

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Cancún and the Yucatán

In This Chapter

- ▶ Scoping out Cancún and the Yucatán's stellar beaches
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The Yucatán may very well be the beach vacation destination of your dreams. All those glossy images of long stretches of pure, powdery, white-sand beaches and tranquil turquoise waters do exist — and they're found along the eastern coast of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula.

The Yucatán Peninsula welcomes more visitors than any other part of Mexico. Its tremendous variety attracts every kind of traveler with an unequalled mix of sophisticated resorts, rustic inns, ancient Maya culture, exquisite beaches, and exhilarating adventures.

Between the two of us, we've logged thousands of miles crisscrossing the peninsula, and these are our personal favorites — the best places to go, the best restaurants, the best hotels, and must-see, one-of-a-kind experiences.

The Best Beach Vacations

Cancún and the Yucatán have a multitude of stunning beaches — considered the best in Mexico. Known for powdery white sand and crystal-clear turquoise waters, these settings are what make great vacations. The following are our favorite beach getaways:

- ✓ **Cancún:** Essentially one long ribbon of white sand bordering aquamarine water, Cancún has one of Mexico's most beautifully situated beaches. If you want tropical drinks brought to you while you lounge in the sand, this is the place for you. Although Cancún has a reputation as a bustling, modern megaresort, it's also a great place for exploring Caribbean reefs, tranquil lagoons, and the surrounding

jungle. The most tranquil waters and beaches on Cancún Island are those at the northern tip, facing the Bahía de Mujeres. See Chapter 11.

- ✓ **Isla Mujeres:** If laid-back is what you're after, this idyllic island offers peaceful, small-town beach life at its best. Most accommodations are smaller, inexpensive inns, with a few unique, luxurious places tossed in. Bike — or take a golf cart — around the island to explore rocky coves and sandy beaches, or focus your tanning efforts on the wide beachfront of Playa Norte. Here you'll find calm waters and *palapa* (thatched roof) restaurants, where you can have fresh-caught fish for lunch. You're close to great diving and snorkeling just offshore, as well as to Isla Contoy National Park, which features great bird life and its own dramatic, uninhabited beach. If all that tranquillity starts to get to you, you're only a ferry ride away from the action in Cancún. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Cozumel:** It may not have lots of big, sandy beaches, but Cozumel has something the mainland doesn't: the calm, waveless waters of the sheltered western shore. The sea is so calm and full of marine life that it's like swimming in an aquarium. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Playa del Carmen:** This is one of our absolute favorite Mexican beach vacations. Stylish and hip, Playa del Carmen offers a beautiful beach and an eclectic assortment of small hotels, inns, and cabañas. The social scene is focused on the beach by day and the pedestrian-only Quinta Avenida (5th Avenue) by night, with its fun assortment of restaurants, clubs, sidewalk cafes, and shops. You're also close to the coast's major attractions, including nature parks, ruins, and *cenotes* (sinkholes or natural wells). Cozumel Island is just a quick ferry trip away. Enjoy it while it's a manageable size. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Tulum:** Fronting some of the best beaches on the entire coast, Tulum's small *palapa* hotels offer guests a little slice of paradise far from crowds and megaresorts. The bustling town lies inland; at the coast, things are quiet and will remain so because all these hotels are small and must generate their own electricity. If you can pull yourself away from the beach, ruins and a vast nature preserve are nearby. See Chapter 15.

The Best Luxury Resorts

If money is no object, Cancún and the southern coast of the Yucatán have no shortage of places to park yourself in style. There's a string of terrific upscale hotels in Cancún's hotel zone, with a growing array of luxury resorts as you head south along the Yucatán's Riviera Maya.

As an added bonus, most of the Yucatán's resorts have recently added brand-new spas that raise the art of relaxation and pampering to a new level. What could be better than a massage on the beach? (Maybe a massage on the beach with a margarita, too?)

