

Welcome to Cancún, Cozumel & the Yucatán

The Yucatán Peninsula captivates visitors with its endless offerings of natural wonders and an ancient culture that's still very much alive today.

Life's a Beach

Without a doubt, this corner of Mexico has some of the most beautiful stretches of coastline you'll ever see – which explains in large part why beaches get top billing on the peninsula. On the east coast you have the famous coral-crushed white sands and turquoise-blue waters of the Mexican Caribbean, while up north you'll find sleepy fishing villages with sandy streets and wildlife-rich surroundings. For the ultimate beach-bumming experience you can always hit one of several low-key islands off the Caribbean coast.

Maya Ruins Galore

You can't help but feel awestruck when standing before the pyramids, temples and ball courts of one of the most brilliant pre-Hispanic civilizations of all time. Yes, those Maya certainly knew a thing or two about architecture and they were no slouchers when it came to astronomy, science and mathematics either. Witnessing their remarkable achievements firsthand leaves a lasting impression on even the most jaded traveler – and the peninsula is chock-full of these mind-blowing Maya archaeological sites.

Nature's Playground

The Yucatán is the real deal for nature enthusiasts. With colorful underwater scenery like none other, it offers some of the best diving and snorkeling sites in the world. Then you have the many biosphere reserves and national parks that are home to a remarkably diverse variety of animal and plant life. Just to give you an idea of what's in store: you can swim with whale sharks, spot crocodiles and flamingos, help liberate sea turtles and observe hundreds upon hundreds of bird species.

Culture & Fun

In case you need a little something more than pretty beaches, ancient ruins and outdoor adventures, you'll be glad to know that culture and fun-filled activities abound in the Yucatán. On any given day you may come across soulful dance performances, free concerts, interesting museums or art exhibits – particularly in Mérida, the peninsula's cultural capital. For all-out fun, the Yucatán is one big splashfest after another with thousands of underground natural pools, theme parks with subterranean rivers, and all kinds of thrilling boat tours.

**Cancún, Cozumel
& the Yucatán's**

Top 17

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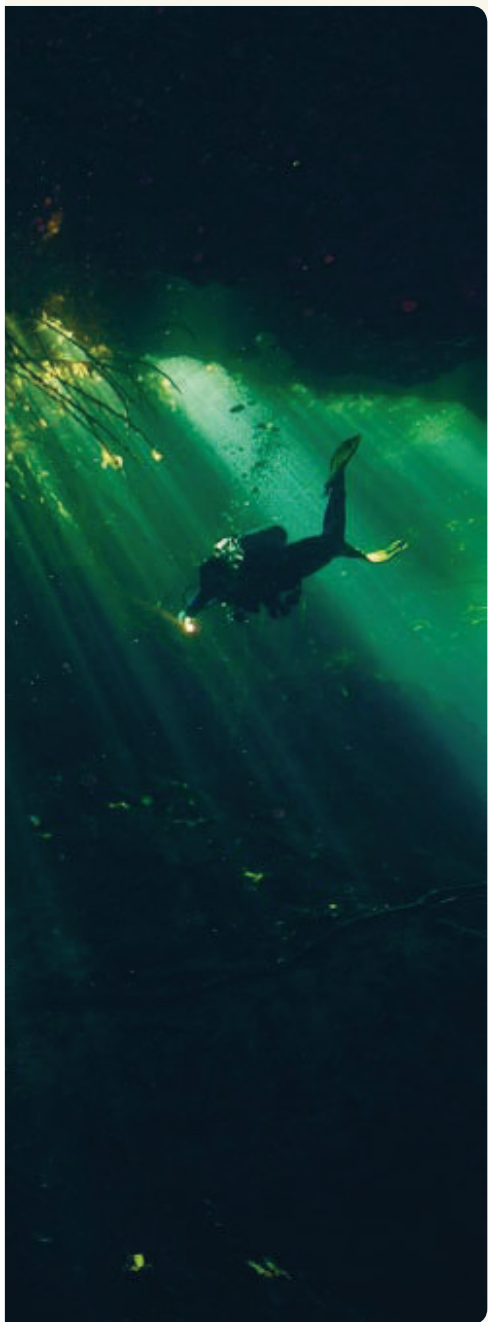
Swimming in Cenotes

1 The Maya considered them sacred gateways to the underworld. OK, so maybe they had a flair for the dramatic, but once you visit a cenote (a limestone sinkhole) you'll better understand where the Maya were coming from. An estimated 6000 cenotes dot the peninsula; some, like the spectacular pair of caverns at Cenote Dzitnup (p186), make for refreshing, fun-filled swimming holes, while others, such as the underground cave system at Dos Ojos (p111), draw divers from far and wide.

