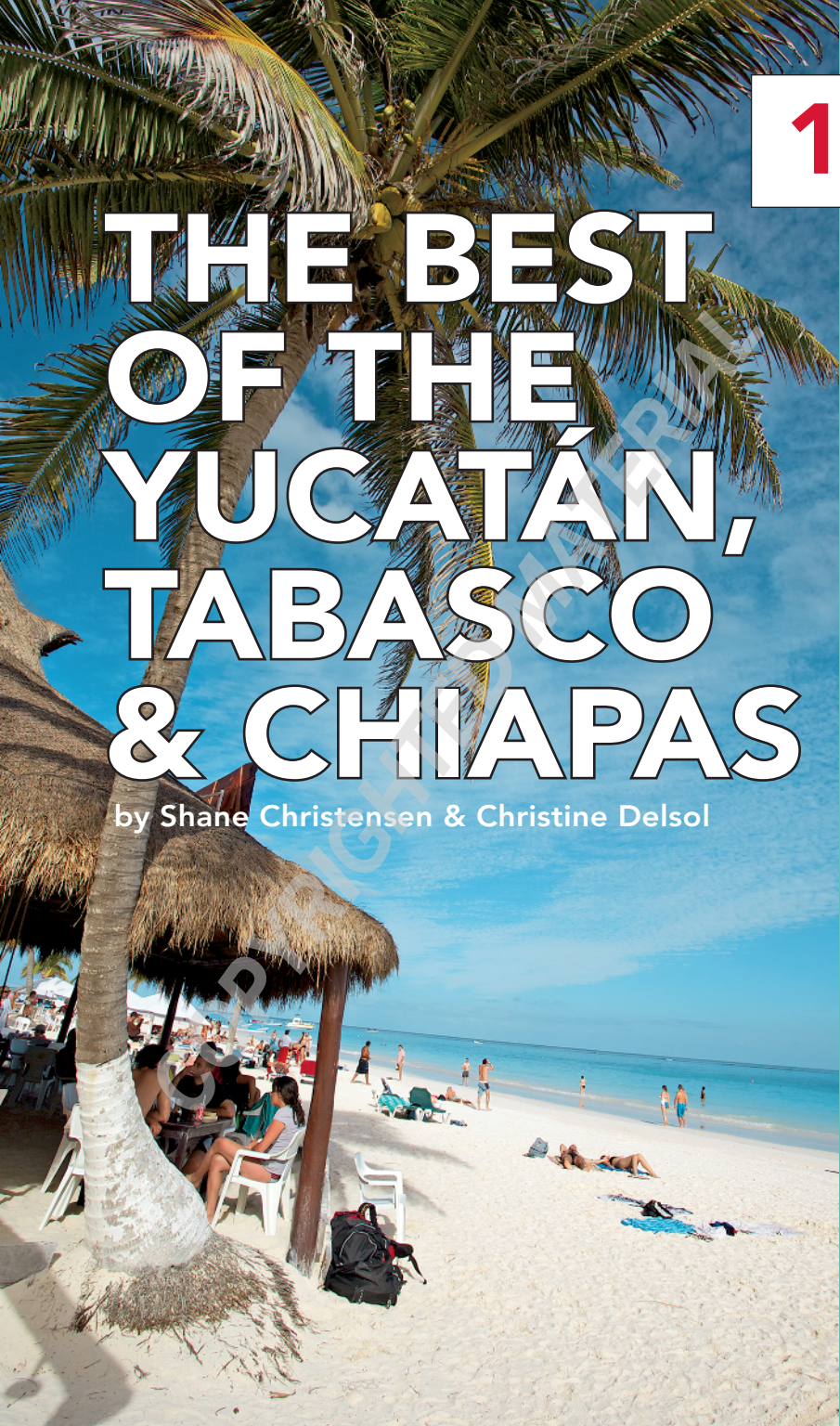


THE BEST OF THE YUCATÁN, TABASCO & CHIAPAS

by Shane Christensen & Christine Delsol



The Yucatán Peninsula welcomes more visitors than any other part of Mexico. Its tremendous variety—from breathtaking beaches, endless water sports, and jungle excursions to visits to Maya ruins, unforgettable walks through indigenous villages, and exhilarating eco-adventures—attracts every kind of traveler. We’ve logged thousands of miles crisscrossing the peninsula, and these are our personal favorites.

