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The Best of Cancún & the Yucatán

An ancient civilization & a brazen new culture make Mexico's last frontier a land of never-ending fascination

THE YUCATAN PENINSULA SOMETIMES SEEMS A COUNTRY ALTOGETHER separate from Mexico. That's partly a legacy of the Maya's determined, centuries-long resistance to being scooped up as part of Spain's booty, and you still feel more than a hint of "in it, but not of it" to the present-day Yucatán. The other-ness goes beyond history, though; the very earth is a mystery, an impossibly flat, porous limestone slab whose rivers run below rather than above the surface and grudgingly yield their contents through sporadic breaches in the stone ceilings. Dependence on these life-giving cenotes, or wells, gave rise to a complex view of the cosmos that nearly 5 centuries of Catholicism have failed to stamp out.

The Yucatán's aloofness from the rest of Mexico, and its closer ties with Europe, Cuba, and the United States, produced a culture unlike any other in Mexico. Still, it's the ancient Maya legacy you see at every turn, and the one that tourism marketers emphasize.

So, what do we make of Cancún in this context? It, too, is unlike the rest of Mexico (with the possible exception of Los Cabos), but equally different from the rest of the Yucatán. Brash and beautiful, blessed by an accident of nature, Cancún is a culture unto itself, as irresistible as it is infuriating.

The tension between the excess and artifice of Cancún and the humility of Yucatán's interior somehow makes the region all the more compelling. It is never one thing or the other, at least not for long. And no matter what you like or dislike about the Yucatán, once you've been there, you always have a stake in it.

THE STATES OF THE YUCATAN PENINSULA

QUINTANA ROO

Cancún might as well be the name of the Yucatán's eastern state. Before Quintana Roo finally became a state in 1974—not coincidentally, the year Cancún's first resorts opened—this was just the scary east side of what originally was one big territory of Yucatán. Even after they had control of the inland, *conquistadores* dreaded entering Quintana Roo's jungles for fear of disappearing forever (and not without some justification). Today, of course, Quintana Roo is the peninsula's cash cow, its sublime Caribbean beaches hosting more tourists and more resort developments every year and still managing to make every visitor feel it's his or

her secret hideaway. This is the land of dreamy beaches; secluded cenotes; picturesque Maya ruins; and, increasingly, resorts that charge more for 1 night than you pay for your monthly mortgage. The southernmost reaches of the state, bumping up against Belize, still have an outback feel.

YUCATAN

Yucatán state is the triangular wedge in the middle of the Yucatán that divides the peninsula roughly into thirds. The lure of a mysterious “lost” civilization made it a travel destination when travel was still the privilege of the wealthy. Travelers are just as captivated today, only there are more of us, and boutique hotels and eco-tours have joined untouched ruins, authentic and inexpensive handicrafts, and Maya villages arrested in time as reasons to venture so far away. Its northern coast, with coarser sands and murkier green water than the Caribbean, is not considered as desirable and therefore is wide open to claim as your own for a day or two. While more tranquil, less crowded, and less expensive than travel on the Caribbean coast, the Yucatán is also somewhat less attuned to U.S. travelers’ needs and quirks. Most of the time, that’s all the more reason to love it.

CAMPECHE

In colonial times, Campeche was the place to be, whether you were a Spanish conqueror or a roving pirate; the only ones who didn’t have it so good were the Maya who were alternately killed and enslaved. Campeche city is a vision of colonial architecture, one of only three walled cities built by Europeans in this hemisphere, and yet it gets a fraction of the visitors that Quintana Roo or even Yucatán do. When Mérida was the only major city on the peninsula, Campeche was no farther away from “civilization” than Tulum was. Now, with all the focus on Cancún up there on the northeast corner of the Caribbean coast, Campeche is the other end of the world. It is, if anything, more relaxed than Yucatán, though far fewer people speak English and, outside of Campeche city, it can be a challenge to get any consistent responses to questions about hours or services.

THE BEST BEACHES

AKUMAL BAY The lazy crescent of Akumal Bay laps a wide swath of soft white sand shaded by coconut palms in the center of town. It’s one of the few places in the Riviera Maya where you’ll regularly find sea turtles swimming beside you. See p. 162.