Savor the Flavors

2 If you've never tried regional *yucateco* cuisine, you're in for a real treat. Even by Mexican standards, with its strong culinary tradition, the Yucatán is a foodie's haven. *Yucatecos* (people of the Yucatán Peninsula) are famous for their marinated *pollo* (chicken) and *cochinita* (pork) *pibiles*. Often wrapped in banana leaves and cooked underground for what seems an eternity, this meaty traditional dish reigns supreme on the peninsula. And a visit wouldn't be complete without sampling a delicious homestyle *sopa de lima* (a brothy lime soup). *Buen provecho!*

Below: Tortilla soup



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PAM MCKEAN / GETTY IMAGES ©

Magical San Cristóbal

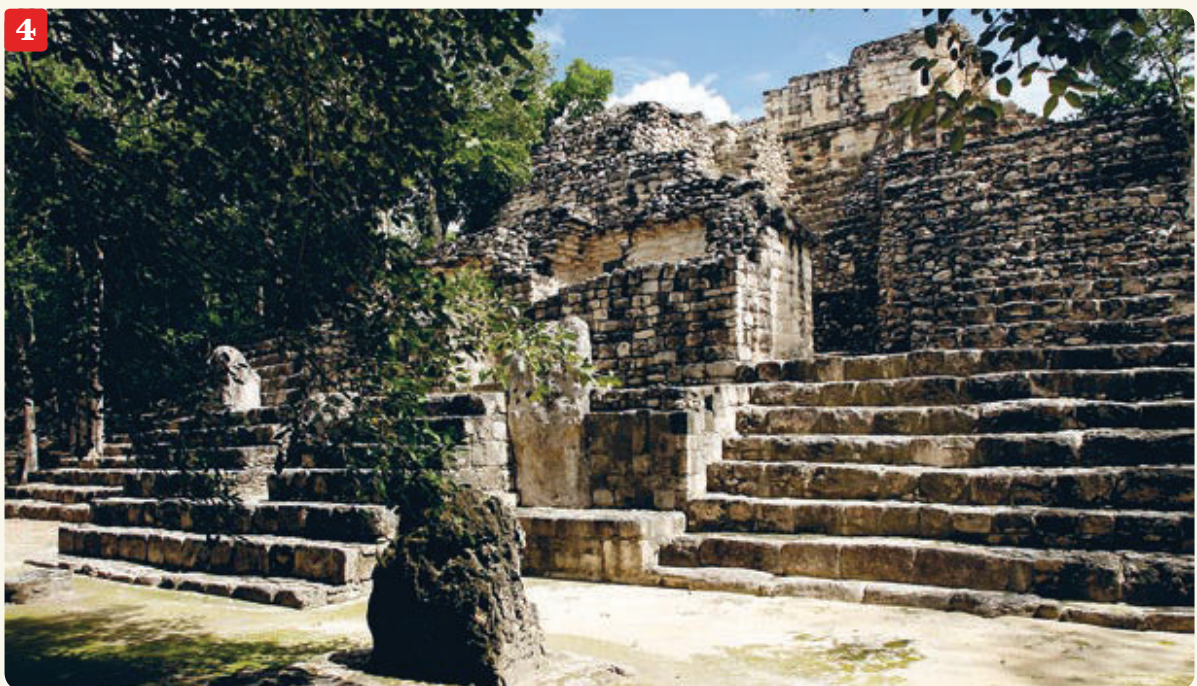
3 Wander through the cobblestone streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas (p223), the high-altitude colonial city in the heart of indigenous Chiapas. A heady mix of modern and Maya, with cosmopolitan cafes and traditional culture, it's also a jumping-off point for fascinating Tzotzil and Tzeltal villages. Spend sunny days exploring captivating churches and shopping at markets for amber or chocolate, then dine at one of many gourmet restaurants in town. Late nights are best whiled away by the fireplace of a cozy watering hole.