THE most UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Swimming in the Caribbean:** Slipping into the brilliant turquoise sea from the white sandy beach, it’s entirely possible you’ll feel you’ve entered paradise. There’s no sensation quite like floating in the warm, welcoming waters of the Caribbean on a clear sunny day. For a more adventurous time in the ocean, you can also swim with dolphins in Cancún, Cozumel, and Isla Mujeres.
- **Catching Island Fever:** Cozumel and Isla Mujeres are two idyllic Caribbean islands far removed from the glitz and revelry of Cancún. Although only 15 minutes away by ferry, sleepy Isla Mujeres feels worlds removed, and Cozumel seems just as far from Playa del Carmen, even though it’s less than 45 minutes by boat.



PREVIOUS PAGE: Tulum Beach. ABOVE: The Tulum ruins, overlooking the Caribbean Sea.

- **Peering Under the Surface:** The Mexican Caribbean boasts magnificent snorkeling and scuba diving, particularly in Cozumel, which is home to one of the planet's most spectacular coral reef marine communities.
- **Exploring Maya Ruins:** Whether Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, Tulum, Palenque, or any of the other ancient Maya ruins dotting this region, the Yucatán Peninsula offers unparalleled chances to view the archaeological legacy of this great Mesoamerican civilization.
- **Experiencing Village Life:** The Yucatán is among the most culturally rich areas of Mexico, the heart of Maya civilization well before the Spanish conquest. Take your time walking village streets, visiting the markets, sampling Yucatecan food, and experiencing a part of the enduring indigenous cultures.
- **Seeing Another World in Chiapas:** The cultural capital of Chiapas, San Cristóbal de las Casas is one of the world's unique cities, where indigenous traditions, Spanish colonial influences, Mexican society, and international tourism all intersect.

THE **best** REGIONAL EXPERIENCES

- **Exploring the Inland Yucatán Peninsula:** Travelers who venture only to the Yucatán's resorts and cities miss the rock-walled inland villages, where women wear brightly embroidered dresses and life proceeds almost as if the modern world (with the exception of highways) didn't exist. The adventure of seeing secluded cenotes, unrestored haciendas, and newly uncovered ruins, deep in jungle settings, is not to be missed. See chapter 7.
- **Catching Street & Park Entertainment in Mérida:** Few cities have so vibrant a street scene as Mérida. Every night of the week you can catch music and dance performances in plazas about town. Then, on Sunday, Mérida really gets going—streets are closed off, food stalls spring up everywhere, and you can enjoy a book fair, a flea market, comedy acts, band concerts, and dance groups. At night, the main plaza is the place to be, with people dancing to mambos and rumbas in the street in front of the city hall. See chapter 7.
- **Exploring San Cristóbal de Las Casas:** The city of San Cristóbal is a living museum, with 16th-century colonial architecture and pre-Hispanic native influences. The highland Maya live in surrounding villages and arrive daily in town wearing

