

A Glimpse of the Maya: Nearby Ruins

As tempting as Cancún may be, the region surrounding the popular beach resort is even richer in natural and cultural pleasures. Those who bemoan the rather Americanized ways of Cancún will find that the Yucatán offers both authentic experiences and a relaxed charm. With a little exploring, you'll find a variety of things to do. This chapter covers the best-known Maya ruins of the Yucatán peninsula, including the seaside ruins of **Tulum**, the jungle complex at **Cobá**, and the supremely restored site at **Chichén Itzá**. These treasures are at once close to the easy air access of Cancún, yet miles away in mood and manner.

EXPLORING THE YUCATAN'S MAYA HEARTLAND

The best way to see the Yucatán is by car. The terrain is flat, there is little traffic, and the main highways are in good shape. If you do drive around the area, you will add one Spanish word to your vocabulary, which through much repetition will stick with you: *topes* (*toh-pehs*), or “speed bumps.” *Topes* come in varying shapes and sizes and with varying degrees of warning. Don't let them catch you by surprise. Off the beaten path, the roads are narrow and rough, but hey—we're talking rental cars. Rentals are, in fact, a little pricey compared with those in the U.S. (due perhaps to wear and tear?), but some promotional deals are available, especially in the low season. For more on renting a car, see “Getting Around: By Car” in chapter 1.

Plenty of buses ply the roads between the major towns and ruins. And plenty of tour buses circulate, too. But buses to the smaller towns and ruins and the haciendas are infrequent or nonexistent. One bus company, Autobuses del Oriente (ADO), controls most of the first-class bus service and does a good job with the major destinations. Second-class buses go to some out-of-the-way places, but they can be slow, stop a lot, and aren't air-conditioned. I will take them when I'm going only a short distance, say around 25km

Tips What You Need to Know When Traveling in the Yucatán

The Yucatán is *tierra caliente* (the hotlands). Don't travel in this region without a hat, sunblock, mosquito repellent, and water. The coolest weather is from November to February; the hottest is from April to June. From July to October, thundershowers moderate temperatures. More tourists come to the interior during the winter months, but not to the same extent as on the Caribbean coast. The high-season/low-season distinction is less pronounced here.

(40 miles). If you don't want to rent a car, a few tour operators take small groups to more remote attractions such as ruins, *cenotes*, and villages.

1 Tulum

130km (80 miles) SW of Cancún

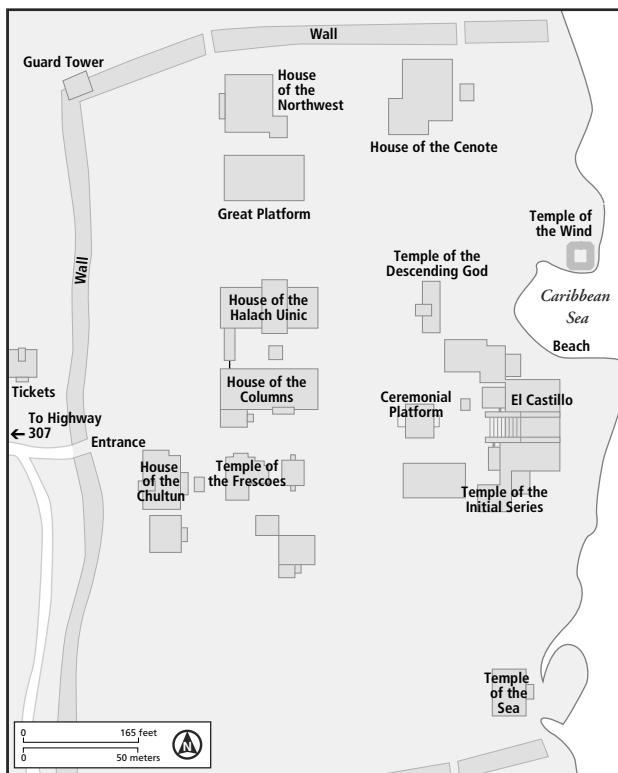
The walled Maya city of Tulum is a large post-Classic site overlooking the Caribbean in dramatic fashion. Tour companies and public buses make the trip regularly from Cancún and Playa del Carmen; get there early to avoid the crowds. Tulum also has wonderful, sandy beaches and no large resort hotels. It's a perfect spot for those who like to splash around in the water and lie on the beach away from the resort scene. The town has a dozen restaurants, five pharmacies, three cybercafes, a bank, two cash machines, and several stores.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE **By Car** Drive south from Cancún on Highway 307; the ruins are 130km (81 miles) southwest of Cancún.

ORIENTATION Highway 307 passes the entrance to the ruins (on your left) before running through town. After the entrance to the ruins but before entering the town you'll come to a highway intersection with a traffic light. The light wasn't functioning the last time I was there. To the right is the highway leading to the ruins of Cobá (see "Cobá Ruins," later in this chapter); to the left is the Tulum hotel zone, which begins about 2km (1½ miles) away. The road sign reads BOCA PAILA, which is a place halfway down the **Punta Allen Peninsula** (see chapter 4). This road eventually goes all the way to the tip of the peninsula and the town of Punta Allen.

Tulum Ruins



EXPLORING THE SITE

Thirteen kilometers (8 miles) south of Xel-Ha (see chapter 4) are the ruins of Tulum, a Maya fortress-city overlooking the Caribbean. The ruins are open to visitors daily from 7am to 5pm in the winter, 8am to 6pm in the summer. It's always best to go early, before the crowds start showing up (around 9:30am). The entrance to the ruins is about a 5-minute walk from the archaeological site. There are artisans' stands, a bookstore, a museum, a restaurant, several large bathrooms, and a ticket booth. Admission fee to the ruins is \$4. If you want to ride the shuttle from the visitor center to the ruins, it's another \$1.50. Parking is \$3. A video camera permit costs \$4. Licensed guides have a stand next to the path to the ruins and charge \$20 for a 45-minute tour in English, French, or Spanish for

up to four persons. In some ways, they are like performers and will tailor their presentation to the responses they receive from you. Some will try to draw connections between the Maya and Western theology. But they will point out architectural details that you might otherwise miss.

