



EYEWITNESS TRAVEL

TOP 10

CANCUN & THE YUCATAN



THE 10 BEST OF EVERYTHING

How to Use this Top 10 Guide

This DK Top 10 guide is one of a new generation of illustrated travel-guide eBooks that guarantees you make the most of your visit – before, during and after your stay. Use this eBook both to plan your trip and explore your destination when visiting. So, before you depart, browse the city's highlights, check out the themed sightseeing lists or simply tap through the guide and be inspired.

The best way to explore this guide is to begin at the main **table of contents**. The first section of the eBook shows you, quite simply, the best sights in the destination. This is followed by: **Top 10 of Everything** – themed Top 10 lists that allow you to make the most of your time away; **Around the Destination** – must-see sights, area by area; **Streetsmart** – essential practical information; and the **General Index** (a great alternative to **Search** when you need to quickly look up a keyword or specific sight).

Shorter **contents** lists appear at the start of every section in the guide, and are designed to make chapter navigation quick and easy. You can jump back to these by clicking on the chapter-heading **links** that sit with an arrow icon at the top of every article.

There are dozens of useful, easy-to-use **maps** at the back of this eBook. Select the "View map" links throughout the guide to see larger-scale versions fill your screen.

As you use this guide, create a personalized itinerary by **bookmarking** the sights, venues and activities that are of most interest, giving you the quickest possible access to everything you'll need for your time away.

Price guide

All price ranges quoted for hotels in this guide are based on a standard, double room per night (with breakfast if included), taxes and extra charges. Similarly, all price ranges quoted for restaurants are based on a three-course meal for one with a beer or soda (or equivalent meal), taxes and extra charges.

THE YUCATÁN'S TOP 10

THE YUCATÁN'S TOP 10



**THE MUST-SEE
SIGHTS AND
EXPERIENCES**



The Yucatán's Top 10

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Highlights of the Yucatán

Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula has a special atmosphere and an immense variety of attractions, including some of the world's best beaches and diving areas. The modern, glittering resorts of the east coast's "Mayan Riviera" lie alongside charming old Spanish Colonial towns, sleepy Mayan villages, and the awesome remains of ancient civilizations.

[View map](#)

TOP 10 Cancún

Just a dot on the map before 1970, Cancún is now the biggest resort on the Caribbean. Its Hotel Zone occupies a huge, narrow sand spit shaped like a giant “7.” On the mainland is the fast-growing city of Ciudad Cancún – also known as Downtown. All along Boulevard Kukulcán are hotels, shopping malls, restaurants, and visitor attractions.



The spit at dusk

Top 10 Sights

[View map](#)

1 Night-time Cancún

Cancún’s pulsating nightlife is most concentrated in the “Corazone” but extends all the way to Ciudad Cancún. A non-stop party atmosphere is maintained in clubs varying from Mexican traditional to modern cool.

2 The Beach

Cancún’s greatest glory is made up of fine white silicate sand that’s soft and somehow always cool despite the warmth of the sun. There are several public access points from Boulevard Kukulcán. The north side of the “7” is best for swimming; the eastern beaches have more crashing waves.

3 Laguna Nichupté

The placid lagoon enclosed by Cancún Island offers more tranquility than the ocean, and is a favorite place for water sports. To the west are mangroves and jungle.



4 Punta Cancún and the “Corazone”

The heart of the action on the Hotel Zone strip is around the bend in the “7.” Here are vast shopping and entertainment malls, such as Plaza Caracol and Forum by the Sea, and the biggest nightclubs, The City [*Dady’O*](#), and [*Coco Bongo*](#).

5 Teatro de Cancún

This theatre is known for its lively, vibrant performances of traditional Mexican music and dance. It also hosts a show that includes the rhythms of the Caribbean (For further details see [*Teatro de Cancún*](#)).

6 Shopping Areas

Cancún is a shopaholic’s heaven. You have everything from international fashion in the vast, gleaming malls of the Hotel Zone to Mexican souvenirs in the markets of Downtown.

7 Avenida Tulum and Downtown

The hub of the more Mexican town of Ciudad Cancún is tree-lined Avenida Tulum. It’s a good spot for strolling and souvenir-shopping, and its cafés and restaurants are more tranquil than those by the beach.

8 El Meco Ruins

Near the Isla Mujeres ferry ports, the ruined city of El Meco dates back to AD 300. An impressive pyramid and the remains of an opulent Mayan palace can be seen.