PLAYA DELFINES One of Cancún’s longest and widest beaches escapes the high-rises along the spectacular east shore to display a perfect Caribbean landscape of glittering dunes and striated shades of aqua water; on a peaceful early morning, you can watch the wild dolphins that give the beach its name. See p. 45.

PLAYA NORTE You can sink up to your ankles in the powdery sand at Isla Mujeres’ northern tip, and you can wade out in the placid, perfectly crystalline water for 37m (120 ft.) before it reaches your chest. See p. 83.

TULUM Stretching south from the Maya’s unique seaside city are some of the Caribbean’s most beautiful beaches, becoming more sublime and less populated the farther you go. See “Active Tulum” on p. 172.

THE BEST ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

CALAKMUL Both a vast Maya city and a biosphere reserve where you encounter more howler monkeys than tourists, Calakmul boasts the Yucatán's tallest pyramid and was a rival to Guatemala's Tikal. See p. 262.

EDZNA This huge but barely excavated city gets fewer visitors in a year than Chichén Itzá does in a day, leaving you to absorb the natural and architectural beauty—resembling Palenque or Tikal more than anything in the Yucatán—on a whole different level. See p. 261.

EK BALAM Archaeologists, who began work only in 1997, continually unveil history-altering finds in a city that might eventually prove to be as big and as important as Chichén Itzá. Ek Balam's main pyramid, one of the few that visitors are still allowed to climb, is 6m (20 ft.) higher than El Castillo at Chichén Itzá. See p. 240.

UXMAL Yes, Chichén Itzá and Tulum are must-sees, so see them you must. But many less famous ruins stay with you longer. Deep in a sparsely populated jungle, Uxmal was second in size and influence only to Chichén Itzá, yet its graceful proportions and intricate stone work reveal no military ambition or human sacrifice. See p. 215.

THE BEST DIVING & SNORKELING

AKUMAL The first place where divers waded into the Mexican Caribbean not only offers easy reef diving with abundant sea life but is surrounded by cenotes where the earth opens to underground rivers. Local operators specialize in cenote diving; snorkelers can get an introduction to the spectacular cavern system at Hidden Worlds Cenotes Park (p. 164) or explore the lovely Laguna Yal-Kú (p. 162); the more adventurous can visit more than a dozen secluded cenotes just north of town. See p. 165.

COZUMEL Cradled by 32km (20 miles) of the Great Maya Reef, made famous by Jacques Cousteau in the 1960s, Cozumel is still considered one of the world's great dive destinations. Nondivers can get an eyeful in dozens of snorkeling spots where the underwater mountains of coral rise close to the surface. See p. 118.

PUERTO MORELOS This quiet fishing village's snow-white beaches are protected by a pristine section of the Great Maya Reef 183m (600 ft.) offshore. Divers gravitate to the Ojo de Agua (Eye of Water), where fresh water wells up from a cenote below the sea floor, while novice snorkelers can see an abundance of colorful sea life less than a meter (3 ft.) from the surface right in front of town. See p. 154.

THE BEST MUSEUMS

CASA 6 Visitors step into colonial life as the Spanish merchant elite in Campeche knew it, in a 17th-century home with its interior courtyard, sitting room, bedroom, and kitchen re-created to look just as it would have been 350 years ago. See p. 254.

LA CASA DEL ARTE POPULAR MEXICANO Cancún’s overlooked museum, hidden away in a nondescript marina building, boasts one of the most comprehensive displays of Mexican folk art in the country, set up in lifelike dioramas including a chapel scene with life-size wax figures modeled after real people from throughout Mexico. See p. 46.

MUSEO DE LA CULTURA MAYA Interactive displays decoding Maya architecture and customs, a three-level exhibit representing the sacred *ceiba* tree, and a glass floor that allows you to walk over replicas of ancient cities make Chetumal’s innovative museum one of the best places in the country to get insight into the ancient Mayas’ intricate spiritual and temporal worlds. See p. 180.

MUSEO REGIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGIA Ensnconced in Mérida’s most sumptuous colonial mansion, the Museo Regional de Antropología displays artifacts of the ancient Maya’s daily life, including limestone jaguars, deformed skulls, and sacrificial offerings—all surrounded by European Beaux Arts architectural flourishes. See p. 198.

THE BEST YUCATECAN CUISINE

CASA TIKINXIK *Tikin xic* fish from this classic *palapa* restaurant on Isla Mujeres’s best west-side swimming beach is a mandatory pilgrimage for seafood lovers. A fresh whole fish is marinated in sour orange juice and chilies, then grilled in a banana leaf over an open flame. See p. 81.

