PACK LIGHTLY

SIX COUNTRIES IN ONE, MAPPED BY REGION

Mexico

Yucatán cenotes and Maya ruins, Mexico City street food, Oaxaca mezcal, Pacific surf towns, and Baja desert coast, split into trips that actually fit the time you have.

p.7 Why there is no single Mexico loop, and how to pick the one region your trip should lead with

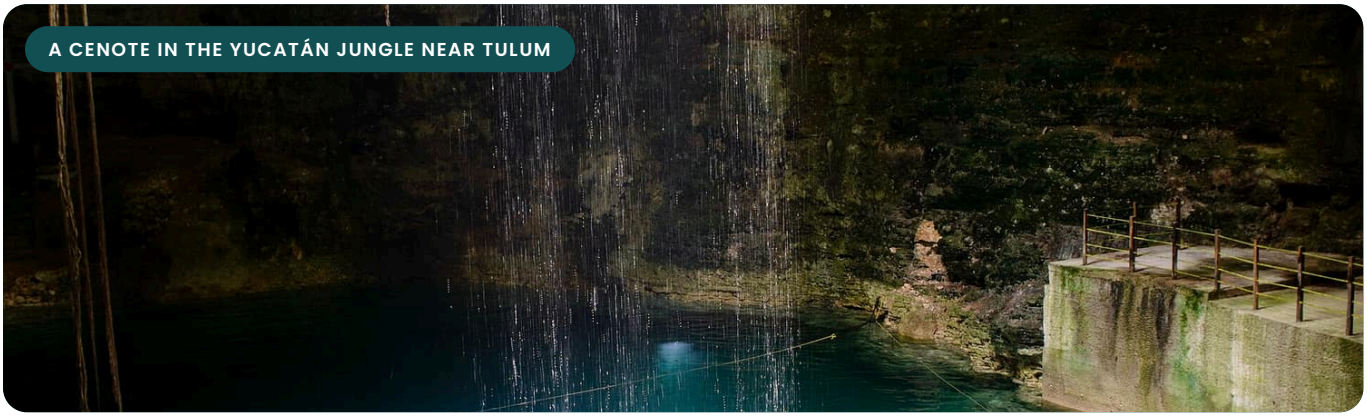
p.17 The food, in two pages: the dishes to calibrate against and the regional plates worth a detour

p.33 Safety is a state map, not a country verdict: which zones are routine and which to route around

39 PAGES USD PRICES VISA-FREE FOR US AND EU EDITION 2026.07

Start here

the shape of a Mexico trip, what it costs, what to sort first



A CENOTE IN THE YUCATÁN JUNGLE NEAR TULUM

Mexico is too large and too varied to see in one trip, and the fastest way to waste a holiday here is to try. The country splits cleanly into regions that each carry a different pace: the Yucatán for cenotes, reefs, and Maya ruins; the central highlands for Mexico City, colonial towns, and the best eating on the continent; Oaxaca for markets and mezcal; the Pacific coast for surf and slow beach towns; and Baja for desert-meets-sea road trips. Most first trips pick one region and go deep, not two and rush. Seven days covers a tight Yucatán loop. Fourteen days lets you pair the Yucatán with Mexico City and Oaxaca without living on buses.

The shape of a trip

Pick a region first, then a base or two inside it. Yucatán trips run Cancún or Tulum plus Mérida. Highland trips run Mexico City plus Oaxaca. Beach trips run the Oaxaca or Nayarit coast. Baja is its own road trip. Combining regions means a domestic flight, not an overnight bus. Distances are continental, so plan around flight hubs.

What a day costs

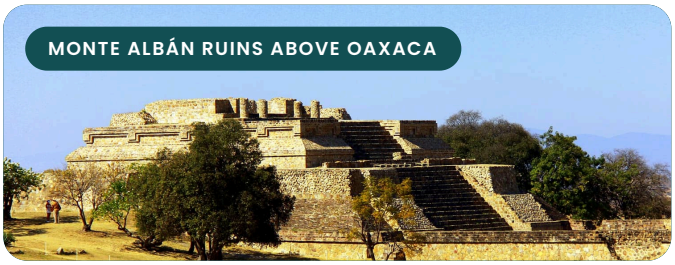
Budget travel runs near 45 USD a day: hostel or cheap posada, street food and comedor lunches, colectivos and second-class buses. Midrange sits around 95 a day with a private room, restaurant meals, and one paid activity. Baja and Tulum run pricier than Oaxaca or Chiapas. The full receipt is itemised on page 28.

Sort before you fly

US and EU citizens need no visa for tourism, up to 180 days on arrival: keep the entry stamp or FMM slip. No vaccines are required. Book flights into the region hub, Cancún, Mexico City, or Oaxaca, not one national airport. Page 19 covers the fast facts that trip up first-timers.



