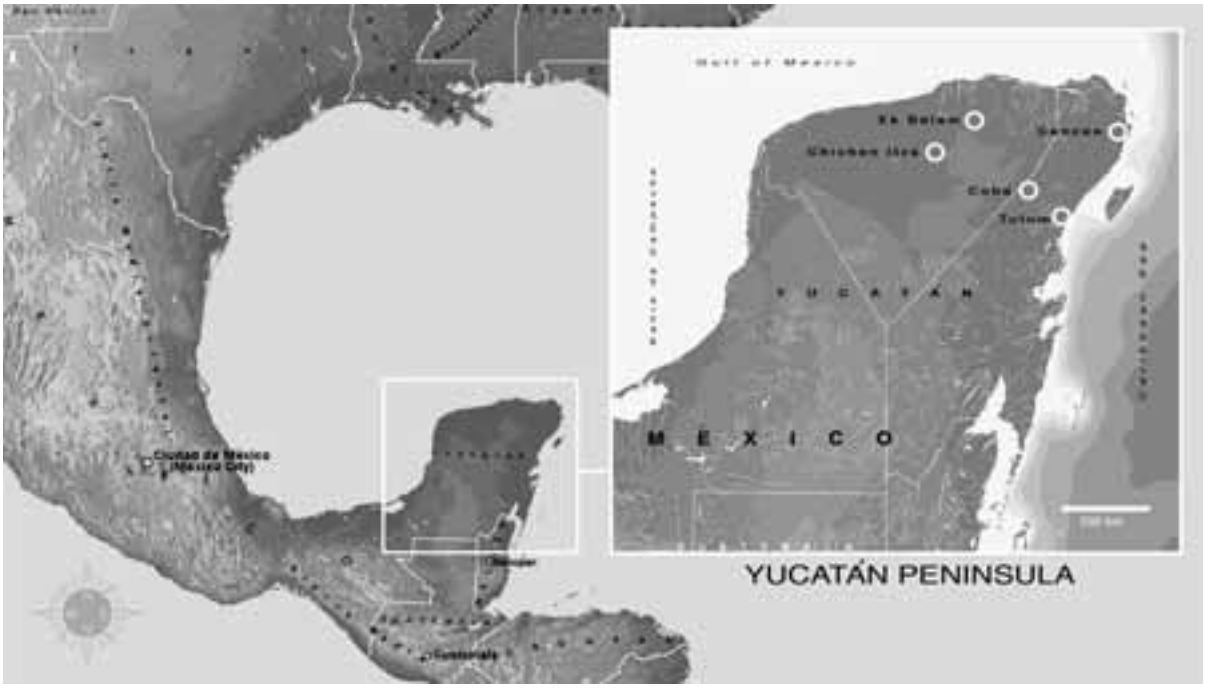
MAYAN SITES

Although Mayan archaeological sites extend across the Yucatán Peninsula and throughout much of Central America, visitors to the region who land in Cancún should definitely include the following four sites in their travel agendas. Visits early and late in the day are strongly recommended; not only are temperatures more pleasant, lighting more varied, but the vast busloads of tourists, especially at Chichen Itzá and Tulum are thus avoided to a large degree. Adapted from material provided at http://www.mayasites.com/.



Map of the Yucatán Peninsula showing the approximate locations of Cancún and the four major Mayan archaeological zones in the northeastern part of the peninsula.

Chichen Itzá

Maybe the most famous of all Mayan archaeological sites, Chichen Itzá dates from the Late Classic period (~600–900 AD). Within the 6 km^2 of the archaeological zone are two distinct architectural styles (classified as "new" and "old" Chichen). The glorification of the Toltec god Quetzalcoatl in his Mayan form of Kukulcan, the Feathered Serpent, led to the belief that the Toltecs had taken over this formerly Mayan city. Now, however, scholars are beginning to dispute the idea of a foreign invasion. Contemporary thought is that Chichen Itzá was a cosmopolitan city inhabited by a diverse group of peoples including the Puuc Mayans and the Toltecs.