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Calakmul, Jungle Ruins

4 The 'Kingdom of the Serpent's Head' was one of the most powerful Maya cities that ever existed. What has survived the ravages of time here is very impressive – some of the Maya's largest and tallest pyramids, with awesome views of expansive surrounding jungle alive with birds, monkeys and jaguars. And relatively recent excavations at Calakmul (p215) have unearthed an amazing rarity in the Maya world – incredibly well-preserved painted murals and a spectacular stucco frieze.



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Diving in Cozumel

5 Don't miss the opportunity to plunge into the colorful waters surrounding Isla Cozumel, one of the world's best diving and snorkeling destinations. While the spectacular coral reefs are undeniably the main draw, the island's beautiful beaches and pleasant town square keep nondiver types sufficiently entertained. If you're planning on visiting in February, don't miss the annual Carnaval (p90), a street celebration infused with lively music, dancing and plenty of partying.

Cancún

6 Cancún may not appeal to everyone, but the resort city certainly has its charms. The Zona Hotelera, for instance, straddles some of the most precious Caribbean coastline in the Yucatán and it boasts the new Museo Maya de Cancún (p56), plus several small Maya ruins. For local flavor, stay in downtown Cancún, where the happening nightlife scene is within stumbling distance of most hotels and the Zona Hotelera's beaches are just a short bus ride away.

Top right: Playa Chac-Mool, Zona Hotelera, Cancún

Morning in Cobá

7 Everyone will tell you to get to the ruins of the Yucatán early to beat the crowds, but at the ruins of Cobá (p120) it really makes a difference. To be there as the jungle awakens – with bird calls and the morning light filtering through the canopy – is magical. The experience of climbing the massive Nohoch Mul pyramid and looking out over the surrounding jungle on your own is unbeatable. Make it even more memorable and explore the ruins on a rented bike.

Above right: Nohoch Mul Pyramid, Cobá



Playa del Carmen

8 European chic. Night-life extraordinaire. Rivera Maya boomtown. Oh yeah, Playa del Carmen (p102) has some pretty nice beaches too. And if at any moment you grow tired of wining, dining and dancing under the moon at beachside discos, you'll be happy to know that Playa makes for a convenient base to explore nearby sinkholes, such as Cristalino cenote (p110), and it's also a prime spot for scuba diving and snorkeling.

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Isla Mujeres

9 Isla Mujeres (p75) doesn't have the mega-resort mindset of nearby Cancún across the bay, and therein lies its appeal. Even though it's a fairly small island, you should have no problem finding things to do. Scuba diving and snorkeling are big, and it has some of the most swimmable beaches on the Yucatán, making it perfect for kids. The island is also home to the Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm (p77), which releases tens of thousands of turtles each year and has a nice little aquarium.

Top right: Sea turtle

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Wonderful Chichén Itzá

10 Ever since Chichén Itzá (p177) was named one of the new seven wonders of the world, it started making its way onto many bucket lists. The massive El Castillo pyramid, Chichén Itzá's most iconic structure, will knock your socks off, especially at vernal and autumnal equinoxes, when morning and afternoon sunlight cast a shadow of a feathered serpent on the staircase.

Above: El Castillo (p180), Chichén Itzá

VISIONSOFAMERICA / JOE SOHN / GETTY IMAGES ©

Isla Contoy

11 Parque Nacional Isla Contoy (p70), an uninhabited island just a short distance from Cancún and Isla Mujeres, allows only 200 visitors a day in order to retain its mostly pristine environment. Home to more than 150 bird species and nesting sea turtles during summer months, the island will definitely appeal to nature lovers and those simply looking to get in a little hiking and snorkeling.