A STREET TACO STAND IN MEXICO CITY



MONTE ALBÁN RUINS ABOVE OAXACA

HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

Contents

tap a line to jump straight there

01 The country 04

02 Where to go, region by region 08

03 What to do 16

04 Routes and itineraries 20

05 When to go 25

06 Practical 27

07 Safe and smart 32

08 Tools and reference 35

QUICK JUMPS

Pick your Mexico, region map 21

The food, calibrated 17

What a day really costs 28

01

The country

The trip on one page, the scorecard, and the single decision that shapes a Mexico trip more than any other: which region you lead with.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Your trip on one page 05

Mexico at a glance 06

One country, five very different trips 07

Your trip on one page

14 days recommended · 45 to 260 USD/day · best Nov to Apr

There is no single loop. The route below is the most common two-region first trip: the Yucatán for ruins and cenotes, then a flight inland to Mexico City and Oaxaca for food and highland culture. Single-region trips drop the flight and go deeper into one side. Baja and the Pacific coast are separate trips again.

THE TWO-REGION ROUTE

Tulum, Yucatán	2h drive → Valladolid	1h30 drive → Mérida	2h flight → Mexico City	1h flight → Oaxaca City	fly home → Mexico City
day 1-3	day 4	day 5-6	day 7-9	day 10-13	day 14

BUDGET PER DAY

Budget	45 USD
Midrange	95 USD
Luxury	260 USD

BOOK FIRST

01	Flights into the region hub, 6 to 8 weeks out	Aviasales
02	Accommodation, lock Tulum and Oaxaca early	Booking.com
03	eSIM, install before departure	Saily

BEST MONTHS

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
best	best	best	best	shoulder	shoulder	shoulder	shoulder	peak	peak	best	best

best: dry, warm, lowest rain risk · shoulder: hot, building rains, fewer crowds · peak rain and coastal storm risk

Mexico at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Food and drinks	95
Culture	90
Nature	85
Budget friendly	80
Cities	80
Safety	55

Budget travel	45 USD/day
Mid-range	95 USD/day
Luxury	260 USD/day

FOOD CULTURE BEACH RUINS CITY

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-07

QUICK STATS

Capital	Mexico City
Language	Spanish
Currency	Mexican peso, MXN
Timezone	Central, UTC-6, zones vary
Best months	November to April
Days needed	14 recommended, 7-21 flexible
Power	US plugs, Type A/B, 127V
Tap water	drink bottled or filtered
Tipping	10 to 15% at restaurants

One country, five very different trips

the region decision comes before the itinerary

The mistake first-timers make is booking a country, not a region. Mexico runs roughly the size of Western Europe, and the Yucatán has about as much to do with Baja as Portugal does with Poland. Decide which of the five regions leads the trip, build around it, and treat any second region as a flight away, not a bus ride. What follows is the real split, and safety belongs on this page too because it is regional, not national.

Yucatán and the Caribbean coast

Cenotes, reef snorkeling, Maya ruins, and colonial towns, all within a rental-car loop. The easiest first trip, and the safest region on the map. Cancún or Tulum plus Mérida.

Central highlands

Mexico City, Puebla, and the colonial silver towns. The best eating in the country and the deepest history. Cool climate at altitude, walkable cities, short bus hops.

Oaxaca

Markets, mole, mezcal, and Zapotec ruins in the city, with a wild Pacific coast below it. The culture-and-food region for travelers who already know the classics.

Pacific coast and Baja

Surf towns from Nayarit to Oaxaca, and a desert-meets-sea road trip in Baja California Sur. Beach-first trips, separate from the ruins-and-cities circuit.



COLONIAL FACADES IN GUANAJUATO



BALANDRA BEACH NEAR LA PAZ, BAJA

GO DEEPER

Where Mexico sits and how the regions connect on the location and map page, the full spread of standout places in the most beautiful places rundown, and a passport-by-passport check on the Visa Checker tool.

photos: Wikimedia Commons

02

Where to go, region by region

The five regions in detail: the Yucatán coast, colonial Yucatán, Mexico City and its highlands, Oaxaca, the Pacific coast, Baja California, and the Maya ruins that thread through them.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The Yucatán and the Caribbean coast	09
Mérida and colonial Yucatán	10
Mexico City and its highlands	11
Oaxaca, city and coast	12
The Pacific coast	13
Baja California	14
Maya ruins and cenotes	15

The Yucatán and the Caribbean coast

reef and cenotes · base for 5-7 nights · best Nov to Apr



THE TULUM RUINS ABOVE THE CARIBBEAN

The turquoise-water side of Mexico: freshwater cenotes to swim, the second-largest reef on earth to snorkel, and cliff-top Maya ruins at Tulum. Cancún is the flight hub and the party strip; most travelers pass through it to Playa del Carmen, Tulum, or the quieter cenote towns inland. Holbox and Isla Mujeres add car-free island days. This is the region to start with if it is a first Mexico trip.

Skip: the Cancún Hotel Zone as a base unless the goal is a resort. It is walled-off tourism at the highest prices in the region.

Cenotes are best before 11am, before the tour buses and while the light still cuts through the water.

Tulum

Cliff-top ruins, jungle cenotes, and a beach strip. Pricey now, still the anchor.

Bacalar

The lagoon of seven colors, three hours south and a fraction of the Tulum crowd.

Cozumel and Akumal

Reef diving off Cozumel, shore snorkeling with turtles at Akumal bay.

Holbox and Isla Mujeres

Car-free islands for slow beach days and, in season, whale sharks off Holbox.

