

Isla Mujeres

An Island Retreat

More Caribbean, casual, and noncommercial than Cancún and Cozumel, Isla Mujeres is the perfect place for a do-nothing vacation. You can tour the five-mile-long island in a day—if you really take your time—which makes it a popular day trip from Cancún. But you can easily avoid the crowds during your sojourn and thoroughly enjoy the island's laid-back nightlife.

Most of the island's visitors spend considerable time on **Playa Norte**, which extends from the ferry pier to the northern tip of the island and has every sort of amusement you might desire. Early mornings are best for snorkeling around **El Garrafón**, a marine park turned major tourist attraction, or tooling around the island in a golf cart. A few other sights provide diversion, and you won't want to miss the cemetery, pirate's hacienda, and turtle farm. But that's about it for serious sightseeing.

Isla Mujeres—the Isle of Women, or just “Isla” for short—was purportedly dedicated to the goddess Ixchel by the Maya. A small shrine sits at the island's southern tip, near the lighthouse. The island was given its current name by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, who arrived with the Spanish conquistadors and explorers in 1517. The skinny limestone strip was of little use to the Spaniards until the pirate era in the 1800s, when swash-bucklers stored their booty in caves and wooed local maidens (in their own inimitable style). It was hardly on the map until Cancún emerged with its chain of lights just eight miles west across the Caribbean.

From the 1960s to the mid-1980s, Isla was favored by backpacking travelers who wanted nothing more than a hammock under the palms and a freshwater shower. Campgrounds outnumbered hotels, and happy campers wandered barefoot on sandy streets. A few cafes served tacos and pizza, and a dozen hotels catered to those who preferred beds, bathrooms, and clean towels. Serious tourism was just beginning to develop

when Hurricane Gilbert blew through in 1988, leaving massive destruction in his wake. It took a long time for Isla to recover—the government’s attention was focused on Cancún’s nearly instant makeover.

Today, Isla is prettier than it’s been in decades, with fresh coats of yellow, blue, and red paint on wooden houses and shops. The long white beaches are raked daily, the palms are flourishing, and business owners are seriously courting travelers. The only thing missing is the hammock campgrounds.

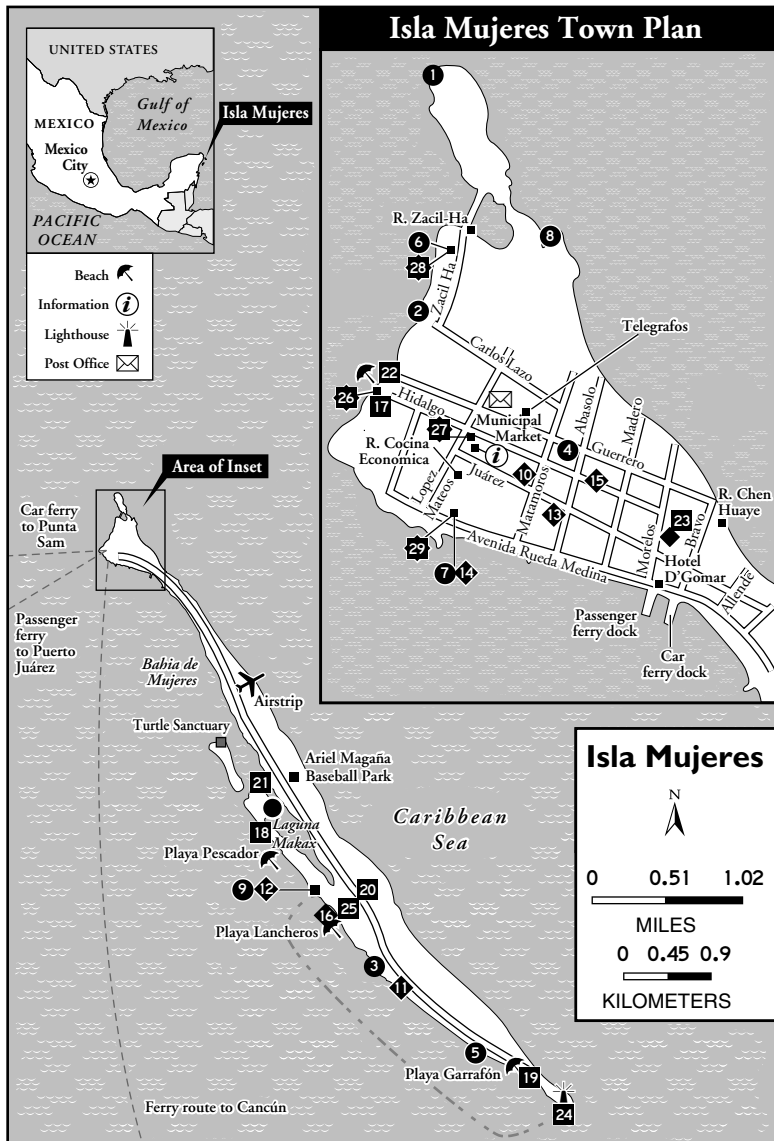
Instead, Isla has several really good accommodations in the budget and moderate price ranges and a new wave of small boutique hotels. Tourists here are a blend of beach lovers who’ve been coming here for decades and newcomers seeking small-town life rather than the flash and glitz of a major beach resort.

Quick Facts about Isla Mujeres

Airport Isla has an airstrip, but it’s primarily used by the military—there are no commercial flights. Visitors typically arrive and depart at the Cancún airport and take a ferry to the island (see “Ferries” below). You shouldn’t have to overnight in Cancún unless your flights arrive late at night or leave early in the morning. In those cases it’s best to book a room in Cancún to avoid stressful situations.

