



Destination Guide: Cancun



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AAA Destination Guide: Cancun includes trip-planning information covering AAA recommended attractions and restaurants, exclusive member discounts, maps and more.

Imagine water so deeply turquoise that the color simply does not look real. Pair it with an expanse of pearly white sand for contrast, and then phase in the soothing aural backdrop of gently breaking waves. Add coconut palms: gracefully curving trunks crowned with arching green fronds rustled by a constant breeze. Install an azure sky. Mix well. *Voilà*—you have Cancún.

If this sounds like a seaside recipe cooked up in a laboratory dedicated to creating the ideal vacation, the truth is not all that far off the mark. While Mayan settlement of the Yucatán is believed to date as far back as 2,500 B.C.—and the Maya had abandoned their city strongholds before Spanish *conquistadores* even set foot on Mexican soil—Cancún dates only from the late 1960s. It came into being when the Mexican government, as part of an ambitious tourism development program, chose an offshore sandbar lying just off the Yucatán Peninsula's northeastern tip as the site on which to develop a resort (another version of the story is that a computer program selected the location).

It was a project on a grand scale—a master plan calling for a tourist zone, a residential area and a nearby airport was approved, bridges were built to connect Cancún Island to the mainland, a sewer system and other infrastructural necessities were installed and a makeshift city was erected to house workers who literally built paradise from the ground up. Cancún opened for business in 1974, the same year that the territory of Quintana

Roo (named after an army general who fought for Mexican independence) officially became a Mexican state.

The rest, as they say, is history. Cancún, a playground for families, honeymooners, spring breakers and just about everyone else, was a success from the word go. It has grown to become one of the most popular leisure destinations in the world, with a “Hotel Zone” of luxurious properties fronting an outstanding stretch of beaches. Not even a category 4 tempest was able to slow the city down.

Although Hurricane Wilma's ferocious winds and torrential rains caused major damage in October 2005, the city bounced back dramatically—even the beach sand that battering waves washed away was replaced.

This is a place to—depending on your pleasure—sun, swim, shop, eat and party. But above all, it is a place where you kick back and relax. Cancún is decidedly not colonial Mexico, steeped in time and tradition; here themed shopping complexes and raucous nightspots tend to overshadow historical and cultural nuance. No matter. Get up early, have a hearty breakfast of *huevos motuleños* and then indulge in that unbeatable combination of sun, sand and incredible turquoise water. We guarantee you'll have quite the good time.



Essentials

Location, location, location. Cancún's biggest attraction, besides year-round warm weather, is the beach—and better yet, you're never more than a few steps away from it. That contrast of white sand and intensely turquoise water is simply an unbeatable combination. Add an almost

constant breeze and the soothing lullaby of breaking surf and you have the ideal recipe for letting go—of worries, routines and the 9-to-5 grind in general.

This resort city can put a pretty good bite in your wallet, which makes hotel hopping all the more fun—and it's free. The impressively glitzy Hotel Zone resorts span a range of architectural styles and decorative moods, from the marble-walled luxury of the [Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach](#) to the coolly sensuous, hi-tech deco look of the [ME by Melia](#). Stroll through the lobbies and lush garden areas, or have lunch, dinner or a drink at one of the hotel restaurants. See *Insider Info* for "Doing the Hotel Zone Hop."



One of the nice things about Cancún is that in spite of omnipresent Americanization and stateside fast-food chains you can still enjoy Yucatecan cookery. If you're in the mood to try such dishes as *pollo pibil* (chicken marinated in garlic, cumin, peppercorns, red-hued *achiote* paste and the juice from bitter oranges, then wrapped in banana leaves and baked) or *papadzules* (chopped hard-boiled eggs rolled up in a tortilla and covered with a

sauce made from pumpkin seeds), head to downtown Ciudad Cancún. Unpretentious eateries like [Los Almendros](#) or [Restaurant El Calamar](#) are great places to try regional fare.

The waters of [Nichupté Lagoon](#) may not boast the striking hues of the Caribbean, but they're perfect for a dinner cruise. The *Cancún Queen*, an old-fashioned paddlewheeler operated by the [Aqua World](#) marina, chugs through the mangroves lining the lagoon. For a more romantic getaway sail off into the sunset aboard the Spanish-style galleon *Columbus* for a surf-and-turf dinner, dancing to live jazz saxophone music and glittering nighttime views of the Hotel Zone.

As spring breakers can attest, the nightlife in Cancún is rockin'—and it not only goes on most of the night, but all year. The popularity of dance

clubs, like the careers of pop stars, tends to depend on the fickle tastes of the public, but old reliables and newer upstarts keep the party going. If you don't feel like gyrating on a packed dance floor with young revelers there are plenty of more sedate options, like the cool tropical elegance of The Lobby Lounge in [The Ritz-Carlton, Cancún](#). Your hotel front desk can tell you where the hotspots are and how to get to them.

Mall it. The big Hotel Zone malls—Plaza Caracol, Kukulcán Plaza, La Isla Shopping Village—are as shiny and appealing as their U.S. counterparts, and La Isla also has the [Interactive Aquarium Cancún](#), a great place to keep kids occupied. Chamber of commerce-style optimism aside, it does rain in paradise, so keep this option open for the occasional dreary day.

Go snorkeling or scuba diving. Offshore coral reefs teem with tropical fish and other marine creatures, and there are plenty of marinas and dive shops in the Hotel Zone that can set up a guided trip and provide all the necessary equipment and instruction. You can even explore cenotes, limestone sinkholes deep in the Yucatán jungle that are filled with crystal-clear fresh water.

Take a ferry to [Isla Mujeres](#). The boat will take you across aquamarine waters to this sliver of an island 4 miles off the coast. Whether wandering narrow streets lined with souvenir shops, inspecting the wares of seashell and craft vendors, savoring fresh seafood at a small sidewalk *lonchería* (open-air restaurant), exploring the island via golf cart or motor scooter, or simply dozing under the shade of a palm tree on the beach, you'll fall into Isla's laid-back rhythms immediately.

[Chichén Itzá](#) is halfway across the Yucatán Peninsula and about 2 hours away, but tour operators like Gray Line Cancún make it easy to visit these Mayan ruins on an organized excursion—or rent a car and hit the road yourself. Do not, however, miss the chance to see this world-renowned archeological site. Once a large city, it offers breathtaking evidence that the Maya were not only accomplished architects; as you marvel at these stone structures consider the fact that they were built without benefit of metal tools, beasts of burden or the wheel.

Xcaret is the closest thing the Riviera Maya has to a big American-style theme park, albeit one with a focus on preserving the Yucatán's natural resources. At this all-day destination you can float down an underground river, swim with dolphins, go snorkeling, observe sea turtles and native wildlife or simply kick back on the beach. If you don't have a rental car—or don't feel like driving—organized excursions depart frequently from Cancún.

Restaurants

As befits a big, popular resort, Cancún has a number of reliably good hotel restaurants—and there are a few local joints that are well-kept secrets. If you're the non-adventurous culinary type you'll find plenty of options in the Hotel Zone, from familiar fast food to pricey establishments with reliably standard menus. But if you want to dive into the more unfamiliar world of Yucatecan cuisine, your best bets will be in Ciudad Cancún.

Some of Mexico's most distinctive dishes come from the Yucatán region. Pungent spices flavor dishes like *cochinita pibil*, pork baked in a wrapper of banana leaves. *Sopa de lima* is chicken soup to which little pieces of fried tortilla and a healthy splash of lime juice are added. *Antojitos* include *panuchos*, tortillas with refried beans, shredded chicken and lettuce, and the similar *salbutes*, small, thick corn cakes topped with shredded chicken or turkey and often a *mole* sauce. Standard condiments eaten with these tasty snacks are red onions pickled in a mixture of citrus juices and vinegar and the incendiary *chile habanero*, which is not for the faint of heart.