GO DEEPER

Ruins, cenotes, and beach in the Tulum write-up, the lagoon town in the Bacalar page, and the car-free island in the Holbox rundown.

Mérida and colonial Yucatán

colonial · base for 2-3 nights · year round



PASTEL COLONIAL STREETS IN MÉRIDA

Inland from the coast, the Yucatán turns colonial and calm. Mérida is the safe, walkable capital with a strong food scene and a base for day trips to Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. Valladolid is the smaller, prettier colonial town closest to the big ruins and the best cenotes. Izamal is the yellow town, painted a single ochre color end to end. This side balances the beach with history and costs far less.

Skip: Chichén Itzá at midday. Arrive at opening or take the late slot to beat both heat and the tour-bus wave.

Base in Valladolid, not the ruins, for early access to Chichén Itzá and the cenotes around Ek Balam.

Mérida

Walkable colonial capital, strong Yucatecan food, base for the western ruins.

Valladolid

Small colonial town nearest Chichén Itzá and the best cenote swimming.

Izamal

The yellow town, an easy half-day from Mérida, painted a single ochre.

Celestún and Río Lagartos

Flamingo lagoons on the Gulf coast, a wildlife day trip from Mérida.

KEEP READING Cenotes and colonial streets in the Mérida write-up, the town nearest the ruins in the Valladolid page, and the flamingo coast in the Celestún rundown.

Mexico City and its highlands

city and culture · base for 3-4 nights · year round



THE ANGEL OF INDEPENDENCE, MEXICO CITY

The cultural heart of the country and, by most measures, the best place to eat on the continent. Mexico City rewards a base in Roma or Condesa, with the Zócalo, Frida Kahlo's Coyoacán, and Teotihuacán's pyramids all reachable without a car. Around it sit Puebla for talavera tile and mole, the colonial silver towns of Guanajuato and San Miguel de Allende, and Oaxaca a short flight south. Cool climate at altitude, so pack a layer.

Altitude is real at 2,240 metres. Take the first day slow, hydrate, and hold off on the mezcal until you have acclimatised.

Teotihuacán is a day trip by bus from Terminal Norte. Go early for the pyramids before the heat and the crowds.

Roma and Condesa

The walkable, tree-lined base neighborhoods for food, cafes, and nightlife.

Teotihuacán

The Pyramid of the Sun, an hour out, one of the great archaeological sites.

Puebla and Cholula

Talavera tile, mole poblano, and the widest pyramid base in the world.

Guanajuato and San Miguel

The colonial silver towns, tunnel streets and pink parroquia, a few hours north.

THE FULL PICTURE

The capital and its pyramids in the Mexico City write-up, tile and pyramids in the Puebla page, and the tunnel-street town in the Guanajuato rundown.

Oaxaca, city and coast

food and craft · base for 3-4 nights · year round in the city



A MEZCAL PALENQUE IN THE OAXACA VALLEYS

Oaxaca is the region food travelers save for a second trip. The city runs on markets, seven kinds of mole, and mezcal distilled in the surrounding valleys, with the Zapotec ruins of Monte Albán on the hill above and Mitla's stone mosaics nearby. Below the mountains, the Oaxaca coast holds the surf and turtle towns of Puerto Escondido, Mazunte, and Zipolite. City and coast connect by a short flight or a long, winding drive.

The mountain road from Oaxaca City to the coast winds for six hours and turns stomachs. Take the 40-minute flight if it fits the budget.

Day of the Dead, late October into early November, is Oaxaca at its fullest and its most booked. Reserve months ahead.

Oaxaca City markets

Mole, tlayudas, and mezcal tastings, the food capital's daily draw.

Monte Albán and Mitla

Zapotec ruins on the hill and the stone-mosaic tombs in the valley.

Puerto Escondido

The coast's surf capital, from beginner beaches to the heavy Zicatela break.

Mazunte and Zipolite

Slow turtle-beach villages, one clothing-optional, both a world from the resorts.

READ ON Mole, mezcal, and Zapotec sites in the Oaxaca City write-up, the surf coast in the Puerto Escondido page, and the slow beach in the Mazunte rundown.

The Pacific coast

surf and slow towns · base for 4-6 nights · dry Nov to Apr



THE SURF BREAK AT SAYULITA, NAYARIT

Mexico's Pacific runs long and warm, and the stretch around Nayarit and Jalisco is the classic surf-and-slow-town circuit. Sayulita is the bohemian anchor, busy and colorful; San Pancho next door is quieter; Yelapa is boat-access only. Puerto Vallarta is the airport and the city night. Further south, Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo pairs a resort strip with an old fishing town. This is a beach-first region, not a ruins circuit, and it works as its own trip.

Sayulita fills on weekends with the Guadalajara crowd. Arrive midweek, or base in San Pancho for the same coast without the queue.

Fly into Puerto Vallarta for the Nayarit towns; they are a 45-minute to two-hour drive north, no long overland leg needed.

Sayulita

The bohemian surf-town anchor, beginner waves and a busy plaza scene.

San Pancho and Yelapa

The quiet neighbor and the boat-access cove, for the slow version of the coast.

Puerto Vallarta

The airport, the malecón, and the region's city night out.

Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo

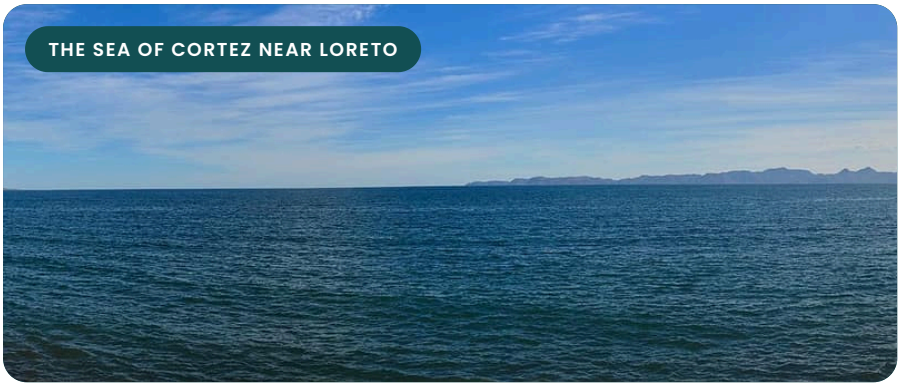
A paired resort strip and old fishing town, further south down the coast.

GO DEEPER

The surf-town anchor in the Sayulita write-up, the quiet neighbor in the San Pancho page, and the Pacific city in the Puerto Vallarta rundown.

Baja California

desert and sea · road trip · dry, warm winters


THE SEA OF CORTEZ NEAR LORETO

The long desert peninsula down Mexico's northwest is its own trip: cactus landscapes meeting the clear Sea of Cortez, whale watching in winter, and a wine valley an hour from the US border. La Paz is the calm capital of Baja California Sur, with Balandra beach and sea-lion snorkeling nearby. Los Cabos is the resort end. Valle de Guadalupe, up north near Ensenada, is Mexico's wine country. Rent a car; distances here are long and the road is the point.

Skip: Cabo San Lucas as a base if the aim is nature. La Paz and Todos Santos give the same coast at half the price and none of the spring-break scene.

Gray whale season runs roughly January to March in the Pacific lagoons. Book the tour, not a walk-up, in the peak weeks.

La Paz

Calm Sea of Cortez capital, Balandra beach, sea-lion and whale-shark trips.

Todos Santos

A pueblo mágico between the desert and the surf, artsy and quiet.

Loreto

Old mission town and marine park on the gulf coast, kayaking and quiet.

Valle de Guadalupe

Mexico's wine valley near Ensenada, tasting rooms and desert vineyards.

KEEP READING The Sea of Cortez capital in the La Paz write-up, the desert-surf pueblo in the Todos Santos page, and the wine valley in the Valle de Guadalupe rundown.

Maya ruins and cenotes

the archaeology thread · Yucatán and Chiapas · year round



THE PYRAMID AT CHICHÉN ITZÁ

The ancient Maya thread runs across the south, and it is worth planning a trip around. Chichén Itzá is the headline and the most crowded; Uxmal near Mérida draws a fraction of the buses for arguably finer carving. Palenque, in the Chiapas jungle, is the most atmospheric, ringed by waterfalls. Between the ruins sit the cenotes, the flooded limestone sinkholes the Maya held sacred, best swum early. This page is the reason many people come, so give it real days.

Skip: doing Chichén Itzá as a long day trip from the coast. Sleep in Valladolid and walk in at opening instead of arriving with the buses.

Cenotes ask for reef-safe sunscreen or none at all; the enclosed water damages easily. Rinse off before you get in.

Chichén Itzá

The famous pyramid and ball court, best at opening from Valladolid.

Uxmal

Finely carved and far quieter, an easy trip south of Mérida.

Palenque

Jungle ruins and waterfalls in Chiapas, the most atmospheric of the lot.

Cenotes

Flooded limestone caves for swimming, thickest around Valladolid and Tulum.

THE FULL PICTURE

Jungle ruins and waterfalls in the Palenque write-up, cenote and reef swimming in the snorkeling guide, and the signature dive sites in the diving rundown.

03

What to do

The food gets two pages here, because in Mexico it is the reason to come. Then the regional plates and the fast facts that trip up first-timers.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Food: the calibration dishes 17

Food II: the regional plates and mezcal 18

Fast facts before you fly 19

Food: the calibration dishes

the plates to know · 1 to 13 USD · street to sit-down

Mexican food scores higher than anywhere else in the Pack Lightly index, and it earns it on the street as much as the table. These are the dishes to calibrate against: order them early, learn what good looks like, then chase the regional versions. Prices below are per plate, street to casual.



Tacos al pastor

USD 1-3 · street

Spit-roasted pork with pineapple, the Mexico City default. Order by the piece and eat standing.



Cochinita pibil

USD 5-10 · Yucatán

Achiote pork slow-cooked in banana leaf, the Yucatán's signature. Best from a market stall.



Mole negro

USD 7-13 · Oaxaca

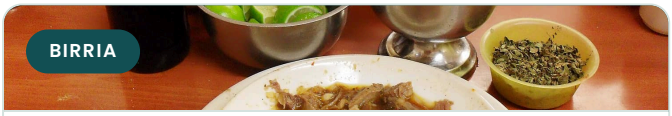
The darkest of Oaxaca's seven moles, chilies and chocolate over chicken. A sit-down dish.



