

## Miami, Florida

### OVERVIEW

#### Introduction

Miami has always billed itself as a travel destination. Warm weather, sandy beaches and bright sunshine were selling points more than 100 years ago, just as they are today. But Miami's allure extends beyond its shores. People from all over the Caribbean and Latin America have settled in Miami, giving the city its distinctive lively, international character.



The warm-weather fun is still a big attraction, but the biggest draw is the cosmopolitan flavor coupled with all the great restaurants, sports teams (Dolphins, Heat, Hurricanes and Marlins) and upscale sheen. Plus a long list of TV shows that just have to have "Miami" in their titles.

South Beach, with its cheerful, sherbert-colored art-deco buildings and palm-tree-lined avenues, is the center of Miami's trendy dining and nightlife scene. Other corners of Miami, including Coconut Grove and Coral Gables, offer their own versions of fine living and colorful happenings. And don't overlook the natural world—though you may have to drive to the Everglades to get a good view of it.

#### Must See or Do

**Sights**—The breathtaking view of the city from the MacArthur Causeway at night; the Everglades; the palmy streets and posh estates of Coral Gables; Coconut Grove and CocoWalk; a drive down historic Old Cutler Road from Coconut Grove to Southwest 168th Street.

**Museums**—The Italianate gardens of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens; art-nouveau and art-deco objects at the Wolfsonian-FIU Museum on South Beach; first-rank traveling exhibits at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) in North Miami; extensive collections at Lowe Art Museum on the University of Miami campus in Coral Gables; the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach.

**Memorable Meals**—Stone crabs with the rich and famous at Jue's Stone Crab Restaurant; Euro-hip at the Forge; Palm Tree Cuisine at Chef Allen's; Cuban favorites in an upscale atmosphere at Versailles Restaurant Bakery; Latin blends at Azul.

**Late Night**—The street scene in South Beach; the sidewalk bars and bistros, shops and nightclubs along Lincoln Road and elsewhere in Miami Beach; Coconut Grove; Southwest Eighth Street.

**Recreation**—Golfing at one of Miami's many courses; betting on a horse race; boating, scuba diving, snorkeling or fishing in the Atlantic or Biscayne Bay; hang gliding, kite boarding and windsurfing on Biscayne Bay along Rickenbacker Causeway; bicycling or in-line skating through Coconut Grove or South Beach.

**Especially for Kids**—Performing dolphins at the Miami Seaquarium; monkeys at Miami MetroZoo; boat and tram tours in Everglades National Park; hands-on activities at Miami's Science and Children's museums; interactive chess games at World Chess Hall of Fame & Sidney Samole Museum; bananas and exotic fruits growing at the Fruit and Spice Park in Homestead.

## **Geography**

Miami is a sparkler of a city set against the water. The downtown area hugs the junction of the Miami River and Biscayne Bay. A surge of development has brought new life to sleepy downtown neighborhoods, transforming them into urban vistas of galleries, cafes, nightlife, restored homes and high-rises. To the south, Coconut Grove is 3 mi/5 km along the water, and South Miami is about 6 mi/10 km away. Farther south, you'll find Homestead and, beyond that, the Florida Keys. The neighborhood of Coral Gables is approximately 6 mi/10 km west of Miami. Beyond that is Kendall—a vast stretch of condos, homes, shopping malls and restaurants that reaches the edge of the Everglades. Miami Beach is a finger of land separating Biscayne Bay and the Atlantic, connected by five causeways to the mainland. At its southern tip is South Beach, also known as the Art Deco District.

## **History**

Originally settled at the mouth of the Miami River by the Tequesta Indians, Miami wasn't much more than a trading post when real estate and railroad developer Henry Flagler extended his railroad to meet it in 1896 and then dredged the harbor to allow his fleet of steamships to dock. The land boom of the 1920s put the city on the map, thanks to the millionaires who built mansions along Biscayne Bay. The economic bust in 1929, combined with major destruction from a hurricane the previous year, reduced Miami to a depressed shadow of its former self, with few jobs and little development.

In the 1940s, the invention of air-conditioning and the return of ex-servicemen who had savored Miami's charms during World War II led to steady growth. In the 1950s, thousands more arrived—from New York, Chicago, Detroit and elsewhere—to start careers, raise families and become movers and shakers. Miami was transformed into a cosmopolitan hub. Beginning in 1960, a flood of Cuban refugees turned Miami into a bilingual city within about five years. Succeeding decades brought many other Latinos, as well as Haitians, Asians, Israelis, Canadians and Europeans. Today the city is considered a melting pot of the Americas, with more than 60% of its citizens foreign-born. Miami's government, politics and businesses reflect its diversity.

## **Port Information**

### **Location**

One of the busiest cruise-ship ports in the world is conveniently located on Dodge Island, which is connected by a five-lane bridge to downtown Miami. There's usually lots of traffic going back and forth—about 4 million passengers a year embark from the port, which serves nearly 10 cruise lines and has seven passenger terminals. Taxis are plentiful. For those who drive to Miami, secured parking lots are adjacent to each terminal. Expect to pay US\$15 per day.

Most cruise-ship passengers arrive in Miami by air. The trip from Miami International Airport to the port usually takes 20-30 minutes, except in rush hour, when it can be a lot longer. There is a flat US\$24 rate from Miami International Airport to the Port of Miami. Most major cruise lines offer bus service from the airport to the port. (If you weren't provided ground transportation as part of a fly-cruise package, it wouldn't hurt to ask if there's room on the bus to your terminal.) [http://www.miamidade.gov/portofmiami/cruise\\_terminals.asp](http://www.miamidade.gov/portofmiami/cruise_terminals.asp).

### **Potpourri**

Forty of Miami's buildings are permanently decorated in lights. The Bank of America Tower changes color 80-100 times a year. The Metromover, which circles downtown, stays lit by a rainbow of neon that rises over the city skyline at night.

South Beach is a mecca for buff bodies. One estimate put the number of models living there at 1,500.

Burger King is a Miami institution. In 1954, the very first Burger King stand opened at 3090 N.W. 36th St. The city is still home to Burger King's world headquarters.

Miami's residents come from more than 120 countries and speak nearly 70 languages.

The video game *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* is modeled after Miami.

## **SEE & DO**

### **Sightseeing**

Although Miami is scarcely more than a century old, it has architecturally significant public, commercial and residential buildings—including some designed by architects with international reputations. For visual treats, take a slow drive along side streets in historic neighborhoods such as Little Havana, Miami Beach, South Beach, Coconut Grove and Coral Gables.

Downtown in the Miami-Dade Cultural Center, you'll find both the Miami Art Museum and the Historical Museum of Southern Florida (which offers excellent walking tours). Southwest of the cultural center, around Southwest Eighth Street ("Calle Ocho"), is Little Havana—home not just to Cuban immigrants but also to Nicaraguans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, and other Latin-American and Caribbean immigrants. If you're there in March, join more than a million revelers at Little Havana's Calle Ocho Festival, a one-day extravaganza billed as one of the biggest block parties in the world.

It will only *seem* as if a million people are on the streets of South Beach, the super-trendy section of Miami Beach between First and 23rd streets. The best way to see the sites there is on a walking tour offered by the Miami Design Preservation League. Also, Parrot Jungle Island's home on MacArthur Causeway is a quick trip from just about anywhere.

On the mainland in Coconut Grove, don't miss the Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, an Italianate palace filled with fine European furnishings and surrounded by formal gardens that are a great place to stroll. For a look at early settlers' life in Florida, visit The Barnacle, a pioneer residence. Also worth a visit is the Ancient Spanish Monastery in North Miami Beach. Built in Spain in the 12th century, it was disassembled in 1925, shipped to the U.S. in numbered pieces and reassembled on its present site in the 1950s.

## **Historic Sites**

### **Ancient Spanish Monastery**

This is the oldest nonnative building in the Western Hemisphere. It was built in Spain between 1133 and 1141, and William Randolph Hearst brought it to the U.S. in numbered pieces in 1925. In the 1950s, it was reassembled on the current site. It is a popular spot for weddings and private events, so public hours vary. Call ahead Friday-Sunday before you go to be sure it is open to the public. Generally open daily 9 am-5 pm. US\$5 adults, US\$2.50 students and seniors. 16711 W. Dixie Highway, North Miami Beach. Phone 305-945-1461. <http://www.spanishmonastery.com>.

### **Coral Castle**

Edward Leedskalnin, a Latvian immigrant, built this stone edifice over a span of two decades (1920-40) as a monument to Agnes Scuffs, a young woman who had rejected him. Though he stood just 5 ft/1.5 m tall and weighed only 100 lbs/45 kg, he managed with makeshift tools to dig, cut and move thousands of pounds of limestone rocks, whose total weight exceeded the stones used to build Stonehenge and even the Great Pyramid of Giza. Leedskalnin died in Miami in 1951. Today his handiwork is a museum. Sunday-Thursday 8 am-6 pm, Friday and Saturday 8 am-8 pm. US\$9.75 adults, US\$6.50 seniors, US\$5 children ages 7-12, free for children younger than 7. Group rates available. 28655 S. Dixie Highway, Homestead. Phone 305-248-6345. <http://www.coralcastle.com>.

### **Deering Estate at Cutler**

Chicago industrialist Charles Deering, whose younger brother James Deering built Vizcaya in Coconut Grove, created his own estate farther south in the town of Cutler (now part of Miami). He acquired more than 440 acres/180 hectares on which stood the Richmond Cottage (built 1896-1916), a wood-frame house that served as his first winter home. In 1922, Deering hired

architect Phineas Phaist to design and build Stone House, a Mediterranean revival-style mansion. Deering died in 1947. His estate remained in his family until his youngest daughter died in 1982, when it was purchased by the state of Florida. Badly damaged by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, the estate has been restored and is now an environmental, archaeological, historical and architectural preserve. It offers daily historical, mangrove and trail tours (each lasting 45-60 minutes), as well as day and moonlight canoe tours. Daily 10 am-5 pm (closed Thanksgiving and Christmas); last tickets sold at 4 pm, last tour 4:15 pm. US\$7 adults, US\$5 children younger than 14. Weekend canoe tours US\$25 adults, US\$15 children 9-14; call to confirm schedule. 16701 S.W. 72nd Ave., Miami. Phone 305-235-1668. <http://www.deeringestate.com>.

### **Holocaust Memorial**

This tribute to the 6 million who lost their lives during the Holocaust was completed in February 1990. The centerpiece is a large bronze fist tattooed with an Auschwitz concentration camp number: It rises from the ground, grasping at life. Light and dark imagery is also emphasized, with Jerusalem stone columns leading through an arbor to granite walls etched with Holocaust history. The memorial also has a meditation garden and an eternal flame. Audio tracks of Israeli children singing Holocaust songs are very moving. Daily 9 am-9 pm. Free. 1933 Meridian Ave. (near the Miami Beach Convention Center), Miami Beach. Phone 305-538-1663. <http://www.holocaustmmb.org>.

### **The Barnacle**

This state historic site contains the oldest home in Miami-Dade County. Situated on the shore of Biscayne Bay, The Barnacle was the home of Ralph Middleton Munroe, one of Coconut Grove's pioneers. A visit to the site is like a step back in time. Open Friday-Monday 9 am-4 pm. Free guided tours are available at 10 and 11:30 am and 1 and 2:30 pm. Also open Tuesday-Thursday for group tours with advance reservations. Admission US\$1, free for children younger than 6. 3485 Main Highway, Coconut Grove. Phone 305-442-6866. <http://www.floridastateparks.org/thebarnacle>.

### **Neighborhoods & Districts**

#### **Brickell Financial District**

High-rise office buildings, condos and high-end hotels are mushrooming in this neighborhood south of downtown, home to many international banks and multinational companies. New restaurants are replacing old favorites displaced by construction. Many Brickell-area restaurants open and quickly close. Their food tends to be expensive.

#### **Coconut Grove**

"The Grove" was an independent municipality until the city of Miami annexed it in a summer referendum in 1925—an event still resented by Grove residents. Coconut Grove encompasses a historic neighborhood built by Bahamians who went to work on Vizcaya Museum and Gardens. The narrow tree-shaded streets of North and South Grove are treasure troves of eclectic architecture and diverse tropical landscaping. <http://www.coconutgrove.com>.

#### **Coral Gables**

In 1917, developer George Merrick turned his father's citrus groves into a planned community with architectural and height restrictions. His Mediterranean vision survives in street names, the building styles of older homes and commercial structures, and to a lesser extent, in the main shopping area along Miracle Mile and Ponce de Leon Boulevard. Restaurants and bars give downtown Gables a vibrant nightlife. Be prepared to pay for parking after 6 pm. <http://www.shopcoralgables.com>.

#### **Design District**

Once just a shopping district for interior designers, this area, 10 minutes from South Beach across the Julia Tuttle Causeway, is becoming increasingly hip in its own right. Gallery walks are held once a month, and a sprinkling of hipster hangouts attracts a young, artsy crowd as well as more-sophisticated art collectors. Just south of the Design District, Wynwood is

emerging as a revitalized residential, gallery and nightlife hot spot.  
<http://www.designmiami.com>.

### **Little Havana**

A trip to this neighborhood is like visiting Havana without ever leaving Miami. The heavily commercial district is a locus of Cuban (and other Latin-American) stores and restaurants. Jewelry, furniture, clothes, music, and odds and ends can be purchased there at fair prices. You'll find plenty of good eateries as well—and not just Cuban fare. At Calle Ocho and Memorial Boulevard (S.W. 13th Avenue) stands the Brigade 2506 Memorial, recalling the unsuccessful 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by an exile force. A tiny museum is adjacent, open Monday-Saturday 9 am-4 pm. S.W. Eighth Street, or Calle Ocho (between Interstate 95 and 27th Avenue), Miami. <http://www.brigada2506.com>.

### **South Beach/Art Deco District**

South Beach has the highest concentration of art-deco architecture in the world. For the most part, these mid-20th-century buildings have been restored or are in the process of being redone. The architecture and the pretty people will compete for your attention. After a tour of the buildings, stop at a cafe on Ocean Drive to people-watch. This strip, with the ocean and beach right across the street, is an internationally known nightspot, as chic as the French Riviera. Wear shorts and sunscreen during the day, your most stylish clothes at night. Between First and 23rd streets. Walking tours are available. US\$20 adults, US\$15 seniors and students. Contact the Art Deco Welcome Center, 1001 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach, or the Miami Design Preservation League. Phone 305-672-2014. <http://www.mdpl.org> or <http://www.miamibeachfl.gov>.

### **South Miami-Dade County**

South of Coral Gables, several small communities and incorporated cities have grown steadily toward one another to form a solid suburban strip, but each has distinctive characteristics. South Miami, the Old Cutler area and Pinecrest look a lot like Coral Gables. Kendall has newer homes on smaller lots, many apartments and a busy commercial district around the massive Dadeland Mall. Agriculture still holds sway in the vicinity of Florida City, Homestead, the Redlands and Perrine. Many of Miami's best-known attractions are in these neighborhoods, including Coral Castle, Fairchild Tropical Garden, MetroZoo, Monkey Jungle, the Fruit and Spice Park and the World Chess Hall of Fame. You'll need a car to explore these areas.

