

Cancun, Mexico

Cancun In 1967, the Mexican government commissioned a study to pinpoint the ideal place for an international Caribbean resort. The computer chose Cancun, and a Cinderella-like transformation began. More vacationers come here than to any other part of Mexico, and many come again and again for the white-sand beaches, crystalline turquoise waters, sizzling nightlife, numerous restaurants, and the proximity of Maya ruins throughout the Yucatan peninsula.

It's clear as you fly into Cancun that this resort was carved out of the jungle. When development began here in the early 1970s the beaches were deserted except for birds and iguanas. Now luxury hotels, shopping malls, and restaurants line the oceanfront.

But there is more to Cancun than plopping yourself down under a palapa (thatched roof). Downtown offers a more authentic glimpse into the sights and sounds of Mexico. For diving and snorkeling, the reefs off Cancun and nearby Cozumel, Puerto Morelos, and Isla Mujeres are among the best in the world. Cancun also makes a relaxing base for venturing to the stupendous ruins of Chichen Itza, Tulum, and Coba, remnants of the area's rich Maya heritage.

The Maya people settled the area during the Pre-Classic era, around AD 200, and remained until the 14th or 15th century. But little is known about them. Other explorers seem to have overlooked the barrier island -- it doesn't appear on early navigators' maps. It was never heavily populated, perhaps because its terrain of mangroves and marshes (and resulting swarms of mosquitoes) discouraged settlement. Some minor Maya ruins were discovered in the mid-19th century, but archaeologists didn't get around to studying them until the 1950s.

Cancun has followed the typical course of any tourist resort area, first attracting the jet set and gradually welcoming less affluent tourists. Nowadays there are large numbers of package-tourists and college students, particularly during spring break when hordes of flawless, tanned young bodies fill the beaches and restaurants.

Arriving and Departing

By Air

Cancun Airport (CUN) (PHONE: 98/86-05-00) is 16 km (9 mi) southwest of the heart of Cancun City, 10 km (6 mi) from the southernmost point of the Hotel Zone.

Almost all flights to Cancun have stopovers at hub airports (Houston, Dallas, or Miami), where you must change planes and transfer luggage. Some flights go to Mexico City, where you must pass through customs before transferring to a domestic flight to Cancun.

Cancun is 3 1/2 hours from New York and Chicago, 4 1/2 hours from Los Angeles. However, your actual traveling time may be more if you must change planes at one of the hub airports and have a long layover. Flights to Cozumel and Merida are comparable in length.

Carriers

Major Airlines

Aeromexico (PHONE: 800/237-6639) to Cancun, Cozumel.

American (PHONE: 800/433-7300) to Cancun, Cozumel.

Continental (PHONE: 800/231-0856) to Cancun, Cozumel.

Delta (PHONE: 800/241-4141) to Cancun.

Mexicana (PHONE: 800/531-7921) to Cancun, Cozumel.

US Airways (PHONE: 800/428-4322)

By Taxi or Van

Currently, no buses are allowed at the airport. The options are taxis or colectivos (vans). A counter at the airport exit sells colectivo and taxi tickets; prices range from \$15 to \$40, depending on the destination. Getting back to the airport for your trip home is cheaper; taxi rates to the airport range from \$10 to \$22. Hotels post the most current rates. Be sure to agree on a price before getting into the taxi.

Contacts and Resources

When to Go

High season along the Mexican Caribbean runs from mid-December through the week after Easter. The most popular vacation times are Semana Santa (Holy Week, the week before Easter) and the week from Christmas to New Year's. Most hotels are booked well in advance for these holiday periods, when prices are at their highest and armies of travelers swarm popular attractions. Resorts popular with college students (i.e., any place with a beach) tend to fill up in the summer months.

Off-season price changes are considerable at the beach resorts but are less pronounced in Merida, Campeche, and other inland regions. To avoid crowds, and high prices, the best times to go are October and March-May.

December to May is usually pleasant along the coast, although you may experience some afternoon rain and winds; in autumn, storms are common. The steamiest times of year both on the coast and inland are late spring and in August and early September, just before the rainy season.