Ek Balam

Dating from 100 AD to its height at 700–1,200 AD, the newly opened archaeological site at Ek Balam is unique and well worth a visit before the word gets out and the site is overrun by tourists. The main temple is over 500 feet long and 200 feet wide, making it one of the largest structures ever excavated in the Yucatán. Various sculpted works are extremely well preserved. The site's most striking temple is the "monster mouth," representing a portal to the "other world."

Tulum was the only Mayan city still thriving when the Spanish conquistadors arrived.

Many sculpted works at Ek Balam are extremely well preserved.

Tulum

Situated on a cliff facing the beautiful turquoise waters of the Caribbean, this is among the most scenic of all the Mayan sites. Tulum was at its peak from 1,000–1,600 AD and is unusual in being surrounded by a high wall that speaks to a need for defense against invaders from both land and sea. Tulum was one of the first cities encountered by the conquistadors and was the only Mayan city still thriving when the Europeans arrived. The Mayans eventually abandoned the city, but not until almost a century after the Spanish conquest.

Cobá

The Mayan ruins at Cobá are unique in that they have been barely restored. Only a few of the estimated 6,500 structures have been uncovered. Cobá, dating from 600–900 AD, may once have had a population estimated at 100,000 people, largest of all the ancient Mayan cities. The site's pyramids and buildings are situated on the shores of several lakes and as many as fifty sacbes (ancient roads), one of them over 62 miles long (longest in the Mayan world), connected Cobá to cities throughout the region. The Nohoc Mul pyramid, at over 126 feet, is the tallest Mayan structure on the Yucatán Peninsula, and the building techniques are characteristic of the Petan region of Guatemala.

Tulum is situated on a cliff overlooking the Caribbean and is among the most scenic of all the Mayan sites. Waves breaking over the barrier reef that parallels the coastline can be seen in the background.

Climbing the pyramid at Cobá was exciting, as the uneven steps forced one to consider how one small misstep would lead to an unpleasant and possibly lethal experience.

The main pyramid at Cobá is the highest Mayan structure on the Yucatán Peninsula.

25 Years of Change

Several years ago, before a visit to México after an absence of over ten years, a friend who traveled south of the border on a regular basis told me that I would immediately notice three major changes that had come to pass since my last trip: (1) There are a lot more Mexicans (villages had become towns, towns cities, and cities major metropolitan areas). (2) One can buy safe ice nearly everywhere (in the old days, one often had to search diligently for the local ice plant and then, not knowing the source of the water used, had to be extremely careful for fear of contracting what is widely known as "Monteczuma's revenge"). (3) The PEMEX (Mexican national petroleum company) stations had clean restrooms (during previous visits, even females invariably preferred the "bushes" to the often-gruesome facilities at the filling stations). All of his observations were right on the money.

If such dramatic changes were evident after only ten years, you might imagine what had happened in the 25 years since I had last visited the Yucatán Peninsula with students in 1980. I won't try to list them all, but some of the innovations were impossible to ignore — and some were a bit disturbing.

One significant advantage of development is access to fine dining establishments.

This juvenile *Coleonyx elegans*, a eublepharid gecko, was crossing the road at night. Travel speeds that prevail today would have made seeing this little lizard difficult and stopping in time to catch it nearly impossible.

Mexicans are definitely more abundant. Cancún has grown from a little town into a booming metropolis with all of the accompanying traffic and pollution. Playa del Carmen is a city (with a Sam's Club!) instead of a sleepy seaside village. Much of the population growth is attributable to immigration into the region from other parts of México. When the government decided to foster development for the tourist trade some 40 years ago, it began the process by constructing an international airport. When we visited in 1980, the airport had been in operation only a few years and the terminal was an open-air affair through which one passed in seconds. Today, the airport rivals those in large cities anywhere in the world with jet ways, huge customs complex, and stores and restaurants galore (even a Hard Rock Café). In 1980, our rental vehicles had to be brought in from Mérida (capital of the state of Yucatán); today the rental car options equal those at any major international destination. Growth and expansion continue.

