

# Planning Your Trip to Cancún

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**C**ancún remains Mexico's calling card to the world, exquisitely showcasing the country's breathtaking natural beauty as well as the depth of its 1,000-year history. One astonishing statistic suggests that more Americans travel to Cancún than to any other overseas destination. Indeed, nearly three million people visit this enticing beach resort annually—most of them on their first trip to Mexico.

The reasons for Cancún's allure have not changed since the government turned this once-isolated beach into a five-star destination. While it embodies Caribbean splendor and the exotic joys of Mexico, even a traveler feeling apprehensive about visiting foreign soil will feel completely at ease here. Cancún also offers the highest quality accommodations and easy access by air; English is spoken, and dollars are accepted; roads are well-paved and lawns manicured. Most travelers feel comfortable in Cancún, while some also feel surprised to find that it almost resembles a U.S. beach resort more than authentic Mexico.

Despite Cancún's convenience as a destination, a little planning can still make the difference between a good trip and a great one. When should you go? What's the best way to get there? How much should you plan to spend? What safety or health precautions should you take? We'll answer these and other practical questions in this chapter.

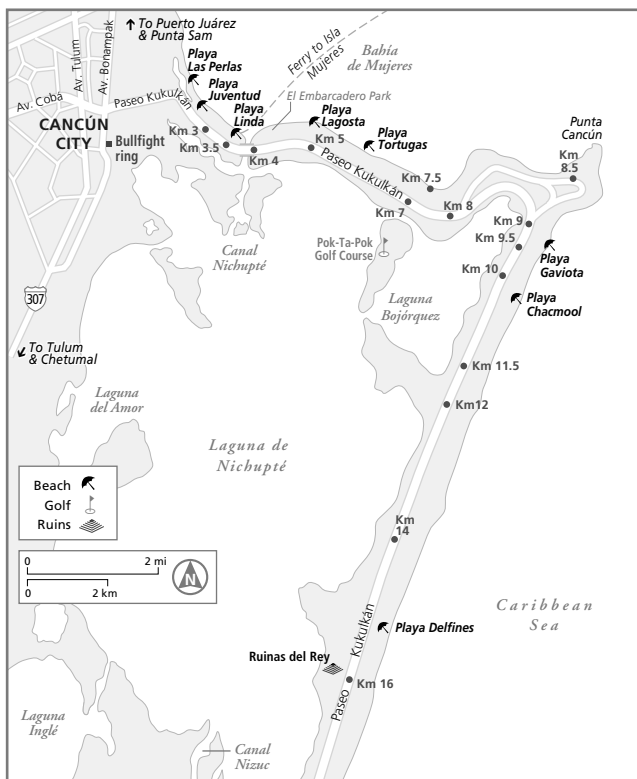
## 1 Orientation

### CANCUN LAYOUT

Cancún (or "golden snake" in Mayan) stretches from the old city to a 24km (15-mile) sliver of land connected to the mainland by two bridges. Between the old and the new rests the expansive Nichupté lagoon, a lush reminder of Cancún's jungle past.

There are really two Cancúns: **Isla Cancún (Cancún Island)** and **Ciudad Cancún (Cancún City)**. The latter, on the mainland, has restaurants, shops, and less expensive hotels, as well as pharmacies, dentists, automotive shops, banks, travel and airline agencies, and car-rental firms—all within an area about 9 square blocks. The city's

# Cancún



main thoroughfare is **Avenida Tulum**. Heading south, Avenida Tulum becomes the highway to the airport and to Tulum and Chetumal; heading north, it intersects the highway to Mérida and the road to Puerto Juárez and the Isla Mujeres ferries.

The famed **Zona Hotelera**, or Hotel Zone (also called the Zona Turística, or Tourist Zone), stretches out along Isla Cancún, which is a sandy strip 22km (14 miles) long, shaped like a “7.” It connects to the mainland by the Playa Linda Bridge at the north end and the Punta Nizuc Bridge at the southern end. Between the two areas lies Laguna Nichupté. Avenida Cobá from Cancún City becomes Bulevar Kukulcán, the island’s main traffic artery. Cancún’s international airport is just inland from the south end of the island.

# Cancún Environs



## **The Best Websites for Cancún**

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- **All About Cancún: [www.cancunmx.com](http://www.cancunmx.com)** This site is a good place to start planning. There's a database of answers to the most common questions, called "The Online Experts." It's slow, but it has input from lots of recent travelers to the region.
- **Cancún Convention & Visitors Bureau: [www.cancun.info](http://www.cancun.info)** The official site of the Cancún Convention & Visitors Bureau lists excellent information on events and attractions. Its hotel guide is one of the most complete available, and it has an active message board of recent visitors to Cancún.
- **Cancún Online: [www.cancun.com](http://www.cancun.com)** This comprehensive guide has lots of information about things to do and see in Cancún, with most details provided by paying advertisers. You can even reserve a tee time or conduct wedding planning online.
- **Cancún Travel Guide: [www.go2cancun.com](http://www.go2cancun.com)** This group specializing in online information about Mexico has put together an excellent resource for Cancún rentals, hotels, and attractions. Note that it lists only paying advertisers, but you'll find most of the major players.
- **Mexico Web Cancún Chat: [www.mexicoweb.com/chats/cancun](http://www.mexicoweb.com/chats/cancun)** This is one of the more active chats online specifically about Cancún. The users share inside information on everything from the cheapest beer to the quality of food at various all-inclusive resorts.

**FINDING AN ADDRESS** Cancún's street-numbering system is a holdover from its early days. Addresses are still given by the number of the building lot and by the *manzana* (block) or *supermanzana* (group of blocks). The city is relatively compact, and the downtown commercial section is easy to cover on foot.

On the island, addresses are given by kilometer number on Boulevard Kukulkán or by reference to some well-known location. In Cancún, streets are named after famous Maya cities. Chichén Itzá, Tulum, and Uxmal are the names of the boulevards in Cancún, as well as nearby archaeological sites.

## THE SURROUNDING REGION AT A GLANCE

In addition to attractions of its own, Cancún is a convenient distance from the more traditional resorts of Isla Mujeres and the coastal zone now known as the Riviera Maya—extending down from Cancún, through Playa del Carmen, to the Maya ruins at Tulum, Cozumel, Chichén Itzá, and Cobá. All lie within day-trip distance.

Travelers to the peninsula have an opportunity to see pre-Hispanic ruins—such as **Chichén Itzá** and **Tulum**—and the living descendants of the cultures that built them, as well as the ultimate in resort Mexico: **Cancún**. The peninsula borders the aquamarine Gulf of Mexico on the west and north, and the clear blue Caribbean Sea on the east. It covers almost 197,600 sq. km (76,294 sq. miles), with nearly 1,600km (1,000 miles) of shoreline. Underground rivers and natural wells called *cenotes* are a peculiar feature of this region.

## 2 Visitor Information & Maps

The **State Tourism Office**, Cancún Center, Bulevar Kukulcán Km 9, 1st floor, Zona Hotelera (☎ 998/881-9000; [www.qroo.gob.mx](http://www.qroo.gob.mx)), is open Monday to Friday from 9am to 8pm. The **Cancún Municipal Tourism Office** is downtown on Avenida Cobá at Avenida Tulum (☎ 998/887-3379). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 7pm. Each office lists hotels and their rates, and ferry schedules. For information prior to your arrival in Cancún, visit the Convention Bureau's website, [www.cancun.info](http://www.cancun.info).

Pick up copies of the free monthly booklet, *Cancún Tips* ([www.cancuntips.com.mx](http://www.cancuntips.com.mx)), and a seasonal tabloid of the same name.

More information about Mexico is available on the official site of Mexico's Tourism Promotion Board, [www.visitmexico.com](http://www.visitmexico.com).

## 3 Entry Requirements & Customs

### ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

#### PASSPORTS

All travelers to Mexico are required to present **photo identification** and **proof of citizenship**, such as a valid passport, naturalization papers, or an original birth certificate with a raised seal, along with a driver's license or official ID, such as a state or military issued ID. Driver's licenses and permits, voter registration cards, affidavits, and similar documents are not sufficient to prove citizenship for readmission into the United States. If the last name on the birth certificate is different from your current name, bring a photo identification card *and* legal proof of the name change, such as the

original marriage license or certificate. **Note:** Photocopies are *not* acceptable.

Effective January 23, 2007, all U.S. citizens traveling by **air** to Mexico are required to have a valid passport to enter or reenter the United States. As early as January 1, 2008, U.S. citizens traveling between the United States and Mexico by **land** or **sea** may also be required to present a valid U.S. passport or other documents as determined by the Department of Homeland Security.

Safeguard your passport in an inconspicuous, inaccessible place like a money belt, and keep a copy of the critical pages with your passport number in a separate place. If you lose your passport, visit the nearest consulate of your native country as soon as possible for a replacement.

For information on how to get a passport, go to “Passports” in the “Fast Facts” section of this chapter—the websites listed provide downloadable passport applications as well as the current fees for processing passport applications. For an up-to-date, country-by-country listing of passport requirements around the world, go to the “Foreign Entry Requirement” Web page of the U.S. State Department at <http://travel.state.gov>.

## ONCE YOU'RE IN MEXICO

You must carry a **Mexican Tourist Permit (FMT)**, the equivalent of a tourist visa, which Mexican border officials issue, free of charge, after accepting your proof of citizenship (via your passport). Airlines generally provide the necessary forms aboard your flight to Mexico. The FMT is more important than a passport in Mexico, so guard it carefully. If you lose it, you may not be permitted to leave the

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### *Tips* Passport Savvy

Allow plenty of time before your trip to apply for a passport; processing normally takes 3 weeks but can take longer during busy periods (especially spring). And keep in mind that if you need a passport in a hurry, you'll pay a higher processing fee. When traveling, safeguard your passport in an inconspicuous, inaccessible place like a money belt and keep a copy of the critical pages with your passport number in a separate place. If you lose your passport, visit the nearest consulate or embassy of your native country as soon as possible for a replacement.

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country until you can replace it—a bureaucratic hassle that can take anywhere from a few hours to a week.

The FMT can be issued for up to 180 days. Sometimes officials don't ask but just stamp a time limit, so be sure to say "6 months," or at least twice as long as you intend to stay. If you decide to extend your stay, you may request that additional time be added to your FMT from an official immigration office in Mexico.

**Note:** Children under age 18 who are traveling without parents or with only one parent must have a notarized letter from the absent parent(s) authorizing the travel. Mexican law requires that any non-Mexican under the age of 18 departing Mexico must carry notarized written permission from any parent or guardian not traveling with the child. This permission must include the name of the parent, the name of the child, the name of anyone traveling with the child, and the notarized signature(s) of the absent parent(s). The child must carry the original letter—not a copy—as well as proof of the parent/child relationship (usually a birth certificate or court document)—and an original custody decree, if applicable.

## 4 When to Go

### SEASONS

**High season** in the Yucatán begins around December 20 and continues to Easter. This is the best time for calm, warm weather; snorkeling, diving, and fishing (the calmer weather means clearer and more predictable seas); and for visiting the ruins that dot the interior of the peninsula. Book well in advance if you plan to be in Cancún around the holidays.

**Low season** begins the day after Easter and continues to mid-December; during low season, prices may drop 20% to 50%. In Cancún and along the Riviera Maya, demand by European visitors is creating a summer high season, with hotel rates approaching those charged in the winter months.

Generally speaking, Mexico's **dry season** runs from November to April, with the **rainy season** stretching from May to October. It isn't a problem if you're staying close to the beaches, but for those bent on road-tripping to Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, or other sites, temperatures and humidity in the interior can be downright stifling from May to July. Later in the rainy season, the frequency of **tropical storms** and **hurricanes** increases; such storms, of course, can put a crimp in your vacation. But they can lower temperatures, making climbing ruins a real joy, accompanied by cool air and a slight wind.

November is especially ideal for Yucatán travels. Cancún, Cozumel, and Isla Mujeres also have a rainy season from November to January, when northern storms hit. This usually means diving visibility is diminished—and conditions may prevent boats from even going out.

Villahermosa is sultry and humid all the time. San Cristóbal de las Casas, at an elevation of 2,152m (7,059 ft.), is much cooler than the lowlands and is downright cold in winter.

## 5 Getting There & Getting Around

### GETTING THERE

If this is not your first trip to Cancún, you'll notice that the airport's facilities and services continue to expand. **AeroMéxico** (☎ 800/237-6639 in the U.S., or 01/800-021-4000 in Mexico; [www.aeromexico.com](http://www.aeromexico.com)) offers connecting service to Cancún through Mexico City. **Mexicana** (☎ 800/531-7921 in the U.S., 01/800-502-2000 in Mexico, or 998/881-9090; [www.mexicana.com.mx](http://www.mexicana.com.mx)) offers connecting flights to Cancún through Miami or Mexico City. In addition to these carriers, many **charter** companies—such as Apple Vacations and Funjet—travel to Cancún; these package tours make up as much as 60% of arrivals by U.S. visitors (see “Packages for the Independent Traveler,” later in this chapter).

Regional carrier **Click Mexicana**, a Mexicana affiliate (☎ 01-800/112-5425 toll-free in Mexico; [www.click.com.mx](http://www.click.com.mx)) flies from Cozumel, Havana, Mexico City, Mérida, Chetumal, and other points within Mexico. You'll want to confirm departure times for flights to the U.S. **Aviacsa** (☎ 01-800/711-6733 toll-free in Mexico; [www.aviacsa.com](http://www.aviacsa.com)) and **InterJet** (☎ 01-800/01-12345 toll-free in Mexico; [www.interjet.com.mx](http://www.interjet.com.mx)) are two other regional carriers that fly to Cancún from Mexico City.

