

Tabasco & Chiapas



These neighboring southern states could hardly stand in clearer contrast. Chiapas is a green jewel tucked into Mexico's southernmost corner, its sweaty emerald jungles sparkling with unbelievably beautiful Maya ruins and waterfalls, its cool, mist-wrapped highlands the re-doubt of the most traditionalist and unreconstructed of contemporary Maya peoples. Smaller Tabasco is largely a flat, steamy, well-watered lowland – and detains far fewer visitors. But those who do it a little justice will discover a region with a fascinating pre-Hispanic heritage and a unique natural environment of enormous rivers, endless wetlands and some surprisingly good Gulf of Mexico beaches.

The two states have hosted as rich a procession of cultures as anywhere in Mexico. It was at La Venta in western Tabasco that Mesoamerica's 'mother culture,' the Olmec, reached its greatest heights of development, between about 800 and 400 BC. Olmec religion, art, astronomy and architecture deeply influenced all Mexico's later civilizations.

Low-lying, jungle-covered eastern Chiapas gave rise to some of the most splendid and powerful city-states of another great civilization, the Maya, during its Classic period. Remains of these can be seen at Palenque and Yaxchilán. Dozens of lesser Maya powers – including Bonampak and Comalcalco – prospered in eastern Chiapas and in Tabasco as Maya culture reached its peak of artistic and intellectual achievement. Today, the modern Maya are best observed in and around the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

Pre-Hispanic Tabasco was the prosperous nexus of a far-reaching trade network extending round the Yucatán coast as far as Honduras, up the rivers to the jungles and mountains of Guatemala, and westward to highland central Mexico. And it was near Frontera, Tabasco, in 1519 that Cortés and his conquistadors fought their first battle against native Mexicans.

HIGHLIGHTS


- Encountering indigenous traditions in the highlands enclave of **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p239) and surrounding villages (p245)
- Prowling the ruins of **Palenque** (p246), a stunning array of Maya architecture set amid the Chiapas jungle
- Marveling at the famed frescoes of **Bonampak** (p249), a remarkable tableau of pre-Hispanic society
- Frolicking on Tabasco's remote Gulf beaches around **Puerto Ceiba** (p238)
- Standing face-to-face with colossal Olmec heads at **Parque-Museo La Venta** (p236) in Villahermosa



TABASCO

Tabasco has few tourists, some intriguing pre-Hispanic sites, a lively capital city, a beautiful natural environment and a relaxed populace with an insatiable love for *música tropical*. Due to onshore and offshore oil exploitation by Mexico's state oil company, Pemex, Tabasco has emerged from poverty to become one of Mexico's more prosperous states.

VILLAHERMOSA




 993 / pop 673,000

This sprawling, hot and humid city with over a quarter of Tabasco's population was never the 'beautiful town' that its name implies, but it is at last taking advantage of its position on the winding Río Grijalva, with a welcome riverside leisure development near the pedestrianized city center.

Orientation & Information

The central Zona Luz extends north-south from Parque Juárez to the Plaza de Armas, and east-west from the Río Grijalva to roughly Calle 5 de Mayo. The main bus terminals are 750m to 1km to its north.




Parque-Museo La Venta, an attractive lakeside park, lies 2km northwest of the Zona Luz, beside Avenida Ruíz Cortines, the main east-west highway crossing the city. West of the park is the Tabasco 2000 district of modern commercial and government buildings.

There are many **cybercafés** (per hr US\$0.75-1) in the Zona Luz, along with numerous banks and the **post office** (Sáenz 131;  9am-3pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat). A **tourist office** ( 314-1642, 800-216-0842; www.visitetabasco.com;  8am-4pm Tue-Sun) is located at the Parque-Museo La Venta.

Sights

Apart from Parque-Museo La Venta, the pedestrianized **Zona Luz** is enjoyable to explore. Its busy lanes, full of hawkers' stalls and salsa-blasting stores, are dotted with cafés and galleries and buzz with tropical atmosphere.

PARQUE-MUSEO LA VENTA


The outdoor **park** ( 314-1652; Av Ruíz Cortines; admission US\$3.75;  8am-5pm, last admission 4pm, zoo closed Mon; ) was created in 1958 when pe-

troleum exploration threatened the ancient Olmec settlement of La Venta in western Tabasco. Archaeologists moved the site's most significant finds, including three colossal stone heads, to Villahermosa.

There's an informative display in English and Spanish on Olmec archaeology as you enter the **sculpture trail**. This 1km walk is lined with finds from La Venta. Among the most impressive are **Stela 3**, which depicts a bearded man with a headdress; **Altar 5**, depicting a figure carrying a child; **El Gobernante**, a very sour-looking seated ruler; a monkey-faced monument; the colossal head of a helmet-wearing warrior; and a stela showing a young goddess (a rare Olmec representation of anything female).



Parque-Museo La Venta is 3km from the Zona Luz. A 'Fracc Carrizal' *combi* (van or minibus) from Madero, just north of Parque Juárez, will drop you on Paseo Tabasco near Avenida Ruíz Cortines. Then walk 1km northeast across Parque Tomás Garrido Canabal and along a lakeside path to the entrance.

Tours






Turismo Nieves ( 314-1888; reservaya@turismonieves.com.mx; Sarlat 202) offers a range of comprehensive tours around Tabasco including Comalcalco, La Venta, Palenque and some beaches.

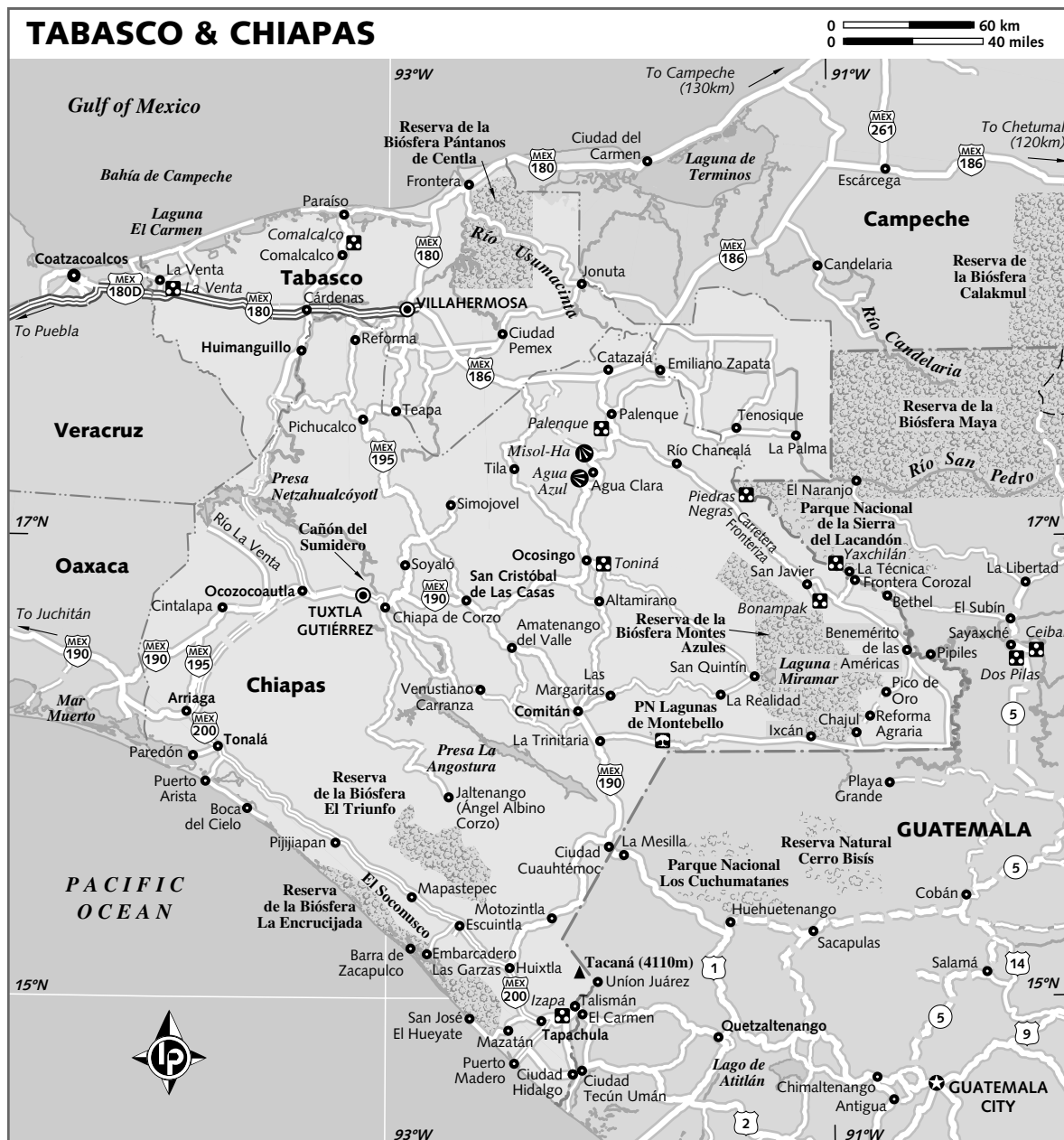
Sleeping

As an oil town, Villahermosa is well supplied with midrange and top-end hotels with good amenities, some offering discounted weekend rates.

