

and even a couple of seafood restaurants. There's a good Mexican **bakery**, *Flor de Palenque*, on Allende just off Juárez.



**Café de Yara** Hidalgo at Abasolo. Good café, both in terms of coffee and the casual atmosphere. Try the cappuccino (from a proper espresso machine) and breakfasts especially. Dinner, with European as well as Mexican dishes, is also decent, and it's a reliable spot to get a green salad.

**Chan Kah** Juárez at Independencia, on the plaza. The hotel has a first-floor terrace bar/restaurant with great views over the action on the plaza. Prices reflect the location (and aren't worth it for the standard Mexican food), but this is a good place for an early evening drink.

**Mara** Juárez at Independencia, on the plaza. A pleasant little café from which to watch the plaza

scene. Tacos are good here, but you can get big platters as well – or just a cold beer.

**Las Tinajas** 20 de Noviembre at Abasolo. Pleasant, family-run restaurant, open morning till night and popular for its vast menu of hearty meats, fish, chicken and pasta in addition to the usual Mexican fare. No comida corrida, but most dishes are around M\$85, and all are big enough to share.

**Tropitacos** Juárez between Allende and Abasolo. The biggest skewer of *pastor* pork in town, served hot and fast to the constant drone of blenders whipping up fruit drinks. Go for the *torta de bifeck*, garnished with griddle-fried cheese, if you want something more substantial.

## Listings

**Banks and exchange** Several banks along Juárez will change travellers' cheques and have ATMs.

**Internet access** There are a few places along Juárez: try Red M@aya (daily 9am–10pm; M\$15/hr) at no. 133 between Allende and Aldama. In La Cañada area, the hotels run something of a cartel, ripping off isolated customers with a charge of M\$25/hr. *El Panchán* also has internet access (10am–11pm; M\$15/hr).

**Laundry** Several in town, including Azul Lavanderia, 2a Avenida Sur Ote, just east of the plaza (Mon–Fri 9am–2pm & 5–8pm, Sat 9am–2pm).

**Post office** On Independencia, a block from the plaza (Mon–Fri 9am–6pm, Sat & Sun 9am–1pm).

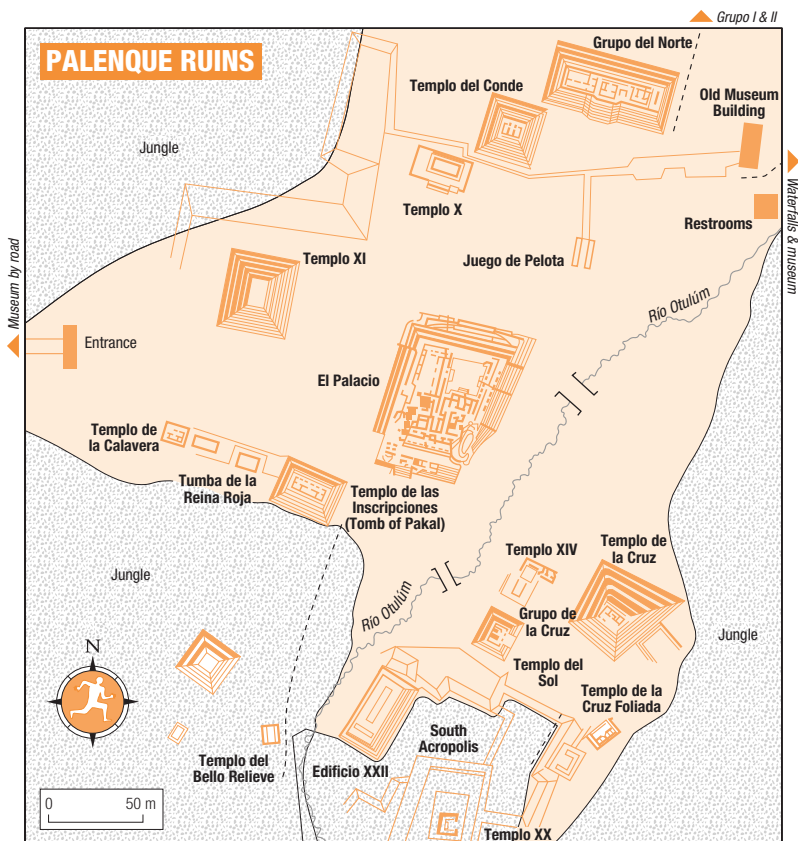
**Tours** Walk the streets of Palenque and you'll be accosted by touts offering a huge variety of tours to local attractions, above all the waterfalls at Agua