### **The Biscayne Corridor**

The area surrounding Biscayne Boulevard, from Morningside near 57th Street, north of downtown, to 79th and beyond, is developing into an eclectic antiques and ethnic-restaurant district on the edge of Little Haiti.

### **Recreation**

If it doesn't involve snow, you can do it in Miami. Nearly every marina has fishing charters and sailboats available. For those who prefer to spend time in the water, snorkeling and diving opportunities abound. If you like to blend with the locals, we recommend renting a bike or a pair of in-line skates and exploring South Beach or Coconut Grove.

### **Beaches**

There's no shortage of good beaches in Miami. Millions of dollars have gone into replenishing some of those that have suffered from erosion. Along the Rickenbacker Causeway, on the way to Key Biscayne, the beach areas provide a knockout view of the Miami skyline. Crandon Park on Key Biscayne is a wide, beautiful public beach.

The South Beach sand in Miami Beach is crowded, but the people are a feast for the eyes. If you go farther north in Miami Beach, you'll reach North Shore State Recreation Area, a short stretch of beach bliss. It runs along Collins Avenue from 79th to 87th streets (entrance at 85th Street).

### **Haulover Park and Beach**

Haulover Park and Beach (a Miami-Dade County park between Bal Harbour and Sunny Isles) is part of a 177-acre/70-hectare, 1-mi/1.6-km stretch free of high-rises. The northernmost 0.6 mi/1 km of the beach is clothing-optional. Open sunrise-sunset. Visitors pay a US\$5 parking fee. 10800 Collins Ave., Miami. Phone 305-947-3525. <http://www.miamidade.gov/parks>.

### **Golf**

#### **Biltmore Golf Course**

This facility offers an 18-hole course, driving range, putting green, clubhouse, restaurant, pro shop, instruction and equipment rental. Cart and greens fees run about US\$140. There is a discounted twilight rate of US\$115. 1210 Anastasia Ave., Coral Gables. Phone 305-460-5364. <http://www.biltmorehotel.com/golf>.

#### **Crandon Golf Course**

It's a beautiful, superior course situated on Biscayne Bay. Watch for raccoons peering out from sea-grape clumps. Greens fees in winter are US\$149.50, in summer US\$58. Twilight discount rates are available for US\$27. 6700 Rickenbacker Causeway, Key Biscayne. Phone 305-361-9129. [http://www.co.miami-dade.fl.us/parks/parks/crandon\\_golf.asp](http://www.co.miami-dade.fl.us/parks/parks/crandon_golf.asp).

#### **Doral Golf Resort and Spa**

The scene of the Ford Championship and many other national tournaments, this club boasts four 18-hole courses (with a fifth off-site) and one nine-hole, par-3 executive course. The finishing hole of the Blue Monster is considered one of the area's best. Greens fees vary with the time of year, ranging US\$105-\$250 for hotel guests, US\$130-\$275 for nonguests. 4400 N.W. 87th Ave., Miami. Phone 305-592-2000, ext. 2333. <http://www.doralgolf.com>.

#### **Fontainebleau Golf Club**

Two 18-hole courses are available for play. A lit driving range, putting green, clubhouse, snack bar and pro shop are on-site. Instruction and equipment rental can be arranged. Cart and greens fees: US\$21-\$27 in winter, US\$12-\$18 in summer. Discounted rates begin at 3 pm. 9603 Fontainebleau Blvd. (west of the airport), Miami. Phone 305-221-5181.

#### **International Links Miami (Melreese Golf Course)**

After a multimillion-dollar renovation, this course boasts a notorious fourth hole; the monstrous par-5 will test the very best. Greens fees run US\$100 in summer, US\$140 in winter. 1802 N.W. 37th Ave., Miami. Phone 305-633-4583.

#### **Miami Beach Golf Club**

You'll find 18 holes, a lit driving range, putting green, temporary clubhouse, sandwich shop and bar, and pro shop. Instruction and equipment rental available. In the winter high season (22 December-30 April), cart and greens fees are about US\$200; shoulder season (November-21 December) US\$120; summer season (May-October) US\$90-\$95 on weekends. 2301 Alton Road, Miami Beach. Phone 305-532-3350. <http://www.miamibeachgolfclub.com>.

### **Nightlife**

Nightlife in Miami is hot and heavy. The Latin influence dominates the scene, with jazz and rock also popular. Electronic and hip-hop music are favorites of the younger crowd. The most recent club revival started in South Beach and has spread across the county. Clubs open and close quickly and regularly change names, locations and themes; finding them is a challenge even for locals. Look in the *Miami New Times*, a free weekly publication, and on the *Miami Herald's* Web site (<http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/nightlife>). If a particular kind of music interests you, call some clubs and ask when it's available. A club may start the night with rock and later switch to a Latin beat. Many clubgoers migrate from venue to venue through the night.

## **Shopping**

The shopping mall is king in Miami. The Falls is a water-oriented, lushly landscaped delight filled with upscale shops and restaurants. Dadeland Mall was the first and is the most successful mall, and Bal Harbour Shops, at the other end of the county, caters to the ultrarich. Aventura is a mall that's been turned into an entire city, with condos and high-rises. Dolphin Mall, west of the airport, has its own Florida Turnpike exit. Smaller and very funky is CocoWalk in Coconut Grove, geared to the young and restless, and the Shops at Sunset Place wins the prize for size (at least in the vertical dimension). Village of Merrick Park in Coral Gables, also serving a high-end clientele, is Miami-Dade's newest mall.

Not everyone lives at the mall, however. In fact, there's been a backlash against them as people seek a small-town feeling and small owner-operator shops. South Miami has typified this kind of atmosphere. In the southwest corner of Coral Gables, at Sunset Drive (72nd Street) and Red Road (57th Avenue), the merchants have fought hard to preserve their special ambience. Shops and restaurants provide a charming mix—from children's clothes to antique jewelry. Miracle Mile in Coral Gables (Coral Way between Douglas Road and LeJeune Road) is a blend of small shops and restaurants. The stores there were improved, with the aim of maintaining the small-town feel they've had since they were built in the 1920s. We highly recommend that travelers take a look. The Lincoln Road Mall has a distinctly antimall feel to it—strictly a pedestrian space—but in the past decade, small, funky shops have been replaced by chains such as Gap and Victoria's Secret. Renovated from its art-deco glory days, the mall has become one of the most cosmopolitan places for a stroll, drinks and shopping.

## **Shopping Areas**

### **Aventura Mall**

Competing with the high-end specialty stores of Bal Harbour Shops is a challenge, but Aventura Mall tries. It features Bloomingdale's, Macy's, Nordstrom and more than 250 other shops and restaurants. Fortunately, there's plenty of free parking and valet-parking service. Open Monday-Saturday 10 am-9:30 pm, Sunday noon-8 pm. 19501 Biscayne Blvd., Aventura. Phone 305-935-1110. <http://www.shopaventuramall.com>.

### **Bal Harbour Shops**

You'll find such names as Tiffany & Co., Gucci, Cartier, Fendi, Yves St. Laurent, Hermes, Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue in a lush tropical setting, as well as charming cafes and restaurants. Open Monday-Saturday 10 am-9 pm, Sunday noon-6 pm. Parking US\$4 per hour (US\$1 per hour with validation). 9700 Collins Ave., Bal Harbour. Phone 305-866-0311. <http://www.balharbourshops.com>.

### **Bayside Marketplace**

This waterfront collection of unique shops, chain stores, eateries and kiosks represents the diverse cultures of Miami. The shopping center's position offers spectacular views of Biscayne Bay. Open Monday-Friday 10 am-10 pm, Saturday 10 am-11 pm, Sunday 11 am-9 pm. 401 Biscayne Blvd., Miami. Phone 305-577-3344. <http://www.baysidemarketplace.com>.

### **CocoWalk**

This trendy, self-styled European village has shops, a movie complex, outdoor cafes, nightclubs and many, many people (mostly young). It's a design experiment that works so well it has been copied in shopping centers all over Florida. The second-story balcony is a great place to people-watch and have a drink. Shops are standard mall venues. Open Sunday-Thursday 10 am-10 pm, Friday and Saturday 10 am-11 pm; restaurants and bars are open late. 3015 Grand Ave., Coconut Grove. Phone 305-444-0777. <http://www.cocowalk.com>.

### **Dadeland Mall**

Among the first and still one of the most successful malls in Florida, Dadeland is a favorite with Latin-American shoppers. Open Monday-Saturday 10 am-9:30 pm, Sunday noon-7 pm. 7535 N. Kendall Drive (12 mi/19 km southwest of Miami off Highway 1; or via Metrorail), Kendall. Phone 305-665-6226. <http://www.shopdadelandmall.com>.

### **Dolphin Mall**

A single path loops throughout the entire mall, which is divided into eight paseos, or walkways. Cast-iron sculptures of dolphins are at the four entrances. Open Monday-Saturday 10 am-9:30 pm, Sunday 11 am-7 pm. 11401 N.W. 12th St. (about 5 mi/8 km from Miami International Airport—it has its own exit off Florida's Turnpike), Miami. Phone 305-365-7446. <http://www.shopdolphinmall.com>.

### **Lincoln Road**

Between 16th and 17th streets in South Beach, Lincoln Road is an open-air mall of 175 galleries, shops and restaurants along an eight-block pedestrian promenade with shade trees down the middle. At one time, Lincoln Road was a posh shopping strip. The street was closed to traffic, and in the 1960s, it began to decline. Hard on the heels of the South Beach renaissance, Lincoln Road was transformed into a row of art galleries, performing-arts showcases and trendy cafes. You can stroll through numerous galleries or admire the Lincoln Theater. Delightful Sunday flea market and farmers market. Keep an eye out for in-line skaters, bicyclists and dogs. From Washington Avenue on the east to Alton Road on the west. City parking lots and garages nearby charge reasonable rates. Open daily. <http://www.lincolnroadmiamibeach.com>.

## **DINING**

### **Dining Overview**

Dining in Miami is a multicultural smorgasbord, where you can sample Cuban *arepas*, Brazilian *churrasco*, alligator nuggets and the best of old-world cuisines. Restaurants are all over Miami-Dade County, from trendy tourist areas such as Coconut Grove, Coral Gables and Miami Beach to established neighborhoods such as South Miami and Kendall—where some of the best restaurants and values are found. Latin-American cuisine is ubiquitous, with Italian, Japanese and Thai fare being close contenders. "Floribbean" meals, which fuse Caribbean spices and fruits (papayas, oranges, plantains, mangos, avocados) with Florida classics, have gained popularity. The creation is both light and exotic.

Foodies will enjoy sampling the country's largest collection of homegrown tropical and subtropical fruits in the Homestead and Florida City farming communities. Fruit and Spice Park is the perfect place to sample fresh exotic fruit such as mamey and guava. Area farmers markets provide delicacies for guests to take with them.

The dress code varies greatly. If you're in doubt, call and ask before you go. Many restaurants and clubs are very specific about what is or isn't acceptable—and because many of-the-moment restaurants in South Beach and elsewhere double as lounges and late-night clubs, chic dressing there is de rigueur.

Typical dining times are 7-10 am for breakfast, 11:30 am-2 pm for lunch and 6-10 pm or later for dinner. These guidelines aren't firm in Miami-Dade, a round-the-clock community with a growing number of after-hours and 24-hour dining locations. Many restaurants cut back on their hours and days during summer.

Do make dinner reservations for restaurants in Miami Beach, and not at the last minute.

Expect to pay within these general guidelines, based on the cost of a dinner for one, excluding drinks, tax and tip: \$ = less than US\$15; \$\$ = US\$15-\$25; \$\$\$ = US\$26-\$50; \$\$\$\$ = more than US\$50.

### **Local & Regional**

#### **Chef Allen's**

At his restaurant founded in 1986, Chef Allen Susser has refined his version of Floribbean cuisine into "Palm Tree Cuisine," which blends spices and other ingredients from the Mediterranean, the Americas and the Caribbean. Daily for dinner. Reservations recommended.

\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 19088 N.E. 29th Ave., Aventura. Phone 305-935-2900. <http://www.chefallens.com>.

### **Nemo**

Known as "the epitome of South Beach cool," Nemo offers American and Caribbean cuisine with a twist: from watermelon salad with feta cheese, lemon and basil to Chilean sea bass with carrot butter. Dine in the courtyard under a 100-year-old pigeon plum tree. Open daily for lunch and dinner, also Sunday brunch. Reservations recommended. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 100 Collins Ave., Miami Beach. Phone 305-532-4550. <http://www.nemorestaurant.com>.

### **Ortanique on the Mile**

Next to the Miracle Theater in Coral Gables, chef Cindy Hutson creates her tropical-fusion "Cuisine of the Sun." Jazz every Sunday evening. Open Monday-Friday for lunch, daily for dinner. Reservations recommended. \$\$\$ . Most major credit cards. 278 Miracle Mile, Coral Gables. Phone 305-446-7710. <http://www.cindyhutsoncuisine.com>.

### **Cuisines**

#### **American**

##### **Green Street Cafe**

Dine outside and on burgers, pastas and salads while people-watching. Popular with the local Sunday-morning brunch crowd, including locals with well-behaved, leashed dogs. Daily for breakfast, lunch, dinner and late-night. \$\$ . Most major credit cards. 3468 Main Highway, Coconut Grove. Phone 305-444-0244. <http://www.greenstreetcafe.net>.

##### **Ice Box Cafe**

The eclectic menu boasts outstanding must-have desserts, such as butterscotch walnut pumpkin cake or Chocolate Nemesis. Despite the low-key decor and a location only steps from the bustle of Lincoln Road, this is a favorite discovery among trendy locals and visitors, who like its healthy gourmet dishes; try the bacon-wrapped figs and empanadas du jour. Open Monday-Friday for lunch and dinner, Saturday and Sunday for brunch and dinner. \$\$-\$\$\$ . Most major credit cards. 1657 Michigan Ave., Miami Beach. Phone 305-538-8448. <http://www.iceboxcafe.com>.

##### **Shorty's Bar-B-Q**

This Miami tradition launched in 1951, when the original Shorty's was a long drive from anywhere. Now it's in the heart of the Dadeland business district and a quick Metrorail ride from downtown Miami. (Shorty's also has two other locations in Miami and two in Broward County.) Diners sit family-style. Expect to wait in line during peak hours. Daily for lunch and dinner. Reservations not accepted. \$-\$\$ . (Discount coupons are available on Web site.) Most major credit cards. 9200 S. Dixie Highway, Miami. Phone 305-670-7732. <http://www.shortys.com>.

### **Italian**

#### **Casa Tua**

If not for the discreet valet stand outside, you would walk right past this intimate garden courtyard restaurant attached to a six-suite luxury inn. The menu features exquisitely prepared items such as lamb ragout with Barolo wine and *pappardelle*, as well as a constantly changing, 200-bottle wine menu with everything from sauternes to French garage wines. Open Monday-Friday for lunch and dinner, Saturday and Sunday for dinner only. Reservations required. \$\$\$\$ . Most major credit cards. 1700 James Ave., Miami Beach. Phone 305-673-1010. <http://www.casatualifestyle.com>.

