnicharters (in Cancún ☎ 998-884-0212; www.magnicharters.com.mx) Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, León, San Luis Potosí.

Mexicana (code MX; ☎ 800-502-2000; www.mexicana.com) Over 50 cities nationwide.

Volaris (☎ 800-786-5274; www.volaris.com.mx) Toluca, Guadalajara, León, Monterrey.

BICYCLE

Cycling on the peninsula's highways can be hair-raising because of the narrow shoulders and speeding traffic. Many routes see a lot of local bicycle traffic, but on some of them you'll often see cyclists, pedestrians and even dogs step off the pavement and wait by the side of the road until traffic passes. The tropical sun can be brutal, but at least the roads are mostly flat. If you're bringing your own bike to tour, be prepared to handle your own repairs.

For details on bike rental, see p56.

Purchase

Of course it's possible to purchase a bicycle in the Yucatán. Indeed, if you plan on staying on the peninsula for months and want to get around by bike or at least exercise on one, purchasing isn't a bad option, as there are many inexpensive models available in the big cities. A good place to pick up a cheap bike is the duty-free Zona Libre between Belize and Mexico; see p150.

BOAT

Ferries run from the mainland to the islands of Isla Mujeres (p90), Cozumel (p113) and Isla Holbox (p93).

BUS & COLECTIVO

The Yucatán Peninsula has a good road and bus network, and comfortable, frequent, reasonably priced bus services connect all cities. Most cities and towns have one main bus terminal where all long-distance buses arrive and depart. It may be called the Terminal de Autobuses, Central de Autobuses, Central Camionera or simply La Central (not to be confused with *el centro*, the city center!) If there is no single main terminal, different bus companies will have separate terminals scattered around town.

Baggage is safe if stowed in the bus's baggage hold, but get a receipt for it when you hand it over. Keep your valuables (passport, money etc) on you, and keep them closely protected.

Highway robbery happens very occasionally, usually at night, on isolated stretches of highway. See p257 for details.

Classes

DELUXE

De lujo services, sometimes termed *ejecutivo* (executive), run mainly on the busy routes. They are swift, modern and comfortable, with reclining seats, adequate legroom, air-con, few or no stops, toilets on board (but not necessarily toilet paper), and sometimes drinks or snacks. Deluxe buses usually show movies on video screens, and may offer headphones.

1ST CLASS

On *Primera (1a) clase* buses, standards of comfort are adequate at the very least. The buses usually have air-con and a toilet and they stop infrequently. They always show movies (often bad ones) for most of the trip.

Bring a sweater or jacket to combat overzealous air-conditioning. As with deluxe buses, you buy your ticket in the bus station before boarding.

2ND CLASS

Segunda (2a) clase buses serve small towns and villages, and provide cheaper, slower travel on some intercity routes. A few are almost as quick, comfortable and direct as 1st-class buses. Others are old, slow and shabby.

Many 2nd-class services have no ticket office; you just pay your fare to the conductor. These buses tend to take slow, nontoll roads in and out of big cities and will stop anywhere to pick up passengers: if you board midroute you might make some

EXPRESO MAYA TRAIN

The only passenger train still plying the peninsula, the **Expreso Maya** (☎ 999-944-9393; www.expresomaya.com) will give you a rare taste of Mexico's golden age of rail travel.

This involves deluxe travel: four-course meals of regional specialties are served on flatware that was designed and manufactured in local haciendas. The décor, created by Yucatán artist Carlos Billete, evokes Maya world themes, with henequen wall covering and seat numbers in Maya numerals. Each of the eight nonsmoking, air-conditioned cars reflects a different destination, with faux cobblestone floors in the Campeche car and spider monkeys painted on the tables of the Palenque car, which is equipped with board games, a library and a bar.

The Expreso Maya makes two journeys each month (except September), one from Palenque to Dzitás (near Chichén Itzá) and a second in the other direction. The 691km journey takes a week eastbound, six days westbound, with stops at the Agua Azul Cenote, Campeche, Mérida and Izamal. At some points, buses shuttle passengers to the ruins at Uxmal and Chichén Itzá. Rates start around US\$2000 per person, including meals and stays in five-star hotels. Reservations should be made 60 days in advance.

of the trip standing. The small amount of money you save by traveling 2nd class is not usually worth the discomfort or extra journey time entailed.

Second-class buses can also be less safe than 1st-class or deluxe buses, for reasons of maintenance, driver standards, or because they are more vulnerable to being boarded by bandits on quiet roads. Out in the remoter areas, however, you'll often find that 2nd-class buses are the only buses available.

Microbuses or 'micros' are small, usually fairly new, 2nd-class buses with around 25 seats, often running short routes between nearby towns.