Downtown Cancún (an easy bus or cab ride from the Hotel Zone) has a number of restaurants that specialize in regional fare. A good choice for first-timers is Los Almendros. All of the Yucatecan classics are on the menu, and a color picture of each dish can help make the decision of what to order easier. But you really can't go wrong with something like *poc chuc*, slices of pork marinated in the tangy juice of bitter oranges, then slow-cooked and served with pickled onions.

Seafood appears on a number of menus. One of downtown's most popular restaurants is La Habichuela (The String Bean), where you can dine on the outdoor patio in a jungly garden sitting. The restaurant's namesake makes an appearance in soup, but this is a place to try jumbo shrimp—deep fried with coconut, grilled and served with garlic butter or in a tequila sauce prepared tableside. The signature dish is *cocobichuela*, shrimp and chunks of lobster in a light curry sauce with rice, garnished with tropical fruit and presented in a coconut shell. Finish with Mayan coffee given a shot of *xtabentun*, an anise-flavored, honey-sweetened liqueur.

In addition to offering authentic cooking, downtown restaurants are often a less expensive option than many places in the Hotel Zone. Restaurant El Calamar is a simple cantina where you can get seafood or any number of well-prepared Mexican standbys. If you order a whole fish, it will be brought to the table first for inspection. For an appetizer, have freshly made *ceviche*—fish marinated in lime juice—or a plate of *bocadillos*, bite-sized meat and cheese snacks.

There's more seafood at El Pescador, on a little pedestrian-only street just off Avenida Uxmal. The menu features several Creole-style shrimp preparations, or you can order the crustacean on a shish-kebab skewer together with lobster. Red snapper is one of several fish dishes. Another reasonably priced spot, good for lunch, is La Pastería-Crepería, at Avenida Cobá #7. Try one of the cheese, cream, chicken or turkey breast crepes. The on-premises bakery turns out Mexican sweets like *cajeta* (milk candy) and *tres leches* cake.

Many of the Hotel Zone restaurants, on the other hand, lean more toward a fine dining experience. Aioli, in the Le Meridien Cancun Resort & Spa, is one of the best spots in the city for an intimate dinner. Tables with damask linens and floor-to-ceiling windows offering dramatic views of the Caribbean set the romantic mood. The cuisine is Mediterranean with French accents. First courses range from pâté or escargot with a wine-butter sauce to a rich cream of lobster; for a main course choose from the likes of duck breast, pan-seared grouper or rack of lamb with couscous.

Dessert must not be ignored; particularly sinful is the chocolate creation known as the “fifth element.” Reservations are required.

Fantino, in The Ritz-Carlton, Cancún, maintains that hotel’s embodiment of high-end luxury. The mood here is elegant, the ambience classical European. The dining room’s hand-painted ceiling frescos and beautiful Caribbean views set the stage for gastronomic adventure. You can choose from the a la carte or tasting menu, the latter paired with selections from an outstanding wine list.

From tuna carpaccio to such entrees as poached Maine lobster or herb-crust lamb to a sweet ending like bread pudding with orange blossom ice cream, this is special-occasion dining you’ll remember.



Oakwood paneling and cool marble floors characterize Le Basilic, in the Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach. This sophisticated restaurant specializes in Mediterranean-inspired cuisine, emphasizing fresh ingredients and beautiful presentation. Chef Henri Charvet works wonders with seafood—grouper filet roasted in olive oil with artichokes, braised turbot with fennel and black olive gnocchi or, for an appetizer, a shredded red snapper cake in a delightfully simple tomato sauce. Service is gracious and attentive. After dinner you can adjourn to the hotel lounge and enjoy live entertainment.

There’s atmosphere to spare at Ku-Nah, in the Gran Melia Cancun Beach & Spa Resort. Colonial-style wood furniture, elegant chandeliers and authentic-looking period decoration, plus servers garbed in white cotton shirts and pants accented with a colorful waist sash, all lend the feeling that you have been invited to dine in a gracious old Mexican hacienda. Guests are greeted with cool, mint-scented hand towels, and women receive a comfy pillow for their feet. Bottled beverages are kept chilled in silver ice buckets. The details also extend to the food. Chips, served in a hollowed-out gourd, come with several salsas and a pepita-tomato-

cilantro dip, and fresh-baked breads incorporate the flavors of banana, *huitlacoche* (an earthy, smoky-flavored fungus that grows naturally on ears of corn) and *achiote*, a sauce frequently used in Yucatecan cooking that is made from tomatoes, spices and the ground seeds of the annatto tree. For an entrée try the tender duck breast drizzled with a dark, sweet *mole* sauce and topped with a classic sprinkling of white sesame seeds.

Cancún’s malls also offer fine dining possibilities. Casa Rolandi’s, in Plaza Caracol, is an old favorite where the polished service and superb food keep regulars coming back. The Italian cuisine can be as simple as homemade lasagna, thyme-infused pork chops or a fish filet sautéed with garlic, lemon and white wine, or as sinfully rich as the black ravioli stuffed with lobster. The salad and antipasto bar is a meal in itself.

La Madonna, in La Isla Shopping Village, is nothing if not stylish. Huge statues of angels and an enormous reproduction of the Mona Lisa fill the cavernous space, which is softly lit and very romantic. The good news is that the food—northern Italian with a Swiss influence—lives up to the standard set by the striking decor. Throw caloric caution to the wind and have lobster bisque, a rich saffron risotto with sautéed shrimp, seafood linguine or a charcoal-grilled Black Angus steak. Cap off the indulgence at La Madonna’s martini bar, which offers more than 180 different cocktails.

Given the lovely tropical backdrop, dining with a view is almost guaranteed in Cancún. The restaurants located along Boulevard Kukulkán opposite the big hotels have the added attraction of the sun setting over the waters of Nichupté Lagoon. One of them, Lorenzillo’s, is one of the city’s longtime favorites. Literally built over the water, the restaurant’s thatched *palapa* roof is a local landmark. The seafood—in-season soft shell and stone crabs, live Caribbean lobster, Chilean sea bass—is above reproach, but you also can order oysters on the half shell, shrimp stuffed with cheese and wrapped in bacon or crayfish sautéed in a garlic-butter sauce. Try to get an upstairs table in the smaller two-story *palapa* that’s on the pier; the views are well worth it.

As its name implies, [La Destileria](#) (The Distillery), across from Plaza Kukulcán, evokes the fiery alcoholic beverage Mexico is known for; if you like margaritas and have a taste for tequila, you've come to the right place. The food is traditional Mexican as well, but without a lot of concessions to tourist palates. Take the fajitas; strips of *arrachera* beef arrive in a sizzling hot *molcajete* (a three-legged mortar made of volcanic basalt rock), and the fixings include roasted nopal cactus, smoked jalapeños and a tomato-tomatillo salsa. Seafood choices include sautéed shrimp in a tamarind sauce that delivers a spicy kick.

[Puerto Madero](#) is one of several Argentinean steakhouses that have become part of the Hotel Zone dining scene. The restaurant's décor—enhanced by a spectacular view of the lagoon—is inspired by the Puerto Madero neighborhood in Buenos Aires, a formerly dilapidated area that gentrified into a fashionable commercial and residential district after the Argentine capital's port facilities were relocated. Carnivores will appreciate the ham and cheese-stuffed *empanadas*, homemade Argentinean sausage and the big rib eye steaks, although the house specialty is for seafood lovers: a platter for two laden with clams, oysters in the shell, jumbo shrimp, whitefish and Alaskan king crab legs.

Like Lorenzillo's, [La Dolce Vita](#) is another longtime local favorite. The fare is basic Italian, executed with reliable flair: antipasto for two, Caesar salad, capellini with a light tomato-basil sauce, pizzas, grilled fish, shrimp scampi, veal scallopini. The fettucine with lobster medallions in a cream sauce makes for a rich, albeit caloric, treat. And do save room for desserts like zabaglione; the warm custard is prepared with a tableside flourish. As it should be at any good Italian restaurant, La Dolce Vita's wine list is impressive. The open-air terrace has a lovely lagoon view, although if it's really warm outside you might prefer the air-conditioned interior.