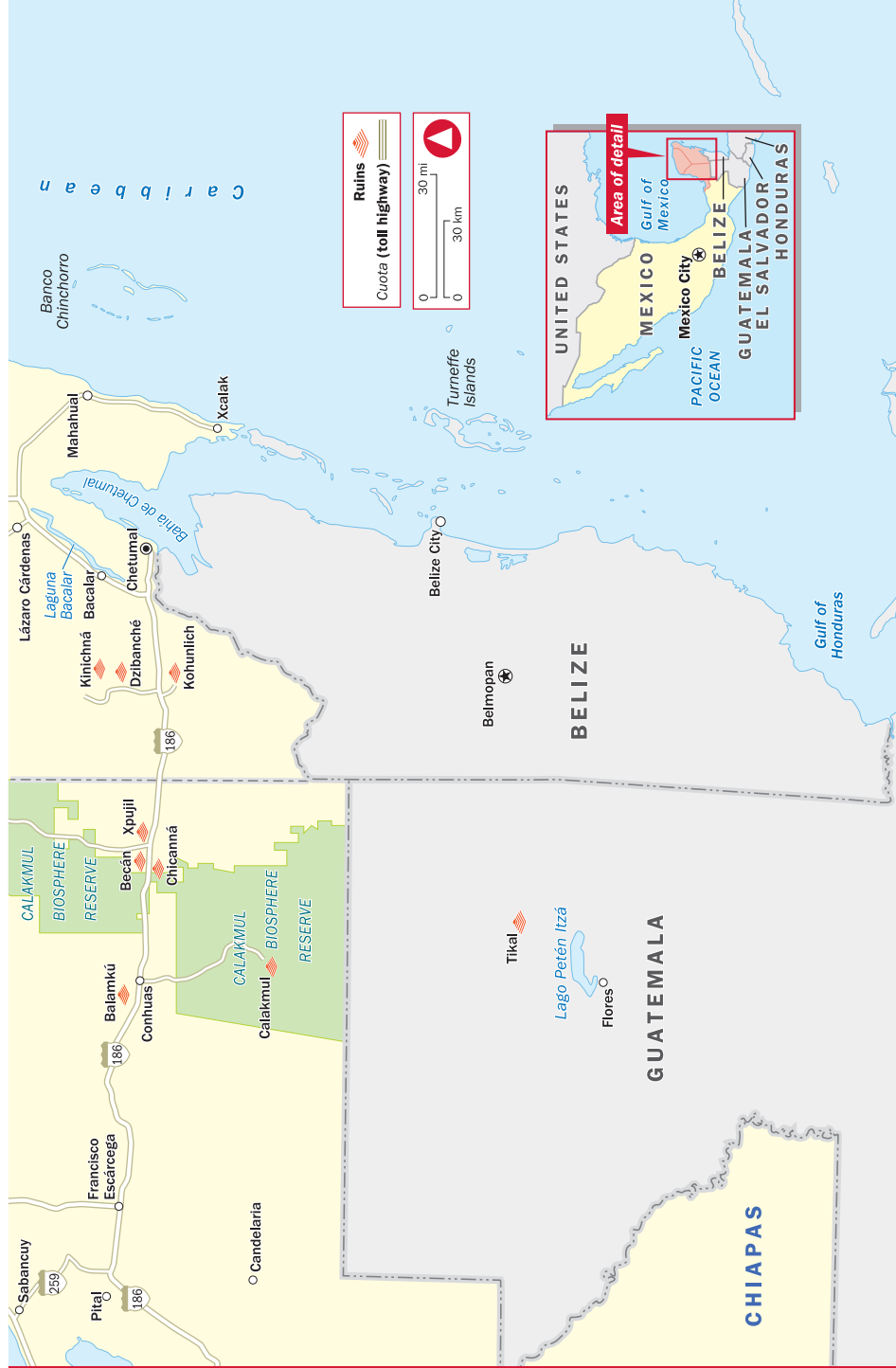


Mérida by night.

The Yucatán Peninsula

Gulf of Mexico





colorful handmade clothing. A visit to the villages is a window into another world, giving visitors a glimpse of traditional Indian dress, religious customs, churches, and ceremonies. See chapter 8.

- **Visiting a Hacienda:** They were built by the wealthy, but you don't have to be rich to stay in a restored hacienda hotel. The fabulous haciendas now owned or managed by the Starwood chain are the best known and most expensive, while places such as Hacienda Yaxcopoil, Hacienda San Pedro Nohpat, and Hacienda San José Cholul, all near Mérida, are not only affordable but far more evocative of life on a hacienda during their heyday. See chapter 7.

THE best FOOD & DRINK EXPERIENCES

- **Feasting in Cancún's Hotel Zone:**

This famous (some would say infamous) resort town is home to some of the top restaurants in all of Mexico. Expect internationally trained chefs in the Hotel Zone's acclaimed independent restaurants, where menus tend to focus on fresh Caribbean seafood and Black Angus steaks using Mexican and Mediterranean ingredients. The top-rated restaurants lie in The Ritz-Carlton, JW Marriott, Le Meridien, and Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach resorts, and are less often found in all-inclusive hotels. See p. 93.



TOP: Fresh seafood is abundant. BOTTOM: *Panucho* (tortillas filled with beans and topped with chicken, lettuce, and pickled red onion) is a local staple.