Costs

First-class buses typically cost around US\$4 per hour of travel (70km to 80km). Deluxe buses may cost just 10% or 20% more than 1st class, or about 60% more for super-deluxe services such as UNO. Second-class buses cost 10% or 20% less than 1st class. Children under 13 pay half-price on many Mexican long-distance buses, and, if they're small enough to sit on your lap, they will usually go for free.

Reservations

For trips of up to four or five hours on busy routes, you can usually just go to the bus terminal, buy a ticket and head out without much delay. For longer trips, or routes with infrequent service, buy a ticket a day or more in advance. Deluxe and 1st-class bus companies have computerized ticket systems that allow you to select your seat when you buy your ticket.

Seats on deluxe and 1st-class lines such as UNO, ADO and OCC can be booked through **Ticket Bus** (☎ 800-702-8000; www.ticketbus.com.mx), a reservations service with offices in Mérida, Cancún, Cozumel, Campeche and Ciudad del Carmen.

If you pay for a bus ticket in cash, cash refunds of 80% to 100% are available from many bus companies if you return your ticket more than an hour or two before the departure time.

Combi, Colectivo & Truck

In much of the peninsula, a variety of other vehicles, often Volkswagen, Ford or Chevrolet vans, operate shuttle services between

some towns, especially on short-haul routes and those linking rural settlements. These vehicles usually leave whenever they are full. Fares are typically a little less than 1st-class buses. *Combi* is often used as a catch-all term for these services regardless of van type, as is *taxi colectivo* (shared taxi) or simply *colectivo*.

More basic are passenger-carrying *camiones* (trucks) and *camionetas* (pickups), usually with benches lining the sides. Standing in the back of a lurching truck with a couple of dozen *campesinos* (farm workers) and their machetes and animals is at least an experience to remember. Fares are similar to 2nd-class bus fares.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Driving in Mexico is not as easy as it is north of the border, and rentals are more expensive, but having your own vehicle gives you extra flexibility and freedom.

Drivers should know some Spanish and have basic mechanical knowledge, reserves of patience and access to extra cash for emergencies. Good makes of car to drive in Mexico are Volkswagen, Nissan, General Motors, Chrysler and Ford, which have plants in Mexico and dealers in most big towns. Very big cars are unwieldy on narrow roads. A sedan with a trunk (boot) provides safer storage than a station wagon or hatchback. Mexican mechanics are resourceful, and most repairs can be done quickly and inexpensively, but it still pays to take some spare parts (spare fuel filters are very useful). Tires (including spare), shock absorbers and suspension should be in good condition. For security, have something to immobilize the steering wheel.

Motorcycling in Mexico is not for the fainthearted. Roads and traffic can be rough, and parts and mechanics hard to come by. The parts you'll most easily find will be for Kawasaki, Honda and Suzuki bikes.

Fuel

All *gasolina* (gasoline) and diesel fuel in Mexico is sold by the government-owned Pemex (Petróleos Mexicanos). Most towns, even small ones, have a Pemex gas station, and the stations are pretty common on most major roads. In remote areas you should fill up whenever you can.

The gasoline on sale is all *sin plomo* (unleaded). There are two varieties: *magna sin*, roughly equivalent to US regular unleaded, and premium, roughly equivalent to US super unleaded. At the time of research, *magna sin* cost about US\$0.60 a liter (US\$2.40 a US gallon), and premium about US\$0.70. Diesel fuel is widely available at around US\$0.50 a liter. Regular Mexican diesel has a higher sulfur content than US diesel, but there is a '*diesel sin*' with less sulfur.

Pump attendants at gas stations appreciate a tip of US\$0.20 to US\$0.50.

Maps

Mexican signposting can be poor and decent road maps are essential. See p262 for more information on maps.

Rental

Auto rental in the Yucatán is expensive by US or European standards, but is not hard to organize. You can book by Internet, phone or in person and pick up cars at city offices, airports and many of the big hotels.

Renters must provide a valid driver's license (your home license is OK), passport and major credit card, and are usually required to be at least 21 (sometimes 25, or if you're aged 21 to 24 you may have to pay a surcharge). Read the small print of the rental agreement. In addition to the basic rental rate, you pay tax and insurance to the rental company, and the full insurance that rental companies encourage can almost double the basic cost. You'll usually have the option of taking liability-only insurance at a lower rate. Ask exactly what the insurance options cover: theft and damage insurance may only cover a percentage of costs. It's best to have plenty of liability coverage: Mexican law permits the jailing of drivers after an accident until they have met their obligations to third parties. The complimentary car-rental insurance offered with some US credit cards does not usually cover Mexico.

