



THE MEXICAN CARIBBEAN IS A WORLD OF ADVENTURES

AWAITING DISCOVERY

Exploring the states of Quintana Roo and Yucatan

Cancun is hosting TBEX this week, an international event that brings together travel bloggers from all over the world. The turquoise waters, soft white sand that's cool to the touch and the warmth of the Mexican people will captivate them and they'll soon find out that there is so much more to discover in the Mexican Caribbean than fabulous beaches. Amazing travel experiences await and no matter how many visits you make here, there's always something new to see in the states of Quintana Roo and neighboring Yucatan.

From ancient Maya pyramids to coral reefs, eco-adventure parks and nature reserves to vibrant communities, mysterious caves and cenotes and the gracious colonial towns in the Yucatan, just a few hours away, there's something for every interest, whether for families, nature lovers, adventure seekers, history fans, foodies and those who want to learn about a different culture. This really is a multifaceted destination like no other, the gateway to the Yucatan and a world of natural and historical wonders.

Take a look at what's in store when you step out outside your resort and start exploring:

Underwater World

Did you know that the Mesoamerican Reef, the world's second longest barrier reef runs south along the Mexican Caribbean coast from Contoy to the neighboring country of Belize? Six hundred miles of spectacular reefs, home to as many as 500 species of multicolored fish and other marine creatures, await discovery. From the reefs of Cancun and Isla Mujeres to Puerto Morelos, Akumal, Cozumel, first made famous by Jacques Cousteau, and Banco Chinchorro, an atoll in southern Quintana Roo, there are dive sites for advanced divers and beginners alike.

And you don't have to be a diver to marvel at the underwater world of the Mexican Caribbean. Many reefs are in shallow, calm waters and are great snorkeling spots, and crystal-clear caletas or inlets such as Xel-Ha Park, Yalku and Chankanaab on Cozumel are snorkel heaven.

The area's newest underwater attraction, Cancun's iconic Underwater Sculpture Museum entices divers and snorkelers alike. The creation of British artist Jason deCaires Taylor, it has 500 sculptures in different underwater galleries in the bay between Cancun and Isla Mujeres and at Punta Nizuc and is still expanding. In addition to being beautiful, the sculptures have a conservation role, as they provide a home for corals, sponges, fish and other reef dwellers.





For those who prefer not to get their feet wet, there are aquariums in Cancun and Xcaret Park, glass-bottom boats, semi-submersibles and the Atlantis submarine for a look at Cozumel's Palancar Reef.

The Ancient Maya

Travel back in time to the days of the ancient Maya. Visit some of the ancient cities that dot the Yucatan Peninsula and learn about Mayan architecture, art, society, religion and scientific achievements.

The cliff top city of Tulum and Chichen Itza, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that was also voted one of the World's Seven New Wonders in an online poll in 2007, are the area's most famous Mayan sites but there are many more to visit. How about a trip to Ek Balam, Coba or Chichen Itza's fellow World Heritage Site, Uxmal, the most important archaeological site on the Puuc Route south of Merida? If your Mayan discoveries look set to take you further afield, other major sites include Kohunlich and Dzibanche in southern Quintana Roo, another UNESCO World Heritage Site Calakmul in southern Campeche, Palenque in Chiapas and Tikal in neighboring Guatemala.

Start your Maya tour right here in Cancun with visits to El Rey and El Meco archaeological sites and the Cancun Maya Museum for an introduction to Maya culture.

Wild and Wonderful Nature

With ecosystems ranging from jungle and mangrove forest to coral reefs, the Yucatán Peninsula is a natural wonderland with plenty of exciting experiences to offer eco tourists. Whether you venture into the coastal wetlands in search of flamingos and herons, swim with the whale sharks in the summer or follow a guide through the jungle on the trail of spider monkeys, jaguars and toucans, the area is teeming with wildlife.

Plan an eco trip to Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, one of the largest protected areas in Mexico and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Then it's on to Rio Lagartos Biosphere Reserve on the north coast of the Yucatán where thousands of flamingos literally turn the horizon pink! Sail away to Contoy, an island bird sanctuary; visit Punta Laguna, a private community reserve near Cobá that is famous for its colony of spider monkeys or plan a dawn bird watching trip in the forest near Puerto Morelos. Further afield are Celestun, another great spot to see flamingos, and Calakmul Biosphere Reserve.

No matter what the season, bird watchers will have fabulous sightings but particularly during the winter. The Yucatan Peninsula is on one of the world's great bird migration routes and an estimated 150 million birds, including hawks, waders, ducks, songbirds and even hummingbirds, fly south from the US and Canada to escape the cold.





Beach Hopping

We know that you won't be able to resist the call of our beaches and in the Mexican Caribbean we have 500 miles of them! Discover Playa Norte on Isla Mujeres or remote Isla Blanca, and walk the Cancun shoreline, home to three Blue Flag beaches.