Here are the U.S. numbers of major international carriers serving Cancún: **Alaska** (☎ 800/426-0333; [www.alaskaair.com](http://www.alaskaair.com)), **American** (☎ 800/433-7300; [www.aa.com](http://www.aa.com)), **Continental** (☎ 800/231-0856; [www.continental.com](http://www.continental.com)), **Delta** (☎ 800/221-1212; [www.delta.com](http://www.delta.com)), **Northwest** (☎ 800/225-2525; [www.nwa.com](http://www.nwa.com)), and **US Airways** (☎ 800/428-4322; [www.usairways.com](http://www.usairways.com)).

Most major car-rental firms have outlets at the airport, so if you're renting a car, consider picking it up and dropping it off at the airport to save on airport-transportation costs. Another way to save money is to arrange for the rental before you leave home. If you wait until you arrive, the daily cost will be around \$50 to \$75 (£28–£41) for a



Chevrolet Atos. Major agencies include **Avis** (☎ 800/331-1212 in the U.S., or 998/886-0221; www.avis.com); **Budget** (☎ 800/527-0700 in the U.S., or 998/886-0417; fax 998/884-4812; www.budget.com); **Dollar** (☎ 800/800-3665 in the U.S., or 998/886-2300; www.dollar.com); **National** (☎ 800/227-7368 in the U.S., or 998/886-0153; www.nationalcar.com); and **Hertz** (☎ 800/654-3131 in the U.S. and Canada, or 998/884-1326; www.hertz.com). If you're looking for an exotic car rental (such as a Porsche or Mercedes convertible) and don't mind paying a small fortune for it, try **Platinum** (☎ 998/883-5555; www.platinumcarrental.com), with an office inside the JW Marriott hotel. The Zona Hotelera (Hotel Zone) lies 10km (6¼ miles)—a 20-minute drive—from the airport along wide, well-paved roads.

Rates for a **private taxi** from the airport are around \$25 (£14) to downtown Cancún, or \$28 to \$40 (£15–£22) to the Hotel Zone, depending on your destination. **Colectivos** (vans) run from the airport into town. Buy tickets, which cost about \$10 (£5.50), from the booth to the far right as you exit the airport terminal. There's **minibus** transportation (\$9.50/£5.25) from the airport to the Puerto Juárez passenger ferry to Isla Mujeres, or you can hire a private taxi for about \$40 (£22). There is no *colectivo* service returning to the airport from Ciudad Cancún or the Hotel Zone, so you'll have to take a taxi, but the rate will be much less than for the trip from the airport. (Only federally chartered taxis may take fares *from* the airport, but any taxi may bring passengers *to* the airport.) Ask at your hotel what the fare should be, but expect to pay about half what you paid from the airport to your hotel.

## BY CAR

From Mérida or Campeche, take **Highway 180** east to Cancún. This is mostly a winding, two-lane road that branches off into the express **toll road 180D** between Izamal and Nuevo Xcan. Nuevo Xcan is approximately 40km (25 miles) from Cancún. Mérida is about 80km (50 miles) away.

## BY BUS

Cancún's **ADO bus terminal** (☎ 998/884-4352 or -4804) is in downtown Ciudad Cancún at the intersection of avenidas Tulum and Uxmal. All out-of-town buses arrive here. Buses run to Playa del Carmen, Tulum, Chichén Itzá, other nearby beach and archaeological zones, and other points within Mexico.

## GETTING AROUND

### BY TAXI

Taxi prices in Cancún are clearly set by zone, although keeping track of what's in which zone can take some doing. The minimum fare within the Hotel Zone is \$6 per ride, making it one of the most expensive taxi areas in Mexico. In addition, taxis operating in the Hotel Zone feel perfectly justified in having a discriminatory pricing structure: Local residents pay about half of what tourists pay, and prices for guests at higher-priced hotels are about double those for budget hotel guests—these are all established by the taxi union. Rates should be posted outside your hotel; if you have a question, all drivers are required to have an official rate card in their taxis, though it's generally in Spanish.

Within the downtown area, the cost is about \$1.50 (85p) per cab ride (not per person); within any other zone, it's \$6 (£3.30). Traveling between two zones will also cost \$6 (£3.30), and if you cross two zones, that'll cost \$8 (£4.40). Settle on a price in advance, or check at your hotel. Trips to the airport from most zones cost \$15 (£8.25). Taxis can also be rented for \$18 (£9.90) per hour for travel around the city and Hotel Zone, but this rate can generally be negotiated down to about \$15 (£8.25). If you want to hire a taxi to take you to Chichén Itzá or along the Riviera Maya, expect to pay about \$30 (£17) per hour—many taxi drivers feel that they are also providing guide services.

### BY BUS

Bus travel within Cancún continues to improve and is increasingly popular. In town, almost everything lies within walking distance. **Ruta 1** and **Ruta 2** (HOTELES) city buses travel frequently from the mainland to the beaches along Avenida Tulum (the main street) and all the way to Punta Nizuc at the far end of the Hotel Zone on Isla Cancún. **Ruta 8** buses go to Puerto Juárez/Punta Sam for ferries to Isla Mujeres. They stop on the east side of Avenida Tulum. All these city buses operate between 6am and 10pm daily. Beware of private buses along the same route; they charge far more than the public ones. Public buses have the fare painted on the front; at press time, the fare was 60¢ (P33).

### BY MOPED

Mopeds are a convenient but dangerous way to cruise around through the very congested traffic. Rentals start at \$30 (£17) for a day, and a credit card voucher is required as security. You should

receive a crash helmet (it's the law) and instructions on how to lock the wheels when you park. Read the fine print on the back of the rental agreement regarding liability for repairs or replacement in case of accident, theft, or vandalism.

## 6 Money & Costs

### CURRENCY

The currency in Mexico is the Mexican **peso**. Paper currency comes in denominations of 20, 50, 100, 200, 500, and 1,000 pesos. Coins come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, and 20 pesos, and 20 and 50 **centavos** (100 centavos = 1 peso). The current exchange rate for the U.S. dollar, and the one used in this book, is around 11 pesos; at that rate, an item that costs 11 pesos would be equivalent to US\$1. The current exchange rate for the British pound is .55 to \$1 U.S.

Getting **change** is a problem. Small-denomination bills and coins are hard to come by, so start collecting them early in your trip. Shopkeepers everywhere always seem to be out of change and small bills; that's doubly true in markets.

Many establishments that deal with tourists, especially in coastal resort areas, quote prices in dollars. To avoid confusion, they use the abbreviations "Dlls." for dollars and "M.N." (*moneda nacional*, or national currency) for pesos.

Don't forget to have enough pesos to carry you over a weekend or Mexican holiday, when banks are closed. In general, avoid carrying the U.S. \$100 bill; it's the bill most commonly counterfeited in Mexico and therefore the most difficult to exchange, especially in smaller towns. Because small bills and coins in pesos are hard to come by in Mexico, the \$1 bill is very useful for tipping. A tip of U.S. coins cannot be exchanged into Mexican currency and is of no value to the service provider.

The bottom line on exchanging money: Ask first, and then shop around. Banks generally pay the top rates. Exchange houses (*casas de cambio*), however, are generally more convenient than banks because they have more locations and longer hours; the rate of exchange may

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### Money Matters

The **universal currency sign (\$)** is used to indicate pesos in Mexico. The use of the symbol in this book, however, denotes U.S. currency.

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### *Tips* A Few Words about Prices

The peso's value continues to fluctuate—at press time, it was roughly 11 pesos to the dollar. Prices in this book (which are always given in U.S. dollars and British pounds) have been converted to U.S. dollars at 11 pesos to the dollar. Most hotels in Mexico—with the exception of places that receive little foreign tourism—quote prices in U.S. dollars. Thus, currency fluctuations are unlikely to affect the prices most hotels charge.

Mexico has a **value-added tax** of 15% (*Impuesto de Valor Agregado*, or IVA; pronounced “ee-vah”) on most everything, including restaurant meals, bus tickets, and souvenirs. (Exceptions are Cancún, Cozumel, and Los Cabos, where the IVA is 10%; as ports of entry, they receive a break on taxes.) Hotels charge the usual 15% IVA, plus a locally administered bed tax of 2% (in most areas), for a total of 17%. In Cancún, Los Cabos, and Cozumel, hotels charge the 10% IVA plus 2% room tax. The prices quoted by hotels and restaurants do not necessarily include IVA. You may find that upper-end properties (three or more stars) quote prices without IVA included, while lower-priced hotels include IVA. Always ask to see a printed price sheet and always ask if the tax is included.

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be the same as at a bank or slightly lower. Before leaving a bank or exchange-house window, count your change in front of the teller.

Large airports have currency-exchange counters that often stay open whenever flights are operating. Though convenient, they generally do not offer the most favorable rates.

A hotel's exchange desk commonly pays less favorable rates than banks; however, when the currency is in a state of flux, higher-priced hotels are known to pay higher rates than banks, in an effort to attract dollars. **Note:** In almost all cases, you receive a better rate by changing money first, then paying.

### **BANKS & ATMs**

Banks in Mexico tend to be open weekdays from 9am until 5pm, and often for at least a half-day on Saturday. In larger resorts and cities such as Cancún, they can generally accommodate the exchange of dollars anytime during business hours. During times when the currency is in flux, a particular bank may not exchange dollars, so check before standing in line. Some, but not all, banks charge a service fee of about 1% to exchange traveler's checks. However, you can

pay for most purchases directly with traveler's checks at the establishment's stated exchange rate. Don't even bother with personal checks drawn on a U.S. bank—the bank will wait for your check to clear, which can take weeks, before giving you your money.

Travelers to Cancún can easily withdraw money from **ATMs**, and the use of ATMs is perfectly safe—just use the same precautions you would at any ATM. Universal bankcards (such as the Cirrus and PLUS systems) can be used. This is a convenient way to withdraw money and avoid carrying too much with you at any time. The exchange rate is generally more favorable than that at a currency house. Most machines offer Spanish/English menus and dispense pesos, but some offer the option of withdrawing dollars. Be sure to check the daily withdrawal limit before you depart.

For **Cirrus** locations abroad, check ☎ **800/424-7787** or **www.mastercard.com**. For **PLUS** outlets abroad, check ☎ **800/843-7587** or **www.visa.com**. Before you leave home, check your daily withdrawal limit, and make sure that your personal identification number (PIN) works in international destinations. Also keep in mind that many banks impose a fee every time a card is used at a different bank's ATM, and that fee can be higher for international transactions (up to \$5 or more) than for domestic ones. To compare banks' ATM fees within the U.S., use **www.bankrate.com**. For international withdrawal fees, ask your bank.

You can also get cash advances on your credit card at an ATM. Keep in mind that credit card companies try to protect themselves from theft by limiting the funds someone can withdraw outside their home country, so call your credit card company before you leave home. And keep in mind that you'll pay interest from the moment of your withdrawal, even if you pay your monthly bills on time.

## CREDIT CARDS

Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are the most accepted cards in the Yucatán, as in the rest of Mexico. You'll be able to charge most hotel, restaurant, and store purchases, as well as almost all airline tickets, on your credit card. Pemex gas stations began to accept credit card purchases for gasoline in 2006, though this option may not be available everywhere and is usually not offered at night. You can get cash advances of several hundred dollars on your card, but there may be a wait of 20 minutes to 2 hours.

Charges will be made in pesos, then converted into dollars by the bank issuing the credit card. Generally you receive the favorable

bank rate when paying by credit card. However, be aware that some establishments in Mexico add a 5%-to-7% surcharge when you pay with a credit card. This is especially true when using American Express. Many times, advertised discounts will not apply if you pay with a credit card.

## TRAVELER'S CHECKS

You can buy traveler's checks at most banks. They are offered in denominations of \$20, \$50, \$100, \$500, and sometimes \$1,000. Generally, you'll pay a service charge ranging from 1% to 4%.

The most popular traveler's checks are offered by **American Express** (☎ 800/807-6233, or 800/221-7282 for card holders—this number accepts collect calls, offers service in several foreign languages, and exempts Amex gold and platinum cardholders from the 1% fee); **Visa** (☎ 800/732-1322)—AAA members can obtain Visa checks for a \$9.95 fee (for checks up to \$1,500) at most AAA offices or by calling ☎ 866/339-3378; and **MasterCard** (☎ 800/223-9920).

Be sure to keep a record of the traveler's checks serial numbers separate from your checks in the event that they are stolen or lost. You'll get a refund faster if you know the numbers.

**American Express, Thomas Cook, Visa, and MasterCard** offer **foreign currency traveler's checks**, useful if you're traveling to one country or to the euro zone; they're accepted at locations where dollar checks may not be.

Another option is the new prepaid traveler's check cards, reloadable cards that work much like debit cards but aren't linked to your checking account. The **American Express Travelers Cheque Card**, for example, requires a minimum deposit, sets a maximum balance, and has a one-time issuance fee of \$14.95. You can withdraw money from an ATM (for a fee of \$2.50 per transaction, not including bank fees), and the funds can be purchased in dollars, euros, or pounds. If you lose the card, your available funds will be refunded within 24 hours.

## 7 Travel Insurance

The cost of travel insurance varies widely, depending on the destination, the cost and length of your trip, your age and health, and the type of trip you're taking, but expect to pay between 5% and 8% of the vacation itself. You can get estimates from various providers through **InsureMyTrip.com**. Enter your trip cost and dates, your age, and other information, for prices from more than a dozen companies.

**U.K. citizens** and their families who make more than one trip abroad per year may find an annual travel insurance policy works out cheaper. Check [www.moneysupermarket.com](http://www.moneysupermarket.com), which compares prices across a wide range of providers for single- and multi-trip policies.

Most big travel agents offer their own insurance and will probably try to sell you their package when you book a holiday. Think before you sign. **Britain's Consumers' Association** recommends that you insist on seeing the policy and reading the fine print before buying travel insurance. **The Association of British Insurers** (☎ 020/7600-3333; [www.abi.org.uk](http://www.abi.org.uk)) gives advice by phone and publishes *Holiday Insurance*, a free guide to policy provisions and prices. You might also shop around for better deals: Try **Columbus Direct** (☎ 0870/033-9988; [www.columbusdirect.net](http://www.columbusdirect.net)).