Climate Isla benefits from sea breezes that keep temperatures down, but it still has a tropical climate. Hurricanes are especially dangerous here. The island was decimated by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988, and evacuated for Hurricane Ivan in 2004. If you hear of a hurricane warning, go to the mainland. The average monthly temperature dips gently between 90° F and 80° F

Ferries Most visitors and locals arrive via the ferries from the Gran Puerto terminal in Puerto Juárez. If you’re arriving in Cancún by air, you can get to Puerto Juárez, about 10 kilometers north of Cancún, by taxi, bus, or private transport. Tour companies can arrange transfers between the airport and the ferry terminal. The ride takes about 20 minutes and costs about \$18 each way. Arrange this type of private transfer before you travel by contacting **Best Day** (phone (998) 881-7206; www.bestday.com). Tell them you want direct service to Puerto Juárez and not a shared vehicle with passengers going to other locations. **Cancún Valet** (phone (998) 892-4014; www.cancunvalet.com) charges \$40 one-way or \$75 round-trip for a van holding 10 persons. Alternately, you can hire a taxi for about \$15 each way. The least expensive way to reach the ferry is to take the public bus marked “Riviera” to the Cancún bus station (make sure it’s not headed to Playa



del Carmen) and a bus to Puerto Juárez; the cost is about \$3 and the trip will take about 90 minutes.

The Gran Puerto terminal has lockers, restaurants, and porter to help with your bags. Ferries run every half hour, 6:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., and cost \$3.50. The trip takes about 20 minutes. Schedules change fre-

ACCOMMODATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 14 Pinguino 15 Pizza Rolandi 16 Playa Lancheros 	NIGHTCLUBS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Avalon Reef Club 2 Cabañas Maria del Mar 3 Casa de los Sueños 4 Francis Arlene 5 Garrafón de Castillo 6 Na Balam 7 Posada del Mar 8 Secreto 9 Villa Rolandi 	ATTRACTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 26 Buho's 27 Jax 28 Na Balam 29 Pinguino
RESTAURANTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 17 Cemeterio 18 Dolphin Discovery 19 El Garrafón 20 Hacienda Mundaca 21 Marina Puerto Isla Mujeres 22 Playa Norte 23 Plaza Municipal 24 Punta Sur 25 Tortugranja 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 Café Cito 11 Casa O's 12 Casa Rolandi 13 Lonchería Poc-Chuc 		

quently, so check the schedule board by the ticket window for your return time as well as your trip over to the island.

More expensive shuttles travel between the Embarcadero in Cancún's hotel zone and Isla Mujeres. The boats run five times a day from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. and cost \$15. Ferries arrive at Isla Mujeres' main dock at Avenida Medina and Calle Morelos. Count on the whole journey from the airport to Isla taking at least 90 minutes (longer if you're traveling by bus) if everything runs efficiently. There is also a car ferry from Punta Sam, north of Puerto Juárez, but there's no reason to bring a car to this tiny island unless you intend to move in.

Getting Around Cars are unnecessary on Isla. Most people get around on scooters or in golf carts. Both can be rented at hotels and businesses in town; typical costs are \$40 for 24-hours' worth of golf cart, and \$22 to \$27 a day or \$11 per hour for a moped. Traffic putters along at about 20 mph. Even taxi drivers tend to drive at a leisurely pace. You often see caravans of golf carts headed to Garrafón; many Cancún tour companies include these merry little parades in their Isla tours. The leaders guide their troops to the side of the road occasionally, allowing other drivers to pass. Bicycles are also available for rent, and they are great for short trips. But the heat can get you down on long rides.

Internet Access Air-conditioning and speedy DSL connection make @ **Internet Café** (Avenida Madero 17) popular. The charge is about \$1 for 30 minutes. They'll let you hook up your laptop here.

Telephones The area code is 998; all local phone numbers have seven digits. The old numbers were six digits only (and locals still refer to them this way). Add a 7 to the front of six-digit local numbers.

Tourist Information The **Tourist Information Office** (Avenida Medina 130; (998) 877-0307) is open Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 9 a.m. to noon. The clerks distribute some brochures and information, but they weren't very helpful when we stopped by. **La Isleña** (Avenida Morelos between Avenida Medina and Avenida Juárez; (998) 877-0578) has long been a great source of information. They run snorkeling and boat trips and are generous with info and assistance. **Isla Mujeres Net** (www.isla-mujeres.net) is an excellent source of information and has an interesting message board.

Where to Stay in Isla Mujeres

Many of Isla's accommodations are clustered around Playa Norte and the town and are moderately priced. But a new wave of small boutique hotels has raised the island's profile. These private, serene inns are perfect for those who want total peace and relaxation. There are no major chain hotels on the island and only one all-inclusive (so far).

Rates increase significantly around holidays, so book your hotel room early. Depending on your flight times, you may have to overnight in Cancún; most hotels will suggest the best place to stay in your price range. **Four Seasons Travel** (phone (800) 552-4550; www.yucatanres.com) has specialized in Isla for years and can guide you to the right property. **Sundreamers** (www.sundreamers.com) is an Internet agency that handles reservations at some small hotels, apartments, and condo buildings.

HOW ACCOMMODATIONS COMPARE IN ISLA MUJERES

Accommodation	Overall	Quality	Value	Cost
Villa Rolandi	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	\$\$\$\$
Casa de los Sueños	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$
Na Balam	★★★½	★★★★	★★★	\$\$\$
Secreto	★★★½	★★★★	★★½	\$\$\$
Posada del Mar	★★★	★★★	★★★★	\$
Avalon Reef Club	★★★	★★½	★★★★	\$
Cabañas Maria del Mar	★★	★★	★★★	\$-\$\$
Garrafón de Castillo	★★	★★	★★★	\$
Francis Arlene	★½	★★	★★★★	\$

Accommodation Profiles

AVALON REEF CLUB

\$\$\$

OVERALL ★★★ | QUALITY ★★★½ | VALUE ★★★★★

Calle Zacil-Ha; (998) 999-2050; (888) 497-4325 U.S. and Canada;
fax (998) 999-2052; www.avalonresorts.net

Avalon rebuilt this venerable Isla property in 2002, adding villas and an eight-story tower on a skinny strip of land between the bay and the open sea. The location is extraordinary, with the northern end of Playa Norte on one side and rocky coves that act like natural whirlpool tubs on the other. A wooden bridge connects the property with Zacil-Ha, the sandy road to town.