Chilaquiles

USD 3-6 · breakfast

Fried tortilla in salsa with egg or chicken, the national hangover breakfast, green or red.



Birria

USD 4-9 · Jalisco

Slow-braised chili stew, now served as dipping tacos with consommé. A weekend dish.



Carnitas

USD 3-7 · Michoacán

Pork confit fried in its own fat, sold by weight on Sunday mornings. Ask for surtido.

ON THE WEBSITE

The full dish list with prices in the food and drinks rundown, and what a full day of eating costs in the budget breakdown.

Food II: the regional plates and mezcal

the dishes worth routing a trip around

Past the classics, Mexico's food splits hard by region, and some plates are reason enough to add a stop. These are the ones locals send you across town, or across a state, to try. Pair the region on this page with the map back in chapter two.

Chiles rellenos, central highlands

Roasted poblano stuffed with cheese or meat, battered and fried. At its best in Puebla, where chiles en nogada appears in late summer.

Tlayudas, Oaxaca

The giant crisped tortilla with beans, cheese, and meat, folded off a market comal. The Oaxaca late-night staple, around 3 to 6 USD.

Mezcal, the valleys

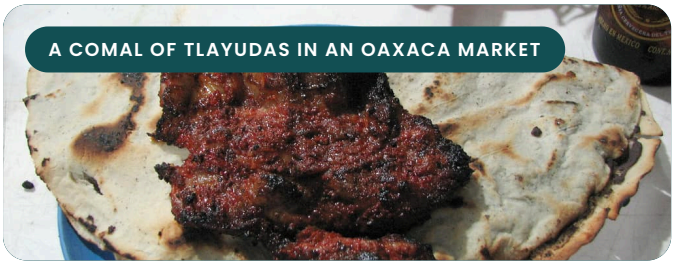
Agave distilled in the Oaxaca palenques, smoky and small-batch. Taste at the source in the valleys around the city, not just the bar.

Seafood, the coasts

Aguachile and ceviche on the Pacific, tikin xic grilled fish on the Yucatán. Order it where the boats land, priced by the day's catch.

The best food is almost always the busiest stall with the shortest menu. Follow the office-lunch queue at 2pm, not the guidebook pin.

Comida corrida, the set lunch, is the budget traveler's friend: three courses for 4 to 6 USD, served only in the middle of the day.



A COMAL OF TLAYUDAS IN AN OAXACA MARKET



MEZCAL TASTING FLIGHT IN A PALENQUE

Fast facts before you fly

eight things that trip up first-time visitors

WORTH KNOWING BEFORE DAY ONE

- [ ] US and EU citizens get up to 180 days visa-free on arrival. Keep the entry stamp or FMM slip; you show it on the way out.
- [ ] Drink bottled or filtered water everywhere, including for brushing teeth. Reputable restaurants use purified ice.
- [ ] Carry pesos in cash for markets, comedores, and colectivos. Cards work in cities and resorts, less so in small towns.
- [ ] Cenotes are best before 11am, before the tour buses and while the light still angles into the water.
- [ ] Distances are continental. Combining two regions means a domestic flight, not an overnight bus.
- [ ] Tip 10 to 15 percent at restaurants, and a few pesos to baggers and attendants. It is expected, not optional.
- [ ] Withdraw from bank ATMs inside branches, not the standalone machines in tourist strips that add heavy fees.
- [ ] Learn a little Spanish. English thins out fast outside the resort zones and the big-city tourist cores.

source: pack-lightly Mexico tips dataset, captured 2026-07

04

Routes and itineraries

The region-pick map, a tight seven-day Yucatán loop, a fourteen-day trip that pairs the Yucatán with the highlands, and the tours worth booking ahead.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pick your Mexico, mapped 21

7 days: the Yucatán loop 22

14 days: Yucatán, Mexico City, Oaxaca 23

Tours worth booking 24

Pick your Mexico, mapped

the two-region first trip, drawn on the real map

Most first trips run the Yucatán loop, then a short flight inland to the highlands. The map below draws that spine: the coast and colonial Yucatán on the peninsula, then the flight west to Mexico City and Oaxaca. Single-region trips stay on one side. Baja and the Pacific coast sit off this map, as their own separate trips.



THE LEGS

- [ ] Cancún or Tulum to Valladolid: 2h drive
- [ ] Valladolid to Mérida: 1h30 drive
- [ ] Mérida to Mexico City: 2h flight
- [ ] Mexico City to Oaxaca: 1h flight or 6h bus
- [ ] Oaxaca back to Mexico City to fly home: 1h flight

7 days: the Yucatán loop

reef, ruins, and cenotes, no domestic flight

The tightest first trip: one region, one rental car, no internal flight. It threads the Caribbean coast, the big ruins, and the colonial towns, and never asks for more than a two-hour drive between stops. Book the car and the first two nights; decide the rest on the ground.

1	**Cancún to Tulum** day 1-3	Land, collect the car, drive south. Ruins above the sea, jungle cenotes, and the beach strip.
2	**Valladolid** day 4	Colonial town base, cenote swimming, and an early walk into Chichén Itzá the next morning.
3	**Mérida** day 5-6	Yucatecan food, colonial streets, and a day trip to Uxmal or the Celestún flamingos.
4	**Back to Cancún** day 7	Drive back east, drop the car, last cenote or beach stop, fly out.