Hotel Oriente ( 312-0121; fax 312-1101; Madero 425; s/d/tr with fan US\$18/25/31, with air-con US\$27/33/42; ) A well-run downtown hotel with comfortable spick-and-span rooms.

Hotel Madan ( 314-0524, 800-543-4777; www.bestwestern.com; Madero 408; r US\$50;  ) The good-value Madan has bright, spacious rooms with wooden furniture, coffeemakers and attractive bathrooms.

Hotel Cencali ( 315-1999, 800-112-5000; www.cencali.com.mx; Av Juárez, Colonia Lindavista; r US\$82;    ) The Cencali, near Parque-Museo La Venta, has 160 good-sized rooms with balconies, bathtubs and some views of the Laguna de las Ilusiones. A swimming pool is in tropical gardens beside the lake.



Eating & Entertainment

Villahermosa's eclectic collection of local, international and chain specialists will satisfy most palates. A cluster of bars with and without music is strung along the riverside *malecón* (boulevard), and some hotels have good restaurants and bars, too. To find out about performances, check www.secured.gob.mx or pick up the free monthly guide *Enterarte*.

Restaurant Los Tulipanes (☎ 312-9209; Periférico Carlos Pellicer 511; mains US\$7.50-17; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 11am-6pm Sun; ♿) Overlooking Río Grijalva, Los Tulipanes is the place for Tabasco specialties including seafood-filled tortillas, and empanadas of *pejelagarto*, the freshwater 'lizard fish' symbolic of Tabasco.

Food Court (Malecón Madrazo; mains US\$5-10; ☎ 10am-11pm) This open-air eating and drinking area on the deck beside the river has the finest location in town.

El Café de la Calle Juárez (☎ 312-3454; Juárez 513; ☎ 8am-11pm) Stroll along the Juárez pedestrian mall for breakfasts (US\$2.50 to US\$5) and coffees (US\$1 to US\$2).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeropuerto Rovirosa (☎ 356-0157) is 13km east of the center, off Hwy 186. Daily flights to/from Cancún and Mérida are served by **Aviaca** (☎ 316-5700) and **Click** (☎ 316-3133) with offices in the Plaza D'Atocha Mall. Click also flies once daily to/from Villahermosa.

BUS & COLECTIVO

Deluxe and 1st-class UNO, ADO and OCC buses, plus a few 2nd-class services, run from the **ADO bus station** (☎ 312-8422; Mina 297) 750m north of the Zona Luz. You can also buy tickets at the bus ticket machine (*cajero automático*) on Madero between the Madan and Olmeca Plaza hotels. Departures include:

Campeche (US\$20-27; 6-7hr; 20 daily)

Cancún (US\$46-81; 12-14hr; 21 daily)

Mérida (US\$27-54; 8-10hr; 20 daily)

Palenque (US\$5-6.50; 2½hr; 12 daily)

San Cristóbal de Las Casas (US\$16-24; 7-8hr; 3 daily)

The 2nd-class **Cardesa bus station** (☎ 314-3079; cnr Bastar Zozaya & Castillo) has service to Comalcalco, Frontera and Paraíso (US\$2.50 to US\$2.75; 1½ to two hours; departures every 30 to 60 minutes, 5am to 9pm).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Hwy 180 runs between Mérida and Villahermosa via the coast. Most rental companies have desks at the airport.

Getting Around

A taxi from the airport to the city costs around US\$18 (US\$15 from city to airport) and takes about 25 minutes.

Taxis within the central area cost US\$1.50. *Combi* rides are US\$0.50. From the ADO bus station to the Zona Luz, it's easiest to take a taxi. To the station, take a 'Chedraui,' 'ADO' or 'Cardesa' *combi* north on Malecón Madrazo.

AROUND VILLAHERMOSA
Comalcalco

The impressive Maya ruins of **Comalcalco** (admission US\$3.25; ☎ 10am-4pm) are around 51km northwest of Villahermosa and 3.5km north of the town of Comalcalco. Many of the site's buildings are uniquely constructed of fired bricks and/or mortar made from oyster shells. Maya Comalcalco was at its peak between AD 600 and 1000 when ruled by the Chontals. It was an important center of commerce for several centuries, trading in a cornucopia of pre-Hispanic luxury goods.

The site's museum has a fine array of sculptures and engravings of human heads, deities, glyphs and animals such as crocodiles and pelicans. The buildings have use-

ful information panels in both Spanish and English.

At the base of **Templo 1** are remains of large stucco sculptures including the feet of a giant winged toad. The **Gran Acrópolis**, with views over a canopy of palms to the Gulf of Mexico, is fronted by a burial pyramid once decorated with stucco sculptures of people, reptiles, birds and aquatic life. Another temple has a tomb lined by nine stucco sculptures showing a Comalcalco lord with his priests and courtiers. Above it is the crumbling profile of **El Palacio**, with parallel 80m-long corbeled-arched galleries, probably once Comalcalco's royal residence.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Comalcalco's **ADO terminal** (☎ 334-0007; cnr López Mateos & Monserrat) on the main road 300m east of the center, has 1st- and 2nd-class buses to Villahermosa (US\$3.50, 1½ hours, seven daily) and nearby destinations.

The site is 1km (signposted) off the Comalcalco-Paraíso road. Vans to the turnoff (US\$0.50) stop outside Comalcalco's ADO terminal. A taxi to the site costs around US\$2.50.

Cocoa Haciendas

Several local plantations make chocolate from home-grown organic cacao and offer tours (1hr tour per person US\$3.50; ☎ 10am-5pm).

Hacienda La Luz (☎ 933-334-1126; Blvd Rovirosa) is 250m west of Comalcalco's central plaza and **Finca Cholula** (☎ 933-344-3815; Carretera Comalcalco-Paraíso) is 1km further north of the archaeological site.

Gulf of Mexico Beaches

Between 20km and 30km north of Comalcalco, several wide, sandy **beaches** front the warm, clean waters of the Gulf of Mexico. At one beach area, Puerto Ceiba, the **Parador Turístico Puerto Ceiba** (☎ 933-333-2257; 5 de Febrero s/n; mains US\$7-8; ☎ noon-7pm or later) offers boat rides around lagoons and mangroves between 10am and 6pm (a 1¼-hour trip for up to 14 people costs US\$28). It also rents kayaks.

Paraíso's **ADO terminal** (☎ 333-0235; Av Romero Zurita), 1.5km south of the center, has 2nd-class buses to Villahermosa (US\$2.75, two hours, every half-hour). A taxi to Paraíso's beaches costs US\$2 to US\$3.

Reserva de la Biósfera Pantanos de Centla

This 3030-sq-km reserve protects a good part of the wetlands around the lower reaches of two of Mexico's biggest rivers, the Usumacinta and the Grijalva. These lakes, marshes, rivers, mangroves, savannas and forests are an irreplaceable sanctuary for countless creatures including the West Indian manatee and Morelet's crocodile (both endangered), various tortoise species, tapirs, ocelots, jaguars, howler monkeys, 60 fish species including the *pejelagarto*, and 230 bird species – not to mention 15,000 people scattered in 90 small waterside villages.

Punta Manglar (☎ 993-315-4491 in Villahermosa; Carretera Frontera-Jonuta Km 10; 🕒 9am-5pm) is an embarkation point for boat-and-foot excursions into the mangroves (up to 10 people US\$94) that last one to 1½ hours. The visitors center, **Centro de Interpretación Uyotot-Ja** (☎ 993-313-9362; Carretera Frontera-Jonuta Km 12.5; admission by donation; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), maintains a 20m-high observation tower overlooking the confluence of three large rivers at a spot known as Tres Brazos (Three Arms). Nature trail guides, displays on the wetlands, and two-hour boat trips (up to 10 people US\$141) are available.