### **Devito**

Danny Devito, restaurateur? This is Devito's first foray into the celebrity-owned restaurant business. It's also a tribute to his pasta-filled childhood. You can dine alfresco while plasma TVs attached to marble columns play *Twins* and other Devito movies. Eccentric, yes, but cool, too. The pasta is fantastic. Steaks and seafood are also on the menu, as are his famous

lemoncellos. Daily for dinner. 150 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach. Phone 305-531-0911.  
<http://www.devitosouthbeach.com>.

### **Latin American Bongos Cuban Cafe**

Singer Gloria Estefan and her husband, Emilio, own this capacious two-story establishment in the American Airlines Arena. It's a restaurant by day and a disco by night, offering authentic Cuban cuisine and *la cultura* of Old Havana. The club plays salsa and Latin music. Ample parking inside the arena, free for restaurant patrons; club patrons pay event parking fee or US\$6 on nonevent evenings. Valet parking US\$10. Restaurant is open Wednesday-Sunday 11:30 am-11 pm. Club is open Friday till 3 am and Saturday till 5 am. Call for restaurant reservations. Cover US\$20. Most major credit cards. 601 Biscayne Blvd. (at the entrance to the Port of Miami and across the street from Bayside Marketplace), Miami. Phone 786-777-2104. <http://www.bongoscubancafe.com>.

### **Cacao**

Chef Edgar Leal trained in Spain under Ferran Adria of El Bulli, and although he uses some of the same techniques he learned there, Leal's dishes are traditionally South American with a new-wave rendering. Cacao's signature dish is the Venezuelan specialty *Reina Pepiada*, with the flavors of corn, chicken and avocado presented in layers of thin chips. Also on the menu are suckling pig, duck breast and rack of lamb. Don't skip dessert; specialties include Velvet Chocolate Mousse Dome, and guava-and-cream-cheese empanadas. Open Monday-Friday for lunch and dinner, Saturday for dinner only. Reservations recommended. \$\$-\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 141 Giralda Ave., Coral Gables. Phone 305-445-1001.  
<http://www.cacaorestaurant.com>.

### **El Chalan Restaurant**

This Peruvian restaurant serves outstanding seafood. Your server will ask how hot you want your seviche (fish marinated in lemon and red chili)—take it easy the first time. Some of the staff speak little English, but pictures of every dish on the menu are posted in the restaurant and printed in its literature. There's a second location in South Beach. Daily for lunch and dinner. \$-\$\$\$. Some major credit cards. 7971 S.W. 40th St., Miami. Phone 305-266-0212.

### **El Palacio de los Jugos**

For almost 30 years, this small roadside Cuban restaurant and market has welcomed tourists and locals alike. If you don't speak Spanish, other patrons will assist you. Servings are large, the staff is friendly, and the menu is traditional family-style Cuban food. Limited picnic-style outdoor seating. Daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner. \$. No credit cards. 5721 W. Flagler St., Miami. Phone 305-262-0070.

### **Jaguar Ceviche Spoon Bar and LatAm Grill**

The *tres leches* bread pudding and the *dulce de leche* cheesecake are irresistible at this colorful yet sophisticated Latin-American restaurant, just steps away from Cocowalk. The regular menu is a selection of newly styled classics including Mexican snapper, Yucatan empanadas and steaks of various cuts. The restaurant is named for its six types of seviche, served in large ceramic spoons and representing creative takes on Peruvian, Japanese and Mexican recipes. Peruvian beer is offered, and the wine list includes a substantial number from South America and Spain. Daily for lunch and dinner. \$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 3067 Grand Ave., Coconut Grove. Phone 305-444-0216. <http://www.jaguarspot.com>.

### **Larios on the Beach**

Singer Gloria Estefan's restaurant is a great introduction to the Cuban flavors of Miami. Its prime location on South Beach lets you people-watch while you eat. The roasted chicken is tender, the rice and beans savory. A live salsa band plays on weekend nights, frequently inspiring patrons to feel the rhythm, as Gloria herself would say. Open daily for lunch and dinner. \$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 820 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach. Phone 305-532-9577.

## **Seafood**

### **A Fish Called Avalon**

This seafood grill on the patio of the Avalon Hotel provides casual but upscale New American dining and a perfect view for people-watching in the midst of South Beach action. Try the signature Bang-bang Shrimp, Diver Scallops or Caribbean spice grouper with mango relish, all paired perfectly with wines. Open daily for dinner. \$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 700 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach. Phone 305-532-1727. <http://www.afishcalledavalon.com>.

### **Big Fish**

Ambience is basic and dress is casual for this upscale fish house on the Miami River. Its forte is Italian seafood dishes. Open Monday-Friday for dinner, Saturday and Sunday for lunch and dinner. Reservations recommended. \$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 55 S.W. Miami Ave. (in the Brickell Financial District), Miami. Phone 305-373-1770. <http://www.thebigfishmiami.com>.

### **Joe's Stone Crab Restaurant**

This is the most famous restaurant in the county. The modest, plain structure where Joe's started out in 1913 (now extensively remodeled) is visited by presidents and the rich and very famous. Joe's almost single-handedly *invented* stone crabs as an eating adventure. The slaw, key lime pie and hash browns are all an integral part of the experience. Open Tuesday-Saturday for lunch and dinner, Sunday and Monday for dinner only. Summer hours (mid-May to July) Wednesday-Sunday for dinner. Closed August to mid-October. No reservations; expect a long wait. \$\$-\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 11 Washington Ave., Miami Beach. Phone 305-673-0365. <http://www.joesstonecrab.com>.

## **Steak Houses**

### **Bourbon Steak Miami**

The area's hottest restaurant opened to great acclaim. Located in the Fairmont Turnberry Isle Resort, the restaurant is the latest from uberchef Michael Mina. Open nightly for dinner. Good luck getting a reservation. \$\$\$\$. 19999 W. Country Club Drive (about a 20-minute drive from downtown Miami), Aventura. Phone 786-279-6600. [http://michaelmina.net/mm\\_bourbonsteak\\_miami](http://michaelmina.net/mm_bourbonsteak_miami).

### **Capital Grille**

Located in the Brickell Financial District near the mouth of the Miami River, Capital Grille is hard to find from the road. It resembles a bankers' club, with pictures of Miami's founding businesspeople adorning dark wood walls. Cigars and brandy available. The specialty is dry-aged steaks, but the menu also offers spit-roasted chicken and lobster. Open Monday-Friday for lunch and dinner, Saturday and Sunday for dinner only. \$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 444 Brickell Ave. (turn on Fifth Street and follow valet-parking signs to the building), Miami. Phone 305-374-4500. <http://www.thecapitalgrille.com>.

## **SECURITY**

### **Personal Safety**

It's no secret that crime has been a major problem in Miami. A concerted campaign by local and state law-enforcement groups has made real progress in protecting tourists, and crime rates have dropped over the past few years. Maps are distributed by car rental agencies to show the safest routes. Signs have been put up on the expressways to guide visitors more effectively. A booklet of tips and warnings is given to each visitor, and intensive police surveillance around the airport has made a difference.

The tourist areas themselves—Bayside, Miami Beach, Coconut Grove and Coral Gables—are no more dangerous than tourist areas in any other large city. The popularity of South Beach is such that it has extended the "safe" tourist area into streets that were marginal (or perilous) a few years ago. Still, it's best not to stray into areas where you don't see crowds on the sidewalks. Use your common sense—take notice of your surroundings. Avoid wearing expensive (or expensive-looking) jewelry or watches on the street, and don't flash cash. Try to keep to the main streets when driving through certain areas of the city—the northwest section

of town, east of the Palmetto Expressway and just west of South Miami. Ask your hotel's concierge or at the front desk for information about specific areas you'll be visiting.

### **Health**

General sanitation is excellent, and the food and water are safe to consume. Miami's heat can exceed 100 F/38 C in the summer, so drink plenty of fluids to avoid fatigue and dehydration. Apply sunscreen liberally when outdoors. Mosquito-borne illnesses such as malaria and West Nile virus are not a serious threat, but efforts should be made to prevent any exposure. The Everglades and beach areas at dusk and dawn will pose the highest risks of these illnesses; wear mosquito repellent. Alligators aren't often roaming free on main highways, but in the Everglades they aren't an odd sight. Keep substantial distance and do not try to feed them. Everglades tours will give more specific safety guidelines on animal interaction safety.

Excellent hospitals in the area include Baptist Hospital at 8950 N. Kendall Drive (phone 786-662-7111; <http://www.baptisthealth.net>) and Mount Sinai Medical Center at 4300 Alton Road (phone 305-674-2121; <http://www.msmc.com>).

In the case of a medical emergency, dial 911.

### **Disabled Advisory**

Although there isn't one central source for information on disabled access, Florida, in general, has stringent accessibility standards. Many of Miami's attractions are accessible, as are some of its bus routes. There's even a sailing program for disabled people, Shake-a-Leg (phone 305-858-5550; call 48 hours in advance). To arrange transportation, call Medical Care Transportation at 305-633-0553.

*Wheelchairs on the Go* is a great resource for disabled travelers. The book, by Michelle and Randy Stigelman with Deborah Van Brunt, covers accessibility details for the entire state of Florida, including Miami. <http://www.wheelchairsonthego.com>.

### **Dos & Don'ts**

Don't waste your time looking for a free parking spot in Miami Beach or Coconut Grove at night or on the weekend. Just use a pay lot (or valet parking).

Do turn on your headlights if you drive in the rain—it's required by state law.

Do make sure to pack plenty of sunscreen and insect repellent if you plan on exploring South Florida's great outdoors.

Don't disturb sea turtles if you're lucky enough to see them nesting along Atlantic beaches. Undisturbed nesting and egg laying are crucial to the survival of this endangered species.

Do use caution on the road. There are lots of elderly and international drivers in Miami, and that often means creative interpretations of traffic laws.

Do avoid MacArthur Causeway at rush hour, if at all possible.

### **FACTS**

#### **Geostats**

**Population:** 404,048.

**Languages:** English and Spanish..

**Predominant Religions:** Christian (Roman Catholic, Protestant), Jewish, Islamic.

**Time Zone:** 5 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-5 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is observed from the second Sunday in March to the first Sunday in November.

**Voltage Requirements:** 110 volts.

**Telephone Codes:** 305, and 786;

## **Money**

### **Currency Exchange**

The best way to get money is at one of the many ATMs located around the city. Miami Beach has a bank on just about every corner, and almost every bank has an ATM. If you're downtown, head for the area around Brickell Avenue, one of Miami's major banking strips. Most ATMs accept major credit cards and bank cards if you have a PIN.

Exchanging foreign currency for U.S. dollars or vice versa is surprisingly difficult in Miami, considering the number of foreign visitors the city gets. Before visiting Miami from abroad, buy U.S. currency or U.S. dollar-denominated traveler's checks at home. Once you're in Miami, you'll find currency exchanges offering tolerable rates at the airport but not throughout the city. Many hotels will accept foreign currency in payment, and some will exchange it.

Banks are generally open Monday-Friday 9 am-4 pm. Some offer extended drive-through hours.

### **Taxes**

Combined city and state taxes on most purchases total 6.5%. An additional 4% tax is levied on some restaurant meals in Miami Beach, Bal Harbour, Surfside and unincorporated areas of Miami-Dade County. Taxes on accommodations can be as much as 13%, depending on the location of the hotel.

### **Tipping**

In most restaurants (especially those in South Beach), you'll find that an 18% tip has already been added to the bill. Check first before adding a 15%-20% tip yourself.

### **Weather**

Winter is the ideal time to go to Miami, when temperatures average 59-76 F/15-24 C. Days are warm, the humidity is reasonable and nights are comfortably cool (take along a sweater). Visitors heading to Miami as early as November or as late as April will find comfortable temperatures (low 80s F/high 20s C) and bearable humidity. Summers tend to be hot and quite humid, with frequent lightning. The heaviest rainfall is expected May-October. Hurricane season is June-November.

### **What to Wear**

A mix of clothing styles has evolved in Miami—partly because of the weather, partly because of a prevailing casual atmosphere. It ranges from power suits in the immediate downtown area to stylish-yet-casual dress in all other parts of town. Clothing that would be somewhat showy in a business setting in New York City or Washington, D.C., is more kindly regarded in Miami. Leisure travelers will find that relaxed attire is acceptable almost everywhere. Light, bright colors are worn year-round, though black is always in style. Wintertime visitors should be prepared for rare cold snaps that can send the temperature close to freezing at night.

## Honduras

### OVERVIEW

#### Introduction

Honduras offers an array of different vacation experiences—perhaps more than any other country in Central America. It can be a resort-oriented getaway for divers and snorkelers (in the Bay Islands), a showplace of Mayan archaeological treasures (at Copan) or an eco- and adventure-travel playground (on the north coast and in the rain forest). Honduras also offers a great bang for the travel buck, with prices of most goods and services surprisingly inexpensive.



On the down side, Honduras shares some of the region's less admirable travel qualities. Roads can be rough, travel slow and amenities basic. Even though Honduras has not had destabilizing insurgencies of the sort that El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua have suffered, conditions are far from ideal. Crime and a lack of attractions make the big cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula places you'll want to avoid or to pass through quickly. That said, Honduras is doing much to make its best features more accessible and enjoyable—quite a feat given the widespread destruction the country faced after Hurricane Mitch struck in 1998. Travelers who don't mind a bit of adventure—or who are seeking it out—will likely relish the country's unpolished charm.

#### Geography

The country is defined by a 460-mi/735-km Caribbean coastline in the north and a small Pacific coastline in the south. It has land borders with Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Two mountain ranges covered by pine forests and creased with fast-moving rivers run through the center of Honduras, giving way to low flatlands and tropical vegetation along both coasts. The Bay Islands, off the northern coast, are typical of the Caribbean—white-sand beaches, crystal waters and teeming tropical reefs. Rainfall is heaviest on the northern shore and in the eastern part of the country.

#### History

Like other areas of Mexico and Central America, Honduras was the home of the Maya, who may have been living in that area as early as 1000 BC. One of the most advanced civilizations in ancient America, the Maya were known for the monumental architecture of their great cities, with Copan being a prime example. Their densely populated city-states had an ordered class system with defined occupations and trades.

Christopher Columbus, on his fourth and last voyage to the New World, landed on Guanaja (one of the Bay Islands) and on the north shore of the mainland in 1502. Spain soon colonized all of Central America, though it had to overcome the fierce opposition of Native American tribes. These included the Lenca, whose great chief Lempira is now a Honduran national hero. Other Europeans also took an interest in Honduras: British pirates were based on the Bay Islands beginning in the 1500s. Great Britain continued to control the islands and the Caribbean coast until 1859, which is why English is widely spoken there today.

Honduras achieved independence in 1821, along with the other four states of the Central American Confederation (Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua). The confederation soon broke up, and Honduras became an independent nation in 1838. Thereafter, conflict between conservative and liberal forces kept the country in turmoil, with numerous coups and rebellions. In the 1850s, William Walker, an adventurer from the U.S., tried to take over Central America. He actually ruled Nicaragua from 1855 to 1857 and gained recognition from the U.S. When he tried to attack the country again in 1860, Hondurans helped foil his plans and he was executed.

By the 1900s, Honduras was the quintessential banana republic—bananas provided 66% of the country's exports, and U.S. companies held 75% of Honduran banana fields. These powerful companies—supported by U.S. troops on occasion—were partly responsible for the development of Honduras' strong military and repressive government agencies. In the 1980s, Honduras became involved in the struggle between the U.S. and the Sandinista government in neighboring Nicaragua. Many of the Contra rebels who fought against the Sandinistas were based in Honduras.

