

The Best of Cancún, Cozumel & the Yucatán

by David Baird & Lynne Bairstow

The Yucatán Peninsula welcomes more visitors than any other part of Mexico. Its tremendous variety attracts every kind of traveler with an unequaled 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.

1 The Best Beach Vacations

- **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 vacation for you. Though Cancún has a reputation as a bustling, modern megaresort, it's also a great place for exploring Caribbean reefs, peaceful 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 4.
- **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* restaurants, where you can have fresh-caught fish for lunch. You're close to great diving and snorkeling just offshore, as well as 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 5.
- **Cozumel:** It may not have lots of big, sandy beaches, but Cozumel has something the mainland doesn't: the calm, flat waters of the sheltered western shore. It's so easy, it's like swimming in an aquarium. Cozumel also has lots to see under the water. See chapter 5.
- **Playa del Carmen:** This is one of our absolute favorite Mexican beach vacations. Stylish and hip, Playa del Carmen has a beautiful beach and an eclectic assortment of small hotels, inns, and cabañas. The social scene focuses on the beach by day and the pedestrian-only Quinta Avenida (Fifth Avenue) by night, with its fun assortment of restaurants, clubs, sidewalk

Mexico





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 still a manageable size. See chapter 6.

- **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, nearby are ruins to explore and a vast nature preserve. See chapter 6.

2 The Best Cultural Experiences

- **Exploring the Inland Yucatán Peninsula:** Travelers who venture only to the Yucatán's resorts and cities miss the rock-walled inland villages, where women wear colorful embroidered dresses and life seems to proceed as though the modern world (with the exception of highways) didn't exist. The adventure of seeing newly uncovered ruins, deep in jungle settings, is not to be missed. See chapters 6 and 7.
- **Street & Park Entertainment (Mérida):** Few cities have so vibrant a street scene as Mérida. Throughout the week you can catch music and dance performances in plazas about the city, and on Sunday, Mérida really gets going—streets are closed off, food stalls spring up everywhere, and you can enjoy a book fair, a flea market, comedy acts, band concerts, and dance groups. At night, the main plaza is the place to be: People dance to mambos and rumbas in the street in front of the town hall. See chapter 7.

- **San Cristóbal de las Casas:** The city of San Cristóbal is a living museum, with 16th-century colonial architecture and pre-Hispanic native influences. The highland Maya live in surrounding villages and arrive daily in town wearing colorful handmade clothing. The villages are a window into another world, giving visitors a glimpse of traditional Indian dress, religious customs, churches, and ceremonies. See chapter 8.
- **Regional Cuisine:** A trip to the Yucatán allows for a culinary tour of some of Mexico's finest foods. Don't miss specialties such as *pollo* or *cochinita pibil* (chicken or pork in savory *achiote* sauce), great seafood dishes, the many styles of *tamal* found throughout Chiapas and the Yucatán, and Caribbean-influenced foods such as fried bananas, black beans, and yuca root. For a glossary of popular regional dishes, see appendix B.

3 The Best Archaeological Sites

- **Calakmul:** Of the many elegantly built Maya cities of the Río Bec area in the lower Yucatán, Calakmul is the broadest in scope and design. It's also one of the hardest to get to—about 48km (30 miles) from the Guatemalan border and completely surrounded by jungle (actually, the

Calakmul Biological Reserve). Calakmul is a walled city with the tallest pyramid in the Yucatán—a city whose primary inhabitants are the trees that populate the plazas. Go now, while it remains infrequently visited. See “The Río Bec Ruin Route” in chapter 6.

- **Tulum:** Some dismiss Tulum as less important than other ruins in the Yucatán Peninsula, but this seaside Maya fortress is still inspiring. The stark contrast of its crumbling stone walls against the clear turquoise ocean just beyond is an extraordinary sight. See “Tulum, Punta Allen & Sian Ka’an” in chapter 6.
- **Uxmal:** No matter how many times I see Uxmal, the splendor of its stone carvings remains awe-inspiring. A stone rattlesnake undulates across the facade of the Nunnery complex, and 103 masks of Chaac—the rain god—project from the Governor’s Palace. See “The Ruins of Uxmal” in chapter 7.
- **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 “The Ruins of Chichén Itzá” in chapter 7.
- **Ek Balam:** In recent years, this is the site where some of Mexico’s most astounding archaeological discoveries have been made. 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 “Ek Balam: Dark Jaguar” in chapter 7.
- **Palenque:** The ancient builders of these now-ruined structures carved histories in stone that scholars have only recently deciphered. Imagine the magnificent ceremony in A.D. 683 when King Pacal was buried below ground in a secret pyramidal tomb—unspoiled until its discovery in 1952. See “Palenque” in chapter 8.