The more popular archaeological sites at Chichen Itzá and Tulum now have paved parking lots with attendants, extensive visitor centers, and the free-lance vendors of largely hand-made crafts have been replaced by row after row of shops catering to almost any whim (local vendors still exist, but their access to the sites is carefully controlled). Getting there is faster, since the old two-lane roads that had only recently been paved were now four-lane, limited-access highways. Deserted stretches of beach have been replaced by one huge resort after another, and, instead of nesting sea turtles, the beaches are occupied by dense crowds of tourists covered in oil. Note, however, that many of the attractions that promote near-shore snorkeling experiences require (and sell) biodegradable sunscreen to prevent the formation of huge oil slicks.

Sadly, the remaining Mayan culture that we experienced so vividly in 1980 is much less visible today. This is partly attributable to the speed of travel (one couldn't drive fast on the old roads even if so inclined) and partly to the displacement of

Mayan villages along the roads have been displaced by commercial development along the highways.

Treefrogs, like this *Phrynohyas venulosa*, are abundant, but inconspicuous — until the males call during rainy periods.

Archaeological zones provide protection for wildlife as well as ruins. Here a Great Egret (*Casmerodius albus*) waits patiently for lunch at the lake at Cobá.

Red-eared Sliders (*Trachemys scripta*) are not native to the Yucatán Peninsula, but the crocs seem to find them every bit as tasty as the native species.

Mayan villages farther into the interior to make room for profitable enterprises. Mayan faces were common then; today, one encounters them only rarely, usually in the form of maids or laborers with whom tourists have limited contact.

Wildlife still exists, but the diversity that was so evident 25 years ago is much harder to find (during our 1980 trip, we collected 25 snakes of 17 different species). Those species that adapt well to humans and their altered habitats abound; those that don't have retreated farther into the remaining forests, access to which is now more difficult. We were able to enter the forests along numerous small dirt roads that led to little villages or hunting and logging camps. These no longer exist. The huge flocks of shore birds that populated the myriad inlets and bays have moved to the protected biosphere reserves farther south and are rarely seen along the Mayan Riviera, replaced instead by motorboats and jet skis (an abomination and a sure sign of a declining civilization).

Was the Cancún of 1980 more charming that what exists now? Sure. However, I have a hard time condemning the development. Not only has it proven to be an economic boon in a previously depressed area (well over 90% of all local revenue in the state of Quintana Roo is tourist-related), a large portion of the millions of tourists who have visited the region in the past couple of decades have been enticed to visit the archaeological sites — and a few may well have left with a much greater appreciation of pre-Columbian culture than they could have acquired by watching the travel channel. Knowing our past speaks well of our future, and tourism, albeit motivated largely by white-sand beaches and crystal-clear water, has been largely responsible for the education of many.

Robert Powell

MUCH MORE THAN AN ALLIGATOR FARM

Just north of Puerto Morelos on what has become known as the Mayan Riviera, is a small roadside zoo called CrocoCun. As the name implies, crocs are the featured attraction — and both American Crocodiles (*Crocodylus acutus*) and Morelet's Crocodiles (*C. moreleti*) are abundantly represented. In fact, the privately supported facility has become sufficiently adept at breeding the latter that they have run out of sites to release them (many of the developers of luxurious resorts along the Caribbean coast apparently resist efforts to reintroduce crocs to the lagoons and beaches where they once were plentiful).

However, this little zoo offers much more than crocodiles. Exhibits include many species native to the forests of the Peninsula, including several snakes, a few lizards, and mammals that include Whitetail Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*; yes, the same species overrunning suburbs throughout the United States), Collared Peccaries or Javelinas (*Tayassu tajacu*), and Spider Monkeys (*Ateles geoffryi*).