Gray *combis* and *colectivo* taxis from Calle Madero in nearby Frontera (one to 1½ blocks south of the plaza) charge US\$1 for the 15-minute trip to Punta Manglar or Uyotot-Ja.

From the Frontera **ADO terminal** (☎ 913-332-1149; Zaragoza 609), six blocks from the plaza, 1st-class buses leave for Villahermosa (US\$3.75, 1½ hours, 25 daily) and Campeche (US\$14 to US\$16, 4½ hours, three daily).

CHIAPAS

Chiapas is a fascinating, exciting place to visit, with wildly beautiful landscapes, rich and mysterious indigenous cultures, the colonial charm of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, an array of exotic Maya ruins and an ever-improving tourism infrastructure.

Due to its oil and gas resources the cities and towns are home to a growing middle class. Yet despite this wealth, the people of rural Chiapas are among the poorest in the country. These inequities helped spark the state's Zapatista revolutionary movement

(see p242), and it's still impossible not to notice Zapatista as you travel round Chiapas.

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

☎ 967 / pop 129,000

San Cristóbal (*cris-toh-bal*), at an elevation of 2160m in the temperate, pine-clad Valle de Jovel, is at the heart of one of the most deeply rooted indigenous areas in Mexico, surrounded by dozens of Tzotzil and Tzeltal villages where age-old customs coexist with elements of modernity.

The city is a gathering place for an ever-changing community of artsy, socially aware Mexicans and foreigners and for sympathizers (and some opponents) of the Zapatista rebels, and a base for organizations working with Chiapas' indigenous people. San Cristóbal also has a terrific selection of accommodations, and a cosmopolitan array of cafés, bars and restaurants.

Orientation

The city is easy to walk around, with straight streets rambling up and down gentle hills. The Pan-American Hwy (Hwy 190, Blvd Juan Sabines, 'El Bulevar') runs through the southern part of town. Nearly all transportation terminals are on or just off the Pan-American. From the OCC bus terminal, it's six blocks north to the central square, Plaza 31 de Marzo. A long pedestrian mall, the Andador Turístico (or Andador Eclesiástico), runs north up Avenidas Hidalgo and 20 de Noviembre from the Arco de El Carmen to the Templo de Santo Domingo, crossing Plaza 31 de Marzo en route.

Information

Banamex (Plaza 31 de Marzo; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Has an ATM and does currency exchange.

Cybercafés (per hr about US\$0.60) Many along Real de Guadalupe and the Andador Turístico.

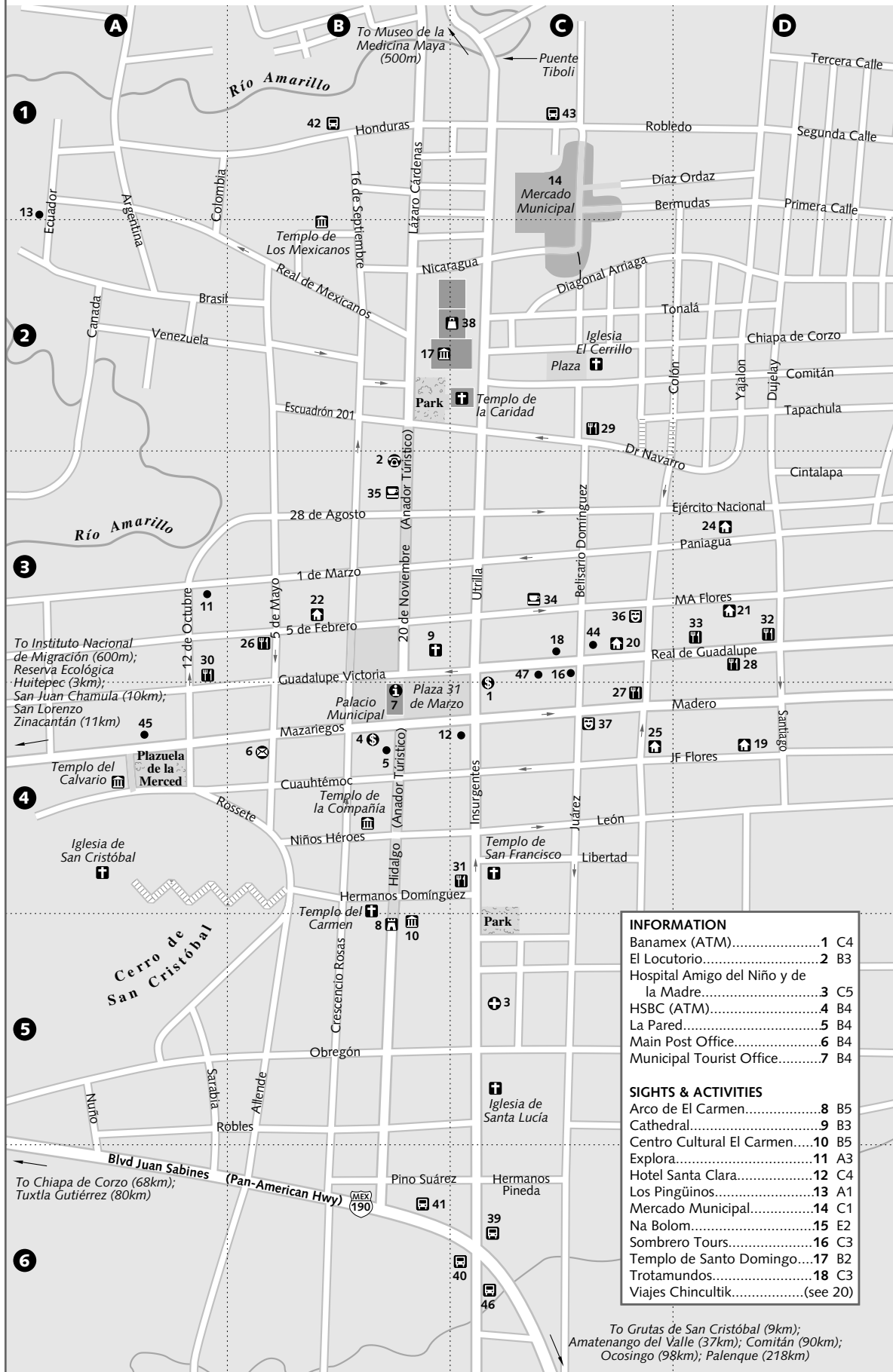
Hospital Amigo del Niño y de la Madre (☎ 678-0770; Insurgentes)

HSBC (Mazariegos 6; 🕒 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2:30pm Sun) Has an ATM and does currency exchange.

Instituto Nacional de Migración (☎ 678-6594; Diagonal El Centenario 30) About 1.2km west of the OCC bus station on the Pan-American Hwy.

La Pared (☎ /fax 678-6367; Hidalgo 2; 🕒 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Tue-Sat, noon-2pm & 4-8pm Sun) Sells new and used books in English, including guidebooks, and offers the cheapest international calls: US\$0.15 a minute to the USA and Canada, US\$0.20 to Western Europe.

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS



TABASCO & CHIAPAS

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To Grutas de San Cristóbal (9km);
 Amatenango del Valle (37km); Comitán (90km);
 Ocosingo (98km); Palenque (218km)



Main post office (☎ 678-0765; Allende 3)
Municipal tourist office (☎ 678-0665; Palacio Municipal, Plaza 31 de Marzo; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat & Sun)

Sights

The **cathedral**, on the north side of **Plaza 31 de Marzo**, was begun in 1528 but wasn't completed till 1815. It was restored in the early and late 20th century. The gold-leaf interior has five gilded altarpieces featuring 18th-century paintings by Miguel Cabrera. The **Hotel Santa Clara** on the plaza's southeast corner was built by Diego de Mazariegos, the Spanish conqueror of Chiapas, and is a rare secular example of Spanish renaissance style in Mexico. North of the center, along 20 de Noviembre, is the 16th-century **Templo de Santo Domingo** with its lavishly gilded interior.

Na Bolom (☎ 678-1418; www.nabolom.org; Guerrero 33; view house only US\$3.25, 1½hr tours in English or Spanish US\$4.25; 🕒 10am-5pm, tours 11:30am & 4:30pm) is a museum and research center for the study of Chiapas' indigenous cultures and natural environment with a library of more than 9000 books and documents on the Maya.

San Cristóbal's busy municipal **market** (Mercado Municipal; 🕒 approx 7am-5pm) is eight blocks north of the main plaza between Utrilla and Belisario Domínguez.