Peerless Palenque

12 Gather all your senses and dive headfirst into these amazing ruins (p234), one of the Maya world's finest. Here pyramids rise above jungle treetops and howler monkeys sound off like monsters in the dense canopy. Wander the mazelike Palace, gazing up at its iconic tower. Scale the stone staircases of the Templo de las Inscripciones, the lavish mausoleum of Pakal. Following the Otulum river and its pretty waterfalls, and end by visiting Palenque's excellent museum.

Bottom: Templo de la Cruz, Palenque

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Campeche's Walled City

13 This lovely colonial city (p196) is a pleasant antidote to the larger, more bustling tourist-filled destinations in other parts of the Yucatán. And since relatively few tourists make it here you'll get more of that real Mexican experience. Campeche's Unesco-listed historic center is like a pastel wonderland, surrounded by high stone walls and home to narrow cobbled streets with well-preserved buildings. Nearby, the *malecón* (beachside promenade) provides a fine place to stroll, people-watch and say goodnight to the setting sun.

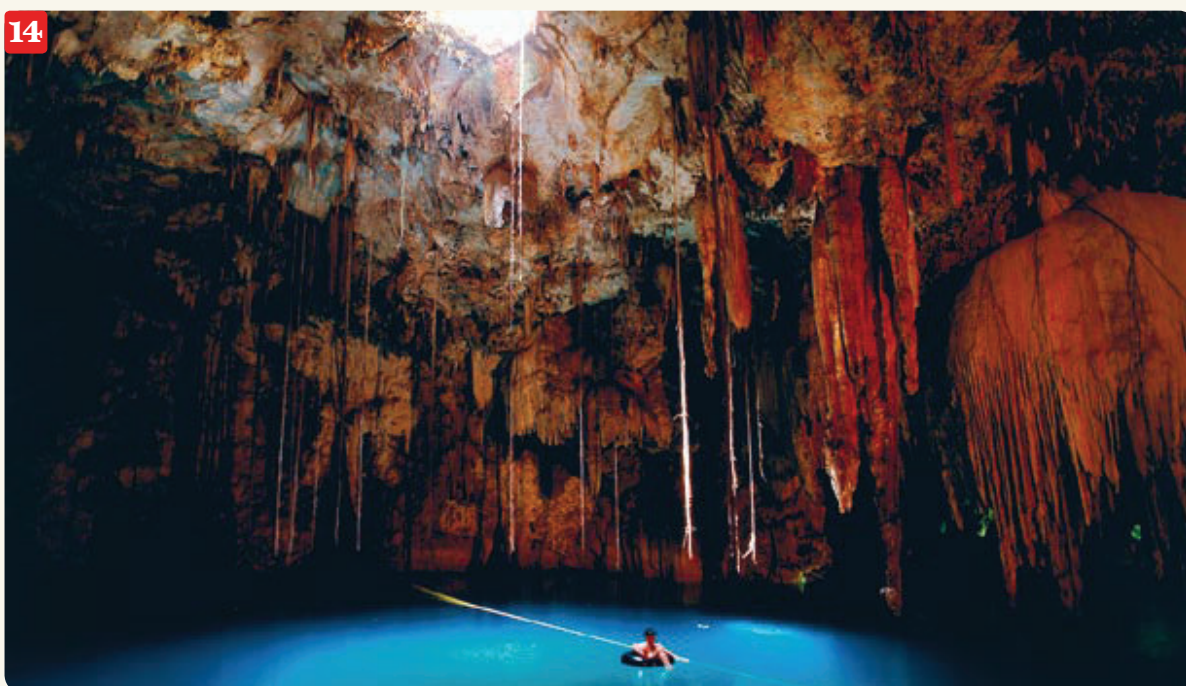
Scenic Laguna Bacalar

14 Known as 'the lake of seven colors' for its intense shades of blue and aqua-green, it doesn't get any more scenic for an afternoon swim than sparkling Laguna Bacalar (p132). Resort hotel Rancho Encantado (p133) has quite possibly the best view on the shore, and at the lake's south end you can take a plunge into the 90m-deep Cenote Azul (p132).

