

Getting to the sites

Because the sites are far apart, and on a road poorly served by buses, it's best to **rent a car**: in two days you can explore all of the key sites, spending the night in Santa Elena or Ticul. For details of car rental agencies, see p.776. If your budget doesn't allow for a car, opt for the **Ruta Puuc day-trip bus** (M\$146) from Mérida (see p.774). It's a bit rushed, leaving you only a short time at each set of ruins, but Uxmal is the last stop, so it's possible to stay later here and pay for a different bus back. Scores of Mérida travel agencies offer pricier Puuc-route trips that include meals and a guide.

Uxmal

Meaning “thrice-built”, the UNESCO world heritage site of **UXMAL** (pronounced OOSH-mal; daily 8am–5pm; M\$111) represents the finest achievement of the Puuc-region Maya culture before it fell into its ultimate decline near 1000 AD. Its spectacular buildings are encrusted all over with elaborate, and sometimes grisly, decoration. It's potentially more rewarding than a visit to Chichén Itzá, as the crowds are (somewhat) smaller, the decorative detail is fascinating, and you can still climb one of the pyramids. Try to arrive close to opening time (the drive from Mérida takes about an hour); you can see the major buildings in a couple of hours and leave before the buses start arriving.

As in all Maya sites in the Yucatán, the face of **Chac**, the rain god, is everywhere. Chac must have been more crucial in this region than almost anywhere, for Uxmal and the other Puuc sites have no cenotes or other natural sources of water, relying instead on *chultunob*, jug-shaped underground cisterns, to collect and store rainwater (most have been filled in, to prevent mosquitoes breeding, but Kabáh has an extant one).

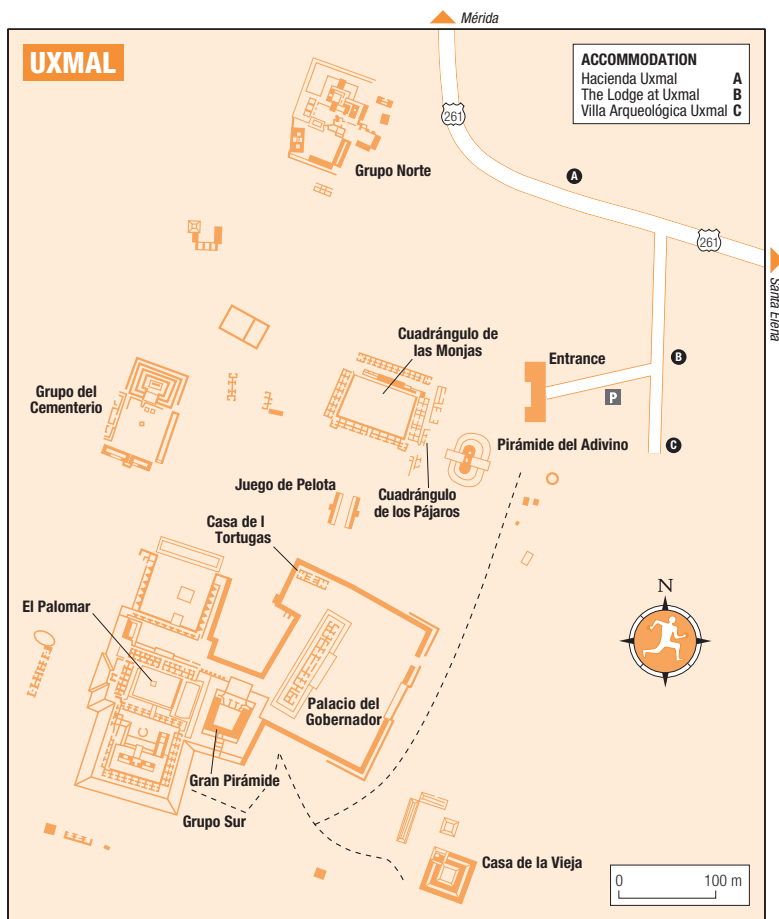
Little is known of the city's history, but the chief monuments, which marked its peaks of power and population, were erected around 900 AD. Sometime after that, the city began to decline, and by 1200 Uxmal and the other Puuc sites, together with Chichén Itzá, were all but abandoned. The reasons are unknown, although political infighting, ecological problems and loss of trade with Tula, near Mexico City, may have played a part. Later, the **Xiu dynasty** settled at Uxmal, making it one of the central pillars of the League of Mayapán (see p.787), but a rebellion in 1441 overthrew that alliance and put an end to centralized Maya authority over the Yucatán.