The award-winning **Maya Medicine Museum** (Museo de la Medicina Maya; ☎ 678-5438; www.medicinamaya.org; Av Salomón González Blanco 10; admission US\$2; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) explains the system of traditional medicine of many indigenous people in the Chiapas highlands.

The **Arco de El Carmen**, once the city's gateway, is at the southern end of the Andador Turístico on Hidalgo and dates from the late 17th century. The ex-convent just east is now the **Centro Cultural El Carmen** (Hermanos Domínguez s/n; admission free; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sun), hosting art and photography exhibitions.

Tours

Many agencies in San Cristóbal offer a variety of tours, often with guides who speak English, French or Italian. Recommended tour agencies (most open 8am to 9pm): **Explora** (☎ 678-4295; www.ecochiapas.com; 1 de Marzo 30; 🕒 9am-2pm & 4:30-8pm Mon-Sat) Adventure trips in and around the Lacandón Jungle (US\$330 for five days; minimum four people).

TABASCO & CHIAPAS

Sombrero Tours (☎ 674-6508; www.sombrerotours.com.mx; Juárez 1A) Specializes in trips around eastern Chiapas (eg five days including Palenque, Bonampak, Yaxchilán, Lagos de Montebello and El Chiflón for US\$275 per person).

Trotamundos (☎ /fax 678-7021; Real de Guadalupe 26C)

Viajes Chincultik (☎ 678-0957; agchincultik@prodigy.net.mx; Casa Margarita, Real de Guadalupe 34)

Festivals & Events

Semana Santa (Holy Week, Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday) The crucifixion is acted out on Good Friday in the Barrio de Mexicanos.

Feria de la Primavera y de la Paz (Spring & Peace Fair) Easter Sunday is the start of a week-long town fair.

Festival Cervantino Barroco (Late Oct-early Nov) A lively cultural program with music, dance and theater.

Sleeping

San Cristóbal has a glut of budget-priced accommodations but also a number of appealing midrange hotels, many in colonial or 19th-century mansions, and a smattering of top-end luxury.

Posada México (☎ 678-0014; Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez 12; posadamexico@hotmail.com; dm US\$6, s with/without bathroom US\$14/12.50, d with/without bathroom US\$19/15; ☎) This HI (Hostelling International) hostel has pretty gardens and bright rooms and dorms, with relaxing terraces and patios. Rates include a cooked breakfast.

Posada Jovel (☎ 678-1734; Paniagua 28; www.mundochiapas.com/hotelposadajovel; s with/without bathroom US\$19/10.50, d with/without bathroom US\$26/16, r in 'hotel' US\$36-39; ☎ ☎) Rooms in the original 'posada' building have highland blankets and some wooden floors, while those in the 'hotel' section across the street, surrounding a pretty garden, are larger and brightly decorated.

Casa Margarita (☎ 678-0957; agchincultik@prodigy.net.mx; Real de Guadalupe 34; s/d/tr/q US\$24/28/33/42; ☎) This efficiently run travelers' haunt offers tastefully presented, impeccably clean rooms around a pretty courtyard. It has free Internet and an in-house travel agency.

THE ZAPATISTAS

On January 1, 1994, the day of the North American Free Trade Agreement's (Nafta) initiation, a previously unknown leftist guerrilla army, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), emerged from the woods to occupy San Cristóbal de Las Casas and other towns in Chiapas. Linking antiglobalization rhetoric with Mexican revolutionary slogans, the Zapatistas (as they're better known) declared their intentions to overturn a wealthy oligarchy's centuries-old hold on land, resources and power and to fight to improve the wretched living standards of Mexico's indigenous people.

The Mexican army evicted the Zapatistas within days (most of the 150 people killed during the fighting were Zapatistas) and the rebels retreated to jungle hideouts on the fringes of the Selva Lacandona. Here they launched an effective propaganda blitz on the Internet (the main Zapatista-affiliated website is www.ezln.org.mx). The Zapatistas' charismatic pipe-puffing Subcomandante Marcos (actually a former university professor named Rafael Guillén) rapidly became a cult figure. International supporters flocked to Zapatista headquarters at La Realidad, about 85km southeast of Ocosingo. Zapatista-aligned peasants took over hundreds of farms and ranches in Chiapas.

In 1996 an agreement on indigenous rights was reached between Zapatista and government negotiators, though the government never turned the accords into law. Zapatistas later created several 'autonomous municipalities.' In 1997 right-wing paramilitaries responded by massacring 45 people in the village of Acteal.

Hopes of a fresh start rose in 2000 when non-PRI President Vicente Fox was elected. Attempts to make the necessary constitutional changes failed, however, as Congress watered down EZLN proposals.

Since then, the Zapatistas have come out of the jungle and under the tolerant eyes of the government and have made well-publicized tours around the country to promote their views and gain supporters. Most recently, in the run-up to the 2006 elections, Subcomandante Marcos launched La Otra Campaña (The Other Campaign) in repudiation of the three leading political parties and their candidates, although Marcos himself has not declared any intention of participating in the conventional political process.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Casa Felipe Flores (☎ 678-3996; www.felipeflores.com; JF Flores 36; r incl full breakfast from US\$85) This charming colonial guesthouse, decked with outstanding Mexican and Guatemalan art, crafts and furnishings, has just five immaculate guest rooms set off two flowery courtyards. The hospitable American owners have created a wonderfully tranquil, cozy abode, and the Mexican staff are welcoming and attentive. Each room has a very individual character and all boast fireplaces.

Hotel Casavieja (☎/fax 678-6868; www.casavieja.com.mx; MA Flores 27; s & d US\$70, tr US\$75) The Casavieja is in a beautifully renovated 18th-century house and comes with modern comforts in rooms arranged around flowery courtyards.

Hotel El Paraíso (☎ 678-0085; www.hotelposada-paraiso.com; 5 de Febrero 19; s/d/tr US\$39/53/66) The colonial-style El Paraíso has a bright wood-pillared patio and courtyard garden. Several of the high-ceilinged rooms are bilevel, with an extra bed upstairs.

Parador San Juan de Dios (☎/fax 678-1167; www.sanjuandios.com; Calz Roberta 16; ste US\$165; (P)) A stunning boutique hotel on the northern edge of town, the Parador San Juan de Dios offers luxurious suites furnished with antique and modern art and craft. It's located in the former 17th-century Rancho Harvard.

Eating

The travel and tourism scene has yielded a huge variety of cuisine in San Cristóbal's increasingly sophisticated and professional restaurants.

El Gato Gordo (☎ 678-8313; Real de Guadalupe 20; mains US\$2.50-4.50; ☎ 1-11pm Wed-Mon) Gato Gordo attracts travelers for well-prepared pasta, crêpes, Mexican snacks and meat dishes, plus a great choice of drinks.

La Casa del Pan Papalotl (snacks & mains US\$2.75-5.50; (V)) Centro Cultural El Puente, Real de Guadalupe 55 (☎ 678-3723; ☎ 9am-10pm); Dr Navarro 10 (☎ 678-5895; ☎ 8am-10pm Tue-Sun) This restaurant-cum-bakery emphasizes its local organic ingredients, offering great breakfasts and lots of vegetarian fare. The Real de Guadalupe branch does a good buffet lunch

(US\$3.50 to US\$6). The views from the Dr Navarro branch are a pleasant way to start the day.

Madre Tierra (☎ 678-4297; Insurgentes 19; mains US\$2.50-5; ☎ 8am-10pm; (V)) Madre Tierra has an atmospheric dining room for an eclectic, appetizing, mainly vegetarian menu. Breakfasts here (US\$2.50 to US\$3.50) are superb, too.

Mayambé (☎ 674-6278; Real de Guadalupe 66; mains US\$3.75-6.50; ☎ 9:30am-11pm or later; (V)) This superb courtyard restaurant boasts an Asian, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean menu that includes plenty of vegetarian options. There's mellow live music here some evenings, and a warming, welcoming fireplace.

Ristorante Italiano Da Angelo (Real de Guadalupe 40; mains US\$4.50-7.50; ☎ 2-11pm Wed-Sun, 6:30-11pm Mon & Tue; (V)) Good Italian food and a warm atmosphere are a surefire hit. Plenty of pizzas, pasta, meat dishes and wine are on offer.

Los Barrios (☎ 678-1910; Guadalupe Victoria 25; mains US\$6-9.50; ☎ 1-10pm) In a neat patio lined with photos of local neighborhoods, Los Barrios serves up tasty, innovative Mexican fare – try the breaded prawns in coconut-and-tamarind sauce, or the banana-stuffed chicken breast in spicy *adobo* sauce.