Weather Chart

The following are the normal daily temperature ranges for Cancun:

January 84-66 deg. F (29-19 deg. C); February 85-68 deg. F (29-20 deg. C); March 88-69 deg. F (31-21 deg. C); April 88-71 deg. F (31-22 deg. C); May 91-73 deg. F (33-23 deg. C); June 92-75 deg. F (33-24 deg. C); July 91-73 deg. F (33-23 deg. C); August 91-75 deg. F (33-24 deg. C); September 87-75 deg. F (31-24 deg. C); October 87-73 deg. F (31-23 deg. C); November 86-71 deg. F (30-22 deg. C); December 84-66 deg. F (29-19 deg. C).

Holidays

January 1: New Year's Day.

January 6: El Dia de Los Reyes (Three Kings Day/Feast of the Epiphany) is the day Mexican children receive gifts brought by the three kings (the Mexican version of Santa Claus).

March 21: Aniversario de Benito Juarez (Benito Juarez's Birthday) is the celebration of the birthday of one of Mexico's greatest heroes; parades are held on this national holiday.

Easter Week: Easter is the most important holiday in Mexico. Fiestas, parades, visits to the family, and numerous religious processions and services mark the event.

May 1: Dia del Trabajo (Day of Work) is celebrated with a big parade.

September 15-16: Independence Day, the commemoration of a historic speech, known as the grito (shout), by Independence leader Padre Miguel Hidalgo, is celebrated throughout Mexico with fireworks and parties.

December 16-25: Christmas is celebrated in the Yucatan villages with processions culminating in the breaking of candy-filled pinatas.

December 24: The most important day of the holiday season is December 24, Nochebuena (Holy Night), when families gather to eat a traditional midnight dinner.

Festivals & Seasonal Events

February 2: La Candelaria is the date of the final Christmas fiesta, hosted by whoever got the small plastic doll called El Nino (for Baby Jesus) in their piece of Rosca de Reyes (King's Ring) cake on January 6.

February-March: Carnival festivities take place the week before Lent, with parades, floats, outdoor dancing, music, and fireworks.

Late April-June: Billfish Tournaments take place in Cozumel, Puerto Aventuras, Puerto Morelos, and Cancun.

Memorial Day Weekend: The Cancun Jazz Festival, an annual event since 1991, has featured such top musicians as Wynton Marsalis and Gato Barbieri.

October 18-25: Fiesta of the Christ of Sitalpech in Izamal, an hour from Merida, heralds a week of daily processions in which the image of Christ is carried from Sitalpech village to Izamal; dances and fireworks accompany the walks.

November 1-2: On the Day of the Dead, or All Saints' Day, Mexicans all over the country visit cemeteries to construct marigold-strewn altars on the graves of loved ones and ancestors, and to symbolically share a meal with them by leaving offerings and having graveside picnics. Bakers herald the annual return of the departed from the spirit world with pastry skulls and candy.

Early December: Cancun Fair serves as a nostalgia trip for provincials who now live along the Caribbean shore but still remember the small-town fiestas back home.

December 3-9: Fiesta of the Immaculate Conception is observed for six days in the villages across Quintana Roo, with processions, folkloric dances, fireworks, and bullfights.

December 12: Fiesta de Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe (Festival of Our Lady of Guadalupe) is celebrated throughout Mexico. Pilgrims who journeyed to the Basilica of the Madonna of Guadalupe in Mexico City return home via bicycles or on foot in time for a midnight Mass followed by dance performances and fiestas.

Visitor Information

In the United States: PHONE: 800/446-3942 nationwide; 31 East 63rd St., 3rd fl., New York, NY 10021, PHONE: 212/821-0314, FAX: 212/821-0367; 300 North Michigan Ave., 4th fl., Chicago, IL 60601, PHONE: 312/606-9273, FAX: 312/606-9015; 2401 West 6th St., 5th fl., Los Angeles, CA 90057, PHONE: 213/351-2069, FAX: 213/351-2074; 10440 West Office Dr., Houston, TX 77042, PHONE: 713/780-3740, FAX: 713/780-8367; 1200 NW 78th Ave., Suite 203, Miami, FL 33126, PHONE: 305/381-6996, FAX: 305/381-8982.