WORTH A READ

The full week mapped stop by stop in the 7 day itinerary. The fourteen-day version that adds the highlands follows on the next page.

14 days: Yucatán, Mexico City, Oaxaca

two regions, one internal flight, ruins to mole

The complete first trip, for anyone with two weeks. It runs the Yucatán loop, then flies inland for the highlands and Oaxaca: the two ends of Mexican culture, coast and cordillera, in one arc. One domestic flight does the heavy lifting no bus should.

1	**Tulum and the coast** day 1-3	Ruins, cenotes, reef snorkeling, and the beach strip along the Caribbean.
2	**Valladolid and Mérida** day 4-6	Chichén Itzá at opening, colonial streets, Yucatecan food, and Uxmal.
3	**Mexico City** day 7-9	Fly inland. Roma and Condesa, the Zócalo, Coyoacán, and a day at Teotihuacán.
4	**Oaxaca City** day 10-13	Markets, mole, and mezcal, with Monte Albán and Mitla in the valleys around.
5	**Fly home via Mexico City** day 14	Short hop back to the capital hub, last meal, and the flight out.

KEEP READING

The two-week route stop by stop in the 14 day itinerary, and the full hub for every region in this guide at pack-lightly.com/mexico.

Tours worth booking

top-rated local operators, filtered to group trips, sorted toward backpacker prices

A few things here are worth booking ahead: the early ruins entries, the cenote circuits, and the reef trips that need a boat. The cards below fill in from live, top-rated group tours across the main bases once the tour data runs. Match them to the route on the previous pages.

WHAT TO BOOK AHEAD

- [ ] Chichén Itzá early-access or sunrise entry from Valladolid or Mérida
- [ ] Cenote circuit tours around Valladolid and Tulum, before the buses
- [ ] Reef and cenote snorkeling off Cozumel, Akumal, and Tulum
- [ ] Whale shark trips off Holbox and Isla Mujeres, in season
- [ ] Mezcal palenque tastings in the Oaxaca valleys
- [ ] Teotihuacán early-entry or balloon flights from Mexico City

Live Viator tours load here once the tour data runs. Prices captured at build time, ratings from verified bookings. Some links earn Pack Lightly a commission at no extra cost.

05

When to go

Warm most of the year, so the split is dryness and coastal storm risk, plus altitude: the highlands stay cool while the coast runs hot.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, dry season, regional variation 26

Weather, dry season, regional variation

the split is dryness, storm risk, and altitude

November through April is the dry, reliable window across most of the country, and the peak season on the coasts. The rains build from May, with the heaviest downpours and the Atlantic and Pacific storm risk clustered September and October. Altitude matters as much as the calendar: Mexico City and Oaxaca stay cool year round at height, while the Yucatán and the coasts run hot and humid.

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

best: Nov–Apr, dry, warm, peak season

shoulder: May–Aug, hot, building rains, fewer crowds

storm risk: Sep–Oct, peak rain on both coasts

source: pack-lightly best-travel-time dataset, captured 2026-07

Best: Nov–Apr

Dry across the country, warm on the coasts, cool in the highlands. Peak crowds and prices.

Shoulder: May–Aug

Hot and humid, afternoon rains that clear, fewer tourists, lower prices inland.

Storm risk: Sep–Oct

Peak hurricane window on both coasts. Book refundable stays and track forecasts.

DRY-SEASON CARIBBEAN WATER OFF TULUM

COOL HIGHLAND MORNING IN OAXACA

06

Practical

What a day costs, what to pack for a trip that spans reef, jungle, city, and altitude, and where to sleep across the regions.

IN THIS CHAPTER

What a day really costs 28

Packing checklist 29

Where to stay I: Yucatán and the highlands 30

Where to stay II: the coasts and Baja 31

What a day really costs

itemised, budget vs midrange · region swings the total

Mexico stretches a budget further than most of the Americas, but the region moves the number: Oaxaca and Chiapas run cheap, Tulum and Los Cabos run near US prices. The two receipts below itemise a full day at each level, on a mid-country average.

A DAY IN MEXICO

* budget *

bed, hostel or posada	12-20
food, street and comedor	10-15
colectivo and bus	4-8
one activity or ruin	6-12
drink	2-4
TOTAL / DAY	**35-55 USD**

budget-calculator data, July 2026

A DAY IN MEXICO

* midrange *

bed, private room	40-60
food, restaurants	20-30
rental car or taxis	15-25
one activity or tour	20-40
drinks	8-15
TOTAL / DAY	**85-130 USD**

budget-calculator data, July 2026

⚠ Tulum and Los Cabos run well above these receipts. Budget travelers save real money by basing in Oaxaca, Chiapas, or colonial Yucatán instead.

The set lunch, comida corrida, is the single biggest budget lever: a full midday meal for the price of one restaurant starter.

THE FULL BREAKDOWN

Category by category detail in the budget and saving write-up, or run the numbers for your own trip length on the Trip Budget Calculator.