Azul and Misol-Há (see p.713) and the ruins of Bonampak and Yaxchilán (see p.723 & p.725). There are also trips to Tikal in Guatemala or to Toniná, and adventure tours, including kayaking and horseriding. Prices vary according to season (and even time of day if there's one seat left to fill) but start from around M\$100 for the waterfalls, M\$600 for a day trip to Bonampak and Yaxchilán. Be sure to check what's included – entrance fees, meals and English-speaking guides most importantly. Two of the more reliable agents are Na Chan Kan (☎916/345-0263, @nachan@tinet.net.mx), with a small office on Juárez, just up from the bus station, and a main office on Hidalgo at Jiménez, and Viajes Shivalva, based at the *Hotel Xibalba* in La Cañada (☎916/345-0411).

## The ruins of Palenque

The **ruins of Palenque** occupy the top of an escarpment marking the north-western limit of the Chiapas highlands. Superficially, the site bears a closer resemblance to the Maya sites of Guatemala than to those of the Yucatán, but ultimately the style here is unique – the **towered palace** and **pyramid tomb** are like nothing else, as is the abundance of reliefs and inscriptions. The setting, too, is remarkable. Surrounded by jungle-covered hills, Palenque is right at the edge of the great Yucatán plain – climb to the top of any of the structures and you look out over an endless stretch of low, pale-green flatland. If you arrive early enough in the day, the mist still clings to the treetops and the howler monkeys are roaring off in the greenery.

Founded around 100 BC as a farming village, it was four hundred years before Palenque began to flourish, during the Classic period (300–900 AD). Towards the end of this time the city ruled over a large part of modern-day Chiapas and Tabasco, but its peak, when the population is thought to have numbered some



100,000, came during a relatively short period in the seventh century, under two rulers: **Hanab Pakal (Jaguar Shield)** and **Chan Bahlum (Jaguar Serpent)**. Almost everything you can see (and that's only a tiny, central part of the original city) dates from this era.

### El Palacio and around

As you enter the site, **El Palacio**, with its extraordinary watchtower, stands ahead of you. The path, however, leads to the right, past a row of smaller structures – one of them, the so-called **Tumba de la Reina Roja** (“Tomb of the Red Queen”), is open inside, and you can climb in to see a sarcophagus still in place. This is nothing, though, compared with the structure’s neighbour, the enormous **Templo de las Inscripciones**, an eight-step pyramid, 26m high, built up against a thickly overgrown hillside. You are not permitted to climb the pyramid, so you just have to imagine the sanctuary on top, filled with a series of stone panels carved with hieroglyphic inscriptions relating to Palenque’s dynastic history. Deep inside the pyramid is the **tomb of Hanab Pakal**, or Pakal the Great (615–683 AD). Discovered in 1952, this was the first such pyramid burial found in the Americas, and is still the most important and impressive. Some of the smaller objects found inside – the skeleton and the jade death mask – are on

display at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City (see p.419), but the massive, intricately carved stone **sarcophagus** is still inside; a reproduction is in the site museum (see p.720).