The country faced a crisis of a different sort in 1998, when Hurricane Mitch struck. At least 5,600 people were killed, 1.4 million lost their homes, and the country's businesses—particularly agriculture—were dealt a harsh blow. Repairs and rebuilding began shortly after the storm's passing, however. Today, visitors will see little if any evidence of the damage, though the economic and psychological effects of the storm are still being felt.

### **Snapshot**

The main attractions in Honduras are the Mayan ruins of Copan, Spanish colonial mountain towns, scuba diving, snorkeling, fishing, white-water rafting, north coast beaches, La Ceiba, birding, rain and cloud forests, wood carvings, primitive paintings and friendly people.

Honduras will appeal to people who enjoy scuba diving, snorkeling and exploring ancient ruins. Those uncomfortable or unfamiliar with travel in developing countries or who desire a wide range of luxurious beachside resorts may find Honduras less to their liking. Regardless, what the country lacks in ultra-modern amenities in its remote corners, it makes up for with the sheer decency and joviality of its people. Hondurans are generally wonderful people: patient, conversant, fun-loving and giving.

### **Port Information**

#### **Location**

Cruise ships stopping in Honduras usually do so as part of a trip down the Caribbean coast of Central America (which could include passing through the Panama Canal), or as part of a western Caribbean itinerary. Because time is short and distances are long, there usually isn't time to do much exploring on your own from the ports in Honduras. As a result, the best way to see the sights is probably on one of your ship's shore excursions. The most popular stop is Roatan, the largest and most developed of the Bay Islands, where you can swim and scuba dive along the barrier reef. Many cruise passengers arriving at Roatan may prefer to just relax on the island's beaches with a cool drink. But most ships also offer several shore excursions.

Most ships visiting Roatan anchor and tender passengers to the newly expanded terminal at Coxen Hole, a dusty town at the southern end of the island—you only need a few minutes to see it. Both the airport and the island's main ferry dock are near the town, which also is the capital of the Bay Islands province. (It was named after the pirate John Coxen; locals sometimes refer to the entire island as Coxen Hole.)

#### **Potpourri**

Every city, town and village in Honduras has a patron saint. Many (essentially all) hold a fiesta in honor of their saint's day, and they can be quite fun if you happen to encounter one.

When Hurricane Mitch hit Roatan, some of the resident dolphins at Anthony's Key Resort escaped into open waters but were later recovered. They're valuable creatures as they can earn their owners US\$4,000 an hour to "act" in film and TV productions.

In addition to Spanish and English, at least five indigenous languages are spoken in Honduras: Garifuna, Mayan, Pech, Tolupan and Tawahka.

American short story writer William Sydney Porter (pen name O. Henry) hid out in the town of Trujillo for a year in the 1890s while his creditors in the U.S. searched for him. (He was avoiding imprisonment for bank fraud.) He wrote *Cabbages and Kings* during his stay in Honduras.

Honduras shares the Montecristo Cloud Forest Reserve with El Salvador and Guatemala. The easiest access is from the El Salvador side.

The lempira (the Honduran currency) was named after the famous Indian chief who died fighting the Spanish invaders.

One of the most important royal tombs at Copan was looted shortly after being uncovered in 1997.

Historians believe that Sun-Eyed Green Quetzal Macaw, the revered founder of Copan, may have come from another civilization—the city of Teotihuacan, in central Mexico.

Although it is one of the closest allies of the U.S., Honduras has remained one of the poorest countries in the Americas.

Some of the most beautiful Spanish Conquest-era colonial towns in the Western hemisphere can be found in the Honduran interior. The cobbled streets, horsemen sporting cowboy hats, and gaggles of uniform-clad schoolchildren provide fun and interesting sights.

In 1969, Honduras and El Salvador fought a war lasting about 100 hours that had been immediately preceded by a World Cup qualifying match between the two small countries. The war was brought on by deeper economic issues, such as the collapse of the Central American Common Market, yet it still became known as the Soccer War. To this day, patriotic fervor in Honduras peaks when the country goes toe to toe with El Salvador on the soccer field.

## **SEE & DO**

### **Recreation**

Most tourists visit Honduras for scuba diving and snorkeling, taking advantage of the long barrier reef that nudges right up to the Bay Islands. Fishing tours are a popular draw as well, along with sailing and lying on the beach.

Apart from seeing the ruins of Copan, most of the interior activities attract birders and adventure travelers. Hiking, rafting and bird-watching are the predominant activities at Pico Bonito national park. Nature tours, canoeing and kayaking are the main reasons to visit the wild Mosquitia region. Ziplining facilities are set up in the main tourist areas.

In Roatan, Gumbalina Park offers a good one-day excursion for cruise passengers and others. For one reasonable price, visitors can get up close with tropical birds and monkeys, go ziplining through the canopy and then relax on a white-sand beach with a pool and several bars. <http://www.gumbalimbapark.com>.

The dolphin encounter swim at Anthony's Key Resort is also a great experience. <http://www.anthonyskey.com/en/index.html>.

At Pico Bonito, the best bet is to stay at Pico Bonito Lodge and take advantage of the nature programs there.

For rafting and other adventures, the most experienced companies in the area are based at Jungle River Lodge (<http://www.jungleriverlodge.com>) and Omega Jungle Lodge (<http://www.omegatours.info/index2.htm>).

## Shopping

Unlike neighboring Guatemala, Honduras is not known for its indigenous textiles. But it is gaining a reputation for its mahogany and cedar carvings (the small chests are especially beautiful) and for its primitive paintings of mountain villages. (The beauty of the paintings is often enhanced by hand-carved mahogany frames.) In the gift shop at the Copan ruins, you'll find small replicas of stelae (stone carvings) that are quite well done. You can also purchase jade jewelry, statues and other carvings that local artists have faithfully reproduced from artifacts recovered by archaeologists.

Imapro, an organization devoted to the preservation of traditional crafts, especially woodcarving, operates a large showroom and sales center (TuriPlaza) in El Progreso, near San Pedro Sula. It is well-stocked with a wide variety of high-quality handicrafts, including magnificent carved doors, screens and chests.

Another category of sought-after souvenirs is the mostly black-and-white pottery made by the indigenous Lenca people around La Ceiba. Masks from the regions of the northeast are also unique items to take home.

Expertly woven baskets and hats also are available throughout the country, as are quality leather goods. Honduran factories now make brand-name purses and other leather items and ship them to the U.S. Many big-name designers have their leather purses assembled in San Pedro Sula, where they are sold for reduced prices—without the designer name, of course.

You can also buy Honduran cigars, which rival those from Cuba in taste and quality. Cigars are made at the Royal Tobacco Factory, which was founded in 1765 and is not far from the town of Copan Ruinas. Cuban cigars also are readily available in many parts of the country, but do not try to take them back to the U.S. It is illegal, and besides, many are local cigars with fake labels since few can tell the difference.

Haggling over prices is not as popular in Honduras as it is elsewhere in Central America. Where prices are marked, a request for a *precio mejor* (better price) is likely to net at best a 10% *descuenta* (discount). If prices are not marked, expect to haggle for a somewhat, but not greatly, lower price. Be aware that the local shops recommended by tour operators and taxi drivers generally pay for the privilege. Prices at those shops may be somewhat higher than others.

**Shopping Hours:** Most stores open Monday-Friday between 8 and 9 am, close around 11:30 am or noon, reopen between 1 and 2 pm and close around 5 pm. On Saturday, they close at noon and don't reopen until Monday. In the largest cities (Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba) and on Roatan, midday closing is slowly being abandoned, although many establishments still observe it.

Family-run stores, particularly those small-town mom-and-pop operations set up in the front room of the family home, generally open around 7 or 8 in the morning and close as late as 9 or 10 in the evening before the family retires for the night. Even when closed, they are often willing to open for a few minutes for polite travelers who shower them with the requisite dozen repetitions of *por favor* (please).

## DINING

### Dining Overview

The major cities in Honduras have a wide variety of Italian, Mexican, Chinese and other international cuisines, as well as fast-food restaurants.

In the smaller towns and the Bay Islands, you'll find mainly simple dishes of meat, fish, fresh local fruit and vegetables. Tortillas, seafood, beans, *mondongo* (a soup with tripe), *tapado* (meat and vegetable soup), corn tamales and enchiladas are characteristic of the cuisine.

If you visit some of the Garifuna villages, try the coconut bread and conch soup. Food in the Bay Islands gets a bit more upscale and varied each year as more vacationers and retirees join the divers. A handful of hotels in Copan Ruinas also offer more daring choices.

When dining, it's a good idea to realize that Hondurans from all walks of life tend to be very traditional in their table manners. Travelers who make any initial contact with fellow diners in restaurants, especially small-town eateries off the beaten path, should wish them a good meal by saying, "*Buen provecho*." This is considered *lo correcto* (the right thing to do) and will help you make quick friends.

Dining hours in Honduras are closer to those in the U.S. than in Mexico or other Central American countries; late-night dinners are not common.

## **SECURITY**

### **Etiquette**

Hondurans tend to be friendly, unassuming and somewhat formal. It is a good idea to spend time getting to know people before using their first names or launching into business discussions. Politeness and respectfulness are the norm. Punctuality is not given as high a priority as it is in North America and Europe. Men should always remove their hats before entering a church or someone's home. The way of life on the Bay Islands is considerably less conservative than in highland cities.

Both islanders and mainlanders put a high value on friendliness, respect and the ability to get along with others. A big smile and plenty of patience will often smooth over any difficulties.

### **Personal Safety**

Crime—including purse snatching, pickpocketing and armed robbery—is a continuing concern in both urban and rural areas in Honduras: Caution should be exercised.

The greatest danger is in the large cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. Robberies and assaults have also occurred in Tela and Trujillo, but state security forces have been active in those areas and have had some success in deterring crime.

The Bay Islands and Copan pose fewer dangers—petty theft being the most common—but as more money comes to the islands, the crimes of opportunity are increasing.

No matter where you are, remain aware of your surroundings and avoid deserted areas, especially after dark. Urban areas (especially neighborhoods outside of commercial districts) can be particularly dangerous because of gang activity, and isolated beaches can be very unsafe in the evening. Central America has seen a sharp rise in sex offenses and violent crime recently. Single female travelers should be extremely cautious when venturing into unknown areas. Avoid deserted stretches of beach and always stick to marked trails in national parks and archaeological sites. Women should avoid flashy jewelry or watches and follow local norms when it comes to how much skin is showing, especially in urban areas.

Highway robberies are another danger, although these have declined somewhat in recent years. Also, Honduran police officers have been known to stop random motorists and charge them with speeding to get bribes. We recommend traveling overland as part of a tour whenever possible or taking one of the luxury buses run by companies such as Hedman Alas. If you must go by car, avoid driving at night and keep your speed in check. During Nicaragua's civil war, land mines were planted on both sides of the Honduras-Nicaragua border, especially along the Coco River. Many of them have been cleared in recent years, but caution should still be exercised in the area.

The Honduran government has created a special tourism police force to help protect visitors. There are tourism police offices in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Tela, La Ceiba and on Roatan.

For the latest advisories, contact your country's travel-advisory agency.

### **Health**

Do not drink the tap water: Stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks. Bottled water (*agua purificada*) is available everywhere. Most first-class hotels and restaurants either treat their water supply or provide bottled water as a matter of course, but be sure to ask. Street vendors, stores, fast-food chains and many others also sell small 12-ounce bags of purified water for just a few centavos. Be aware of local vendors trying to sell unfiltered tap water in unlabeled plastic bags. Sanitary conditions can cause problems for visitors, so be careful what you eat: Avoid salads unless the ingredients have been disinfected or at least washed in purified water. Peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables, make sure meat is cooked thoroughly, and avoid unpasteurized dairy products. Lots of food available at roadside stands may look good, and some of it may be, but it's best to steer clear if you are not confident it is fresh and fully cooked. Most hot, freshly cooked food should be safe, especially if it's included on a package tour or recommended by a guide or someone else you trust.

There are a number of health threats that you should protect yourself against. Because of the presence of malaria and dengue fever, avoid mosquito bites by using a repellent with deet. You should also see a doctor about antimalaria medication before your visit. Make sure your vaccinations are current for tetanus/diphtheria, typhoid and adult polio. A vaccination for hepatitis A is also recommended.

Leptospirosis, a bacterial disease found in water contaminated with animal urine, is present in Honduras. Take care to minimize contact with standing water in rural areas. Cholera is present: A vaccine is available, but offers only limited immunity. The best precaution is to follow the guidelines on eating and drinking listed previously. Avoid contact with animals because of the danger of rabies: If you are even nipped by an animal, consult a doctor and try to bring the animal with you, but be extremely careful when dealing with stray dogs. Prevent skin infections by covering and disinfecting even the smallest wound.

Sand fleas are a constant presence on the Bay Islands. They are more of an annoyance than a health threat, but use some kind of repellent to avoid getting welts.

Be aware that AIDS is a danger, especially in San Pedro Sula, which has a very high incidence of the disease.

Take along all needed prescription medicine and over-the-counter drugs. It's a good idea to have a doctor's note for any medication you take with you. Hospital supplies are not always available. Serious medical procedures such as surgery should be completed in other countries, if possible, though there are private clinics and hospitals in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba capable of handling many medical emergencies. Each town of any size has at least one drugstore open 24 hours a day. The duty is rotated—if a store is closed, look for a temporary sign reading *turno* or *de turno hoy*. It will list the name and location of the drugstore (*farmacia*) that is open round-the-clock. Make sure that you have adequate out-of-country health insurance before leaving home.

For more information, contact your country's health-advisory agency.

### **Dos & Don'ts**

Do make international calls and faxes from the local office of Hondutel (the national phone company) rather than from your hotel, which will add a sizable surcharge. There are phones that accept phone cards all over the country. These cards are inexpensive and can be used for domestic or international calls.

Do pick up a copy of *Honduras Tips*. It's full of useful information and is available at virtually all major hotels, restaurants and stores.

Don't be alarmed by unexpected loud noises—Hondurans often celebrate events with firecrackers, sometimes in the early morning hours.

Do take along plenty of insect repellent for the pesky mosquitoes and no-see-ums if you are stopping at the Bay Islands or along the north coast. Some locals claim oil—coconut, baby and vegetable—is the best defense against sand fleas. The bugs are very tiny, and they drown in it. The oil can increase the risk of sunburn, however, so be careful. The *garrapatas* (war ticks) that live in the jungles of the Bay Islands are also to be avoided: They cause a nasty itch.

Don't buy coral products or seashells—it contributes to the destruction of the coral reef. And don't touch any coral when you're diving or snorkeling.

Don't take anything from an archaeological site that may look even remotely like an artifact: It's punishable by fines and prison sentences.

Do take along small bills for spending money. Most shops, except those in large commercial districts, can't exchange large bills of any currency. To protect against pickpockets, travelers may want to divide up their cash into small quantities to put in different places.

Do make an effort to visit some of Honduras' pretty colonial mountain towns.

Do try to find a way to minimize your use of plastic water bottles and plastic shopping bags. Very few of them get recycled, as you can see from their proliferation on the roadways.