Avalon sells vacation ownership at the all-inclusive hotel and brings in boatloads of potential buyers from Cancún. The same fast boat carries hotel guests, making the arrival and departure process easier. When the potential buyers from Cancún are gone, the hotel feels like a private club. The salespeople have gotten a bad rep in town for pushing their product. Not interested? Just say no.

SETTING AND FACILITIES

Location Northern tip of the island near downtown

Dining 3 restaurants; meal plans available

Amenities and services Beach, pool, hot tub, gym, spa, water-sports center, tour desk, organized children's activities, shops, 24-hour room service, business center, Internet access

ACCOMMODATIONS

Rooms 83 rooms, 6 suites, 55 studios

All rooms AC, windows that open, ocean view, balcony or terrace, bathtub, hair dryer, safe, coffeemaker, satellite TV, VCR/DVD/CD

Some rooms Fans, whirlpool tub, minibar, refrigerators, kitchenette, high-speed Internet, disabled access, nonsmoking

Comfort and decor Suites at top of the hotel tower are fabulous, with large living rooms, kitchens, and balconies with hot tubs. Basic rooms are small. The villas facing the open sea lack the views of the island and the lights of Cancún that you get in the tower. Hotel suites have separate living rooms, balconies, and hot tubs; villas have kitchenettes and bedrooms.

PAYMENT, RESERVATIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS

Deposit More than a month, 25% of booking value; within a month, full booking value. Cancellation policy: 21 or more days, \$75; 20–8 days, \$75 plus 50% of booking value; 7 days or less, nonrefundable

Credit cards AE, MC, V

Check in/out 3 p.m./noon

CABAÑAS MARIA DEL MAR**\$--\$\$**

OVERALL ★★ | QUALITY ★★ | VALUE ★★★

Avenida Arq. Carlos Lazo #1; (998) 877-0179; (800) 223-5695 U.S. and Canada; fax (998) 877-0213; www.cabanasdeldemar.com

This is one of Isla's oldest hotels, with plenty of modifications through the years. The least-expensive bungalow rooms face the gardens and pool in a two-story palapa-roofed building; rooms connect for families and groups. The Tower section is a two-story Mexican-style building with red tile roofs holding 24 large rooms with fridges and wood furnishings; second-story rooms have a beach view from the balcony. The Castle section is across the street and has large rooms with fridges and large terraces overlooking the beach.

SETTING AND FACILITIES

Location On Playa Norte

Dining 1 restaurant, complimentary continental breakfast

Amenities and services Beach, 2 pools, tour desk

ACCOMMODATIONS

Rooms 73

All rooms AC, fan, refrigerator

Some rooms Ocean view, windows that open, balcony or terrace, satellite TV

Comfort and decor Management is casually efficient and can help with everything from sending your piles of clothes to the laundromat to arranging group functions. Guests wander barefoot between rooms, pool, and beach. The gardens provide shade and add to the hotel's character; they also harbor mosquitoes. You may need to use repellent in the evening.

PAYMENT, RESERVATIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS

Deposit 2-night deposit required; 15-day cancellation in low season, 30 days in high season for full refund

Credit cards MC, V

Check in/out Noon/noon

CASA DE LOS SUEÑOS**\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$**

OVERALL ★★★★★ | QUALITY ★★★★★ | VALUE ★★★

Carretera Garrafón 9; (998) 877-0651, (800) 728-9098 U.S. and Canada; fax (998) 877-0708; www.casadelossuenosresort.com; www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com

Modern Mexico meets L.A. Asian at this boutique property, where no expense has been spared in architecture and design. Glossy hardwoods,

rustic bamboo, and handcrafted textiles stand out against sleek white walls. The whole setup feels as though it were designed for a fashion photo shoot. The private setting, serene spa, and gourmet restaurant create a setting that pampers the senses.

SETTING AND FACILITIES

Location Near Garrafón

Dining 1 restaurant; complimentary breakfast

Amenities and services Beach, pool, gym, spa, water-sports center, tour desk, room service, Internet access

ACCOMMODATIONS

Rooms 9

All rooms AC, fan, windows that open, ocean view, balcony or terrace, hair dryer, safe, minibar, nonsmoking

Some rooms Whirlpool tub, TV, DVD, CD

Comfort and decor Rooms feel like bedrooms in a beach vacation home with puffy mattresses on the beds and thoughtful design that evokes a meditative mood. In such a small, isolated hotel, your experience is somewhat determined by your fellow guests. Thusfar, the hotel is so exclusive that you could be there alone, feeling as though you have private housekeepers and a chef.

PAYMENT, RESERVATIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS

Deposit. Credit card, 4-day cancellation policy

Credit cards AE, MC, V

Check in/out 3 p.m./noon

FRANCIS ARLENE

\$

OVERALL ★★★ | QUALITY ★★ | VALUE ★★★★★

Avenida Guerrero #7; (998) 877-0310 or (998) 877-0861;
www.francisarlene.com

We're fond of this family-run budget hotel on a back street in town. The Magañas keep their coral-colored buildings immaculately clean, and guests tend to return year after year. Though it's not on the beach, the hotel is a short walk from the open sea and about a 10-minute walk from Playa Norte. A small courtyard separates the buildings. Room rates are quoted in pesos and are very reasonable. If you ask for them in dollars, they get higher.

SETTING AND FACILITIES

Location On a back street in downtown between the bay and sea

Dining No restaurant

Amenities and services No extra services, no luggage storage

ACCOMMODATIONS

Rooms 26

All rooms Fans, refrigerators, no phones, no TV

Some rooms AC, kitchenette

Comfort and decor The rooms are simply decorated with tiled floors and floral bedspreads and are immaculately clean. There's always someone from the family on hand to help with any questions.

