

Buses arrive at a small station one block west of the main plaza. Services run back to Mérida about twelve times daily (the last one goes at 7pm) and hourly to Valladolid and Cancún till 1am (though faster Oriente buses go only three times daily, via Tizimín). In the north plaza you'll find a Banorte **bank** with ATM, while on the main plaza is a **post office** (Mon–Fri 8am–2.30pm) and the very friendly **tourist office** (daily 9am–6pm; ☎ 988/954-0009). An **internet café** is on Calle 32, just south of the bus station. A **laundry** is on Calle 30 two blocks north of the north plaza. **Horse-drawn carriages** lined up around the plaza will take you for a pleasant *paseo* around the town (20min; M\$80). If you're **driving** here, know that most streets are one-way, but very haphazardly signed.

Chichén Itzá

The most famous, the most extensively restored and by far the most visited of all Maya sites, **Chichén Itzá** lies conveniently along the main highway from Mérida to Cancún, a little more than 200km from the Caribbean coast. A fast and very regular bus service runs all along this road, making it perfectly feasible to visit as a day's excursion from Mérida, or en route from Mérida to the coast, or even as a day out from Cancún, as many tour buses do. But both to do the ruins justice and to see them when they're not entirely thronged with tourists, an overnight stop is well worth considering – either at the site itself or, less extravagantly, in the nearby village of **Pisté** or in Valladolid, which is both convenient and inexpensive (see p.796).

Arrival and practicalities

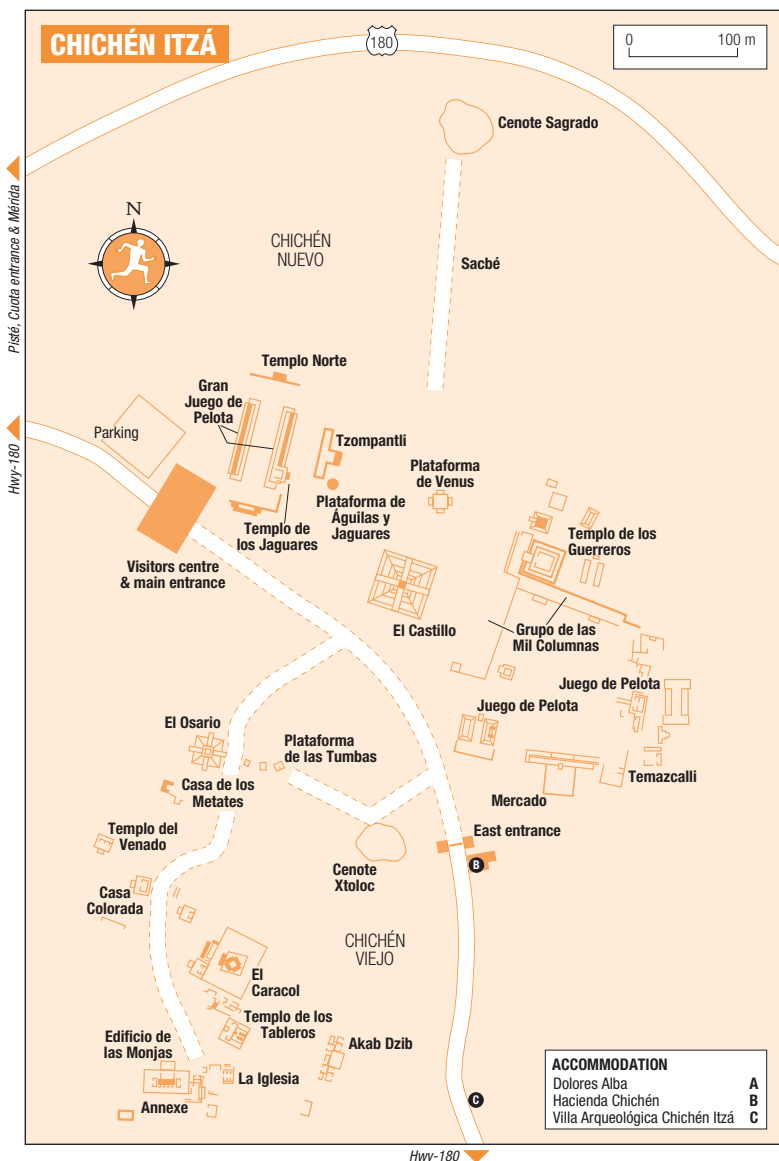
Arriving at Chichén Itzá, Hwy-180 *libre* curves around the site to the north, making an arc that merges with the site access road (the original highway straight through) at both ends. All first-class buses drive right up to the site entrance. All buses stop in Pisté as well, at one of two stations, on the west end of town (eastbound buses) or the east end (westbound buses).