Na Bolom (☎ 678-1418; Guerrero 33; dinner US\$10.50) For unique ambience, reserve for dinner (7pm) with the assembled company at Na Bolom (see p241 for more info). Everyone sits at one long wooden table in the Boloms' old dining room. The vegetables are organically grown in the garden.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

El Caldero (5 de Mayo 4; soups US\$3.50; ☎ 1-10pm Thu-Tue) Simple, friendly little El Caldero specializes in delicious, hearty Mexican soups (*caldos*) – *pozole*, *mondongo*, *mole de olla*, frijoles – with avocados and various salsas. Steaming *caldos* are served in sturdy handmade crockery on simple wooden tables filled with locals and Spanish students. The *mole de olla* is a warming stew of meat, green beans, zucchini and small pieces of corn on the cob. Great value for an authentic, inexpensive local meal.

Drinking & Entertainment

For genuine, indigenous-grown (and tasty) coffee stop by **Café Museo Café** (☎ 678-7876; MA Flores 10; ☎ 9am-9:30pm), which also has an excellent museum (admission US\$1) explaining coffee cultivation in Chiapas, or **Cafetería Maya** (☎ 678-9146; 20 de Noviembre 12C; ☎ 8am-10pm).

Any night of the week except Sunday you can hear at least five live bands within a couple of blocks of the plaza, in reassuringly relaxed and informal venues where Mexicans and foreigners mingle easily. Along the Andador Turístico several popular places thump with reggae and electronica. The city's *salseros* (aficionados of salsa) gather at **Latino's** (☎ 678-9927; Madero 23; admission Thu-Sat US\$1.50; ☎ 8pm-3am Mon-Sat). Find blues, jazz, or *trova* (Yucatecan songs) at **La Pera** (☎ 678-1209; MA Flores 23; ☎ 1-11pm) and reggae and Cuban *son* upstairs at **Madre Tierra** (☎ 678-4297; Insurgentes 19; ☎ 10pm-3am).

Shopping

The outstanding indigenous *artesanías* (crafts) of the Chiapas highlands are textiles such as *huipiles*, blouses and blankets: Tzotzil weavers are some of the most skilled and inventive in Mexico. Another Chiapas specialty is amber, which is sold in numerous shops alongside silver, turquoise, jade, red coral and lapis-lazuli in well-made jewelry.

The thickest clusters of craft shops are on Real de Guadalupe and the Andador Turístico. But there's also a big range of items at good prices at the busy daily crafts market near Santo Domingo church. Next to Santo Domingo, a cooperative of 800 indigenous women weavers called **Sna Jolobil** (☎ 678-2646; Calz Lázaro Cárdenas s/n; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat) shows and sells some of the very best woven items.

Getting There & Away

If traveling to/from Palenque on Hwy 199, be aware that there have been highway holdups on this route targeting tourist-carrying vehicles, sometimes at gunpoint. It's strongly recommended to travel by day, preferably early, to minimize risks.

AIR

San Cristóbal's airport has no regular passenger flights. In nearby Tuxtla Gutiérrez, **Click Mexicana** (☎ 602-5771; Blvd Belisario Domínguez

1748) flies direct once daily to/from Villahermosa, Mérida and Cancún from **Aeropuerto Francisco Sarabia** (☎ 671-5311; Carretera Escuela de Veterinaria Km 1.5), also called Aeropuerto Terán. Taxi-vans (US\$18, 1½ hours) depart directly from the airport to San Cristóbal (80km) about every 30 minutes.

BUS, COLECTIVO & VAN

Around a dozen transportation terminals are on or just off the Pan-American Hwy. The 1st-class terminal of **OCC** (☎ 678-0291; cnr Pan-American Hwy & Insurgentes) is also used by ADO and UNO 1st-class and deluxe buses. In town, tickets are sold at **Ticket Bus** (☎ 678-8503; Real de Guadalupe 5A; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun).

Avisa (2nd class) is 150m west of OCC along the highway; 1st-class **AEXA** (☎ 678-6178) is on the south side of the highway; and various Suburban-type vans and *colectivo* taxi services have depots in the same area. Daily departures include:

Campeche (US\$27-33; 11hr; 2 from OCC terminal)

Cancún (US\$51-60; 16-18hr; 4 from OCC)

Mérida (US\$38-44; 13hr; 2 from OCC)

Palenque (US\$7-11; 5hr; 11 from OCC, 4 AEXA)

Villahermosa (US\$16-24; 7-8hr; 3 from OCC)

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Hwy 199, a 207km scenic mountain journey, connects San Cristóbal de las Casas to the Yucatán Peninsula and Tabasco.

Optima (☎ 674-5409; optimacar1@hotmail.com; Mazariagos 39) rents VW Beetles (US\$52 per day – less for payment in cash) and other cars with insurance, taxes and unlimited kilometers. International car-rental companies are available at the airport in Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

Getting Around

Combis go up Rosas from the Pan-American Hwy to the town center. Taxis cost US\$1.75 within the town (US\$2.25 after 11pm).

Los Pingüinos (☎ 678-0202 8am-8pm; Ecuador 4B; www.bikemexico.com/pinguinos; ☎ office 10am-2:30pm & 3:30-7pm Mon-Sat) rents mountain bikes for three/five/nine/24 hours for US\$7.50/10.50/11.50/14.

Croozy Scooters (☎ 631-4329; www.prodigyweb.net.mx/croozyscooters; Belisario Domínguez 7; ☎ 9am-7pm) rents 90cc scooters for US\$7/19/24/33 for one/five/nine/24 hours.

Both companies require you to deposit your passport.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF CHIAPAS

Of the 4.2 million people of Chiapas, more than one million are indigenous (mostly Maya groups). At least nine languages are spoken in the state. Although all derived from ancient Maya, most of these tongues are now mutually unintelligible, so local inhabitants use a second language such as Spanish or Tzeltal to communicate with other groups.

The indigenous people travelers are most likely to come into contact with are the 400,000 or so Tzotziles, who mainly live in the highland area around San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Tzotzil clothing is among the most varied, colorful and elaborately worked in Mexico. It not only identifies wearers' villages but also marks them as inheritors of ancient Maya traditions.

You may also encounter the Tzeltales, numbering about 380,000, who inhabit the region between San Cristóbal and the Selva Lacandona. Both groups are among Mexico's most traditional indigenous peoples. Their nominally Catholic religious life involves some distinctly pre-Hispanic elements. Most of the people live in the hills outside the villages, which are primarily market and ceremonial centers.

Despite indigenous peoples' de facto status as 2nd-class citizens (economically and politically), their identities and self-respect survive. Traditional festivals, costumes, crafts and often ancient religious practices assist in this. Many indigenous people remain suspicious of outsiders (not without reason), and may resent interference, especially in their religious observances. But they also will be friendly and polite if treated with due respect.

VILLAGES AROUND SAN CRISTÓBAL

The inhabitants of the beautiful Chiapas highlands are descended from the ancient Maya and maintain some unique customs, costumes and beliefs.

Weekly **markets** at the villages are usually on Sunday, starting around dawn and winding down by lunchtime. Occasions such as **Carnaval** (late February/early March), **Semana Santa** (Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday) and **Día de Muertos** (November 2) are celebrated almost everywhere.

Indigenous villages are often extremely close-knit and their people can be suspicious of outsiders and especially sensitive about having their photos taken. Photography is banned in and around the church at San Juan Chamula, and in Zinacantán. You may put yourself in physical danger by taking photos without permission. It's not wise to wander into unfrequented areas or down isolated tracks.

The Chamulans are a fiercely independent Tzotzil group about 80,000 strong. Their main village, **San Juan Chamula**, is 10km northwest of San Cristóbal. The **Templo de San Juan**, Chamula's main church, stands beside the plaza. A sign tells visitors to obtain tickets (US\$1.50) at the **tourist office** (☎ 9am-6pm) before entering the church. Inside, flickering candles, clouds of incense and worshippers kneeling with their faces to the pine-needle-carpeted floor make a

powerful impression. Images of saints are surrounded with mirrors and dressed in holy garments.

The orderly village of **San Lorenzo Zinacantán** is about 11km northwest of San Cristóbal. The Zinacantán people, like Chamulans, are Tzotzil. The most important celebrations here are **La Virgen de La Candelaria** (August 7 to 11) and **San Sebastián** (January 19 to 22). The small **Museo Jsoz' Levetik** (admission by donation, ☎ 9am-5pm) covers the local culture and has some musical instruments and fine textiles.

The women of the Tzeltal village of **Amatenango del Valle**, by the Pan-American Hwy 37km southeast of San Cristóbal, are renowned potters. Amatenango children find a ready tourist market with *animalitos* – little pottery animals that are inexpensive but fragile.