PAYMENT, RESERVATIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS

Deposit Credit-card deposit, fully refundable if canceled within 30 days of scheduled stay

Credit cards Cash only, no credit cards

Check in/out Flexible

GARRAFÓN DE CASTILLO

\$

OVERALL ★★ | QUALITY ★★ | VALUE ★★★

Carretera a Punta Sur (same as Carretera Garrafón) Km 6; (998) 877-0107; fax (998) 877-0019; www.isla-mujeres.net/castilla/home.htm

Pink two-story buildings face a wooden pier and the sea, and guests have access to fabulous snorkeling. Outsiders pay a day fee to use the beach club and restaurant; when they're gone, guests have the run of a secluded, private beach. You may want a scooter for exploring and going to restaurants in town. Beach club restaurant serves breakfast, lunch, dinner.

SETTING AND FACILITIES

Location Just south of El Garrafón

Dining 1 restaurant

Amenities and services Beach, water-sports center

ACCOMMODATIONS

Rooms 12

All rooms AC, windows that open, ocean view, balcony or terrace, refrigerator; no phones or TVs

Some rooms Same

Comfort and decor If you're seeking isolation and plenty of time in the water, you'll like this small hotel that faces the water and Cancún skyline. The rooms are perfectly acceptable, with tile floors and furnishing painted pale blue. Maintenance can be shaky, so check out a few rooms before settling in.

PAYMENT, RESERVATIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS

Deposit Payment for all nights required upon arrival**Credit cards** Cash only**Check in/out** Flexible**NA BALAM****\$\$\$**

OVERALL ★★★½ | QUALITY ★★★★★ | VALUE ★★★

Calle Zazil-Ha 118, Playa Norte; (998) 877-0279; fax (998) 877-0446;
www.nabalam.com

An emphasis on health and serenity prevails at this extremely popular beachfront hotel. The beach-side section has lush gardens around rooms facing the sea. The section on the other side of the road has a pool. The owner has filled the place with folk art, mostly from Chiapas and Guatemala. Na Balam means “tiger” in Maya, and the cat’s image appears in statues and on the hotel’s stationery. Check the Web site for packages. The hotel sometimes hosts yoga workshops and weddings, and offers yoga classes. Its restaurant, Zazil-Ha, serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

SETTING AND FACILITIES

Location Playa Norte**Dining** 1 restaurant**Amenities and services** Beach, pool, massage**ACCOMMODATIONS**

Rooms 31**All rooms** AC, fan, safe deposit box, terrace or balcony**Some rooms** Ocean view, windows that open, whirlpool tubs on the terrace**Comfort and decor** The large rooms (called suites) have white textiles, white walls, graceful wood furnishings with ornate carvings, peaked palapa ceilings, separate seating and dining areas, and folk-art decorations.**PAYMENT, RESERVATIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS**

Deposit 1-night deposit**Credit cards** AE, MC, V**Check in/out** 3 p.m./noon**POSADA DEL MAR****\$**

OVERALL ★★★ | QUALITY ★★★ | VALUE ★★★★★

Avenida Rueda Medina 15-A; (998) 877-0044; (998) 877-0770;
fax (998) 877-0266; www.posadadelmar.com

Some island regulars wouldn't consider staying anywhere but this rambling oldie that attracts a mixed bag of travelers. Families are happy with the large, simple rooms impervious to the wear of sand and wet clothes. Travelers counting their pesos find the hotel comfortable and accessible to town and the beach. The pool is buried in trees, lawn, and rock arches, and sits beside the palapa bar with its swing chairs and affable bartender, Miguel. Hammocks swing under palm trees in a quiet, shady area near the pool. The pace is slow and congenial, especially if you speak a bit of Spanish. The restaurant serves breakfast, lunch, dinner.

SETTING AND FACILITIES

Location Across the street from Playa Norte near ferry pier

Dining 1 restaurant

Amenities and services Pool, tour desk

ACCOMMODATIONS

Rooms 61

All rooms AC, fan, windows that open, cable TV

Some rooms Ocean view, balcony or terrace, bathtub, refrigerator, disabled access

Comfort and decor The newest section's rooms are more refined, with niches with reading lamps over the beds and sliding glass doors to the gardens.

PAYMENT, RESERVATIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS

Deposit Full prepayment before arrival, 3-day cancellation policy

Credit cards AE, MC, V

Check in/out 3 p.m./1 p.m.

SECRETO

\$\$\$

OVERALL ★★★½ | QUALITY ★★★★★ | VALUE ★★½

Sección Rocas, Lote 11, Punta Norte; (998) 877-1039; (998) 877-1048; (800) 728-9098 U.S. and Canada; www.hotelsecreto.com; www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com

A white-on-white, ultra-private retreat on a small beach near the bridge to the Avalon, Secreto looks very L.A. or South Beach. White gauze curtains flow from canopies over the beds; white walls angle around a lobby/lounge and pool. One expects to hear some sort of ethereal music in the background; thankfully, the guests determine the ambience. Celebrities are fond of the privacy and serenity.

SETTING AND FACILITIES

Location Near Na Balam on Half Moon Beach

Dining No restaurant, complimentary continental breakfast

Amenities and services Beach, pool, tour desk, room service, Internet access

ACCOMMODATIONS

Rooms 9

All rooms AC, windows that open, ocean view, balcony or terrace, hair dryer, safe, refrigerator, satellite TV, CD, nonsmoking

Some rooms

Comfort and decor Minimalists love the rooms' clean, fresh look; hermits and romantics like the private terraces overlooking Half Moon Beach. The beach and water are visible from some beds when the sliding glass doors are open, and couches face the candlelit terraces. Towels are fluffy and soft, sheets crisp and cool.

PAYMENT, RESERVATIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS

Deposit 2-night, nonrefundable deposit charged to credit card to reserve; 25% of balance if cancelled within 90 days, 50% if cancelled within 60 days, 100% charges for less than 30 days.