It makes sense to go with the obvious at the [Crab House Caribe](#). Stone, soft shell and Alaskan king crabs all get their due here, and the crustacean also shows up in the house salad and the cakes that can be ordered as an appetizer. The smoked marlin with capers, olives and

sliced tomatoes is another delicious starter. Meat eaters can opt for filet mignon or a grilled rib eye. Like the other restaurants that line the lagoon, the Crab House has both an outdoor deck and indoor seating.

[Captain's Cove Steak & Seafood Grill](#), toward the southern end of the Hotel Zone, is another popular seafood eatery that's been around for awhile. It's a multilevel place with big windows overlooking the lagoon and the Royal Yacht Club Marina. Seafood is the main draw, with shrimp, crab platters, whole fried fish and a grouper filet prepared Yucatecan style—marinated in seasonings and cooked in a banana leaf wrapper with tomatoes, peppers, onions and limes—all on the menu. An outdoor deck overlooking the water is shaded by a big *palapa* roof. The all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet here is a good deal.

[Paloma Bonita](#) has big windows overlooking another body of water, aquamarine Mujeres Bay. It's also a lovingly decorated restaurant, with colorful furniture, table settings and wall art in different rooms representing different regions of Mexico (you'll be given a mini tour before being seated). Strolling mariachis add to the festive atmosphere. The menu ranges all over the country for inspiration. Marinated pork tacos (*tacos al pastor*) make a great starter, as do the *panuchos*—corn tortillas topped with black beans, red onion and spicy chicken stew. Main dishes include enchiladas, chicken with two kinds of *mole* sauce and jumbo shrimp sautéed with the pulp of the sour-flavored tamarind fruit and served with sweet mango chutney. Tequila aficionados will appreciate Paloma Bonita's bountifully stocked bar.

Many Cancún restaurants are open for lunch and dinner only, which makes finding breakfast outside your hotel a bit of a daunting proposition. Fortunately there's Vips, on Boulevard Kukulcán next to the Cancún Center. Although you can get breakfast, lunch and dinner here, the morning meal is their specialty. Go for one of the egg plates—perhaps Motul-style, which is two fried eggs, peas and diced ham atop a crispy tortilla, the whole covered in tomato sauce, with pureed black beans and slices of fried banana on the side. Add toast, fruit juice and good *café Americano* and you'll be set for most of the day.

Attractions

In a city with dozens of attractions, you may have trouble deciding where to spend your time. Here are the highlights for this destination, as chosen by AAA editors. GEMs are “Great Experiences for Members.”

It’s somewhat ironic that Cancún gives off such a decided here-and-now vibe—there always seems to be a new hotel or condo on the drawing board or under construction—when the Yucatán Peninsula is so rich in archeological ruins that exude a timeless sense of antiquity. The legacies in stone left behind by the Maya people are some of the region’s most compelling and mysterious sights.

The Maya are probably the best known of Mesamerica’s classical civilizations, which also include the Zapotecs, who built the ceremonial center of Monte Albán in southern Mexico’s Valley of Oaxaca, and the unknown people who erected the ancient city of Teotihuacán outside Mexico City. At the same time that Europe was floundering in the Dark Ages, the Maya had developed a hieroglyphic writing system and mapped out the heavens with a calendar that served as a prototype for those used today. They also were skilled at clearing thick jungle to plant crops, building underground reservoirs to store seasonal rainwater and constructing limestone road networks to facilitate trade.



Rising to prominence around A.D. 250, Maya civilization spread north from Honduras and Guatemala to Belize and the Yucatán Peninsula. There are the remains of ancient Mayan cities in those three countries as well as in the Mexican states of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo and Yucatán, but arguably the most famous are the ruins of [Chichén Itzá](#). This archeological zone is about 125 miles west of Cancún but easily reached by car via toll highway Mex. 180-D. Better yet, arrange to spend the night at one of the hotels just outside the ruins, which will free up your sightseeing time as well as freeing you from the tight schedule of a

guided tour. And this AAA GEM place is well worth the journey for its amazing pyramids and temples, which are monumental in scope and architecturally fascinating.

Chichén Itzá’s focal point is [The Castle](#) (El Castillo). Perfectly symmetrical, this 100-foot-high pyramid has 91 steps on each of its four sides. It can be climbed, but keep in mind that the angle is extremely steep, a fact that is much more apparent only after you’ve reached the top. Those afraid of heights will find it easier to descend by holding onto the link chain that runs up the middle of one side. Nearby is another impressive building, the [Temple of the Warriors](#), which is embellished with decorative carvings. Note the preponderance of skulls, serpent heads and jaguars incorporated into Maya structures, all images that reflected the warlike nature of the people.

For an authentically Mexican experience, head to the 5,500-seat [Plaza de Toros Bullring](#) in downtown Ciudad Cancún. Bullfighting originated in Spain in the 12th century and subsequently spread to Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela. The *corrida*, or main event, is usually preceded by an interactive pre-show, with T-shirts thrown to the loudest cheering spectators and amateurs trying their hand at fighting small (and not-so-small) bulls.

Note: If you believe that a bullfight is essentially animal cruelty as opposed to a form of artistic expression emphasizing bravery and passion, do not attend.

Visitors rather than matadors get up close and personal with animals—in this case, dolphins and other marine creatures—at the [Interactive Aquarium Cancún](#) in La Isla Shopping Village. Manta rays and sea turtles can be touched, and display tanks house sea horses, groupers, barracudas, bull sharks and many other species. Interacting or swimming with dolphins and feeding sharks also can be experienced for an additional fee. This is another good rainy-day activity.

Cancún’s beaches, of course, are its most valuable natural asset. The water is absolutely beautiful, the sand is soft and it’s warm enough to

swim year-round. Cancún Island is essentially one long beach separated from the mainland by [Nichupté Lagoon](#). If you're staying at a beachfront property—whether it's located at the top of the island's "seven" configuration, which borders Mujeres Bay, or south of Cancún Point, which faces the Caribbean—it's easy and convenient to use the stretch associated with your hotel. Keep in mind that all beaches in Mexico are federally owned and therefore accessible to anyone, even if many of the hotels may make you feel less than welcome if you're not a guest.



If you're not staying *on* the beach, you can still park your towel at one of the official public beaches. [Playa Langosta](#) (beginning at Km marker 5 on Boulevard Kukulcán) and [Playa Tortugas](#) (roughly between Km markers 6 and 8) front the calm, shallow waters of Mujeres Bay, which makes them good for wading, swimming, snorkeling, kayaking and such water toys as wave runners. Restaurants are

within easy walking distance, and Playa Tortugas has public restrooms and changing areas. Tortugas is especially popular with local families on Sundays, when most people have the day off.

While Hurricane Wilma mostly spared the Mujeres Bay beaches—some stretches actually ended up wider after the storm—the beaches along the Caribbean were not so lucky. Pounding waves basically washed all the sand away, leaving behind gaping expanses of rock in place of powdery white grains. But a concerted reclamation effort in 2006, which involved dredging sand 20 miles offshore and re-depositing it along the shoreline, restored much of their former glory.

The beaches from Cancún Point south to Nizuc Point are almost solidly backed by hotels, so it's a bit trickier accessing them. Playa Marlin, between the La Isla and Plaza Kukulcán malls (around Km marker 13 on Boulevard Kukulcán), offers nice views and is good for surfing. [Playa Delfines](#) is in the vicinity of Km marker 18 on Boulevard Kukulcán. This beach is known as "El Mirador" (the Vantage Point) for its panoramic

lookout over the water. There also is a small public parking lot right off the boulevard. Keep in mind that the Caribbean beaches can have strong undertows and large waves that make swimming potentially hazardous. Heed the posted warning flags; green means conditions are safe.