Bottom: Cenote Azul



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Isla Holbox

15 You gotta love a place with no cars and no banks. Granted, you may see some golf carts humming up and down Holbox's sandy streets for the dinner-hour rush, but that's about as hectic as it gets on this low-key fisherfolks' island (p71). Snorkeling with 15-ton whale sharks is all the rage at Holbox these days. Even if you miss whale-shark season, boat tours go to a freshwater spring and nearby islands for some excellent bird-watching.

Above left: whale shark

Mérida, Cultural Capital

16 Everyone who goes to Cancún or Playa del Carmen should carve off a couple days to get to Mérida (p141), a town with awesome Spanish colonial architecture unlike anything you'll find by the sea. The weekends see great citywide parties: the city center closes to cars and you can munch on *yucateco* street eats as you watch all sorts of spirited song-and-dance around the main plaza, aka Plaza Grande. And living up to its fame as the peninsula's cultural capital, Mérida abounds with museums and art galleries.

Tulum, Scenic Ruins

17 Talk about your prime beachfront real estate! The dramatically situated Tulum ruins (p113) sit pretty, atop a high cliff overlooking a spectacular white-sand beach. After marveling at the sun-baked Maya ruins, and dodging iguanas and distracted tourists, you can cap off your history lesson with a refreshing dip in the azure waters of the Mexican Caribbean. Come nighttime, join in on soulful fiestas in bars along Tulum Pueblo's main strip or escape to the Zona Hotelera for a quiet oceanfront dinner.

Bottom right: El Castillo and ruins, Tulum

Need to Know

For more information, see Survival Guide

Currency

Mexican peso (M\$)

Language

Spanish, Maya

Visas

Tourist permit required; some nationalities also need visas

Money

ATMs widely available in big cities and most towns. Credit cards accepted in many midrange and top-end hotels and restaurants.

Cell Phones

Many US cell-phone companies offer Mexico roaming deals. Local SIM cards can only be used on phones that have been unlocked.

Time

Central Standard Time (GMC/UTC minus six hours)

When to Go

- Tropical climate, wet & dry seasons
- Tropical climate, rain year round
- Dry climate



High Season

(Dec–Apr)

- ➔ Remains dry for the most part, but so-called 'nortes' bring northerly winds and occasional showers.
- ➔ Hotel rates increase considerably, even more so during 'ultra' high-season periods around Christmas and Easter.

Shoulder Season

(Jul & Aug)

- ➔ Very hot and humid throughout the peninsula. Hurricane season begins.
- ➔ Vacationing Mexicans flock to the beaches to beat the heat.

Low Season

(May, Jun, Sep–Nov)

- ➔ Weather cools down from September to November. Hurricane and rainy seasons end in October.
- ➔ Great deals on hotels. Crowds thin out at ruins, beaches and other popular attractions.

Money

ATMs can be found in all major and medium-size cities and most small towns. In towns with just one or two ATMs, the machines might run out of money, so bring extra cash just in case. For security, use ATMs during the day; also be aware that every time you pull out money you'll be charged 'service fees.' Most midrange and top-end hotels and restaurants accept major credit cards; Visa is the most commonly accepted. Plan on making all cash purchases with Mexican pesos. You can exchange cash at banks or money-exchange offices.

Bargaining

Most stores and shops have set prices. You can do some friendly haggling in some arts and crafts markets, but don't get carried away – most of the artisans are just trying to make a living.

Tipping

- ➔ **Hotels** About 5% to 10% of room costs for staff
- ➔ **Restaurants** Leave 15% if service is not already included in the check
- ➔ **Supermarkets** Baggers usually get M\$3 to M\$5
- ➔ **Porters** Tip M\$20 per bag
- ➔ **Taxis** Drivers don't expect tips unless they provide an extra service
- ➔ **Bars** Bartenders usually don't get tipped, so anything is appreciated

Language

English is widely spoken in Cancún and the Riviera Maya. Elsewhere on the peninsula, you can get by with English in the main tourist centers, but outside of these Spanish is useful. Any effort to speak Spanish is appreciated. See Language for more information.

Phrases to Learn Before You Go

1 Where can I buy handicrafts?

¿Dónde se puede comprar artesanías?

don-de se pwe-de kom-prar ar-te-sa-nee-as

Star buys in Mexico are the regional handicrafts produced all over the country, mainly by the indigenous people.