Most rental agencies offer a choice between a per-kilometer deal or unlimited kilometers. Local firms may or may not be cheaper than the big international ones. In most places the cheapest car available (often a Volkswagen Beetle) costs US\$50

to US\$60 a day including unlimited kilometers, insurance and tax. If you rent by the week or month, the per-day cost can come down by 20% to 40%. You can also cut costs by avoiding airport pickups and drop-offs, for which 10% can be added to your total check. The extra charge for drop-off in another city, when available, is usually about US\$0.40 per kilometer.

Some major firms in Mexico:

Alamo (☎ 800-849-8001; www.alamo.com)

Avis (☎ 800-288-8888; www.avis.com.mx)

Budget (☎ 55-5705-5061; www.budget.com.mx)

Dollar (☎ 998-886-2300; www.dollar.com)

Europcar (☎ 800-201-2084; www.europcar.com.mx)

Hertz (☎ 800-709-5000; www.hertz.com)

National (☎ 800-716-6625; www.nationalcar.com.mx)

Thrifty (☎ 55-5207-1100; www.thrifty.com.mx)

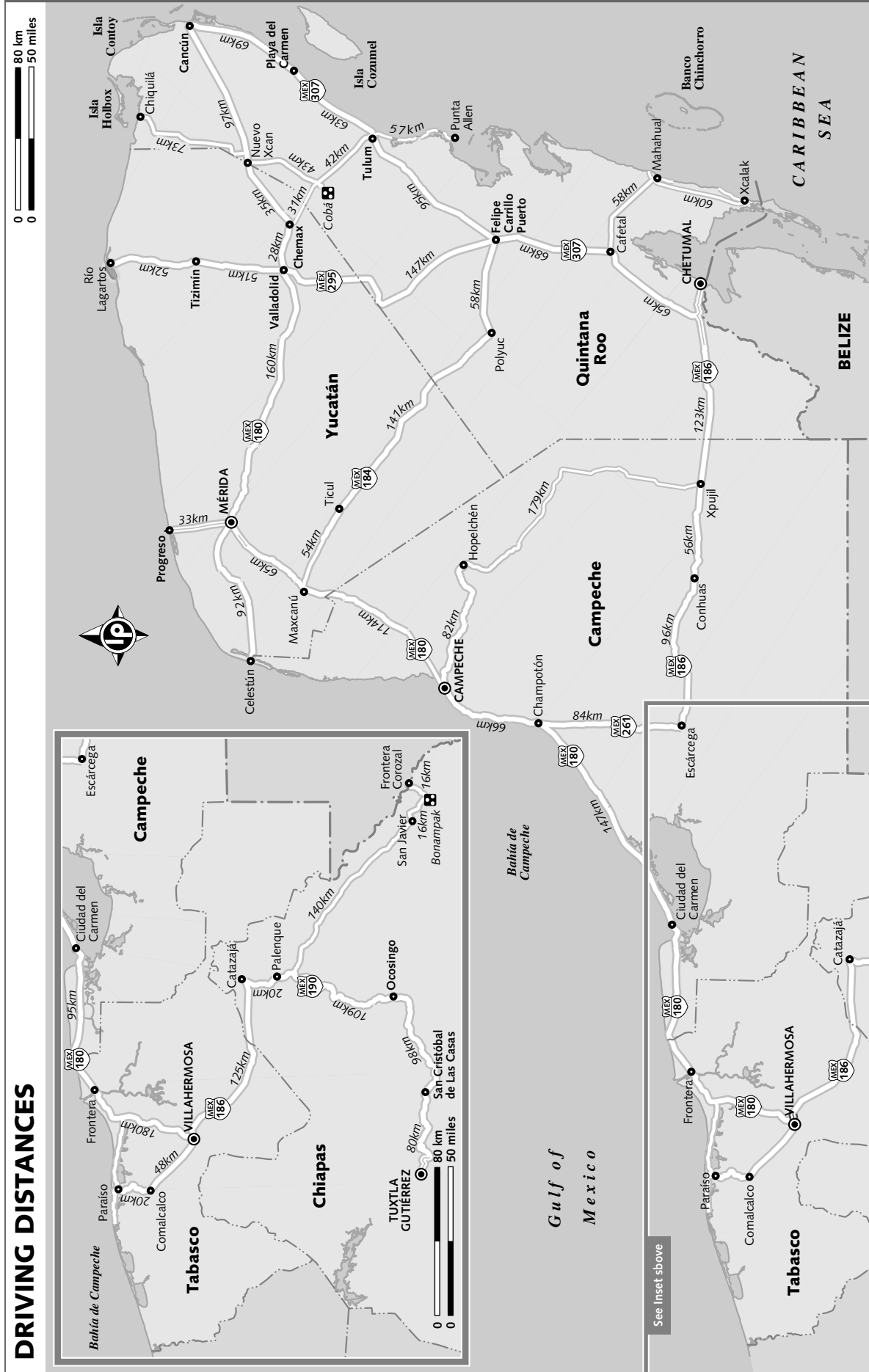
Motorbikes or scooters are available for rent in a few tourist centers. You're usually required to have a driver's license and credit card. It's advisable to look particularly carefully into insurance arrangements here: some renters do not offer any insurance at all. Note that a locally acquired motorcycle license is not valid under some travel insurance policies.