The site

The main restored buildings are set out on a roughly north-south axis in a large cleared site; the alignment of individual buildings often has astrological significance, usually connected with Venus or the sun. Little is known of the history, but what is clear is that the chief monuments and the city's peaks of power and population, fall into the Terminal Classic period, 800–1000 AD. Though there are indications of settlement long before this, most of the buildings that you see date from this time.

The Pirámide del Adivino

Entering the site, you first see the most remarkable of all Mexican pyramids, the **Pirámide del Adivino** (Pyramid of the Magician), soaring at a startling angle from its uniquely oval base. The legend of the pyramid's creation tells that an old sorceress who lived in a hut where the pyramid now stands hatched a dwarf son from an egg and encouraged him to challenge the king to a series of tests – all of which the dwarf won, thanks to a little magic. Finally the king challenged him to build a pyramid overnight: the dwarf succeeded, and became ruler of Uxmal.



Archeological evidence, however, shows at least five stages of construction – six if you count the modern restoration, which may not correspond to any of its earlier incarnations. At the base of the rear (east) stairway, a tunnel reveals **Templo III**, one of the earlier levels. Walk around to the west face of the pyramid into the **Cuadrángulo de los Pájaros** (named for the macaws that stud the roofline of the building on the west side) to admire the even steeper stairway that runs down either side of a second, earlier sanctuary in a different style. Known as the **Edificio Chenes** (or Templo IV), as it reflects the architecture of the Chenes region (see p.758), the building's entire front forms a giant mask of Chac. At the bottom of the west face, divided by the stairway, is the very first stage of construction.

The Cuadrángulo de las Monjas and the Casa de las Tortugas

Behind the pyramid, the **Cuadrángulo de las Monjas** (Nunnery Quadrangle) is a beautiful complex of four buildings enclosing a plaza. Despite the Spanish name, it wasn't a convent; theories range from a military academy to a sort of earthly paradise, where intended sacrificial victims would spend their final months in

debauchery. The four buildings, probably constructed between 895 and 906 AD, are each set on a slightly different level, possibly representing the four main levels of the Maya universe. The facade of each is decorated with complex reliefs, and the quadrangle itself is a slightly irregular shape, apparently to align with Venus.

Maya architectural skills are at their finest here, as the false vaults of the interiors are taken about as wide as they can go without collapsing (wooden crossbeams provided further support), and the frontages are slightly bowed in order to maintain a proper horizontal perspective. The **north building**, probably also the oldest, has a strip of plain stone facade (from which doors lead into vaulted chambers) surmounted by a slightly raised panel of mosaics, featuring geometric patterns and human and animal figures, with representations of Maya huts above the doorways. The **west building**, which has been heavily reconstructed, boasts even more varied themes, and the whole of its ornamentation is surrounded by a coiling, feathered rattlesnake with the face of a warrior emerging from its jaws. The **east building** mirrors the west one in its proportions; its snake decorations, however, run in long horizontal bars.

An arched passageway through the middle of the **south building**, the lowest of the four, is directly aligned with the **ball-court** (ham-handedly rebuilt with cement) outside. Today a path leads through here, between the ruined side walls of the court and up onto the levelled terrace on which stand the Palacio del Gobernador (see below) and the **Casa de las Tortugas** (House of the Turtles). This very simple, elegant building, named after the stone turtles carved around the cornice, demonstrates another constant theme of Puuc architecture: stone facades carved to resemble rows of narrow columns. These, marked with bands of masonry, probably represent the Maya huts still in use today, with walls of bamboo or saplings lashed together.

The Palacio del Gobernador and the Grupo Sur

The **Palacio del Gobernador** (Governor's Palace) marks the finest achievement at Uxmal. Arriving at the then virtually unknown site in June 1840, explorer and writer John L. Stephens did not doubt its significance. "If it stood this day on its grand artificial terrace in Hyde Park or the Garden of the Tuileries," he later wrote, "it would form a new order...not unworthy to stand side by side with the remains of the Egyptian, Grecian and Roman art." The palace faces east, away from the buildings around it, probably for astronomical reasons – its central doorway aligns with the column of the altar outside and the point where Venus rises. The use of light and shade on the long, low facade lends a remarkable harmony, as do the strong diagonals that run through its broad band of mosaic decorations. Close up, the mosaic features masks of Chac alternating with grid-and-key patterns and highly stylized snakes. Moreover, the patterns vary in depth, lending a fascinating texture to the facade.