By A.D. 900, the end of the Classic period, Maya civilization had begun its decline, and the large cities to the south were abandoned. Tulum is one of the small city-states that rose to fill the void. It came to prominence in the 13th century as a seaport, controlling maritime commerce along this section of the coast, and remained inhabited well after the arrival of the Spanish. The primary god here was the

Fun Fact Tulum: A Friendly Difference of Opinion

Two of us cover the entirety of Mexico for Frommer's, and almost without exception we agree on the country's top destinations. However, we have an ongoing dialogue regarding the relative merits and beauty of the ruins at Tulum. Herewith we present our respective cases, and leave it for you to decide with whom you agree.

Lynne says: Ancient Tulum is my favorite of all the ruins, poised as it is on a rocky hill overlooking the transparent, turquoise Caribbean. It's not the largest or most important of the Maya ruins in this area, but it's the only one by the sea, which makes it the most visually impressive. Intriguing carvings and reliefs decorate the well-preserved structures, which date from the 12th to 16th centuries A.D., in the post-Classic period.

David says: Aside from the spectacular setting, Tulum is not as impressive a city as Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, or Ek Balam. The stonework is cruder than that at these other sites, as if construction of the platforms and temples had been hurried. The city's builders were concerned foremost with security and defense. They chose the most rugged section on this coast and then built stout walls on the other three sides. This must have absorbed a tremendous amount of energy that might otherwise have been used to build the large ceremonial centers and more varied architecture we see elsewhere in the Yucatán.

diving god, depicted on several buildings as an upside-down figure above doorways. Seen at the Palace at Sayil and Cobá, this curious, almost comical figure is also known as the bee god.

The most imposing building in Tulum is a large stone structure above the cliff called the **Castillo (castle)**. Actually a temple as well as a fortress, it was once covered with stucco and painted. In front of the Castillo are several unrestored palacelike buildings partially covered with stucco. On the **beach** below, where the Maya once came ashore, tourists swim and sunbathe, combining a visit to the ruins with a dip in the Caribbean.

The **Temple of the Frescoes**, directly in front of the Castillo, contains interesting 13th-century wall paintings, though entrance is no longer permitted. Distinctly Maya, they represent the rain god Chaac and Ixchel, the goddess of weaving, women, the moon, and medicine. On the cornice of this temple is a relief of the head of the rain god. If you pause a slight distance from the building, you'll see the eyes, nose, mouth, and chin. Notice the remains of the red-painted stucco—at one time all the buildings at Tulum were painted bright red.

Much of what we know of Tulum at the time of the Spanish Conquest comes from the writings of Diego de Landa, third bishop of the Yucatán. He wrote that Tulum was a small city inhabited by about 600 people who lived in platform dwellings along a street and who supervised the trade traffic from Honduras to the Yucatán. Though it was a walled city, most of the inhabitants probably lived outside the walls, leaving the interior for the residences of governors and priests and ceremonial structures. Tulum survived about 70 years after the Conquest, when it was finally abandoned. Because of the great number of visitors this site receives, it is no longer possible to climb all of the ruins. In many cases, visitors are asked to remain behind roped-off areas to view them.

WHERE TO STAY IN & AROUND TULUM

This stretch of coast has great beaches. The seven or eight hotels in town are cheaper than all but the most basic of beach accommodations, but they aren't as much fun. They offer no-frills lodging for \$20 to \$50 a night. All the beach hotels must generate their own electricity, and this raises the price of lodging. Most of them are simple affairs without a lot of luxuries. Turn east at the highway intersection. Three kilometers (2 miles) ahead, you come to a T junction. North are most of the cheap cabañas. Over the years, I've heard from several sources about cases of theft at a few of these establishments.

To the south are most of the *palapa* hotels, including some moderately priced lodging. The pavement quickly turns into sand, and on both sides of the road you start seeing cabañas. You can try your luck at one of many places. The rates listed below don't include the week of Christmas and New Year, when prices go above regular high season rates.

EXPENSIVE

Hotel Nueva Vida ★ I like this place because it's so different, with few rooms, much space, and an ecological orientation. It has 150m (500 ft.) of beautiful beachfront, but the cabañas are built behind the beach, in the jungle, which has been preserved as much as possible. Most of the rooms are in freestanding thatched cabañas 4m (12 ft.) off the ground. Each is midsize with a private bathroom, a double and a twin bed with mosquito netting, and a ceiling fan (solar cells and wind generators provide energy 24 hr. a day; there are no electrical outlets in the units). There are also some junior suites housed in a two-story building, which are larger and come with a few more amenities, also there are some two-bedroom units, which go for a bit more than the junior suites. The owners are from South America and operate a family-style restaurant.

Carretera Punta Allen Km 8.5, 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ☎ 984/877-8512. Fax 984/871-2092. www.tulumnv.com. 9 units. High season \$132 double, \$181 suite; low season \$83 double, \$122 suite. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour information; limited room service; massage; laundry service; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* No phone.

Restaurant y Cabañas Ana y José ★★ This comfortable hotel sits on a great beach with a good beach restaurant. The rock-walled cabañas in front (called "oceanfront"), closest to the water, are a little larger than the others and come with two double beds. I also like the attractive second-floor oceanview rooms, which have tall *palapa* roofs. The garden-view rooms are much like the others but don't face the sea. Newer construction has crowded them in back, making them much less desirable. There is 24-hour electricity for lights and ceiling fans. Sometimes you can book a package deal that includes hotel and a rental car waiting for you at the Cancún airport. Ana y José is 6.5km (4 miles) south of the Tulum ruins.