Tabasco & Chiapas



- Eating Like a Local:** Downtown Cancún is dotted with tasty, inexpensive eateries, whether you're looking for a spicy sidewalk taco or a sit-down Mexican meal. Steep yourself in traditional Yucatecan culture at **Labná**, which showcases Maya cuisine and music. The Labná Special samples four of the region's best dishes, including baked suckling pig with guacamole. See p. 98.
- Sampling Yucatecan Cuisine Across the Region:** A trip to the Yucatán allows for a culinary tour of some of Mexico's finest foods. Don't miss specialties such as *pollo* or *cochinita pibil* (chicken or pork in savory achiote sauce), the uniquely Campechan *pan de cazón*, great seafood dishes, the many styles of tamal found throughout Chiapas and the Yucatán, and Caribbean-influenced staples such as fried bananas, black beans, and yucca root. For a glossary of popular regional dishes, see chapter 10.

- **Cracking Open a Fresh Caribbean Lobster on the Islands:** You'll find lobster on the menus of even the most simple seafood establishments in Isla Mujeres and Cozumel, and the great thing is it's completely fresh and not too expensive. If you want an ideally seasoned, succulent lobster dinner in Cozumel, **Cabaña del Pescador** is the place. If you want anything else, you're out of luck—lobster dinner, expertly prepared, is all it serves. See p. 144.
- **Learning to Cook Like a Local:** You won't miss Yucatecan cuisine so much after you get home if you make it part of your repertoire. Cooking schools take all forms: The Ritz-Carlton Cancún's instruction in a gleaming new culinary center; *mercado* shopping, tours and cooking lessons at Los Dos in Merida; and the Little Mexican Cooking School's savory blend of lecture, demonstration, and hands-on practice is spiced liberally with humor in Puerto Morelos. See p. 60.

THE **best** LOCAL EXPERIENCES

- **Chilling Like a Local on Isla Mujeres:** If uninterrupted relaxation is what you're after, Isla Mujeres offers a quintessential laid-back vacation. Bike—or take a golf cart—around the island to explore rocky coves and sandy beaches, or focus your tanning efforts on the wide beachfront of Playa Norte. Here you'll find calm waters perfect for swimming and snorkeling, as well as beachfront *palapa* restaurants beckoning you to linger over fresh red snapper. If island fever starts to take over, you're only a ferry ride away from the action in Cancún.
- **Sipping an Ice-Cold Cerveza:** The hot weather calls for a frosty beer, whether served on a beach chair or in a traditional cantina. Mexicans love to drink their Corona, Dos Equis, Negro Modelo, Bohemia, or any other number of



Relaxing on the beach in Isla Mujeres.

Mexican brands straight from the bottle and often with a slice of lemon. It should be accompanied by some crispy tortilla chips and hot salsa.

- **Perusing the Local Flea Markets:** Most Mexican towns in this book have flea markets that meet weekly, if not daily. These are the places to buy handicrafts, textiles, and inexpensive jewelry. They're far less expensive, and often more interesting, than shopping malls, and if you look carefully you'll find plenty of hand-made items. Respectful bargaining is expected.
- **Walking the Walk with Campechanos:** After exploring the confection of impeccably preserved centuries-old mansions, domed churches, and stone fortifications in Campeche's Centro Historico, breach the city walls for a walk along the *malecón*. Campechanos congregate on the broad, palm-lined sea walk to visit and cool off, and you'll likely never see a better sunset than the celestial conflagration that stops joggers, strollers, and squealing children in their tracks every evening.

