



**World Nomads**  
Safety Guides

# Insider's guide to Mexico and the Yucatan Peninsula

The Yucatan Peninsula is the jewel in the crown of Mexico tourism.

Cancun, the bustling resort town at the head of the Riviera Maya attracts more than 4 million visitors a year to Cancun's beaches bars and clubs. But there's more to the region than the famous white sand beaches of the Mexican Caribbean coast.

The largest concentration of Mayan ruins in Mexico is here, including the impressive Chichen Itza. We pick the top 5 sites to visit in this guide.

There's also nature, including thousands of cenotes, natural swimming holes and subterranean reservoirs. Which ones are best for swimmers, and which ones are for serious scuba divers only? Read on to discover.

And there's adventure too: diving on the magnificent Mesoamerican barrier reef, whale watching on the warm waters of the Caribbean, zip-lining through the jungle canopy, or going off-road in your own ATV. We'll tell you about it all in the World Nomads Insider's Guide to Yucatan.

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## Getting to Yucatan and the Mexican Caribbean

There are airports of all sizes across the peninsula, but the largest, with the most international services is the airport at Cancun.

Large numbers of tourists arrive by cruise ship, but these are stops on a tour and not suited to independent travel.

Mexico has an excellent network of intercity bus services. The luxury coaches (camiones) are comfortable and inexpensive. But Yucatan is in the far south of Mexico and would require a long bus journey, even from the capital.

If you're already driving yourself around Mexico the Yucatan peninsula should be on your roadmap. But be aware of the complicated bureaucracy of bringing your own vehicle into Mexico, and if you intend to rent a car, be ready for more paperwork and additional costs.

## Car Rental in Mexico

When you arrive to pick up your rental you'll be in for serious sticker shock. Mandatory

personal liability and Mexican-based insurance could triple the original price.

Driving in a rented car requires a valid license plus registration and insurance papers. Be sure to have all of them at all times, there are a lot of checkpoints especially on the highway of Tulum to Cancun.

***Insider's tip:** In Cancun, rental cars at the airport are expensive and the paperwork is a hassle, so pre-book before your arrival.*

There are gas stations that tinker with the pump meters, so you get less than you pay for. Parking is a problem, especially in the hotel zone area.

(See our Cancun Public Transport section below).

Corrupt police love rental cars. They'll flag you down and invent violations that you didn't actually commit. Which brings us to...





## Bribery in Mexico

World Nomads does not condone the offering or taking of bribes, and we suggest these tactics for staying “clean”.

In most cases accepting a written citation from the traffic officer, rather than paying him a ‘tip’ to make the ticket disappear, will generally be cheaper.

If an official suggests that a bribe must be paid before you can go on your way, be patient, stay calm and cordial, and he will often relent.

Another effective method is to pretend you don’t speak Spanish (the befuddled gringo is a good persona to adopt), which will make the officer feel they are taking more time than you are worth.

During a police pullover, only provide photocopies of your passport or ID.

In certain cases where your personal safety is in question, if the demanding officer is drunk or you’re in an isolated area and the official is armed, you may decide paying a bribe is the best option.

But don’t mention the word “bribe”. Instead you are “helping” the officer to do his job (or not to do it) slower, quicker or through a more effective means.

When you instigate ‘negotiations’ the same rules apply as when you are bartering for wares in the local market: be very friendly, start as low as possible and raise the amount in small increments.

Sometimes officers may covet your expensive watch or camera (another reason to keep them in the hotel).

## How to buy genuine silver in Mexico

All of Mexico is famous for quality silver jewellery and there are some bargains to be had, but not all that glistens is the genuine article.

Real silver is marked “925” or “S925” which represents the 92.5 silver composition of the jewellery. If they have marks like these, it’s highly likely it’s genuine. Another good indicator of a fake is the price, if it seems too good to be true, it is too good to be true.

***Insider’s tip: to identifying real silver: Rub the supposed silver with a white, soft cloth and if black marks appear, then you have the real thing, because silver oxidizes upon exposure to air. This is why it develops a black tint on it over a long period of time.***



Sterling silver has non-metallic properties. So if it does not attract a magnet, it’s real sterling silver, but if it does, you have a plain stainless steel polished to perfection to make it shine like silver.

### **How to be an expert silver haggler**

Never buy from beach vendors.

Most silver shops are ready for your persistent haggling and will put a 30% on top of their price. They’ve already put a 100% mark-up on the price they paid, so a piece that cost them \$100 will be priced at \$260. An expert haggler will get that piece for \$150 - here’s how.



Show them the money. Put the cash on the table, and tell them that's all you have. If they resist, pick up the money and start walking out of the store (but be prepared to keep walking if they call your bluff.)

***Insider's tip:** English is perfectly understood in most touristic places, but if you want to get off the beaten track, you'll need some basic Spanish knowledge.*

## Yucatan places to stay - Cancun

You'll most likely start your Yucatan experience in Cancun because that's where most international flights go.

This is a major tourist destination with a notorious party-town atmosphere – not that there's anything wrong with that (thank you Jerry Seinfeld) – and can make a great base for discovering the rest of the region.

### **Is Cancun safe?**

Cancun is generally peaceful and one of the safest places to travel in the whole of Mexico. Of course there's the usual petty crime associated with tourist-heavy areas, but serious crime, violence or assault is very rare.

The tourist or hotel zone, where safety and security are a priority, has a lower crime rate than the city of Cancun itself. But the urban sprawl and related crime of Cancun City is far from the areas tourists frequent, and there are no "attractions" to draw them here.

Police and military presence is evident 24 hours. Police patrols and personnel can be seen even in the wee hours of the morning. Mexico's 066 number, which is similar to 911, responds quickly.

### **Is Cancun safe for women?**

There's nothing extraordinarily dangerous about Cancun's tourist zones and a woman

here is at no more risk than if she were on holiday in New York, Paris, or Sydney. However, there is one aspect of Mexican culture that many women may find confronting and uncomfortable - machismo - the exaggerated sense of masculinity, a belief that strength, entitlement, dominant behaviour and virility are the essential attributes of being a male.

Sadly, it falls on the woman to adjust her behaviour to make sure machismo results in chivalrous deference, not aggressive patronisation.





*Watch your stuff, watch your wallet and your phone... It is highly unlikely to get mugged, but it is pretty likely to get your stuff stolen from not taking care of it.*

**Felipe Mena**

## Tips for avoiding unwanted attention.

- Ignore the cat-calls and wolf-whistles of blue collar workers. If they attempt to start a conversation, turn your back and walk on.
- If you fail to cover up when you leave the beach you will attract attention. You may not agree with this limitation on your right to wear whatever you want, but unless you want to take up where Frida Kahlo left off, it may be prudent to dress modestly.
- When you are on the bus, sit next to another woman or if there's a vacant seat, put your bag there so you could choose your preferred seatmate.
- Plan your journey before you leave your accommodation - looking lost or asking for directions may make you appear vulnerable.
- Going out to a bar or nightclub, it's safer to go with friends.