[Isla Mujeres](#) is the kind of place where you can spend an afternoon—or an entire week. If you're not staying here, set aside time for a day trip by boat from Cancún (public ferries are the cheapest ride and take about 45 minutes). Explore the narrow cobblestone streets and do some shopping on waterfront Avenida Rueda Medina or pedestrian-only Avenida Hidalgo (two blocks inland). Isla's big tourist attraction is [Garrafón Park](#). The easiest way to enjoy all the activities this marine park offers is to spring for a round-trip cruise ship package from Cancún; your hotel or a local travel agency can provide details.

The closest thing the Quintana Roo coast has to a big, American-style theme park is [Xcaret](#) (pronounced ISH-car-et), about an hour south of Cancún. You name it and this AAA GEM attraction has it—snorkeling, floating along an underground river, exploring subterranean caverns, wildlife viewing (deer, tapirs, jaguars, spider monkeys, flamingos, butterflies), a living coral reef aquarium, a re-created Mayan village, even a *granja de hongos* (mushroom farm). The park is great fun for kids while also emphasizing conservation and preserving Mayan history and culture in the form of a rousing and colorful (in every sense of the word) evening show. Organized day trip excursions to Xcaret depart frequently from Cancún's Hotel Zone.

Recreation

Biking, swimming, backpacking, fishing, hiking—whatever your interest, make sure you experience these recreational highlights, as chosen by AAA editors.

On the surface Cancún seems like a pretty hedonistic place if you consider the course a typical day might take. Lazing by the pool all morning. Dawdling over lunch at a beachside *palapa* restaurant. Perhaps a poolside afternoon nap, followed by a leisurely beach stroll. A tropical

drink served in a coconut before a deliciously indulgent dinner. Partying at a succession of strobe-lit, dry ice-shrouded, decibel-pounding dance clubs.

Some people want to be pampered on vacation, others like to have some serious fun—and Cancun provides plenty of both. But if you're the active sort who would rather go scuba diving, water skiing, windsurfing or parasailing, never fear; if it involves water, you can do it here. And for true adventurers—those who relish paddling a kayak at the break of dawn in order to observe wildlife in natural surroundings, or exploring the mysterious depths of an underwater cave—the state of Quintana Roo is loaded with opportunities.

Eco tourism is very popular in the Yucatán. The peninsula is uncommonly rich in flora and fauna, and nature is protected in wilderness sanctuaries like the [Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve](#). A coral reef runs offshore along much of the Mexican Caribbean coast, offering a bounty of marine environments for scuba divers and snorkelers. Bird watchers flock to such places as Isla Holbox, Contoy Island and the cenotes of the Yucatán jungles to see flamingos, migratory sea birds and tropical species like the toucan. On the beaches, sea turtle observation goes hand in hand with the preservation of nesting sites and the protection of these endangered animals.

An organized excursion with a reputable guide is the best way to experience the region's ecological diversity. [Contoy Island National Park](#), for example, is strictly regulated—no more than 200 visitors a day, with the actual number usually less than half that. Protected by the Mexican government since 1961, the setting of this small (a little over 5 miles long), uninhabited island about 19 miles north of [Isla Mujeres](#) remains pristine.

A designated bird sanctuary, Isla Contoy is one of the most important sea bird nesting sites in the Mexican Caribbean. Mangrove forests, lagoons, palm-dotted beaches and windswept rocks facing the open sea provide habitats for approximately 150 resident and migratory species, including brown pelicans, frigate birds and double-crested cormorants. In addition

the island offers a safe nesting haven for green sea, hawksbill, leatherback and loggerhead turtles, all on the endangered list.

Guided eco tours allow Isla Contoy's beauty to be appreciated without compromising its delicate environmental balance. Snorkeling is excellent; an offshore reef and sheltered bay are alive with stingrays, barracuda, spiny lobsters, starfish and other marine life. Guided tours led by a trained biologist explore the limited portion of the island open to visitors, and a small museum has exhibits that describe local flora and fauna. You can climb a watchtower for panoramic views. Lunch is included as well, usually freshly caught fish baked in a banana leaf wrapper with *achiote* (ah-chee-OH-tay), a spicy sauce, and the juice from bitter oranges—a method of preparation known as *tikin-xic*.

Note: Organized trips to Contoy depart from Isla Mujeres and Puerto Juárez, on the mainland north of Cancun. Depending on the company or boat co-operative, transportation ranges from a vessel accommodating up to 60 passengers to a small outboard motor-powered fishing boat that holds less than 10. The smaller the boat the longer the trip will take (up to 3 hours one way, as opposed to about an hour on a bigger boat), and the open sea can be rough. If you go, bring sunglasses, a hat, biodegradable sunscreen, binoculars (for bird watching) and last but not least a camera.

Another off-the-beaten-path option for nature encounters is [Isla Holbox](#), less than 10 miles off the northern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula. Some 7 miles long and a quarter mile wide at its narrowest point, this idyllic island is separated from the mainland by Yalahao Lagoon. Mass tourism has yet to discover Holbox (pronounced hole-BOSH), which makes it just about perfect for nature lovers. The fishing is excellent, and the island's location—where the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea merge—results in superb shelling. Isla Pájaros, or Bird Island, an islet in the lagoon, is visited (depending on the time of year) by flamingos, ibises, spoonbills, cranes and multicolored tropical species.

Holbox is one of the few places on Earth offering the opportunity to get up close and personal with whale sharks. This is the world's largest living fish species, attaining a length of up to 45 feet. Also called domino shark

for the distinctive pattern of pale yellow spots marking its body, the whale shark—unlike many of its more fearsome brethren—is harmless to humans. This shark is a filter feeder: It pumps sea water through five large pairs of gills that act as sieves, trapping plankton, algae, krill, small vertebrates and other food that are then swallowed.

Whale sharks visit the waters around Holbox from June through September. Boat trips led by local licensed guides allow visitors to photograph and even swim with these surprisingly docile giants that are known to exhibit a playful streak toward divers. Tours leave early in the morning from the beach in front of the Xaloc Resort in Holbox Village. In addition to the island's various nature-oriented activities, adrenaline seekers can engage in the relatively new sport of kite surfing, which utilizes a surfboard with foot straps and a large kite that together propel a user both through the air and on the water.

Isla Holbox is about a 3-hour drive from Cancún via Mex. 180 west to the village of El Ideal (watch for the "Isla Holbox" directional signs), then north on a paved road to the land's-end village of Chiquilá. From Chiquilá water taxis and a ferry service take passengers on the 30-minute ride across the lagoon to the island. Second-class buses also travel to Chiquilá from the central bus station in downtown Ciudad Cancún.

Cenotes (pronounced say-NOH-tay) are another of the Yucatán's natural wonders. The peninsula, once covered by ocean water, is a flat, porous limestone shelf with practically no above-ground rivers; instead there are rivers that run underground. Cenotes are freshwater sinkholes that form when the roof of an underground cavern collapses due to erosion. The water that collects is usually crystal clear, turquoise in color and has a uniform temperature of about 78 degrees. In addition to numerous lakes and ponds created by sinkhole formation, there are subterranean cenotes that have an atmosphere of otherworldly beauty due to stalagmite and stalactite formations and holes in the cavern ceiling that allow flitting rays of sunlight to illuminate it.

Cenotes are refreshing swimming holes, often surrounded by tropical jungle. They also are popular with divers; underwater visibility is

excellent, the water is cool and calm, there are passageways and rock formations to explore, and diving conditions are unaffected by the weather. Snorkelers are likely to encounter small tropical fish and freshwater turtles.

A cenote often serves as the entry point to a subterranean system of shallow, flooded caves. Cave diving is a sport for only the most intrepid, and it can be an extremely hazardous one without the proper equipment and training. But although the environment of an underwater cave is forbidding, it also is spectacular: caverns encrusted with speleothems—mineral deposits that over time form all sorts of fantastical shapes—and often a pyrotechnic light display at the cave entrance (the result of natural daylight entering and silhouetting the stalactites that hang from the ceiling).