Packing checklist

five groups, for reef, jungle, city, and altitude in one trip

DOCUMENTS

- [ ] Passport, valid six months, plus the entry stamp or FMM slip kept safe
- [ ] Travel insurance documents and a 24 hour contact
- [ ] A card that reimburses foreign ATM fees, plus a backup card
- [ ] Hotel confirmations and any pre-booked ruin or tour tickets

CLOTHING

- [ ] Lightweight layers for coastal heat and jungle humidity
- [ ] One warm layer for the highlands, cool at altitude after dark
- [ ] Modest cover for churches and rural towns, shoulders and knees
- [ ] Broken-in walking shoes for ruins and cobbled colonial streets
- [ ] Swimwear plus a rash guard for cenotes and reef days

HEALTH AND SUN

- [ ] Reef-safe sunscreen, oxybenzone free, required in cenotes and reef parks
- [ ] Insect repellent for the jungle and coastal evenings
- [ ] Oral rehydration salts and a basic stomach remedy
- [ ] Any prescriptions in original packaging, plus a small first aid kit
- [ ] A refillable filter bottle to cut plastic and cost

TECH

- [ ] No adapter needed, US Type A/B plugs, 127V
- [ ] A local eSIM or a roaming plan set before departure
- [ ] Portable battery for long ruin and beach days
- [ ] Waterproof phone pouch for cenotes, reefs, and boats

BEACH AND WATER

- [ ] Snorkel and mask, cheaper to bring than to rent daily
- [ ] Microfiber towel that dries in humid air
- [ ] Water shoes for rocky cenote and reef entry
- [ ] A dry bag for electronics on boat and beach days

GO DEEPER The season by season packing list at the packing list page, and what to wear where in the dress code write-up.

Where to stay I: Yucatán and the highlands

getting around · rent a car in the Yucatán, fly between regions

The Yucatán is the one region where a rental car earns its keep from day one: the cenotes, ruins, and colonial towns spread wide and the roads are good. In the highlands, skip the car. Mexico City and Oaxaca are walkable with cheap taxis and metro, and buses connect the colonial towns better than driving does. Between the two regions, take the domestic flight rather than the long overland haul. Book stays in Tulum and Oaxaca early; both fill in high season.

Tulum

Base for the coast, cenotes, and ruins, though prices run high on the beach strip. See what a room costs around town, or find the dorm scene through Hostelworld.

Mérida

The calm colonial base for the western ruins and the flamingo coast. Live prices around the centro, and Hostelworld for the budget end.

Mexico City (Roma / Condesa)

The walkable food-and-cafe base for the capital and its day trips. Check what Roma is charging or browse Hostelworld.

Oaxaca City

The food capital's centro, walking distance to the markets and the mezcal bars. See what a room costs or check Hostelworld.

Hotels, guesthouses, and posadas across every region, with free cancellation while plans are still moving.

Find Stays on Booking.com

Where to stay II: the coasts and Baja

the beach-first regions, on their own trips

The coasts are separate trips from the ruins circuit, and they reward basing in one town rather than moving nightly. On the Oaxaca coast, Puerto Escondido is the surf and nightlife base; the slow crowd sleeps in Mazunte or Zipolite nearby. In Baja, La Paz is the calm, well-priced base for the Sea of Cortez, with Todos Santos a short drive for the desert-surf pace. Rent a car in Baja; the distances are long and the road is the trip.

Puerto Escondido

The Oaxaca coast's surf-and-nightlife base, from beginner beaches to Zicatela. Live prices around the beaches, or the dorm scene on Hostelworld.

La Paz (Baja California Sur)

The calm Sea of Cortez base, Balandra beach and marine trips on the doorstep. Check live prices along the malecón or Hostelworld.

San Miguel de Allende

The colonial-highlands add-on, cobbled streets and the pink parroquia. See what a room costs or browse Hostelworld.

BOOK A LOCAL GUIDE

Surf lessons, marine tours, and cenote trips across the bases list on GetYourGuide for Puerto Escondido, La Paz, and Tulum.

07

Safe and smart

Safety in Mexico is a state map, not a country verdict. The tourist regions are routine; a handful of states carry real advisories worth routing around.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Staying safe, region by region 33

Do and do not 34

Staying safe, region by region

the real version: it is a state map, not a country score

Mexico's overall safety score is dragged down by a handful of states most travelers never set foot in. The tourist regions in this guide, the Yucatán, Mexico City's central neighborhoods, Oaxaca, and the main coasts, run routine day and night with normal city sense. The real risks for visitors are petty theft, tourist-scam taxis, and overland travel after dark, not the headlines. Check the state-level advisory, not the country one.

Read the state, not the country

Advisories are issued by state. Quintana Roo, Yucatán, Oaxaca, and central Mexico City sit far below the flagged states. Route around the few Level 4 states rather than skipping the country.

Taxis and ATMs

Use app rides or hotel-called taxis over street hails in big cities. Withdraw from bank ATMs inside branches, and cover the keypad.

Travel by day

Take first-class buses and drive the toll roads in daylight. Night overland travel is where most avoidable risk sits.

The real coastal risk

Rip currents on the Pacific and the odd hurricane in autumn are a bigger practical threat to most visitors than crime. Swim where flagged.