Getting There & Away

Transportation to most villages leaves from near the Mercado Municipal in San Cristóbal. *Combis* to San Juan Chamula (US\$0.70) leave from Calle Honduras fairly frequently from 4am until about 6pm; for Zinacantán, *combis* and *colectivo* taxis (both US\$1) go at least hourly, 5am to 7pm, from a yard off Robledo. For Amatenango, take a bus or *combi* for Comitán (12 from OCC, Avisa every 30 minutes between 5am and 8pm).

PALENQUE

☎ 916 / pop 37,000

The ancient Maya city of Palenque, with its exquisite architecture, is one of the marvels of Mexico. Modern Palenque town, a few kilometers to the east, has limited attraction but provides all the basic services. Many visitors prefer to base themselves at one of the forest hideouts along the road between the town and the ruins.

Palenque was first occupied about 100 BC and flourished from around AD 630 to 740. The city rose to prominence under the ruler Pakal, who reigned from AD 615 to 683. During Pakal's reign, many plazas and buildings, including the superlative Templo de las Inscripciones (Pakal's own mausoleum), were constructed. Then Pakal's son Kan B'alam II (AD 684–702) continued Palenque's expansion and its artistic development.

After AD 900 Palenque was largely abandoned. The city remained unknown to the Western world until 1746 when Maya hunters revealed its existence to a Spanish priest named Antonio de Solís. It was not until 1837 that the site was insightfully investigated, when John L Stephens, an amateur archaeology enthusiast, reached Palenque with artist Frederick Catherwood.

Orientation & Information

Hwy 199 meets Palenque's main street, Avenida Juárez, at an intersection with a large statue of a Maya chieftain's head at the west end of town. The main bus stations are on Juárez just east of the statue, and the central square, El Parque, is 1km east.

A few hundred meters south from the statue the paved road to the Palenque ruins diverges west off Hwy 199, passing the site museum after about 6.5km, then winding on about 1km further to the main entrance.

Bancomer (Juárez 96; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri, 10am–3pm Sat)

Clínica Palenque (☎ 345-0273; Velasco Suárez 33; ☎ 9:30am–1:30pm & 5–8pm)

Instituto Nacional de Migración (☎ 345-0795; 6km north of town on Hwy 199; ☎ 8am–4pm) 'Playas' combis run here from the Autotransportes Otolum terminal on Allende (US\$0.90).

Post office (Independencia; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri)

Tourist Information Office (Cnr Juárez & Abasolo; ☎ 9am–9pm Mon–Sat, 9am–1pm Sun)

Palenque Ruins

Ancient **Palenque** (admission US\$3.75; ☎ 8am–5pm, last entry 4:30pm) stands where the first hills rise out of the Gulf Coast plain, and the dense jungle forms an evocative backdrop to the exquisite Maya architecture. Hundreds of ruined buildings are spread over 15 sq km, but only a fairly compact central area has been excavated.

The ruins and surrounding forests form a national park, the Parque Nacional Palenque, for which you must pay a separate US\$1 admission fee at Km 4.5 on the road to the ruins.

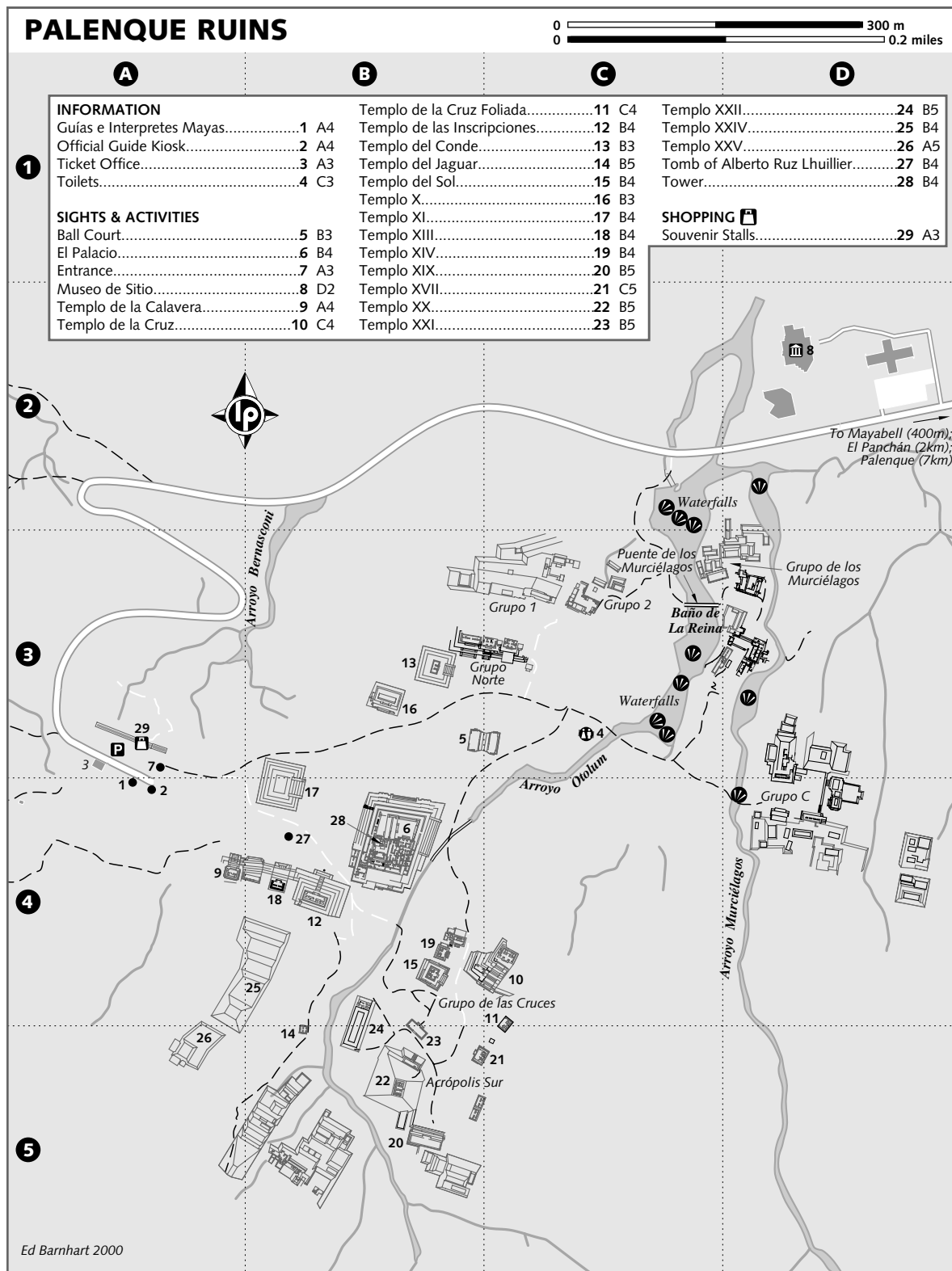
Palenque's **Site Museum** (Museo del Sitio; ☎ 348-9331; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 7; admission free; ☎ 9am–4:30pm Tue–Sun) does a wonderful job of displaying finds from the site and interpreting, in English and Spanish, Palenque's history. Next door is the **Casa de las Artesanías de Chiapas** (☎ 348-9331; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun), a well-stocked handicraft shop.

Official site **guides** (2hr tour for up to 7 people in English/Spanish/French/Italian US\$52/42/56/56) and a Maya guide association, **Guías e Interpretes Mayas** (☎ 341-7688) are available by the entrance. A couple of websites maintained by archaeologists are packed with interest for Palenque fans: **Maya Exploration Center** (www.mayaexploration.org), and the **Group of the Cross Project** (www.mesoweb.com/palenque).

Most visitors take a *combi* or taxi to the ruins' main (upper) entrance, see the major structures and then walk downhill to the museum, visiting minor ruins along the way. Note that it's not permitted to exit the site this way before 9am or after 4pm.

EXPLORING THE SITE

As you enter the site, a line of temples rises in front of the jungle on your right, culminating about 100m ahead at the **Templo de las Inscripciones** (Temple of the Inscriptions), the tallest and most stately of Palenque's buildings. From the top, interior stairs lead down into the tomb of Pakal (closed indefinitely to avoid further damage from the humidity exuded by visitors). Pakal's jewel-bedecked skeleton and jade mosaic death mask were removed from the tomb to Mexico City, and the tomb was re-created in the Museo Nacional de Antropología (from where the priceless death mask was stolen in 1985), but the carved stone sarcophagus lid remains at the Site Museum.