## TRIP-CANCELLATION INSURANCE

Trip-cancellation insurance will help retrieve your money if you have to back out of a trip or depart early, or if your travel supplier goes bankrupt. Trip cancellation traditionally covers such events as sickness, natural disasters, and State Department advisories. The latest news in trip-cancellation insurance is the availability of **expanded hurricane coverage** and the “**any-reason**” cancellation coverage—which costs more but covers cancellations made for any reason. You won't get back 100% of your prepaid trip cost, but you'll be refunded a substantial portion. **TravelSafe** (☎ 888/885-7233; [www.travel-safe.com](http://www.travel-safe.com)) offers both types of coverage. Expedia also offers any-reason cancellation coverage for its air-hotel packages.

For details, contact one of the following recommended insurers: **Access America** (☎ 866/807-3982; [www.accessamerica.com](http://www.accessamerica.com)); **Travel Guard International** (☎ 800/826-4919; [www.travelguard.com](http://www.travelguard.com)); **Travel Insured International** (☎ 800/243-3174; [www.travelinsured.com](http://www.travelinsured.com)); and **Travelex Insurance Services** (☎ 888/457-4602; [www.travelex-insurance.com](http://www.travelex-insurance.com)).

## MEDICAL INSURANCE

For travel overseas, most U.S. health plans (including Medicare and Medicaid) do not provide coverage, and the ones that do often require you to pay for services upfront and reimburse you only after you return home.

As a safety net, you may want to buy travel medical insurance, particularly if you're traveling to a remote or high-risk area where emergency evacuation might be necessary. If you require additional

medical insurance, try **MEDEX Assistance** (☎ 410/453-6300; www.medexassist.com) or **Travel Assistance International** (☎ 800/821-2828; www.travelassistance.com; for general information on services, call the company's **Worldwide Assistance Services, Inc.**, at ☎ 800/777-8710).

**Canadians** should check with their provincial health plan offices or call **Health Canada** (☎ 866/225-0709; www.hc-sc.gc.ca) to find out the extent of their coverage and what documentation and receipts they must take home in case they are treated overseas.

## LOST-LUGGAGE INSURANCE

On flights within the U.S., checked baggage is covered up to \$3,000 per ticketed passenger. On round-trip international flights originating in the U.S, liability limits are about \$1,400 per passenger. If you plan to check items more valuable than what's covered by the standard liability, see if your homeowner's policy covers your valuables, get baggage insurance as part of your comprehensive travel-insurance package, or buy Travel Guard's "BagTrak" product.

If your luggage is lost, immediately file a lost-luggage claim at the airport, detailing the luggage contents. Most airlines require that you report delayed, damaged, or lost baggage within 4 hours of arrival. The airlines are required to deliver luggage, once found, directly to your house or destination free of charge.

## 8 Health

### STAYING HEALTHY

#### GENERAL AVAILABILITY OF HEALTHCARE

In most of the Yucatán's resort destinations, healthcare meeting U.S. standards is now available. Mexico's major cities are also known for their quality healthcare, although the facilities available may be sparser, and the equipment may be older than what is available at home. Prescription medicine is broadly available at Mexico pharmacies; however be aware that you may have to have a copy of your prescription or obtain a prescription from a local doctor.

Contact the **International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IAMAT)**; ☎ 716/754-4883, or 416/652-0137 in Canada; www.iamat.org) for tips on travel and health concerns in the countries you're visiting, and lists of local, English-speaking doctors. The U.S. **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (☎ 800/311-3435; www.cdc.gov) provides up-to-date information on health hazards by region or country and offers tips on food safety. The website **www.tripprep.com**, sponsored by a consortium



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## *Tips* **Over-the-Counter Drugs in Mexico**

Antibiotics and other drugs that you'd need a prescription to buy in the States are often available over-the-counter in Mexican pharmacies. Mexican pharmacies also carry a limited selection of common over-the-counter cold, sinus, and allergy remedies.

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of travel medicine practitioners, may also offer helpful advice on traveling abroad. You can find listings of reliable clinics overseas at the **International Society of Travel Medicine** ([www.istm.org](http://www.istm.org)).

### **COMMON AILMENTS**

**HIGH-ALTITUDE HAZARDS** Travelers to certain regions of Mexico occasionally experience **elevation sickness**, which results from the relative lack of oxygen and the decrease in barometric pressure that characterizes high elevations (more than 1,515m/4,969 ft.). Symptoms include shortness of breath, fatigue, headache, insomnia, and even nausea. Mexico City is at 2,121m (6,957 ft.) above sea level, as are a number of other central and southern cities, such as San Cristóbal de las Casas (even higher than Mexico City). At high elevations, it takes about 10 days to acquire the extra red blood corpuscles you need to adjust to the scarcity of oxygen. To help your body acclimate, drink plenty of fluids, avoid alcoholic beverages, and don't overexert yourself during the first few days. If you have heart or lung problems, talk to your doctor before going above 2,424m (7,951 ft.).

**BUGS, BITES & OTHER WILDLIFE CONCERNS** **Mosquitoes** and **gnats** are prevalent along the coast and in the Yucatán lowlands. Insect repellent (*repelente contra insectos*) is a must. If you'll be in these areas and are prone to bites, bring along a repellent that contains the active ingredient DEET. Avon's Skin So Soft also works extremely well. Another good remedy to keep the mosquitoes away is to mix citronella essential oil with basil, clove, and lavender essential oils. If you're sensitive to bites, pick up some antihistamine cream from a drugstore at home.

Most readers won't ever see an *alacrán* (scorpion). But if one stings you, go immediately to a hospital or a doctor. The one lethal scorpion found in some parts of Mexico is the *Centruroides*, part of the Buthidea family, characterized by a thin body, thick tale, and triangular-shaped sternum. Most deaths from these scorpions result

within 24 hours of the sting as a result of respiratory or cardiovascular failure, with children and seniors most at risk. Scorpions are not aggressive (they don't hunt for prey), but they may sting if touched, especially in their hiding places. In Mexico you can buy scorpion toxin antidote at any drugstore. It is an injection and it costs around \$25. This is a good idea if you plan to camp in a remote area where medical assistance can be several hours away.

**MORE SERIOUS DISEASES** You shouldn't be overly concerned about tropical diseases if you stay on the normal tourist routes and don't eat street food. However, both dengue fever and cholera have appeared in Mexico in recent years. Talk to your doctor or to a medical specialist in tropical diseases about precautions you should take. You can also get medical bulletins from the U.S. State Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (see "Visitor Information," earlier in this chapter). You can protect yourself by taking some simple precautions: Watch what you eat and drink; don't swim in stagnant water (ponds, slow-moving rivers, or wells); and avoid mosquito bites by covering up, using repellent, and sleeping under netting. The most dangerous areas seem to be on Mexico's west coast, away from the big resorts.

### **WHAT TO DO IF YOU GET SICK AWAY FROM HOME**

Any foreign consulate can provide a list of area doctors who speak English. If you get sick, consider asking your hotel concierge to recommend a local doctor—even his or her own. You can also try the emergency room at a local hospital. Many hospitals also have walk-in clinics for emergency cases that are not life-threatening; you may not get immediate attention, but you won't pay the high price of an emergency room visit. We list hospitals and emergency numbers under "Fast Facts" in chapter 4.

If you suffer from a chronic illness, consult your doctor before you depart. For conditions like epilepsy, diabetes, or heart problems, wear a **MedicAlert Identification Tag** (☎ 888/633-4298; [www.medicalert.org](http://www.medicalert.org)), which will immediately alert doctors to your condition and give them access to your records through MedicAlert's 24-hour hot line.

Pack **prescription medications** in your carry-on luggage, and carry them in their original containers, with pharmacy labels—otherwise they won't make it through airport security. Also bring along copies of your prescriptions in case you lose your pills or run out.

Don't forget an extra pair of contact lenses or prescription glasses. Carry the generic name of prescription medicines, in case a local pharmacist is unfamiliar with the brand name.

**EMERGENCY EVACUATION** In extreme medical emergencies, a service from the United States will fly people to American hospitals. **Global Life Flights** (© 800/831-9307, or 01-800/305-9400 in Mexico; [www.globallifeflight.com](http://www.globallifeflight.com)) is a 24-hour air ambulance.

## 9 Safety

### CRIME

Crime in Mexico, especially in Mexico City, in selected cities along the U.S. border, and in some states affected by drug violence, has received attention in the North American press over the past several years. Many feel this unfairly exaggerates the real dangers, but it should be noted that crime rates, including taxi robberies, kidnappings, and highway carjackings, have risen in recent years. The most severe problems have been concentrated in Mexico City, where even longtime foreign residents will attest to the overall lack of security. Violent crime has also continued at high levels in Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, Acapulco, and the state of Sinaloa. The U.S. Department of State recommends caution in traveling to the southern states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guerrero due to sporadic incidents of politically motivated violence there. Check the U.S. State Department Consular Information Sheet (and any applicable travel advisories) for Mexico before you travel to any notable “hot spots.”

Precautions are necessary, but travelers should be realistic. Common sense is essential. You can generally trust people whom you approach for help or directions—but be wary of anyone who approaches you offering the same. The more insistent the person is, the more cautious you should be. The crime rate is, on the whole, much lower in Mexico than in many parts of the United States, and the nature of crimes in general is less violent.

Travelers should exercise caution in traveling Mexico's highways, avoiding travel at night, and using *cuota* (toll) roads rather than the less secure *libre* (free) roads whenever possible. It is also advised that you should not hike alone in backcountry areas, nor walk alone on scarcely frequented beaches, ruins, or trails.

### BRIBES & SCAMS

As is the case around the world, there are the occasional bribes and scams in Mexico, targeted at people believed to be naive—such as

## **Treating & Avoiding Digestive Trouble**

It's called "travelers' diarrhea" or *turista*, the Spanish word for "tourist": persistent diarrhea, often accompanied by fever, nausea, and vomiting, that used to attack many travelers to Mexico. (Some in the U.S. call this "Montezuma's revenge," but you won't hear it called that in Mexico.) Widespread improvements in infrastructure, sanitation, and education have greatly diminished this ailment, especially in well-developed resort areas. Most travelers make a habit of drinking only bottled water, which also helps to protect against unfamiliar bacteria. In resort areas, and generally throughout Mexico, only purified ice is used. If you do come down with this ailment, nothing beats Pepto Bismol, readily available in Mexico. Imodium is also available in Mexico and is used by many travelers for a quick fix. A good high-potency (or "therapeutic") vitamin supplement and even extra vitamin C can help; yogurt is good for healthy digestion.

Since dehydration can quickly become life-threatening, the Public Health Service advises that you be careful to replace fluids and electrolytes (potassium, sodium, and the like) during a bout of diarrhea. Drink Pedialyte, a rehydration solution available at most Mexican pharmacies, or natural fruit juice, such as guava or apple (stay away from orange juice, which has laxative properties), with a pinch of salt added.

**How to prevent it:** The U.S. Public Health Service recommends the following measures for preventing travelers' diarrhea: **Drink only purified water** (boiled water, canned or bottled beverages, beer, or wine). **Choose food carefully.** In general, avoid salads (except in first-class restaurants), uncooked vegetables, undercooked protein, and unpasteurized milk or milk products, including cheese. Avoid eating food prepared by street vendors. Choose food that is freshly cooked and still hot. In addition, something as simple as **clean hands** can go a long way toward preventing *turista*.

the telltale tourist. For years, Mexico was known as a place where bribes—called *mordidas* (bites)—were expected; however, the country is rapidly changing. Frequently, offering a bribe today, especially to a police officer, is considered an insult, and it can land you in deeper trouble.

If you believe a **bribe** is being requested, here are a few tips on dealing with the situation. Even if you speak Spanish, don't utter a word of it to Mexican officials. That way you'll appear innocent while understanding every word.

When you are crossing the border, should the person who inspects your car ask for a tip, you can ignore this request—but understand that the official may suddenly decide that a complete search of your belongings is in order. If faced with a situation where you feel you're being asked for a *propina* (literally, “tip”; colloquially, “bribe”), how much should you offer? Usually \$3 to \$5 or the equivalent in pesos will do the trick. Many tourists have the impression that everything works better in Mexico if you “tip”; however, in reality, this only perpetuates the *mordida* attitude. If you are pleased with a service, feel free to tip, but you shouldn't tip simply to attempt to get away with something illegal or inappropriate, whether it is crossing the border without having your car inspected or not getting a ticket that's deserved.

Whatever you do, **avoid impoliteness**; under no circumstances should you insult a Latin American official. Extreme politeness, even in the face of adversity, rules Mexico. In Mexico, *gringos* have a reputation for being loud and demanding. By adopting the local custom of excessive courtesy, you'll have greater success in negotiations of any kind. Stand your ground, but do it politely.

As you travel in Mexico, you may encounter several types of **scams**, which are typical throughout the world. One involves some kind of a **distraction** or feigned commotion. While your attention is diverted, a pickpocket makes a grab for your wallet. In another common scam, an **unaccompanied child** pretends to be lost and frightened and takes your hand for safety. Meanwhile the child or an accomplice plunders your pockets. A third involves **confusing currency**. A shoeshine boy, street musician, guide, or other individual might offer you a service for a price that seems reasonable—in pesos. When it comes time to pay, he or she tells you the price is in dollars, not pesos. Be very clear on the price and currency when services are involved.

## 10 Specialized Travel Resources

### TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Mexico may seem like one giant obstacle course to travelers in wheelchairs or on crutches. At airports, you may encounter steep stairs before finding a well-hidden elevator or escalator—if one exists. Airlines will often arrange wheelchair assistance to the baggage area. Porters are generally available to help with luggage at airports and large bus stations, once you've cleared baggage claim.

Mexican airports are upgrading their services, but it is not uncommon to board from a remote position, meaning you either descend stairs to a bus that ferries you to the plane, which you board by climbing stairs, or you walk across the tarmac to your plane and ascend the stairs. Deplaning presents the same problem in reverse.