Other recreational activities abound. The entire Mexican Caribbean is well known for the excellence of its deep sea fishing, particularly billfish (sailfish and marlin). But many other game species can be hooked, including amberjack, barracuda, bonito, grouper, tuna and wahoo.

The Great Mayan Reef, which extends from Cape Catoche (Cabo Catoche) at the northern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula south to the northern coast of Honduras, is the world's second largest reef system (only Australia's Great Barrier Reef is more extensive). While the reef is more impressive farther south (and especially in the vicinity of Puerto Morelos, where it practically hugs the coast) there are plenty of locations for scuba divers and snorkelers to explore in the vicinity of Nizuc Point (Punta Nizuc), at the southern end of the Hotel Zone, and off Isla Mujeres. Particularly interesting are the sunken ships that dot the coast; teeming with marine life, the wrecks are fantastic snorkeling and diving sites.

Marinas and tour operators provide the necessary equipment and guided expertise for these outdoor adventures, and usually transportation and hotel pickup as well. One of the biggest marinas is Aqua World, on Boulevard Kukulcán (the lagoon side). Scuba Cancún is an established, family-run dive center at Km marker 5 on Boulevard Kukulcán (also the

lagoon side). Some hotels offer basic instruction courses that can set you up for a beginning dive; ask at the front desk for information or a local recommendation.

Getting close to a dolphin can be a memorable experience, and several locations in and around Cancún offer the opportunity. In the Hotel Zone, [Interactive Aquarium Cancún](#) and the [Wet 'n Wild](#) water park sponsor educational programs that include either swimming or interaction. At [Dolphin Discovery](#) on Isla Mujeres you can participate in three different encounters designed to encourage interactive participation with these marine mammals—from hugging and kissing to being taken for an exhilarating ride while you hold on to one of their fins. Reservations must be made in advance.

Active water sports like jet skiing, parasailing and wave running are all big here. Watercraft can be rented at Aqua World or other marinas and then taken for a spin on [Nichupté Lagoon](#). The lagoon's quiet, mangrove-lined estuaries offer secluded spots to paddle a kayak. And if you just don't feel like exerting yourself, Cancún has raised the swimming pool to an art form; the imaginatively designed pool complexes at the big resorts are a far cry from backyard built-ins—and they have the Caribbean as a backdrop.

Landlubbers can get in on the action, too. Golfers can choose from two championship 18-hole courses right in the Hotel Zone. The Cancún Golf Club at Pok-ta-Pok, the area's oldest course, has a Robert Trent Jones, Jr.-designed layout wedged between the sea and the lagoon. Guests at some hotels, including the [Crown Paradise Club Cancun](#), [Dreams Cancun Resort & Spa](#) and the [Hotel Riu Cancun](#), can take advantage of special rates; reservations must be made through the hotel's front desk.

The course at the [Hilton Cancun Golf & Spa Resort](#) reopened in late 2006 after a \$6 million renovation. The fairways now incorporate a highly salt-resistant variety of turf, and you're likely to see peacocks, iguanas and exotic birds on the grounds.

For a morning jog or an early evening walk, sidewalks run along both sides of Boulevard Kukulcán from the seashell sculpture at the entrance to Ciudad Cancún east to Cancún Point. There are unobstructed scenic views of Nichupté Lagoon from the south side of the boulevard between Km markers 5 and 7, and from the north side you can see the beaches fronting Mujeres Bay. Traffic is heavy, however, and it does zip along. A newer sidewalk path for walkers, joggers and roller bladers has been installed along the Caribbean side of Kukulcán beginning around Km marker 20 and continuing south past Nizuc Point. Attractive new landscaping put in after Hurricane Wilma, less traffic congestion and occasional lovely views of the water make this stretch a less congested alternative if you're in the mood for some exercise.

Special Events

The Day of the Kings (Feast of the Epiphany, or El Día de Los Reyes) on Jan. 6 is a day of gift-giving. Local restaurants serve a King's Cake (Rosca de Reyes) that contains a small plastic Jesus doll (El Niño) inside. The person receiving the piece with the doll acts as a host on Candlemas (La Candelaria), the season's final Christmas celebration held the first week in February, when a meal of *tamales* and hot chocolate is served in homes and restaurants.

Carnaval, a fiesta in the spirit of Mardi Gras, is held the week preceding Ash Wednesday. Residents dress up in elaborate costumes, floats parade down the streets of Ciudad Cancún, and there are street parties featuring dancing, fireworks and regional foods and beverages.

On Mar. 21 the Vernal Equinox (Inicio Primavera) is observed at Chichén Itzá. When the late afternoon sun shines on El Castillo, a shadow remarkably reminiscent of a slithering serpent appears on the side of the pyramid. Thousands of people attend this event.

As in all of Mexico, Independence Day (Patria de la Independencia) festivities take place Sept. 15-16 and include fireworks, a parade (on the 16th) and traditional food. Father Miguel Hidalgo's famous speech *Grito*

de Dolores is re-enacted as people gather at midnight to shout out *Viva México!*"

The Eve of All Souls' Day, Oct. 31, is observed throughout the Yucatán by adorning headstones with wreaths of marigolds and placing candles and offerings of food and tequila at gravesites. Day of the Dead graveside and church ceremonies take place amid a party-like atmosphere Nov. 1 and 2, with bakeries doing big business turning out various skull-shaped pastries.

The Cancún Ironman 70.3 in September attracts triathletes from around the world who compete in swimming, running and bicycling. Events are held at the Fiesta Americana Condesa Cancún hotel. Also in November is the International Caribbean Cultural Festival, held in downtown Ciudad Cancún. It brings artists, dancers, musicians and in particular salsa groups from all over the Caribbean.

Christmas celebrations begin 9 days prior to Dec. 25 and feature *posadas* (processions) of families and friends who take part in *pastorelas* (plays) portraying Jesus' birth, along with street fairs, *piñata* smashing and other festivities. One highlight of the season is the display of nativity scenes.

Things to Do

Shopping

Shopping in Cancún's Hotel Zone usually focuses on two things: pricey specialty items, or T-shirts and beach supplies. Window-shopping is a popular pastime, but don't expect a lot of bargains. For garden-variety souvenirs it pays to look around, as merchants compete vigorously for tourist dollars and prices can be on the steep side. Inspect carefully before buying; quality can vary greatly.

As a duty-free zone Cancún does offer potential bargains on international merchandise. High-quality tequila and cigars are two of the most popular purchases. Ultra Femme, downtown on Avenida Tulum, has good buys

on cosmetics, jewelry and imported perfume; there also are branches in several of the Hotel Zone malls and at the airport.

In Ciudad Cancún, a variety of shops and open-air craft markets line Avenida Tulum. Ki-Huic, near the intersection with Avenida Cobá, is a flea market a block long with more than 100 vendors offering handicrafts, knickknacks, marble chess sets, men's *guayabera* shirts, *huipil* (ee-PEEL) dresses and Panama hats. Another downtown crafts market is Mercado Plaza, at the corner of avenidas Tulum and Uxmal. Bargaining is expected at the markets; never offer to pay the initial asking price.

If you feel the need to shop for basics, branches of three familiar stateside retailers also are in Ciudad Cancún: Costco (Price Club), at the corner of avenidas Kabah and Yaxchilán; Sam's Club, at the corner of avenidas Xcaret and Yaxchilán; and Wal-Mart, at the corner of avenidas Kukulcán and Mayapán. Pick up convenience items at an Oxxo store (similar to 7-11); there are several branches in the Hotel Zone.

The Hotel Zone has both enclosed, air-conditioned malls and open-air complexes. Elegant Plaza Caracol is at Km 8.5 next to the Cancún Center. Cool marble walls and floors are the setting for some 200 shops and boutiques offering jewelry, designer clothing, resort wear, silver and decorative art. You'll also find pharmacies, art galleries, cafes and restaurants here.