The centrepiece of the site, **El Palacio**, is in fact a complex of buildings constructed at different times to form a rambling administrative and residential block. Its square **tower** is unique, and no one knows exactly what its purpose was – perhaps a lookout post or an astronomical observatory. Throughout you'll find delicately executed **relief carvings**, the most remarkable of which are the giant human figures on stone panels in the grassy courtyard, depicting rulers of defeated cities in poses of humiliation. An arcade overlooking the courtyard held a portrait gallery of Palenque's rulers, though many of these have been removed.

South of El Palacio and adjacent to the Templo de las Inscripciones, a small path leads to the **Templo del Bello Relieve (Templo del Jaguar)**. More temples are being wrested from the jungle beyond, but the paths are closed, and though the path leads eventually to the *ejido* of Naranjo, you won't be permitted to pass much further into the forest without a guide. Even so, clambering around here, it's easy to believe you're walking over unexcavated buildings, as the ground is very rocky and some of the stones don't look naturally formed.

### The Grupo de la Cruz and around

The main path then leads across the Río Otulúm, one of several streams that cascade through the site. The Otulúm was once completely lined with stone and used as an aqueduct; the reinforcement also kept the stream from overflowing its banks and undermining the foundations of the surrounding buildings.

The path leads uphill to end in the plaza of what's called the **Grupo de la Cruz**, oddly oriented away from Palenque's more central buildings. The **Templo del Sol**, the **Templo de la Cruz** and the **Templo de la Cruz Foliada** are all tall,



▲ The ruins at Palenque

narrow pyramids surmounted by a small temple with an elaborate stone roofcomb. All contain carved panels representing sacred rites – the cross found here is as important an image in Maya iconography as it is in Christian, representing the meeting of the heavens and the underworld with the land of the living. On the right-hand side of the Templo de la Cruz, God L, one of the gods of the underworld, is depicted smoking tobacco – so far the oldest known image of someone smoking. A small path next to the Templo de la Cruz Foliada leads to the only open portion of the South Acropolis, a building with a replica relief carving, covered with elaborate glyphs and a triumphant king.

### The Grupo del Norte and around

Following the Río Otulúm to the northern edge of the cleared site, you reach the lesser buildings of the **Grupo del Norte** and the **Juego de Pelota** (ball-court), on lower ground across a grassy area from El Palacio. Beyond them, two **paths** lead downhill towards the museum. One goes down some perilous stairs behind Grupo del Norte, leading to **Grupo I** and **Grupo II**, intricate complexes of interconnected rooms. The other path follows the stream as it cascades through the forest and flows over beautiful limestone curtains and terraces into a series of gorgeous pools (no swimming allowed, though). The paths join again just after a suspension bridge crossing the river; eventually the route emerges on the main road opposite the museum. If you don't want to exit here, and want to make a loop, it's best to go down via Grupo I and II – the steeper route – then make your way back up by the other, somewhat easier trail.

### The museum

Palenque's excellent **museum** (Tues–Sun 9am–4.30pm, included in site entry), on the road 1.5km from the site entrance, will give you a good idea of the scale of Palenque, and a look at some of its treasures. Many of the glyphs and carved relief panels found at the site are on display, as are examples of the giant ceramic

### Ruin practicalities

Getting to the ruins of Palenque, nine kilometres from town, is straightforward. Two **combi** services, Chambalú and Pakal, run at least every fifteen minutes (6am–6pm; M\$10 one way) from their terminals near Juárez, and will stop anywhere along the road to the ruins – useful if you're staying at one of the hotels or campsites near the ruins. After 6pm, you'll have to either walk or take a **taxi** (M\$60). There are also plenty of organized **tours** from town (see p.717).