LABNA Marked by a towering Maya-style entrance, this downtown Cancún landmark serves not just the piquant regional favorites *poc chuc* (marinated pork strips grilled and served with pickled onions) and *pollo pibil* (spiced chicken baked in banana leaves), but also lesser known specialties such as *papadzules* (hard-boiled eggs rolled inside tortillas and smothered in a pumpkin seed—and–fried tomato sauce). See p. 39.

LA PIGUA The best example of Campeche’s signature *pan de cazón* (tortillas layered with shredded baby shark meat, black beans, and tomato sauce) comes from this distinctive glass restaurant modeled after a traditional oblong Maya house. See p. 252.

YAXCHE Just off Playa del Carmen’s Quinta Avenida, Yaxché honors Maya culinary traditions and offers intriguing contemporary tweaks—think cream of *xcatic* pepper and potato soup and grilled shrimp fajitas marinated in *achiote*—in a setting of reproduction stelaes and murals of Maya gods and kings. See p. 142.

THE BEST “OTHER” EXPERIENCES

KEEPING PACE WITH THE TURTLES Thousands of endangered sea turtles come ashore along Mexico’s Caribbean coast to lay their eggs each spring. Visitors can join local conservationists in Cancún, Cozumel, and Akumal to help protect the exhausted mothers returning to the water or usher the tiny hatchlings safely on their first journey to the sea. See p. 51, 124, and 165, respectively.

A MAYA VILLAGE Deep in the tropical forest, families living much as the ancient Maya did in round thatch huts will show you their jungle paths, mangrove lagoons, and hidden cenotes; bestow ancient blessings; and serve you lunch in an open-air *palapa*. See p. 144.

THE HACENDADO LIFE Sotuta de Peón isn't just a restored hacienda; it's an entire *henequén* plantation and processing plant for the “green gold” that made Mérida fabulously wealthy a century ago. You can witness the whole process and try your hand at combing the fiber and spinning it into twine—then cool off after your labors in a cenote. See p. 199.

SPEAK YOUR PIECE Sometimes all you have to do to get in with the locals is speak English. The Mérida English Library's “Conversaciones con Amigos” (“Conversations with Friends”) is a regular weekly social event that allows English and Spanish speakers to practice their second languages together (p. 200), while Isla Mujeres' La Gloria English School asks for a commitment of a few hours to work with students in the classroom who need to practice their new English skills (p. 88).

THE BEST WEEKLONG ITINERARIES

Creatures Great & Small

Swimming with sea turtles, gliding among flamingos, and snorkeling with whale sharks are the highlights of this eco-adventure tour, which takes in cenotes, jungles, and the Great Maya Reef. It's a bit of a whirlwind but allows a little sleepy-village down time.

Days ① & ②: Playa del Carmen

Pick up a rental car from the Cancún airport and stop at Croco Cun (p. 47) on your way to Playa del Carmen for the night.

Take a dive trip to Cozumel the next day. The Tank-Ha Dive Center (p. 145) is one of the few operators who will take you to Cozumel in the dive boat; most require you to take the ferry and meet the dive boat on the island. If you're not a diver, book a tour with Alltournative to visit the Maya village of Pac Chen, where you'll hike through the jungle, glide over a cenote on a zipline, rappel down into another for a swim, and kayak a lagoon where howler

monkeys scold you from the mangroves, all followed by lunch prepared by village women in an open-air *palapa* (p. 144). Drive to Akumal for the night.

Days ③ & ④: Akumal

Start your mornings swimming with the turtles in Akumal Bay. In the afternoons, shift your sights inland, to Laguna Yal-Kú for snorkeling (p. 162), or the cenote Jardín del Edén, frequented (but not *too* much) by both snorkelers and divers (p. 157). At the end of day 4, drive to Valladolid on the road leading inland from Tulum.

Days 5 & 6: Valladolid

Get up with the roosters and drive north to Río Lagartos for a boat trip into the Ría Lagartos flamingo reserve (p. 241). Afterward, have lunch and soak up some real small-town atmosphere. If you have time and energy on the way back to Valladolid, stop at Ek Balam (p. 240). The next morning, stop at Cenotes Dzitnup (p. 240) on your way to Chiquilá on the north coast, where you'll get the ferry to Isla Holbox (p. 96). Make it an early night.