TABASCO & CHIAPAS

Diagonally opposite the Templo de las Inscripciones is **El Palacio** (The Palace), a large structure divided into four main courtyards, with a maze of corridors and rooms. Soon after the death of his father, Pakal's son Kan B'alam II started designing the temples of the **Grupo de las Cruces** (Group of the Crosses). All three main pyramid-

shaped structures surround a plaza south-east of the Templo de las Inscripciones. The **Templo del Sol** (Temple of the Sun), on the west side of the plaza, has the best-preserved roofcomb at Palenque. Steep steps climb to the **Templo de la Cruz** (Temple of the Cross), the largest and most elegantly proportioned in this group.

South of the Grupo de las Cruces is the **Acrópolis Sur**, where archaeologists have recovered some terrific finds in recent excavations. It appears to have been constructed as an extension of the Grupo de las Cruces, with both groups set around what was probably a single long, open space.

Tours

Numerous travel agencies in Palenque offer transportation packages to Bonampak, Yaxchilán and even Tikal in Guatemala.

Kichan Bajlum (☎ 345-2452; www.kichanbajlum.com; Juárez)

Servicio Turístico de Palenque (☎ 345-1340; www.stpalenque.com; cnr Juárez & 5 de Mayo)

Viajes Kukulcan (☎ 345-1506; www.kukulcantravel.com; Juárez)

Sleeping

Most people stay out of town at places along the road to the ruins. Many of these are in **El Panchán** (www.elpanchan.com; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 4.5), a cluster of budget accommodations and eateries that includes nightly entertainment, a meditation temple and a *temazcal* (a pre-Hispanic steam bath). *Combis* between town and the ruins will drop and pick you up anywhere along this road.

Margarita & Ed Cabañas (☎ 341-0063, 916-100-7814; edcabanas@yahoo.com; El Panchán; s & d cabana US\$14-15, r with fan US\$14-24, with air-con US\$28; 📍 🚽 🚿) The owners...yep, Margarita and Ed, maintain scrupulously clean rooms in the middle of the Panchán jungle. The rustic screened cabanas come with reading lights and all accommodations have private bathrooms.

Mayabell (☎ 345-1464, 916-348-4271; www.mayabell.com.mx; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 6; hammock shelters or sites per person US\$2.75, s cabana US\$14-19, d US\$19-23, s/d with fan US\$33/38, with air-con US\$47/52; 📍 🚽 🚿) This spacious grassy campground is 400m from the site museum and has a plethora of sleeping options and a large pool. The *temazcal* is US\$7.50 per person (up to eight people).

La Aldea del Halach-Uinic (☎ 345-1693; laaldea.palenque.com; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 2.7; cabana per person US\$12, cabana with air-con US\$75; 📍 🚽 🚿) Some 3km from town, this place has over 40 *palapa*-roofed cabanas in spacious gardens. The air-conditioned accommodations are large and bright with their own bathrooms

and terraces, and attractive décor using natural materials. The smaller cabanas, without bathrooms, have hammocks on a little porch. A small pool is refreshing.

Hotel Villas Kin-Ha (☎ 345-0533; www.villaskinha.com; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 2.7; r US\$62-82; 📍 🚽 🚿) The Kin-Ha has more than 90 rooms and bungalows set around its pretty gardens, but doesn't seem crowded. Most accommodations are palm-thatched and wood-beamed and all have air-con. The grounds hold two good pools and an auditorium where a theatrical show (US\$11.50) based on ancient Palenque is sometimes staged. Times vary.

Eating & Entertainment

Palenque is definitely not the gastronomic capital of Mexico, but there's an improving dining scene and prices are fair. Most of the accommodations near the ruins have their own restaurants.

Don Mucho's (☎ 348-0520; El Panchán; mains US\$3.50-8.50, snacks US\$1.50-3.50) Don Mucho's provides great-value meals in the jungly El Panchán setting, with a magical candlelit atmosphere at night. Busy waiters bring pasta, fish, plenty of *antojitos* ('little whims') and pizzas (cooked in an Italian-designed wood-fired oven). A live band of some sort usually starts up around 8 or 9pm, followed by the local fire-dancing troop!

Café de Yara (☎ 345-0269; Hidalgo 66; snacks & breakfasts US\$2.50-4.50, mains US\$4.50-8; 🕒 7am-11pm) This efficient modern café serves fine organic Chiapas coffee as well as breakfasts and light lunches.

Restaurant Las Tinajas (Cnr 20 de Noviembre & Abasolo; mains US\$4-9; 🕒 7:30am-10pm) Gargantuan portions and decent home-style cooking make Las Tinajas a perennial travelers' favorite. The two branches either side of one intersection have the same menu, but the more westerly one is considerably airier.

Restaurant Maya (☎ 345-0042; cnr Independencia & Hidalgo; mains US\$5-9; 🕒 7am-11pm) This long-established place facing El Parque serves up a good range of meat, fish and *antojitos* and satisfying breakfasts, under whirring fans.

La Palapa (☎ information 345-0421; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 5; 🕒 10am-3am) Reggae, psycho, salsa and electronica play at a large *palapa* (thatched-roofed structure) with tables, chairs, dance space and even sofas.

Getting There & Away

The main route to San Cristóbal is via Hwy 199. It's strongly recommended to travel by day, preferably early: tourist-carrying vehicles have been held up (sometimes at gunpoint) on this highway. There are also occasional reports of theft on board buses to/from Mérida, especially at night.

The main bus terminal is **ADO** (☎ 345-1344; Juárez s/n), with deluxe and 1st-class services, also used by **OCC** (1st class). **AEXA** (☎ 345-2630; Juárez 159), with 1st-class buses, is 1½ blocks east. It's a good idea to buy your outward bus ticket a day in advance. Some daily departures:

Campeche (US\$18-25; 5½-7hr; 4 from ADO terminal)

Cancún (US\$41-48; 13-14hr; 5 from ADO)

Mérida (US\$27-30; 8hr; 4 from ADO)

San Cristóbal de Las Casas (US\$7-11; 5¼hr; 8 from ADO, 6 AEXA)

Tulum (US\$36-41; 11hr; 4 from ADO)

Villahermosa (US\$4.50-7; 2hr; 17 from ADO, 10 AEXA)

For information on transportation for Bonampak and Yaxchilán, see p251.

Getting Around

Taxis wait at the northeast corner of El Parque and at the ADO bus station; they charge US\$3.75 to El Panchán or Mayabell and US\$5 to the ruins. **Transportes Chambalú** (☎ 345-0466; Allende) and **Transportes Palenque** (☎ 345-2430; cnr Allende & 20 de Noviembre) run *combi*s to the ruins about every 15 minutes from 6am to 6pm daily (US\$1 each way).

BONAMPAK & YAXCHILÁN

Never a major city, Bonampak spent most of the Classic period under Yaxchilán's sphere of influence. Bonampak's fame – and its name, which means 'Painted Walls' in Yucatecan Maya – are due to the discovery of a series of astonishing frescoes.

Yaxchilán has a peerless jungle setting above a horseshoe loop in the broad, swift Río Usumacinta. The control this location gave it over river commerce, and a series of successful alliances and conquests, made Yaxchilán one of the most important Classic Maya cities in the Usumacinta region. Archaeologically, Yaxchilán is famed for its ornamented façades and roofcombs and its impressive stone lintels carved with conquest and ceremonial scenes. A flashlight can be useful here.

Another feature of Yaxchilán is the howler monkeys that come to feed in some of the tall trees. Spider monkeys, and occasionally red macaws, may also be sighted.

It's a three-hour drive on a good paved road from Palenque to the jumping-off points for Bonampak and Yaxchilán.

Tours

It's possible to visit this area independently, but there are also tour options. Many Palenque-based travel agencies (see opposite) run day tours to Bonampak and Yaxchilán for around US\$60 per person. There's also a two-day version for around US\$105. Check the details of these offers carefully: how many meals, what transportation, and so on.

Bonampak

Bonampak's setting in dense jungle hid it from the outside world until 1946 when Chan Bor, a Lacandón, took some Americans there, including a photographer, Giles Healey, who found the Templo de las Pinturas with its famous murals.

The site of **Bonampak** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-4.45pm) spreads over 2.4 sq km, but all the main ruins stand around the rectangular Gran Plaza. The most impressive surviving monuments were built under Chan Muwan II, a nephew of Yaxchilán's Itzamnaaj B'alam II, who acceded to Bonampak's throne in AD 776. The famed frescoes are inside the modest-looking **Templo de las Pinturas** (Edificio 1). Diagrams outside the temple help interpret these murals, which are the finest known from pre-Hispanic America but have weathered badly since their discovery.