2 Which *antojitos* do you have?

¿Qué antojitos tiene? *ke an-to-khee-tos tye-ne*

'Little whimsies' (snacks) can encompass anything – have an entire meal of them, eat a few as appetisers, or get one on the street for a quick bite.

3 Not too spicy, please.

No muy picoso, por favor. *no mooy pee-ko-so por fa-vor*

Not all food in Mexico is spicy, but beware – many dishes can be fierce indeed, so it may be a good idea to play it safe.

4 Where can I find a *cantina* nearby?

¿Dónde hay una cantina cerca de aquí?

don-de ai oo-na kan-tee-na ser-ka de a-kee

Ask locals about the classical Mexican venue for endless snacks, and often dancing as well.

5 How do you say ... in your language?

¿Cómo se dice ... en su lengua?

ko-mo se dee-se ... en su len-gwa

Numerous indigenous languages are spoken around Mexico, primarily Mayan languages and Náhuatl. People will appreciate it if you try to use their local language.

Etiquette

- ➔ **Greetings** A handshake is standard when meeting people for the first time. Among friends, men usually exchange back-slapping hugs; for women it's usually an (air) kiss on the cheek.
- ➔ **Conversation** *Yucatecos* are generally warm and entertaining conversationalists. As a rule, they express disagreement more by nuance than by contradiction. The Maya can be more reserved.

Safety

Is it safe to go to the Yucatán, given all the news about Mexico's drug-related violence? The answer is yes. Yucatán has barely been touched by the violence, which is mostly in northern Mexico. Safety precautions are as they would be for anywhere else in the world (such as avoiding hitchhiking and not putting up resistance if mugged).

If You Like...

Maya Ruins

The peninsula boasts some of the best-preserved and most remarkable ruins in all of Mexico.

Chichén Itzá Recently named one of the 'new seven wonders of the world.' Enough said.

Tulum Maya ruins perched atop a cliff with jaw-dropping views of the Caribbean blue down below.

Cobá A sprawling site in a jungle setting that's best explored on a bicycle.

Calakmul High pyramids sit pretty in a huge Maya city tucked away in a rainforest.

Palenque Exquisite Maya temples backed by steamy, jungle-covered hills.

Uxmal Set in the hilly Puuc region, this site contains some of the most fascinating structures you'll ever see.

Yaxchilán Half the fun is getting there on a riverboat adventure deep in the Chiapas jungle.

Beach Resorts

There's more to the beach resort experience than white sands and turquoise waters. Each destination has its own unique vibe.

Cancún The mother of all megaresorts is part glitzy hotel zone, part downtown scene with local flavor.

Isla Cozumel A popular divers' destination with a pleasant town square and surprisingly quiet beaches.

Isla Mujeres Has some of the most gorgeous beaches around but is more low-key than Cancún and Cozumel.

Playa del Carmen The hippest beach town on the coast – European chic meets the Mexican Caribbean.

Tulum Idyllic beachside bungalows coupled with a buzzing, friendly inland town.

Puerto Morelos Calm, small-town feel, plus great diving and snorkeling.

Colonial Towns

The 300-year period of Spanish rule left behind awesome plazas and opulent mansions and haciendas.

Mérida Even if you're not big on architecture, the stately mansions in the peninsula's cultural capital never cease to amaze.

Campeche The protective walls once used to fend off pirate attacks still stand today.

Valladolid Think Mérida without the grandeur. Colonial flavor here comes on a smaller, more intimate scale.

San Cristóbal de las Casas The cobble streets of San Cristóbal lead to splendid colonial-era churches.

Izamal Smack in the middle of town rises the imposing Convento de San Antonio de Padua.

Diving & Snorkeling

Not only does this region have some of the best reef diving in the world it also offers fascinating dives in cave systems.

IF YOU LIKE... TURTLES

Check out the Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm, which liberates more than 100,000 of these little guys each year.

Arts & Crafts

Hamacas El Aguacate Who doesn't like to catch a siesta on a quality hammock? Buy one here, then it's sweet dreams baby.