Days 7 & 8: Isla Holbox

If it's summer, snorkeling with the whale sharks that congregate just off Holbox's shores will be the biggest thrill of your trip—maybe of any trip (p. 101). In other months, book a boat tour to Isla Pájaros, Isla de la Pasión, and the Ojo de Agua cenote, or see if you can arrange for a boat to Cabo Catoche, Holbox's best snorkeling spot, at the island's northeastern tip (p. 102). The next morning, allow about 3½ hours to catch the ferry back and drive to Cancún's airport.

Into the Maya Heartland

The hint of Maya history and culture that flavors the Yucatán's resort areas is part of everyday life in the interior and on the west coast. This itinerary requires some road time, but it's easy driving. Your rewards are grand but sparsely visited ruins; lively traditional towns; haunting haciendas; and the splendid city of Mérida, cultural nexus of the entire peninsula.

Days 1 & 2: Valladolid

Rent a car at Cancún's airport and drive to Valladolid on the toll road. Stroll around the plaza or, if you arrive late, have a bite and enjoy some live music at Las Campanas, which stays open until 2am (p. 238).

Get to Ek Balam (p. 240) when it opens to see the huge but undiscovered ruins at their most peaceful time. Back in town, get lunch from the food vendors in Valladolid's central plaza, relax in the shade, make a leisurely circuit of the shops, and peek into the cathedral. Go to the second floor of El Ayuntamiento (City Hall) to see the dramatic murals, then head down the street to the Museo San Roque's display of artifacts from Ek Balam. Cool off at Cenote Zací a few blocks farther on (p. 239). Then go for a sunset walk down beautiful Calzada de los Frailes to the Ex-Convento de San Bernardino de Siena.

Days 3 & 4: Campeche

On the way out of town in the morning, stop at Cenotes Dzitnup and Samulá (p. 240). If you haven't been to Chichén Itzá (p. 227) before, make time to stop there on the way and plan to arrive in Campeche after dark. After all that time on the road, stretch your legs with a walk along the *malecón*—you'll have plenty of *campechanos* for company.

Get to the ethereally beautiful ruins of Edzná (p. 261) at opening time the next day, and stop for lunch at Hacienda Uayamon on your way back to town (p. 253). Back in the city center, drive or take a taxi to the 18th-century Fuerte San Miguel and its Museo de la Cultura Maya, with artifacts from ruins throughout the state (p. 257). Spend the rest of the day relaxing in the plaza and visiting the *baluartes* (bastions) and their small museums. Be

sure to take a walk along the one remaining fragment of the original city wall, and visit Casa 6 to see how the Spanish elite lived during colonial times (p. 254). If it's a weekend, join in a game of Campechean bingo in the plaza at night (p. 253).

Days 5 & 6: Mérida

Work your way to Mérida on the inland route, Hwy. 261, making a quick stop at Kabah (p. 218), the most interesting of the smaller Puuc Route cities, before arriving at Uxmal (p. 211). If you don't stay for the evening light-and-sound show, stop at Hacienda Yaxcopoil on your way to the capital (p. 212). Even after a full day of travel, the lower evening temperatures and the activity around Mérida's Plaza Grande and nearby squares might lure you out for a stroll.

Get to the sprawling Mercado (p. 201) in the morning on the next day, and visit the Museo de la Ciudad in its splendid new home (p. 197). Return to the plaza, relax a bit and visit Casa de Montejo (p. 196) and the Palacio de Gobierno (p. 196) with its

haunting murals. Next door to the cathedral, visit the MACAY to see works by the region's best contemporary artists (p. 196). Save the evening for one of the city's free cultural events.

Day 7: Izamal

Drive to Hacienda Sotuta de Peón (p. 199) for the first tour to see how *henequén* is produced and how the *hacendados* once lived. When you leave, head east toward Tecoh, then north through Acanceh and Seyé to Hwy. 180 and drive east to the exit for Izamal (p. 231). In the "Yellow City," stop at the Casa de Cultura for informative exhibits on regional handicrafts and pick up a walking tour map; spend the rest of the afternoon visiting local artists' studios. Afterward, walk up to the Ex-Convento de San Antonio de Padua at sunset to see it at its ethereal best. If you didn't get a place to stay in or near Izamal, you can easily drive back to Mérida for the night.