Credit cards AE, MC, V

Check in/out 3 p.m./noon

VILLA ROLANDI

\$\$\$\$

OVERALL ★★★★★ | QUALITY ★★★★★ | VALUE ★★★½

Fraccionamiento Laguna Mar; (998) 877-0700; 998-877-0100;
www.villarolandi.com

When this romantic boutique hotel opened, Isla suddenly gained a certain cachet as a glamorous hideaway. The fanfare has died down, and other island hotels have updated their rooms and amenities to meet this competition, but Rolandi still holds a special charm. Its restaurant is a standout. Privacy is protected; only guests are allowed by the horizon pool and small beach. The hotel is ideal for honeymooners and couples on romantic getaways—or celebrities like British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who booked the whole place for his family. The room rate includes a transfer from Cancún and lunch or dinner at Casa Rolandi. Complimentary continental breakfast is slipped through a little niche in each suite each morning.

SETTING AND FACILITIES

Location Between Laguna Makax and the sea facing Cancún

Dining 1 restaurant

Amenities and services Beach, pool, gym, massage, Internet access

ACCOMMODATIONS

Rooms 20 suites

All rooms AC, ocean view, balcony or terrace, whirlpool tub, hair dryer, safe, minibar, cable TV, CD

Some rooms Nonsmoking rooms

Comfort and decor The attention to detail is exceptional, with comfortable seating areas by the balconies and terraces (which are designed for privacy), cushy beds with fine linens, and cozy robes in the spacious closets. The bathrooms have fabulous showers with dueling showerheads, jets, a small seat, and stereo speakers; they can be used as steam rooms. Green marble counters have plenty of room for your toiletries, and there's a separate vanity area. All that's missing are hammocks on the terraces.

PAYMENT, RESERVATIONS, AND RESTRICTIONS

Deposit Credit card required to make reservation

Credit cards AE, MC, V

Check in/out 3 p.m./noon

Where to Eat in Isla Mujeres

Isla has a surprising number and variety of restaurants. Many are clustered around the pedestrian zone on Avenida Hidalgo; those on the north end by the nightclubs tend to change names and management but are fun places to eat tacos and pizza while watching the crowd. Many of the hotels have good or even excellent restaurants; along with those listed below are **Zazil-Ha** in the Na Balam hotel and **La Cazuela** at the hotel Roca Mar by the seafront *malecón* (promenade). There are several small palapa-covered beach bars and neighborhood restaurants along the road to El Garrafón. Stop by for a cold drink and snack, and you're sure to get a feel for the Mexican residents of the island. All restaurants are casual; some do not accept credit cards.

HOW RESTAURANTS COMPARE IN ISLA MUJERES

Restaurant	Cuisine	Cost	Overall	Quality	Value
Casa Rolandi	Gourmet Italian	Exp	★★★★	★★★½	★★★
Casa O's	Seafood/Steak	Mod	★★★½	★★★	★★½
Pinguino	Mexican/Seafood	Mod	★★★	★★★	★★★★
Pizza Rolandi	Italian	Mod	★★★	★★★	★★★
Playa Lancheros	Seafood	Inexp	★★½	★★★	★★½
Café Cito	Crêpes/International	Inexp	★½	★½	★★
Lonchería Poc-Chuc	Mexican/Yucatecan	Inexp	★	★	★★★

Restaurant Profiles

CAFÉ CITO

★½

CRÊPES/INTERNATIONAL | INEXPENSIVE | QUALITY ★½ | VALUE ★★

Downtown; Matamoros 42; (998) 877-0438

Reservations Not accepted**Entree range** \$2.50–\$5**Payment** Cash only**Service rating** ★★**Parking** Street**Bar** No**Dress** Casual**Disabled access** Limited**Customers** Regular locals, travelers**Hours** Daily, 8 a.m.–2 p.m., year-round; open for dinner in high season**Setting and atmosphere** Glass tops cover arrangements of shells on sand on tables painted Mediterranean blue**House specialties** Crêpes**Summary and comments** Visitors linger over newspapers and postcards as they sip espresso with their croissants. Crêpes filled with fruit, ice cream, or other treats, and baguettes stuffed with cream cheese and avocado or melted cheese with tomatoes are both served throughout the day. This is a great, quiet place to take a breather when shopping downtown.

CASA O'S

★★★★½

SEAFOOD/STEAK | MODERATE | QUALITY ★★★ | VALUE ★★½

Close to El Garrafón on south side of island; Carretera Garrafón s/n; (998) 888-0170

Reservations Recommended**Entree range** \$8–\$18**Payment** MC, V**Service rating** ★★★★★**Parking** Street**Bar** Full service; good selection of wines from California, Mexico, France, and Chile**Dress** Casual**Disabled access** Not good**Customers** Locals on special nights out, travelers**Hours** Daily, 1–9 p.m.; closed October

Setting and atmosphere A wooden walkway winds over a stream to a large palapa by the sand, where tables are covered in linens and candle-light sparkles on crystal.

House specialties Lobster bisque; spiny lobster; Black Angus beef; shrimp kabobs

Summary and comments Book a table for just before sunset, order a bottle of imported wine, and settle back for a romantic, enjoyable evening. Prices are high for the island, but the setting and delicious food are worth the splurge. If you can't spring for the lobster, try the fresh fish *veracruzano* style, with onions and tomatoes. Don't miss the key lime pie. It seems your name must end in an "o" to work as a waiter here (hence Casa O's); it also helps to speak English and/or French and be sincerely accommodating.

CASA ROLANDI

★★★★

GOURMET ITALIAN | EXPENSIVE | QUALITY ★★★½ | VALUE ★★★

Hotel Villa Rolandi by Laguna Makax; Fraccionamiento Laguna Mar; (998) 877-0700

Reservations Recommended

Entree range \$13–\$30

Payment AE, V, MC

Service rating ★★★

Parking Street

Bar Full service

Dress Casual chic

Disabled access Yes

Customers Hotel guests, island visitors, day-trippers from Cancún

Hours Daily, 8 a.m.–10:30 p.m.