Escalators (and there aren't many in the country) are often out of order. Stairs without handrails abound. Few restrooms are equipped for travelers with disabilities; when one is available, access to it may be through a narrow passage that won't accommodate a wheelchair or a person on crutches. Many deluxe hotels (the most expensive) now have rooms with bathrooms for people with disabilities. Those traveling on a budget should stick with one-story hotels or hotels with elevators. Even so, there will probably still be obstacles somewhere. Generally speaking, no matter where you are, someone will lend a hand, although you may have to ask for it.

Most disabilities shouldn't stop anyone from traveling. There are more options and resources out there than ever before.

Organizations that offer assistance to disabled travelers include **MossRehab** (☎ 1-800-CALLMOSS or 215/456-9900; [www.mossresourcenet.org](http://www.mossresourcenet.org)), which provides a library of accessible-travel resources online; the **American Foundation for the Blind (AFB)**; ☎ 800/232-5463; [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org)), a referral resource for the blind or visually impaired that includes information on traveling with Seeing Eye dogs; and **SATH** (Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality; ☎ 800/513-1126; [www.sath.org](http://www.sath.org); annual membership fees: \$49 adults, \$29 seniors and students), which offers a wealth of travel resources for all types of disabilities and informed recommendations on destinations, access guides, travel agents, tour operators, vehicle rentals, and companion services. **AirAmbulanceCard.com** is now partnered with SATH and allows you to preselect top-notch hospitals in case of an emergency for \$195 a year (\$295 per family), among other benefits.

For more information, check out the quarterly magazine *Emerging Horizons* (www.emerginghorizons.com; \$17 per year, \$22 outside the U.S.); and *Open World* magazine, published by SATH (see above; subscription: \$13 per year, \$21 outside the U.S.).

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Mexico is a conservative country, with deeply rooted Catholic religious traditions. Public displays of same-sex affection are still rare in most parts of the country, especially outside of urban or resort areas. Women in Mexico frequently walk hand in hand, but anything more would cross the boundary of acceptability. However, gay and lesbian travelers are generally treated with respect and should not experience any harassment, assuming they give the appropriate regard to local culture and customs.

**The International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA;** © 800/448-8550 or 954/776-2626; www.iglta.org) is the trade association for the gay and lesbian travel industry, and offers an online directory of gay- and lesbian-friendly travel businesses; go to their website and click on “Members.”

Many agencies offer tours and travel itineraries specifically for gay and lesbian travelers. **Above and Beyond Tours** (© 800/397-2681; www.abovebeyondtours.com) is the exclusive gay and lesbian tour operator for United Airlines. **Now, Voyager** (© 800/255-6951; www.nowvoyager.com) is a well-known San Francisco-based, gay-owned and -operated travel service. **Olivia Cruises & Resorts** (© 800/631-6277; www.olivia.com) charters entire resorts and ships for exclusive lesbian vacations and offers smaller group experiences for both gay and lesbian travelers.

**Gay.com Travel** (© 415/644-8044; www.gay.com/travel or www.outandabout.com), is an excellent online successor to the popular *Out & About* print magazine. It provides regularly updated information about gay-owned, gay-oriented, and gay-friendly lodging, dining, sightseeing, nightlife, and shopping establishments in every important destination worldwide. It also offers trip-planning information for gay and lesbian travelers for more than 50 destinations, along various themes, ranging from “Sex & Travel” to “Vacations for Couples.”

The following travel guides are available at many bookstores, or you can order them from any online bookseller: *Frommer's Gay & Lesbian Europe* (www.frommers.com), an excellent travel resource to the top European cities and resorts; *Spartacus International*

**Gay Guide** (Bruno Gmünder Verlag; [www.spartacusworld.com/gayguide](http://www.spartacusworld.com/gayguide)); and **Odysseus: The International Gay Travel Planner** (Odysseus Enterprises Ltd.), both good, annual, English-language guidebooks focused on gay men; and the **Damron** guides ([www.damron.com](http://www.damron.com)), with separate, annual books for gay men and lesbians.

## SENIOR TRAVEL

Mexico is a popular country for retirees. For decades, North Americans have been living indefinitely in Mexico by returning to the border and re-crossing with a new tourist permit every 6 months. Mexican immigration officials have caught on, and now limit the maximum time in the country to 6 months within any year. This is to encourage even partial residents to acquire proper documentation.

Some of the most popular places for long-term stays are Guadalajara, Lake Chapala, Ajijic, and Puerto Vallarta, all in the state of Jalisco; San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato in Guanajuato state; Cuernavaca in Morelos; and Alamos in Sinaloa. The Caribbean coast of the Yucatán is becoming an increasingly popular place to invest and retire as well.

**AIM**, Apdo. Postal 31–70, 45050 Guadalajara, Jal., is a well-written, informative newsletter for prospective retirees. Issues have evaluated retirement in Aguascalientes, Puebla, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Puerto Angel, Puerto Escondido and Huatulco, Oaxaca, Taxco, Tepic, Manzanillo, Melaque, and Barra de Navidad. Subscriptions are \$18 to the United States and \$25 to Canada. Back issues are three for \$5.

**Sanborn Tours**, 2015 S. 10th St., Post Office Drawer 519, McAllen, TX 78505-0519 (☎ **800/454-5768**; [www.sanborns.com](http://www.sanborns.com)) offers a “Retire in Mexico” orientation tour.

Mention the fact that you’re a senior when you make your travel reservations. Although all the major U.S. airlines have canceled their senior discount and coupon book programs, many hotels still offer lower rates for seniors. In most cities, people over the age of 60 qualify for reduced admission to theaters, museums, and other attractions, and discounted fares on public transportation.

Members of **AARP** (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons), 601 E St. NW, Washington, DC 20049 (☎ **888/687-2277**; [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)), get discounts on hotels, airfares, and car rentals. AARP offers members a wide range of benefits, including *AARP: The Magazine* and a monthly newsletter. Anyone over 50 can join.



Many reliable agencies and organizations target the 50-plus market. **Elderhostel** (☎ 877/426-8056; www.elderhostel.org) arranges study programs for those aged 55 and over (and a spouse or companion of any age) in the U.S. and in more than 80 countries around the world. Most courses last 5 to 7 days in the U.S. (2–4 weeks abroad), and many include airfare, accommodations in university dormitories or modest inns, meals, and tuition. **ElderTreks** (☎ 800/741-7956; www.eldertreks.com) offers small-group tours to off-the-beaten-path or adventure-travel locations, restricted to travelers 50 and older. Recommended publications offering travel resources and discounts for seniors include the quarterly magazine *Travel 50 & Beyond* (www.travel50andbeyond.com); *Travel Unlimited: Uncommon Adventures for the Mature Traveler* (Avalon); *101 Tips for Mature Travelers*, available from Grand Circle Travel (☎ 800/221-2610 or 617/350-7500; www.gct.com); and *Unbelievably Good Deals and Great Adventures That You Absolutely Can't Get Unless You're Over 50* (McGraw-Hill), by Joann Rattner Heilman.

## FAMILY TRAVEL

Children are considered the national treasure of Mexico, and Mexicans will warmly welcome and cater to your children. Many parents were reluctant to bring young children into Mexico in the past, primarily due to health concerns, but I can't think of a better place to introduce children to the exciting adventure of exploring a different culture. Cancún is one of the best destinations. Hotels can often arrange for a babysitter.

Before leaving, ask your doctor which medications to take along. Disposable diapers cost about the same in Mexico but are of poorer quality. You can get Huggies Supreme and Pampers identical to the ones sold in the United States, but at a higher price. Many stores sell Gerber's baby foods. Dry cereals, powdered formulas, baby bottles, and purified water are easily available in midsize and large cities or resorts.

Cribs may present a problem; only the largest and most luxurious hotels provide them. However, rollaway beds are often available. Child seats or highchairs in restaurants are common.

Consider bringing your own car seat; they are not readily available for rent in Mexico.

Every country's regulations differ, but in general children traveling abroad should have plenty of documentation on hand, particularly if they're traveling with someone other than their own parents

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## *Tips* Advice for Female Travelers

Mexicans in general, and men in particular, are nosy about single travelers, especially women. If a taxi driver or anyone else with whom you don't want to become friendly asks about your marital status, family, and so forth, my advice is to make up a set of answers (regardless of the truth): "I'm married, traveling with friends, and I have three children." Saying you're single and traveling alone may send the wrong message. U.S. television—widely viewed now in Mexico—has given many Mexican men the image of American single women as being sexually promiscuous. Check out the award-winning website **Journeywoman** ([www.journeywoman.com](http://www.journeywoman.com)), a "real-life" women's travel information network; or the travel guide **Safety and Security for Women Who Travel** by Sheila Swan and Peter Laufer (Travelers' Tales, Inc.), offering common-sense tips on safe travel.

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(in which case a notarized form letter from a parent is often required). For details on entry requirements for children traveling abroad, go to the U.S. State Department website ([www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)); click on "International Travel," "Travel Brochures," and "Foreign Entry Requirements."

Throughout this book, the "Kids" icon distinguishes attractions, hotels, restaurants, and other destinations that are particularly attractive and accommodating to children and families.

Recommended family travel Internet sites include **Family Travel Forum** ([www.familytravelforum.com](http://www.familytravelforum.com)), a comprehensive site that offers customized trip planning; **Family Travel Network** ([www.familytravelnetwork.com](http://www.familytravelnetwork.com)), an award-winning site that offers travel features, deals, and tips; **Traveling Internationally with Your Kids** ([www.travelwithyourkids.com](http://www.travelwithyourkids.com)), a comprehensive site offering sound advice for long-distance and international travel with children; and **Family Travel Files** ([www.thefamilytravelfiles.com](http://www.thefamilytravelfiles.com)), which offers an online magazine and a directory of off-the-beaten-path tours and tour operators for families.

## STUDENT TRAVEL

Because many Mexicans consider higher education more a luxury than a birthright, there is no formal network of student discounts and programs. Most Mexican students travel with their families

rather than with other students, so student discount cards are not commonly recognized.

However, more hostels have entered the student travel scene. The **Mexican Youth Hostel Association**, or Asociación Mexicana de Albergues Juveniles ([www.hostels.com./en/mx.html](http://www.hostels.com./en/mx.html)), offers a list of hostels in Tulum, Cancún, and Playa del Carmen, and other towns and cities outside the Yucatán.

If you're a student planning to travel outside the U.S., you'd be wise to arm yourself with an **International Student Identity Card (ISIC)**, which offers substantial savings on rail passes, plane tickets, and entrance fees. It also provides you with basic health and life insurance and a 24-hour help line. The card is available from **STA Travel** (☎ 800/781-4040 in North America; [www.sta.com](http://www.sta.com) or [www.statravel.com](http://www.statravel.com)), the biggest student travel agency in the world. If you're no longer a student but are still under 26, you can get an **International Youth Travel Card (IYTC)** for the same price from the same people, which entitles you to some discounts (but not on museum admissions). **Travel CUTS** (☎ 800/667-2887 or 416/614-2887; [www.travelcuts.com](http://www.travelcuts.com)) offers similar services for both Canadians and U.S. residents. Irish students may prefer to turn to **USIT** (☎ 01/602-1600; [www.usitnow.ie](http://www.usitnow.ie)), an Ireland-based specialist in student, youth, and independent travel.

## 11 Sustainable Tourism/Ecotourism

Each time you take a flight or drive a car CO<sub>2</sub> is released into the atmosphere. You can help neutralize this danger to our planet through “carbon offsetting”—paying someone to reduce your CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by the same amount you've added. Carbon offsets can be purchased in the U.S. from companies such as **Carbonfund.org** ([www.carbonfund.org](http://www.carbonfund.org)) and **TerraPass** ([www.terrapass.org](http://www.terrapass.org)), and from **Climate Care** ([www.climatecare.org](http://www.climatecare.org)) in the U.K.

Although one could argue that any vacation that includes an airplane flight can't be truly “green,” you can go on holiday and still contribute positively to the environment. You can offset carbon emissions from your flight in other ways. Choose forward-looking companies that embrace responsible development practices, helping preserve destinations for the future by working alongside local people. An increasing number of sustainable tourism initiatives can help you plan a family trip and leave as small a “footprint” as possible on the places you visit.

**Responsible Travel** ([www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com)) contains a great source of sustainable travel ideas run by a spokesperson for responsible tourism in the travel industry. **Sustainable Travel International** ([www.sustainabletravelinternational.org](http://www.sustainabletravelinternational.org)) promotes responsible tourism practices and issues an annual Green Gear & Gift Guide.

You can find eco-friendly travel tips, statistics, and touring companies and associations—listed by destination under “Travel Choice”—at the TIES website, [www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org). Also check out **Conservation International** ([www.conservation.org](http://www.conservation.org))—which, with *National Geographic Traveler*, annually presents **World Legacy Awards** ([www.wlaward.org](http://www.wlaward.org)) to those travel tour operators, businesses, organizations, and places that have made a significant contribution to sustainable tourism. **Ecotravel.com** is part online magazine and part ecodirectory that lets you search for touring companies in several categories (water-based, land-based, spiritually oriented, and so on).

In the U.K., **Tourism Concern** ([www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk)) works to reduce social and environmental problems connected to tourism and find ways of improving tourism so that local benefits are increased.

### *Tips* **It's Easy Being Green**

We can all help conserve fuel and energy when we travel. Here are a few simple ways you can help preserve your favorite destinations:

- Whenever possible, choose nonstop flights; they generally require less fuel than those that must stop and take off again.
- If renting a car is necessary on your vacation, ask the rental agent for the most fuel-efficient car available. Not only will you use less gas, you'll save money at the tank.
- At hotels, request that your sheets and towels not be changed daily. You'll save water and energy by not washing them as often, and you'll prolong the life of the towels, too. (Many hotels already have programs like this in place.)
- Turn off the lights and air conditioner (or heater) when you leave your hotel room.