Forum-by-the-Sea, Km 9.5 near the Cancún Center, is a three-level entertainment complex. There are specialty boutiques like Swatch and Tommy Hilfiger, but the emphasis is on restaurants, bars and nightspots, which include the Cancún branch of the Hard Rock Café. Flamingo Plaza, Km 11.5 on Kukulcán (lagoon side), is a smaller shopping center with several duty-free stores and boutiques, as well as a currency exchange office and restaurants like Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville. It also has a branch of the Mexican chain Sanborn's that is open 24 hours and has a pharmacy and newsstand.

Cancún's hottest mall is La Isla Shopping Village, Km 12.5 on Kukulcán (lagoon side). La Isla is as bright and shiny as anything you'll find in the

states. The stores and shops are linked by crisscrossing bridges and walkways running over small canals. Johnny Rockets and Chili's are two of the several familiar stateside eateries here. There also is a 10-screen multiplex, the Interactive Aquarium Cancún and other family-friendly features. It's upscale and expensive but a fun place to spend a few hours, especially on a rainy day.

At Km marker 13 is one of the largest malls, Kukulcán Plaza, which also caters to tourists with stores and boutiques offering gifts, handicrafts, perfume, leather goods, jewelry and silver. It also contains a parking garage, bank, currency exchange offices, drugstores, a kiosk providing Internet access and a food court with a number of U.S. fast-food franchises. The mall's "Luxury Avenue" features such high-end retailers as Baccarat, Cartier, Louis Vuitton and Tiffany & Co.

If you enjoy the bargaining experience, browse the many craft stalls at the Mercado de Artesanías Coral Negro (Flea Market), a peach-colored building just south of the Cancún Center (at the point where Blvd. Kukulcán splits). The selection of items is large, and it's open daily.

Most of the mall stores are open daily 10-8 or 10 p.m. Outside the Hotel Zone some stores observe the traditional *siesta* and close for a few hours in the afternoon. The sales tax is 10 percent, which may be waived at some shops if you pay in cash. Paying with cash instead of a credit card may also lower the price when bargaining with vendors. Almost all stores will accept U.S. dollars, and at some establishments prices are quoted in dollars rather than pesos.

Nightlife

Cancún provides something for everyone after dark, from rowdy spring break hangouts to Mexican and Caribbean-themed dinner shows. The clubs, needless to say, offer plenty of high-decibel action. Hotels also get in the act with lobby bars, happy-hour specials and varied entertainment.

Most clubs open around 10 or 10:30 p.m. and stay open until as late as 6 a.m. Cover charges begin at about \$12 (U.S.), go up to \$35 or \$40 with

an open bar, and may be waived on certain nights; at some places women are routinely admitted free of charge. Inquire about the dress code; some don't allow jeans or shorts.

Coco Bongo, at Km 9.5 on Kukulcán in the Forum-by-the-Sea shopping complex, draws young scenesters with a mix of recorded techno, hip-hop, house, salsa and '70s and '80s hits, as well as live bands. There's no actual dance floor, you gyrate wherever there's a spot. This cavernous space regularly packs in as many as 3,000 people.

The City, also at Km 9.5 in front of Coco Bongo, attracts visiting international DJs who spin pulsating dance music accompanied by dizzying light shows. With nine bars and lounges and a beach club that has a wave pool, cabanas and food and drink service, this is a 24-hour hangout during spring break; other times it opens around 10 p.m. and stays open until at least 4 a.m.

Dady'O, at Km 9.5 on Kukulcán (near the Cancún Center), is a granddaddy as far as longevity goes but is still very popular; like the other clubs it's loud and wild, and the sound and lighting are first-rate. Dady Rock Bar & Grill, next door to Dady'O, has both live bands and DJ-spun music, karaoke contests, T-shirt giveaways, an open bar and a restaurant.

A somewhat less frantic atmosphere prevails at Glazz, in the La Isla Shopping Village complex. This lounge and nightclub targets the over-30 crowd with DJ dance music, a huge selection of martinis and varied live entertainment. The La Madonna restaurant, also at La Isla Shopping Village, has a European-style ambiance and a well-stocked martini bar. If you prefer a quieter evening, most of the resort hotels have a nightclub or lobby bar with jazz or other live music; the lobby lounge at The Ritz-Carlton, Cancún is particularly elegant.

For those who love to party there are plenty of places that combine food, music and a frathouse sense of fun. Two Mexican chains—Carlos 'n Charlie's, at Km 5.5 on the lagoon side of Kukulcán (across from the Casa Maya Hotel), and Señor Frog's, at Km 9.5 on Kukulcán—are noisy

and popular, with waiters who get as crazy as the patrons. Cancún's Hard Rock Cafe, in the Forum-by-the-Sea complex, has live rock bands every night except Wednesday, a menu of Mexican and American favorites and a view of the Caribbean.

Note: Cancún's spring break begins in mid-February and lasts for about 2 months. Excessive alcohol consumption associated with partying is common; the legal drinking age in Mexico is 18 but is not uniformly enforced. Much of the rowdy behavior takes place at nightspots that target a younger crowd.

Planet Hollywood, in La Isla Shopping Village, sticks to the movie memorabilia formula that has sustained the chain's worldwide popularity. Mango Tango, at Km 14.2 on the lagoon side of Kukulcán (opposite The Ritz-Carlton), accompanies dinner with a lively floor show staged outdoors nightly at 8:30, with live music (usually salsa or reggae) following at 9:30.

For those who don't want to stand in line—or pay exorbitant cover charges three times over—the Party Hopper Tour does the work for you. It gets under way at 9 p.m. with bongo players, crazy waiters and free-flowing drinks at the Congo Bar (across Blvd. Kukulcán from the Coco Bongo club), then hits two other hotspots, Señor Frog's and The City. The cost is about \$50 (U.S.) per person, which includes a reserved seating area at each club. Check with your hotel for details.

Mexican-style entertainment in Cancún is still available amid the lasers and fog machines. The Ballet Folklórico de Cancún performs Tues.-Sat. at the Cancún Center. The ticket booth is just inside the center; tickets can be purchased for a Mexican buffet dinner and the show, or for the show only. Dinner begins at 7 p.m.; the show begins at 8. Tickets are about \$50 (U.S.) for dinner and the show (ages 6-12, \$25), about \$30 for the show only (ages 6-12, \$15). For more information check with your hotel or a local travel agency.

The El Mexicano Restaurant, in the Costa Blanca shopping center at Km 8.5 on Kukulcán, also offers a folkloric ballet show beginning nightly at 8

p.m. Dinner at this beautifully decorated restaurant, which re-creates the look of a 19th-century Mexican hacienda, comes complete with strolling mariachis.

Romantics will enjoy a moonlit cruise. The Lobster Dinner Cruise sets sail for Nichupté Lagoon from the Aquatours Marina pier at Km 6.5 on Kukulcán (across from Playa Tortugas). A lobster or surf-and-turf dinner is served aboard the 60-foot galleon *Columbus*, along with dancing to live jazz music. Departures are Mon.-Fri. at 5:30 and 8:30 (arriving 30 minutes before scheduled departure is recommended). Reservations are required; under 12 are not permitted. Transportation to the pier is not included. You can book this excursion through a local tour company; check with your hotel for more information.

Dining

Hotel restaurants offer the gamut of casual and fine dining choices, with uniformly reliable quality and predictable expense. Most hotels go to great lengths to keep their guests on the premises, and some may charge for meals whether they are eaten or not. Dress is usually casual but not unkempt (no shorts or T-shirts). Don't expect much in the way of regional cookery in the Hotel Zone; U.S. fast-food and chain restaurant franchises, as well as Mexican chains like Sr. Frog's, are the norm.