- Refuse any 'free' drinks offered to you. Drink spiking is common in the Cancun party scene.
- Have fun, but don't let too much alcohol impair your thinking and decisions.

***Insider's tip:*** *It's great to make local friends when you travel, but in Cancun there are some who are well-practiced at befriending and taking advantage of women travellers.*

Keep an ear out for these Spanish words and phrases that may indicate bad intentions:

- Coquetear - flirt or "easy" woman.
- medicamentos para dormir - sleeping drugs

- llevara a cabo an un hotel - take out in a hotel
- robarlo - steal it
- violarla - rape her
- caliente en la cama - hot in bed
- mutilar su - maul her
- armas blancas - bladed weapons
- pistolas - guns
- abajo y perdido - down and wasted
- posible victima - possible victim
- borracho indefensos - helpless drunk

## Public transport in Cancun

The beach resorts, restaurant, shops and stores are all close-by in the hotel zone and easily reached on foot. But if you're not the "walking kind" or want to travel a little further, then Cancun's public transport system is the choice.

Buses are the most preferred way of going around Cancun, cost only 8.50 pesos and can take you to all destinations within the hotel zone. They also run 24 hours, so you don't have to walk at night.



### Cancun Bus routes

- R1 - Take this bus going downtown. To Puerto Juarez, Kiu-Huic Market, Mercado 23, Wal-Mart, La Habichuela and the main bus station
- R2, R15 - Take this bus going to the different hotels, Wal-Mart and Mercado 28; Kabah is posted in the bus front window
- R27 - Take this bus going to Tulum Avenue, Plaza Las Americas

## Cancun bus tips

Pay the exact fare in pesos and use coins.

Know the exact destination and make sure you are on the right side of the road. Then pay the driver by saying clearly the name of the place, resort or restaurant. Some drivers can speak and understand English, but most can't. You will be handed a ticket as proof of payment.

Take a seat immediately, especially if you are travelling with children. Bus drivers are paid on a commission basis - the more passengers they have, the higher their income. So expect them to drive fast to take on more passengers.

If your bus doesn't have a bell to signal to the driver, just shout "para señor" (stop it sir).

## Cancun taxi tips

Most hotels are connected to taxi companies. They offer standard rates; no need for haggling on prices as they remain fixed within a specified distance. Hotels commonly post the rates at the front desk, if not, then ask at the front desk.

Always pay using the local currency. Otherwise the driver will make up a conversion rate that's in his favour, and you'll still get the change in Pesos.

Some taxis are metered while some are not. Metered taxis will give the exact fare for the distance covered as they are checked and calibrated annually for their taxi licenses. Those that are not metered will involve negotiating the fare with your driver. Again, best to ask your hotel staff about the approximate fare.

If you are taking a taxi just within the hotel zone, there's no problem with security. If you plan traveling outside the zone leave your valuables in your hotel room.

Try to avoid traveling alone in a taxi, but if you must, search for the taxi driver's ID,



usually hanging on the center mirror. It's a laminated card with a hologram and a photo. Make a note of the driver's name and the vehicle's plate number. Very unlikely in the hotel zone, but to safeguard against taxi gangs - a cohort of the driver slips into the taxi when it's stopped at an intersection and robs you - lock the doors.

When travelling to and from the airport, count the number of bags you put in the taxi, and make sure they're all there at the end of the trip (and not still on the backseat of that disappearing cab!).



# A guide to Cancun's beaches

Cancun is the top destination in the Caribbean and its biggest attraction is its spectacular line of beaches.

14 miles of Caribbean coastline composed of soft, flour-like, weightless white sand that remains cool on the feet even under the sun's scorching heat. Perfect for strolling bare footed. Then there's the stunning turquoise water. You will feel like sitting all day long in a lounge chair under thatched umbrellas called "palapas" while drinking your favorite soda or wine.

Cancun is surrounded by three bodies of water and each is majestic and unique in its own character.

## The Caribbean Sea

These are the beaches running north to south. It has warm blue waters and unbelievably white sands. But it's a little windier and the waves are higher compared to other waters.

- The Gaviota Azul, Chac Mool and Playa Martin have winds perfect for parasailing, surfing and kite boarding.
- Playa Ballenas offers tube rides and

other beach fun like sand golf and beach volleyball.

- Punta Nizuc, Playa Delfines and San Miguelito have awe inspiring views, ideal too for surfing and sand games.

## Bahia de Mujeres

The beaches running east to west. Its blue waters are shallow, tranquil and with generally low waves. Just like any beaches in Cancun, it boasts of very fine, white sands set in a picturesque environment. This surrounds the northern end of the tourist



zone. It's ideal for swimming, and snorkeling.

## The Nichupte Lagoon

A saltwater lagoon that has become a haven for the adventurous. You can experience sailing, kayaking, wind surfing, water skiing, water explorations and jungle adventures.





## Beach safety tips for Cancun

Cancun beaches are public. There are restricted areas within hotels and resorts, but they can't stop you from enjoying a swim at any beach.

The ocean beaches are prone to erosion and can suddenly go deep even when you're close to the beach.

For your further safety, most have lifeguards, identified by their red outfits.

There are colored flags to indicate swimming safety and conditions.

- Green Flag: You can safely swim
- Yellow Flag: You can swim but with caution and care
- Red Flag: You can swim but with extreme caution and care
- Black Flag: Don't swim and it's highly dangerous

## Shopping in Cancun

There are a lot of shopping malls, designer boutiques, specialized shops and even flea markets that cater to the needs of tourists and travelers.

The hotel zone is where all the great

shopping centers are located and have everything you need from food, luxury items and even Mexican arts and antiques.

Luxury Avenue, and Kukulcan Plaza, are a couple of the upscale and busiest malls.

The old mall at Plaza Caracol is a hit for handicrafts and Mexican arts.

For souvenir items and unique goods, the Coral Negro Flea Market continues to attract thousands of visitors.

Plaza Las America's in downtown Cancun is very popular for silver jewelries, Mexican paintings and rums and tequilas.

Market 28 remains as the most popular when it comes to open air flea markets where a fabulous array of various goods can be bought at relatively low prices.

Wal-Mart is where grocery items like food, snacks, beer, and lotions are available.

## Shopping tips

"Mercados" is the term used for open air shopping markets. They are actually flea markets where local goods and native products are sold at bargain prices.

The vendors know you've come in search of a bargain, yet the prices can still be



inflated (remember, the vendors have lower overheads like rent). Spend a day or two shopping around and asking other travellers about how much they paid, so you'll have an idea of the true price.

The mercados attract a higher number of petty thieves and pickpockets, so keep your money safe.

Check the change you're given by vendors and also double check what they've placed in the bag. Some vendors will swap your purchase for an inferior one.

Use cash, skimming and credit card fraud is quite common.

### Restaurants in Cancun

The hotel zone in Cancun countless restaurants line the streets and serve all types of cuisines - seafood, pastas steak and much more.