## **Frommers.com: The Complete Travel Resource**

It should go without saying, but we highly recommend **Frommers.com**, voted Best Travel Site by *PC Magazine*. We think you'll find our expert advice and tips; independent reviews of hotels, restaurants, attractions, and preferred shopping and nightlife venues; vacation giveaways; and an online booking tool indispensable before, during, and after your travels. We publish the complete contents of more than 128 travel guides in our **Destinations** section covering nearly 3,600 places worldwide to help you plan your trip. Each weekday, we publish original articles reporting on **Deals and News** via our free **Frommers.com Newsletter** to help you save time and money and travel smarter. We're betting you'll find our new **Events** listings (<http://events.frommers.com>) an invaluable resource; it's an up-to-the-minute roster of what's happening in cities everywhere—including concerts, festivals, lectures and more. We've also added weekly **Podcasts**, **interactive maps**, and hundreds of new images across the site. Check out our **Travel Talk** area featuring **Message Boards** where you can join in conversations with thousands of fellow Frommer's travelers and post your trip report once you return.

The **Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA;** [www.abta.org](http://www.abta.org)) acts as a focal point for the U.K. travel industry and is one of the leading groups spearheading responsible tourism.

The **Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO;** [www.aito.co.uk](http://www.aito.co.uk)) is a group of interesting specialist operators leading the field in making holidays sustainable.

For information about the ethics of swimming with dolphins and other outdoor activities, visit the **Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society** ([www.wdcs.org](http://www.wdcs.org)) and **Tread Lightly** ([www.treadlightly.org](http://www.treadlightly.org)).

For companies that specialize in ecotourism in Mexico, see "The Active Traveler," later in this chapter.

## 12 Staying Connected

### TELEPHONES

#### To call Mexico:

1. Dial the international access code: 011 from the U.S.; 00 from the U.K., Ireland, or New Zealand; or 0011 from Australia.
2. Dial the country code: 52.
3. Dial the two- or three-digit area code, then the eight- or seven-digit number. For example, if you wanted to call the U.S. consular agent in Acapulco, the whole number would be 011-52-744-469-0556. If you wanted to dial the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, the whole number would be 011-52-55-5080-2000.

**To make international calls:** To make international calls from Mexico, first dial 00, then the country code (U.S. or Canada 1, U.K. 44, Ireland 353, Australia 61, New Zealand 64). Next, dial the area code and number. For example, to call the British Embassy in Washington, you would dial 00-1-202-588-7800.

**For directory assistance:** Dial ☎ **040** if you're looking for a number inside Mexico. **Note:** Listings usually appear under the owner's name, not the name of the business, and your chances to find an English-speaking operator are slim to none.

**For operator assistance:** If you need operator assistance in making a call, dial **090** to make an international call, and **020** to call a number in Mexico.

**Toll-free numbers:** Numbers beginning with 800 within Mexico are toll-free, but calling a U.S. toll-free number from Mexico costs the same as an overseas call. To call an 800 number in the U.S., dial 001-880 and the last seven digits of the toll-free number. To call an 888 number in the U.S., dial 001-881 and the last seven digits of the toll-free number. For a number with an 887 prefix, dial 882; for 866, dial 883.

### CELLPHONES

The three letters that define much of the world's wireless capabilities are **GSM** (Global System for Mobile Communications)—a big, seamless network that makes for easy cross-border cellphone use worldwide. In the U.S., T-Mobile, AT&T Wireless, and Cingular use this quasi-universal system; in Canada, Microcell and some Rogers customers are GSM; and all Europeans and most Australians use GSM. GSM phones function with a removable plastic SIM

card, encoded with your phone number and account information. If your cellphone is on a GSM system, and you have a world-capable multiband phone such as many Sony Ericsson, Motorola, or Samsung models, you can make and receive calls across civilized areas around much of the globe. Just call your wireless operator and ask for “international roaming” to be activated on your account. Unfortunately, per-minute charges can be high.

Mexico doesn't offer many cellphone rental options yet. Rentals aren't common in either airports or with the national (monopoly) telephone company. One option in Cancún is a company called **Phone Rental** (☎ 55/5250-9996; www.phonerental.com.mx; Av. Ejercito Nacional 505, Suite 603). This international cellphone service will deliver a cellphone to you in Cancún, Merida, Playa del Carmen, or Isla Mujeres. Clients can make arrangements via e-mail or phone. The first week of the phone rental is free, and clients pay only the costs of the calls.

North Americans can rent a phone before leaving home from **InTouch USA** (☎ 800/872-7626; www.intouchglobal.com) or **RoadPost** (☎ 888/290-1606 or 905/272-5665; www.roadpost.com). InTouch will also, for free, advise you on whether your existing phone will work overseas; simply call ☎ 703/222-7161 between 9am and 4pm EST, or go to <http://intouchglobal.com/travel.htm>.

## VOICE-OVER INTERNET PROTOCOL (VOIP)

If you have web access while traveling, you might consider a broadband-based telephone service (in technical terms, **Voice-over Internet protocol**, or **VoIP**) such as Skype (www.skype.com) or Vonage (www.vonage.com), which allows you to make free international calls if you use their services from your laptop or in a cybercafe. The people you're calling must also use the service for it to work; check the sites for details.

## INTERNET/E-MAIL

### WITHOUT YOUR OWN COMPUTER

To find cybercafes in Cancún, check [www.cybercaptive.com](http://www.cybercaptive.com) and [www.cybercafe.com](http://www.cybercafe.com). Most major airports have **Internet kiosks** that provide basic Web access for a per-minute fee that's usually higher than cybercafe prices.

### WITH YOUR OWN COMPUTER

More and more hotels, resorts, airports, cafes, and retailers are going **Wi-Fi** (wireless fidelity), becoming “hotspots” that offer free

## Online Traveler's Toolbox

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Veteran travelers usually carry some essential items to make their trips easier. Following is a selection of handy online tools to bookmark and use.

- **Airplane Food** ([www.airlinemeals.net](http://www.airlinemeals.net))
- **Airplane Seating** ([www.seatguru.com](http://www.seatguru.com) and [www.airlinequality.com](http://www.airlinequality.com))
- **Foreign Languages for Travelers** ([www.travlang.com](http://www.travlang.com))
- **Maps** ([www.mapquest.com](http://www.mapquest.com))
- **Subway Navigator** ([www.subwaynavigator.com](http://www.subwaynavigator.com))
- **Time and Date** ([www.timeanddate.com](http://www.timeanddate.com))
- **Travel Warnings** (<http://travel.state.gov>, [www.fco.gov.uk/travel](http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel), [www.voyage.gc.ca](http://www.voyage.gc.ca), or [www.dfat.gov.au/consular/advice](http://www.dfat.gov.au/consular/advice))
- **Universal Currency Converter** ([www.xe.com/ucc](http://www.xe.com/ucc))
- **Visa ATM Locator** ([www.visa.com](http://www.visa.com)), **MasterCard ATM Locator** ([www.mastercard.com](http://www.mastercard.com))
- **Weather** ([www.intellicast.com](http://www.intellicast.com) and [www.weather.com](http://www.weather.com))

high-speed Wi-Fi access or charge a small fee for usage. Most laptops sold today have built-in wireless capability. To find public Wi-Fi hotspots at your destination, go to **www.jiwire.com**; its Hotspot Finder holds the world's largest directory of public wireless hotspots.

For dial-up access, most business-class hotels throughout the world offer dataports for laptop modems, and a few thousand hotels in Europe now offer free high-speed Internet access.

Wherever you go, bring a **connection kit** of the right power and phone adapters, a spare phone cord, and a spare Ethernet network cable—or find out whether your hotel supplies them to guests. The electrical system in Mexico is 110 volts AC (60 cycles), as in the United States and Canada, and phone adapters are the same, as well.

## THE BEST CANCUN WEBSITES

- [www.cancun.com.mx](http://www.cancun.com.mx)
- [www.gocancun.com](http://www.gocancun.com)
- [www.cancun.com](http://www.cancun.com)
- [www.go2cancun.com](http://www.go2cancun.com)
- [www.cancun.info](http://www.cancun.info)



### 13 Packages for the Independent Traveler

Package tours are simply a way to buy the airfare, accommodations, and other elements of your trip (such as car rentals, airport transfers, and sometimes even activities) at the same time and often at discounted prices.

One good source of package deals is the airlines themselves. Most major airlines offer air/land packages, including **American Airlines Vacations** (☎ 800/321-2121; [www.aavacations.com](http://www.aavacations.com)), **Delta Vacations** (☎ 800/654-6559; [www.deltavacations.com](http://www.deltavacations.com)), **Continental Airlines Vacations** (☎ 800/301-3800; [www.covacations.com](http://www.covacations.com)), and **United Vacations** (☎ 888/854-3899; [www.unitedvacations.com](http://www.unitedvacations.com)). Several big **online travel agencies**—Expedia, Travelocity, Orbitz, Site59, and Lastminute.com—also do a brisk business in packages.

**Aeroméxico Vacations** (☎ 800/245-8585; [www.aeromexico.com](http://www.aeromexico.com)) offers year-round packages to almost every destination it serves, including Cancún and Cozumel. Aeroméxico has a large (more than 100) selection of resorts in these destinations and more, in a variety of price ranges. The best deals are from Houston, Dallas, San Diego, Los Angeles, Miami, and New York, in that order.

**Mexico Travel Net** ([www.mexicotravelnet.com](http://www.mexicotravelnet.com)), also offers most of the well-known travel packages to Mexico beach resorts, plus offers last-minute specials.

**From the East Coast: Liberty Travel** (☎ 888/271-1584; [www.libertytravel.com](http://www.libertytravel.com)), one of the biggest packagers in the Northeast, often runs a full-page ad in the Sunday papers, with frequent Mexico specials. You won't get much in the way of service, but you will get a good deal.

**From the West: Suntrips** (☎ 800/248-7471 for departures within 14 days; [www.suntrips.com](http://www.suntrips.com)) is one of the largest West Coast packagers for Mexico, with departures from San Francisco and Denver; regular charters to Cancún and other Mexican locations; and a large selection of hotels.

**From the Southwest: Town and Country** (book through travel agents) packages regular deals to Cancún with America West from the airline's Phoenix and Las Vegas gateways.

**Resort Packages:** The biggest hotel chains and resorts also sell packages. To take advantage of these offers, contact your travel agent or call the hotels directly.

Travel packages are also listed in the travel section of your local Sunday newspaper. Or check ads in national travel magazines such

### *Tips* **Questions to Ask Tour Operators**

Before you invest in a package deal or an escorted tour:

- Always ask about the **cancellation policy**. Can you get your money back? Is there a deposit required?
- Ask about the **accommodations choices and prices** for each. Then look up the hotels' reviews in a Frommer's guide and check their rates online for your specific dates of travel. Also find out what types of rooms are offered.
- Request a complete **schedule**. (Escorted tours only.)
- Ask about the **size** and demographics of the group. (Escorted tours only.)
- Discuss what is included in the **price**: transportation, meals, tips, airport transfers, and so on. (Escorted tours only.)
- Finally, look for **hidden expenses**. Ask whether airport departure fees and taxes, for example, are included in the total cost—they rarely are.

as *Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel Magazine*, *Travel + Leisure*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *Condé Nast Traveler*.

## **RECOMMENDED TOUR OPERATORS IN THE YUCATAN**

- **Caribbean Coast Travel**  
([www.caribbeancoasttravel.com](http://www.caribbeancoasttravel.com))
- **Espresso Maya Train**  
([www.railsnw.com](http://www.railsnw.com))
- **Mayan Expeditions**  
([www.mayanexpeditions.com](http://www.mayanexpeditions.com))
- **SS-Tours**  
([www.ss-tours.com/yucatan.html](http://www.ss-tours.com/yucatan.html))
- **Yucatán Spiritual Mayan Tours**  
([www.iluminado-tours.com](http://www.iluminado-tours.com))

## **14 Special-Interest Trips**

### **THE ACTIVE TRAVELER**

**GOLF** Golf courses are plentiful in Cancún and Playa del Carmen. Visitors can also enjoy **tennis, water-skiing, surfing, bicycling**, and

**horseback riding**, **Snorkeling** and **scuba diving** are excellent off the Yucatán's Caribbean coast; Cozumel is considered one of the top five dive spots in the world.

**PARKS** Many of the national parks and nature reserves are understaffed or unstaffed. Reliable Mexican companies (such as **AMTAVE** members; see below) and many U.S.-based companies offer adventure trips.

### **OUTDOORS ORGANIZATIONS & TOUR OPERATORS**

**AMTAVE** (Asociación Mexicana de Turismo de Aventura y Ecoturismo, A.C.) is an active association of eco- and adventure-tour operators. It publishes an annual catalog of participating firms and their offerings, all of which must meet certain criteria for security, quality, and training of the guides, as well as for sustainability of natural and cultural environments. For more information, contact AMTAVE (☎ 55/5688-3883; www.amtave.org).

**The Archaeological Conservancy**, 5301 Central Ave. NE, Suite 402, Albuquerque, NM 87108 (☎ 505/266-1540; www.americanarchaeology.com/tour.html), presents one trip to Mexico per year led by an expert, usually an archaeologist. The trips change from year to year and space is limited; make reservations early.

**ATC Tours and Travel**, Av. 16 de Septiembre 16, 29200 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. (☎ 967/678-2550 or 967/678-2557; fax 967/678-3145; www.atctours.com), a Mexico-based tour operator with an excellent reputation, offers specialist-led culture and nature trips to southern Mexico. The company can also prepare custom itineraries.

**Culinary Adventures**, 6023 Reid Dr. NW, Gig Harbor, WA 98335 (☎ 253/851-7676; fax 253/851-9532; www.marilyn tausend.com) specializes in a short but select list of cooking tours in Mexico. They feature well-known cooks and travel to regions known for excellent cuisine. The owner, Marilyn Tausend, is the coauthor of *Mexico the Beautiful Cookbook* and *Cocinas de la Familia* (Family Kitchens). Most trips take place in central Mexico, but ask about itineraries in the Yucatán.