The main **entry to the site** (daily winter 8am–5pm; summer 8am–6pm, last entry an hour earlier; M\$111) is on the west side. A huge **visitor centre** (open until 10pm) houses a museum, restaurant, **ATM** and shops selling souvenirs, film, maps and guides. **Guided tours** of the ruins can be arranged here: private tours in one of four languages (Spanish, English, German or Italian) cost approximately M\$480 and last ninety minutes; group tours cost a little less. You can also buy tickets and get in at the **smaller eastern gate** by the *Hotel Mayaland*, where there are fewer facilities. You can book two-hour **horseback trips** around the wilder, southern part of the site, Chichén Viejo, at the hotel reception area (M\$500 with guide). A **sound-and-light-show** in Spanish runs nightly (7pm in winter, 8pm in summer; included in price of day entrance ticket); it's a bit of a yawn, but it does recreate the shadow-serpent effect (see p.793) on the stairs of El Castillo, and it's the only thing to do in the evening.

About 3km west of Chichén Itzá, **Pisté** is an unattractive village straddling the road. Its main function is providing visitors with accommodation (see p.792), so they can get up early enough to beat the buses that arrive at the ruins around 10.30am. There's an **internet café** here, opposite the **bus station**, at the east end of town.

Accommodation

Visitors to Chichén Itzá have a choice of staying in a handful of more expensive **hotels** immediately **east of the ruins** (all but one are on the short access road




off Hwy-180, signposted “Zona Hotelera”), or along the main street in the town of **Pisté**, to the west of the site. In Pisté, most hotels are on the main road, between the village and the ruins, so it’s easy to shop around for the best deal – though quality can be low and occupancy high; the reliable *posadas* have only a few rooms apiece. You can **camp** or sling up a hammock at the *Pirámide Inn* (M\$55).

Near the ruins

Dolores Alba Hwy-180 *libre* km 122, 2km east of Chichén Itzá east entrance ☎999/928-5650, @www.doloresalba.com. The best-value hotel near the ruins, with clean, colourful rooms, a good restaurant (see below) and two swimming pools. Transport is provided to the site (but not back). 4

Hacienda Chichén Off Hwy-180, near the east entrance to the ruins ☎985/920-8407, @www.haciendachichen.com. Of the two luxury choices at the ruins (*Mayaland* is the other), this place has a more old-colonial, Mexican feel. Rooms are in cottages that housed Carnegie Institution archeologists in the 1920s. 3

 **Villa Arqueológica Chichén Itzá** off Hwy-180 *libre*, near the east entrance to the ruins ☎985/986-6000, @www.villasarqueologicas.com.mx. Not as lavish as its neighbours, but certainly comfortable. Rooms are set round a patio enclosing a pool and cocktail bar. By night, its library full of archeological tomes doubles as a disco, which is usually empty. 3

In Pisté

Felix Inn Just west of *Posada Chac-Mool* ☎999/851-0033, @hotelfelixinnchichenitza@hotmail.com. The *Felix* is a sensible and sunny

alternative to the hotels by the ruins. Clean a/c rooms are laid out around a pool, plus a restaurant, an internet café and wi-fi. 6