The following are a few of our favorite luxury resorts:

- ✔ **Le Méridien Cancún Resort & Spa:** Although there are grander hotels in Cancún, we prefer this resort, as it's the most intimate of the luxury hotels, with an understated sense of highly personalized service. Most notable is its 4,546 square-meter (15,000 square-foot) Spa del Mar. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Fiesta Americana Grand Aqua:** Because this resort was just opening at press time, we can't say we've had the experience of staying here, but the exquisite design and detailed amenities blew us away — it's certain to become our top pick for luxury that indulges the senses without overwhelming them. Clean design and a color scheme that mirrors the aquamarine and white beach landscape are inherently relaxing. Add a superb spa, dazzling selection of restaurants, and a chill music scene in the evenings around the pool, and the mood is set for a more modern take on luxury. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Ikal del Mar:** Small, secluded, and private, Ikal del Mar offers extraordinary personal service and spa treatments. Rooms spread out through the jungle, and there's a beautiful seaside pool and restaurant. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Maroma:** You can't ask for a better setting for a resort than this beautiful stretch of Caribbean coast with palm trees and manicured gardens. You begin to relax before you even take the first sip of your welcome cocktail. Service is very attentive, and the rooms are large and luxurious. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Paraíso de la Bonita:** Operated by InterContinental Hotels, this resort has a super-equipped spa based on the elaborate system of thalassotherapy. The guest rooms are elaborate creations, and the hotel provides all kinds of service. It has three pools and an immaculately kept beach. See Chapter 14.

The Best Good-Value Accommodations

Being on a budget in the Yucatán doesn't mean you have to sacrifice style — or the perfect beach vacation. There are plenty of well-priced options, and here are our favorites:

- ✔ **Cancún INN Suites El Patio:** This European-style inn welcomes many guests for repeat or long-term stays. Each room is tastefully decorated, and all surround a plant-filled courtyard. Special packages combine Spanish lessons and accommodations. It's an oasis of cultured hospitality in one of Mexico's most commercial beach resorts. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Rey del Caribe Hotel:** Not only will you find exceptional value here, but you'll also support a true ecological hotel, which uses environmentally sensitive practices from collecting rainwater to composting. Sunny rooms are surrounded by lush jungle landscaping — and all in the heart of downtown Cancún! See Chapter 10.

- ✔ **Treetops:** An economical, quiet hotel steps from both the beach and Avenida 5, Treetops could easily get by on its location alone. But the owners have gone out of their way to create a distinctive lodging with plenty of amenities. The hotel has its very own *cenote* (natural well) and piece of shady jungle, making it a lovely place to relax after a trying day of strolling the beach and wandering the village streets. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Villa Catarina Rooms & Cabañas:** These stylishly rustic rooms nestle in a garden of tall palms, flowering trees, and singing birds. Just a block from the wide beach and tranquil Caribbean, it's a short walk from the action of Avenida 5. See Chapter 14.

The Most Unique Places to Get Away from It All

The Yucatán offers a multitude of unique places to escape the world and relax in seaside splendor. While some of the specific hotels in this section offer more activity than others, all transport you to a truly “away” state of mind:

- ✔ **Isla Mujeres:** If there's one island in Mexico that guarantees a respite from stress, it's Isla Mujeres. You'll find an ample selection of hotels and restaurants, and they're as laid-back as their patrons. Here life moves along in pure *mañana* mode. Visitors stretch out and doze beneath shady palms or languidly stroll about. For many, the best part about this getaway is that it's comfortably close to Cancún's international airport, as well as shopping and dining, should you choose to reconnect. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Casa de los Sueños Resort & Spa Zenter:** This intimate inn combines the sense of being at a private villa with the ideal complements of a holistic spa, daily yoga classes, and delectable fusion cuisine served from the onsite restaurant. The resort's private pier is an ideal launch for snorkeling, with Garrafon Reef just offshore. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Na Balam:** One of Isla's older hotels, it has made a name for itself as a favored center of yoga retreats and workshops. Set on a broad stretch of beach, this unique inn allows you to indulge in a daily offering of yoga, Tai Chi, or meditation, making it an ideal place for a change in attitude. Its recommended restaurant offers healthful cuisine with many vegetarian options. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **The Yucatán's Riviera Maya:** Away from the busy resort of Cancún, a string of quiet getaways, including Capitán Lafitte, KaiLuum, Paamul, Punta Bete, and a portion of Xpu-ha, offer tranquillity on beautiful beaches at low prices. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Hotel Jungla Caribe:** In a town filled with exceptional inns, this one's a standout. The eclectic décor combines neoclassical details with a

decidedly tropical touch. The rooms and suites surround a stylish courtyard, restaurant, and pool. You couldn't be better located — 1 block from the beach, with an entrance on happening Avenida 5. See Chapter 14.