**Mexico Travel Link Ltd.**, 300-3665 Kingsway, Vancouver, BC V5R 5W2 Canada (☎ 604/454-9044; fax 604/454-9088; www.mexicotravel.net), offers cultural, sports, and adventure tours to the Maya Route, and other destinations off the beaten path.

**Trek America**, P.O. Box 189, Rockaway, NJ 07866 (☎ 800/221-0596 or 973/983-1144; fax 973/983-8551; www.trekamerica.com),

organizes lengthy, active trips that combine trekking, hiking, van transportation, and camping in the Yucatán.

## 15 Getting Around Cancún

**An important note:** If your travel schedule depends on a vital connection—say, a plane trip or a ferry or bus connection—call to find out if the connection is still available.

### BY PLANE

Mexico has two large private national carriers: **Mexicana** (☎ 01-800/509-8960 toll-free in Mexico), and **AeroMéxico** (☎ 01-800/021-4000 toll-free in Mexico), in addition to several up-and-coming regional and low-cost carriers. Mexicana and AeroMéxico offer extensive connections to the United States as well as within Mexico.

Up-and-coming low-cost carriers include **Aviacsa** ([www.aviacsa.com](http://www.aviacsa.com)), **Click Mexicana** ([www.click.com.mx](http://www.click.com.mx)), and **Interjet** ([www.interjet.com.mx](http://www.interjet.com.mx)). Regional carriers include **Aerovega** ([www.aerovega.com](http://www.aerovega.com)), **Aero Tucán** ([www.aero-tucan.com](http://www.aero-tucan.com)), and AeroMéxico's **Aerolitoral** ([www.aerolitoral.com.mx](http://www.aerolitoral.com.mx)). The regional carriers can be expensive, but they go to difficult-to-reach places.

Because major airlines can book some regional carriers, read your ticket carefully to see if your connecting flight is on one of these smaller carriers—they may use a different airport or a different counter.

**AIRPORT TAXES** Mexico charges an airport tax on all departures, which is included in the price of plane tickets. Passengers leaving the country on international flights pay roughly \$24—in dollars or the peso equivalent. Taxes on each domestic departure within Mexico are around \$17, unless you're on a connecting flight and have already paid at the start of the flight.

Mexico also charges an \$18 “tourism tax,” the proceeds of which go into a tourism promotional fund. Your ticket price may not include it, so be sure to have enough money to pay it at the airport upon departure.

**RECONFIRMING FLIGHTS** Although Mexican airlines say it's not necessary to reconfirm a flight, it's still a good idea. To avoid getting bumped on popular, possibly overbooked flights, check in for an international flight at least 2 hours in advance of travel.

### BY CAR

Most Mexican roads are not up to U.S. standards. Driving at night is dangerous—the roads are rarely lit; trucks, carts, pedestrians, and

bicycles usually have no lights; and you can hit potholes, animals, rocks, dead ends, or uncrossable bridges without warning.

The spirited style of Mexican driving sometimes requires super vision and reflexes. Be prepared for new customs, as when a truck driver flips on his left turn signal when there's not a crossroad for miles. He's probably telling you the road's clear ahead for you to pass. Another custom that's very important to respect is turning left. Never turn left by stopping in the middle of a highway with your left signal on. Instead, pull onto the right shoulder, wait for traffic to clear, then proceed across the road.

**GASOLINE** There's one government-owned brand of gas and one gasoline station name throughout the country—**Pemex** (Petroleras Mexicanas). There are two types of gas in Mexico: *magna*, 87-octane unleaded gas, and premium 93 octane. In Mexico, fuel and oil are sold by the liter, which is slightly more than a quart (40 liters equals about 11 gal.). Many franchise Pemex stations have bathroom facilities and convenience stores.

**Important note:** Pemex stations now accept both credit and debit cards for gas purchases, marking an important change from prior years, although this service is often not available at night, when most stations still accept only cash.

**TOLL ROADS** Mexico charges some of the highest tolls in the world for its network of new toll roads; as a result, they are rarely used. Generally speaking, though, using toll roads cuts travel time. Older toll-free roads are generally in good condition, but travel times tend to be longer.

**BREAKDOWNS** If your car breaks down on the road, help might already be on the way. Radio-equipped green repair trucks operated by uniformed English-speaking officers patrol major highways during daylight hours. These “**Green Angels**” perform minor repairs and adjustments free, but you pay for parts and materials.

Your best guide to repair shops is the Yellow Pages. For repairs, look under “Automóviles y Camiones: Talleres de Reparación y Servicio”; auto-parts stores are under “Refacciones y Accesorios para Automóviles.” To find a mechanic on the road, look for a sign that says TALLER MECANICO.

Places called *vulcanizadora* or *llantera* repair flat tires, and it is common to find them open 24 hours a day on the most traveled highways.

**MINOR ACCIDENTS** When possible, many Mexicans drive away from minor accidents, or try to make an immediate settlement,

to avoid involving the police. If the police arrive while the involved persons are still at the scene, everyone may be locked in jail until blame is assessed. In any case, you have to settle up immediately, which may take days. Foreigners who don't speak fluent Spanish are at a distinct disadvantage when trying to explain their version of the event. Three steps may help the foreigner who doesn't wish to do as the Mexicans do: If you were in your own car, notify your Mexican insurance company, whose job it is to intervene on your behalf. If you were in a rental car, notify the rental company immediately and ask how to contact the nearest adjuster. (You did buy insurance with the rental, right?) Finally, if all else fails, ask for the nearest Green Angel, who may be able to explain to officials that you are covered by insurance.

**CAR RENTALS** You'll get the best price if you reserve a car at least a week in advance in the United States. U.S. car-rental firms include **Advantage** (☎ 800/777-5500 in the U.S. and Canada; www.arac.com), **Avis** (☎ 800/331-1212 in the U.S., 800/TRY-AVIS in Canada; www.avis.com), **Budget** (☎ 800/527-0700 in the U.S. and Canada; www.budget.com), **Hertz** (☎ 800/654-3131 in the U.S. and Canada; www.hertz.com), **National** (☎ 800/CAR-RENT in the U.S. and Canada; www.nationalcar.com), and **Thrifty** (☎ 800/847-4389 in the U.S. and Canada; www.thrifty.com), which often offers discounts for rentals in Mexico. For European travelers, **Kemwel Holiday Auto** (☎ 800/678-0678; www.kemwel.com) and **Auto Europe** (☎ 800/223-5555; www.autoeurope.com) can arrange Mexican rentals, sometimes through other agencies. These and some local firms have offices in Mexico City and most other large Mexican cities. You'll find rental desks at airports, all major hotels, and many travel agencies.

Cars are easy to rent if you are 25 or over and have a major credit card, valid driver's license, and passport with you. Without a credit card, you must leave a cash deposit, usually a big one. One-way rentals are usually simple to arrange but more costly.

Car-rental costs are high in Mexico because cars are more expensive. The condition of rental cars has improved greatly over the years, and clean new cars are the norm. You will pay the least for a manual car without air-conditioning. Prices may be considerably higher if you rent around a major holiday. Also double-check charges for insurance—some companies will increase the insurance rate after several days. Always ask for detailed information about all charges you will be responsible for.

Car-rental companies usually write credit card charges in U.S. dollars.

**Deductibles** Be careful—these vary greatly; some are as high as \$2,500, which comes out of your pocket immediately in case of damage.

**Insurance** Insurance is offered in two parts: **Collision and damage** insurance covers your car and others if the accident is your fault, and **personal accident** insurance covers you and anyone in your car. Read the fine print on the back of your rental agreement and note that insurance may be invalid if you have an accident while driving on an unpaved road.

**Damage** Always inspect your car carefully and note every damaged or missing item, no matter how minute, on your rental agreement, or you may be charged.

## BY TAXI

Taxis are the preferred way to get around Cancún. Fares for short trips within towns are generally preset by zone, and are quite reasonable compared with U.S. rates. For longer trips or excursions to nearby cities, radio taxis can generally be hired for around \$10 to \$15 per hour, or for a negotiated daily rate. A negotiated one-way price is usually much less than the cost of a rental car for a day, and a taxi travels much faster than a bus. For anyone who is uncomfortable driving in Mexico, this is a convenient, comfortable alternative. A bonus is that you have a Spanish-speaking person with you in case you run into trouble. Many taxi drivers speak at least some English. For safety reasons, you should request a *sitio* (radio) taxi rather than hailing one off the street. Your hotel can assist you with the arrangements.

## BY BUS

Mexican buses run frequently, are readily accessible, and can get you almost anywhere you want to go. They're often the only way to get from large cities to other nearby cities and small villages. Don't hesitate to ask questions if you're confused about anything, but note that little English is spoken in bus stations.

Dozens of Mexican companies operate large, air-conditioned, Greyhound-type buses between most cities. Classes are second (*segunda*), first (*primera*), and deluxe (*ejecutiva*), which goes by a variety of names. Deluxe buses often have fewer seats than regular buses, show video movies, are air-conditioned, and make few stops. Many run express from point to point. They are well worth the few

dollars more. In rural areas, buses are often of the school-bus variety, with lots of local color.

Whenever possible, it's best to buy your reserved-seat ticket, often using a computerized system, a day in advance on long-distance routes and especially before holidays. See the appendix for a list of helpful bus terms in Spanish.

## 16 Tips on Accommodations

### MEXICO'S HOTEL RATING SYSTEM

The hotel rating system in Mexico is called "Stars and Diamonds." Hotels may qualify to earn one to five stars, or five diamonds. Many hotels that have excellent standards are not certified, but all rated hotels adhere to strict standards. The guidelines relate to service, facilities, and hygiene more than to prices.

Five-diamond hotels meet the highest requirements for rating: The beds are comfortable, bathrooms are in excellent working order, all facilities are renovated regularly, infrastructure is top-tier, and services and hygiene meet the highest international standards.

Five-star hotels usually offer similar quality, but with lower levels of service and detail in the rooms. For example, a five-star hotel may have less luxurious linens, or perhaps room service for less than 24 hours.

Four-star hotels are less expensive and more basic, but they still guarantee cleanliness and basic services such as hot water and purified drinking water. Three-, two-, and one-star hotels are at least working to adhere to certain standards: Bathrooms are cleaned and linens are washed daily, and you can expect a minimum standard of service. Two- and one-star hotels generally provide bottled water rather than purified water.

The nonprofit organization Calidad Mexicana Certificada, A.C., known as **Calmecac** ([www.calmecac.com.mx](http://www.calmecac.com.mx)), is responsible for hotel ratings. For additional details about the rating system, visit Calmecac's website or [www.starsanddiamonds.com](http://www.starsanddiamonds.com).

### HOTEL CHAINS

In addition to the major international chains, you'll run across a number of less-familiar brands as you plan your trip to Mexico. They include:

- **Brisas Hotels & Resorts** ([www.brisas.com.mx](http://www.brisas.com.mx)). These were the hotels that originally attracted jet-set travelers to Mexico. Spectacular in a retro way, these properties offer the laid-back luxury that makes a Mexican vacation so unique.



- **Fiesta Americana** and **Fiesta Inn** ([www.posadas.com](http://www.posadas.com)). Part of the Mexican-owned Grupo Posadas company, these hotels set the country's midrange standard for facilities and services. They generally offer comfortable, spacious rooms and traditional Mexican hospitality. Fiesta Americana hotels offer excellent beach-resort packages. Fiesta Inn hotels are usually more business oriented. Grupo Posadas also owns the more luxurious Aqua and Caesar Park hotels and the eco-oriented Explorea hotels.
- **Hoteles Camino Real** ([www.caminoreal.com](http://www.caminoreal.com)). Once known as the premier Mexican hotel chain, Camino Real still maintains a high standard of service at its properties, although the company was sold in 2005, and many of the hotels that once formed a part of it have been sold off, or have become independent. Its beach hotels are traditionally located on the best beaches in the area. This chain also focuses on the business market. The hotels are famous for their vivid and contrasting colors.
- **NH Hoteles** ([www.nh-hoteles.com](http://www.nh-hoteles.com)). The NH hotels are noted for their family-friendly facilities and quality standards. The beach properties' signature feature is a pool, framed by columns, overlooking the sea.
- **Quinta Real Grand Class Hotels and Resorts** ([www.quintareal.com](http://www.quintareal.com)). These hotels, owned by Summit Hotels and Resorts, are noted for architectural and cultural details that reflect their individual regions. At these luxury properties, attention to detail and excellent service are the rule.

## HOUSE RENTALS & SWAPS

House and villa rentals and swaps are becoming more common in Mexico, but no single recognized agency or business provides this service exclusively for Mexico. In the chapters that follow, we have provided information on independent services that we have found to be reputable.

With regard to general online services, the most extensive inventory of homes is found at **VRBO** (Vacation Rentals by Owner; [www.vrbo.com](http://www.vrbo.com)). They have over 33,000 homes and condominiums worldwide, including a large selection in Mexico. Another good option is **VacationSpot** (☎ 888/903-7768; [www.vacationspot.com](http://www.vacationspot.com)) owned by Expedia.com, and a part of its sister company, Hotels.com. It has fewer choices, but the company's criteria for

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## *Finds* **Out-of-the-Ordinary Places to Stay**

**Mexico Boutique Hotels** ([www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com](http://www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com)) specializes in smaller places to stay with a high level of personal attention and service. Most options have fewer than 50 rooms, and the accommodations consist of entire villas, *casitas*, bungalows, or a combination. The Yucatán is especially noted for luxury haciendas throughout the peninsula.

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adding inventory are much more selective, and often include on-site inspections. They also offer toll-free phone support.

You might also consider trying **HomeLink International** ([www.homelink.org](http://www.homelink.org)), the largest and oldest home-swapping organization, founded in 1952, with over 11,000 listings worldwide (\$90 for a yearly membership). **HomeExchange.org** and **InterVac.com** are also reliable.