## **FACTS**

**Population:** 7,483,763.

**Languages:** Spanish, English..

**Predominant Religions:** Predominantly Christian (Roman Catholic)..

**Time Zone:** 6 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-6 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is not observed.

**Voltage Requirements:** 110 volts.

**Telephone Codes:** 504, country code;

## **Money**

### **Currency Exchange**

Honduras' official currency is the lempira. U.S. dollars are also widely accepted in major hotels and restaurants. Small denomination bills are the easiest to cash. Major banks will exchange traveler's checks issued in U.S. funds and give cash advances on credit cards. ATMs also give advances on some foreign credit cards, although ATMs are surprisingly hard to find on Roatan. Check with your bank and credit card company before leaving home. Private exchange booths called *casas de cambio* often have shorter lineups than banks and offer competitive rates on U.S. dollars.

**Taxes**

A 12% value-added tax (ISV) is charged on all retail goods in Honduras. There is an additional 4% tax on hotel rooms. The international departure tax is US\$31, which must be paid in cash at airports upon leaving the country. There is also a small additional tax for flights within the country, such as the popular one from La Ceiba to Roatan.

**Tipping**

Some restaurants add a 10% gratuity to the bill. If not, tip waiters 10%-15% depending on the quality of service. It is not customary to tip taxi drivers unless you have excessive luggage or they perform some special service. Tipping is not generally expected in restaurants outside tourist areas, but a small tip is always appreciated. Tip porters about US\$0.50 per bag and room maids about US\$1 per day.

**Weather**

Although Honduras is pleasant most of the year, February-April is probably the best time to visit: The days are warm (80s F/28-32 C) and dry, and the nights are cool (60s F/16-22 C). Mid-December to February is dry and pleasant in the interior but can be a bit chilly. Mid-September to mid-December, it's cool with occasional rain, and the rainy season is in full force mid-May to mid-September (heavy showers fall once or twice a day, but the rest of the day can be sunny).

On the Bay Islands and on the north coast, rain is heavy October-December or January, while April, May and September are the hottest months there. In the Bay Islands, the summer months are generally dry except during times of tropical disturbance, when torrential rains can fall. Take along a jacket any time of year. From mid-May to mid-December, make it a waterproof/breathable one or else take a collapsible umbrella.

**What to Wear**

Pack casual summer clothing for sightseeing in the cities and light outdoor-wear for exploring parks and archaeological sites. You might also want to take one dressy outfit for dining out in the cities. Take a good pair of walking shoes or hiking boots and a waterproof shell if you're planning to hike in the coastal or mountain forests. Good shoes are also essential for the hills and cobblestones of the colonial towns. Hats and sunscreen are recommended. Conservative attire is the norm for business meetings in Honduras. However, men do not always wear suits and neckties because of the heat.

As in most of Latin America, men do not wear shorts outside the coastal regions, and women (especially married ones) generally wear less-revealing clothing than is typical in the U.S. On the Bay Islands, however, beachwear is fine for most any situation.

**Communication****Telephone**

Telephone service is good. No city codes are needed when dialing. Most public phones take both Honduran coins (centavos) and prepaid Hondutel phone cards. International calls can be made at Hondutel offices, which are found in almost every town. Private communication centers and some Internet cafes offer international telephone service at cheaper rates than Hondutel, the state-run telephone company. Some Internet cafes offer Web telephone calls through a local company or Skype, which are gaining popularity. Cell phones can be rented in Honduras. Check with your hotel for the location of a cellular phone rental service.

For U.S. cell phones, only AT&T has reliable coverage in the country, and most others don't have any local roaming agreements.

**Internet Access**

Internet access is readily available in Honduras. Cybercafes can be found in tourist areas and in larger towns and cities. Quality of service and costs vary considerably. Some upscale hotels offer Wi-Fi service to their guests, but often at a cost that is five or 10 times what it would be at an Internet cafe a block away.

## Belize

### OVERVIEW

#### Introduction

Belize was founded by adventurers—pirates, loggers and roughneck settlers who carved a place to live from swamps and jungles. A few centuries later, adventurous ecotourists found this corner of Central America, and today, Belize is a rising star among those seeking active and educational vacations. Tourists go to see its vast expanses of rain forest, rich collection of birds and animals, long stretch of coral reef and plentiful Maya ruins. As a result, tourism has replaced agriculture as the largest industry in Belize, generating almost one-fifth of the country's GDP. Many people go to Belize for everything from honeymoons to snorkeling.



Of course, Belize's growing popularity is making it somewhat less wild than it used to be—especially if you find yourself in a well-appointed jungle lodge or seaside resort (even the sounds of howler monkeys can seem rather civilized when you're sipping cappuccino on the veranda). San Pedro on Ambergris Caye offers a pleasing mix of informal living, watersports and the country's best restaurants and nightlife.

Belize's travel infrastructure is continually improving but remains far from polished: Some areas are difficult and/or expensive to get to, and conventional resort amenities such as golf courses and tennis courts are few and far between. Belize's handful of "highways" are narrow but in fairly good condition, and getting around the country is not without its delays and challenges. We find these to be rather minor drawbacks, however. A bit of rawness just seems fitting for a place that caters to so many active travelers.

#### Must See or Do

**Sights**—Exploring Maya ruins such as Lamanai, Xunantunich, Caraco or Altun Ha; diving or snorkeling along one of the world's longest barrier reefs; glass-bottomed-boat tours at Hol Chan Marine Reserve; cave tubing in Caves Branch River near the Jaguar Paw Resort; a visit to Hopkins, a mellow Garifuna beach village; a trip inside Actun Tunichil Muknal to find the remains of Maya human sacrifices.

**Museums**—Maya jade exhibits at the Museum of Belize; British colonial and history displays at Government House in Belize City.

**Memorable Meals**—Stew chicken served with rice and beans and fried plantains at Nerie's in Belize City; Creole food at Macy's or Big Daddy's; romantic dining at Harbor View or Smokey Mermaid; sophisticated international cuisine on Ambergris Caye; healthy veggie dishes at Hannah's or Serendib in San Ignacio; inexpensive, fresh, no-frills Belizean food at Omar's in Placencia.

**Late Night**—Cheesy beach music and disco dancing in San Pedro; tropical drinks at the Pickled Parrot in Placencia; the popular Wednesday-night "Chicken Drop" at the Pier Lounge or dining, gambling, dancing and bowling at the Princess Hotel and Casino on Ambergris Caye.

**Walks**—Bird-watching on a hike through Bacalar Chico National Park; a walk along one of Belize's many white-sand beaches; a leisurely nature stroll through any Maya ruin; searching for wildlife at Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary's network of trails.

**Especially for Kids**—Spotting native animals while strolling through the Belize Zoo; looking for the blue morpho and other butterflies at one of the country's butterfly farms, such as Green Hills, Tropical Wings or Shipstern Reserve; climbing and exploring ancient Maya pyramids; cave tubing; snorkeling.

## **Geography**

Belize shares a small northern border with Mexico. To the west and south, its neighbor is Guatemala. The entire eastern coastline is open to the Caribbean Sea, with a 175-mi-/280-km-long barrier reef running the full length.

Although relatively small, Belize is a country of great geographical diversity. The south and west are hilly, reaching altitudes of 3,700 ft/1,130 m. In the high, hard-to-log areas, virgin forest remains, and the rest of the country has a variety of forests that have regrown after logging. The north and central coastal areas are laced with mangrove swamps, which give way to beaches in the south. Off the mainland, the water is only about 16 ft/5 m deep all the way to the islands (locally called cayes, pronounced *keys*), which are just west of the barrier reef. The islands are, for the most part, flat. Some are surrounded by mangroves, and others are lined with narrow sandy beaches.

## **History**

Archaeologists have determined that the Maya settled in Belize as early as 1500 BC. Their civilization reached its height between AD 250 and 900. Descendants of the Maya continue to live in Belize today, particularly the Mopan, Yucatek, and Q'eqchi' branches.

The Spanish claimed Central America along with the rest of their New World possessions, but they didn't settle the area that would become Belize. The first sustained European presence came instead from British buccaneers and shipwrecked British sailors, who soon realized that Belize's forests of mahogany were valuable commodities. Slaves were brought in to harvest the timber, and the Baymen—as the British settlers were known—began to extract a tidy profit from the jungle.

Spain continued to claim the area, however, and the decisive battle between the Spanish and British was fought 10 September 1798, off St. George's Caye. The British won and continued to rule the area despite advances by Mexico and Guatemala in the 1820s. The settlement became known as British Honduras, though it wasn't until 1862 that it officially became a British colony. In 1973, the name was changed to Belize, and Belmopan became the new capital city. On 21 September 1981, Belize declared its independence from Britain and became part of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

During the late 1990s, the Belize government and private businesses invested millions of dollars in rejuvenating downtown Belize City and countering the flourishing drug trade. A Tourism Police Unit was also established to help protect visitors, particularly in the small area where cruise-ship passengers disembark.

Today, Belize is a multicultural and multilingual society. Maya, English, African, Creole and mestizo communities are joined by Mennonites who immigrated to Belize by way of Canada after World War II (and now make up 3% of Belize's population). Spanish-speaking mestizos from neighboring Central American countries are a large and growing group, making up one-half of the population. East Indians, Chinese and expatriate Europeans and North Americans are also part of the Belizean melting pot.

## **Snapshot**

The country's main attractions include Maya ruins, scuba diving, a cheerful cultural melting pot, relaxed island life, nature reserves, white-water kayaking, snorkeling, deep-sea and fly fishing, caving and cave tubing, canoeing, beaches and bird-watching. Most travelers divide their time between the coast and the forests.

If you are interested in water-related activities, nature and Maya culture, or if you want nothing more than to laze about, you'll enjoy Belize. If you want massive white-sand beaches, extensive nightlife and staged entertainment, look elsewhere.

## **Port Information**

### **Location**

Belize was all but ignored by Caribbean cruise ships until 2001, when a docking terminal for cruise-ship tenders opened in the historic Fort George area of Belize City. Called "Tourism Village," this waterside minimall has a host of overpriced shops, bars and other amenities. On some days, three or four large ships may be in port at the same time, stretching Belize's limited tourism infrastructure and overcrowding popular sites such as Shark-Ray Alley near Ambergris Caye and the Altun Ha ruins, just north of Belize City. A few smaller ships sail into other ports in Belize, stopping at fishing villages on the mainland and at tiny islands off the coast so passengers can dive or snorkel.

Belize City's central location (near the middle of the country on the Caribbean) has made it a convenient base for trips into the interior to explore rain forests and Maya ruins. The northern cayes also are a short plane flight or boat ride away from Belize City.

### **Potpourri**

Belize's deforestation rates are the lowest in Central America.

Approximately 800 documented species of birds live in North and Central America. Belize is home to 540 of them.

A "grand slam" for anglers in Belize is catching tarpon, bonefish and permit (a pompano) on the same trip.

Although Belize City is low-lying, locals claim it will never sink into the sea because it was built upon a foundation of rum bottles, mahogany chips and ballast bricks.

Belize's modern capital city, Belmopan, was built from scratch after Hurricane Hattie devastated Belize City in 1961.

Belize has two Blue Holes—the underwater dive site at Lighthouse Reef and an inland sinkhole with sapphire-colored water just south of Belmopan.

The electric-blue color of the blue morpho butterflies makes them easy to spot in the dark green rain forests of Belize. If you see them nowhere else, look for the blue morpho and other butterflies at one of the country's butterfly farms, such as Green Hills or Tropical Wings.

In 1992, Guatemala finally recognized Belize as an independent nation. Guatemala had claimed that Belize was part of its territory on the basis of 500-year-old Spanish decrees. Tensions between the two countries have lessened, but some Guatemalans continue to believe Belize was stolen from them by the British.

Some of the small hillocks, both inland and on the islands, are Maya sites buried under lush vegetation.

Queen Elizabeth II was served gibbon (a rodent that's a national delicacy) on her visit to Belize. Headlines in London the following day read "Queen Served Rat by Wogs"; to this day, the dish is proudly known as "royal rat."

You can see crocodiles (locally called alligators, though true alligators aren't found in Belize) in many areas of Belize. There are even some in the canals around Belize City.

Among the movies filmed in Belize are *The Mosquito Coast*, adapted from the novel by Paul Theroux, and *The Dogs of War*, which is set in Africa but features many recognizable places in Belize City

Baron Bliss, an eccentric English-Portuguese adventurer who became Belize's greatest benefactor, died in 1926 of food poisoning on a yacht anchored off the Belizean coast, without ever having set foot in the country. His generosity is celebrated each year on 9 March, Baron Bliss Day, a national holiday.

## **SEE & DO**

### **Recreation**

A visit to Belize is not complete until you spend at least a few days diving, snorkeling or deep-sea fishing along the reef. More than 200 islands, called cayes (pronounced *keys*) parallel the coastline, some large enough for small villages and guesthouses and others barely large enough for a boat to dock. The barrier reef that lies along the east coast of Mexico and Central America is the longest in the Western and Northern hemispheres. Belize's section of reef runs for 175 mi/280 km—the full length of the country. It received a lot of attention when Jacques Cousteau called the Blue Hole one of the four "must-dive" sites on the planet. The reef and its exceptionally clear waters are stunning. Among the sights are coral gardens, sharks, manta rays, barracuda, blue-striped grunt fish, green moray eels and bottle-nosed dolphins. In southern Belize in April, you may even see congregations of whale sharks, the biggest fish in the world.

The mainland offers other pleasures and adventures. You can climb 1,500-year-old Maya structures in the rain forest and then relax with a cold drink and a five-course meal at a posh jungle lodge. Many lodges have their own luxurious spas. You can go cave tubing (ride an inner tube in underground rivers) or explore (with a guide) ancient limestone caves that still contain Maya relics and human skeletons. The Mountain Pine Ridge, the largest forest reserve in the country, is excellent for mountain biking and hiking, and you can cool off in one of the area's many waterfalls. Belize's many nature reserves also provide ample opportunities for bird-watching.

Although Belize is far from a paradise for golfers, duffers can get a fix at a challenging (and expensive) 18-hole course at Caye Chapel, about midway between Belize City and Ambergris Caye, or at an inexpensive nine-hole "jungle course" at Roaring River Golf Course, about 50 mi/80 km west of Belize City. Both courses feature crocodiles in the water traps.

### **Scuba & Snorkeling**

#### **Dive Connection**

This full-service PADI dive shop at the Radisson Fort George Marina offers all manner of trips and certification courses. It also runs Belize's first dolphin encounter program at nearby Spanish Lookout Caye, where it has a lodge, restaurant and fleet of kayaks. The dolphin show is in a natural lagoon and caters primarily to cruise passengers. Phone 501-223-5086 or 223-4526. Toll-free 888-223-5403. <http://www.belizediving.com>.

### **Shopping**

Belize doesn't have the crafts tradition of Guatemala or most other Central American countries, and few quality items are available. However, you can find attractive Maya baskets, slate carvings and some nice carvings from zircote, mahogany and other local woods. Good souvenirs include Marie Sharp's hot sauce (in a dozen different fiery-hot versions), recordings of *punta* music (an electrified Caribbean sound native to southern Belize) and Belizean One Barrel rum.