Setting and atmosphere Open-air restaurant over the water fronting the main dining room; tables are set with linen cloths and crystal, casually elegant

House specialties Seafood carpaccio; black ravioli filled with shrimp; shrimp with saffron and sambuca; lamb chops

Summary and comments Isla's leading gourmet restaurant is run by the Swiss-Italian family whose restaurants are renowned in the area for their wood-burning ovens and fabulous pizza. But the cuisine here is far more refined. White truffle oil is drizzled on carpaccio; arugula and radicchio cover salad plates, and homemade ravioli is filled with venison. Linger over a long lunch or dinner, and don't skip any courses. Finish with the silky passion fruit mousse or panna cotta with berries.

LONCHERÍA POC-CHUC

★

MEXICAN/YUCATECAN | INEXPENSIVE | QUALITY ★ | VALUE ★★★

Downtown; Avenida Juárez at Abasolo; no phone

Reservations Not accepted**Entree range** \$2–\$7**Payment** Cash only**Service rating** ★★**Parking** Street**Bar** No**Dress** Casual**Disabled access** No**Customers** Locals, budget travelers**Hours** Monday–Saturday, 8 a.m.–10 p.m.**Setting and atmosphere** Tiny, bare-bones restaurant a few steps above the street, with seven wobbly wooden tables**House specialties** *Poc-chuc*; *panuchos*; tacos**Summary and comments** Few places in Isla's traveler areas serve authentic Yucatecan dishes. Most of the standards (see our "Guide to the Mexican Menu," page 62) are on the menu at this little neighborhood restaurant, where meals are served on plastic plates and diners tend to be taking a break from jobs at nearby businesses. The *poc-chuc* (marinated, grilled pork chop) is a good choice, as is *cochinita pibil* (marinated pork baked in banana leaves). The cooking is simple, and portions are small.**PLAYA LANCHEROS**

★★½

SEAFOOD | INEXPENSIVE | QUALITY ★★½ | VALUE ★★★

Middle of the west coast of the island, just past the hacienda Mundaca on the way to Garrafón; (998) 877-0340

Reservations Not accepted**Entree range** \$5–\$10**Payment** No credit cards**Service rating** ★½**Parking** Street**Bar** Beer, tequila, rum**Dress** Beach casual**Disabled access** Difficult**Customers** Locals on weekend afternoons, travelers during the week

Hours Daily, 11 a.m.–sunset

Setting and atmosphere Beach basic, with palapas for shade over picnic tables, children playing in the sand nearby

House specialties *Ceviche; pescado tikin-xic*

Summary and comments A classic Mexican Sunday afternoon includes a long, leisurely lunch with the whole family. On Isla, the generations gather on the beach at this casual cafe. They visit over platters of mixed seafood *ceviche*, and yucatecan *pescado tikin-xic*, the freshest fish of the day seasoned with *achiote* (reddish annatto seed), baked in banana leaves, and served with fresh tortillas, shredded cabbage, and limes. The beer bottles accumulate, someone pulls out a guitar, and everyone sings melancholic ballads. Only the setting sun forces the sated diners to disperse. This is the perfect place to experience this family tradition and enjoy a superb meal. The menu includes barbecued chicken, guacamole, and nachos.

PINGUINO

★★★

MEXICAN/SEAFOOD | MODERATE | QUALITY ★★★ | VALUE ★★★★★

Downtown across from the main beach; Avenida Rueda Medina 15-A;
(998) 877-0044

Reservations Accepted

Entree range \$7–\$12

Payment MC, V

Service rating ★★★

Parking Street

Bar Full service

Dress Casual

Disabled access Yes

Customers Hotel guests, island visitors, locals

Hours Daily, 7 a.m.–10 p.m.

Setting and atmosphere Large dining room set just above the sidewalk, across from the beach. Tables on the balcony at the rail have excellent sunset view. New furnishings have updated this old favorite.

House specialties Seafood soup; seafood platter for two; lobster

Summary and comments Everything the cooks prepare is fresh and yummy, from the fruit and yogurt at breakfast to the fabulous lobster tail at dinner. The cuisine isn't gourmet, but it's very good—and the setting is more peaceful than at restaurants in the middle of town. Try the enormous platter of grilled fish and shellfish for two.

PIZZA ROLANDI

★★★

ITALIAN | MODERATE | QUALITY ★★★ | VALUE ★★★

Downtown; Avenida Hidalgo 110; (998) 877-0429

Reservations Not accepted**Entree range** \$6–\$13**Payment** AE, V, MC**Service rating** ★★★**Parking** Limited street parking**Bar** Full service**Dress** Casual**Disabled access** Limited**Customers** Everybody on the island**Hours** Daily, 11 a.m.–11:30 p.m.**Setting and atmosphere** Front tables face the pedestrian sidewalk; in the back, a huge dining room sits in a courtyard beneath the Hotel Belmar. Try for a table away from the wood-burning oven.**House specialties** Pizza; baked chicken; coconut ice cream with Kahlua**Summary and comments** It seems every visitor has at least one meal at this island institution (sister to the more gourmet Casa Rolandi). The pizzas are crisp and loaded with toppings of your choice; salads are fresh and bountiful; and there are plenty of other pasta, seafood, and beef selections. The crowd is convivial—you might run into fellow travelers you've met during your ramblings, or locals who've helped you at shops and hotels.

Sightseeing in Isla Mujeres

Isla seems to float like a reef atop the water. It's so skinny—half a mile at its widest point—and so flat you can easily imagine the sea washing right over it. Most of the residences and businesses sit atop the northern section on a fairly substantial hunk of ground between the **Bahía de Isla Mujeres** and the open sea. The town extends from the ferry pier on the bay at Avenida Medina four blocks northeast to a *malecón* facing the sea.

Shops, budget hotels, and restaurants line the ten cross-streets running east to west. It's pretty hard to get lost, but the streets sometimes seem like a maze. The **Plaza Municipal** is little more than a cement slab in front of the undistinguished city hall at Juárez and Bravo; a pedestrian walkway leads to the *malecón* (waterfront promenade), a great place to stroll any time of day.