THE **best** FAMILY EXPERIENCES

- **Kicking Back on the Beach:** In Cancún just above the Hotel Zone, the northern beaches facing Isla Mujeres are protected by the Bahía de Mujeres, making for calm waters that are perfect for swimming. At most of the beaches along this stretch, you can rent a sailboard and take lessons, ride a parasail, or partake in a variety of watersports. There's a small but beautiful portion of public beach on **Playa Caracol**, popular with families because of its shallow sandy bottom. See p. 88.
- **Going Underwater at Cancún's Coolest Aquarium:** The **Interactive Aquarium** at the family-friendly La Isla shopping center in Cancún offers 13 fish tanks (27,800 gallons of water); a contact area for kids to feed a turtle, touch a sea ray, or hold a sea star; dolphin swims and shows; and the chance to feed a shark while immersed in the water in an acrylic cage. Guides inside the main tank use underwater microphones to point out the sea life and answer questions. See p. 92.
- **Getting Wet at a Natural Waterpark: Xel-Ha,** near Tulum, is a beautiful lagoon where you can swim, float, snorkel, or take a zip line surrounded by lush jungle. The clear, protected waters make it a natural aquarium with several species of colorful fish. Swimming with dolphins, Snuba (a combination of snorkeling and diving), or walking under water with a "Sea Trek" are also offered here. See p. 184.
- **Relaxing in the Center of Town:** Head for the central plaza of just about any town in the evening as families gather to end their day with gossip, snacks, maybe a little music, and a chance for children to run out their excess energy. Especially on weekends, it may take on a carnival atmosphere, filling with food carts, balloon vendors, and street performers—or even puppet shows or trampolines.

THE **best** BEACH EXPERIENCES

- **Drinking in the Sun at Cancún:** Whether or not you believe Cancún is an unrelenting spring break party in which Americans compete with Mexicans for the city's real identity—and I'd say the truth lies in the timing of your



Catching some rays at one of the many luxury resorts in Cancún.

visit—you're likely to agree this man-made resort has some of the most spectacular beaches in the country. The powdery white sand is complemented by warm Caribbean waters that look like a Technicolor dream, so clear that you can see through to the coral reefs below. The northern beaches facing Isla Mujeres just above the Hotel Zone are protected by a bay and ideal for swimming.

- **Zoning Out in Isla Mujeres:** If uninterrupted relaxation is what you're after, Isla Mujeres is your island. Within a few minutes' walk of the main town, you can plant your toes on one of the world's most stunning swimming beaches at Playa Norte. Try to come for more than just a daytrip from Cancún to experience the island's easygoing beach culture. Most accommodations here are small, inexpensive inns, with a few luxury boutique hotels tempting you for at least a night.
- **Soaking in the Waters at Cozumel:** It may not offer lots of big, sandy beaches, but Cozumel promises something the mainland doesn't: the calm, flat waters of the sheltered western shore. It could be mistaken for a giant swimming pool, only this pool has lots of brilliantly colored fish, so take your snorkeling mask even if you don't plan to do any diving, which is among the best in the world.
- **Taking in the Scene at Playa del Carmen:** Stylish and hip, Playa del Carmen has a beautiful beach and an eclectic assortment of small hotels, inns, and cabañas. The social scene focuses on the beach by day and the pedestrian-only Quinta Avenida (Fifth Avenue) by night, with its assortment of restaurants, clubs, sidewalk cafes, and shops offering all the entertainment you could want. You're also close to the coast's major attractions, including nature parks, ruins, and cenotes (sinkholes or natural wells). Fast-growing Playa is becoming homogenized (think Dairy Queen and Starbucks). Enjoy it while it's still a manageable size. See chapter 6.

- **Relaxing in the Shade of Tulum's Ruins:** Fronting some of the best beaches on the entire coast, Tulum's small hotels offer guests a little slice of paradise far from the crowds and megaresorts. The bustling town lies inland; at the coast, activities and partying compete with swinging in a hammock and doing absolutely nothing. If you can pull yourself away from the beach, there are ruins to marvel at and a vast nature preserve to explore. See chapter 6.
- **Going Back in Time on the Southern Caribbean:** For a glimpse of the Caribbean coast as it was before Cancún brought the world rushing in, head for the Costa Maya, beginning at the southern border of the Sian Ka'an reserve and stretching to the Belize border. The wide, white sands seem to go on forever, and beyond the two main towns, it might be forever before you encounter another soul. With some local guidance, you can work your way into a part of Sian Ka'an that tourists rarely see.