The **ruins** (daily 8am–5pm, last entry 4.30pm; M\$48 including museum) are in the **Parque Nacional de Palenque**, which takes an additional M\$22 at the park gate, just after *El Panchán*. (If you're staying inside the park, at *Mayabell*, say, you only have to pay once.) The main road first passes a nice *artesanías* shop, a café and the site **museum** – it's possible to buy a site ticket here, after 9am (but not on Mondays, when the museum is shut), then enter at the gate across the road, hiking up to the main part of the site via the waterfalls trail. But most people will press on to the main site entrance, at the top of the hill another 2km up a winding road. In this area, there's a small **café** and numerous souvenir stalls selling drinks, as well as toilets and some expensive lockers. Guides officially cost M\$350 for groups of up to seven people, but that's open to negotiation.

Even if you have your own **car**, you may still prefer to take a *combi*, as this enables you to exit on the downhill side of the site by the museum, and spare yourself having to hike back up to your vehicle. There's also very limited parking space at the main entrance at the top of the hill.

## Moving on from Palenque

Leaving Palenque by **bus**, there are **first-class** departures from the ADO/OCC terminal to Mérida (4 daily) via Campeche. There are also first-class departures for Oaxaca (1 daily at 5.30pm); Cancún (5 daily), via Chetumal; and overnight buses to Mexico City (2 daily). Buses for **Tuxtla Gutiérrez** (10 daily) all call at **Ocosingo** (2hr 30min) and **San Cristóbal** (5hr). The main regional transport hub is **Villahermosa** (10 daily), and you may find it easier to get there and change for your onward journey. You can also get a *de paso* first-class bus to Emiliano Zapata in Tabasco (9 daily), for **Tenosique** and Guatemala. Luxury ADO GL services run to Cancún via Chetumal at 9pm; and to Tuxtla via San Cristóbal at 7.05am. **Second-class** buses – Auto Cardeso, Expreso Azul and others – run to Cancún, **Tuxtla**, and Villahermosa from a terminal just down the street.

Transportes Comitán Lagos de Montebello, on Velasco Suárez, just past the market, and Transportes Río Chancalá, on 5 de Mayo, have numerous departures to destinations along the Frontier Highway, beginning at 3.40am. All go to the turn-off (*crucero*) for **Frontera Corozal** (for Yaxchilán), and Montebello's early-morning departures continue all the way to Comitán via Benemérito and the Lagos de Montebello. Transportes de Chamoán, on the west side of the traffic circle by the statue of the Maya head, runs regular **minivans** to Frontera itself; these cost a bit more (M\$70, rather than M\$60), but you don't have to pay for a taxi into town. You can find **taxis** on the northeast corner of the plaza to: **Agua Azul** (return, with 2hr waiting time), **Bonampak** (return, with 2hr waiting time), Frontera, Ocosingo, Palenque ruins and around town.

For further information, see Travel details, p.746.

incense-burners in the form of gods or mythological creatures. An intricate model of El Palacio reveals how it would have appeared in the Classic period – with the tops of the buildings adorned with roofcombs.

The back wing is devoted to a replica of Pakal's sarcophagus lid from the Templo de las Inscripciones – entrance is restricted to small groups, every 30 minutes or so. One of the most renowned iconographic monuments in the Maya world, the engraved sarcophagus lid depicts Pakal at the moment of his death, falling into Xibalba, the underworld, symbolized by a monster's jaws. Above the dead king rises the **Wakah Kan** – the World Tree and the centre of the universe – with **Itzam-Yé**, the Celestial Bird, perched on top representing the heavens. So that the deified king buried here should not be cut off from the world of the living, a psychoduct – a hollow tube in the form of a snake – runs up the side of the staircase, from the tomb to the temple.

## The Usumacinta valley and the Frontier Highway south

The Carretera Fronteriza (**Frontier Highway**) provides access to the Lacandón forest and the valley along the Río Usumacinta, and the great Maya sites located here: **Bonampak**, famous for its murals, and **Yaxchilán**, a vast ruined city on the riverbank. The remote highway, which roughly follows the line of the Guatemalan border, has a reputation as a dangerous place – as recently as 2003, Mexican federal police escorted tourists in convoys. A steady military presence has made the area relatively safe, however, and though it's not advisable to drive