Carretera Punta Allen Km 7 (Apdo. Postal 15), 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ☎ 998/887-5470 in Cancún. Fax 998/887-5469. www.anayjose.com. 21 units. High season \$206–\$276 double, \$296 suite; low season \$130–\$200 double, \$220 suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; small pool; spa; tour info; car rental. *In room:* No phone.

MODERATE

Cabañas Tulum Next to Ana y José is a row of cinderblock facing the same beautiful ocean and beach. These accommodations are basic. Rooms are simple, not unattractive, though poorly lit. The bathrooms are ample. All rooms have two double beds (most with new mattresses), screens on the windows, a table, one electric light, and a porch facing the beach. Electricity is available from 7 to 11am and 6 to 11pm.

Carretera Punta Allen Km 7 (Apdo. Postal 63), 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ☎ 984/879-7395. Fax 984/871-2092. www.hotelstulum.com. 32 units. \$70–\$100 double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant; game room.

Retiro Maya *Retiro* is Spanish for retreat, and the word is used aptly here. I suspect that the English-speaking owner, Lu Montiel, was looking for something that would be the exact opposite of her native Mexico City. This place is it—supremely quiet and lit only by candles. The 12 attractive Maya-style cottages are arranged for privacy on 50m (165 ft.) of immaculate beachfront. Each has a king-size bed draped in mosquito netting. There is no electricity, just candles. There is no floor, only swept sand. The units share a common bathroom area. A restaurant has reasonable prices and good food.

Carretera Punta Allen Km 6.5 (Apdo. Postal 166), 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ☎ 998/101-1154. www.retiromaya.com. 12 units. \$90–\$115 double with shared bathroom. No credit cards. No children. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* No phone.

Zamas ★★ The owners of these cabañas, a couple from San Francisco, have made their rustic getaway most enjoyable by concentrating on the essentials: comfort, privacy, and good food. The cabañas are simple, attractive, well situated for catching the breeze, and not too close together. Most rooms are in individual structures; the suites and oversize rooms are in modest two-story buildings. For the money, I like the six individual garden *palapas*, which are attractive and comfortable, with either two double beds or a double and a twin. Two small beachfront cabañas with one double bed go for a little less. The most expensive rooms are the upstairs oceanview units, which enjoy a large terrace and lots of sea breezes. I like these especially. They come with a king-size and a queen-size bed or a double and a queen-size bed. The restaurant serves fresh seafood—I've seen the owner actually flag down passing fishermen to buy their catch. A white-sand beach stretches between large rocky areas.

Carretera Punta Allen Km 5, 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ☎ 415/387-9806 in the U.S. www.zamas.com. 20 units. High season \$90–\$130 beachfront double, \$100 garden

double, \$120–\$155 oceanview double; low season \$65–\$95 beachfront double, \$65 garden double, \$85–\$110 oceanview double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant.

WHERE TO DINE

There are several restaurants in the town of Tulum. They are reasonably priced and do an okay job. On the main street are **Charlie's** (☎ 984/871-2136), my favorite for Mexican food, and **Don Cafeto's** (☎ 984/871-2207). A good Italian-owned Italian restaurant, **Il Giardino di Toni e Simone** (☎ 984/804-1316; closed Wed), is 1 block off the highway—you'll see a large building-supply store called ROCA. It's on the opposite side of the road, 1 block away. Also in town are a couple of roadside places that grill chicken and serve it with rice and beans. Out on the coast, you can eat at **Zamas** or at **Ana y José** (see above).

2 Cobá Ruins

168km (105 miles) SW of Cancún

Older than most of Chichén Itzá and much larger than Tulum, Cobá was the dominant city of the eastern Yucatán before A.D. 1000. The site is large and spread out, with thick forest growing between the temple groups. Rising high above the forest canopy are tall, steep classic Maya pyramids. Of the major sites, this one is the least reconstructed and so disappoints those who expect another Chichén Itzá. Appreciating it requires a greater exercise of the imagination. Bordering the ruins are two lakes, an uncommon feature in the Yucatán, where surface water is rare.

ESSENTIALS

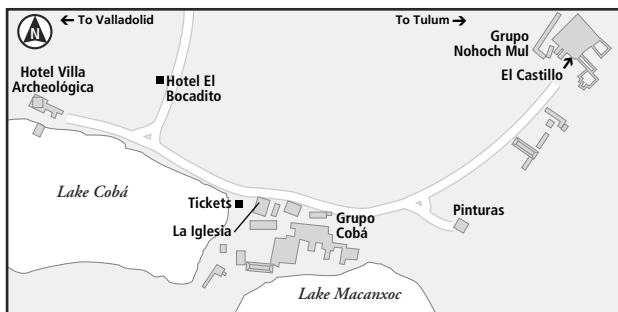
GETTING THERE & DEPARTING By Car The road to Cobá begins in Tulum, across Highway 307 from the turnoff to the Punta Allen Peninsula. Turn right when you see signs for Cobá, and continue on that road for 65km (40 miles). Watch out for both *topes* (speed bumps) and potholes. Enter the village, proceed straight until you see the lake, then turn left. The entrance to the ruins is a short distance down the road past some small restaurants. There's a large parking area.

By Bus Several buses a day leave Tulum and Playa del Carmen for Cobá. Several companies offer bus tours.