- **L'escargot:** A small French restaurant located in a side street in downtown Cancun. The garden decorated with soft lights and the French music is perfect for a romantic meal for two.
- **Julia Mia:** A local favorite that serves authentic Mexican dishes. Favorites like flautas, enchiladas, blue crab taquitos,

corn smut and garlic octopus fettuccini are sure winners. This place is ideal for an initial experience with Mexican foods. Julia Mia is open from 1pm to 12 am

- **Harry's Prime Steakhouse and Raw Bar:** For American tourists who miss the taste of their food back home. Prime cuts of US beef and Kobe beef are served in this plush restaurant. Its specialized beef that is dry-aged is tastier and more tender than the usual cuts. A wide array of wines is available that blend well with your beef.
- **La Habichuela:** This venue has been here for almost 30 years. Its sculptures, plants and dazzling lights can be enjoyed either in the open air or inside a lounge. Try the specialty Cocobichuela. It's served in a coconut shell and is a mixture of lobster, shrimp, tropical fruit and curry sauce.
- **La Palapa Belga:** It's a hidden treasure away from the busy restaurants. French and Belgian dishes are served along with a spectacular view of a lagoon. It's a known among the locals for its different blends of Mexican tequilas. It's quite small and usually accepts guests upon reservation.

## Cancun nightlife

### The top 3 Cancun nightclubs

- **Coco Bongo:** The best known and Cancun's most popular nightclub. Frequented by many, including stars and celebrities. Every night, a string of performers takes the stage, including acrobat shows, a Michael Jackson impersonator and even the occasional visit by a superhero. The waiters and bartenders join in the fun and provide some song and dance numbers. You can dance all night with music from live bands and a packed dance floor. It's located along Kukulcan Boulevard and highly accessible by foot.



- **Mandala Club:** Located in the party zone near Coco Bongo. It's considered as one of the most elegant nightclubs in Cancun with its Indian inspired décor, sparkling lights and magnificent fabrics. Mexican spicy foods mix well with your favorite tequila. Many consider it Cancun's hottest nightclub, consequently it's very busy every night.
- **Dady'o:** It's one of Cancun's oldest nightclubs, but still a hit among tourists and locals. The entrance is marked with a huge rock. You enter through a hallway that's like a tunnel into a dance floor designed like a cave. Bands, singers and famous DJs perform night.



way of getting attentive service - but make good on your promise!

Drink spiking is, sadly, common in Cancun. Keep your drinks close to you. Never leave them unattended to go to the toilet or dance floor. Don't accept opened "free" drinks from strangers or recently-made friends.

Watch out for the whistle girls. Dressed in revealing clothes, they'll approach you with a glass of tequila on hand, ask for a selfie picture with you, but when you entertain them you'll see your dollars fly by quickly. A shot of tequila costs around \$9- \$10 each.

Never leave valuables on the table. There are lots of fast hands around.

Cancun's nightclubs can be very large. When you enter remember where the exits are in case of fire.

Be wary of new friends. Some are trying to gain your confidence to steal from you. Never tell them your hotel or room number.

Refuse all offers of illegal drugs. The suppliers often work with corrupt police (or fake police) to shake you down.

If you leave the tourist zone and head over to the seedier and riskier Cancun city, be aware of reports of young prostitutes accusing their clients of rape. It's time consuming and expensive getting out of this bad rap. Best to avoid the situation.

## How to avoid trouble and tourist traps in Cancun's nightclubs

Pay for each round of drinks instead of running a "tab". The clubs are notorious for taking advantage of less-than-sober patrons and overcharging. For the same reason, check your change each time you pay.

Tipping bar staff and waiters is expected. But tell them "Yo me ocupari deti", which means, I'll take care of you later. It's the best

## Must do's in Cancun

### **Kayaking, Paddle boarding and Canoeing:**

Calm waters and low waves are the pre-requisites to fully enjoy these activities. Some resorts offer the equipment for free, but some rent it out. Among the well known resorts in Cancun, which have an inclusive package for all its amenities and facilities are Grand Park Royale Cancun, Iberostar Cancun and Hotel Riu Palace Las Americas.

**Snorkeling:** the best place to snorkel in the tourist zone is between the Club Med and Westin Regina Resorts. This part of

the ocean is where the waters are shallow, the waves are almost non-existent and the underwater beauty is simply amazing. Some other places for snorkeling are:

### **El Garrafon National Park in Isla Mujeres**

- boasts of almost 80 species of different fish and marine life.

**Xcaret and Xel-ha Eco Parks** - snorkeling equipment is available. There are instructors to teach you the basics of snorkeling

Cenotes: these are sinkholes and underwater caves. See our detailed pick of the best below.



**Fishing:** Fishing In Cancun is a favorite pastime for locals and tourists alike. Beach resorts offer trips to lucrative fishing grounds.

- Blue Marlin - June /August
- Sailfish - March/July
- Grouper, Barracuda, Kingfish - October/ December
- Amberjack - September/December
- Dolphin fish, Black Fin Tuna, Bonita - July/ August



**Zip lining:** Cancun offers the maximum thrill in zip lining as it covers a distance of 3 kms. across the jungle canopy. You can book for an all inclusive zip line adventure that includes hotel pickup, an army truck ride that will take you to a hidden grotto and a chance to have a spectacular view of the countryside. Prices from around \$100, but it's worth the excitement and fun.

**Camel Safari Adventure:** Explore the Caribbean on a gentle 45 minute camel ride. This comes with free snacks and bottled water to keep you refresh throughout your amazing journey.

**Sea Exploration adventures:** There's plenty of ocean life to spot, including marine turtles, flamingos, manta rays, crocodiles and a variety of colorful birds. You can visit at the historic Boca Iglesias, which is the first church in Mexico, built by the Spaniards.

**Off road adventures:** Ride like a pro; you can choose a modern BMW motorcycle or an enduro when you go through spectacular back country roads. Or try other off road adventures like paragliding, mountain biking and even horseback riding.

**Swim with the Dolphins:** You can actually hug, kiss and touch these cute mammals; enjoy watching them perform amazing



tricks and marvel at their peculiar behaviors. Resorts and hotels host programs that last around an hour, where children and adults are welcome to participate. It's safe

swimming with the dolphins; they are well trained and highly disciplined. A safety vest is required and a group of trainers is on watch.

**Insider's tip:** Visit a hacienda. They were "plantations" or "factories", and today a bunch of them have been restored as fancy hotels... The best ones in my opinion are this [www.thehaciendas.com](http://www.thehaciendas.com) **Felipe Mena**



# Yucatan places to stay - Isla Mujeres

This small island measuring 8 kms in length and half-a-kilometer in width is just 6 kms northeast of Cancun. It's a perfect hideaway from the hustle and bustle of busy Cancun. Isla Mujeres has shallow, calm waters and low waves ideal for snorkeling, diving and fishing. It's underwater beauty is simply amazing with bright, colorful coral reefs and different fish species that seem to shine under the sun's rays.