Ciudad Cancún is a different story. Avenida Tulum is lined with restaurants, and most have outdoor tables. Look for places where locals congregate if you want authentically prepared Yucatecan dishes like *sopa de lima*—soup with a chicken broth base, vegetables and a tangy dose of fresh lime juice—or *poc-chuc*, spicy marinated pork grilled with onions.

One local favorite—and a place where you can sample home-style cooking for a fraction of the cost of the Hotel Zone restaurants—is Checándole, Av. Xpuhil #6 (SM 18). It serves tacos, steak *tampiqueña* and other Mexican standards, along with fresh fruit juices. A three-course lunch is about \$3 (U.S.). The easiest way to get there from the Hotel Zone is to take a bus downtown, then a taxi to the restaurant. There also

are branches on Mex. 307 at Km 13.5, just before the airport exit, and in the Plaza Flamingo food court.

For a reasonably priced Mexican-style breakfast try one of Cancún's coffee shops. At Vips, a popular chain with branches all over the country, you can order standards like *huevos motuleños*—two fried eggs, peas and diced ham atop a crispy tortilla covered in tomato sauce, with pureed black beans and slices of fried banana on the side. This, plus toast, orange juice and good *cafe americano*, will fill you up for about \$10. The Hotel Zone Vips is next to the Cancún Center.

Restaurants in the large hotels use purified water for cooking and for washing produce; inquire about this health procedure specifically at places on the mainland. In general, avoid ice cubes in drinks unless you know purified water has been used.

Sports and Recreation

Water sports, not surprisingly, top Cancún's list of leisure activities. Fishing is excellent; the open Caribbean, Mujeres Bay, the channel between Cozumel and the mainland, and the waters of Nichupté Lagoon together are home to some 500 species, including all types of game fish. Bonito, dorado and sailfish run from March into July; bluefin tuna from April through June. Barracuda, grouper, mackerel and red snapper can be hooked all year.

Hotel Zone marinas offer a range of vessels and top-of-the-line equipment. Larger boats are 35-40 feet long; single-engine diesel boats average 26-28 feet. Four- and 8-hour charter excursions normally include a captain, first mate, gear, bait and soft drinks. Cost varies and the marinas compete for business, so it pays to shop around; ask at your hotel for recommendations.

In addition to the islands, fishing opportunities are plentiful all along the Caribbean coastline and farther south at La Ascención and Espíritu Santo, two large bays along the shore of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Shark fishing is good in Yalahau Lagoon, the body of water

between the mainland and Cape Catoche at the northeastern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula. Boats can be hired in the port town of Chiquilá, reached via a paved road branching north off Mex. 180 at the town of El Ideal, and on Isla Holbox.

Scuba diving and snorkeling also are rewarding, particularly at the southern end of Cancún Island around Nizuc Point, off Cozumel and Isla Mujeres, and in Nichupté Lagoon. Dive shops along Kukulcán rent equipment, give lessons and schedule trips; some hotels also can arrange dive excursions. Check credentials, boats and equipment, and if possible get the inside scoop from a diver familiar with the area. Conditions are best from May or June through August.

Scuba Cancún, on the lagoon side of Kukulcán at Km marker 5 (across from Playa Langosta), offers a 5-hour "resort course" that includes pool practice and a one-tank dive at a shallow reef with a certified PADI instructor. They also organize all-day snorkeling and cavern diving excursions (on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) to freshwater cenotes in the jungles just north of the Tulum ruins. Transportation, wet suits and gear are included; open water certification is required to participate in the cavern dive. Phone (998) 849-7508.

Other activities include water skiing, windsurfing, parasailing, swimming and boating. The best place to water ski is Nichupté Lagoon; ski clubs along Kukulcán on the lagoon side rent boats and equipment. Windsurfing propels its participants across the water at exhilarating speeds; the sailboard used by windsurfers is comprised of a masted sail attached to a surfboard. The pools at the big resort hotels are masterfully designed, with the added bonus of the Caribbean as a backdrop.

For landlubbers there's golf at the Cancún Golf Club at Pok-Ta-Pok, a championship 18-hole course designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr. Located on an island between Laguna de Bojórquez and Laguna Nichupté (access is off Kukulcán at Km 7.5), it offers fine views of both lagoons and the Caribbean. Shoes, carts and clubs are available for rent, and there is a pro shop. Reservations are advised; phone (998) 883-1230 or (998) 883-1277.

Another championship 18-hole course is at the Hilton Cancún Golf & Spa Resort, off Kukulcán at Km 17; phone (998) 881-8000 for reservations information. Greens fees vary depending on the season and are less for hotel guests.

Horseback riding trips take in locations from jungle to seashore. Rancho Loma Bonita, off Mex. 307 just south of Puerto Morelos (Km 49), provides transportation to and from the ranch, in addition to a guide and lunch. Phone (998) 887-5465, or make arrangements through your hotel or a local travel agency.

Tennis is offered at the big resort hotels; there are courts at the Crown Paradise Club Cancún, Fiesta Americana Condesa, Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach and Le Meridien Cancún Resort & Spa, among others. A jogging and bicycling path—also used for roller blading—parallels the sidewalk along the northern (bay) side of Kukulcán, extending as far as Cancún Point; a path also parallels the sidewalk along most of the southern half of the Hotel Zone. Runners should make the circuit in the early morning before it gets too hot.

If you just want to relax—and are willing to pay the price—the spa at the J.W. Marriott Cancún Resort & Spa, Km 14.5 on Kukulcán, offers hydrotherapy, massage and facial and body treatments, plus a state-of-the-art gym, an indoor pool, steam and sauna rooms and a natural juice bar. An appointment is required; for information phone (998) 848-9600.

Beaches Hurricane Wilma decimated Cancún's spectacular beaches, but by mid-2006 they had been restored. The beaches along the Caribbean were literally replaced; sand was dredged from the bottom 20 miles offshore and dumped on top of areas where the storm's fury had completely washed it away. The new beaches are thus artificial, but that makes little difference to visitors. The white sand is soft and fine grained, and the water—which is warm enough for swimming all year—provides a gorgeous counterpoint, its ever-shifting hues ranging from opalescent green to vivid turquoise. The beaches at the northern end of the Hotel Zone, which front Mujeres Bay (Bahía Mujeres), are narrow and have

calm, shallow water. The beaches along the Caribbean are wider and more dramatic, with occasional crashing breakers and dangerous undertows.

The best beaches are in front of the big hotels. All beaches in Mexico, however, are federally owned and therefore public, even stretches that may seem like they are on hotel property. Keep in mind that you cannot use hotel facilities unless you are a guest, although changing areas and outdoor showers are available. Note the flags posted to indicate surf conditions. A green flag indicate safe conditions for swimming; yellow indicates caution; and red or black, dangerous conditions.

The "inner" coast of Cancún Island borders saltwater Nichupté Lagoon. Much of the lagoon is lined with stands of mangrove. Wilma killed many of the trees, but they are starting to grow back, with patches of green showing up amid the dead wood. Nichupté doesn't have the Caribbean's beauty, but the calm water is ideal for boating and water skiing, and the restaurants along the shore are popular places for sunset watching.

The following designated public beaches are described in the order they appear along Cancún Island, beginning at the top of the island's "seven" configuration after leaving the mainland.

Playa Linda Playa Langosta Playa Tortugas Playa Caracol Playa Chac-Mool Playa Delfines.

Insider Info

Doing the Hotel Zone Hop

Cancún's Hotel Zone is full of architecturally striking resorts, and even if you're staying at one of them it's worth checking out some of the others—if only as research for your next vacation. Hotel hopping is fun and free, and you don't even need a car; getting from one property to another is easy if you take one of the local city buses (numbered "R-1" on the windshield) that travel up and down Boulevard Kukulcán. They make frequent stops and run until late at night, and the fixed fare is a mere 7.5 pesos (about 60 cents)—much cheaper than a taxi.