EXPLORING THE RUINS

The Maya built many intriguing cities in the Yucatán, but few grander than Cobá ("water stirred by wind"). Much of the 67-sq.-km

Cobá Ruins



(26-sq.-mile) site remains unexcavated. A 100km (60-mile) *sacbé* (a pre-Hispanic raised road or causeway) through the jungle linked Cobá to Yaxuná, once a large, important Maya center 50km (30 miles) south of Chichén Itzá. It's the Maya's longest known *sacbé*, and at least 50 shorter ones lead from here. An important city-state, Cobá flourished from A.D. 632 (the oldest carved date found here) until after the rise of Chichén Itzá, around 800. Then Cobá slowly faded in importance and population until it was finally abandoned. Scholars believe Cobá was an important trade link between the Yucatán Caribbean coast and inland cities.

Once at the site, keep your bearings—you can get turned around in the maze of dirt roads in the jungle. And bring bug spray. As spread out as this city is, renting a bike (which you can do at the entrance for \$2.50) is a good option. Branching off from every labeled path, you'll notice unofficial narrow paths into the jungle, used by locals as shortcuts through the ruins. These are good for birding, but be careful to remember the way back.

The **Grupo Cobá** boasts an impressive pyramid, **La Iglesia (The Church)**, which you'll find if you take the path bearing right after the entrance. As you approach, notice the unexcavated mounds on the left. Though the urge to climb the temple is great, the view is better from El Castillo in the Nohoch Mul group farther back.

From here, return to the main path and turn right. You'll pass a sign pointing right to the ruined *juego de pelota* (ball court), but the path is obscure.

Continuing straight ahead on this path for 5 to 10 minutes, you'll come to a fork in the road. To the left and right you'll notice jungle-covered, unexcavated pyramids, and at one point, you'll see a raised portion crossing the pathway—this is the visible remains of the

Tips For Your Comfort at Cobá

Visit Cobá in the morning or after the heat of the day has passed. Mosquito repellent, drinking water, and comfortable shoes are imperative.

sacbé to Yaxuná. Throughout the area, intricately carved steles stand by pathways or lie forlornly in the jungle underbrush. Although protected by crude thatched roofs, most are weatherworn enough that they're indiscernible.

The left fork leads to the **Nohoch Mul Group**, which contains **El Castillo**. With the exception of Structure 2 in Calakmul, this is the tallest pyramid in the Yucatán (rising even higher than the great El Castillo at Chichén Itzá and the Pyramid of the Magician at Uxmal). So far, visitors are still permitted to climb to the top. From this magnificent lofty perch, you can see unexcavated jungle-covered pyramidal structures poking up through the forest all around.

The right fork (more or less straight on) goes to the **Conjunto Las Pinturas**. Here, the main attraction is the **Pyramid of the Painted Lintel**, a small structure with traces of its original bright colors above the door. You can climb up to get a close look. Though maps of Cobá show ruins around two lakes, there are really only two excavated groups.

Admission is \$4, free for children under age 12. Parking is \$1. A video camera permit costs \$4. The site is open daily from 8am to 5pm, sometimes longer.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

El Bocadoito El Bocadoito, on the right as you enter town (next to the hotel's restaurant of the same name), offers rooms arranged in two rows facing an open patio. They're simple, with tile floors, two double beds, no bedspreads, a ceiling fan, and a washbasin separate from the toilet and cold-water shower cubicle. The open-air restaurant offers good meals at reasonable prices, served by a friendly, efficient staff.

Calle Principal, Cobá, Q. Roo. (Reservations: Apdo. Postal 56, 97780 Valladolid, Yuc.) No phone. 8 units. \$18–\$25 double. No credit cards. Free unguarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* No phone.

Villas Arqueológicas Cobá This lovely lakeside hotel is a 5-minute walk from the ruins. It is laid out like its Club Med counterparts in Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. The beautiful grounds hold a

pool and tennis court. The restaurant is top-notch, though expensive, and the rooms are stylish and modern, but small. Beds occupy niches that surround the mattress on three sides and can be somewhat uncomfortable for those taller than about 2m (6 ft.). The hotel also has a library on Mesoamerican archaeology (with books in French, English, and Spanish). Make reservations—this hotel fills with touring groups.

Cobá, Q. Roo. ☎ 800/258-2633 in the U.S., or 55/5203-3086 in Mexico City. 41 units. \$105 double. Rates include continental breakfast. Half-board (breakfast plus lunch or dinner) \$15 per person; full board (3 meals) \$30 per person. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. Drive through town and turn right at lake; hotel is straight ahead on the right. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; midsize pool. *In room:* No phone.

3 The Ruins of Chichén Itzá ★★

179km (112 miles) W of Cancún; 120km (75 miles) E of Mérida

The fabled pyramids and temples of Chichén Itzá (no, it doesn't rhyme with "chicken pizza"; the accents are on the last syllables: Chee-chen Eet-zah) are the Yucatán's best-known ancient monuments. The ruins are plenty hyped, but Chichén is truly worth seeing. Walking among these stone platforms, pyramids, and ball courts gives you an appreciation for this ancient civilization that books cannot convey. The city is built on a scale that evokes a sense of wonder: To fill the plazas during one of the mass rituals that occurred here a millennium ago would have required an enormous number of celebrants. Even today, with the mass flow of tourists through these plazas, the ruins feel empty.

When visiting this old city, remember that much of what is said about the Maya (especially by tour guides, who speak in tones of utter certainty) is merely educated guessing—or just plain guessing. Itzáes established this post-Classic Maya city perhaps sometime during the 9th century A.D. Linda Schele and David Freidel, in *A Forest of Kings* (Morrow, 1990), have cast doubt on the legend of its founding. It says that the Toltec, led by Kukulcán (Quetzalcoatl), came here from the Toltec capital of Tula, in north-central Mexico. Along with Putún Maya coastal traders, they built a magnificent metropolis that combined the Maya Puuc style with Toltec motifs (the feathered serpent, warriors, eagles, and jaguars). Not so, say Schele and Freidel. According to them, readings of Chichén's bas-reliefs and hieroglyphs fail to support that legend and, instead, show that Chichén Itzá was a continuous Maya site influenced by association with the Toltec but not by an invasion. Not all scholars embrace this thinking, so the idea of a Toltec invasion still holds sway.