This island pays tribute to the Mayan Moon Goddess Ixchel. In fact, it has a small ruin, in honour of this Goddess who symbolizes femininity.

The north side of the beach is where all the resorts, restaurants, shops and nightclubs are located. But because it's small (and popular) the prices are high, as much as 800peso a night. For a cheaper alternative ask about a room located behind one of the restaurants. You can get one of these for as little as 150 pesos.

## How to get there?

You can take a boat to get there that departs from Puerto Juarez, located at Jose Lopez

Portillo Ave, Puerto Juarez. This is cheaper than the boat rides from Cancun.

## Where to go and what to do in Isla Mujeres:

- **Garrafon Natural Park:** A natural park with beautiful ocean scenery. You can also try snorkeling, kayaking, zip lining, hiking and beach volleyball.
- **Isla Contoy:** A sanctuary for birds and a home to almost 70 marine species. A

snorkeling haven and the best place to enjoy freshly caught fish with vendors selling blue marlin and tuna.

- **Marine safari adventure:** Take a boat for a diving and photography adventure. Have a close encounter with tiger sharks or watch whales in the Sea of Cortez.
- **Reef diving:** Many who have been to Isla Mujeres have dubbed it "The Aquarium of the World". It has a wonderful reef formation. Its shallow waters make it ideal for swimming and snorkeling even for kids.



- **Crafts:** At the center of the island, there's a women's cooperative that sell crafts like beads and purses. Artistically made and sold at very reasonable prices.

### Where to eat

Food choices in Isla Mujeres are endless. Try these specialties: chicken taco salad at Ruben's; chicken pitas at Pita Amore; personally made cookies and muffins at Rooster's Café and Bistro, and great Italian pastas at Caffè Italia.

## Yucatan places to visit - Playa del Carmen

If you are looking for the perfect balance of a laid-back beach town without sacrificing entertainment and modern conveniences, then Playa del Carmen, Mexico is an excellent location that should be considered.

Once a small fishing town, PDC has grown into a thriving resort area where you can access pristine beaches, great restaurants, and a fun melting-pot of travelers and residents from all over the world.

### Playa del Carmen or Cancun: Which is Better?

Located about an hour south of Cancun, Playa del Carmen has white beaches and crystal clear water, with a laid-back atmosphere. While Cancun is filled with tall all-inclusive hotels, Playa del Carmen has smaller boutique hotels. You can get away from the hustle and bustle of the bigger city, without sacrificing fun options for daytime beach clubs or evening entertainment.

### Is Playa del Carmen safe?

Tourism is the lifeblood of the economy in Playa del Carmen. As such, local authorities actively keep the streets safe and welcoming to visitors.

The main downtown area of Playa del Carmen is known as the "Central" part of town, and it has clean, well-lit streets lined with vacation rentals and outdoor restaurants. It is safe to walk through the streets during any time of the day, and you can often see police driving around to monitor the safety of everyone in the area.

Once you step outside of the tourist district of Playa del Carmen and into the "Republic," you will find local neighbourhoods that have more of a traditional Mexican feel and atmosphere.

It is still safe to move about, but, many people choose to stay in the tourist areas since they aren't familiar with the "good" and



“bad” neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the town. Don't be worried though, Playa del Carmen is considered one of the safest areas in Mexico.

### **Safety for women in Playa del Carmen**

As a woman, it is safe to travel to Playa del Carmen. Many of the hotels and condo apartments offer 24-hour security guards, although these guards are only there to put the tourist's mind at ease.

As you stroll along the main tourist walking street, 5th Avenue, you might hear some cat-calls from the street vendors as they are vying for your attention to shop at their store. Ignore them.

## **Public transportation & taxis in Playa del Carmen**

One of the biggest benefits to visiting Playa del Carmen is the fact that everything is within walking distance. No need to rent a car, because you can easily get around town on foot or by using the buses or taxis. You might even consider a bike rental, to quickly get from one area to another.

The streets are on a grid, with the avenues parallel to the beach and the streets (Calles)



running perpendicular. The avenues are numbered by fives, starting with 1st avenue at the beach, and then 5th, 10th, 15th, 20th, etc as you move away from the beach. 50th Avenue is also Route 307, the main coastal highway.

The Calles are numbered in twos and run the length of the city.

### **Buses**

To get around town, You will see two types of public transportation: “Collectivos” which are smaller vans that run the length of 30th Avenue (the main artery of the town), as well as larger buses that will take you to the outer areas of Playa del Carmen.

The bus and colectivo fares are the same: 5 pesos per person. When you step onto the

bus, simply reach up to hand your money to the driver.

### **Taxis**

Another option to is to catch a taxi, and these white cars can be seen all over the city. Stand by the side of the road to flag one down.

Keep in mind that the taxi fares are usually more expensive around the touristy 5th Avenue area, so if you want to save a little money, walk a block away from the beach to 10th Avenue where the fares will be much cheaper. Generally, a taxi fare is around 35 - 50 pesos depending on the length of the ride.

Beware, because some of the drivers might charge travellers more, commonly called the “gringo tax”. So, it is best to ask the rate before sitting in the taxi. Most taxi drivers speak enough English to get by.

## **Currency exchange in Playa del Carmen**

Many of the small vendors don't accept credit card or debit card payments, so you'll need cash for shopping, drinks, and food.

You might be tempted to exchange all of

your currency at Cancun airport when you arrive, but you'll get a poorer exchange rate than in Play del Carmen. There are plenty of "cambio" kiosks along the main 5th Avenue. Make sure to bring your photo ID.

You can also find ATMs along the streets and in the bigger stores.

## Playa del Carmen nightclubs, restaurants and bars

Playa del Carmen is a melting pot of people from all over the world, which is good for the food connoisseurs because you can find some amazing food in the area.

If you want a delicious, authentic, cheap meal, then El Fogon should be at the top of your list. Playa del Carmen has two El Fogon locations, and these restaurants are almost always filled with locals and a handful of tourists.

Once you try their "Tacos al Pastor" you will understand why the restaurant is so popular! "Tacos of the Shepherd" are made with marinated pork, cooked on a slow turning spit at the entrance of the restaurant. You can watch the chef prepare your tacos,

topping the delicious pork with a slice of grilled pineapple, cilantro and onions. The easiest way to find El Fogon is to look for the Mega grocery store on Constituyentes and 30th Avenue, and walk across the street to the north.

Other popular restaurants include:

- **Los Aguachiles** - Where you will find incredible fish tacos, located on Calle 34 and 25th
- **Babe's Noodles and Bar** - A retro themed Thai restaurant, located at Calle 10 between 5th and 10th
- **La Parrilla** - A fun grill serving traditional Mexican food, including quesadillas and enchiladas, located on 5th Avenue between Calle 8 and Calle 10.
- **Romeo Trattoria Pizzeria** - The best place for authentic pizza and amazing Italian food, located on Calle 4 between 10th and 15th





- **La Brocherie** - A blend of Fresh cuisine with a Mexican flair, located on 15th Avenue between Calle 4 and Calle 6.