Attractions

Playa Norte, which runs from Avenida Medina to land's end, is the center of the action for most of Isla's visitors. The beach faces shallow, crystalline,

calm water and is dotted with palapa-roofed bars and a few hotels. Umbrellas, lounge chairs, and some beach toys are available for rent. Fortunately, there aren't a lot of powered watercrafts buzzing about. A sandy road runs parallel to the beach past the **Cementerio** (Cemetery) on Calle Zazil-Há. The pirate Fermín Mundaca had his tomb with skull and crossbones put here, though he was buried elsewhere. The monument is here, but it's unmarked and hard to find. The seaside cemetery is packed with floral bouquets (many plastic) and plaster angels.

Avenida Medina runs southwest nearly the whole length of the island; the name of the street eventually changes to Carretera Garrafón. Another unnamed road branches off Medina at the south edge of **Laguna Makax**, a large lagoon that shelters the busy **Marina Puerto Isla Mujeres**. The marina has 70 slips, gas, and a large boatyard where all the vessels from Cancún are maintained.

Dolphin Discovery (phone (998) 849-4757; www.dolphindiscovery.com) is located on the bay side of the road. It is recommended that you make reservations in advance if you want to swim, dive, or simply have an encounter with the dolphins. The first swims and encounters begin 10 a.m. Prices start at \$69 for adults and \$64 for children under 12.

Another road juts west to **Playa Lancheros**, where the water is calm and there are plenty of palms for shade. This is a good spot to stop for a swim and lunch. Nearby **Tortugranja** (phone (998) 877-0595) is a science center focused on protecting the sea turtles that lay their eggs on Isla's beaches. The program was stopped by government agencies, then started up again. Its future is uncertain. A few turtles are being raised in the center's outdoor tanks; inside the buildings are aquariums and exhibits on sea turtles, plus a shop selling books, videos, and turtle-oriented souvenirs. The center is fascinating (kids love the baby turtles), and its proceeds help protect the turtles and their eggs and babies. To get there, take Avenida Rueda Medina south of town; about a block southeast of Hacienda Mundaca, take the right fork (the smaller road that loops back north); the entrance is about a half kilometer (quarter mile) farther, on the left. Admission is \$2, and the center is open daily, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

A crumbling rock archway marks the entrance to **Hacienda Mundaca** (no phone), built by the pirate Fermín Mundaca for an island girl he loved. As the legend goes, the maiden didn't return his affection, and Mundaca lived a lonely life amid his tropical gardens and rambling estate. He deserted the hacienda and died in Mérida. Some guides say the Mundaca story is bunk, and that a slave-trader impersonated the pirate. Whoever built the hacienda left it to crumble into ruins that travelers and locals enjoy exploring. The municipality has taken over the grounds and turned it into a park and zoo. Spider monkeys, white-tailed deer, a boa

constrictor, and a jaguar are kept in roomy cages with plaques bearing the names of the animals in Maya; crocodiles sun at the edge of ponds. The remains of a chapel, cannons, and a few buildings are buried in thick bushes and vines. It's a pleasant, shady place to wander about for an hour. It's located east off Avenida Rueda Medina; take the main road southeast from town to an S-curve at the end of Laguna Makax, then turn left onto a dirt road. Open daily, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; admission is \$2.50.

The biggest attraction on Isla is **El Garrafón** (Carretera El Garrafón, 2.5 km (1.5 miles) southeast of Playa Lancheros; (998) 849-4950; www.garrafon.com), an underwater preserve and marine park. The same people who created Xcaret (see Part Four, Cancún, page 82) took over the neglected park a few years ago and have turned it into a commercial complex. Snorkeling here can be an adventure, depending on the currents, since the water swirls around rocky inlets. But there are large schools of parrotfish, angelfish, and other sea creatures. Hammocks hang under palms along a grassy slope above the water; some visitors set up housekeeping in this area for the day. Beach chairs and palapas are set on various sand areas, and there are large shower, locker, and scuba and snorkel rental facilities. Admission rates vary. Basic admission is \$14 adults and \$8 kids ages 4 to 11; an all-inclusive rate takes care of rentals and meals (\$40 adults, \$20 kids ages 4 to 11). Tours from Cancún arrive throughout the day. If you're staying on the island, get here early to avoid the crowds. The park is open daily, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Garrafón's management has taken over the southern tip of the island, site of the lighthouse and small Maya temples believed to have been pilgrimage sites for women. You now have to pay an admission fee of \$5 to enter the area called **Punta Sur**. A pathway lined with enormous metal sculptures leads to the ruins atop a ragged cliff.

Tours and Side Trips from Isla Mujeres

Boat Tours

Boat captains who run snorkeling, diving, and sightseeing trips congregate at the **Sociedad Cooperativa Turística** (Avenida Median just north of the pier; (998) 877-0239 or (998) 877-1304). Most of the boats are small skiffs (called *pangas*) that comfortably carry four to six persons. You can hire one to cruise along the bay side of the island to Garrafón and the waters below the lighthouse. Captains arrange various types of tours that last four hours and can include food and drink. The system is very informal; you just shop around until you get a captain and price you like. Typically, four hours of fishing close to shore costs \$100, while eight hours farther out costs \$240. Consider getting a boat with an awning or some

form of shade—it may cost more, but it will save your skin from burning. The captains also run sportfishing trips; some will take you to Puerto Juárez for less money than the ferry. The journey can get rough, however.

Isla Contoy

Birders in particular are fascinated with **Isla Contoy**, 19 miles north of Isla Mujeres. The four-mile-long island is a haven for herons, flamingos, spoonbills, petrels, and dozen of other migratory species. The island has been a wildlife sanctuary since 1981 and has gone through several migrations of its own. At times, visitors have been allowed to go onshore and visit a small museum; at other times, they are restricted to a small landing area. There have even been times when the island is completely off limits. We've met travelers who have made the journey to Isla Mujeres strictly to visit Contoy and have been denied access. The whims of various marine, military, and environmental agencies are unpredictable. **Amigos de Isla Contoy** (www.islacontoy.org) monitors the environmental issues on the island and is a great source of info. Tours to Contoy usually include lunch, which often consists of grilled fish caught along the 45-minute trip to the island. Shop around the **Sociedad Cooperativa Turística** (Avenida Median just north of the pier; (998) 877-0239 or (998) 877-1304) for a tour, which usually lasts about four hours and costs \$38 to \$50. Ask if the boat actually stops at the island; if so, you must pay a \$5 authorization fee. Stop by the co-op's offices and inspect the boats, talk with the captains and set up your trip a few days before you want to go, if possible.