Though it's possible to make a round-trip from Mérida to Chichén Itzá in a day, it will be a long, tiring, very rushed day. Try to spend at least a night at Chichén Itzá (you will already have paid for the sound-and-light show) or the nearby town of Valladolid. Then you can see the ruins early the next morning when it is cool and before the tour buses arrive.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING By Plane Travel agents in the United States and Cancún can arrange day trips from Cancún.

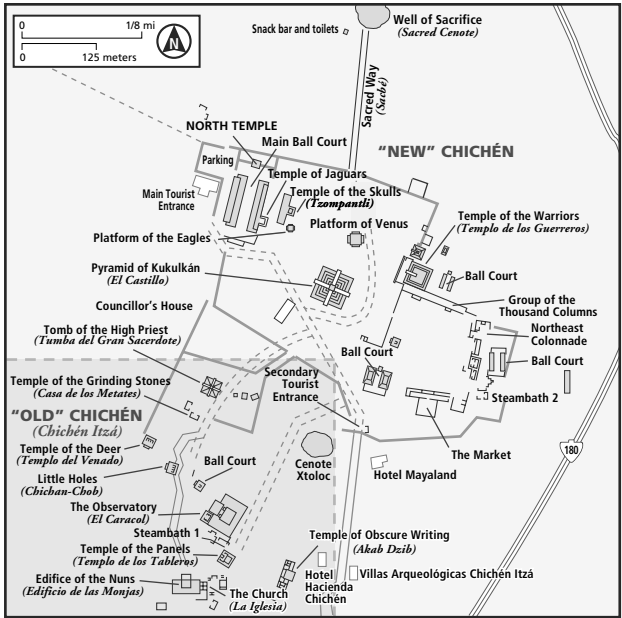
By Car Chichén Itzá is on old Highway 180 between Mérida and Cancún. The fastest way to get there from either city is to take the *autopista* (or *cuota*). The toll is \$8 from Mérida, \$20 from Cancún. Once you have exited the *autopista*, you will turn onto the road leading to the village of Pisté. After you enter the village, you'll come to Highway 180, where you turn left. Signs point the way. Chichén is 1½ hours from Mérida and 2½ hours from Cancún.

By Bus From Mérida, there are three first-class ADO buses per day, and a couple that go to Valladolid stop here. Also, there are several second-class buses per day. If you want to take a day trip from Mérida, go with a tour company. From Cancún, there are any number of tourist buses, and regular first-class buses leave for Chichén every hour.

Tips The Best Websites for Chichén Itzá & the Maya Interior

- **National Geographic:** www.nationalgeographic.com A fascinating collection of articles from *National Geographic* and other sources.
- **Yucatán Travel Guide:** www.mayayucatan.com Yucatán's newly formed Ministry of Tourism maintains this site. It has an update section and good general info on different destinations in the state.
- **Mexico's Yucatán Directory:** www.mexonline.com/yucatan.htm A nice roundup of vacation rentals, tour operators, and information on the Maya sites. For more information on Mexico's indigenous history, see the links on the pre-Columbian page (www.mexonline.com/precolum.htm).

Chichén Itzá Ruins



ORIENTATION The village of **Pisté**, where most hotels and restaurants are located, is about 2.5km (1½ miles) from the ruins of Chichén Itzá. Public buses from Mérida, Cancún, Valladolid, and elsewhere discharge passengers here. A few hotels are at the edge of the ruins, and one, the Hotel Dolores Alba (see “Where to Stay,” later in this chapter), is out of town about 2.5km (1½ miles) from the ruins on the road to Valladolid.

EXPLORING THE RUINS

The site occupies 6.5 sq. km (4 sq. miles), and it takes most of a day to see all the ruins, which are open daily from 8am to 5pm. Service areas are open from 8am to 10pm. Admission is \$10, free for children under age 12. A video camera permit costs \$4. Parking is extra. *You can use your ticket to reenter on the same day, but you'll have to pay again for an additional day.* The cost of admission includes the **sound-and-light show**, which is worth seeing. The show, held at 7 or 8pm depending on the season, is in Spanish, but headsets are available for rent (\$4.50) in several languages.

The large, modern visitor center, at the main entrance where you pay the admission charge, is beside the parking lot and consists of a museum, an auditorium, a restaurant, a bookstore, and bathrooms. You can see the site on your own or with a licensed guide who speaks English or Spanish. Guides usually wait at the entrance and charge around \$40 for one to six people. Although the guides frown on it, there's nothing wrong with approaching a group of people who speak the same language and asking if they want to share a guide. Be wary of the history-spouting guides—some of their information is just plain out-of-date—but the architectural details they point out are enlightening. Chichén Itzá has two parts: the northern (new) zone, which shows distinct Toltec influence, and the southern (old) zone, with mostly Puuc architecture.

EL CASTILLO As you enter from the tourist center, the magnificent 25m (75-ft.) El Castillo pyramid (also called the Pyramid of Kulkán) will be straight ahead across a large open area. It was built with the Maya calendar in mind. The four stairways leading up to the central platform each have 91 steps, making a total of 364, which when you add the central platform equals the 365 days of the solar year. On either side of each stairway are nine terraces, which makes 18 on each face of the pyramid, equaling the number of months in the Maya solar calendar. On the facing of these terraces are 52 panels (we don't know how they were decorated), which represent the 52-year cycle when both the solar and religious calendars would become realigned. The pyramid's alignment is such that on the **spring** or **fall equinox** (Mar 21 or Sept 21) a curious event occurs. The setting sun casts the shadow of the terraces onto the ramp of the northern stairway. A diamond pattern is formed, suggestive of the geometric designs on some snakes. Slowly it descends into the earth. The effect is more conceptual than visual, and to view it requires being with a large crowd. It's much better to see the ruins on other days when it's less crowded.