Telephones **Directory & Operator Information**

Throughout Mexico, dial 040 for information.

International Calls

The country code for the United States and Canada is 1

Safety

When visiting the Yucatan, even in such resort areas as Cancun and Cozumel, use common sense. Wear a money belt, make use of hotel safes when available, and carry your own baggage whenever possible unless you are checking into a hotel. Leave expensive jewelry and other valuables in the hotel safe when you go on sightseeing excursions. Reporting a crime to the police is often a frustrating experience unless you speak excellent Spanish and have a great deal of patience.

Passports & Visas **Entering Mexico**

Citizens of the United States and Canada need only a valid piece of identification (passport, certified copy of a birth certificate, or a voter registration card) for stays of 180 days.

Money

Cancun is probably the most expensive destination in Mexico. For obvious reasons, if you stay at international chain hotels and eat at restaurants geared to tourists (especially hotel restaurants), you may not find the Yucatan such a bargain.

In the off-season, Cancun hotels can cost one-third to one-half what they cost during peak season. Keep in mind, however, that this is also the time that many hotels undergo necessary repairs or renovations.

Some peak-season sample costs: cup of coffee, 6-15 pesos; bottle of beer, 15-45 pesos; plate of tacos with trimmings, 15-55 pesos; grilled fish platter at a tourist restaurant, 25-75 pesos; 2-km (1-mi) taxi ride, 15 pesos.

Currency

Nuevos pesos (new peso notes) come in denominations of 10, 20, 50, and 100 pesos. Old bills still circulate in some areas; they come with three zeroes attached (i.e., 10,000 = 10; 50,000 = 50). Do not accept old pesos as change from anyone, as it will be impossible to spend them elsewhere. Coins come in denominations of 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1 pesos and 50, 20 and 10 centavos. Some denominations of bills and coins are very similar, so check carefully.

U.S. dollar bills, but not coins, are widely accepted in the Yucatan, particularly in Cancun. Many hotels, shops, and market vendors, as well as virtually all hotel service personnel, take them, too. Dollar bills are particularly welcome tips.

Exchanging Money

Most banks only change money on weekdays until 1 (though they stay open until 5), while casas de cambio (private exchange offices) generally stay open until 6 and often operate on weekends. Bank rates are regulated by the federal government and are therefore invariable; casas de cambio have slightly more variable rates. Some hotels also exchange money, but for providing you with this convenience, they help themselves to a bigger commission than banks.

When changing money, count your bills before leaving the bank, and don't accept any partially torn or taped-together bills; they will not be accepted anywhere. Also, many shop and restaurant owners are unable to make change for large bills. Enough of these encounters may compel you to request billetes chicos (small bills) when you exchange money.

Taxes

An air-departure tax of \$18 or the peso equivalent must be paid at the airport for international flights from Mexico. For domestic flights the departure tax is around \$10. Save a little cash for this transaction, because traveler's checks and credit cards are not accepted.

Hotels in Cancun charge a 12% lodging tax.

Mexico has a value-added tax (V.A.T.) or I.V.A. (impuesto de valor agregado) of 15% (10% along the Cancun-Chetumal corridor). Many establishments already include the I.V.A. tax in the quoted price. Occasionally (and illegally) it may be waived for cash purchases.

Tipping

At restaurants it's customary to leave a 10%-15% tip (make sure, however, that a service charge has not already been added to your bill). Give bellhops and porters \$1 to \$2; hotel maids, \$1 per day per room. Tour guides should get \$1 per person for a half-day tour, \$2 for a full day, and \$10 per person for a week. Tour-bus drivers should receive \$1 per person per day. Car watchers and windshield wipers (usually young boys), as well as gas station attendants and theater ushers, should be satisfied with 3-5 pesos. Taxi drivers and shoe shiners do not expect tips, although a few pesos are always appreciated.

Mail

Mail can be sent from your hotel or the local post office. Be forewarned, however, that mail service to and within Mexico is notoriously slow and can take anywhere from 10 days to six weeks. Never send anything of value to Mexico through the mail including checks or credit card numbers.