9 El Rey Ruins

These ruins were part of a city that was prominent in the last centuries of Mayan civilization, just before the Spanish Conquest. By the ruins is a mock Mayan village, presenting a reconstruction of ancient Mayan life, including traditional cooking.

Wet'n Wild

There are slides and rides of all sizes at this huge water park; a snorkeling pool with stingrays and (harmless) sharks; an interactive dolphin pool; and bungee-jumping from the [Wet'n Wild, Cancún](#).

Tip: Kilometer markers, numbered from the north end, are used as locators along Boulevard Kukulcán.

Tip: Bus routes R-1, R-2 and R-15 run up and down between Avenida Tulum and along the Hotel Zone, 24 hours a day.

Tip: For good Mexican cooking and some local atmosphere, try the restaurants inside Mercado 28 in Downtown Cancún.

A Growing Resort

The Camino Real hotel by the tip of Punta Cancún is where Cancún all started back in 1971, when it opened as the first hotel on the island. The rest of the “7” was then empty except for trees, dunes, and a very few beach houses and fishing lodges. Since then, Cancún has acquired over 29,000 hotel beds.

Visitor Information

- Tourist info kiosks inside Town Hall, Av Tulum, La Isla and Forum malls, and Centro de Convenciones
- 998 881 0400
- www.cancun.travel
- **El Rey ruins**
- 8am–5pm daily
- adm \$3
- **El Meco ruins**
- 8am–5pm daily
- adm \$3

Cozumel

The island of Cozumel was the first part of the Yucatán to be “discovered” for modern visitors when, in the 1950s, the famous ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau came here. Second only to the Great Barrier Reef in the scale of its coral reef system, Cozumel was declared by Cousteau to be one of the finest diving areas in the world. The island's offshore reef is full of life and a dazzling array of colors. Onshore, Cozumel has an easygoing atmosphere, ideal for families.

Top 10 Sights

[View map](#)

1 San Miguel

Cozumel's only town has a laid-back street life centered on the waterfront (Malecón) and Plaza Cozumel. For shoppers, there's the modern and very lavish [Punta Langosta](#) mall and cruise terminal.



San Miguel Harbor

2 Museo de Cozumel

Cozumel's charming waterfront museum in San Miguel illuminates the history of Mayan Cozumel, the arrival of the Spaniards, and the dawn of the pirate era. It also has a lovely rooftop café (For further details see [Café del Museo, Cozumel](#)).

3 North Beach Hotel Zone

The island's biggest upscale hotel cluster is situated along a shaded boulevard north of town. Multistory hotels and resort complexes line a row of intimate beaches. Pools, water sports, and every comfort are on hand, and there are fine views across the channel to the Yucatán mainland from most hotel rooms.

4 Paraíso Reef

Shallow and close to the shore, this is a favorite reef for snorkeling, beginners' scuba courses, and easy diving by day and night. Parrot fish are common.

5 Laguna Chankanaab

Created around a natural coral lagoon, this glorious park includes a botanical garden, a dolphin pool, a pretty beach, and reefs that are ideal for novice divers.



6 Playa Mai and Playa San Francisco

Two of Cozumel's best beaches, packed with facilities for water lovers, from banana boat rides to surf aqua exploration.

7 Palancar Reef

The most famous of Cozumel's reefs, with fabulous coral canyons and caves in livid reds and blues. The waters are full of vibrant creatures, including the luminous [*angelfish*](#).

8 Parque Punta Sur

A wildly diverse nature reserve, with turtle-nesting beaches, a snorkeling area, and huge mangroves and lagoons that are home to crocodiles and flamingos. There's also a lighthouse and a tiny Mayan temple.

9 Punta Santa Cecilia and Chen Río

The east side of the island is more rugged and windblown than the west, with rocky, empty beaches and crashing surf that can be dangerous to swim in. At Punta Santa Cecilia there's a lonely beach bar, Mezcacalito's, which has great views, while [Chen Río](#) has a lovely sheltered beach and an idyllic beach restaurant.

10 San Gervasio Ruins

Cozumel's Mayan capital was one of the richest religious and trading cities in pre-Conquest Yucatán. The layout of its pyramids and small palaces gives a strong impression of life in a Mayan community.

Tip: The waters off Cozumel are so clear and some reefs so close to the surface that you can often see as much by snorkeling or free-diving as you can by using scuba equipment.

Tip: Some of the most atmospheric places to eat are the restaurants scattered along the wild east coast of Cozumel.