## **SURFING FOR HOTELS**

In addition to the online travel booking sites **Travelocity**, **Expedia**, **Orbitz**, **Priceline**, and **Hotwire**, you can book hotels through **Hotels.com**; **Quikbook** ([www.quikbook.com](http://www.quikbook.com)); and **Travelaxe** ([www.travelaxe.net](http://www.travelaxe.net)).

**HotelChatter.com** is a daily webzine offering smart coverage and critiques of hotels worldwide. Go to **TripAdvisor.com** or **HotelShark.com** for helpful independent consumer reviews of hotels and resort properties.

It's a good idea to **get a confirmation number** and **make a printout** of any online booking transaction.

## **LANDING THE BEST ROOM**

Somebody has to get the best room in the house, and it might as well be you. You can start by joining the hotel's frequent-guest program, which may make you eligible for upgrades. Always ask about a corner room. They're often larger and quieter, with more windows and light, and they often cost the same as standard rooms. When you make your reservation, ask if the hotel is renovating; if it is, request a room away from the construction. Ask about nonsmoking rooms, rooms with views, rooms with twin, queen-, or king-size beds. If you're a light sleeper, request a quiet room away from vending machines, elevators, restaurants, bars, and dance clubs. Ask for a room that has been most recently renovated or redecorated.

In resort areas, ask the following questions before you book a room:

- What's the view like?
- Does the room have air-conditioning or ceiling fans? Do the windows open? If they do, and the nighttime entertainment takes place alfresco, you may want to find out when showtime is over.
- What's included in the price?
- How far is the room from the beach and other amenities? If it's far, is there transportation and is it free?

## 17 Tips on Dining

Authentic Mexican food differs dramatically from what is frequently served in the United States under that name. For many travelers, even Cancún will be new and exciting culinary territory. Even grizzled veterans will be pleasantly surprised by the wide variation in specialties and traditions offered from region to region.

Despite regional differences, some generalizations can be made. Mexican food usually isn't pepper-hot when it arrives at the table (though many dishes must have a certain amount of piquancy, and some home cooking can be very spicy, depending on a family's or chef's tastes). Chiles and sauces add piquant flavor after the food is served; you'll never see a table in Mexico without one or both of these condiments. Mexicans don't drown their cooking in cheese and sour cream, a la Tex-Mex, and they use a great variety of ingredients. But the basis of Mexican food is simple—tortillas, beans, chiles, squash, and tomatoes—the same as it was centuries ago, before the Europeans arrived.

### THE BASICS

**TORTILLAS** Traditional tortillas are made from corn that's boiled in water and lime, and then ground into *masa* (a grainy dough), patted and pressed into thin cakes, and cooked on a hot griddle known as a *comal*. In many households, the tortilla takes the place of fork and spoon; Mexicans merely tear them into wedge-shaped pieces, which they use to scoop up their food. Restaurants often serve bread rather than tortillas because it's easier, but you can always ask for tortillas. A more recent invention from northern Mexico is the flour tortilla, which is seen less frequently in the rest of Mexico.

**ENCHILADAS** The tortilla is the basis of several Mexican dishes, but the most famous of these is the enchilada. The original name for

this dish would have been *tortilla enchilada*, which simply means a tortilla dipped in a chile sauce. In like manner, there's the *entomatada* (tortilla dipped in a tomato sauce) and the *enfrijolada* (a bean sauce). The enchilada began as a very simple dish: A tortilla is dipped in chile sauce (usually with ancho chile) and then into very hot oil, and then is quickly folded or rolled on a plate and sprinkled with chopped onions and a little *queso cotija* (crumbly white cheese) and served with a few fried potatoes and carrots. You can get this basic enchilada in food stands across the country. I love them, and if you come across them in your travels, give them a try. In restaurants you get the more elaborate enchilada, with different fillings of cheese, chicken, pork, or even seafood, and sometimes in a casserole.

**TACOS** A taco is anything folded or rolled into a tortilla, and sometimes a double tortilla. The tortilla can be served either soft or fried. Flautas and quesadillas are species of tacos. For Mexicans, the taco is the quintessential fast food, and the taco stand (*taquería*)—a ubiquitous sight—is a great place to get a filling meal. See the section “Eating Out: Restaurants, *Taquerías* & Tipping,” below, for information on *taquerías*.

**FRIJOLE** An invisible “bean line” divides Mexico: It starts at the Gulf Coast in the southern part of the state of Tamaulipas and moves inland through the eastern quarter of San Luis Potosí and most of the state of Hidalgo, then goes straight through Mexico City and Morelos and into Guerrero, where it curves slightly westward to the Pacific. To the north and west of this line, the pink bean known as the *flor de mayo* is the staple food; to the south and east, including all of the Yucatán, the standard is the black bean.

In private households, beans are served at least once a day and, among the working class and peasantry, with every meal, if the family can afford it. Mexicans almost always prepare beans with a minimum of condiments—usually just a little onion and garlic and perhaps a pinch of herbs. Beans are meant to be a contrast to the heavily spiced dishes. Sometimes they are served at the end of a meal with a little Mexican-style sour cream.

Mexicans often fry leftover beans and serve them on the side as *frijoles refritos*. “Refritos” is usually translated as refried, but this is a misnomer—the beans are fried only once. The prefix “re” actually means “well” (as in thoroughly).

**TAMALES** You make a tamal by mixing corn *masa* with a little lard, adding one of several fillings—meats flavored with chiles (or

no filling at all)—then wrapping it in a corn husk or in the leaf of a banana or other plant, and finally steaming it. Every region in Mexico has its own traditional way of making tamales. In some places, a single tamale can be big enough to feed a family, while in others they are barely 3 inches long and an inch thick.

**CHILES** Many kinds of chile peppers exist, and Mexicans call each of them by one name when they're fresh and another when they're dried. Some are blazing hot with only a mild flavor; some are mild but have a rich, complex flavor. They can be pickled, smoked, stuffed, stewed, chopped, and used in an endless variety of dishes.

## MEALTIME

**MORNING** The morning meal, known as *el desayuno*, can be something light, such as coffee and sweet bread, or something more substantial: eggs, beans, tortillas, bread, fruit, and juice. It can be eaten early or late and is always a sure bet in Mexico. The variety and sweetness of the fruits is remarkable, and you can't go wrong with Mexican egg dishes.

**MIDAFTERNOON** The main meal of the day, known as *la comida* (or *el almuerzo*), is eaten between 2 and 4pm. Stores and businesses often close, and many people go home to eat and perhaps take a short afternoon siesta before going about their business. The first course is the *sopa*, which can be either soup (*caldo*) or rice (*sopa de arroz*) or both; then comes the main course, which ideally is a meat or fish dish prepared in some kind of sauce and served with beans, followed by dessert.

**EVENING** Between 8 and 10pm, most Mexicans have a light meal called *la cena*. If eaten at home, it is something like a sandwich, bread and jam, or perhaps a couple of tacos made from some of the day's leftovers. At restaurants, the most common thing to eat is *antojitos* (literally, "little cravings"), a general label for light fare. Antojitos include tostadas, tamales, tacos, and simple enchiladas, which are big hits with travelers. Large restaurants offer complete meals as well.

## EATING OUT: RESTAURANTS, TAQUERIAS & TIPPING

Avoid eating at those inviting sidewalk restaurants that you see beneath the stone archways that border the main plazas. These places usually cater to tourists and don't need to count on getting any return business. But they are great for getting a coffee or beer.

If you venture outside Cancún, you'll find that most towns have one or two restaurants (sometimes one is a coffee shop) that are social centers for a large group of established patrons. These establishments over time become virtual institutions, and change comes very slowly. The food is usually good standard fare, cooked as it was 20 years ago; the decor is simple. The patrons have known each other and the staff for years, and the *charla* (banter), gestures, and greetings are friendly, open, and unaffected. If you're curious about Mexican culture, eating and observing the goings-on is fun.

During your trip, you're going to see many *taquerías* (**taco joints**). These are generally small places with a counter or a few tables set around the cooking area; you get to see exactly how the cooks make their tacos before deciding whether to order. Most tacos come with a little chopped onion and cilantro, but not tomato and lettuce. Find one that seems popular with the locals and where the cook performs with brio (a good sign of pride in the product). Sometimes a woman will be making the tortillas right there (or working the *masa* into *gorditas*, *sopes*, or *panuchos*, if these are also served). You will never see men doing this—this is perhaps the strictest gender division in Mexican society. Men may do all other cooking and kitchen tasks, and work with prepared tortillas, but they will never be found working *masa*.

For the main meal of the day, many restaurants offer a multi-course blue-plate special called *comida corrida* or *menú del día*. This is the least expensive way to get a full dinner. In Mexico, you need to ask for your check; it is generally considered inhospitable to present a check to someone who hasn't requested it. If you're in a hurry to get somewhere, ask for the check when your food arrives.

**Tips** are about the same as in the United States. You'll sometimes find a 15% **value-added tax** on restaurant meals, which shows up on the bill as "IVA." This is a boon to arithmetically challenged tip-pers, saving them from undue exertion.

To summon the waiter, wave or raise your hand, but don't motion with your index finger, which is a demeaning gesture that may even cause the waiter to ignore you. Or if it's the check you want, you can motion to the waiter from across the room using the universal pretend-you're-writing gesture.

Most restaurants do not have **nonsmoking sections**; when they do, we mention it in the reviews. But Mexico's wonderful climate allows for many open-air restaurants, usually set inside a courtyard of a colonial house, or in rooms with tall ceilings and plenty of open windows.

## DRINKS

All over Mexico you'll find shops selling *jugos* (**juices**) and *licuados* (**smoothies**) made from several kinds of tropical fruit. They're excellent and refreshing; while traveling, I take full advantage of them. You'll also come across *aguas frescas*—water flavored with hibiscus, melon, tamarind, or lime. Soft drinks come in more flavors than in any other country I know. Pepsi and Coca-Cola taste the way they did in the United States years ago, before the makers started adding corn syrup. The coffee is generally good, and **hot chocolate** is a traditional drink, as is *atole*—a hot, corn-based beverage that can be sweet or bitter.

Of course, Mexico has a proud and lucrative **beer**-brewing tradition. A lesser-known brewed beverage is *pulque*, a pre-Hispanic drink: the fermented juice of a few species of maguey or agave. Mostly you find it for sale in *pulquerías* in central Mexico. It is an acquired taste, and not every gringo acquires it. **Mezcal** and **tequila** also come from the agave. Tequila is a variety of mezcal produced from the *A. tequilana* species of agave in and around the area of Tequila, in the state of Jalisco. Mezcal comes from various parts of Mexico and from different varieties of agave. The distilling process is usually much less sophisticated than that of tequila, and, with its stronger smell and taste, mezcal is much more easily detected on the drinker's breath. In some places such as Oaxaca and Guerrero, it comes with a worm in the bottle; you are supposed to eat the worm after polishing off the mezcal. But for those of you teetotalers out there who are interested in just the worm, I have good news—you can find them for sale in Mexican markets when in season. ¡Salud!

### **FAST FACTS: Cancún**

**Abbreviations** Dept. (apartments); Apdo. (post office box); Av. (*avenida*; avenue); c/ (*calle*; street); Calz. (*calzada*; boulevard). "C" on faucets stands for *caliente* (hot), "F" for *fría* (cold). "PB" (*planta baja*) means ground floor; in most buildings the next floor up is the first floor (1).

**American Express** The local office is at Av. Tulum 208 and Agua (☎ 998/881-4000 or -4055; [www.americanexpress.com/mexico](http://www.americanexpress.com/mexico)), 1 block past the Plaza México. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm, Saturday from 9am to 1pm.

**Area Code** The telephone area code is 998.

**ATMs** See “Banks & ATMs,” p. 12.

**Climate** It’s hot but not overwhelmingly humid. The rainy season is May through October. August through October is hurricane season, which brings erratic weather. November through February is generally sunny but can also be cloudy, windy, somewhat rainy, and even cool.

**Consulates** The **U.S. Consular Agent** is in the Plaza Caracol 2, Bulevar Kukulkán Km 8.5, 3rd level, 320–323 (☎ 998/883-0272). The office is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 2pm. The **Canadian Consulate** is in the Plaza Caracol, 3rd level, Loc. 330 (☎ 998/883-3360). The office is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm. The **United Kingdom** has a consular office at the Royal Sands Hotel in Cancún (☎ 998/881-0100, ext. 65898; fax 998/848-8662; information@britishconsulateCancun.com). The office is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 3pm. Irish, Australian, and New Zealand citizens should contact their embassies in Mexico City.

**Crime** Car break-ins are just about the only crime here. They happen frequently, especially around the shopping centers in the Hotel Zone. VW Beetles and Golfs are frequent targets.

**Currency Exchange** Most banks sit downtown along Avenida Tulum and are usually open Monday through Friday from 9:30am to 4pm. Many have automated teller machines for after-hours cash withdrawals. In the Hotel Zone, you’ll find banks in the Kukulkán Plaza and next to the convention center. There are also many *casas de cambio* (exchange houses). Downtown merchants are eager to change cash dollars, but island stores don’t offer very good exchange rates. Avoid changing money at the airport as you arrive, especially at the first exchange booth you see—its rates are less favorable than those of any in town or others farther inside the airport concourse.

**Cameras & Film** Film costs about the same as in the United States. It is never considered polite to take photos inside a church in Mexico.

**Car Rentals** See “Getting Around Cancún,” p. 36.

**Customs What You Can Bring Into Mexico** When you enter Mexico, Customs officials will be tolerant as long as you have no illegal drugs or firearms. Tourists are allowed to bring in their personal effects duty-free. A laptop computer, camera equipment, and sports equipment that could feasibly be used



during your stay are also allowed. The underlying guideline is: Don't bring anything that looks as if it's meant to be resold in Mexico. **U.S. citizens** entering Mexico by the land border can bring in gifts worth a value of up to \$50 duty-free, except for alcohol and tobacco products. Those entering Mexico by air or sea can bring in gifts worth a value of up to \$300 duty-free. The **website for Mexican Customs (Aduanas)** is: [www.aduanas.sat.gob.mx/webadunet/body.htm](http://www.aduanas.sat.gob.mx/webadunet/body.htm).