It costs 3.50 pesos to mail a postcard or letter weighing less than 20 grams to the United States or Canada. The cost to Great Britain is 4.40 pesos.

Language

Spanish is the official language of Mexico, although Indian languages are spoken by approximately 20% of the population, many of whom speak no Spanish at all. In the beach resorts of Cancun, English is understood by most people employed in tourism; at the very least, shopkeepers will know numbers in English for bargaining purposes. Mexicans welcome even the most halting attempts to use their language.

Health**Divers' Alert**

Do not fly within 24 hours of scuba diving.

Guided Tours**Air Tours**

Grupo Taca (Cancun Airport, PHONE: 98/87-41-10 or 98/84-39-38) flies between Cancun and Guatemala City, continuing on to Flores and the ruins at Tikal, for \$290 round-trip. This one-day tour covers all ground transfers, departure taxes, entrance to ruins, tour guide, and lunch. The most efficient way to get your tickets is through a local travel agent.

Day Cruises

Day cruises to Isla Mujeres are popular; they generally include snorkeling, shopping downtown, open-bar buffet lunches, and listening to music or lounging at Playa Norte. While there are plenty of tour operators offering such trips, it's just as simple and far cheaper to plan your own. All you have to do is catch the ferries to Isla Mujeres that leave every half hour or so from Puerto Juarez and Punta Sam, both north of Cancun.

If you do want someone else to do the planning and don't mind spending the money, Captain Hook (Blvd. Kukulcan, Km 4.5, PHONE: 98/83-37-36) runs an Isla Mujeres day tour that departs at 10 AM from the pier in front of Fat Tuesday's and returns at 5 PM; it costs about \$55.

Dolphin Discovery (Playa Langosta, PHONE: 98/83-07-77 or 98/83-07-79) sails daily from Playa Langosta and Playa Tortugas to the company's dock on Isla Mujeres. The program includes an instruction video, a 30-minute swim session with the dolphins, and time to explore the island.

Jungle Ecotours

Many claim to have jungle tours, but few actually deliver. An exception is Reserva Ecologica El Eden (Apdo Postal 308, Postal 770, 77500, Cancun, Quintana Roo, 98/80-50-32). Established in 1990 by one of Mexico's leading naturalists, Arturo Gomez-Pompa, and his nephew, Marco Lazcano-Barrero, the 500,000-acre reserve, 48 km (30 mi) northwest of Cancun, is dedicated to research for biological conservation in Mexico. It offers "Eco-scientific" tours for people interested in experiencing the wetlands, mangrove swamps, sand dunes, savannas, and tropical forests in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Prices include transportation to and from Cancun, one to two nights' accommodation at La Savanna Research Station, meals, cocktails, guided nature walks, and all tours. Two-day/one-night excursions start at \$235, three-day/two-nights at \$315.

Submarine Cruises

Nautibus (PHONE: 98/83-35-52 or 98/83-21-19), or the "floating submarine," has a 1 1/2-hour Caribbean-reef cruise. Nautibus currently departs at 9:30, 11:30, 1, and 3, but times often change, so double-check in advance. The \$30 price includes music and drinks.

The Atlantis (Aqua Tours, Blvd. Kukulcan, Km 6.25, PHONE: 98/83-04-00) offers submarine trips that actually go underwater (others float on the surface and have window seats below). Tours depart every hour 10-3 and include an hour-long cruise to Playa Indios on Isla Mujeres, a 45-minute tour to the reefs, food and drink at the Atlantis Bar & Grill (also on Isla), showers, towels, and locker service, all for about \$69.

Etiquette & Behavior

In the United States, being direct, efficient, and succinct are highly valued traits. In Mexico, where communication tends to be more diplomatic and subtle, this style is often perceived as rude and aggressive. People will be far less helpful if you lose your temper and/or complain loudly, as such behavior is considered impolite. Remember that things move at a much slower pace here and there is no stigma attached to being late. Try to accept this pace gracefully. Learning basic phrases such as "please" and "thank you" in Spanish will make a big difference.