Behind the palace stand the ruinous buildings of the **Grupo Sur** (South Group), with the partly restored Gran Pirámide (Great Pyramid) and El Palomar (Dovecote, or Quadrangle of the Doves). You can climb the rebuilt staircase of the **Gran Pirámide** to see the temple on top, decorated with macaws and more masks of Chac – some of these have even smaller carved faces set inside their mouths. **El Palomar** was originally part of a quadrangle like that of the Nunnery, but the only building to retain any form is this, topped with the great latticed roofcomb that gives it its name: it looks somewhat like a dovecote.

The outlying structures are rather anticlimactic, but the scrub forest is the perfect place to spot some of the Yucatán's more distinctive birds, such as the turquoise-browed motmot, with its pendulum-like tail, particularly along the path that runs off the south side of the Palacio del Gobernador. The trail leads to an odd display of small **stone phalluses**, protected by a thatch roof – collected from all over the

site, they're evidence of a fertility cult centred on Uxmal. (They're also worked into the back of the building on the west side of the Nunnery Quadrangle.)

Visiting Uxmal

Several **buses** a day run direct from Mérida to Uxmal in about an hour, and any bus heading down the main road towards Hopelchén will drop you a short walk from the entrance. There's a pay car park at the entrance to the site, where the **visitor centre** includes a small museum, bookshop with guides to the site, crafts store, snack bar and ATM. **Guides** cost about M\$550 for a small group. A **sound-and-light show** (M\$40, or included in price of day entrance ticket) starts at 7pm in winter and 8pm in summer. The commentary is in Spanish (translation equipment M\$25) and of dubious historical accuracy, but the lighting effects highlight the relief decorations beautifully. No buses run back to Mérida after the hour-long show.

Several **hotels** are close to the site, none in the budget category. All are subject to sudden arrivals of huge tour groups, which can make quality of service and food erratic, but are likely to offer good deals when not full. Two are right at the site's entrance: *Villa Arqueológica Uxmal* (☎ 997/974-6020, 🌐 www.villasarqueologicas.com.mx; Ⓜ) is the best value here, with a pool and tennis courts, though the rooms are relatively small; *The Lodge at Uxmal* (☎ 998/877-2495, 🌐 www.mayaland.com; Ⓜ) is more spacious, if a bit overpriced, and its breezy **restaurant** and bar, *La Palapa*, is a convenient spot for a cool drink. Across the main highway from the site entrance, the colonial-style *Hacienda Uxmal* (☎ 998/887-2495, 🌐 www.mayaland.com; Ⓜ) is a sister hotel to *The Lodge*, with similar rates. Other accommodation nearby but not within walking distance includes budget options in Santa Elena (see below) or the ultra-luxury of *Hacienda Temozón* (see box, p.780).

Santa Elena

The village of **SANTA ELENA**, sixteen kilometres south of Uxmal, and just seven from Kabáh, is worth visiting mainly for the magnificent view from its large **church**, which dominates the skyline for miles around from a position atop a small hill. Beside the church is a morbidly interesting small **museum** (daily 8am–6pm; free) with displays on local funerary practices, including the 200-year-old mummified remains of four children discovered under the church floor in 1980.

Two exceptionally pleasant (and popular, so book ahead) **places to stay** are both on Hwy-261 as it bypasses the village centre. The 🦋 *Flycatcher Inn* (no phone, 🌐 www.flycatcherinn.com; Ⓜ) is the first you reach, a B&B with seven rooms and a separate guest cottage, all decorated with local craftwork and furnished with lovely beds; air-conditioning is optional. It's about a five-minute walk south from the main square, or buses from Mérida will drop you on the highway very nearby. A little further south is 🦋 *Sacbe Bungalows* (☎ 985/858-1281, 🌐 www.sacbebungalows.com.mx; Ⓜ), where a hospitable Mexican–French couple offer basic but spotless bungalow rooms, all with porches, dotted about spacious grounds; there's a cottage with a kitchen as well. Breakfast and supper are available. In between the two hotels are two small **restaurants**: *El Chac Mool* does decent, inexpensive local food (closes at 8pm), while *The Pickled Onion* (Mon–Sat 1–9pm, Sun 5–9pm), which has a pool for guests, has a more international menu but also does excellent versions of local dishes; vegetarians will appreciate the fresh salads and the *chaya* soufflé.

Ticul

Located 80km south of Mérida on Hwy-184, **TICUL** is another good base for exploring the Puuc region, though not especially scenic. Historically an important centre of Maya shamanism, it's also a shoe-producing town, full of shops stocked