El Castillo was built over an earlier structure. A narrow stairway at the western edge of the north staircase leads inside that structure, where there is a sacrificial altar-throne—a red jaguar encrusted with jade. The stairway is open from 11am to 3pm and is cramped, usually crowded, humid, and uncomfortable. A visit early in the day is best. Photos of the jaguar figure are not allowed.

JUEGO DE PELOTA (MAIN BALL COURT) Northwest of El Castillo is Chichén's main ball court, the largest and best preserved anywhere, and only one of nine ball courts built in this city. Carved

on both walls of the ball court are scenes showing Maya figures dressed as ball players and decked out in heavy protective padding. The carved scene also shows a headless player kneeling with blood shooting from his neck; another player holding the head looks on.

Players on two teams tried to knock a hard rubber ball through one of the two stone rings placed high on either wall, using only their elbows, knees, and hips (no hands). According to legend, the losing players paid for defeat with their lives. However, some experts say the victors were the only appropriate sacrifices for the gods. One can only guess what the incentive for winning might be in that case. Either way, the game must have been riveting, heightened by the wonderful acoustics of the ball court.

THE NORTH TEMPLE Temples are at both ends of the ball court. The North Temple has sculptured pillars and more sculptures inside, as well as badly ruined murals. The acoustics of the ball court are so good that from the North Temple, a person speaking can be heard clearly at the opposite end, about 135m (450 ft.) away.

TEMPLE OF JAGUARS Near the southeastern corner of the main ball court is a small temple with serpent columns and carved panels showing warriors and jaguars. Up the steps and inside the temple, a mural was found that chronicles a battle in a Maya village.

TZOMPANTLI (TEMPLE OF THE SKULLS) To the right of the ball court is the Temple of the Skulls, an obvious borrowing from the post-Classic cities of central Mexico. Notice the rows of skulls carved into the stone platform. When a sacrificial victim's head was cut off, it was impaled on a pole and displayed in a tidy row with others. Also carved into the stone are pictures of eagles tearing hearts from human victims. The word *Tzompantli* is not Mayan but comes from central Mexico. Reconstruction using scattered fragments may add a level to this platform and change the look of this structure by the time you visit.

PLATFORM OF THE EAGLES Next to the Tzompantli, this small platform has reliefs showing eagles and jaguars clutching human hearts in their talons and claws, as well as a human head emerging from the mouth of a serpent.

PLATFORM OF VENUS East of the Tzompantli and north of El Castillo, near the road to the Sacred *Cenote*, is the Platform of Venus. In Maya and Toltec lore, a feathered monster or a feathered serpent with a human head in its mouth represented Venus. This is

also called the tomb of Chaac-Mool because a Chaac-Mool figure was discovered “buried” within the structure.

SACRED CENOTE Follow the dirt road (actually an ancient *sacbé*, or causeway) that heads north from the Platform of Venus; after 5 minutes you’ll come to the great natural well that may have given Chichén Itzá (the Well of the Itzáes) its name. This well was used for ceremonial purposes, not for drinking water—according to legend, sacrificial victims were drowned in this pool to honor the rain god Chaac. Anatomical research done early in the 20th century by Ernest A. Hooten showed that bones of both children and adults were found in the well. Judging from Hooten’s evidence, they may have been outcasts or diseased or feeble-minded persons.

Edward Thompson, who was the American consul in Mérida and a Harvard professor, purchased the ruins of Chichén early in the 20th century and explored the *cenote* with dredges and divers. His explorations exposed a fortune in gold and jade. Most of the riches wound up in Harvard’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology—a matter that continues to disconcert Mexican classicists today. Excavations in the 1960s unearthed more treasure, and studies of the recovered objects detail offerings from throughout the Yucatán and even farther away.

TEMPLO DE LOS GUERREROS (TEMPLE OF THE WARRIORS) Due east of El Castillo is one of the most impressive structures at Chichén: the Temple of the Warriors, named for the carvings of warriors marching along its walls. It’s also called the Group of the Thousand Columns for the rows of broken pillars that flank it. During the recent restoration, hundreds more of the columns were rescued from the rubble and put in place, setting off the temple more magnificently than ever. A figure of Chaac-Mool sits at the top of the temple, surrounded by impressive columns carved in relief to look like enormous feathered serpents. South of the temple was a square building that archaeologists called *El Mercado* (**The Market**); a colonnade surrounds its central court. Beyond the temple and the market in the jungle are mounds of rubble, parts of which are being reconstructed.

The main Mérida-Cancún highway once ran straight through the ruins of Chichén, and though it has been diverted, you can still see the great swath it cut. South and west of the old highway’s path are more impressive ruined buildings.

TUMBA DEL GRAN SACERDOTE (TOMB OF THE HIGH PRIEST) Past the refreshment stand to the right of the path is the Tomb of the High Priest, which stood atop a natural limestone cave in which skeletons and offerings were found, giving the temple its name.

CASA DE LOS METATES (TEMPLE OF THE GRINDING STONES) This building, the next one on your right, is named after the concave corn-grinding stones the Maya used.

TEMPLO DEL VENADO (TEMPLE OF THE DEER) Past Casa de los Metates is this fairly tall though ruined building. The relief of a stag that gave the temple its name is long gone.