- ✔ **Deseo Hotel + Lounge:** Perhaps it should be Hotel = Lounge. That may be an overstatement, but the lounge is at the center of everything, making Deseo the perfect fit if you're an outgoing type who is into an alternative lodging experience. Although it may be too lively for some looking to truly get away from it all, for others, the scene here is an ideal departure from everyday life. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Tulum:** Near the Tulum ruins, about two dozen beachside *palapa* inns offer some of the most peaceful getaways in the country. This stretch just may offer the best sandy beaches on the entire coast. Life here among the birds and coconut palms is decidedly unhurried. See Chapter 15.

The Best Restaurants

Best doesn't necessarily mean most luxurious. Although some of the restaurants listed in this section are fancy affairs, others are simple places to get fine, authentic Yucatecan cuisine:

- ✔ **Aïoli:** Simply exquisite French and Mediterranean gourmet specialties served in a warm and cozy country French setting, at the hotel Le Méridien. For quality and exceptional service, it's Cancún's best value in fine dining. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **La Dolce Vita:** A longtime favorite, La Dolce Vita remains untouched by newer arrivals. It continues to draw diners with such blissful dishes as green tagliolini with lobster medallions, veal with morels, and fresh salmon with cream sauce, all served (at night) to the sound of live jazz music. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Labná:** A showcase of authentic Yucatecan cuisine and music, in downtown Cancún, this is the place to sample regional specialties such as pork *pibil*, *papadzules*, and *poc chuc*. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Zazil Ha:** It doesn't get more relaxed and casual than Zazil Ha, with its sandy floor beneath thatched *palapas* and palms. This is the place for island atmosphere and well-prepared food. Along with its signature seafood and Caribbean cuisine, this restaurant continues to prove that vegetarian cuisine can be both artfully and tastefully prepared. It also offers special menus for those participating in yoga retreats on the island. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Cabaña del Pescador (Lobster House):** If you want an ideally seasoned, succulent lobster dinner, Cabaña del Pescador (Lobster House) is the place. If you want anything else, you're out of luck — lobster dinner, expertly prepared, is all it serves. When you've achieved perfection, why bother with anything else? See Chapter 13.

- ✓ **Prima:** The Italian food here is fresh, fresh, fresh — from the hydroponically grown vegetables to the pasta and garlic bread. And it's all prepared after you walk in, most of it by owner Albert Domínguez, who concocts unforgettable shrimp fettuccine with pesto, crab ravioli with cream sauce, and crisp house salad in a chilled bowl. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Media Luna:** The inviting atmosphere of this sidewalk cafe on Avenida 5 is enough to lure you in. The expertly executed and innovative menu, together with great prices, makes it one of the top choices on the Caribbean coast. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Yaxché:** No restaurant in the Yucatán explores the region's culinary traditions and use of local ingredients more than this one. Its menu presents several pleasant surprises and is a welcome relief from the standard offerings of most Yucatecan restaurants. See Chapter 14.

The Best Activities and Attractions

With the ocean as tempting as it is off the Yucatán coast, you're certain to find multiple ways to enjoy it above and below the surface. On dry land, you can also find plenty of ways to fill your days. Here are our favorite things to do:

- ✓ **Scuba diving in Cozumel and along the Yucatán's Caribbean coast:** The coral reefs off the island are among the top five dive spots in the world and constitute Mexico's premier diving destination. The Yucatán's coastal reef, part of the second-largest reef system in the world, affords excellent diving all along the coast. Especially beautiful is the Chinchorro Reef, lying 20 miles offshore from Majahual or Xcalak. Diving from Isla Mujeres is also quite spectacular. See Chapters 12 and 13.
- ✓ **Snorkeling:** Even if you're not usually the sporting type, you don't want to miss the chance to try snorkeling the same reef system so highly acclaimed by divers. The waters offshore are so clear that snorkelers are guaranteed to see clouds of tropical fish in every color of the rainbow, and possibly even a turtle or two. You can see a stunningly beautiful underwater world. One of the best places is El Garrafon Park in Isla Mujeres. See Chapters 11, 12, and 13.
- ✓ **Cenote diving on the Yucatán Mainland:** Dive into the clear depths of the Yucatán's *cenotes* (natural wells) for an interesting twist on underwater exploration. The Maya considered the *cenotes* sacred — and their vivid colors seem otherworldly indeed. Most are located between Playa del Carmen and Tulum, and dive shops in these areas regularly run trips for experienced divers. For recommended dive shops, see Chapters 13 and 14.
- ✓ **Fly-fishing off the Punta Allen and Majahual Peninsulas:** Serious anglers enjoy the challenge of fly-fishing the saltwater flats and lagoons on the protected sides of these peninsulas. See Chapter 14.