Mayan Cozumel

As a shrine to Ixchel, goddess of fertility, Cozumel was one of the most important places of pilgrimage in the Yucatán in the centuries just before the [Spanish Conquest](#). A visit here was seen as especially important for childless women, though everyone in Mayan Yucatán tried to make the trip at least once in their lives.

Visitor Information

- **Parque Chankanaab**
- 10am–4pm daily
- adm \$17, discount for under 12s; snorkel hire extra
- **San Gervasio ruins**
- 9am–4pm daily
- adm \$9, under 6s free
- **Parque Punta Sur**
- 10am–4pm daily
- adm \$15, under 6s free
- **Museo de Cozumel**
- 9am–5pm daily
- adm \$3

- **Cozumel Parks**
- 987 872 2940
- **Tourist information**
- 987 872 7585
- www.islacozumel.com.mx

TOP 10 Playa del Carmen

If you prefer a beach-town atmosphere to the long hotel strip of Cancún, this is the ideal choice on the Mayan Riviera. Only a tiny fishing village with sand streets in the 1980s and a backpackers' hangout in the early '90s, Playa has blossomed into a fun town with an energetic beach- and nightlife.

Top 10 Sights

[View map](#)

1 Town Beach

Center of the action by day is the main beach, with more beautiful soft, white Yucatán sand and plenty of shoreline cafés. Beach volleyball is something of a specialty.



2 Quinta Avenida

Stretching north from the town plaza, “Fifth Avenue” is Playa’s main drag, for daytime shopping and nighttime promenading. Spread along the pedestrianized avenue is a multicolored array of shops, cafés, hotels, clubs, and pavement restaurants.

3 Nighttime Playa

After dark the Quinta buzzes with wandering crowds meeting up, dining and bar-hopping. With mariachi bands in some bars and techno DJs in others, there’s plenty of variety. The center of the action is the junction of the Quinta and Calle 12.

4 Hip Hotels

Playa is well known for its stylish small hotels, like Mosquito Blue on Calle 12, El Faro, and Acanto (For further details see [Haciendas and Hip Hotels](#)). Discreetly spectacular and with wonderful pools, they showcase contemporary elegance.



5 Xaman-Ha Mayan Ruins

Playa shares its ground with the site of a Mayan settlement known as Xaman-Ha. Several temples survive, most scattered around the Playacar area.

6 Playacar

This smartly landscaped development shows a different side of Playa. It encompasses resort hotels, winding lanes of luxury villas, a fine aviary, Mayan ruins, beach clubs, restaurants, and a championship standard [golf course](#).

7 Playacar Aviary

The aviary within Playacar contains a fine collection of toucans, parrots, flamingos, and over 50 other bird species in a lush green setting that seems almost like real jungle. A very easy way to see some of the Yucatán's rarer birds without trekking into the forest.

8 Playa Tukán and Mamita's Beach

Two beach clubs, with laid-back bar-restaurants, palapa-sunshades and loungers for hire, and snorkel tours. The hotels nearby all have arrangements so that guests can use the beach-club facilities free of charge.

9 Chunzukul Beach

Playa's best snorkeling spots are found on the beaches north of Mamita's, beyond the striking cabaña of Shangri-La. There are also nudist beaches along this stretch of coast.

10 Xcaret

Created around a natural lagoon 6 km (4 miles) south of Playa, [Xcaret](#) is a huge, imaginatively landscaped "eco-park" bursting with flora, fauna, and sea life.

Tip: Take your own snorkels. They're expensive to rent or buy in Playa.

Tip: For good traditional Mexican food at lower prices, eat away from the Quinta. Along Calle 4 there are several enjoyable, low-key restaurants with bargain seafood, like [Las Brisas](#).

The Beach Bar League

Unswervingly popular and the hub of the local scene ever since it first opened back in the days when Playa was just a village under palm trees, the [Blue Parrot](#) was voted "one of the world's ten best beach bars" in an international magazine survey of the late '90s. The judges must have enjoyed their research.

Visitor Information

- **Tourist information**
- Av 20 and 1^a sur
- 084 873 0242
- www.playadelcarmen.caribemexicano.com
- 9am–8:30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–5pm Sat, Sun
- **Xcaret**
- 098 883 0470
- summer: 8:30am–9pm, winter: 8:30am–8pm
- tours daily from Cancún and Playa del Mar
- adm \$79, children 4–11 half-price (under 5s free)
- www.xcaret.com.mx

TOP 10 Playa del Carmen: Xcaret

[View layout](#)

1 Underground Snorkeling River

This winding stream of clear turquoise water allows you to swim and snorkel all the way through the park and the Mayan village to the beach, via rocky canyons, pools, and caverns lit by shafts of daylight.