4 The Best Active Vacations

- **Scuba Diving in Cozumel & along the Yucatán’s Caribbean Coast:** The coral reefs off the island, Mexico’s premier diving destination, are among the top five dive spots in the world. 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 32km (20 miles) offshore from Majahual or Xcalak. Diving from Isla Mujeres is also quite spectacular. See chapters 5 and 6.
- **Fly-Fishing off the Punta Allen & Majahual Peninsulas:** Serious anglers will enjoy the challenge of fly-fishing the saltwater flats and lagoons on the protected sides of these peninsulas. See “Tulum, Punta Allen & Sian Ka’an” and “Majahual, Xcalak & the Chinchorro Reef” in chapter 6.
- **Cenote Diving on the Yucatán Mainland:** Dive into the clear depths of the Yucatán’s *cenotes* for an interesting twist on underwater exploration. The Maya considered the *cenotes* sacred—and their vivid colors so indeed seem otherworldly. Most are between Playa del Carmen and Tulum, and dive shops in these areas regularly run trips for experienced divers. For recommended dive shops, see “Cozumel” in chapter 5, and “Playa del Carmen” and “South of Playa del Carmen” in chapter 6.
- **An Excursion to Bonampak & Yaxchilán:** Bonampak and Yaxchilán—two remote, jungle-surrounded Maya sites along the Usumacinta River—are now accessible by car and motorboat. The experience could well be the highlight of any trip. See “Road Trips from San Cristóbal” in chapter 8.

- **Birding:** The Yucatán Peninsula, Tabasco, and Chiapas are 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 p. 112, chapter 6, and chapter 8.

5 The Best Places to Get Away from It All

- **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 to shopping and dining, should you choose to reconnect. See "Isla Mujeres" in chapter 5.
- **The Yucatán's Riviera Maya:** Away from the busy resort of Cancún, a string of quiet getaways, including Capitán Lafitte, Paamul, Punta Bete, and a portion of Xpu-ha, offer tranquility on beautiful beaches at low prices. See "North of Playa del Carmen" and "South of Playa del Carmen" in chapter 6.
- **Tulum:** Near the Tulum ruins, about two-dozen beachside *palapa* inns offer some of the most peaceful getaways in the country. This stretch just might offer the best sandy beaches on the entire coast. Life here among the birds and coconut palms is decidedly unhurried. See "Tulum, Punta Allen & Sian Ka'an" in chapter 6.
- **Rancho Encantado Cottage Resort** (Lago Bacalar; ☎ 800/505-MAYA in the U.S., or 983/831-0037; www.encantado.com);

The attractive casitas are the place to unwind at this resort, where hammocks stretch between trees. The hotel is on the shores of placid Lago (Lake) Bacalar, south of Cancún near Chetumal, and there's nothing around for miles. But if you want adventure, you can head out to the lake in a kayak, follow a birding trail, or take an excursion to Belize and the intriguing Maya ruins on the nearby Río Bec ruin route. See p. 176.

- **Hotel Eco Paraíso Xixim** (Celestún; ☎ 988/916-2100; www.eco-paraíso.htm): In these crowded times, space is a luxury that's getting harder to come by. Space is precisely what makes this place so great: Fifteen bungalows and 5km (3 miles) of beach bordering a coconut plantation. Throw in a good restaurant, a pool, and a couple of hammocks, and you have that rare combination of comfort and isolation. See p. 204.
- **Hacienda San José Cholul:** Though only an hour outside the bustling city of Mérida, this hacienda feels like another world. The quiet, unhurried manner of both guests and staff and the beautiful tropical surroundings make it the perfect place to recoup some of the silence and slow time lost to the modern world. See "Hacienda Hotels" on p. 197.