Day 8: Izamal to Cancún Airport

The Cancún airport is about 4 hours from Mérida or 3½ from Izamal.

A Family Affair

Never mind that Cancún and the Riviera Maya are best known for their nightlife, spas, and shopping; the region's beaches, exotic animals, and abundance of exciting activities captivate kids of all ages. This itinerary plucks some of the most beguiling offerings on land and sea without overtaxing youthful attention spans or requiring hard road time.

Days 1 & 2: Cancún

Start your trip with a stay in Cancún's Zona Hotelera; you won't need (or want) a car until Day 5. Start with beach time, either at your resort or at Playa Ballenas or Playa Delfines (p. 45). You might spend part of the day taking a jungle tour or renting a kayak or

WaveRunner on Laguna Nichupté (p. 53); for real thrill junkies, try some of AquaWorld's more outrageous offerings (p. 55). An alternative: spend the day at Parque Nizuc, which includes the Wet'n Wild water park, an aquarium, and a dolphin-swim program (p. 50). Later in the day, go to La Isla Shopping Village,

with its Interactive Aquarium, boat tours through the canals, and rock-climbing wall (p. 61).

On day 2, after some morning beach time at Playa Linda, ride the Torre Escénica Giratoria (Rotating Scenic Tower) (p. 50) at the adjacent Embarcadero Marina and visit La Casa del Arte Popular (p. 46). Even kids with the shortest attention spans will enjoy the realistic settings and the fascinating toy room. Swashbuckle your way through dinner on the Captain Hook Pirate Cruise (p. 66).

Days 3 & 4: Isla Mujeres

Take a morning ferry to Isla Mujeres (p. 70). After you settle in, preferably in town, stop by the Casa de la Cultura to check out the kids' activities (p. 87). Spend the rest of the day in the calm, shallow waters at Playa Norte.

The next day, rent a golf cart and head down the island's west side. At Tortugranja, you can feed young turtles being cared for until they are big enough for release (p. 86). Stop at Playa Lancheros for grilled *tikin xic* fish and pens of languid nurse sharks and sea turtles (p. 81). Get in some leisurely snorkeling at Garrafón de Castilla beach club (p. 89), unless you prefer the ziplines, climbing tower, "snuba" tours, and see-through canoes at Garrafón Natural Reef Park (p. 89). Continue to the island's southern tip to see the lighthouse and the last vestige of Isla's only Maya ruin, then drive back up the east side. Leave time for beach-combing on the beautiful wild beaches, and keep an eye out for the "Crayola House" and the landmark conch-shaped house as you pass the *colonias*.

Days 5 & 6: Akumal

Take the morning ferry to Cancún and get a taxi or a bus to the airport to pick

up your rental car. On the way to Akumal, stop at Croco Cun, where kids love getting touchy-feely with baby crocs, iguanas, boas, and spider monkeys (p. 47). Other options are horse-back riding at Rancho Loma Bonita (p. 60) or farther down the coast at Rancho Punta Venado (p. 146), or a detour to Dolphin Discovery in Puerto Aventuras (p. 147).

The next day, start with a swim in Akumal Bay in the center of town, where sea turtles will swim with you more often than not. If it's turtle nesting season, stop at the Centro Ecológico Akumal to sign up for the 9pm turtle walk (p. 165). Later, drive to the northern end of town to snorkel with turtles, rays, and tropical fish in Laguna Yal-Kú (p. 162). On the way back, stop at La Buena Vida restaurant in Half Moon Bay for dinner in a lookout tower with eagle-eye views of the Caribbean and the jungle (p. 162).

Day 7: Tulum

Hit the Tulum ruins at opening time to beat the crowds and heat (p. 166). Tulum is Maya Ruins 101 for kids, extensively excavated and small enough to cover in an hour (but allow time to explore the beach). Hundreds of resident iguanas, and the occasional coati or other exotic creature, will entertain even the most disengaged youngster. In the afternoon, go to Hidden Worlds Cenotes Park (p. 164) for an introduction to snorkeling in the area's vast network of cenotes—or strike out on your own for one of the low-key cenotes nearby (p. 156). Return to your hotel in Akumal for the night.

Day 8: Akumal to Cancún Airport

Cancún's airport is less than 1½ hours away from Akumal.