Snorkeling river

2 Dolphin Pools

Xcaret has two pools by the beach where visitors can swim with friendly dolphins. It's an extremely popular activity, and only a few people are allowed into the pools each day, so pre-book or try to reserve a slot as soon as you arrive at the park.

3 Sea Trek

A fabulous guided walk – not swim – right along the seabed, using weights to keep you from floating upwards and simple breathing apparatus. You don't need to be a great swimmer to enjoy this, and on the way you see all kinds of wonderful sea life from below.

4 La Caleta Cove and Blue Lagoon

Fine places for easy swimming. La Caleta (“the Inlet”) was the main harbor of Mayan Polé and is now a favorite snorkeling spot, with coral and tropical fish just below the surface. The Blue Lagoon is a big, ultra-relaxing clearwater pool behind the beach, with islands of thick vegetation inviting exploration.

5 Mayan Village and Ball Court

Reached via atmospheric passageways, the village endeavors to represent some of the life of the ancient Mayan world. This includes a reconstruction of a Mayan ball court, where a modern interpretation of the mysterious, long-lost [ball game](#) is played each afternoon. There’s also a well-presented museum by the park entrance.



Mayan Village

6 Butterfly Garden

One of the most spectacular parts of Xcaret, the *mariposario* is the largest butterfly garden in the world, part-hidden in a steep ravine beneath a giant net of a roof. Bursting with all manner of exuberant tropical flowers and vegetation, the garden is alive with an astonishing variety of colorful butterflies. Mornings are best.

7 Aviary and Zoo

Animal attractions are spread all around the park. Among the birds on view – all native to the Yucatán – are toucans, cute aracarís or “little toucans,” bright green parrots, and very rare birds like the quetzal, whose spectacular tail feathers were once used in the headdresses of Mayan lords. Animals include spider monkeys, bats, and pumas.

8 Turtle Pools

Near La Caleta, you can see different kinds of sea turtles – hawksbills, loggerheads, and leather-backs – in every stage of life, from newborns to grumpy-faced ancients with beautiful shells over 1 m (3 ft) long. The pools are part of a repopulation program to preserve this endangered species.

9 Forest Trail and Orchid Greenhouse

A well-signposted trail helps you explore many other parts of the park, through lush natural forest and passing further attractions, such as beehives, animal enclosures, a mushroom farm, and a wonderful greenhouse with more than 100 magnificent varieties of rare orchid. You can also explore a longer, guided trail on horseback.

10 Live Show

Presented nightly, this is a spectacular mix of entertainment spread around the village and theater. It begins with “ancient Mayan” rituals, mariachis and vibrant performances of folk music and dances from all over Mexico, and goes on to a *charrería*, or Mexican rodeo.

TOP 10 Isla Mujeres

Site of the first Spanish landing in Mexico in 1517, “Island of Women” takes its name from the idols of the goddess Ixchel found here. Though close to Cancún, the island has a laid-back atmosphere and has long been a backpackers’ favorite. It also has excellent diving and fishing opportunities.

Top 10 Sights

[View map](#)

1 Isla Town

Isla’s only town still has the look of a Caribbean fishing village, with narrow, sandy streets and wooden houses painted in bright pinks, yellows, greens, and blues. There are plenty of cafés and souvenir shops, and few cars.



Isla town

2 Playa Norte

This beach at the northern tip of the town is the place where many Isla visitors spend their days, with laid-back beach bars like [Buho’s](#) for refreshment breaks. With pure white sand and calm turquoise waters, it’s excellent for tranquil swimming.

3 Playa Secreto

To the northeast of Isla town, this “secret” beach is in a sheltered inlet that’s even more shallow and placid than Playa Norte, and is wonderful for small children. A foot-bridge across it leads to the Avalon Reef Club.



4 Dolphin Discovery

One of the largest interactive dolphin centers on the Riviera, offering visitors a range of options for swimming and diving with these ultra-friendly creatures. Other Dolphin Discovery centers are at Cozumel and Puerto Aventuras.

5 Hacienda Mundaca

The ruins of a 19th-century mansion built by an ex-slave trader have been transformed into a park, with a small zoo of Yucatán wildlife.

6 El Garrafón

This nature park and snorkeling center is created around a natural, shallow pool. There are restaurant equipment rental, and swimming and snorkeling opportunities in the rock pool, offshore reefs, or in the swimming pool.