A BUSY PLAZA EVENING IN CENTRAL OAXACA

FIRST-CLASS ADO BUS AT A YUCATÁN TERMINAL

CHECK BEFORE YOU GO

Current conditions by area on the Travel Safety Map tool, and coverage options in the budget and saving write-up.

Do and do not

five to follow, five to avoid

DO

Pick one region and go deep

Two weeks buys two regions with one flight, not five regions on overnight buses.

DO NOT

Judge safety by the country score

It is a state map. The tourist regions here sit far below the flagged states.

DO

Eat at the busiest stall

High turnover means fresh food. The office-lunch queue beats the guidebook pin.

DO NOT

Drink the tap water

Bottled or filtered only, teeth included. Carry a filter bottle to cut the plastic.

DO

Hit the ruins at opening

Chichén Itzá and Teotihuacán are transformed before the buses land. Sleep close, go early.

DO NOT

Base in the Cancún Hotel Zone

Walled resorts at the region's highest prices. Playa, Tulum, or Valladolid give you Mexico.

DO

Carry pesos in small bills

Street food, colectivos, and markets are cash worlds. Cards thin out past the cities.

DO NOT

Bus long distances at night

Take day buses and toll roads. Night overland travel is where avoidable risk sits.

DO

Use reef-safe sunscreen in cenotes

The enclosed water damages easily, and many cenotes require it or a rinse before entry.

DO NOT

Overpack for the altitude swing

Coast is hot, highlands are cool after dark. One warm layer covers it, not a suitcase.

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide draws from, the questions readers ask most, and where every number in this edition comes from.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you 36

Frequently asked questions 37

Image credits 38

A note on the links in this guide 39

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL, each one preloaded with the same Mexico data this guide was built from.

Trip Budget Calculator

Mexico: 45 USD/day budget, 95 midrange, 260 luxury, adjusted by region.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/

Packing List Generator

A custom list for reef, jungle, city, and highland days in one trip.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/packing-list-generator/

Best Time to Travel

Best: November to April. Month by month weather for 140+ countries.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/

Travel Safety Map

Current conditions by state and area, the map that matters most here.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/travel-safety-map/

Frequently asked questions

the eight questions that come up most

The short answers to what readers ask before booking. Longer detail on each sits in the matching chapter.

Is Mexico safe to travel?

In the tourist regions of this guide, yes, with normal city sense. Safety is issued by state; the Yucatán, central Mexico City, Oaxaca, and the main coasts sit far below the flagged states.

Do I need a visa?

US and EU citizens get up to 180 days visa-free on arrival. Keep the entry stamp or FMM slip to show on the way out.

How many days do I need?

Seven for a tight single-region loop, fourteen to pair two regions with one flight, three weeks to add a coast or Baja. One region beats two rushed.

Which region should I start with?

The Yucatán for a first trip: cenotes, reef, and ruins in a single rental-car loop, and the safest region on the map.

Can I drink the tap water?

No. Drink bottled or filtered water, including for brushing teeth. Reputable restaurants use purified ice and water.

Do I need a car?

In the Yucatán and Baja, yes. In the highlands, no: Mexico City and Oaxaca are walkable with cheap taxis, and buses link the towns.

What is the best time to visit?

November to April is dry and reliable across the country. September and October carry the peak coastal storm risk.

Is it expensive?

It stretches far in Oaxaca and Chiapas, near US prices in Tulum and Los Cabos. Budget from 45 USD a day, midrange near 95.

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12. **Monte Alban Zapotec ruins, Oaxaca**. nsaum75 !Dígamei, CC BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0.
13. **Pastel colonial streets of Merida, Yucatan**. xiquinhosilva, CC BY 2.0, CC BY 2.0.
14. **Sayulita beach / surf town, Nayarit**. Gustavoarroyofotos, CC BY-SA 4.0, CC BY-SA 4.0.
15. **Sea of Cortez coast near Loreto**. Rafael Saldaña, CC BY 2.0, CC BY 2.0.
16. **Street taco stand in Mexico City**. Daniel Case, CC BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0.
17. **Tacos al pastor**. Matt Saunders, CC BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0.
18. **Tlayudas**. Nsaum75, CC BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0.
19. **Tulum Maya ruins**. Popo le Chien, CC BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured July 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

disclosure and sources · why this guide is free



WRITTEN BY

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Founder of Pack Lightly. Performance marketing background, data led travel research. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a flight, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A region, a base, or a transport option is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: **Aviasales** · **Booking.com** · **Saily** · **Hostelworld** · **Stay22** · **GetYourGuide** · via **Travelpayouts**

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Budget figures: pack-lightly budget-calculator dataset, captured July 2026.
2. Country scores and vacation type tags: pack-lightly country-comparison tool, captured 2026-07.
3. Seasonal weather bands: pack-lightly best-travel-time dataset, captured 2026-07.
4. Food prices: pack-lightly local food and drinks dataset for Mexico, captured 2026-07.
5. Pack Lightly Mexico cluster pages, retrieved 2026-07: the hub · budget · food · best places.

What changed in edition 2026.07: first release on the v2 design standard for Mexico. Not covered here: extended Baja overland routes, the northern border cities, all-inclusive resort packages.