Because the rather steep admission price includes the services of a guide, visitors can interact with animals, feeding monkeys or deer and holding snakes or even crocs. Even more interesting, however, than some of the exhibits are the wild animals that have learned that the zoo is an ideal place to scrounge an easy meal. Wild Spider Monkeys readily approach humans in hopes of a handout and the fortunate visitor might stumble across an iguana foraging for scraps or a snake taking advantage of the rodents attracted to the stocks of animal food kept onsite.

Wild Spider Monkeys (*Ateles geoffryi*) had learned that the zoo was a good place to solicit a handout.

Crocs start out small, but don't stay that way. The author holding a hatchling *Crocodylus moreleti* (left). An adult *C. moreleti* at the breeding facility at CrocoCun (above).

With their bright blue backs, wings, and tails, Yucatan Jays (*Cissilopha yucatanica*) provided atmosphere in the form of raucous calls and splashes of color.

Nearby and also worthwhile is the Dr. Alfredo Barrera Marín Botanical Garden, with winding paths snaking through the various vegetative communities found on the Peninsula. In addition to the flora, the facility also is a terrific place to see birds, occasional reptiles, and sometimes even a fleeting glance of a wild mammal disappearing into the brush.

Also worth exploring, at least for the aquatically inclined, are the fabulous coral reefs that parallel the coast, forming North America's longest barrier reef. Unfortunately for tourists (but presumably fortunate for the area's inhabitants), core areas of the region's terrestrial and coastal Biosphere Reserves are off-limits to casual visitors. Biologists, archaeologists, and other scientists must obtain permission from the Mexican government to conduct research in these areas.

The very slender Vine Snake (*Oxybelis aeneus*) feeds primarily on lizards. These snakes were abundant 25 years ago and remain that way today.

Numerous other "natural wonders" are promoted on billboards along every stretch of highway, in every brochure that offers daily tours, and by the staff of "activity desks" at the area's abundant hotels and resorts. Most are pricey and some may be worth the investment of time and money, but don't go expecting to see anything remotely resembling nature. What were once pristine and unique habitats supporting an unbelievably diverse wildlife have become just another tourist attraction.

SOME ADVICE

Use sunscreen. Even during the cooler winter months, the tropical sun is fierce and will fry you much faster than anything you've experienced back home.

Take insect repellent. Although I overheard one tour guide tell visitors to Cobá not to worry about bugs, reminding them that it was winter and "mosquitoes don't like snow," the truth is that biting insects are abundant — and seem to enjoy the taste of tourists.

Don't be paranoid about food and drinks. The bad old days are in the past. The tourist-oriented economy on the Peninsula has adapted well to the reality that folks won't come back if they spend most of their vacation worshiping at the porcelain alter. Do, however, use common sense. Avoid food purchased from street vendors and eat fresh fruits only if served in a reputable restaurant or that you've peeled yourself. Tequila is not a disinfectant that will save you from your sins if you eat something you should have avoided.

As much as possible, plan activities for early and late in the day. Midday temperatures can be brutal and no one has fun in a blast furnace. Also, most animals are likely to be active in the morning and evening. So, eat a light lunch and take a siesta (a very civilized custom) or spend time in the pool or at the beach (but not in the sun!).

If you decide to drive, figure on paying a premium for local insurance (U.S. insurance does not apply in México). When you drive, be patient. Even if the locals drive like they're in a NASCAR race (go fast, turn left, …), don't emulate them. Traffic violations involving injuries or property damage are criminal offenses and even minor transgressions can be expensive, since you may end up paying the arresting authority a substantial amount to allow you to proceed on your way (incidentally, don't automatically assume that a policeman is looking for a bribe, that could get you into even more trouble, but follow Boy Scout guidelines and be prepared).

Above all, enjoy yourself. México is a terrific place full of mostly friendly people and with lots to offer in the way of cultural and natural history.