7 Parque Escultórico Punta Sur

The southern tip of the island has been transformed into a sculpture park, with striking modern art works spread around the wind-blown headland and lighthouse.

8 Manchones Reef

Isla Mujeres' most popular reef for scuba courses and easy diving. Only about 10–12 m (30–40 ft) deep, the waters are safe and have plenty of colorful coral and fish to discover.

9 Sleeping Sharks Cave

An underground river meets the sea at this cave, attracting sharks that come to bask, trance-like, in the mixture of fresh and salt water. A must-see for experienced divers – but don't wake those sharks!

10 Isla Contoy

An uninhabited island about 30 km (18 miles) north of Isla Mujeres, Contoy is an important seabird reserve for pelicans, cormorants, frigate birds, spoonbills, and others. Day trips are run by companies on Isla.

Tip: The slow ferry from Pue to Juárez on Isla is the cheapest and nicest ride.

Tip: Rent a golf cart, scooter, or bicycle to see the whole island.

Tip: Gather food for a picnic at Isla Tuzet before touring the island.

The Lafittes

Isla Mujeres' most famous residents were the 19th-century Louisiana-born brothers Jean and Pierre Lafite, considered the last great Caribbean pirates. Sailing southward after falling out with the U.S. Government, they built a stronghold on the Isla lagoon, but were attacked by the Spanish Navy in 1821. Both badly wounded, they escaped in a boat, and Pierre is believed to have died in Dzilam Bravo on the Yucatán mainland. His brother's fate remains a mystery.

Visitor Information

- **Tourist office**
- Av Rueda Medina 130, to the left from the ferry quay
- 998 877 0307
- www.concunmexico.com.mx
- 9am–4pm Mon–Fri
- **Dolphin Discovery**
- 998 193 3350
- www.dolphindiscovery.com

- adm \$125 (swimming with dolphins), reservations essential
- **Hacienda Mundaca**
- 9am–6pm daily
- adm \$2
- **Parque Garrafón**
- 998 193 3366
- www.garrafon.com.mx
- summer: 8:30am–6:30pm daily, winter: 8:30am–5pm daily
- adm \$69–\$199
- **Parque Escultórico Punta Sur**
- 7am–10pm daily
- free

TOP 10 Tulum

One of the Yucatán's most beautiful places, Tulum offers a special combination of spectacular Mayan ruins and miles of superb, palm-lined beaches. Nearby, too, is the finest cave diving area in the world. This is the most popular destination in the Yucatán for finding cabañas – rooms in palm-roofed cabins right by the beach and the waves.

Top 10 Sights

[View map](#)



Tulum beach

1 Tulum Ruins

Mayan Tulum was a walled town and prosperous trading community at the time when the Spaniards arrived in the 1520s. The ruins include a recognizable main street, the Palace of the Halach Uinic, and the House of the Columns.

2 El Castillo

The most impressive of the Mayan buildings at Tulum is the great temple-pyramid. A flaming beacon at the top of the temple was once visible for miles.



3 Hippy Heaven

The oldest and simplest cabaña clusters – Don Armando’s, the Mar Caribe – are along the stretch of the beach road close to the ruins. Don’t come here if you want much privacy or more than basic showers and other facilities.

4 Secluded Heaven

Along the stretch of beach south of the T-junction in the road is a wide choice of beach cabins, from plain stick-and-sand-floor huts to luxurious cabañas, most of them secluded. Few have electricity and are lit only by candles at night.

5 Tulum Pueblo

The village of Tulum is a rambling place spread out along the main highway. Almost 100 percent Mayan just a few years ago, it now has a bank, bus terminus, cafés, small hotels, and backpacker services.

6 Gran Cenote

Along the road toward Cobá from Tulum are several accessible cenotes. The Gran Cenote is one of the most attractive for swimmers and snorkelers, surrounded by rock columns and exotic flowers, and leading into a wide, arching cavern.

7 Aktun-Ha Cenote

Another enjoyable cenote for swimming, with a broad, peaceful pool that runs into a dark and mysterious cave system. As you swim around the pool you see many shoals of tiny fish.

8 Tankah

A bumpy, winding road leads to this little-developed beach which has an enjoyable beach-bar and restaurant, and a large, easily swimmable cenote just inland of the track.

9 Dos Ojos Cenote

This cenote is the entrance to the world’s longest known underwater cave system, which stretches over 600 km (350 miles). The Hidden Worlds Center (For further details see [Dos Ojos Cenote and Hidden Worlds](#)) offers exhilarating tours.

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