Serious bird-watchers and nature lovers may want to set up their trip in advance, which can be difficult through the Cooperativa. **Captain Tony** (www.isla-mujeres.net/capttony/home.htm) gets rave reviews for his Contoy trips. **La Isleña** (Avenida Morelos between Avenida Medina and Avenida Juárez; (998) 877-0578) runs tours to Isla Contoy and has a stand in front of the shop staffed by friendly clerks who are loaded with local tips. Tours leave from the dock at 8:30 a.m. daily and include a light breakfast, snorkel dive, tour of the lee side of Isla Contoy, and a fresh-cooked lunch, all for \$40. **Captain Ricardo Gaitan** (Fraccionamiento I Madero; (998) 877-0434; www.isla-mujeres.net/contoy/home.htm) runs trips to the island either by motor boat or sailboat. The trip includes lunch, drinks, fishing along the way, and snorkeling opportunities. Both companies also offer fishing and snorkeling tours.

Exercise and Recreation in Isla Mujeres

Scuba Diving and Snorkeling

El Garrafón is the obvious place to snorkel, but the admission is steep. However, the fish don't stick to the park's boundaries, and there are

places where you can snorkel without paying a huge fee. At **Garrafón de Castillo** (phone (998) 877-0508), just north of the park, the proprietors charge a paltry \$2 for visitors to snorkel off the shores and coves adjacent to the park. There are showers and restrooms. Snorkeling is also good off Playa Norte between Na-Balam and the tip of the island by the Avalon resort

The scuba diving off Isla doesn't compare to Cozumel's and the mainland reefs. But a certain kind of diver can't resist **Las Cuevas de los Tiburones Dormidos** (Caves of the Sleeping Sharks). The caves, about three miles northeast of the island, were discovered by a fisherman diving for lobster. He noticed that the sharks in this certain area seemed lethargic; Jacques Cousteau, *National Geographic*, and Ramón Bravo (Mexico's leading shark expert) came by and made the caves famous. Blacktip and bull sharks hover in the caves as if sleeping, and divers can swim about the area without attacks. The dive is for only the most experienced divers, however, as the sharks stick between 80 and 150 feet below the surface. More accessible dive sites include **Los Manchones**, a two-kilometer-long set of reefs about ten minutes from Isla by boat. **Coral Scuba Center** (Avenida Matamoros 13; (998) 877-0763) and **Sea Hawk Divers** (Avenida Lazo; (998) 877-0296) run trips to several local sites.

Shopping in Isla Mujeres

Isla's shops are more interesting than those in Cancún if you're looking for folk art and ethnic souvenirs. Juan Carlos Peña has assembled an exceptional collection of masks at **Aztlán** (Calle Madero; (998) 877-0419). Unlike the manufactured pieces you see at most shops, Peña's masks are the real thing, handmade in Guerrero, Michoacán, and other folk-art centers. **Emilio Sosa Medin** (no phone) creates extraordinary papier-mâché *alebrijes* (dragons) and masks at his shop on López Mateos between Guerrero and Hidalgo. His most spectacular pieces take many months to create and cost hundreds and thousands of dollars. The arcades along Avenida Hidalgo and Matamoros sell batik sarongs from Bali, manufactured Mexican pottery and jewelry, and some original crafts. **Artesanías Melina** (Avenida Juárez at Matamoros; no phone) accepts credit cards and is packed with hammocks, embroidered dresses, Oaxacan rugs, and other good-quality arts and crafts. The **Mercado de Artesanías** (Avenidas Matamoros and Lazo) has several stands displaying a wide range of goods from Guatemalan textiles to Oaxacan pottery. A few fine jewelry shops are located close to the ferry pier. **Van Cleef & Arpels** (Avenida Juárez 141; (998) 877-0496) has been around for several years and displays a dazzling array of gemstones and jewels. Several silver jewelry shops display similar earrings, pins, and necklaces. Make sure the silver is stamped .925 for the genuine thing.

The aromas from **Panadería la Reina** (Avenida Madero at Juárez; (998) 877-0419) are irresistible—stop by for *bollios* (soft rolls), *empanadas*, ham-and-cheese rolls, cookies, and other treats. You can put together a picnic lunch here or buy a few snacks for your room (note that they're closed on Sunday). Isla's **Mercado Municipal** is a small affair on the north end of Guerrero. It's a good place to buy fresh tropical fruit (mangoes are best in May and June), tortillas, and veggies.

Nightlife in Isla Mujeres

The nightlife scene on Isla gets more active every year. Lately, the action takes place on the north end of avenidas Guerrero and Hidalgo. The street is closed to vehicles, and the walkway is crammed with sidewalk tables spilling out from bars and cafes. The names of the businesses change, and popularity is based on the type of visitors on the island. In August, it has a very European flair, while Mexicans prevail around Easter and Semana Santa. **Jax** (Avenida Mateos 42; (998) 877-1218) has a sports bar with satellite TV and good burgers) on the first floor and a sushi bar with live jazz on the second. On Playa Norte, the beach bars at **Buho's** (Cabanas Maria del Mar, Avenida Arq. Carlos Lazo 1; (998) 877-0179) and **Na Balam** (Calle Zazil-Ha No. 118, Playa Norte; (998) 877-0279), stay crowded under the moonlight. **Pinguino** (Avenida Rueda Medina 15, at Hotel Posada del Mar; (998) 877-0044) was one of Isla's first late-night hangouts, and it remains a good place to mingle with locals. Move from here to the hotel bar seemingly buried in jungle beside the pool, and grab a swing seat at the bar.