THE **best** HISTORIC EXPERIENCES

- **Standing Over the Ocean at Tulum:** Tulum isn't the most important ancient Maya city, either historically or architecturally, but its seaside setting is uniquely beautiful. The stark contrast of its crumbling stone walls against the clear turquoise ocean just beyond is an extraordinary sight. See chapter 6.
- **Wandering the City of Calakmul:** Of the many elegantly built Maya cities of the Río Bec area, in the lower Yucatán, Calakmul is the broadest in scope and design. It's also one of the hardest to reach—about 48km (30 miles) from the Guatemalan border and surrounded by the jungle of the Calakmul Biological Reserve. Calakmul is a walled city with the tallest pyramid in the Yucatán—a city that continuing research might prove to be the largest in the Maya world, more than equal to Guatemala's Tikal. Go now, while it remains infrequently visited. See chapter 6.



The Palenque ruins.

- **Examining the Carvings at Uxmal:** No matter how many times we see Uxmal, the splendor of its stone carvings remains awe-inspiring. A stone rattlesnake undulates across the facade of the Nunnery complex, and 103 masks of Chaac—the rain god—project from the Governor's Palace. See chapter 7.
- **Visiting the Center of Mayan Life at Chichén Itzá:** Stand beside the giant serpent head at the foot of El Castillo and marvel at the architects and astronomers who positioned the building so precisely that shadow and sunlight form a serpent's body slithering from peak to the earth at each equinox (Mar 21 and Sept 21). See chapter 7.
- **Marveling at the Pyramid of Ek Balam:** In recent years, this is the site where some of Mexico's most astounding archaeological discoveries have been made. Ek Balam's main pyramid is taller than Chichén Itzá's, and it holds a sacred doorway bordered with elaborate stucco figures of priests and kings and rich iconography. See chapter 7.
- **Raiding the Tombs of Palenque:** The ancient builders of these structures carved histories in stone that scholars have only recently deciphered. Imagine the magnificent ceremony in A.D. 683 when King Pacal was buried deep inside his pyramid—his tomb unspoiled until its discovery in 1952. See chapter 8.
- **Avoiding the Crowds in Edzná:** This huge but barely excavated city about 50km (31 miles) outside of Campeche gets fewer visitors in a year than Chichén Itzá does in a day. Its natural beauty; marvelous network of canals, reservoirs, and aqueducts; and ornate architecture—resembling Palenque or Tikal more than anything in the Yucatán—are yours to absorb in utter peace. See p. 279.

THE **best** OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES

- **Scuba Diving in Cozumel & Along the Yucatán's Caribbean Coast:** The coral reefs off the island, Mexico's premier diving destination, are among the top five dive spots in the world. The Yucatán's coastal reef, part of the planet's second-largest reef system and a national marine park, affords excellent diving all along the coast. Diving from Isla Mujeres is quite spectacular. Especially beautiful is the Chinchorro Reef, lying 32km (20 miles) offshore from Mahahual or Xcalak. See chapters 5 and 6.
- **Fly-Fishing off the Punta Allen & Mahahual Peninsulas:** Serious anglers will enjoy the challenge of



Scuba diving in Cozumel.



Great white herons in Isla Contoy.

fly-fishing the saltwater flats and lagoons on the protected sides of these peninsulas. See chapter 6.

- **Cenote Diving on the Yucatán Mainland:** Dive into the clear depths of the Yucatán’s cenotes for a whole new world of underwater exploration. The Maya considered the cenotes sacred—and their vivid colors do indeed seem otherworldly. Most are between Playa del Carmen and Tulum, and dive shops in these areas regularly run trips for experienced divers. For recommended dive shops, see “Cozumel” in chapter 5, and “Playa del Carmen” and “South of Playa del Carmen” in chapter 6.
- **Swimming with Giants on Isla Holbox:** A shark the size of a whale might sound like a science-fiction nightmare, but whale sharks—three times the size of the biggest great white shark—are peaceful, plankton-eating creatures, and swimming with them is a unique and awe-inspiring experience. Isla Holbox, Quintana Roo’s northernmost island, is whale shark central, hosting the polka-dotted behemoths from May to September. See p. 303.
- **Birding:** The Yucatán Peninsula, Tabasco, and Chiapas are ornithological paradises. Two very special places are Isla Contoy, with more than 70 species of birds as well as a host of marine and animal life (p. 125), and the Huitepec Cloud Forest, with its flocks of migratory species (p. 332). North America’s largest flamingo breeding and nesting grounds lie at opposite ends of Yucatán state’s Gulf Coast, in Celestún (p. 255) and Ría Lagartos (p. 301).
- **Trekking to Bonampak & Yaxchilán:** Bonampak and Yaxchilán—two remote, jungle-surrounded Maya sites along the Usumacinta River—are accessible by car and motorboat. Colorful murals of battle and victory at Bonampak have



Exploring the ruins of Yaxchilán.

managed to survive the elements after hundreds of years, and remain some of the best examples of Maya painting on the peninsula. The experience could well be the highlight of any trip. See “Road Trips from San Cristóbal” in chapter 8.