CHICHAN-CHOB (LITTLE HOLES) This next temple has a roof comb with little holes, three masks of the rain god Chaac, three rooms, and a good view of the surrounding structures. It's one of the oldest buildings at Chichén, built in the Puuc style during the late Classic period.

EL CARACOL (OBSERVATORY) Construction of the Observatory, a complex building with a circular tower, was carried out over centuries; the additions and modifications reflected the Maya's careful observation of celestial movements and their need for increasingly exact measurements. Through slits in the tower's walls, astronomers could observe the cardinal directions and the approach of the all-important spring and autumn equinoxes, as well as the summer solstice. The temple's name, which means "snail," comes from a spiral staircase within the structure.

On the east side of El Caracol, a path leads north into the bush to the **Cenote Xtoloc**, a natural limestone well that provided the city's daily water supply. If you see any lizards sunning there, they may well be *xtoloc*, the species for which this *cenote* is named.

TEMPLO DE LOS TABLEROS (TEMPLE OF PANELS) Just south of El Caracol are the ruins of *temazcalli* (a steam bath) and the Temple of Panels, named for the carved panels on top. This temple was once covered by a much larger structure, only traces of which remain.

EDIFICIO DE LAS MONJAS (EDIFICE OF THE NUNS) If you've visited the Puuc sites of Kabah, Sayil, Labná, or Xlapak, the enormous nunnery here will remind you of the palaces at those sites. Built in the Late Classic period, the new edifice was constructed over an older one. Suspecting that this was so, Le Plongeon, an archaeologist working early in the 20th century, put dynamite

between the two and blew away part of the exterior, revealing the older structures within. You can still see the results of Le Plongeon's indelicate exploratory methods.

On the east side of the Edifice of the Nuns is **Anexo Este (annex)** constructed in highly ornate Chenes style with Chaac masks and serpents.

LA IGLESIA (THE CHURCH) Next to the annex is one of the oldest buildings at Chichén, the Church. Masks of Chaac decorate two upper stories. Look closely, and you'll see other pagan symbols among the crowd of Chaacs: an armadillo, a crab, a snail, and a tortoise. These represent the Maya gods, called *bacah*, whose job it was to hold up the sky.

AKAB DZIB (TEMPLE OF OBSCURE WRITING) This temple lies east of the Edifice of the Nuns. Above a door in one of the rooms are some Maya glyphs, which gave the temple its name because the writings have yet to be deciphered. In other rooms, traces of red handprints are still visible. Reconstructed and expanded over the centuries, Akab Dzib may be the oldest building at Chichén.

CHICHEN VIEJO (OLD CHICHEN) For a look at more of Chichén's oldest buildings, constructed well before the time of Toltec influence, follow signs from the Edifice of the Nuns southwest into the bush to Old Chichén, about 1km (½ mile) away. Be prepared for this trek with long trousers, insect repellent, and a local guide. The attractions here are the **Templo de los Inscripciones Iniciales (Temple of the First Inscriptions)**, with the oldest inscriptions discovered at Chichén, and the restored **Templo de los Dinteles (Temple of the Lintels)**, a fine Puuc building.

WHERE TO STAY

The expensive hotels in Chichén all occupy beautiful grounds, are close to the ruins, and serve good food. All have toll-free reservations numbers. Some of these hotels do a lot of business with tour operators—they can be empty one day and full the next. The inexpensive hotels are in the village of Pisté, 2.5km (1½ miles) away. There is little to do in Pisté at night. Another option is to go on to the colonial town of Valladolid, 30 minutes away, but you'll want reservations because a lot of tour-bus companies use the hotels there.

EXPENSIVE

Hacienda Chichén ★★ This is the smallest and most private of the hotels at the ruins. It is also the quietest. This former hacienda served as the headquarters for the Carnegie Institute's excavations in

1923. Several bungalows were built to house the staff; these have been modernized and are now the guest rooms. Each is simply and comfortably furnished (with a dehumidifier and ceiling fan in addition to air-conditioning) and is a short distance from the others. Each bungalow has a private porch from which you can enjoy the beautiful grounds. Standard rooms come with two twin or two double beds. Suites are bigger and have larger bathrooms and double or queen-size beds. The main building belonged to the hacienda; it houses the terrace restaurant, with dining outside by the pool or inside.

Zona Arqueológica, 97751 Chichén Itzá, Yuc. ☎/fax 985/851-0045. www.yucatanadventure.com.mx. (Reservations: Casa del Balam, Calle 60 no. 488, 97000 Mérida, Yuc. ☎ 800/624-8451 in the U.S., or 999/924-2150. Fax 999/924-5011.) 28 units. \$150 double; \$165 suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; large pool. *In room:* A/C, minibar, hair dryer.

Hotel Mayaland ★★ The main doorway frames El Caracol (the observatory) in a stunning view—that's how close this hotel is to the ruins. The long main building is three stories high. The rooms are large, with comfortable beds and large tiled bathrooms. Bungalows, scattered about the rest of the grounds, are built native style, with thatched roofs and stucco walls; they're a good deal larger than the rooms. The grounds are gorgeous, with huge trees and lush foliage—the hotel has had 75 years to get them in shape. The suites are on the top floor of the main building and come with terraces and two-person Jacuzzis. The “lodge section” consists of two groupings of larger bungalows in the back of the property surrounded by a lovely garden and pool area—they are separate from the main hotel and offer greater privacy and quiet.

Zona Arqueológica, 97751 Chichén Itzá, Yuc. ☎ 985/851-0127. (Reservations: Mayaland Resorts, Robalo 30 SM3, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ☎ 800/235-4079 in the U.S., or 998/887-0870. Fax 998/884-4510.) www.mayaland.com. 97 units. Nov \$190 double, \$240–\$290 bungalow, \$290–\$350 suite, \$268–\$330 lodge section; Dec–Apr \$148 double, \$218–\$245 bungalow, \$245–\$320 suite, \$244–\$295 lodge section; May–Oct \$88 double, \$144–\$196 bungalow, \$196–\$235 suite, \$144–\$264 lodge section. Higher rates are for units with Jacuzzi. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; 3 pools; tour desk; room service until 10pm; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, coffeemaker.