### **Customs What You Can Take Home From Mexico**

**U.S. Citizens:** For specifics on what you can bring back and the corresponding fees, download the invaluable free pamphlet *Know Before You Go* online at [www.cbp.gov](http://www.cbp.gov). (Click on "Travel," and then click on "Know Before You Go! Online Brochure") Or contact the **U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP)**, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20229 (☎ 877/287-8667) and request the pamphlet.

**Canadian Citizens:** For a clear summary of Canadian rules, write for the booklet *I Declare*, issued by the **Canada Border Services Agency** (☎ 800/461-9999 in Canada, or 204/983-3500; [www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca](http://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca)).

**U.K. Citizens:** For information, contact **HM Customs & Excise** at ☎ 0845/010-9000 (from outside the U.K., 020/8929-0152), or consult their website at [www.hmce.gov.uk](http://www.hmce.gov.uk).

**Australian Citizens:** A helpful brochure available from Australian consulates or Customs offices is *Know Before You Go*. For more information, call the **Australian Customs Service** at ☎ 1300/363-263, or log on to [www.customs.gov.au](http://www.customs.gov.au).

**New Zealand Citizens:** Most questions are answered in a free pamphlet available at New Zealand consulates and Customs offices: *New Zealand Customs Guide for Travellers, Notice no. 4*. For more information, contact **New Zealand Customs**, The Customhouse, 17–21 Whitmore St., Box 2218, Wellington (☎ 04/473-6099 or 0800/428-786; [www.customs.govt.nz](http://www.customs.govt.nz)).

**Drug Laws** It may sound obvious, but don't use or possess illegal drugs in Mexico. Mexican officials have no tolerance for drug users, and jail is their solution, with very little hope of getting out until the sentence (usually a long one) is completed or heavy fines or bribes are paid. Remember, in Mexico the legal system assumes you are guilty until proven innocent.

**Note:** It isn't uncommon to be befriended by a fellow user, only to be turned in by that "friend," who collects a bounty.

Bring prescription drugs in their original containers. If possible, pack a copy of the original prescription with the generic name of the drug.

U.S. Customs officials are on the lookout for diet drugs that are sold in Mexico but illegal in the U.S. Possession could land you in a U.S. jail. If you buy antibiotics over-the-counter (which you can do in Mexico) and still have some left, U.S. Customs probably won't hassle you.

**Drugstores** Across the street from Señor Frog's in the Hotel Zone, at Bulevar Kukulcán Km 9.5, **Farmacías del Ahorro** (☎ 998/892-7291) offers 24 hour service and free delivery. Plenty of drugstores are in the major shopping malls in the Hotel Zone, and are open until 10pm. In downtown Cancún, **Farmacia Cancún** is located at Av. Tulum 17 (☎ 998/884-1283). You can stock up on over-the-counter and many prescription drugs without a prescription.

**Electricity** The electrical system in Mexico is 110 volts AC (60 cycles), as in the United States and Canada. In reality, however, it may cycle more slowly and overheat your appliances. To compensate, select a medium or low speed on hair dryers. Many older hotels still have electrical outlets for flat two-prong plugs; you'll need an adapter for any plug with an enlarged end on one prong or with three prongs. Many better hotels have three-hole outlets (*trifásicos* in Spanish). Those that don't may have loan adapters, but to be sure, it's always better to carry your own.

**Embassies & Consulates** There is a U.S. consular agency in Cancún (see "Consulates," above). The Embassy of the **United States** in Mexico City is at Paseo de la Reforma 305, next to the Hotel María Isabel Sheraton at the corner of Río Danubio (☎ 55/5080-2000 or 5511-9980); hours are Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5:30pm. Visit [www.usembassy-mexico.gov](http://www.usembassy-mexico.gov) for addresses of the U.S. consulates inside Mexico.

The Embassy of **Australia** in Mexico City is at Rubén Darío 55, Col. Polanco (☎ 55/51101-2200). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 1pm.

The Embassy of **Canada** in Mexico City is at Schiller 529, Col. Polanco (☎ 55/5724-7900); it's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 1pm. At other times, the name of a duty officer is posted on the door. Visit [www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca](http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca) for addresses of consular agencies in Mexico.

The Embassy of **New Zealand** in Mexico City is at Jaime Balmes 8, 4th floor, Col. Los Morales, Polanco (☎ 55/5283-9460; kiwimexico@compuserve.com.mx). It's open Monday through Thursday from 8:30am to 2pm and 3 to 5:30pm, and Friday from 8:30am to 2pm.

The Embassy of the **United Kingdom** in Mexico City is at Río Lerma 71, Col. Cuauhtémoc (☎ 55/5242-8500; www.embajada.britanica.com.mx). It's open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 3:30pm.

The Embassy of **Ireland** in Mexico City is at Bulevar Cerrada, Avila Camacho 76, 3rd floor, Col. Lomas de Chapultepec (☎ 55/5520-5803). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm.

The **South African** Embassy in Mexico City is at Andrés Bello 10, 9th floor, Col. Polanco (☎ 55/5282-9260). It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 4pm.

**Emergencies** To report an emergency, dial ☎ 060, which is supposed to be similar to 911 emergency service in the United States. For first aid, the **Cruz Roja**, or Red Cross (☎ 065 or 998/884-1616; fax 998/883-9218), is open 24 hours on Avenida Yaxchilán between avenidas Xcaret and Labná, next to the Telmex building. **Total Assist**, Claveles 5, SM 22, at Avenida Tulum (☎ 998/884-8022; totalassist@prodigy.net.mx), is a small (nine-room) emergency hospital with English-speaking doctors. It's open 24 hours and accepts American Express, MasterCard, and Visa. Desk staff may have limited command of English. **Air Ambulance** (Global Ambulance) service is available by calling ☎ 01-800/305-9400 in Mexico.

**Internet Access** **Alienet** in a kiosk on the second floor of Kukulkán Plaza, Bulevar Kukulkán Km 13 (☎ 998/840-6099), offers Internet access for \$7 per hour. It's open daily from 10am to 10pm.

**Liquor Laws** The legal drinking age in Mexico is 18; however, asking for ID or denying purchase is extremely rare. Grocery stores sell everything from beer and wine to national and imported liquors. You can buy liquor 24 hours a day, but during major elections, dry laws often are enacted for as much as 72 hours in advance of the election—and they apply to tourists as well as local residents. Mexico does not have laws that apply to transporting liquor in cars, but authorities are beginning to target drunk drivers more aggressively. It's a good idea to drive defensively.

It is not legal to drink in the street; however, many tourists do so. Use your judgment—if you are getting drunk, you shouldn't drink in the street, because you are more likely to get stopped by the police.

**Luggage Storage & Lockers** Hotels will generally tag and store luggage while you travel elsewhere.

**Mail** Postage for a postcard or letter is 8 pesos; it may arrive anywhere from 1 to 6 weeks later. The price for registered letters and packages depends on the weight, and unreliable delivery time can take 2 to 6 weeks. The recommended way to send a package or important mail is through FedEx, DHL, UPS, or another reputable international mail service.

**Newspapers & Magazines** Most hotel gift shops and newsstands carry English-language magazines and English-language Mexican newspapers, such as the *Miami Herald*.

**Police** Cancún has a fleet of English-speaking tourist police to help travelers. Dial ☎ **998/885-2277**. The **Procuraduría Federal del Consumidor (consumer protection agency)**, Av. Cobá 9–11 (☎ **998/884-2634** or -2701), is opposite the Social Security Hospital and upstairs from the Fenix drugstore. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 3pm.

**Passports For Residents of the United States:** Whether you're applying in person or by mail, you can download passport applications from the U.S. Department of State website at <http://travel.state.gov>. To find your regional passport office, either check the U.S. Department of State website or call the **National Passport Information Center** toll-free number (☎ **877/487-2778**) for automated information.

**For Residents of Canada:** Passport applications are available at travel agencies throughout Canada or from the central **Passport Office**, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ottawa, ON K1A 0G3 (☎ **800/567-6868**; [www.ppt.gc.ca](http://www.ppt.gc.ca)).

**For Residents of the United Kingdom:** To pick up an application for a standard 10-year passport (5-year passport for children younger than 16), visit your nearest passport office, major post office, or travel agency or contact the **United Kingdom Identity & Passport Service** at ☎ **0870/521-0410** or search its website at [www.ukpa.gov.uk](http://www.ukpa.gov.uk).

**For Residents of Ireland:** You can apply for a 10-year passport at the **Passport Office**, Setanta Centre, Molesworth Street, Dublin 2 (☎ **01/671-1633**; [www.irlgov.ie/iveagh](http://www.irlgov.ie/iveagh)). Those

younger than age 18 and older than 65 must apply for a €12 3-year passport. You can also apply at 1A South Mall, Cork (☎ 021/272-525) or at most main post offices.

**For Residents of Australia:** You can pick up an application from your local post office or any branch of Passports Australia, but you must schedule an interview at the passport office to present your application materials. Call the **Australian Passport Information Service** at ☎ 131-232, or visit the government website at [www.passports.gov.au](http://www.passports.gov.au).

**For Residents of New Zealand:** You can pick up a passport application at any New Zealand Passports Office or download it from their website. Contact the **Passports Office** at ☎ 0800/225-050 in New Zealand or 04/474-8100, or log on to [www.passports.govt.nz](http://www.passports.govt.nz).

**Post Office** The main *correo* lies at the intersection of avenidas Sunyaxchen and Xel-Ha (☎ 998/884-1418). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 4pm, and Saturday from 9am to noon for the purchase of stamps only.

**Safety** Aside from car break-ins, there is very little crime in Cancún. People are generally safe late at night in tourist areas; just use ordinary common sense. As at any other beach resort, don't take money or valuables to the beach. See "Crime," above.

Swimming on the Caribbean side presents a danger because of the undertow. See the information on beaches in "Beaches, Watersports & Boat Tours" in chapter 3 for information about flag warnings.

**Seasons** Technically, high season runs from December 15 to April; low season extends from May to December 15, when prices drop 10% to 30%. Some hotels are starting to charge high-season rates during June and July, when Mexican, European, and school-holiday visitors often travel, although rates may still be lower than in winter months.

**Smoking** Smoking is permitted and generally accepted in most public places, including restaurants, bars, and hotel lobbies. Nonsmoking areas and hotel rooms for nonsmokers are becoming more common in higher-end establishments, but they tend to be the exception rather than the rule.

**Special Events** The annual **Mexico-Caribbean Food Festival**, featuring special menus of culinary creations throughout town, is held each year between September and November.

Additional information is available through the State Tourism Office.

**Taxes** The 15% IVA (value-added) tax applies on goods and services in most of Mexico, and it's supposed to be included in the posted price. This tax is 10% in Cancún, Cozumel, and Los Cabos. There is a 5% tax on food and drinks consumed in restaurants that sell alcoholic beverages with an alcohol content of more than 10%; this tax applies whether you drink alcohol or not. Tequila is subject to a 25% tax. Mexico imposes an exit tax of around \$24 on every foreigner leaving the country, as well as a tourism tax of \$18 (see "Airport Taxes" under "Getting Around Cancún: By Plane," earlier in this chapter).

**Telephone & Fax** Mexico's telephone system is slowly but surely catching up with modern times. All telephone numbers have 10 digits. Cancún has a three-digit area code (998). To place a local call, you do not need to dial the area code. Many fax numbers are also regular telephone numbers; ask whoever answers for the fax tone ("*me da tono de fax, por favor*"). Cellular phones are very popular for small businesses in resort areas and smaller communities. To call a cellular number inside the same area code, dial 044 and then the number. To dial the cellular phone from anywhere else in Mexico, first dial 01, and then the three-digit area code and the seven-digit number. To dial it from the U.S., dial 011-52, plus the three-digit area code and the seven-digit number.

The **country code** for Mexico is **52**. The area code for **Cancún** is **998**.

**To call Mexico:** If you're calling Mexico from the United States:

1. Dial the international access code: 011.
2. Dial the country code: 52.
3. Dial the two- or three-digit area code, then the eight- or seven-digit number.

**To make international calls:** To make international calls from Mexico, first dial 00, then the country code (U.S. or Canada 1, U.K. 44, Ireland 353, Australia 61, New Zealand 64). Next, dial the area code and number. For example, to call the British Embassy in Washington, you would dial 00-1-202-588-7800.

**For directory assistance:** Dial ☎ **040** if you're looking for a number inside Mexico. **Note:** Listings usually appear under the owner's name, not the name of the business, and your chances to find an English-speaking operator are slim to none.

**For operator assistance:** If you need operator assistance in making a call, dial **090** to make an international call, and **020** to call a number in Mexico.

**Toll-free numbers:** Numbers beginning with 800 within Mexico are toll-free, but calling a U.S. toll-free number from Mexico costs the same as an overseas call. To call an 800 number in the U.S., dial 001-880 and the last seven digits of the toll-free number. To call an 888 number in the U.S., dial 001-881 and the last seven digits of the toll-free number. For a number with an 887 prefix, dial 882; for 866, dial 883.

**Tiping** Most service employees count on tips for the majority of their income, and this is especially true for bellboys and waiters. Bellboys should receive the equivalent of 50¢ to \$1 (P25–55) per bag; waiters generally receive 10% to 20%, depending on the level of service. It is not customary to tip taxi drivers, unless they are hired by the hour or provide touring or other special services.

**Water** Most hotels have decanters or bottles of purified water in the rooms, and the better hotels have either purified water from regular taps or special taps marked *agua purificada*. Some hotels charge for in-room bottled water. Virtually any hotel, restaurant, or bar will bring you purified water if you specifically request it but will usually charge you for it. Drugstores and grocery stores sell bottled purified water. Some popular brands are Santa María, Ciel, and Bonafont. Evian and other imported brands are also widely available.