THE **best** SHOPPING EXPERIENCES

- **Shopping Duty-Free in Cancún’s Hotel Zone:** Isla Cancún’s luxury malls are filled with international designer fashions and duty-free shopping. “La Isla” is the most enticing shopping center here, an outdoor oasis adjacent to the Nichupté Lagoon featuring high street fashions, quality restaurants, Venetian-style canals, and a spectacular aquarium. This is also a great place for families. See chapter 4.
- **Hunting for Bargains in Downtown:** The best flea markets are located downtown, where polite bargaining is welcome. Authentic handicrafts, inexpensive jewelry, and colorful textiles and clothes fill the local shops and markets of Cancún City. Mercado 28 is generally considered a reliable market for good deals. See p. 100.
- **Searching for Splurges in Playa del Carmen:** Shops and boutiques along busy Quinta Avenida (Fifth Avenue) display amber jewelry, Guatemalan embroidered blouses, Brazilian bikinis, and collectible folk art from throughout Mexico. Hold on to your pesos till you’ve thoroughly explored the shops from calles 2 to 30. Treasures are hidden among the endless array of tacky souvenirs. See chapter 6.



Campeche has a market outside the colorful Old Town.

- **Mingling with Locals in the Markets:** San Cristóbal de las Casas and Mérida have some of Mexico's finest market areas filled with local vendors and shoppers wearing traditional embroidered clothing. You'll find hammocks, Panama hats, and *guayaberas* (men's shirts) in Mérida, and woven shawls and *huipiles* (blouses with elaborate colorful patterns) at the Plaza de Santo Domingo in San Cristóbal. See chapter 8.

THE best NIGHTLIFE EXPERIENCES

- **Going Wild in Cancún:** After baking yourself all day in the sun, your bronzed body deserves to be flaunted. Head to Party Row, where longstanding Cancún favorites **Carlos 'n' Charlie's**, **Hard Rock**, and **Señor Frog's** offer potent drinks, hot music, and wild (if sometimes sloppy) dance floors. **Dady'O**, as well as its four offspring bars, all lie within a block of each other pulsating with music and tequila-inspired revelers. See chapter 4.
- **Dancing Like You've Never Danced Before:** Forum by the Sea entertainment center in Cancún has it all: a dazzling array of clubs, sports bars, fast food, and fine dining, with shops open late as well. It's also the home of what remains Cancún's hottest club, **CoCo Bongo**, which regularly packs in up to 3,000 partyers. **The City** is the other mega day-and-night dance club, offering a day club with beach and pool activities and food and bar service, as well as the sizzling multi-level nightclub with nine bars. See p. 102.

◦ **Having a More Sophisticated Night Out on Quinta Avenida (Playa del Carmen):**

Stroll along lively, pedestrian-only Fifth Avenue to find the bar that's right for you. With live-music venues, tequila bars, sports bars, and cafes, you're sure to find something to fit your mood. The intersection with Calle 12 is becoming the de facto club central. See p. 172.

◦ **Being Out & About on Mérida's Grand Boulevard:**

In addition to the nightly free, city-sponsored cultural performances, Mérida has a varied collection of night spots along majestic Paseo de Montejo. Choose from live rock, salsa dancing, and Latin music at clubs clustered around Calle 60, cool hotel lounges, and stellar restaurants that become dance clubs at night. See p. 246.

- **Clubbing It in San Cristóbal de las Casas:** This city, small though it may be, has a live-music scene that can't be beat for fun and atmosphere. The bars and clubs are all within walking distance of each other, and they're a real bargain. See chapter 8.



Playa del Carmen's bustling Quinta Avenida.