Artisans' Market A main attraction in Puerto Morelos, this market sells authentic Tixkokob hammocks and fine jewelry at fair prices.

Bazar Artesanal Campeche's Folk Art Bazaar is a one-stop shop for regional crafts.

Los Cinco Soles Pick up black ceramics from Oaxaca and Talavera pottery at this Isla Cozumel crafts store.

Mercado Municipal Ki-Huic A labyrinthine downtown Cancún market carrying a wide variety of handicrafts.

Centro Cultural y Artesanal Crafts purchases here help support rural indigenous families.

Nature Experiences

The peninsula spoils nature lovers silly with its wide array of wildlife in biosphere reserves and national parks.

Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún Head out to the mangroves here to spy flamingos and crocs.

Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Lagartos Experienced guides lead bird-watching and snor-

keling tours in this magnificent reserve.

Parque Nacional Isla Contoy An uninhabited island that's home to more than 150 bird species and provides nesting grounds for sea turtles as well.

Reserva de la Biosfera Pantanos de Centla This massive reserve in Tabasco has glorious lakes, marshes, rivers and, of course, abundant wildlife.

Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an A sprawling jungle – the dwelling of howler monkeys, jaguars, pumas and hundreds of bird species.

Swimming

Between cenotes, swimmable beaches and spectacular pools, you can enjoy a perfectly amphibious existence here.

Cenote Dzitnup A lovely cavern pool near Valladolid with *álamo* (poplar) roots stretching down many meters.

Playa Norte Swimming in the shallow, crystalline waters of this Isla Mujeres beach is heavenly.

Le Blanc This Cancún resort hotel boasts a gorgeous azure infinity pool overlooking the Caribbean Sea.

Cristalino Cenote A quiet spot with mangrove on one side and a large open section you can dive into.

Xcaret Kids love swimming and snorkeling in underground rivers and caves in this Riviera Maya fun park.

IF YOU LIKE... SPICY FOOD

The Yucatán is home to the four-alarm habanero chili, one of the hottest peppers on the planet.



Casa del Adivino (p159), Uxmal

Plan Your Trip

Exploring Maya Ruins

When you think about it, the Maya accomplished absolutely remarkable feats. Not only did they pull off some pretty sophisticated architecture, but they also made mind-blowing contributions to mathematics, astronomy and art. The cities they left behind remind us of their brilliance and are most certainly a top highlight of the Yucatán.

Planning Your Trip

When to Go

The best time of year to visit archaeological sites is from November to April, when the peninsula has cooler climates and is generally dry. Keep in mind, though, that this is also high season, meaning you'll be dealing with large crowds unless you arrive early in the morning.

Where to Stay

Tulum makes a great base for visiting both the Tulum archaeological site and Cobá. For the ruins of Chichén Itzá and Ek' Balam, consider staying in colonial Valladolid. Many folks who go to Palenque use San Cristóbal de las Casas as a jumping-off point. An overnight in Campeche is convenient for getting an early start at Edzná, and the tranquil town of Santa Elena works as a nice little hub for exploring the Ruta Puuc, Kabah and Uxmal.

What to See

So many interesting sites, so little time. Definite must-sees include Chichén Itzá, Palenque, Tulum, Uxmal and Calakmul.

What to Take

Ensure you have comfortable walking shoes, a hat, sunscreen and plenty of water. Oh, and don't forget that camera.

Amazing Maya

Classic Maya (AD 250–900), seen by many experts as the most glorious civilization of pre-Hispanic America, flourished in three areas:

North The low-lying Yucatán Peninsula.

Central The Petén forest of Guatemala and the adjacent lowlands in Chiapas and Tabasco in Mexico (to the west) and Belize (to the east).

South Highland Guatemala and a small section of Honduras.

It was in the northern and central areas that the Maya blossomed most brilliantly, attaining groundbreaking heights of artistic and architectural expression.

Among the Maya's many accomplishments was the development of a complex writing system, partly pictorial, partly phonetic, with 300 to 500 symbols. They also refined a calendar used by other pre-Hispanic peoples into a tool for the exact recording and forecasting of earthly and heavenly events. Temples were aligned to enhance observation of the heavens, helping the Maya predict solar eclipses and movements of the moon and Venus.