6 The Best Museums

- **Museo de la Cultura Maya** (Chetumal): This modern museum, one of the best in the country, explores

Maya archaeology, architecture, history, and mythology. It has interactive exhibits and a glass floor that

allows visitors to walk above replicas of Maya sites. See p. 177.

- **Museo Regional de Antropología** (Mérida): Housed in the Palacio Cantón, one of the most beautiful 19th-century mansions in the city, this museum showcases area archaeology and anthropological studies in handsome exhibits. See p. 191.
- **Museo Regional de Antropología Carlos Pellicer Cámara** (Villahermosa): This anthropology museum addresses Mexican history in the form of objects found at archaeological

sites, with particular emphasis on the pre-Hispanic peoples of the Gulf Coast region. See p. 241.

- **Parque-Museo La Venta** (Villahermosa): The Olmec, considered Mexico's mother culture, are the subject of this park/museum, which features the magnificent stone remains that were removed from the La Venta site not far away. Stroll through a jungle setting where tropical birds alight, and examine the giant carved stone heads of the mysterious Olmec. See p. 242.

7 The Best Shopping

Some tips on bargaining: Although haggling over prices in markets is expected and part of the fun, don't try to browbeat the vendor or bad-mouth the goods. Vendors won't bargain with people they consider disrespectful unless they are desperate to make a sale. Be insistent but friendly.

- **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 “Shopping” in chapter 4.
- **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 “Shopping” in chapter 4.
- **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 “Isla Mujeres” in chapter 5.
- **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 merchandise popular with counterculture types, such as batik clothing and fabric, Guatemalan textiles, and inventive jewelry and artwork. But you'll also find quality Mexican handicrafts, premium tequilas, and Cuban cigars. See “Playa del Carmen” in chapter 6.

- **Mérida:** This is *the* marketplace for the Yucatán—the best place to buy hammocks, *guayaberas*, Panama hats, and Yucatecan *huipiles*. See “Exploring Mérida” in chapter 7.
- **San Cristóbal de las Casas:** Deep in the heart of the Maya highlands, San Cristóbal has shops, open plazas, and markets that feature the distinctive waist-loomed wool and cotton textiles of the region, as well as leather shoes, handsome pottery, and Guatemalan textiles. Highland Maya Indians sell direct to tourists from their armloads of textiles, dolls, and attractive miniature likenesses of Subcomandante Marcos—complete with ski masks. See “San Cristóbal de las Casas” in chapter 8.

8 The Hottest Nightlife

Although, as expected, Cancún is the center of 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, Carlos 'n' Charlie's, La Boom & Dady'O:** 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 p. 97.
- **Forum by the Sea:** Here's one place that has it all: The newest of the seaside entertainment centers in Cancún has a dazzling array of dance clubs, sports bars, fast food, and fine dining, with shops open late as well. You'll find plenty of familiar names here, including the Hard Rock Cafe and Rainforest Cafe. It's also the home of Cancún's hottest club, **Coco Bongo**, which can pack in up to 3,000 revelers—and does so regularly. See p. 97.
- **The City:** Currently Cancún's newest and hottest offering, **The City** (www.thecitycancun.com) is a day-and-night

club, offering a Beach Club with a wave machine for simulated surfing, a water slide and beach cabañas, a Terrace bar serving food and drinks, and the sizzling Club, at which the world's top DJs have spun through the night until the sun once again rises over the turquoise waters. This is truly a City that never sleeps. See p. 97.

- **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 p. 98.
- **San Cristóbal de las Casas:** This city, small though it may be, has a live-music scene that can't be beat for fun and atmosphere. The bars and clubs are all within walking distance, and they're a real bargain. See "San Cristóbal de las Casas" in chapter 8.
- **Quinta Avenida, Playa del Carmen:** Stroll along 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 p. 142.

9 The Most Luxurious Hotels

- **Aqua** (Cancún; ☎ 800/343-7821 in the U.S.): This brand-new resort, part of the Fiesta Americana chain, was designed with a water theme in mind. The spa is a 1,500 sq.-m (over 15,000-sq.-ft.) facility that blends Eastern, pre-Hispanic, and Western treatment philosophies. Tai Chi, yoga, and Pilates classes are offered, and you can indulge in a full array of massages and treatments. After you've rejuvenated, you can partake of the

exceptional cuisine offered at the resorts' three restaurants under the direction of celebrity chefs, or chill in the Lounge to cool tunes and tempting drinks. See p. 75.