Pirámide Inn Hwy-180 *libre* at the west end of town, next to the bus station ☎985/851-0115, @www.chichen.com. Conveniently situated near the main entrance to the ruins, with a pool, a *temazcal* sauna, extensive gardens and a somewhat New Age clientele. 3

Posada Kary West end of Pisté ☎985/851-0208. Look for the pink trim on this building with six tidy rooms – good value, and a choice of fan or a/c. Turn north off Hwy-180 *libre* just east of the cross-roads and plaza. 3

Posada Maya West end of Pisté ☎985/851-0211. Just past *Kary* on a side street, this place, with eight rooms, is an even better deal. Rooms can be a little dark, but they're livened up with very groovy woodblock prints on the pastel walls. 2

Posada Olalde On C 6 south of the main road ☎985/851-0086. The basic rooms, with fans and hot water, can be a bit dim, but they're very clean. This is one of the quieter spots, since it's off the main road. Calle 6 is about two-thirds of the way through town coming from the bus stop; turn left across from *Posada Carrousel*. 3

Eating

For refreshment near the ruins, the **restaurant** at the *Dolores Alba* is good and affordable, and diners can use the pool. Across the road is the somewhat ritzy *Parque Ikkil* (daily 8am–6pm; M\$60), which is more appealing for its large *Sagrado Azul cenote* than its massive buffet restaurant. In Pisté, the best dining options are *Las Mestizas*, which serves some good regional cuisine, and the short row of *loncherías* on the west end of town, facing the plaza – they serve *comida corrida* for about M\$30, and are also open in the evenings, with lighter fare.

The site

Though in most minds **Chichén Itzá** represents the Maya, it is in fact the site's divergence from Maya tradition that makes it archeologically so intriguing. Experts are fairly certain that the city was established around 300 AD, and began to flourish in the Terminal Classic period (between 800 and 925 AD); the rest of its history, however, as well as the roots of the Itzá clan that consolidated power in the peninsula here after 925, remain hotly disputed. Much of the evidence at the site – an emphasis on human sacrifice, the presence of a huge ball-court and the glorification of military activity – points to a strong influence from central Mexico. For decades researchers guessed this was the result of the city's defeat by the Toltecs, a theory reinforced by the resemblance of the Templo de los Guerreros to the colonnade at Tula, near Mexico City (see p.473), along with Toltec-style pottery remains and numerous depictions of the Toltec god-king, the feathered serpent *Quetzalcoatl* (Kukulcán to the Maya).

Work since the 1980s, however, supports a theory that the Itzá people were not Toltec invaders, but fellow Maya who had migrated from the south (an explanation

for their subjects referring to them as “foreigners” in texts). The Toltec artefacts, this view holds, arrived in central Yucatán via the Itzás’ chief trading partners, the **Chontal Maya**, who maintained allegiances with Toltecs of central Mexico and Oaxaca.

Chichén Nuevo

The old highway that used to pass through the site is now a path dividing the ruins in two: the Itzá-era **Chichén Nuevo** (New or “Toltec” Chichén) to the north and Terminal Classic **Chichén Viejo** (Old Chichén) to the south. If it’s still reasonably early, head first to the north and **El Castillo** (also called the Pyramid of Kukulcán), the structure that sits alone in the centre of a great grassy plaza. It is a simple, relatively unadorned square building, with a monumental stairway ascending each face (though only two are restored), rising in nine receding terraces to a temple at the top. The simplicity is deceptive, however, as the building is in fact the **Maya calendar** rendered in stone: each staircase has 91 steps, which, added to the single step at the main entrance to the temple, amounts to 365; other numbers relevant to the calendar recur throughout the construction. Most remarkably, near sunset on the spring and autumn equinoxes, the great serpents’ heads at the foot of the main staircase are joined to their tails (at the top of the building) by an undulating body of shadow – an event that lasts just a few hours and draws spectators, and awed worshippers, by the thousands.