Business Etiquette

Business etiquette is much more formal and traditional in Mexico than in the United States. Personal relationships always come first, so developing rapport and trust is essential. A handshake is an appropriate greeting, along with a friendly inquiry about family members. With established clients, do not be surprised if you are welcomed with a kiss on the cheek or a full hug with a pat on the back. Mexicans love business cards -- be sure to present yours in any business situation. Without a business card you may have trouble being taken seriously. In public always be respectful towards other colleagues and keep confrontations private. Meetings may or may not start on time but remain patient with delays. When invited

to dinner at the home of a customer or business associate, bring a gift. Send a thank-you note afterward.

Emergencies

To report an emergency dial 06.

Other emergency numbers:

Municipal Police (PHONE: 98/84-19-13).

Traffic Police (PHONE: 98/84-07-10).

Highway Police (PHONE: 98/84-24-45).

Immigration Office (PHONE: 98/84-17-49).

Red Cross (Av. Xcaret and Labna, Sm 21, PHONE: 98/84-16-16).

Fire Department (PHONE: 98/84-12-02).

If you get into a scrape with the law, you can call the 24-hour English-speaking hotline of the Procuraduria de Proteccion al Turista (Attorney General for the Protection of Tourists, PHONE: 01-800-903-9200 within Mexico; 800/482-9832 in the U.S.). The hotline can provide immediate assistance as well as general, nonemergency guidance. Additionally, U.S. citizens can also contact the Citizens' Emergency Center (PHONE: 202/647-5225 weekdays 8:15 AM-10 PM EST; Sat. 9 AM-3 PM; 202/634-3600 after hours and Sun.).

Hospital Emergency Rooms

Hospital Americano (Viento 15, PHONE: 98/84-61-33) is a well-equipped hospital but notorious for grossly overcharging tourists.

Total Assist (Claveles, Sm 22, PHONE: 98/84-10-92 or 98/84-81-16) has English-speaking staff members and more reasonable fees.

Embassies and Consulates

United States

U.S. Embassy (Paseo de la Reforma 305, Col. Cuauhtemoc, Mexico City 06500, PHONE: 5/511-99-80 or 5/209-91-00, FAX: 5/511-99-80).

Electricity

Mexico operates on the same 60-cycle, 120-volt electrical system as the U.S. and Canada; however, many outlets have not been updated to accommodate three-prong and polarized

plugs (those with one larger prong), so bring an adapter plug. When in Mexico purchase a surge protector for valuable electronic equipment such as stereos, computers, and televisions.

Customs & Duties

Arriving in Mexico

Upon entering Mexico, you will be given a baggage declaration form and asked to itemize what you're bringing into the country. You are allowed to bring in 2 liters of spirits or wine for personal use; 400 cigarettes, 50 cigars, or 250 grams of tobacco; a reasonable amount of perfume for personal use; one movie camera and one regular camera and 12 rolls of film for each; and gift items not to exceed a total of \$300. If driving across the U.S. border, gift items must not exceed \$50. You aren't allowed to bring firearms, meat, vegetables, plants, fruit, or flowers into the country.

Business Hours

Banks are open weekdays 9-5 and some are open Saturday mornings. Most businesses are open weekdays 9-2 and 4-7. Most gas stations are open 24 hours.

Stores in Cancun are usually open 10 AM-9 PM Monday-Saturday.

Most museums throughout Mexico are closed on Monday and open 8-5 the rest of the week. But it's best to call ahead or ask at your hotel.

Pharmacies in Cancun are usually open 8 AM-10 PM and stay open through the afternoon; there is a handful of 24-hour pharmacies.

Getting Around

Overview

Motorized transportation of some sort is necessary, as Cancun is somewhat spread out. However, public bus service is good, and taxis are relatively inexpensive.

By Bus

Public buses run between the Hotel Zone and downtown from 6 AM to midnight; the cost is about 3 pesos. There are designated bus stops, but you can also flag down drivers along Boulevard Kukulcan. The service is frequent and quite reliable. Buses from the Zone do not go into downtown Cancun but will drop you off at Avenida Tulum, where you can catch a connecting bus. Taking the bus can save you a considerable amount of money on taxis, particularly if you are staying in the Hotel Zone. They are also kind of fun since they're filled with a variety of people, and the driver often plays his favorite music as he barrels along the boulevard.