- ✔ **Birding:** The Yucatán Peninsula is an ornithological paradise, with hundreds of species awaiting the birder's gaze and list. One very special place is Isla Contoy, with more than 70 species of birds as well as a host of marine and animal life. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Getting a bird's-eye view:** The new Panoramic Tower is the best way to get the lay of the island and Cancún. The gentle ride rotates at the top to give you the perfect 360-degree perspective. See Chapter 12.

The Best Archaeological Sites

In addition to beautiful beaches, the Yucatán also offers a spectacular glance into this region's rich history through its various architectural sites and ruins. These are our top picks for a day-trip in the Yucatán:

- ✔ **Tulum:** Some dismiss Tulum as less important than other ruins in the Yucatán Peninsula, but this seaside Maya fortress is still inspiring. The sight of its crumbling stone walls against the stark contrast of the clear turquoise ocean just beyond is extraordinary. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Chichén Itzá:** Stand beside the giant serpent head at the foot of the El Castillo pyramid and marvel at the architects and astronomers who positioned the building so precisely that shadow and sunlight form a serpent's body slithering from peak to the earth at each equinox (Mar 21 and Sept 21). See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Ek Balam:** In recent years, this has been the site of the most astounding archeological discoveries in Mexico. Ek Balam's main pyramid is taller than Chichén Itzá's, and it holds a sacred doorway bordered with elaborate stucco figures of priests and kings and rich iconography. See Chapter 15.

The Best Shopping

Beyond the ubiquitous T-shirts and glass pyramids, you'll find captivating treasures to take home from your trip to the Yucatán. Here are our favorite shopping experiences:

- ✔ **Resort wear in Cancún:** Resort clothing — especially if you can find a sale — can be a bargain here. And the selection may be wider than what's available at home. Almost every mall on the island contains trendy boutiques that specialize in locally designed and imported clothing. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Duty free in Cancún:** If you're looking for European perfume, fine watches, or other imported goods, you'll find the prices in Cancún's duty-free shops (at the major malls on the island and in downtown Cancún) hard to beat. See Chapter 11.

- ✔ **Precious gemstones in Isla Mujeres:** Isla Mujeres, also a duty-free zone, offers an impressive selection of both precious stones and superb craftsmen who can make jewelry designs to order. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Quinta Avenida, Playa del Carmen:** This pedestrian-only street offers leisurely shopping at its best. No cars, no hassle; simply stroll down the street and let your eye pick out objects of interest. Expect a good bit of counterculture merchandise, such as batik clothing and fabric, Guatemalan textiles, and inventive jewelry and artwork. But you'll also find quality Mexican handcrafts, premium tequilas, and Cuban cigars. See Chapter 14.

The Best Nightlife

Although, as expected, Cancún is home to much of the Yucatán's nightlife, that resort city isn't the only place to have a good time after dark. Along the Caribbean coast, beachside dance floors with live bands and extended happy hours in seaside bars dominate the nightlife. Here are some favorite hot spots, from live music in hotel lobby bars to hip techno dance clubs:

- ✔ **Coco Bongo, Nulldog Café, Glazz, and Mango Tango:** These Cancún bars all offer good drinks, hot music, and great dance floors. **Mango Tango** is a top spot for live Cuban and Caribbean rhythms in Cancún. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **The City:** Here's one place that has it all: Currently Cancún's hottest club, The City revels 24-hours a day. The City Beach Club is the spot for revelry in the sun, with pools and a wave machine to simulate surfing. At night, choose from the Terrace Bar, The Lounge, or The Club — there's a spot for everyone here! See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **The Lobby Lounge:** Located in Cancún's luxurious Ritz-Carlton Hotel, this is the most elegant evening spot on the island. Romantic live music, a selection of fine cigars, and more than 120 premium tequilas (plus tastings) allow you to savor the spirit of Mexico. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Quinta Avenida, Playa del Carmen:** Stroll along the lively, pedestrian-only Fifth Avenue to find the bar that's right for you. With live music venues, tequila bars, sports bars, and cafes, you're sure to find something to fit your mood. See Chapter 14.