The Maya also believed in predestination and developed a complex astrology. To win the gods' favor they carried out elaborate rituals involving dances, feasts, sacrifices, consumption of the alcoholic drink *balché*, and bloodletting.

They believed the current world to be just one of a succession of worlds, and the cyclical nature of their calendrical system enabled them to predict the future by looking at the past.

Top Museums

The following museums provide interesting background that's often missing from some of the archaeological sites.

➔ **Museo Maya de Cancún** This new museum houses one of Mexico's most important Maya collections. The adjoining San Miguelito archaeological site contains more than a dozen restored Maya structures and an 8m-high pyramid. The entrance fee for the museum includes access to San Miguelito.

➔ **Gran Museo del Mundo Maya** Adding to Mérida's rich cultural tradition, this shiny new museum showcases more than 500 Maya artifacts. Permanent and temporary exhibits focus on all things Maya, from culture and art to science and Maya cosmology. There's a free nightly light-and-sound show here too.

➔ **Museo Arqueológico de Campeche** Set in an old fortress, this museum exhibits pieces from the Maya sites of Calakmul and Edzná. Stunning jade jewelry and exquisite vases, masks and plates are thematically arranged in 10 halls; the star attractions are the jade burial masks from Calakmul.

➔ **Museo de la Cultura Maya** Chetumal's pride and joy illustrates the Maya's calendrical system, among other intriguing exhibits. It's organized into three levels, mirroring Maya cosmology. The main floor represents this world; the upper

floor the heavens; the lower floor Xibalbá, the underworld. Try to visit here before seeing the nearby sites of Kohunlich and Dzibanché.

Practicalities

- ➔ Admission to the Yucatán's archaeological sites ranges from free to M\$182; children under 13 often cost a fraction of the adult entrance fee. Nightly light-and-sound shows at Chichén Itzá and Uxmal are included in the cost of admission if you retain your ticket stub.
- ➔ Opening hours at most major sites are 8am to 5pm.
- ➔ Drink lots of water and bring protection against the sun. Insect repellent keeps the mosquitoes away when visiting jungle sites.
- ➔ Explanatory signs may be in Spanish only, or both Spanish and English. Audio translators are available at Chichén Itzá and Uxmal (M\$39).
- ➔ Multilingual guides offer one- to two-hour tours (from M\$400 to M\$600). Official tour-guide rates are posted at the entrances of some sites; legit guides carry government-issued badges.
- ➔ Seldom-visited sites have no food or water available; pack a lunch or stop off for a meal or supplies along the way.
- ➔ Avoid midday visits when the sun is beating down and tourists are out in full force.

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Nohoch Mul (p120), Cobá

PLAN YOUR TRIP EXPLORING MAYA RUINS

Resources

The following books and organizations provide a wealth of information on Maya history and culture.

SITES AT A GLANCE

SITE	PERIOD	HIGHLIGHTS
Chichén Itzá	approx AD 100-1400	El Castillo pyramid, Mexico's biggest ball court, El Caracol observatory, Cenote Sagrado
Uxmal	AD 600-900	pyramids, palaces, riotous sculpture featuring masks of rain god Chac
Tulum	AD 1200-1550	temples and towers overlooking the Caribbean Sea
Calakmul	approx AD 1-900	high pyramids with views over rainforest
Cobá	AD 600-1100	towering pyramids in jungle setting
Kabah	AD 750-950	Palace of the Masks with nearly 300 Chac masks
Ruta Puuc	AD 750-950	three sites (Sayil, Xlapak, Labná), palaces with elaborate columns & sculpture, including Chac masks
Edzná	600 BC-AD 1500	five-story pyramid-palace, Temple of the Masks
Becán	550 BC-AD 1000	towered temples
Xpujil	flourished AD 700-800	three-towered ancient 'skyscraper'
Ek' Balam	approx AD 600-800	huge Acrópolis & high pyramid with unusual carving
Dzibanché	approx 200 BC-AD 1200	semiwild site with palaces & pyramids
Kohunlich	AD 100-600	Temple of the Masks