A few Garifuna crafts are available—dolls or other folk art, primarily, though you may be lucky enough to encounter some ceremonial objects for sale. Look for rain-forest products and natural remedies that are sold in small labeled jars (try one of the jungle salves for bites and stings—they work). Guatemalan and Honduran crafts, such as textiles, weaving and

leatherwork, are available at some gift shops in Belize. Avoid purchasing items made from black coral, sea turtles or other endangered species.

You can also get handmade furniture at the interesting Mennonite market in Belize City. Another unique shopping experience is the Hattieville Central Prison Gift Shop, located on the way to Burrell Boom Baboon Sanctuary, where you can support the rehabilitation of prisoners by buying their fine craft work.

**Shopping Hours:** Generally Monday-Friday 8 am-5 pm, though smaller shops close for lunch. Many shops are open Saturday mornings, and some close on Wednesday afternoons. Nearly everything shuts down on Sunday—except Chinese restaurants and a few tourist shops in San Pedro.

## **DINING**

### **Dining Overview**

You don't go to Belize for the gourmet cuisine, but quality restaurants can be found throughout the country. The quintessential Belizean dish is stewed chicken served with rice and beans and perhaps fried plantain or coleslaw, with a Red Fanta or Belikin beer to wash it down. We like the seafood, the fried chicken and all the rice-and-bean dishes. Mangoes and other tropical fruit are inexpensive and delicious. *Panades* are popular deep-fried patties, usually stuffed with fish. Cow-foot soup (made with real cow's feet) is a Belizean favorite, though it is rarely on restaurant menus. Iguana and gibbon (a small rodent) are occasionally served. Vegetarians will find that most Belizean restaurants have rice-and-bean dishes on the menu. In addition, many larger towns have Chinese and sometimes Indian restaurants that offer meatless options.

Belizean lobster is wonderfully tasty and not too expensive. It's only available during the lobster season (mid-June through mid-February). Belize's lobster beds are feeling severe stress from overharvesting, and off-season lobstering only aggravates the situation. Also, if you see lobster on the menu at a very inexpensive price, around BZ\$8-\$12, it is likely a "short" lobster, meaning it is too small to be legally caught. For the lobsters' sakes, avoid restaurants that serve lobster in that price range. All of the above holds true for conch as well, though off-season for conch is July-September.

Some of our favorite restaurants in Belize City are Nerie's (probably the most popular restaurant in the city among locals), Macy's (long-established eatery serving Creole food), Smokey Mermaid (courtyard dining at the Great House Hotel), Harbor View (the most romantic restaurant in the city) and Wet Lizard (for an inexpensive, fun meal near the Tourism Village). Dit's Restaurant (50 King St.) is hard to beat for reasonably priced, typical Belizean dishes and baked goods. The Riverside Tavern has the best burgers and bar food in town.

On Ambergris Caye, international fine-dining options abound. Don't miss Capricorn (sophisticated international cuisine), JamBel Jerk (Jamaican), Caliente (for appropriately hot Mexican food), Elvi's (touristy but good), Blue Water Grille (don't miss the coconut shrimp), El Divino (an air-conditioned steak house at Banana Beach), Wild Mango's (local and creative dishes) and Papi's (inexpensive local food.) Rojo's Lounge, on Northern Ambergris, is one of most talked-about dining opportunities, located at Azul Belize. For breakfast, try Tropical Takeout (across from the airport) or Ruby's.

A popular restaurant in San Ignacio is Sanny's Grill (hidden away in a residential area north of town but worth finding for its spicy local dishes). A dozen other cheap, decent, diverse eateries line San Ignacio's Burns Avenue. In Belmopan, Caladium (delicious Belizean food) is run by three feisty ladies. In Corozal Town, head to Cafe Kela (a little bayside bistro serving grilled fish, delicious pizza and even French dishes at ridiculously low prices). Also, Cactus Plaza (Mexican) is inexpensive and cheerful.

On Caye Caulker, Rasta Pasta (conch fritters to die for) and Habaneros (upscale fish and other island food) are the way to go. In Placencia, the hotel restaurants still dominate, with those at Robert's Grove and Turtle Inn at the top of the list. Also, Omar's (Belizean) in Placencia Village is good and inexpensive; Pickled Parrot (tropical drinks, pizza and burgers) is a popular spot for expats and visitors. Tranquility Lodge (eclectic) and Earth Runnin' (American-Belizean) are the best in Punta Gorda.

## **SECURITY**

### **Etiquette**

Belizean society is a collage of British, Latin American, Caribbean and Mayan customs. Most Belizeans are friendly and polite but somewhat formal, a legacy of British colonialism. English is the main language of business, but many people use Creole in everyday conversation, especially in Belize City. People tend to be easygoing when it comes to being on time for appointments, and things seldom get done quickly. Tolerance and acceptance are hallmarks of Belizean society. These two virtues are extended to foreign visitors. Dressing modestly in public, refraining from aggressive behavior and removing hats when entering churches are all recommended practices.

### **Personal Safety**

Crime directed at travelers in the resort areas is rare. The greatest danger of theft and robbery is in Belize City, but taking some precautions should minimize your risk: Don't walk alone there, especially at night (take a taxi instead), and stick to well-populated areas. Belize has enacted a "swift justice" law intended to deter thieves from targeting travelers: Those accused of any crime against a tourist are brought to trial the next day. If convicted, they are given a minimum sentence of five years in prison. Special "tourist police" also patrol the streets in Belize City, San Pedro, Caye Caulker, Dangriga, Placencia, Punta Gorda and elsewhere, not only as a means of protection, but also to assist visitors in finding their way around.

Divers and snorkelers have been carried away by strong currents around the cayes, so choose a reputable operator. Be aware that carjackings do occasionally take place on Belize's highways, especially in the southern and western parts of the country. Driving at night is not advisable.

For the latest information, contact your country's travel-advisory agency.

### **Health**

Although the tap water (or "pipe water," as it's called in Belize) is considered safe in 70% of the country and is perfectly potable in resort areas such as San Pedro and Placencia, we recommend that you stick with boiled or purified water—without creating a mountain of plastic trash in your wake. Bottled water is widely available, but so are larger purified water containers from which you can refill your own drinking water bottle.

Most hot, freshly cooked food should be safe (especially if it's included on a package tour). Even street food can be consumed with little risk as long as you can verify that it has been cooked recently. To be safe, though, you might want to peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables before eating them and make sure meat is cooked thoroughly.

Malaria is present in Belize, especially in the bush and in the south of the country; however, the risk is fairly low. You should also consult your doctor about vaccinations against hepatitis. Be sure to take along insect repellent containing deet or pick up some natural, chemical-free repellent in Belize: Both malaria and dengue fever (another danger, but no preventative vaccine exists for it) are transmitted by mosquitoes. The repellent will also be helpful in deterring sand flies, which are found on the islands and in coastal areas, although they can be controlled with simple baby oil.

Mosquitoes can be fierce, especially in low-lying swampy areas. They can also deposit botfly eggs in your skin when they bite you. Botfly-larvae infections aren't life-threatening, but the results are yucky—a live, wormy larva grows under your skin, eventually to the size of a pencil eraser. If you get a welt under your skin that seems to be moving, see a tropical-medicine specialist immediately. Belize also has scorpions—their sting is painful but rarely life-threatening—and tarantulas, which are fun to see on night hikes and are not aggressive or dangerous.

Belize City has adequate hospital facilities, but the smaller towns and villages offer only limited aid. Pack all prescription medication that you will need for the trip. Make sure that you have adequate out-of-country medical insurance before leaving home.

The sun can be very strong, so take along sunscreen and a hat as well.

For the latest information, contact your country's health-advisory agency.

### **Dos & Don'ts**

Do visit one of Belize's many caves, such as Barton Creek, Chechem Ha or Actun Tunichil Muknal.

Do try to meet locals. Belizeans, regardless of background or place in life, are among the most genuinely friendly people you'll ever find.

Don't miss the popular Wednesday-night "Chicken Drop" at the Pier Lounge (part of the Spindrift Hotel) on Ambergris Caye. In this local version of bingo, participants purchase squares that have been drawn on a large wooden board. A chicken is placed on the surface, and whoever owns the square where the chicken lands its first droppings gets the pot—and a rag to clean up the mess.

Don't think something is wrong with you if people keep asking, "You alright?" It's the Belizean way of saying "How are you?"

Do take a nighttime jungle hike with a guide—you won't see jaguars, but you'll see plenty of tree frogs, spiders and scorpions (and the jaguars may very well see you).

Don't expect wide sandy beaches. Although many of Belize's beaches are beautiful, most are narrow and, depending on the current washing trash up the coast, can be dirty. This is because of the barrier reef along the coast, which reduces the wave action that would have created wide beaches and sandy sea floors.

Do take a drive on the Hummingbird Highway, the country's most scenic roadway.

Do go snorkeling—Belize has some of the best snorkeling you'll find anywhere, most of the best spots accessed by boat.

Do spend a couple of nights at one of the wonderful jungle lodges.

Do take binoculars—the bird population is extraordinary. When in the rain forest, try to spot the colorful toucans.

Don't remove coral, pick wild orchids, spearfish, hunt without a license or remove archaeological artifacts: All these actions are against the law.

**Population:** 294,385.

**Languages:** English (official), Spanish, Creole, Maya dialects, Garifuna..

**Predominant Religions:** Christian (Roman Catholic, Protestant)..

**Time Zone:** 6 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-6 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is not observed.

**Voltage Requirements:** 110 volts.

**Telephone Codes:** 501, country code;

### **Money**

#### **Banking Hours**

Generally Monday-Thursday 8 am-1 pm, Friday 8 am-1 pm and 3-6 pm.

#### **Taxes**

Belize has a a general sales tax (GST) of 10%. Hotel tax is 9%.

#### **Tipping**

Tip 10%-15% in restaurants if a service charge hasn't been added. Some hotels will also add a service charge to the bill. Taxi drivers are generally not tipped.

#### **Weather**

The best time to visit is November-March, when days are in the 80s F/27-32 C, with nights a few degrees cooler. April or May would be our second choice, as it's drier and water visibility is excellent. June-October are the rainy months, when hurricanes are possible. Although the weather is less predictable then, attractions are less crowded and hotels generally offer lower off-season rates. Snorkelers and divers claim the weather is better at that time because there's less wind—unless a storm is closing in. Humidity is almost always 70% or more, and it rains at least 50 in/125 cm a year.

#### **What to Wear**

Casual, comfortable summer clothing is appropriate year-round, but take along a sweater or jacket for the occasional cool evening or a restaurant with too much air-conditioning. A favorite expression of the Belizeans is "No shirt, no shoes, no problem," but this adage applies more to the beach and the cayes than to Belize City and nicer restaurants. What you wear is, of course, keyed to what you're doing. If you are visiting ruins, be sure to wear shoes with nonslip soles (hiking boots are fine but rather warm). And while the weather is often warm and muggy, a waterproof, breathable jacket may come in handy.

## **Cozumel, Quintana Roo, Mexico**

### **OVERVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

Cozumel, Mexico, has long been compared to Cancun, the splashy resort just 40 mi/65 km to the north. In the past, Cozumel had a laid-back, sedate atmosphere, and its superior fishing, snorkeling and diving gave it a definite edge. Today, Cozumel is still a better choice for those who don't like planned resorts, but the island is no longer an escapist's paradise. The snorkeling, diving and fishing are still great, but no one would mistake present-day Cozumel for the sleepy backwater it once was.

One reason is cruise ships. Cozumel is the most popular cruise stop in Mexico and can host as many as seven large ships simultaneously. When more than one ship looms on the horizon, Cozumel's restaurants, bars and shops fill with day-trippers. Everyone, from shopkeepers to bartenders, gets a bit stressed by the crowds.

Still, Cozumel tourism can be fun, especially for travelers interested in exploring its coral reefs on scuba and snorkeling outings. Cozumel's only town, San Miguel, fortunately has retained much of its pleasant, small-town atmosphere. Those with enough time for a day trip will find the Mayan ruins of Tulum and Chichen Itza, on the Yucatan mainland, within striking distance of Cozumel attractions.

### **Must See or Do**

**Sights**—Deserted beaches on Cozumel's rugged east coast; sea and jungle vistas in the Punta Sur Ecological Park; the Maya ruins at San Gervasio; the Museo de la Isla de Cozumel with its haunting Maya sculptures.

**Memorable Meals**—Mexican food at El Museo accompanied by turquoise Caribbean vistas; pasta with fresh seafood in Guido's romantic courtyard; scrumptious homemade cakes and cappuccino at The Coffee Bean.

**Walks**—The *malecon*, San Miguel's pretty seaside promenade; the archaeological trail and botanical gardens in Parque Nacional Chankanaab.

**Especially for Kids**—Dolphin encounters at Parque Nacional Chankanaab.

### **Geography**

Cozumel is Mexico's largest island—33 mi/53 km long and 8 mi/13 km wide. The island is very flat. From the mainland, the tall hotel buildings appear to float on the horizon. Shops, restaurants and nightlife are concentrated in San Miguel, the only town, which is on the west coast of the island. Cozumel has two highways. One makes a half-circle around the southern end of the island. Heading south out of San Miguel, it's a four-lane road for about 5 mi/8 km before narrowing to two lanes. The other highway is the Carretera Transversal (the cross-island highway), which is a well-maintained road that cuts straight through the jungle-covered center of the island and connects the east and west coasts.

It's hard to get lost in downtown San Miguel if you know the layout: *Avenidas* (avenues) run north-south, and *calles* (streets) run east-west. Except for the large thoroughfares, such as Avenida Melgar, Calle 11 and the island highways, most roads are one-way.

### **History**

The oldest Maya ruin on Cozumel dates to AD 300. The Maya believed that Cozumel was the spiritual home of Ixchel, the goddess of fertility and love. Maya women were said to make a pilgrimage to the island at least once in their lifetimes to ensure the healthy birth of their children. The name Cozumel comes from the Mayan word *Cuzamil-Peten*, which means "Land of the Swallows." (Ixchel was often depicted with swallows at her feet.)

Cozumel was a quiet place until the early 1960s, when it was first visited by Jacques Cousteau, the well-known underwater explorer and documentary filmmaker. He put the island on the map as one of the great diving destinations in the world. In recent decades, Cozumel has experienced the tourism boom that has transformed the northern Yucatan, and it has become an increasingly popular destination for cruise ships.

After Hurricane Wilma, which hit in October 2005, most of the Island's facilities have been repaired or replaced. Punta Langosta and the International Pier are back in operation, but the pier at Puerta Maya was completely destroyed and is not expected to reopen until the end of 2008. Chankanaab Park is open, and most of the hotels are up and running except for one or two that are undergoing a total renovation. Other than that, the island is back to its carefree self, completely ready to welcome visitors with no sense of post-hurricane blues.

## **Port Information**

### **Location**

Cruise ships visiting Cozumel dock at the International Pier or Punta Langosta, both of which are fully operational after the damage caused by Hurricane Wilma in 2005. The pier at Puerta Maya was totally destroyed and is not expected to reopen until the end of 2008. During peak times, some ships anchor offshore there and tender passengers to land. Punta Lagosta pier is a five-minute walk and the International Pier a short taxi ride or a 2-mi/3-km walk along the waterfront to San Miguel.

The two piers have shopping malls, Internet access, taxis and tour stands.

