

# Cancún

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THE YUCATÁN

Cancún

If nothing else, **CANCÚN** is proof of Mexico's remarkable ability to get things done in a hurry – so long as the political will exists. In the late 1960s, the Mexican government decided to develop a new resort area to diversify the economy. Computers crunched weather data, and surveyors scouted the country's natural attractions to identify a 25-kilometre-long barrier island just off the northern Caribbean coast as the ideal combination of beautiful beaches, sparse population and accessible position. Construction of the resort paradise began in 1970, and when the first hotel opened in 1974, it relied on a generator for electricity and trucked-in water. In the twenty-first century, Cancún has struggled to shed its reputation for tacky fun (Spring Break happens only a month a year, after all), and it has also successfully courted Mexican tourists. But it is facing a mild crisis as seasonal storms in recent years have significantly eroded parts of the beach, the city's literal *raison d'être*.

Independent travellers often find the glitz of the hotel strip off-putting and the beachfront pleasures expensive, and, for anyone who has been out in the rest of the Yucatán or is eager to get there, all the concrete can be a downer. But a night spent here on the way in or out doesn't have to be wasted, so long as you appreciate the city as an energetic, successful frontier experiment, rather than lament its lack of history. A closer look reveals lively salsa clubs, bare-bones beach bars and inexpensive taco stands, all frequented by *cancunenses* who are friendly and proud of their city's prosperity.

Cancún has two parts: the *zona comercial* on the mainland (also called the **centro** or downtown), which has developed a bit of soul in its short lifetime, and the *zona hotelera*, a narrow, 25-kilometre-long barrier island lined with hotels and tourist amenities. It encloses a huge lagoon, so there's water on both sides. **Paseo Kukulcán** runs the length of the hotel zone, from the airport up to **Punta Cancún** (where the road splits around the convention centre and a warren of nightclubs and bars) and back onto the mainland. From Punta Cancún it's a half-hour bus ride to **Avenida Tulum**, the main avenue in the downtown area that runs north–south and eventually turns into Hwy-307, the highway that follows the length of the Caribbean coast.

## Arrival, information and city transport

Charter flights from Europe and South America, along with direct scheduled flights from dozens of cities in Mexico and North and Central America, land at **Cancún International Airport** (@www.cancun-airport.com), 20km south of the centre. Most international flights arrive at terminal 3, while domestic flights and some charter flights come into terminal 2 (terminal 1 is currently not in use). In both of the main terminals, you'll find **currency exchange** desks just past customs. In terminal 3, there's an **ATM** too, but at terminal 2, you have to walk outside and turn right and head for the one in the departures hall, which also has **luggage lockers**. An **airport bus** (M\$40) runs nearly every thirty minutes to downtown (7.45am–12.30am), while **shared vans** take you to any part of the hotel zone for a fixed price (US\$15); buy tickets at the respective desks outside customs. **Taxis** cost at least US\$50.

Arriving by bus, you'll pull in at the city's main **bus station**, in the heart of downtown; it has **luggage storage**. You can walk to most downtown hotels.

**Avenida Tulum**, downtown Cancún's main north–south street, is lined with shops, banks, restaurants and travel agencies. The **tourist office** is a few minutes' walk south of the bus station, inside the city hall at Tulum 26 (daily 9am–8pm;

☎998/884-8073). The friendly bilingual staff will help with even the smallest enquiries. They also dish out free maps and leaflets, but nothing you can't get at any travel agency or hotel reception. Other "tourist information" kiosks are usually pitching time-shares or tickets to the big nature parks down the coast.

To get to and around the *zona hotelera*, **city buses** marked "Tulum-Hoteles, Ruta 1" run along Tulum every few minutes; the fare is M\$6 in downtown and

