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Strategies for Seeing the Yucatán



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The Yucatán is home to pearl-white beaches and deep green jungle, as well as pre-Colombian ruins and breakneck modern development. It's home to three states—Yucatán, Campeche, and Quintana Roo—encompassing 134,400 square kilometers (84,000 sq. m) and has 3,500 years of civic history since the Olmec developed the region's first large-scale human settlements in 1500 B.C. It's also the setting of five UNESCO World Heritage sites. The Riviera Maya's paradisiacal seashore, luxury hotels, fine dining, and exciting nightlife have become the most popular reasons to visit, but the region offers so much more to see and do: Explore ancient Mayan ruins, watch the world go by at a corner café, explore cenotes and other unique natural wonders, or just relax on the beach and think about all the things you're going to do—*mañana*.

Rule #1: Choose, you can't lose.

The Yucatán's attractions are diverse enough to keep you coming back again and again, but the region still offers two basic vacation profiles—sand and sun or history and culture. The coast from Cancún

south to Tulum is known as the Riviera Maya. With its blue water and perfect white sand that doesn't burn your feet when you walk barefoot, it's graced with some of the best beaches in the world. Inland, travelers encounter impressive Maya ruins and native villages,

Previous page: An old form of travel on a beach lost to time.



The Mayan Ball Court and Pyramid at Uxmal.

charming colonial towns, lots of natural beauty—and last but not least, lower prices. Choose one region if your time is limited or combine them for the broadest experience.

Rule #2: Decide whether to hotel-hop or just flop.

Decide whether to book accommodations in one place and take day trips, or change hotels frequently and venture farther afield. For shorter stays, it's better to hole up in Cancún, the Riviera Maya, or Mérida and explore from there. Lodging in one place gives you the greatest stability but limits the distances you can traverse. Wandering allows you to cover more ground and follow your whims, but you may end up feeling that you need another vacation to recover from all the packing and traveling around. Decide which approach suits you best or combine them for the best of both.

Rule #3: Pick the key activity of the day and then plan other activities in the surrounding area.

Regardless of whether you're a sightseeing fool or a beach bum, plan your fun around the key activity you've chosen for the day. For

example, a visit to the ruins of Tulum in the heat of the day could be accompanied by an afternoon of snorkeling at Xel-Ha. Or a boat trip to see the flamingos at Rio Lagartos could include a stop at the Ek Balam ruins, on the way, just north of Valladolid. Better yet, plan your day around lunch. Checking out the Aktun Chen caverns? Arrive early enough to go to Oscar y Lalo's restaurant at nearby Playa Soliman. In Mexico, lunch is often a big meal, and dinner can be a lighter late-evening affair.

Rule #4: Remember you probably came here to relax—so keep your options open.

Travelers who enjoy their south-of-the-border vacations most are those who understand and accept that things don't always work on schedule or according to plan. Use this book as a reference in planning, but don't try to do everything. Roll with the punches and you won't be disappointed when plan A bites the dust; just move on to plan B (or, if necessary, C). Cultural differences in Mexico offer visitors the chance to learn and appreciate an alternative view of what's important in life. Slow down and enjoy more.

Rule #5: Expect the unexpected.

The Yucatán is a safe destination to travel around as long as you observe the same precautions you would in any major North American city. Driving is a good way to see the countryside; the roads are flat and well marked. But keep your speed down. A superhighway toll road known as the *Cuota* runs between Cancún, Chichén Itzá, and Mérida. Expect to pay about \$25 in tolls for the entire distance. Valladolid and Chichén are 2 hours from Cancún on the *Cuota*; Mérida is about 4 hours

or a little more. A parallel route is the *Mérida–Libre*, a two-lane local road through small towns and villages. Try it if you have the time, but watch the *topes*—speed bumps that announce you're approaching a town. You might also consider traveling to major destinations by bus; first class is fast, inexpensive, and comfortable.

Rule #6: Don't drink the water.

That's a bit of an old folk axiom about Mexico, but, the water is safe in Cancún and all the major hotels up and down the Riviera Maya, and in large cities such as Mérida as well. Ice everywhere is made from purified water, so you don't need to ask. We do recommend that you use bottled water for drinking, but don't freak out if you brushed your teeth using tap water. Wash your hands frequently, and, if you get sick, have your hotel contact a local doctor. Most speak English, and many have trained in the U.S.

A palapa on the beach at Sian Ka'an.



The Estrella del Norte sails from Isla Mujeres to Isla Contoy.

Rule #7: You can get there from here.

Street addresses in Latin America are often determined by the distance from someplace else. The Cancún Hotel Zone, for instance, has just one road (Kukulcán), and the street numbers are determined by the number of kilometers from downtown. In more rural areas, you don't need exact addresses; often there's only one road with lots of signs.

Rule #8: Don't worry about hurricane damage.

In October 2005, Hurricane Wilma, the strongest storm ever recorded, stalled over the Yucatán peninsula and pounded the Riviera Maya with winds in excess of 161km per hour (100 mph) for more than 36 hours. Despite extensive damage, all the area's hotels, restaurants, and attractions were up and running by early 2006. Ironically, many of the beaches are now better than before. ●