If you are daring, try the tacos from the food trucks near the Mega supermarket on Constituyentes (Calle 18) and 30th Avenue. Look for the food trucks with a long line of locals, because you will know the tacos will be delicious.

When it comes to nightlife, there is something for everyone. 5th Avenue is a great place to go bar hopping. Many of the restaurants and bars offer live music, or you might have street performers approach your table.

### Here are some of the most popular places for live music:

- **Wah Wah Beach Bar** - With a variety of music styles and different bands throughout the week, located at Calle 2 on the beach.
- **Senor Frog's** - A favorite place for people who are looking for a wild night. Tuesday and Saturday nights offer live rock bands. Located near the ferry dock on Juanto and the beach.
- **Dragon Bar** - This bar is located at the Blue Parrot hotel, on Calle 12 and 5th

Avenue, and the bar typically has live rock music in the evenings. You will love the atmosphere, because the beach is the dance floor.

- **Alux** - A unique nightlife location, because the bar is located in a cave. Located a taxi ride away from the main 5th Avenue, it is worth the trip because you will find a restaurant, bar, and nightclub in a huge, natural cave.

***Insider's tip:** In Playa de Carmen, it is illegal to walk down the street with an open alcoholic beverage. So, finish your drink before you leave!*

Coco Bongo is one of the most popular dance clubs in the area, and it is a great place to go if you are looking for a fun time. The club fills up fast though, so make sure to show up early to miss the long lines of people waiting to get in.

Finding it hard to choose? Try services like Party Playa that offer a bar/club crawl experience so you can see all of the fun clubs in the area. The best thing about this experience is that you don't have to stand in the long lines to get in, because you have VIP access.

## Playa del Carmen Must-Do Activities

There are activities catering to adults, children, and everyone in between. The easiest way to book these is by talking with one of the tour agents located along 5th Avenue. If you use one of the agents remember there is room for negotiation on price.

### Eco parks & adventure parks

These are all-in-one activity "beach clubs" with swimming, snorkeling, beach-lounging, butterfly farms or more adventurous experiences such as zip-lining, and river tubing... enough for a full day's fun. Depending on which park you choose there may be entertainment or a swim with dolphins experience. The majority have change and toilet facilities, restaurants and bars. There's usually an entrance fee.

At one of the most popular parks, Xel-Ha, you can lounge on a beach, go snorkeling in the river or the estuary, go zip-lining, rope swing into the water, and cross a rope bridge. There's the park's own cenote, a cave, a grotto, maya ruins, jungle trails and a children's play area. Plus 4 restaurants, 4 bars, change rooms, and it has Wi-Fi! Entry is around \$80 USD.



Photo: Piedra del Valo

### **Eco Tours**

The local Mayans have worked hard to preserve the ecosystem in the Riviera Maya, and you can enjoy tours that are designed to help you see the area without disturbing the wildlife. These eco tours offer a variety of itineraries, and often include cenotes and snorkeling.

### **Snorkeling**

You can find good snorkeling right off the main beaches in Playa del Carmen. Many

of the hotels offer snorkel gear rental, or you can find a tour company on 5th Avenue that can book a day tour to other snorkeling areas. It might be worth taking a tour to visit some of the beautiful sites just south of Playa del Carmen where turtle sightings are common.

### **Scuba Diving**

PDC is a popular destination for scuba divers, because there are some unique sites in the area. When you are booking your scuba

tours, make sure to plan a day to go diving in the cenotes as well as a day to see the world-famous Santa Rosa Wall in Cozumel. Many of the local dive shops offer a charter day trip that leaves from the Playa del Carmen beaches to take you directly to the dive sites in Cozumel.

### **Swimming with the Sharks**

Depending on the time of year, you might have the experience of swimming with sharks. During the winter months, bull sharks come into the area, and scuba tours take daring divers to see these majestic creatures.

During the summer months whale sharks come into the area to breed. These tours



only allow snorkeling, but they take you to an area where hundreds of these large creatures are gathered. Don't be scared, there are no recorded shark attacks in Playa del Carmen.

### **Fishing Boat Tours**

The oceans are filled with fish, and these excursions can be planned for fisherman of all skill levels. It is unlikely that you will come back empty-handed, because the boat captains know right where to go to find the populated fishing areas.

### **Dune Buggy Jungle Tours**

If you want an activity that will get your heart racing, then consider a dune buggy tour. You will have the opportunity to ride ATVs through the jungle trails, so that you can explore untouched beaches, and places far away from the main touristy areas. .

### **Yoga and Pilates**

There are several popular yoga studios, offering many types of yoga and Pilates classes. For a fun, outdoor yoga experience check out the donation-based classes at the Kava Kasa in the central area of Playa del Carmen. Other popular yoga studios include YogaLoft, Yoga By the Sea, and Yoga By the Way. Some people choose to visit Playa del

Carmen to attend a yoga retreat, and enjoy a week filled with yoga classes, relaxation, delicious food, and cultural experiences.

### **Quinta Avenida Shopping**

You have seen 5th Avenue mentioned several times in this guide for a good reason. 5th Avenue, also known as Quinta Avenida, is a pedestrian-only street, lined with bars, restaurants and shops.

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### **Cirque du Soleil JOYA**

The Vidanta Riviera Maya hotel hosts the JOYA Cirque du Soleil show. Book your tickets, and make sure to pay extra for the bus pickup in Playa del Carmen.

Two of the most popular activities in Playa del Carmen are the cenotes and tours of the ruins. Because these activities are so popular, you will see detailed sections below listing the information that you need.

### **X'cacel Beach**

This pristine beach is located south of Playa del Carmen, marked by a sign on the highway between the Xel-Ha park and Chemuyil. It is a remote beach, and worth the drive down the Federal Highway 307, because you will find a quiet sanctuary far away from the busy beach clubs.

This area attracts a different group of beachgoers, and it is a laid back atmosphere. Depending on the time of year you might have the chance to see grown turtles making their nests on the sandy beaches, or hundreds of baby turtles crawling from the nests back to the ocean.

A donation of 10 - 20 pesos is requested from each visitor, and the money is used to preserve the sanctuary. When you visit, make

sure to take a dip in the freshwater cenote hidden away from the beach in the jungle.

Also, X'cacel is a nice place to go snorkeling, so bring your fins and mask so that you can explore the nearby coral reef. The best snorkeling can be found off the north end of the beach.

## Yucatan places to visit - Cozumel

Just offshore southeast of Playa del Carmen this island is a less frenetic, low-rise version of the mainland resort towns Cancun and Playa del Carmen.

There's still plenty of resort-style hotel accommodation, but there's more space, and once you're outside the only town on the island, San Miguel, it's very laid-back.

Cozumel bills itself as a destination for romantics and adventurers. Honeymooning couples can get away from the crowds, and family groups can enjoy the activities on offer at the resorts and adventure parks.