Road Conditions

Many Mexican highways, even some toll highways, are not up to the standards of US, Canadian or European ones. Still, the main roads are serviceable and fairly fast when traffic is not heavy. Mexicans are not such reckless drivers as they are often supposed to be, and are certainly no worse than their counterparts in southern Europe. Traffic density, poor surfaces and frequent hazards (potholes, speed bumps, animals, bicycles and children) all help to keep speeds down.

Driving on a dark night is best avoided since unlit vehicles, rocks, pedestrians and animals on the roads are common. Also, hijacks and robberies do occur.

In towns and cities and on rural roads, be especially wary of *Alto* (Stop) signs, *topes* (speed bumps) and holes in the road. They are often not where you'd expect, and missing one can cost you a traffic fine or car damage. Speed bumps are also used to slow traffic on highways that pass through built-up areas: they are not always signed, and some of them are severe!



DRIVING DISTANCES

TRANSPORTATION

BREAKDOWN ASSISTANCE

The Mexican tourism ministry, *Sectur*, maintains a network of *Ángeles Verdes* (Green Angels) – bilingual mechanics in green uniforms and green trucks, who patrol 60,000km of major highways throughout the country daily during daylight hours looking for tourists in trouble. They make minor repairs, change tires, provide fuel and oil, and arrange towing and other assistance if necessary. Service is free; parts, gasoline and oil are provided at cost. If you are near a telephone when your car has problems, you can call their **24-hour hot line** (☎ 078) or contact them through the national **24-hour tourist-assistance service** (☎ 800-903-9200) in Mexico City. There's a map of the roads they patrol at www.sectur.gob.mx/wb2/sectur/sect_9454_rutas_carreteras.

CITY PARKING

It's not usually a good idea to park on the street overnight. If your hotel doesn't have parking, it's best to find a commercial *estacionamiento* (parking lot). These usually cost around US\$5 overnight and US\$1 per hour during the day.

TOLL ROADS

There are three major toll roads, mostly four-lane, in the Yucatán that connect the major cities. They are generally in much better condition and a lot quicker than the alternative free roads. *Cuotas* (tolls) average about US\$1 per 10km.

Road Rules

Drive on the right-hand side of the road.

One-way streets are the rule in cities. Priority at street intersections is indicated by thin black and red rectangles containing white arrows. A black rectangle facing you means you have priority; a red one means you don't. The white arrows indicate the direction of traffic on the cross street; if the arrow points both ways, it's a two-way street.

Speed limits range between 80km/h and 120km/h on open highways (less when highways pass through built-up areas), and between 30km/h and 50km/h in towns and cities. Seat belts are obligatory for all occupants of a car, and children under five

must be strapped into safety seats in the rear. Traffic laws and speed limits rarely seem to be enforced on the highways. Obey the rules in the cities so you don't give the police an excuse to demand a 'fine' payable on the spot.

Although less frequent in the Yucatán, there is always the chance that you will be pulled over by traffic police for an imaginary infraction. If this happens, stay calm and polite and don't be in a hurry. You don't have to pay a bribe, and corrupt cops would rather not work too hard to obtain one. You can also ask to see documentation about the law you have supposedly broken, ask for the officer's identification, ask to speak to a superior, and/or note the officer's name, badge number, vehicle number and department (federal, state or municipal). Pay any traffic fines at a police station and get a receipt, then if you wish to make a complaint head for a state tourist office.

HITCHHIKING

Hitchhiking is never entirely safe in any country in the world, and is not recommended. Travelers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. People who do choose to hitch will be safer if they travel in pairs and let someone know where they are planning to go. A woman traveling alone certainly should not hitchhike in Mexico, and even two women together is not advisable.

However, some people do choose to hitchhike, and it's not an uncommon way of getting to some of the off-the-beaten-track archaeological sites and other places that tend to be poorly served by bus. Keep your wits about you and don't accept a lift if you have any misgivings.

In Mexico it's customary for the hitchhiker to offer to pay for the ride, especially if the ride is in a work or commercial vehicle. As a general rule, offer about US\$1 per person for every 30 minutes of the ride but not less than US\$2 total and never more than US\$10.

TOURS

For details on tours offered by locally based operators, check the destination chapters.

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