Inside El Castillo an **earlier pyramid** survives almost intact, and in the temple’s inner sanctuary, archeologists discovered one of the greatest treasures at the site: an **altar**, or perhaps a throne, in the form of a jaguar, painted bright red and inset with jade “spots” and eyes.

The “Toltec” plaza

El Castillo marks one edge of a **plaza** that formed the focus of Chichén Nuevo, and in addition to a *sacbé* leading to **Cenote Sagrado**, all its most important buildings are here, many displaying a strong Toltec influence in their structure and decoration. The **Templo de los Guerreros** (Temple of the Warriors), lined on two sides



▲ Grupo de las Mil Columnas, Chichén Itzá

by the **Grupo de las Mil Columnas** (Group of the Thousand Columns), forms the eastern edge of the plaza. These are the structures that most recall the great Toltec site of Tula, both in design and in detail – in particular the colonnaded courtyard (which would have been roofed with some form of thatch) and the use of Atlantean columns representing battle-dressed warriors, their arms raised above their heads. The temple is richly decorated on its north and south sides with carvings and sculptures of jaguars and eagles devouring human hearts, feathered serpents, warriors and, the one undeniably Maya feature, masks of the rain god Chac, with his curling snout. On top (now visible only at a distance, as you can no longer climb the structure) are two superb examples of figures called **Chac-mools**, once thought to be introduced by the Toltecs: offerings were placed on the stomachs of these reclining figures, which are thought to represent either the messengers who would take the sacrifice to the gods or perhaps the divinities themselves. The “thousand” columns alongside originally formed a square, on the far side of which is the building known as the **Mercado**, although there’s no evidence that this actually was a marketplace. Near here, too, is a small, dilapidated ball-court.

Walking west across the plaza from El Castillo, you pass the **Plataforma de Venus**, a raised block with a stairway up each side guarded by feathered serpents. Here, rites associated with Quetzalcoatl when he took the form of Venus, the morning star, would have been carried out. Slightly smaller, but otherwise identical in design, the adjacent **Plataforma de Águilas y Jaguares** features reliefs of eagles and jaguars holding human hearts. Human sacrifices may have been carried out here, judging by the proximity of a third platform, the **Tzompantli**, where victims’ heads likely hung on display. This is carved on every side with grotesque grinning stone skulls.

Gran Juego de Pelota and the Templo de los Jaguares

Chichén Itzá’s **Gran Juego de Pelota** (ball-court), on the west side of the plaza, is the largest known in existence, with walls some 90m long. Its design is a capital “I” surrounded by temples, with the goals, or target rings, halfway along each side. Along the bottom of each side runs a sloping **panel** decorated with scenes of the game. Although the rules and full significance of the game remain a mystery, it was clearly not a Saturday afternoon kick-about in the park; for more on the game’s significance, see p.876. On the panel, the players are shown proceeding from either side towards a central circle, the symbol of death. One player, just right of the centre (whether it’s the winning or losing captain is up for debate) has been decapitated, while another holds his head and a ritual knife. Along the top runs the stone body of a snake, whose heads stick out at either end. The court is subject to a whispering-gallery effect, which enables you to be heard clearly at the far end of the court, and to hear what’s going on there.

The **Templo de los Jaguares** overlooks the playing area from the east side. At the bottom – effectively the outer wall of the ball-court – is a little portico supported by two pillars, between which a stone jaguar stands sentinel. The outer wall panels, the left and the right of the interior space, are carved with the images of Pawahtuns, the gods who supported the sky and who are thought to be the patrons of the Itzá people. Inside are some worn but elaborate relief carvings of the Itzá ancestors inserted in the Maya creation myth – a powerful demonstration of their entitlement to rule.

Cenote Sagrado

The **Cenote Sagrado** lies at the end of the *sacbé* that leads about 300m off the north side of the plaza. It’s an almost perfectly round hole in the limestone bedrock, some 60m in diameter and more than 30m deep, the bottom third full of water. It was thanks to this natural well (and perhaps another in the southern half