It's also popular with cruise ships which dock at the jetty and disgorge their holidaymakers for the day.



There is an airport but most people get to the island via the ferries that run from Playa del Carmen.

**Insider's tip:** *There are two ferry companies. Buy a one-way ticket, there's no discount for a return ticket. That way you'll be able to get on whichever ferry is leaving next when you return from the island.*

San Miguel and the majority of the activities are on the western side of the island. The eastern side is open to the Caribbean and is windier and wilder – but you will be able to find a secluded spot.

### What to do on Cozumel

The diving and snorkelling is excellent. There are dive shops everywhere on the island.

**Insider's tip:** *dive shop prices are for tanks and belt only, there'll be an additional charge for mask, buoyancy vest, fins and regulator – so ask for an all-inclusive price before choosing an operator.*

### Beach lounging

The majority of the western shore is rocky and not suitable for swimming. The best beaches have been turned into “parks” or privately operated beach clubs. Some charge an entry fee that gets you access, a chair and umbrella and use of the toilets and change rooms. They have restaurants and bars and other activities such as snorkelling, and other water sports.

### Getting around Cozumel

There's plenty to do in the vicinity of the ferry dock, so walking is an option.

The western shore beach parks are a little further afield (for example Paradise Beach is 5 miles/8kms south of the ferry terminal), but there are taxis to get you there.

### Motor scooter and jeep rental

You can rent a motor scooter, known locally as a moto, or a jeep to drive yourself around the island.

**Insider's tip:** Ignore the unbelievably cheap moto and jeep rental deals from the touts who over-run you on the ferry dock. The deals come with conditions – usually a mandatory sales pitch about timeshare on the island, or they're extorting a commission from the shop they take you to!

If you don't know how to ride a moto, or have limited experience of riding one, do not imagine you will magically acquire the skill because you are on holiday. Tourists are frequently injured when they crash or just fall off a moto. If you're travelling at even a low speed and wearing shorts you will lose a lot of skin at best. Broken bones will end your holiday prematurely. Fatalities are common.

**Insider's tip:** make sure you are properly licensed to ride a motorcycle. Travel insurers like World Nomads may deny any claims for medical expenses if you are not properly licensed (and therefore acting illegally). Hint – when the guy who rents you the bike says you don't need a license he might have a vested interest.

## Quiet, laid-back destinations

There's nothing wrong with partying all day and all night, but if you're looking for some peace and quiet and a more genuine Mexican experience there are still plenty of options on Yucatan.

## Yucatan places to visit - Tulum

The major attraction of Tulum is the Maya ruins right on the beach. Spectacular. Plus some of the most beautiful and accessible Cenotes are also in the area, as well as a selection of Maya ruins nearby.



Tulum is mostly the antithesis of Cancun. The accommodation at Tulum Playa is eco-friendly – most switch off the power at midnight and facilities are designed to protect and be in harmony with the environment (read – you can't flush toilet paper). You'll need to go into Tulum Pueblo to stock up on supplies.

It's a cheaper alternative base to explore the ruins and Cenotes of Yucatan. But if you want to enjoy the ruins at Tulum (north of the playa) go early in the morning or late in the afternoon to miss the day-trippers.

## Yucatan places to visit - Isla Holbox

Holbox is a small paradise located northwest of Cancun. It is not anything like the other islands Mujeres or Cozumel. You won't find a lot of tourism, roaring nightlife, or high street shopping. If you are looking for a peaceful spiritual environment, where you can enjoy the silence and embrace nature, Holbox is perfect.

A large part of the population is made up of expatriates and travellers who planned to visit for a few days, but stayed for months - known as "flotantes". This means there is plenty of opportunity to hang out with young international travellers.

The most unsavoury characters you are likely to meet are the local mosquitos, which can be very aggressive. And watch out for racoons if you are camping.

All-in-all, this is not a tourist island, this is where people come to "drop out".

Consequently, the crime you see in other resort towns doesn't exist here.

## Getting around Holbox

There are no pavements, roads or cars, in fact you can walk barefoot around the island



(but avoid the billabongs as you could get cut and risk infection). People generally get around the island on golf carts, which can be rented by the day (150 pesos. "Taxis" are also an option, with journeys usually costing around 30 pesos. Bike rental is available too, just ask at the Inti Balam craft shop or Juan Carateca in front of Carioca Pizza.

***Insider's tip:*** You may find an ATM on the island - it might work, it might not. It might have money, it might not. Most establishments are cash only. The official accepted currency is the Mexican Peso.

There are no currency exchanges or banks

on the island, so make sure you have enough money to last your trip. It is perfectly safe to carry money with you around the island.

Don't miss the sunset. Watch the sun go down while enjoying a delicious cocktail at Hotel Zomay beach bar. Lots of expats meet here and it's one of the best bars in town. Because it is a small fishing village, most locals also enjoy having a drink on the beach and like to test their singing skills at karaoke. Bars to enjoy the island's nightlife include Bambu, Tribu, El Pescador and Bahama Mama. Full moon parties also take place on the beach.

## Staying healthy on Isla Holbox

Bring mosquito repellent. As a natural reserve, it is recommended to use biodegradable repellent. But in an extreme situation, the best brands are:

It is common to find small scorpions, especially if you are staying in a palapa, so it is good idea to shake out towels, hats and shoes before use! However, they are not as dangerous as they are in other places.

If you are camping, beware of racoons. The island is overpopulated with them and they destroy anything they find. Avoid leaving food out or in open bags - or anything that may attract an unwanted visitor!

Avoid drinking tap water - opt for bottled as far as possible.

Health care on the island is poor. In an emergency, it could take 3-4 hours during the day, but at night the only way you can reach a hospital is by arranging a boat or a private plane to take you.

## Other places to stay

**Mahahual:** at the southern end of the coast is a town that was once a sleepy fishing port. But a cruise ship jetty has changed all that with restaurants, bars quad bikes and jet skis catering to the day-tripper crowds. Good news though, the further away from the dock you get the less influence the cruise ship crowds have and it's more like it used to be.

**Valladolid:** is a small, colonial city between Cancun and the state capital Merida. It's the closest town to Chichen Itza, the most

popular Mayan archaeological site, and a great place to base yourself to explore others.

**Sian Ka'an:** South from Tulum, it is a well-preserved natural reserve. Great for camping.

**Punta Allen:** (it is 50 km south from Tulum) is a must see place.

**Bacalar:** It is a lagoon, amazing place, beautiful, not crowded, amazing water colours.



# Guide to Mayan ruins of Yucatan

By [Sarah Rainer](#)

You can't visit the Yucatan without taking a trip to see the beautiful Mayan ruins in the area. There are a number of archaeological sites that are still undiscovered, but some of the bigger locations have been uncovered and restored for tourists and locals to visit.

With all of the Mayan ruins tour sites, it is important that you prepare to spend time in the hot sun. Many of these sites get very warm, and travelers can quickly get in trouble if they aren't staying hydrated. So, take plenty of water, a hat, some sunscreen, and be prepared to sweat while you are visiting the sites.