- **Le Méridien Cancún Resort & Spa** (Cancún; ☎ 800/543-4300 in the U.S., or 998/881-2200; www.meridiencancun.com.mx): This is the most intimate of the luxury hotels in Cancún, with an understated sense of highly personalized service. Most

notable is its 4,546-sq.-m (15,000-sq.-ft.) Spa del Mar. See p. 78.

- **Ritz-Carlton Hotel** (Cancún; ☎ 800/241-3333 in the U.S., or 998/881-0808; www.ritzcarlton.com): Thick carpets, sparkling glass and brass, and rich mahogany surround guests at this hotel, which clearly sets the standard for luxury in Cancún. The service is impeccable, leaving guests with an overall sense of pampered relaxation. In 2004, The Ritz's spa received an impressive makeover. See p. 79.
- **Presidente InterContinental Cozumel** (Cozumel; ☎ 800/327-0200 in the U.S., or 987/872-9500; www.cozumel.intercontinental.com): Surrounded by shady palms, this hotel also has the best beach on the island, right in front of Paraíso Reef. Favorite rooms are the deluxe beachside units with spacious patios and direct access to the beach—you can even order romantic in-room dining on the patios, complete with a trio to serenade you. See p. 132.
- **Ikal del Mar** (north of Playa del Carmen; ☎ 888/230-7330 in the U.S.): Small, secluded, and private, Ikal del Mar offers extraordinary personal service and spa treatments. Rooms are spread out through the jungle,

and there's a beautiful seaside pool and restaurant. See p. 156.

- **Maroma** (north of Playa del Carmen; ☎ 866/454-9351 in the U.S.): You cannot ask for a better setting for a resort than this beautiful stretch of Caribbean coast with palm trees and manicured gardens. You'll start 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 p. 156.
- **Paraíso de la Bonita** (north of Playa del Carmen; ☎ 800/327-0200 in the U.S.): Operated by InterContinental Hotels, this resort has a super-equipped spa based on the elaborate system of thalassotherapy. The guest rooms are elaborate, and the hotel provides all kinds of services. It has three pools and an immaculately kept beach. See p. 156.
- **Hacienda Xcanatún** (outskirts of Mérida; ☎ 888/883-3633 in the U.S.): Large, boldly designed suites built with extravagance in mind, extensive grounds, private spa, excellent restaurant, and ample staff—this hotel does the difficult trick of being small in size but large in offerings. See "Hacienda Hotels" on p. 196.

10 The Best Budget Inns

- **Cancún INN Suites El Patio** (Cancún City; ☎ 998/884-3500; www.cancun-suites.com): 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 p. 83.
- **Rey del Caribe Hotel** (Cancun; ☎ 998/884-2028): A unique oasis in

downtown Cancún, this hotel has considered every detail in its quest for an organic and environmentally friendly lifestyle. Set in a tropical garden, the combination of sunny rooms, warm service, yoga and meditation classes, and healthful dining is a welcome respite to party-hardy Cancún. See p. 83.

- **Treetops** (Playa del Carmen; ☎ 984/873-0351; www.treetopshotel.com): An economical, quiet hotel steps from both the beach and Avenida 5, Treetops could easily get by on 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* 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 p. 147.

- **Casa San Juan** (Mérida; ☎ 999/986-2937; www.casasanjuan.com): This B&B, in a colonial house in Mérida's historic district, is the perfect combination of comfort and

character at a great price. The guest rooms in the original building evoke an earlier time, while the modern rooms in back are quite large and border a lovely patio. See p. 199.

- **Hotel Dolores Alba** (Mérida; ☎ 999/928-5650; www.doloresalba.com): The new rooms offer all the comforts at a rate that other hotels in this category can't match. Add to this the new pool and large sunning area, and I call it a bargain. See p. 199.