Following is a suggested hotel-hopping tour that might inspire you to come up with your own version. (Note: Many of the all-inclusive resorts, such as the Cancun Palace and the Hotel Riu Cancun, do not allow non-guests to walk around their public areas.)

Begin with breakfast at Vips, a bright, cheery restaurant and coffee shop located on Boulevard Kukulcán next to the Cancún Center. It's conveniently located in the thick of the Hotel Zone and is just a short walk from the first resort on your itinerary. One of their Mexican-style breakfasts with eggs, beans (frijoles), toast, juice and coffee should keep you filled up until lunch.

From Vips, cross the northern extension of Boulevard Kukulcán to the large, peach-colored Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach. This opulent hotel has a spacious, high-ceilinged lobby that radiates understated luxury—marble floors, giant flower arrangements and fine art displayed in recessed wall nooks, with cozy sitting areas scattered about. Look straight up for a view of the large, square piece of kaleidoscope-patterned stained glass. The huge swimming pool, which curves like a natural lagoon, looks out onto a secluded beach with a view of Isla Mujeres, 4 miles offshore. Have another cup of coffee—or an early lunch, if you're hungry or you skipped Vips—at Isla Contoy, the hotel's breezy poolside restaurant, which has a thatched roof and a view of the beach.

From the Grand Coral Beach, hop on a southbound R-1 bus and get off at the ME by Melia (near Boulevard Kukulcán Km marker 12, just north of the Park Royal Pirámides hotel and close to La Isla Shopping Village). One of Cancún's newest resorts, it attracts a young clientele and celebrities like Fergie of the Black-Eyed Peas. The look is hip and contemporary, with minimalist art, sleek furniture, stark lighting, flow fountains and lots of black. The postmodern vibe extends to the pool area, which has an infinity pool—so named for the visual effect of water appearing to extend to the horizon and merge seamlessly with the aquamarine Caribbean. ME by Melia really revs up in the evening, when psychedelic light patterns are projected onto the outside walls and the entire hotel seems to throb to the beat of moody techno music. Your next

stop is the Marriott CasaMagna Cancun, around Km marker 15 (just south of the JW Marriott Cancun Resort & Spa). The CasaMagna's lobby is a dramatically marbled space, accented by crystal chandeliers and full of plants and shallow pools of water. The Las Ventanas Lobby Bar, with potted palms and big windows looking out over the pool area and the ocean, is a relaxed spot for a leisurely afternoon cocktail or margarita; if you're in a livelier mood, pull up a chair at the American-style Champions Sports Bar & Grill.

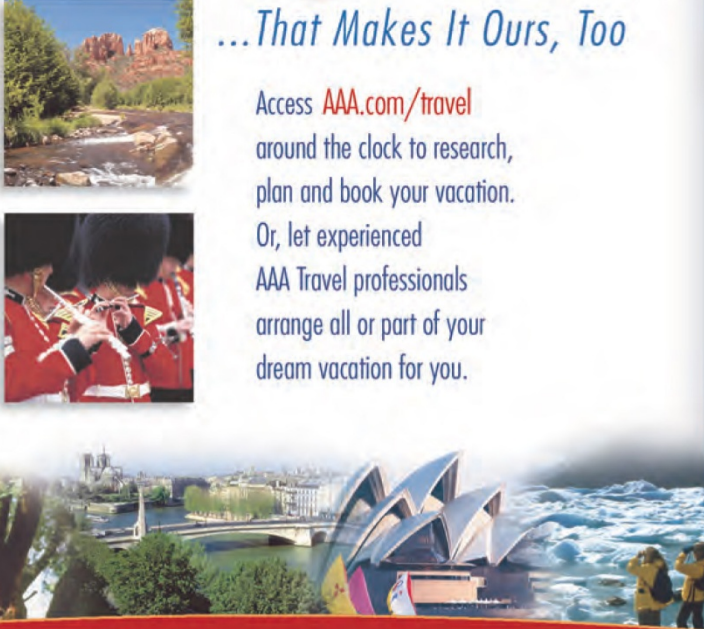
A couple of hotels down from the Marriott CasaMagna is the Gran Melia Cancun Beach & Spa Resort. This is one of the largest properties in the Hotel Zone, with five soaring, pyramid-shaped buildings housing the guest rooms. The public areas here are towering and jungle-like, festooned with hanging plants, dripping with water and incorporating decorative elements—including oversized statues, frescos and calendars—that reflect Mayan motifs and culture. For a light dinner try Nami, a sushi bar and lounge in the central atrium that specializes in Latin-Asian fusion cuisine. If you prefer al fresco dining, La Veranda serves grilled seafood dishes in a setting that overlooks the Caribbean.

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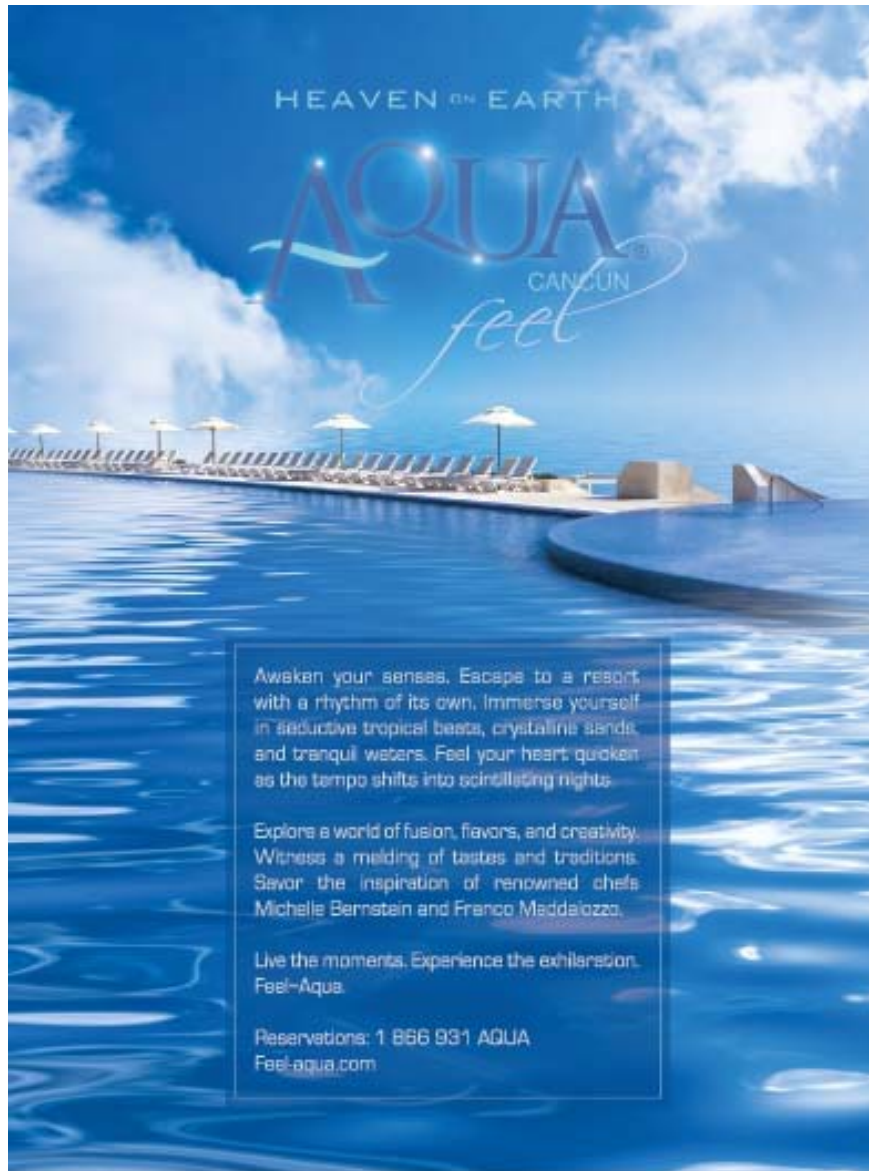
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