You will find vendors selling water bottles outside of the entrance to the ruins, but, it's expensive. So stock up before leaving on your day trip.

***Insider's tip:** If you want to minimize the amount of time that you spend walking, look for bike taxis near the ticket booths at many of these Maya sites. For a minimal price, you can sit on a comfy bench and take a ride to the ruins instead of walking on the dusty trails.*



Here are 5 of the best Mayan archaeological sites in Yucatan and the Riviera Maya.

## Ek Balam

Ek Balam (meaning 'glorious jaguar' in Mayan), a rather smallish site covering an area of 1 km<sup>2</sup> which was inhabited from 700 to 1000 AD, is located in the bush some 25 kilometres north of Valladolid.

Fortunately, despite being reachable in the course of a daytrip from Cancún, it's not (yet) well-known and thus less frequented

than the major ruins like Chichén Itzá or Tulúm.



The main attraction of Ek Balam is hands down the stucco front with its magnificent pattern and spectacular three-dimensional sculptures, which can be found on the stairs of the main pyramid. The latter is still accessible and has a height of 30 m. Don't let the extremely steep stairs keep you from climbing it; the view up there is simply priceless!

### Chichén Itzá

Chichén Itzá, undoubtedly the most famous Maya ruin and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, can be reached in approximately 45 minutes from Valladolid.

Make sure to arrive early (8-9 AM) in order to avoid the crowds brought by innumerable coaches from Cancún.

Chichén Itzá is estimated to have been inhabited between the 8th and 11th century AD and has a total size of 8 km<sup>2</sup>. The most important buildings at Chichén Itzá are the world-famous Kukulcán pyramid, the Great Ball Court where the Mayas used to play the Mesoamerican ballgame 'Juego de Pelota', the 'Temple of the Warriors' with its Group of a Thousand Columns, the 'Cenote Sagrado', a perfectly circular waterhole where gruesome sacrifices were held, and 'El Caracol', one of the rare round buildings in



Mayan architecture which is theorized to have been an observatory for astronomical events.

Don't forget to clap in front of the steps of the Kukulcán pyramid and right in the middle of the Great Ball Court, you'll be surprised by the result!

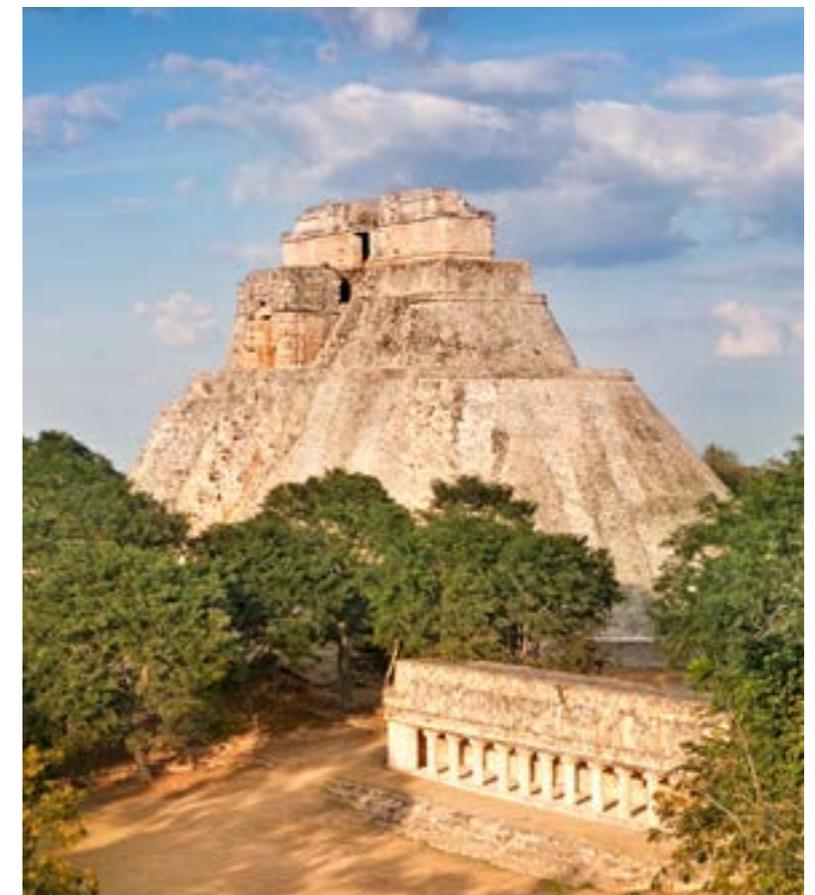
### Uxmál

Uxmál, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, can be found about 80 km southwest of Mérida – the capital of the state of Yucatán –

and (together with Chichén Itzá) represents one of the most important Maya sites of the Yucatán Peninsula.

Its period of glory is assumed to have been between the 8th and 10th century when roughly 20.000 inhabitants populated the ancient city. I was mesmerized by the 38 m tall 'Pyramid of the Magician' with its oval ground-plan, which happens to be unique in Mayan architecture!

During my visit I also discovered the Great Pyramid (which is 30 m tall and still climbable), the ball court, the 'Governor's



Palace' which, with its splendid frieze and perfect proportions, is told to be the most outstanding Mayan building there is, and much more.

One last fun fact on Uxmál: hundreds of iguanas of all sizes populate the site, so keep your eyes open while wandering around.

### Calakmul

Calakmul, a very remote UNESCO World Heritage Site located right in the heart of the jungle and merely 30 km away from the Guatemalan border, was by far my favorite ruin. In order to get there you'll either need to rent a car or take a taxi (though I recommend the former), since there's no public transport available. The day before we spent the night in Campeche, a charming colonial city on the Gulf coast of Mexico, and from there it took us around 5 hours to reach the site.

Some facts and figures about Calakmul: Together with Tikal (located 100 km south in today's Guatemala) it represented the most important and at the same time the biggest city in Mayan history! The site covers an area of approximately 25 km<sup>2</sup> (!), where

archaeologists found more than 6000 buildings and structures. It is estimated that 60.000 – 100.000 inhabitants once populated the ancient city.

A must-do when visiting Calakmul is climbing the 53 m tall pyramid 'Estructura II' – reaching the top and looking at the endless jungle around you will be an unforgettable experience! While strolling through the paths, I encountered different kinds of monkeys, peacocks and armadillos. Rumour has it there even exist jaguars, but (un)fortunately I didn't bump into one of them.

I absolutely do recommend putting up with the long journey to Calakmul as it's just a matter of time until tourism will take over the area and transform it into another crowded spot.

### Tulum

Tulum represents the only Maya site located directly on the shore and in addition receives the most visitors of all the ruins!

The ancient city was mainly populated between the 12th and 14th century AD and contains about 50 buildings (temples,

palaces and houses). Although they are architecturally not as interesting as the ones in Uxmál or Ek Balam, the spot itself absolutely enchanted me with its breathtaking surroundings.