11 The Best Unique Inns

- **Casa de los Sueños Resort & Spa Zenter** (Isla Mujeres; ☎ 998/877-0651): This luxury B&B is steeped in vibrant colors. Its small but well-appointed spa and "Zenter," which is also accessible to nonguests, offers yoga classes, massages, and holistic spa treatments, which take place either outdoors or in a tranquil indoor space. See p. 113.
- **Hotel Villa Rolandi Gourmet & Beach Club** (Isla Mujeres; ☎ 998/877-0700; www.rolandi.com): In addition to being steps away from an exquisite private cove, a tranquil infinity pool, and Isla's finest dining, this intimate inn also pampers guests with every conceivable in-room amenity. Each unit even has a private Jacuzzi on the balcony and a shower that converts into a steam room. See p. 114.
- **Hotel Jungla Caribe** (Playa del Carmen; ☎ 984/873-0650; www.jungla-caribe.com): In a town filled with exceptional inns, this one's a standout. The eclectic decor 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 p. 147.

- **Deseo Hotel + Lounge** (Playa del Carmen; ☎ 984/879-3620): Perhaps it should be Hotel = Lounge. That might be an overstatement, but the lounge is at the center of everything, making Deseo the perfect fit for outgoing types who are into an alternative lodging experience. Enjoy a cocktail at the bar or on one of the large daybeds and chill to the modern lounge music. See p. 145.
- **Cuzan Guest House** (Punta Allen Peninsula; ☎ 983/834-0358; www.flyfishmx.com): Getting to the isolated lobster-fishing village of Punta Allen is half the adventure. Then you can retreat to one of the thatched-roof cottages, swing in a hammock, dine on lobster and stone crabs, and absolutely forget there's an outside world. There are no phones, television, or newspapers, and "town" is 56km (35 miles) away. Nature trips and fly-fishing are readily arranged. See p. 168.
- **Casa Mexilio Guest House** (Mérida; ☎ 800/538-6802 in the U.S., or 999/928-2505; www.mexicoholiday.com): An imaginative arrangement of rooms around a courtyard features a

pool surrounded by a riot of tropical vegetation. The rooms are divided among different levels for privacy and are connected by stairs and catwalks. Breakfast here provides an extra incentive for getting out of bed. See p. 198.

- **Casa Na-Bolom** (San Cristóbal de las Casas; ☎ 967/678-1418): This unique house-museum is terrific for

anthropology buffs. Built as a seminary in 1891, it was transformed into the headquarters of two anthropologists. The 12 guest rooms, named for surrounding villages, are decorated with local objects and textiles; all rooms have fireplaces and private bathrooms, and the room rate includes breakfast. See p. 259.

12 The Best Restaurants

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

- **Aioli** (Cancún; ☎ 998/881-2200): 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 p. 85.
- **Labná** (Ciudad Cancún; ☎ 998/892-3056): Steep yourself in Yucatecan cuisine and music at this downtown eatery, which showcases Mayan culture and cuisine. The Labná Special is a sample of the most traditional of this region's cuisine. See p. 89.
- **La Dolce Vita** (Cancún; ☎ 998/885-0150): 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 p. 86.
- **100% Natural, for Licuados**: *Licuados*, drinks made from fresh fruit mixed with water or milk, are much more popular than soft drinks. This restaurant chain offers the widest

selection, including innovative mixtures like the Cozumel (spinach, pineapple, and orange) and the Caligula (orange, pineapple, beet, celery, parsley, carrot, and lime juices)—a healthy indulgence. Cancún has several branches.

- **Zazil Ha** (Isla Mujeres; ☎ 998/877-0279): It doesn't get more relaxed and casual than Zazil Ha, with its sandy floor beneath thatched *palm* 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 p. 118.
- **Cabaña del Pescador (Lobster House)** (Cozumel; no phone): 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 p. 133.
- **Prima** (Cozumel; ☎ 987/872-4242): 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 p. 134.

- **Media Luna** (Playa del Carmen; ☎ 984/873-0526): 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 p. 149.
- **La Pigua** (Campeche; ☎ 981/811-3365): Campeche's regional specialty

is seafood, and nowhere else will you find seafood like this. Mexican caviar, coconut-battered shrimp, and chiles stuffed with shark are just a few of the unique specialties. Thinking about La Pigua's pompano in a fine green herb sauce makes me want to start checking flight schedules. See p. 224.

- **Yaxché** (Playa del Carmen; ☎ 984/873-2502): 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 p. 149.