References

General Guides

Numerous guidebooks address the logistics of travel to what has become one of the Western Hemisphere's major tourist destinations. All provide some basic background on the archaeological sites buried among recommendations for lodging, dining, and experiencing the apparently abundant nightlife. All are totally devoid of any meaningful discussions of the region's natural resources (except those that have themselves been converted to tourist destinations). Two guides that we found particularly useful, primarily because they went farther beyond the mundane than most of the alternatives, were: *Yucatán* (Lonely Planet) by Ben Greensfelder and *Hidden Cancún & the Yucatán* by Richard Harris.

Reptiles and Amphibians

The Amphibians and Reptiles of the Yucatan Peninsula by Julian C. Lee. Phenomenally comprehensive, a reference rather than a guide. Highly recommended, but expensive and not for carrying into the field.

A Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of the Maya World: The Lowlands of Mexico, Northern Guatemala, and Belize by Julian C. Lee. A field guide based on the more authoritative coffee table book by the same author. Highly recommended.

Amphibians and Reptiles of Northern Guatemala, the Yucatán, and Belize by Jonathan A. Campbell. A nice guide enlivened by tales of the author's personal experiences in the region. Recommended.

Reptiles of Central America by Gunther Köhler. Nicely illustrated, but broader coverage than the other books listed results in less detail than in the other recommended guides. Recommended, but expensive.

Birds

A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America by Steven N. G. Howell and Sophie Webb. The most comprehensive guide to the region, but large and heavy. Highly recommended.

Birder's Mexico (Louise Lindsey Merrick Natural Environment Series, 12) by Roland H. Wauer. Not so much a traditional guide as an introduction to birding in México; definitely nice to have and great for preparation prior to a trip. Recommended.

A Field Guide to Mexican Birds: Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador (Peterson Field Guides) by Roger Tory Peterson (Series Editor) and Edward L. Chalif. Not up to the standards of the Peterson Field Guides for the U.S. and useful only with both U.S. guides in hand. Definitely a third choice among those listed.

Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Adjacent Areas: Belize, Guatemala, and El Salvador by Ernest Preston Edwards and Edward Murrell Butler (illustrator). Nice pictures, but disorganized and difficult to use. Not recommended.

SPECIES PROFILE

Blunt-headed Tree Snake *Imantodes cenchoa*

Snakes in the genus *Imantodes* are among several Central American species to effectively exploit arboreal prey. Like many other species that spend most of their lives in vegetation, these snakes are very slender and elongate and have very long tails. Compressing their sides and forming their bodies into a semblance of an I-beam, they can span remarkable distances as they move from branch to branch. Although they can and do occasionally venture onto the ground, most individuals probably never leave the trees and bushes on which they're usually encountered. Active at dusk and well into the night, these snakes take refuge during the day, occasionally hiding in bromeliads or other epiphytic vegetation.

As do many Neotropical snakes in the Family Colubridae (which includes most common snakes throughout the world), Blunt-headed Tree Snakes have enlarged, grooved teeth near the back of each upper jaw with which they can inject venom. However, the location of the fangs renders the delivery of venom difficult unless the prey item has been taken well into the mouth. Also, the venom appears to be most effective on their usual prey of lizards and frogs. They are not dangerous to humans and very rarely bite, even when handled.

Unlike Vine Snakes in the genus *Oxybelis*, which fill a comparable arboreal, lizard- and frog-eating niche during the daytime, *Imantodes cenchoa* has a vertically elliptical pupil that allows for considerable enlargement in order to trap sparse light at night. Like most snakes, however, Blunt-headed Tree Snakes rely primarily on chemical cues to find lizards sleeping on branches and leaves, nocturnally active frogs, clutches of frog eggs suspended over water, or lizard and snake eggs hidden under bark or in nooks and crannies above the ground. Their blunt heads allow them to consume larger prey than their slender bodies would seem to be able to accommodate.

The long slender bodies of Blunt-headed Tree Snakes (*Imantodes cenchoa*) allow them to span considerable distance as they move from branch to branch.