Four tourist-information booths on the municipal pier and in the nearby park are open daily 8 am-6 pm. The island's main tourism office is on the second floor of the Plaza del Sol shopping center on the east side of the town plaza, half a block from the municipal pier. It's open Monday-Saturday 8:30 am-4 pm, Sunday 9 am-1 pm. Phone 869-0212.  
<http://www.islacozumel.com.mx>.

### **Shore Excursions**

Consider signing up for the excursions offered by your ship. They may not be the least expensive way to see the island, but you won't have to waste your limited time making arrangements yourself—and you won't have to worry about missing the ship. Shore excursions—and their prices—vary from cruise line to cruise line. Typical tours may include visiting the Maya ruins at Tulum; outdoor adventures such as snorkeling, scuba diving, sportfishing, a Jeep safari, a tequila history tour or a jungle tour on horseback; golf; or a shopping expedition to Cancun. Check with your ship's shore-excursion staff or your travel agent for additional information.

*Note:* Long trousers are best for jungle treks. Take along plenty of sunscreen and insect repellent, and don't forget to spray your ankles. A hat that shades your face from the sun is also a good idea.

### **Potpourri**

The El Cedral Festival was started about 150 years ago by Casimiro Cardenas. He survived an attack during the War of the Castes by clutching a small wooden cross and started the festival to honor its power.

Hernando Cortes, the Spanish conqueror of the Aztec Empire in the 16th century, made his first landfall from Cuba at Cozumel.

Cozumel was a sacred island according to its first settlers, the Maya. They dedicated the island to the moon goddess Ixchel and built many temples in her honor.

Cozumel was a favorite lair for some of the most notorious pirates along the Spanish Main. Henry Morgan, the most famous of them, went on to become the British governor of Jamaica as Sir Henry Morgan.

The island's airport was used as U.S. Navy base during World War II.

## **SEE & DO**

### **Sightseeing**

San Miguel, the only town on the island, is a lively place. Although the typical traveler-oriented attractions are centered on the Plaza del Sol and Avenida Melgar (the 9-mi/14-km waterfront road also known as the *malecon*), be sure to take a stroll through some of the streets farther inland. You'll see the houses of the town's residents and non-tourist businesses with colorful, hand-painted signs. Shop windows overflow with shoes and everyday necessities.

Another slice of Cozumel life takes place in the plaza, just off the *malecon*, on Sunday evenings, when the town residents (and a fair number of visitors) turn out for live concerts. Many of the locals are decked out in their finery—this is where those brightly colored shoes get put through their paces. There's dancing, flirting and general merriment. It's also a great opportunity to sample homemade foods, such as tamales, that are sold by local women to raise money for their churches.

As far as formal attractions go, the most popular is Parque Nacional Chankanaab, south of San Miguel, which includes botanical gardens, a fish-filled lagoon, a beach, good snorkeling waters and activities such as swimming with dolphins. At the far southern end of the island is Punta Sur Ecological Park, a nature preserve where visitors board tour vehicles to see the sights.

There are some Maya ruins on the island. They're small in comparison with those at Tulum or Chichen Itza, but they're worth a visit nonetheless, especially if archaeology is an interest or you're up for a jungle adventure. The best-preserved ruins are at San Gervasio, in the middle of the island, and El Cedral on the southern part of the island.

### **Historic Sites**

#### **El Cedral**

This small set of ruins on the southern end of the island is visited by fewer people than San Gervasio, so you may have the place to yourself. The ancient Maya built structures there, and it later became the first Spanish settlement on the island. It's where the conquistadores, led by Cortes, supposedly celebrated the first Catholic Mass in Mexico (though Veracruz claims this honor, as well). Most of the Maya buildings that once stood at El Cedral were torn down by the Spanish, and the ruins were further damaged when the U.S. Army built an airstrip on the site during World War II. Of the Maya ruins, one small arch is all that's easily visible today. Smaller remnants are scattered in the bush around the site, but you'll need a guide and a horse to find them, both of which can be acquired near the arch. A one-room cinder-block church commemorates the first Mass. El Cedral is located off the coastal road on the southern part of the island. Admission to the site is free, but you'll have to pay if you want to take a tour on horseback.

#### **Punta Molas Faro**

This isolated lighthouse on the north shore of the island is rarely visited, making its beach a wonderful getaway for those who like solitude and a magnificent view of the ocean. Although it's a great spot for birding, getting there by car is daunting, and you'll have to walk part of the way. The best bet is to go by boat or on a guided tour. Located at the northernmost tip of the island.

#### **San Gervasio**

The best-preserved ruins on the island, this site is small and compact, and the temples are barely one story high. There are stelae, plazas and six structures to visit. The temple nearest the entrance once contained a steam bath used for purification rituals. A few hundred yards/meters away are smaller buildings where researchers believe priests would gather with pilgrims to interpret their dreams. Don't miss the temple with red handprints on the walls. It's thought that all of the buildings were once connected by roads made of limestone.

Knowledgeable guides wait at the entrance to the site and will give you a tour for a fee. San Gervasio lies about 7 mi/11 km northeast of San Miguel. Get there by taking a small, paved side road off the Carretera Transversal (the cross-island highway). Daily 7 am-4 pm. Admission is US\$6.

## **Museums**

### **Museo de la Isla de Cozumel**

If you are interested in learning about the history of the region, visit this charming little museum housed in what was the island's first luxury hotel. Stroll through exhibits detailing the coral-reef system around Cozumel, the early history of the Maya and the saga of piracy around the island. There are lots of other little nuggets as well, such as a display about Charles Lindbergh's 1928 visit to the island in his famous *Spirit of St. Louis* plane. The museum has a replica of a traditional Mayan house in a courtyard with an explanation by a Maya guide of the medicinal herbs still used for healing today. Stop in for a bite to eat at the second-floor restaurant, which has stunning views of the ocean. Thursday-Sunday, the museum offers cultural programs such as concerts, traditional dance or art exhibits. Daily 9 am-5 pm. Admission runs about US\$3. Special cultural programs are free. Avenida Melgar (between Calle 4 Norte and Calle 6 Norte), Cozumel. Phone 872-1475. <http://cozumelparks.com>.

## **Parks & Gardens**

### **Parque Nacional Chankanaab**

This park is Cozumel's prime sightseeing and activity center, and it gives a lot of bang for the buck. It was built around a saltwater lagoon where you can observe sea life, and it also has a large stretch of oceanfront property consisting of sand leading up to rock ledges along the water. You can dive and snorkel in the ocean to see the underwater reefs, statues and a fair number of fish, or you can swim with dolphins for an extra fee. If you're traveling with small children, take them to swim in the specially protected children's lagoon where small fish are let in from the open sea. Away from the water, there's a botanical garden with hundreds of native tropical plants that have been labeled. You can also follow trails past replicas of stelae and sculptures from the Olmec, Maya and Toltec cultures. Bird-watchers will find frigate birds, tanagers, woodpeckers and swallows. Keep an eye out for the park's golden iguanas—some are as long as 3 ft/1 m. A restaurant and changing areas are located on the beach. We recommend getting to the park early to stake out a good spot near the water. Daily 7 am-5 pm. Park admission is US\$16, US\$8 for children ages 3-11. Snorkeling equipment rental is US\$8. Swimming with the dolphins costs about US\$75-\$120. Carretera Sur Km. 9 (6 mi/9 km south of San Miguel), Cozumel. Phone 872-2940.

### **Punta Sur Ecological Park**

This national preserve at the southern tip of the island contains 247 acres/100 hectares of jungle, wetlands, lagoons and beaches. Before the park was established, this was one of the most isolated places on Cozumel, known primarily for the lighthouse there. Today, cars are prohibited from entering the grounds. Instead, trucks with two-story decks are used to transport visitors through the park to view the birds and jungle vegetation and to spend time at the preserve's nice beach. Electric bikes can also be rented for US\$5 per hour if you wish to explore the park on your own. During the winter months, catamaran tours are available to nearby Colombia Lagoon, where you can do some more bird-watching and view crocodiles. (There's good bonefishing on the flats of the lagoon.) The lighthouse has been turned into a navigation museum chronicling the region's maritime history from the time of the Maya to the present. The park is off Carretera Sur (the southern coastal highway). Daily 9 am-5 pm. Park admission is US\$10 and includes a general tour of the park, plus access to the lighthouse and associated museum. The catamaran tour costs US\$20. Phone 872-2940.

## **Recreation**

Nearly all recreation on the island centers around the picturesque beachfront, with snorkeling, scuba diving, sportfishing, windsurfing and sailing the most popular activities. Golf, tennis and horseback riding are also common.

## **Beaches**

There are three types of beaches on Cozumel. First, there are some stretches of white sand on the west side of the island, where most of the resorts and attractions are located. These beaches front mostly calm, turquoise-colored water sheltered by the Yucatan mainland, making it good for swimming and snorkeling. The best of the sandy beaches are Playa Azul, Playa Pila and Playa San Juan to the north; and Playa San Francisco, Playa Mia Grand Beach Park, Mr. Sancho's, Nachi Cocom and Playa Palancar to the south.

Also on the west side of the island, you'll find "beaches" made of brown limestone, a phenomenon known as "iron shore." To get into the water, you'll usually have to use a set of steps or a ladder from the shore or from a pier. Although iron shore isn't as picturesque as the white beaches, such areas are usually better for snorkeling. The waterfront at Parque Nacional Chankanaab is iron shore, but some sand has been trucked in to create a more pleasant sunning area.

On the east side of the island, facing the open waters of the Caribbean Sea, there are pristine beaches of white sand that are largely deserted. They're beautiful, but the water there can be dangerous, plagued by rough surf and dangerous undertows (which is why so few people frequent the beaches). These shores can be good for lounging, but we recommend that you stay out of the water. You should also keep in mind that the east side is mostly uninhabited save for a few ramshackle but charming restaurants/beach bars.

## **Mr. Sancho's**

"Loco on the beach" is the slogan of this place, where you'll find the most complete assortment of activities in Cozumel. Lounge under a *palapa* on the beach, enjoy the seafood restaurant, swing on the benches in Chichi's bar, relax in the 30-person Jacuzzi, or participate in a brief seminar on tequila and mescal. Rent a speedboat, go horseback riding, or take an ATV or motorcycle tour of the jungle. A shopping area re-creates the ambience of a colorful Mexican town, complete with locally made crafts. Daily 9 am-6 pm. Carretera Sur Km. 13, Cozumel. Phone 876-1629.

## **Nachi Cocom Beach Club**

If you want to combine sunning on a wide, white-sand beach with a good lunch and lots of activities, Nachi Cocom is the right place. Visitors can rent WaveRunners, go parasailing, kayaking, snorkeling, fishing or simply lounge on the beach. Daily 9 am-5 pm. Free. Carretera Sur Km. 16.5, Cozumel. Phone 872-1811. <http://www.cozumelnachicocom.net>.

## **Palancar**

This wide beach lies in front of the most famous reef in Cozumel. It offers such water activities as kayaking, Jet-Skiing, sailing, snorkeling and scuba diving for beginners. A *palapa*-style restaurant in the middle of a great jungle setting serves typical Yucatan dishes and seafood. Daily 10 am-5 pm. No admission fee. Carretera Sur Km. 18, Cozumel.

## **Playa Mia Grand Beach Park**

Formerly Playa Sol, this is a lovely beach area that's ideal for swimming and snorkeling. There are underwater replicas of Maya statues to look at if you get tired of the fish. You can also rent a kayak or sailboat, scale a floating climbing wall, go parasailing, have lunch at one of the restaurants, and visit a small zoo. On the down side, loud music is often blasting at the beach, and there are a lot of in-your-face souvenir vendors. Daily 9 am-6 pm. US\$14 admission. Carretera Sur Km. 15.5, Cozumel. Phone 872-9030. <http://www.playamia.com>.

### **Playa San Francisco**

One of the oldest beaches in Cozumel and shared by several hotels, Playa San Francisco has up-to-date facilities. Maya structures rim the wide, safe beach. The on-site restaurant offers seafood and Mexican cuisine, and there are plenty of watersports and beach activities, as well as a large area for sunbathing. Daily 9 am-5 pm. Carretera Sur Km. 15, Cozumel. Phone 872-0754.

### **Boating & Sailing**

Most beachfront hotels rent sailboarding equipment. Expect to pay US\$25-\$35 for up to two hours. Parasailing is also possible.

### **Cozumel Sailing**

Charter a sailboat (a 35-ft/11-m trimaran or a 22-ft/7-m sloop), with or without crew, for a variety of excursions: sunset sails, all-day adventure sails or deep-sea fishing. Sailing lessons offered. Reservations required. Carretera Norte Km. 3 (at Puerto Abrigo Marina North), Cozumel. Phone 869-2312. <http://www.cozumelsailing.com>.

### **Parasailing Ocean Tours**

Offers 20-minute parasail rides where a boat pulls participants aloft in a parachute. The boats have special platforms on the back so you never get wet. Daily 9 am-sunset. US\$55. El Cozumeleno Resort, Playa Santa Pilar Km. 4.5 (just north of San Miguel), Cozumel. Phone 872-1379.

### **Fishing**

Although no fishing is allowed near Cozumel's protected reefs, the waters around the island have some of the best fishing in the Caribbean, particularly at the drop-off near Playa del Carmen. Catch includes swordfish, blue and black marlin (catch-and-release only), shark, wahoo and barracuda, depending upon the time of the year. On the flats you can catch bonefish, snook and tarpon. For a private charter, expect to pay around US\$400 for the boat for a half-day excursion, and around US\$550 for a full day. Make plans with the companies listed here, or go to the marina, Puerto Abrigo at Carretera Norte Km. 3, and deal directly with the boat captains there.

### **Albatros Charters**

Offers private sportfishing charters. Phone 872-7904. Toll-free 888-333-4643. <http://www.cozumel.net/fun/albatros-charters>.

### **Cozumel Fishing Charters**

Offers deep-sea outings, bottom fishing, fly-fishing tours and combination outings with a variety of local suppliers. Phone 869-8560. Toll-free 866-645-8977 from the U.S. <http://www.fishingcozumel.net>.

### **Marathon**

Private sportfishing charters on a 36-ft/11-m Hatteras fishing boat. Calle 10 Norte at Calle Rafael E. Melgar, Cozumel. Phone 872-1986. <http://www.haciendasanmiguel.com/marathon.htm>.

### **Golf**

#### **Cozumel Country Club**

The island moved one step up the tourism hierarchy when this course opened. The 18-hole, par-72 layout was designed by Jack Nicklaus. Greens fees for nonmembers run US\$149 and include a shared cart. A package price of US\$189 includes 18 holes with a shared cart, Nike club rental, two sleeves of golf balls, range balls and a course souvenir. Carretera Costera Norte Km. 6.5, Cozumel. Phone 872-9570. <http://www.cozumelcountryclub.com.mx>.

### **Horseback Riding** **Aventuras Naturales**

Offers two-hour jungle tours on horseback. Open 9 am-3 pm. About US\$35 per person. Phone 987-872-4695 or 858-366-4632 in the U.S. <http://www.aventurasnaturalascozumel.com>.

### **Rancho Buenavista**

Scenic setting for guided horseback rides through rugged tropical landscape. Can accommodate individuals or groups. Phone 987-872-1537. <http://www.buenavistaranch.com>.