The Bonampak site abuts the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve and is rich in wildlife. *Refrescos* (soft drinks) and snacks are sold at the entrance to the Monumento Natural Bonampak protected zone, 8km before the ruins, and by the archaeological site entrance.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

For details of how to reach the area, see p251. Bonampak is 12km from San Javier on the Carretera Fronteriza. The first 3km is paved; the rest is good gravel/dirt road through the forest. Taxis will take you from San Javier to the Bonampak entrance and

back for US\$5 per person, including waiting time. For the last 7km to the ruins, you can rent bicycles for US\$5 for three hours, or take a *combi* for US\$7 round trip.

Yaxchilán

Jungle-shrouded **Yaxchilán** (admission US\$3.75; ☎ 8am-4:45pm, last entry 4:15pm) peaked in power and splendor between AD 681 and 800 under the rulers Itzamnaaj B'alam II (Shield Jaguar II, 681-742), Pájaro Jaguar IV (Bird Jaguar IV, 752-768) and Itzamnaaj B'alam III (Shield Jaguar III, 769-800). The city was abandoned around AD 810. Inscriptions here tell more about its 'Jaguar' dynasty than is known of almost any other Maya ruling clan. The shield-and-jaguar symbol appears on many Yaxchilán buildings and stelae; Pájaro Jaguar IV's hieroglyph is a small jungle cat with feathers on its back and a bird superimposed on its head.

The main path to the ruins leads to the mazy passages of **El Laberinto** (Edificio 19), built between AD 742 and 752, during the interregnum between Itzamnaaj B'alam II and Pájaro Jaguar IV. Beyond this complicated two-level building is the extensive

Gran Plaza. About halfway along the plaza, **Stela 1**, flanked by weathered sculptures of a crocodile and a jaguar, shows Pájaro Jaguar IV in a ceremony that took place in AD 761. **Edificio 20**, from the time of Itzamnaaj B'alam III, was the last significant structure built at Yaxchilán; its lintels are now in Mexico City.

An imposing stairway climbs to **Edificio 33**, the best-preserved temple at Yaxchilán, with about half of its roofcomb intact. The final step in front of the building is carved with ball-game scenes, and splendid relief carvings embellish the undersides of the lintels.

At the site, *refrescos* are sold at a shack near the river landing. Most of the main monuments have information boards in three languages including English.

SLEEPING & EATING

The Lacandón Maya village of Lacanjá Chansayab is 6km from San Javier on the Carretera Fronteriza, and 12km from Bonampak. Several families run *campamento*, which provide rooms, camping and hammock space. The *campamentos* all offer

THE SELVA LACANDÓN & THE RÍO USUMACINTA

The Selva Lacandona (Lacandón Jungle) in eastern Chiapas occupies just 0.25% of Mexico. Yet it contains about 17% (4300) of its plant species, 42% (450 species) of butterflies, 32% (340 or more) of the bird species and 30% (163) of Mexico's mammal species.

This great fund of natural resources and genetic diversity is the southwest end of the Selva Maya, a 30,000-sq-km corridor of tropical rainforest stretching from Chiapas across northern Guatemala into Belize and the southern Yucatán. But the Selva Lacandona is shrinking fast, under pressure from ranchers, loggers, oil prospectors and settlers desperate for land. Most of what's left is in the Reserva de la Biósfera Montes Azules and the neighboring Reserva de la Biósfera Lacantun.

The Montes Azules reserve itself has become something of a battleground between environmental groups and settlers. According to Conservation International (CI), at least 10 new communities have been established illegally inside the reserve since 2000. Some have since been relocated. Many of these communities back the Zapatistas, whose supporters argue that the settlers are using the forests in sustainable ways, and claim that CI seeks to exploit the forests for the benefit of the Mexican biotechnology giant Grupo Pulsar.

Intimately intertwined with the Lacandón Jungle is the Río Usumacinta, the largest river between Venezuela and the USA. It forms the Mexico-Guatemala border along the eastern fringe of the Lacandón Jungle. Like the jungle around it, the river is an inestimable ecological and genetic treasure. *Lacantunia enigmatica*, a species of catfish discovered in Usumacinta tributaries in 2005, represents only the second new fish family revealed to science since 1938.

Government proposals resurface every few years to build a large hydroelectric dam on the Usumacinta, sending environmentalists, archaeologists and others scurrying noisily to the barricades. To find out more about this vital river and the challenges it faces, visit the website of **goMaya** (www.gomaya.com) or read Christopher Shaw's marvelous *Sacred Monkey River*.

guided walks through the surrounding forests to waterfalls and some little-explored ruins. **Campamento Río Lacanja** (www.ecochiapas.com/lacanja; bunk US\$9.50, d US\$24, Ya'ax Can s/d/tr/q US\$28/38/45/52; **P**) is the most developed. Rustic semi-open-air cabins stand close to the jungle-shrouded Río Lacanjá. A separate group of large rooms has fans, two solid wooden double beds, tiled floors and hot-water bathroom. A restaurant serves all meals (US\$3.50 to US\$5).

In Frontera Corozal, the departure point for Yaxchilán, **Escudo Jaguar** (**☎** 201-250-8057; mx.geocities.com/hotel_escudojaguar; cabana with 1/2/3 double beds US\$31/47/62, cabana without bathroom d/tr US\$14/22, sites per person US\$6; **P**) overlooks the river 300m from the *embarcadero* (boat dock). The best of its thatched cabanas are very spacious and have terraces strung with hammocks. The **restaurant** (mains US\$5-6.50, breakfast US\$4-5.50; **🕒** 7am-8pm) serves straightforward Mexican dishes with lots of chicken.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bonampak and Yaxchilán are accessible from a good paved road, the Carretera Fronteriza, that parallels the Mexico-Guatemala border along the fringe of the Lacandón Jungle. Bonampak is 148km down this road; the bigger and more important Yaxchilán is 173km by road then about 22km by boat from the village of Frontera Corozal.

From Palenque, **Autotransporte Chamoán** (Hidalgo) runs vans to Frontera Corozal (US\$6, 2½ to three hours) 12 times daily. The last *combi* back to Palenque leaves from the *embarcadero* at 3pm. **Transporte Benito Juárez** (**☎** 916-345-2808; cnr Juárez & 20 de Noviembre) runs *combis* every 30 minutes between 4am and 5:30pm. **Autotransportes Río Chancalá** (**☎** 916-341-3356; 5 de Mayo 120) runs hourly from 4am to noon.

Most of these services go to Benemérito or beyond, but all of them stop at San Javier (US\$3.50 to US\$4.50, two hours), the turnoff for Bonampak, 140km from Palenque; and 16km beyond at Crucero Corozal (US\$4 to US\$5, 2½ hours), the

DETOUR: TIKAL & GUATEMALA

Tikal is one of the most fabulous archaeological sites in the region. If it is too tempting to bypass, the most convenient way to get there from Chiapas is to take a transportation package with a tour company in Palenque (see p248). Alternatively, you can get there under your own steam via a boat from Frontera Corozal across to Guatemala, then a bus to the town of Flores (see p274), which is near Tikal. To avoid doubling back, you can make your way back to the Yucatán via Belize and the town of Chetumal in Quintana Roo (see p146).

turnoff for Frontera Corozal and Yaxchilán. From this intersection, taxis (US\$2.50 per person *colectivo*, US\$7 otherwise) and occasional *combis* (US\$2) run another 16km to Frontera Corozal.

This part of Mexico tends to ignore daylight savings time, so triple-check all transportation schedules. And don't forget to bring insect repellent. Also be sure to carry your passport and tourist card as there are a couple of military checkpoints along this route.

Drivers: the last gas station is 44km beyond Palenque at the village of Chancalá, but plenty of entrepreneurial locals sell gasoline from large plastic containers. Watch for 'Se vende gasolina' signs.

GETTING AROUND

To Yaxchilán, four *lancha* (motorboat) outfits with desks in a thatched building near the Frontera Corozal *embarcadero* charge (round-trip) US\$56/66/84/113 for three/four/seven/10 people with 2½ hours at the ruins. It's often possible to hook up with other travelers or a tour group to share costs. River launches take 40 minutes running downstream from Frontera Corozal, and one hour to return.

Lanchas also go to Bethel, on the Guatemalan bank of the Usumacinta 40 minutes upstream, and La Técnica, directly opposite Frontera Corozal.