The fishing peaceful village of Puerto Morelos has wide family-friendly beaches sheltered by the offshore reef and the Riviera Maya offers a chain of picture-perfect beaches including Punta Maroma, Playa del Carmen, Paamul, Puerto Aventuras, Xpu-Ha, Akumal, Xcacel, Tulum and the shoreline in the Sian Ka'an Reserve and south to the Costa Maya. The island of Cozumel has spectacular beaches on both coasts and the island of Holbox just off the Gulf coast is an idyllic hideaway.

Island Gems

Discover the island treasures of the Mexican Caribbean: Isla Mujeres, Contoy, Cozumel and Holbox. You have four islands to visit, each one offering natural wonders, rich history, fabulous beaches and a unique ambiance.

Head for Adventure

Wildlife aside, the forests of the Riviera Maya offer even more thrills. Ever wanted to leap off a cliff into a still, clear jungle pool or cenote, glide through the trees on a zip line or explore a cave? There are jungle activity tours and cenote parks in the Riviera Maya to bring out the adventurer in all of us.

If you enjoy zip lining and the wind on your face as you fly through the jungle canopy, visit Xplor Park, where you'll do the longest and highest zip lining circuit in the area. That's not all, you can also swim and raft in an underground river and drive an ATV along forest trails. Other zip-lining experiences are available at Hidden Worlds, where you'll also snorkel in some spectacular cenotes and Selvatica near Puerto Morelos. For a non-stop jungle adventure try a multisport safari or an ATV expedition.

Cenotes & Caves

The limestone landscape of the Yucatan Peninsula is a labyrinth of underground rivers, caves and the cenotes or sinkholes filled with cool, crystal-clear water that form when cave roofs weaken and collapse over millions of years. Boasting the longest underground rivers in the world discovered to date, the area is a magnet for cave divers, biologists and archaeologists, all of whom are making fascinating discoveries.

The spectacular caves at Rio Secreto and Aktun Chen in the Riviera Maya and Balancanche and Loltun in Yucatan offer you the chance to discover this mysterious otherworld, held sacred by the Maya as the home of the gods.

Many cenotes are open to the public for swimming and snorkeling and you can do your own cenote-hopping trip. There's a chain of them to visit in the Riviera Maya, starting with the Ruta de los Cenotes in Puerto Morelos, continuing on to Puerto Aventuras and ending in Tulum. And more amazing cenotes await in the state of





Yucatan. Visit the Zaci Cenote in Valladolid, Dzitnup and Samula just outside the city and Ik-Kil en route to Chichen Itza.

An alternative is to sign up for the Xenotes, Oasis Maya day trip and discover four different cenotes during one day on the Ruta de los Cenotes.

World-famous Parks, Ideal for Families

Offering the perfect combination of aquatic fun, history, nature and Mexican traditions, Xcaret Park is a Mexican Caribbean must and it doesn't matter how many times you visit it, there's always something new to see and enjoy. Be sure to stay on for the evening show, it's spectacular and a moving tribute to Mexican culture.

Xel-Ha is another popular spot for families who love snorkeling and spending the whole day in the water. At the Garrafon Reef Eco Park on Isla Mujeres you can actually zip line over the Caribbean and Crococun in Puerto Morelos is a small nature park with crocodiles, friendly deer, monkeys and other creatures.

Take to the Water

Ready for an unforgettable day out on the waves? Sail through the turquoise waters of the Caribbean bound for Isla Mujeres. Head for the island bird sanctuary of Contoy or take in a spectacular sunset from the deck of a sleek yacht or a catamaran. Evening cruises include pirate parties or romantic lobster dinner cruises.

The Mexican Caribbean is one vast water playground and activities range from windsurfing and kite surfing to water skiing, speedboats, wave runners and jet skis. Paddle boarding and kayaks offer the chance to explore sheltered bays and lagoons, and fly boarding is growing in popularity in Cancun.

Fishermen can go in search of their own very big fish (catch and release) on a bill fishing trip and try tarpon or flats/fly fishing in the area's coastal lagoons.

Sports Galore

Take to the fairway on 14 immaculate golf courses in Cancun, Riviera Maya and Cozumel. Fine-tune your tennis game, go biking, parasailing or horseback riding; you can even learn to play polo in Puerto Morelos! And other sporting adventures include driving a luxury car, jeep safaris and a night of baseball, basketball, soccer or even lucha libre in Cancun.

Night Rhythms

The hottest nightclubs in Latin America, salsa bars, chic beach watering holes, dinner cruises, shows and every kind of live music, the Mexican Caribbean nightlife scene is pulsating. Mariachis serenade at every turn and traditional cuisine, music and dance are showcased to perfection in evening performances at Xcaret and Xoximilco Parks. For a quieter evening just stroll along the beach, watch the moon rise over the Caribbean and look up at the stars.





Colonial Treasures

Discover another facet of Yucatan's history by visiting its colonial towns: Valladolid, Izamal and the largest of them all, vibrant Merida. All boast impressive churches and convents, mansions and tree-lined squares where one can sit for hours and watch the world go by.