### **Scuba & Snorkeling**

Jacques Cousteau introduced the world to the underwater life of Cozumel in the 1960s, and despite some damage from overuse and hurricanes, the reefs that ring the island remain wonderful places to snorkel and scuba dive—some are close enough to swim to from shore. Dive shops are plentiful—the Cozumel Association of Dive Operators includes more than 100 certified dive shops, many of which operate out of the resorts.

Divers generally can expect visibility of 100 ft/30 m, but it's even better than that at Palancar Reef, at the southern end of the island. Expect to see coral of every color of the rainbow. The rest of the marine life is colorful, too: anemones, starfish, octopuses, lobster, crabs and, on a larger scale, graceful rays and dolphins. San Francisco Reef is popular for its plentiful fish, and the Santa Rosa Wall and the Colombia Pinnacles rate high for sheer excitement as well as for bountiful sea life.

Because of strong currents, Cozumel dive operators practice a style of diving known as "drift diving." Divers relax and float with the 5- to 6-knot Guiana Current, and dive-boat captains follow behind and pick up their groups at the end of the dive.

With so many fine dive operations on the island, it's a buyer's market. If you happen to be visiting in the off-season (May-early December), you can shop around once you get there. During high season, it's best to reserve in advance. You must be a certified diver and present your certification card to go diving, although some shops offer an introductory course for beginners (check locally).

Expect to pay US\$50-\$65 for a two-tank dive with boat trip, water and soft drinks included.

The most accessible place to snorkel is the Parque Nacional Chankanaab, about 6 mi/10 km south of San Miguel. Another possibility is Airplane Flats in front of the La Ceiba Hotel, where a plane was sunk in shallow water for the filming of a movie. Snorkeling gear rents for about US\$5 a day. Another option to consider is one of the island's many snorkel tours to Palancar Gardens and Colombia Shallow Reef. Prices range US\$40-\$50 for a guided group snorkeling trip with boat.

*Note:* Always be careful when snorkeling in Cozumel. Currents along the west side of the island can be swift, and even though most are located away from the shoreline, that's not always the case. On the east coast, the water is much rougher, with stronger currents and undertows. Never go snorkeling or diving alone.

### **Aqua Safari**

Perfect for those who are new to diving, Aqua Safari has received many accolades for safety and expertise in working with novice divers. Expect to pay US\$60 for a two-tank dive, not including equipment rental. Night dives are US\$40, and a one-tank afternoon dive is US\$35. Avenida Melgar 429 (between Calle 5 Sur and Calle 7 Sur), Cozumel. Phone 872-0101. <http://www.aquasafari.com>.

### **Dive Cozumel/Yellow Rose**

If you want to live the high life, sign on for one of the trips aboard the *Yellow Rose*, a 48-ft/15-m craft. A gourmet catered lunch is included. A three-tank dive departs daily at 8:30 am and returns at 4 pm. It costs US\$115. A two-tank afternoon/night dive departs at 4:30 pm and returns at 9 pm for US\$80. Ave. A.R. Salas 85 (between Avenida Melgar and Avenida 5), Cozumel. Phone 872-4567. <http://www.divecozumel.net>.

### **Dive Paradise**

This company offers dive training at all levels and a variety of dive trips by day or night. The company has five locations around Cozumel; you can rent or buy equipment at its main store on Avenida Melgar and at the Costa Club Resort. Two-tank dive trips start at US\$64, and one-tank trips are offered from 3 to 5 pm, starting at US\$33. An exclusive "Cock-A-Doodle-Dive" is offered 6 am-1 pm, allowing divers to visit the reefs before other boats have even left the shore—three tanks for US\$98. Avenue Rafael Melgar 602, Cozumel. Phone 872-5161. <http://www.diveparadise.com>.

### **Shopping**

A favorite pastime of nearly every visitor to Cozumel is shopping, and for good reason. Prices for most crafts are quite high, but you'll find good buys on a wide variety of items: woven hammocks, leather purses and sandals, cotton clothing, ceramics, silver and gold jewelry, onyx and liquor. You can also find bargains on Mexican handicrafts such as brightly colored baskets, papier-mache figures and wood carvings. The main shopping district surrounds the plaza and spreads out north and south along Avenida Melgar—the *malecon*—and the flea market is located at Calle 1 Sur, near the main plaza.

The cruise-ship piers at Punta Langosta and International Pier have malls with high-end boutiques and specialty shops, which varies the piers' shopping experience. You'll find high-fashion clothing, crafts, cosmetics, electronics, jewelry (especially diamonds) and more casual name-brand wear. They are worth checking out even if you are only window shopping.

Almost all stores accept U.S. dollars as well as pesos. Often you'll find prices marked in both currencies—and sometimes only in U.S. dollars. Most major credit cards are readily accepted. (You often can get a better price if you offer cash—U.S. dollars or pesos—instead of credit cards.)

Do be prepared to bargain. In fact, it's expected in most markets and street stalls (though not in upscale boutiques). A good way to start is to offer half of what is asked. Then both negotiators work toward the middle. But don't bargain for something unless you really want it: It's considered rude not to buy after your price has been accepted.

**Shopping Hours:** Generally Monday-Saturday 9 am-9:30 pm. Some stores away from the main tourist areas close for siesta during the midafternoon for two hours.

## **DINING**

### **Dining Overview**

Most restaurants in Cozumel are informal—"comfortably casual"—and jackets are almost never required. There is a wide range of prices. Seafood and Yucatecan cuisine are specialties of the region. Be careful of the habanero-pepper sauce, which is served on the side—it's made from the hottest pepper in the world. Prices in Cozumel's restaurants tend to be higher than those in Playa del Carmen on the mainland.

Expect to pay within these guidelines for a meal for one, not including drinks, tax or tip: \$ = less than US\$10; \$\$ = US\$10-\$20; \$\$\$ = US\$21-\$50; and \$\$\$\$ = more than US\$50.

## **Local & Regional**

### **El Museo**

This open-air restaurant is great for enjoying sea breezes and people-watching. It's on the top floor of the local museum. The food is good—not great—but the view makes it all worthwhile. You can see all the way across the Yucatan Channel to Playa del Carmen. Daily for breakfast and lunch. \$-\$\$\$. No credit cards. Avenida Melgar and Calle 6, Cozumel. Phone 872-0838.

### **La Choza**

This cheerful and casual Mexican restaurant draped with *papel picado* (typical paper cutouts) has a long history of pleasing locals as well as tourists with its wide selection of regional dishes such as tacos, fajitas, stuffed peppers and chicken in mole sauce. Daily for lunch and dinner. \$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Calle Rosado Salas 198 at Avenida 10, Cozumel. Phone 872-0958. <http://www.lachozareastaurant.com>.

### **Las Palmeras**

The ever-popular and oldest restaurant in Cozumel is located a few steps from the main pier, overlooking the ocean and adjacent to the main plaza of Cozumel. Decorated with the palm trees of its name, it captures the quality of the island. It's a good place for a relaxed lunch, a cup of coffee or a cold beer. It's usually packed when the cruise ships come in. Daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner. \$\$-\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Avenida Melgar and Avenida Juarez, Cozumel. Phone 872-0532.

### **Pancho's Backyard**

Located in a courtyard in the prettiest store in town, Los Cinco Soles, this restaurant gets our vote for the most romantic dining spot on the island. Its quiet patio setting and the sounds of trickling water in the fountains only add to the atmosphere. Service is excellent, and the food is always good (though seldom great). Long lines form at lunch when the cruise ships are in port. Monday-Saturday for lunch and dinner, Sunday for dinner only. \$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Avenida Melgar and Calle 6 Norte, Cozumel. Phone 872-2141.

## **Seafood**

### **El Capi Navegante**

Arguably the best seafood restaurant on Cozumel, this place presents very fresh fish beautifully. You can even try octopus in its own ink. Mariachis perform in the evenings. Daily for lunch and dinner. \$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Avenida 10 (between Calles 3 and 5 Sur), Cozumel. Phone 872-1730.

### **Lobster House**

This charming restaurant north of town has a lovely setting—above a marsh that is home to ducks and turtles. It is jam-packed with old fishing gear and relics of the island's past. The menu is simple: lobster, bread, steamed veggies and garlic rice. Select the lobster tail you want—the price is determined by its weight. Daily for dinner. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Carretera Costera Norte Km. 4 (across from the Playa Azul Resort, north of San Miguel), Cozumel. Phone 872-0795.

## **Steak Houses**

### **Pepe's Grill**

The name may not sound elegant, but this place on the waterfront will surprise you: Waiters in tuxedos serve steaks, seafood and Mexican dishes. Prime rib is the house specialty. The drinks are generous, the music is lively and the food is excellent. Sit on the upstairs balcony for a magnificent view of the Caribbean. Try a flaming Cafe Maya with dessert. Daily for dinner only. Reservations recommended. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Avenida Melgar and Calle Salas, Cozumel. Phone 872-0213. <http://www.frenchquartercozumel.com>.

## **SECURITY**

### **Personal Safety**

Cozumel is among the safer islands in the Caribbean, but you should still use commonsense precautions. Don't leave your belongings unattended at the beach or visible in a parked rental car, and don't walk along deserted beaches in the evening. This is especially true on the less-populated east side of the island. (There are sometimes military patrols in the area watching for drug smugglers.) There are police patrols, including English-speaking tourism police, along the *malecon* and at the beaches.

Tourists are not generally the target of crime, and driving around the city is generally safe. However, it is a good idea to take a taxi to your hotel at night. If you rent a car, it's best not to leave it parked on the street overnight.

For the latest information, contact your country's travel-advisory agency.

### **Health**

The water is almost always safe in the major hotels—they usually have purification plants—but ask first to make sure it is *agua purificada* (purified water). Bottled water is widely available. It's a good idea to avoid food from street vendors or raw food and to stick with the clean-looking restaurants that draw a lot of customers. Ask your doctor about hepatitis vaccinations before your trip.

If you get sick, medicines are available from several pharmacies. Some painkillers and other medicines will require a prescription, although antibiotics often don't. In an emergency, go straight to the hospital.

For the latest information, contact your country's health-advisory agency.

### **Disabled Advisory**

Sidewalks with ramps can be found downtown in the main shopping areas along the *malecon* and main plaza. Entrances to some of the bigger shops and some restaurants also have ramps. Beyond this, it's rough going. Newer hotels have special rooms for people with disabilities, but currently there is no public transportation equipped for wheelchairs.

### **Dos & Don'ts**

Do greet everyone with a *buenos dias* (good day), *buenas tardes* (good afternoon) or *buenas noches* (good evening). Mexicans value this practice and will always extend a greeting, even to strangers, before getting down to business.

Do know that prices may be quoted in pesos and/or U.S. dollars. (Pesos are marked M\$.) Although U.S. dollars are often accepted, you can't always be certain. In general, you'll get the best rate if you pay in the denomination marked on the item.

Don't walk out of a bar or cantina with a bottle of beer. Most beer bottles have deposits paid for by the establishment, so the staff keeps a close eye on them. (If you want to take the beverage with you, ask for a plastic cup.)

Do get away from the tourist areas and explore San Miguel's funky back streets with their colorful houses and typical Mexican street life.

Don't enter churches wearing shorts or beach clothing.

## FACTS

**Population:** 71,401.

**Languages:** Spanish is the main language, but English is widely spoken. A few people speak Maya.

**Predominant Religions:** Christian (Roman Catholic).

**Time Zone:** 6 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-6 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is observed from the first Sunday in April until the last Sunday in October.

**Voltage Requirements:** 110 volts.

**Telephone Codes:** 52, country code for Mexico; 987, area code for Cozumel;

## Money

### Currency Exchange

U.S. dollars are widely accepted on Cozumel. In fact, most ATMs give both U.S. dollars and Mexican pesos. ATMs are readily available, and most are located within a block of Plaza del Sol in San Miguel. However, it is possible to pay for purchases in Mexican pesos, and if you visit less-traveled areas on the mainland, you will find pesos to be more commonly used than U.S. dollars. San Miguel has a number of privately run exchange booths, or *casas de cambio*, which will change U.S. and Canadian dollars or traveler's checks to pesos at rates only slightly lower than the banks' rates. *Casas de cambio* keep longer hours than banks and are often more convenient to use.

### Taxes

The government of Mexico charges a value-added sales tax of 15% on virtually all transactions in the state of Quintana Roo. In most cases, it's included in the price quoted. Visitors can not obtain refunds on any taxes.

### Tipping

A tip of 10%-15% is expected at most restaurants. Housekeepers at the luxury hotels normally receive US\$2 a day and sky caps at airports US\$2 a bag. Taxi drivers usually don't expect a tip.

### Weather

Expect daytime high temperatures in the 80s F/20s C almost year-round on the Yucatan Peninsula. The humidity will be higher in the summer months, but breezes off the sea will help to keep you cool. Hurricane season is June-November, which is when rain is most likely.

### What to Wear

Casual summer clothing is appropriate year-round, but swimsuits are worn only on the beaches or at hotel swimming pools. Men are rarely, if ever, required to wear jackets. Shorts and sandals are acceptable for fast-food places, but they are not considered appropriate for the nicer restaurants.

## Communication

### Telephone

The best option for long-distance calls is to buy a phone card sold at pharmacies, hotel gift shops and at newsstands. They cost about US\$3 for 12 minutes or about US\$5 for 20 minutes. A long-distance call to the U.S. or Canada costs approximately US\$0.45 per minute. Phones that allow you to use the card are found in some hotels and at street corners downtown. International calls can also be made and faxes sent from the Calling Station on Avenida Melgar at Calle 3 Sur. Long-distance direct service and fax services are available at some hotels, but expect to pay a lot to use them.

Cell-phone coverage varies in quality throughout the island from excellent to nonexistent. Although using a cell phone with a roaming agreement is the most convenient way to call, bear in mind that the charges are exorbitant.

## **Transportation**

### **Cozumel-Playa del Carmen Ferry**

Passenger-only ferry service between Cozumel and Playa del Carmen on the mainland. Note that the water can be rough: Having something to combat seasickness is a good idea. The ferries dock at the municipal pier on the waterfront in San Miguel, and the passage takes about 45 minutes. Boats generally operate 5 am-10 pm, leaving once an hour in the peak morning and afternoon travel times, less frequently in off-peak periods. Check the schedule at the pier before making your plans—times change frequently. Fare is US\$12 one-way. Tickets can be purchased at the ferry dock.

### **Taxi**

Taxis are always at hand in San Miguel, at the piers, at the major hotels, at the airport and cruising the downtown streets. For short trips, they operate on a set-fare system, so negotiating is not necessary. It's always a good idea to ask about the fare before getting into the cab, however. Say "*Cuanto cuesta un viaje a*" (followed by your destination). The driver should present a fare card and show you the rate. (For example, a round-trip from downtown to Punta Sur costs approximately US\$40.) If you want to go farther afield or charter the taxi for several hours, you can bargain with the driver. Taxi tours of the island (for up to four people) cost about US\$50-\$60 for four hours.

### **Other**

Scooters and mopeds can be rented from vendors along the *malecon* and the side streets leading east. Expect to pay about US\$25 a day. Mexican law requires the use of a helmet. This mode of travel can be particularly dangerous because of road conditions and careless drivers. Be careful and use plenty of sunscreen to protect exposed skin.