Villas Arqueológicas Chichén Itzá ★ This hotel is built around a courtyard and a pool. Two massive royal poinciana trees tower above the grounds, and bougainvillea drapes the walls. This chain has similar hotels at Cobá and Uxmal, and is connected with Club Med. The rooms are modern and small but comfortable, unless you're 1.9m (6 ft., 2 in.) or taller—each bed is in a niche,

with walls at the head and foot. Most rooms have one double bed and an oversize single bed. You can also book a half- or full-board plan.

Zona Arqueológica, 97751 Chichén Itzá, Yuc. ☎ 800/258-2633 in the U.S., or 985/851-0034 or 985/856-2830. 40 units. \$90 double. Rates include continental breakfast. Half-board (breakfast plus lunch or dinner) \$15 per person; full board (3 meals) \$29 per person. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; large pool; tennis court; tour desk. *In room:* A/C.

MODERATE

Hotel Dolores Alba ★ (Value) This place is of the motel variety, perfect if you come by car. It is a bargain for what you get: two pools (one really special), *palapas* and hammocks around the place, and large, comfortable rooms. The restaurant serves good meals at moderate prices. The hotel provides free transportation to the ruins and the Caves of Balankanché during visiting hours, though you will have to take a taxi back. The hotel is on the highway 2.5km (1½ miles) east of the ruins (toward Valladolid). You can make reservations here for the Dolores Alba in Mérida.

Carretera Mérida–Valladolid Km 122, Yuc. ☎ 985/858-1555. (Reservations: Hotel Dolores Alba, Calle 63 no. 464, 97000 Mérida, Yuc. ☎ 999/928-5650. Fax 999/928-3163.) www.doloresalba.com. 40 units. \$50 double. No credit cards. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; 2 pools; room service until midnight; laundry service. *In room:* A/C.

Pirámide Inn Less than 1.5km (1 mile) from the ruins, at the edge of Pisté, this hotel has simple rooms. Most hold two double beds, some three twins or one king-size. The bathrooms are nice, with counter space and tub/shower combinations. The air-conditioning is quiet and effective. Hot water comes on between 5 and 10am and 5 and 10pm. A well-kept pool and a *temazcal* (a native form of steam bath) occupy a small part of the landscaped grounds, which include the remains of a Maya wall. Try to get a room in the back—the hotel is right on the highway. There's a discount for those paying in cash.

Calle 15 no. 30, 97751 Pisté, Yuc. ☎ 985/851-0115. Fax 985/851-0114. www.piramideinn.com. 44 units. \$55 double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; midsize pool; steam room; room service. *In room:* A/C.

WHERE TO DINE

The restaurant in the visitor center at the ruins and the hotel restaurants in Pisté serve reasonably priced meals. Many places cater to large groups, which descend on them after 1pm.

Cafetería Ruinas INTERNATIONAL Though it has the monopoly on food at the ruins, this cafeteria does a good job with such basic meals as enchiladas, pizza, and baked chicken. It even offers some Yucatecan dishes. Eggs and burgers are cooked to order, and the coffee is good. You can also get fruit smoothies and vegetarian dishes.

In the Chichén Itzá visitor center. ☎ 985/851-0111. Breakfast \$5; sandwiches \$6–\$7; main courses \$5–\$10. AE, MC, V. Daily 9am–6pm.

Fiesta YUCATECAN/MEXICAN Though relatively expensive, the food here is dependable and good. You can dine inside or out, but make a point of going for supper or early lunch when the tour buses are gone. There is a full buffet, and the a la carte menu has many Yucatecan classics. Fiesta is on the west end of town.

Carretera Mérida–Valladolid, Pisté. ☎ 985/851-0038. Main courses \$4–\$6; buffet (12:30–5pm) \$8.50. No credit cards. Daily 7am–9pm.

Restaurant Bar “Poxil” YUCATECAN A *poxil* is a Maya fruit somewhat akin to a *guanábana*. Although this place doesn’t serve them, what is on the simple menu is good, but not gourmet, and the price is right. You will find the Poxil near the west entrance to town on the south side of the street.

Calle 15 no. 52, Pisté. ☎ 985/851-0123. Main courses \$4–\$5; breakfast \$3. No credit cards. Daily 8am–9pm.

A SIDE TRIP TO THE GRUTA (CAVE) DE BALANKANCHE

The Gruta de Balankanché is 5.5km (3½ miles) from Chichén Itzá on the road to Valladolid and Cancún. Taxis will make the trip and wait. The entire excursion takes about a half-hour, but the walk inside is hot and humid. Of the cave tours in the Yucatán, this is the tamest, having good footing and requiring the least amount of walking and climbing. It includes a cheesy and uninformative recorded tour. The highlight is a round chamber with a central column that gives the impression of being a large tree. You come up the same way you go down. The cave became a hideaway during the War of the Castes. You can still see traces of carving and incense burning, as well as an underground stream that served as the sanctuary’s water supply. Outside, take time to meander through the botanical gardens, where most of the plants and trees are labeled with their common and scientific names.

The caves are open daily. Admission is \$5, free for children 6 to 12. Children under age 6 are not admitted. Use of a video camera costs \$4 (free if you've already bought a video permit in Chichén the same day). Tours in English are at 11am and 1 and 3pm, and, in Spanish, at 9am, noon, and 2 and 4pm. Double-check these hours at the main entrance to the Chichén ruins.