When visiting the ruins, the same rule as in Chichén Itzá applies – if possible, go there first thing in the morning, as huge amounts of tourists arrive at around 10 AM.

Tulum is considered to be one of the most stunning beaches in the world, so make sure you bring a towel and soak up the sun on the white sand!



# Exploring the Cenotes of Yucatan

By [Jasmin Sherif @ Stunning Places](#)

## 6 of the best cenotes in Yucatan

Although there are an estimated 7,000 cenotes in Mexico, swimming in one feels like an exclusive adventure. These cenotes are essentially sinkholes in the earth's surface where rainfall has slowly eaten away at the limestone over millions of years.

Some of these cenotes are completely open like a lake, or completely closed with only a small opening, or somewhere in between. While many of them have clear fresh water, you can also find those with large blue-green algae build up, creating rich nutrients and an amazing swimming experience.

If you have a rental car, then you can drive to the cenote sites on your own. They are fairly easy to find, because there are big signs on the main highway for the most popular sites. Expect to pay a fee at the entrance, and they often offer snorkel gear rentals for people who want to get in the water.

Many people agree that it is usually best to book a cenote tour with a guide though,

especially if you aren't familiar with the caverns. These caves can be deep and dangerous if you explore in unmapped areas, but it is a very safe activity if you go with someone who knows the cenote.

Cenote tours can be booked through many of the bigger hotels, and you can also find tour booking booths in all the tourist towns.

Here are our picks for the best cenotes on the Yucatan Peninsula for swimming and where to find them.

### **Cenote Yokdzonot**

Amidst the Maya Jungle and just a 15 minute drive from the Mayan pyramids at Chichen Itza is the town of Yokdzonot. Follow the signs to the Ecological Park and you'll find the beautiful freshwater cenote.

The cenote is run by 18 local Mayan females, so ensure you take care when visiting this delicate area. The site itself is enchanting and the women who run it have set up several facilities including a restaurant, kitchen, and public bathrooms.



**Cost:** \$8 per person – includes optional life jacket and visor.



### Cenote Dos Ojos

Located just 15 minutes north of Tulum off Highway 307, or a one hour drive from Cancun Airport, Cenote Dos Ojos is a flooded cave system first discovered in 1986.

Although it continues to be explored today, the cave system is known to extend at least 61km, and is one of the deepest known cave passages with a depth of 118 metres.

Dos Ojos, meaning 'two eyes', refers to the two cenotes connected by a large cavern zone. One of these cenotes is clear blue water, giving snorkelers and divers high visibility. The other, named the 'black eye', is virtually light-free and visitors will need a flashlight to dive here. The area is very



Photo credit: [www.planetnpeople.de](http://www.planetnpeople.de)

cramped however, and isn't for everyone. There are also dry caves which divers can surface at, including the famous bat cave.

Remember to bring food with you to this cenote, as there are no restaurants on site.

**Cost:** \$5 – \$10 for swimmers, snorkelers, and onlookers. Prices start at \$130 for a 2 tank dive.

### Cenote Azul

Just off the highway between Chichen Itza and Valladolid is the beautiful secluded Cenote Azul, situated in an ecological and archaeological park. From Playa Del Carmen or Tulum, visitors can take an inexpensive minivan or taxi to reach Cenote Azul.

The cenote is 26 metres deep, surrounded by vegetation, and has crystal clear water perfect for swimming in. The beautiful turquoise water and marine life also make this a divers dream.



If you aren't a diver, there are still plenty of things to do here, such as jumping off the mini cliff into the water, wading through the shallow pools, or simply having a picnic in the beautiful area.

**Cost:** Approximately \$3

### **Cenote Samula**

Located in Dzitnup, this underground cenote is one of the most photographed cenotes in the Yucatan. A short taxi ride from Valladolid will take you to the complex that contains both Samula and its neighbour, X'Keken.

The massive hole in the ceiling allows a huge system of roots to reach towards the water nearly 8 metres below.

To access the cenote, visitors must go down



Photo credit: [Grutasloltun2](#)

a stone staircase, followed by a wooden staircase that leads to a viewing platform. From here, you can swim through the crystal clear water. A series of ropes have been set up to make it easier to cross the water, and snorkelling equipment is available to rent.

**Cost:** \$5

### **Cenote Ponderosa**

For those who want to mix a little history into their holiday, Cenote Ponderosa is perfect for discovering some Mayan rituals. Cenote Ponderosa is located just 10 minutes south of Puerto Aventuras on Highway 307. From the turnoff, a 1 mile dirt road leads out into the jungle where the cenote is located.

Also known as the Garden of Eden, this cenote was once the location of human sacrifices and the offerings of jade and gold, which were thrown into the water.

The cenote is 15 metres deep, and visitors will see shimmering fish flitting in and out of underwater caves. The area is covered partly by a rocky ceiling, as if chiselled from the side of the rainforest. Visitors can jump from the rocky ledge and swim out to the sunny freshwater pond for snorkelling, or experience cavern and cave diving.

Diving equipment is available to rent on site,



Photo credit: Mike Plavonil

so why not try your luck at discovering some ancient treasure.

**Cost:** \$8

### **Grutas de Loltun**

The largest and most interesting cavern on the Yucatan Peninsula, Grutas de Loltun is a treasure trove of data for archaeologists. Carbon dating has been used at this site, revealing that humans used these caves 2,200 years ago.

Murals of hands, faces, and animals have been found here, but sadly not many of these remain due to people touching them.

Even if you don't like swimming or diving, Grutas de Loltun allows visitors to view the area without having to get wet. Guides lead you through a network of caverns featuring



tree roots bursting through the ceiling. These intricate caves create adventure and mystery, and an unforgettable experience.

The cenote is 3 miles south of Oxkutzcab on highway 188 about 60 miles from Merida.

Cost: \$8

***Insider Tip:*** *If you want to visit a cenote get to know a local diver and ask him or her to take you to an uncrowded cenote. There are a few thousand cenotes in Yucatan, divers know a bunch of them, and they are as beautiful as the famous ones.* **Felipe Mena**

## What you'll need to explore cenotes

For a day at one of these beautiful cenotes, you'll need swimmers, sunscreen, water, thongs, and a towel. You may also want to pack some food, as some of the sites do not have anywhere to purchase food. Most of the sites have snorkelling equipment, changing facilities, flashlights, and anything else you might need.



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Becki is a US based traveller and freelance writer who has made the most of her backyard – South America. She shuns the glitzy tourist spots for the places that truly embody what it means to be a nomad.

### **Melvin Melchor Leal**

In his youth Melvin confesses he wrote romantic poems, unsung love songs and short stories. Now, thankfully for us, he turns his pen to travel writing, and has travelled extensively throughout Mexico.

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Yasmin is a blogger, traveller and contributor to [stunningplaces.net](http://stunningplaces.net), an online travel magazine dedicated to helping travellers find and explore new places around the world.

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