In addition to its colonial churches and opulent Belle Époque houses, Merida is renowned for its museums, galleries and its open-air cultural events during the week. Izamal is known as the "City of Gold" due to the bright yellow color of its huge convent and all the buildings in the town center. Valladolid has 16th-century churches, another sprawling convent, a colonial home known as Casa de los Venados that is also a folk art museum, and the Mayapan distillery on the outskirts of town that produces a tequila-like liquor from the blue agave plant using artisanal methods.

Learn about the history of henequen cultivation in the Yucatan by visiting an old hacienda or estate such as Hacienda Sotuta, Teya or Yaxcopoil. Henequen is a native agave plant that yields a tough fiber used to make rope, sacking and mats. World demand for rope fuelled an economic boom in the late 19th century and the plant was known as "green gold."

Meeting the Maya

Meeting the local people and learning about their lives is one of the most interesting aspects of travel and for many one of the most rewarding and the Mexican Caribbean offers many opportunities to do just that. Maya Ka'an is a new destination in central Quintana Roo comprising nine Mayan communities around Felipe Carrillo Puerto and in Sian Ka'an that offers eco adventures and trips to the villages to meet the inhabitants.

Sixteen different small group eco adventures and community trips are offered by tour operators from the villages themselves, meaning that local people benefit from this sustainable tourism initiative. Visitors can talk to village elders and learn about the history of the area, traditions and legends; walk through the forest gathering medicinal plants; watch honey and chicle, the tree sap that is the natural source of chewing gum being harvested and witness ancient rituals.

Further north, other villages to visit are Nuevo Durango, Punta Laguna, Campamento Hidalgo near Coba and San Angel and Solferino en route to Holbox.

Wherever you go in the Yucatan visit the markets, listen to the language, sample the cuisine or simply sit in the town squares and watch life go by. You may even be lucky enough to see a saint's day procession or fair and the village fiesta or vaqueria.

In the village of X'ocen near Valladolid, a community theater production called Momentos Sagrados Mayas (Sacred Mayan Moments) is staged from January to March on Sunday at 4 p.m. and gives visitors a glimpse of a world of timeless beliefs and customs. Over 200 actors of all ages from seven different villages take to an open-air stage to reenact scenes from daily life, culminating in the dances performed during the village fiesta.





Off the Beaten Track

If you take Highway 307 south and have days to spare, don't stop at Tulum, keep on going! You'll find that central and Southern Quintana Roo have many more natural and historical treasures to offer.

The Zona Maya comprises rural communities clustered around area capital Felipe Carrillo Puerto; this is the Mayan heartland and is known as the Zona Maya. Further south is the archaeological site of Chacchoben and the turn off towards the coast and the fishing villages of Mahajual and Xcalak.

A sheet of turquoise and aquamarine water, Bacalar Lagoon, also known as the Lagoon of Seven Colors, is spectacular and the Cenote Azul on its shores is the deepest sinkhole in the Maya World. A colonial fort is testimony to the area's history of Mayan uprisings and pirate raids.

You can make Bacalar or state capital Chetumal your base for exploring a chain of ancient Mayan cities in the jungle such as Kohunlich, Dzibanche, Oxtankah and Chakanbakan or for longer trips into southern Campeche to Calakmul or the neighboring countries of Belize and Guatemala.

Once in a Lifetime Experiences

How about swimming with the world's largest fish, the whale shark? From mid-May to mid-September these gentle giants gather in the northern waters of the Mexican Caribbean to feast on plankton and tours are available out to their feeding grounds. Marine biologists believe that this is the largest gathering of whale sharks in the world and a swim with these beautiful creatures is a once in a lifetime experience.

And incredible sightings don't stop there, during the year you can see manta rays, golden ray migrations and dolphins, swim with sea turtles and even dive with sailfish in the spring, the ocean's fastest predators.

A helicopter or ultra light flight along the coast is also a memory to treasure, or how about an evening walk in the jungle or on the beach, a light and sound show in the ancient cities of Chichen Itza and Uxmal or a candlelit dinner in the courtyard of a gracious old mansion or hacienda. There are so many unforgettable experiences here.

Viva Mexico!

Unlock the secrets of the Mexican kitchen. The national cuisine is so diverse that UNESCO declared it World Heritage in the category reserved for culture and traditions in November 2010 and there are so many delicious dishes to try. Spare some space for Yucatecan cuisine and if you like food then you'll love a Mexican cooking class in Cancun, Puerto Morelos, Valladolid or Merida.

For a Mexican evening out, head for Xoximilco, the new park from Experiencias Xcaret located five minutes to the south of Cancun Airport. A celebration of Mexican cuisine and music, it is inspired by the famous floating gardens and canals of Xochimilco on the outskirts of Mexico City. You'll board a colorful barge known as a





trajinera for dinner and a fiesta out on the water as you drift through a series of canals in the jungle.

Take in the unforgettable evening show at Xcaret and you'll soon be shouting "Viva Mexico." With 300 dancers and musicians on stage, it takes you on a spectacular tour of this wonderful country, its history and traditions.

