

# Christmas in Cancún

**Intercontinental family abandons tradition  
for a holiday reunion on the Mexican Caribbean.**

**By Jeff Borg**

Over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go for another "traditional" Anglo-Venezuelan-Colombian-American Christmas. The old house will fill with the aromas of holiday feasting. Grandma Jan's American turkey and Abuelita Elia's Venezuelan *hallacas* will invoke generations of diverse family history.

But traditionally, the grandmothers spend their holidays in the kitchen. The rest of us wage traditional arguments over football and presidents. We fly for days to reach Grandma's small northern town. On Christmas, we phone Tío Tomás because he hasn't had a visa since The Incident.

Or, maybe this year we dump tradition and throw a holiday reunion someplace warm, fun, and central for the *whole* family. Christmas in Cancún!

[pics RivieraMayaMap2004NoInset.PDF,  
CancunBeachAerialPunta1, WindsurfCancunDreams,  
PlayaCarmenAmbiance4GA, PlayaCarmenDiablitoAbs25,  
PMorelosLightSailor1788, SwimRMCoupleTube1660,  
TulumCliffsBerenice99, FamilyRMBeachBoat893,

FamilyTulumBeach95, KiteboardXpuHaSabine45,  
MarriedRMBeachCouple1477, WomanTulumAzulikBeach6,  
WomanPuntaVenadoBoat128, WomanPlayaCarmenNite4288,  
WomanTulumBeachFer16]

**Beach.** The ladies could flirt with the Aztec sun gods on the fabulous beaches, at the intersection of white sand and blue sea, Mexican sun and American dollars, world music and local tequila.

On northern beaches, protected by Isla Mujeres, water is shallow and good for young kids. Playa Tortugas draws parasailers, divers, and kayakers. On eastern beaches, the waves get stronger and sober people swim near lifeguards.

Parasails rise with flyers hanging from safety harnesses, an adventure accessible to anyone who can sit for 12 minutes and pay air fare around US\$60.

South of Cancún, every beach is fabulous from Punta Maroma to Tulum. Perched high on a bluff, watching over powdery sand and emerald sea, the ancient Maya city of Tulum poses for pictures. Below, swimmers ply the waters while iguanas ply the rocks. Steps away, the sand spreads out before tiny resorts and eateries.

[pics BeachRM495, BeachRMVendor1618,  
BeachTulumCliff288, BeachTulumCliffsESJM760,  
CouplePMorelosDesireBed, CouplePuntaVenadoBeach180,  
CoupleRMBeach1567, SpaPlayacarVRBeach4128,  
BoatPlayaCarmen852, ParasailPlayacarTowBoat695,  
ParasailPlayacarAerial707]

**Dolphins.** The grandmas could take the kids to swim with the dolphins, who enjoy entertaining humans. They act like big friendly dogs, only smarter. When a 600-pound marine mammal plants a big wet kiss on your cheek, that's a vacation!

Delphinus runs leisurely 50-minute programs. Delphinus Dreams Cancún is the only dolphinarium on the grounds of a resort. Delphinus Riviera Maya (Playa del Carmen) helps rescue, protect, and study stranded animals. Three more facilities include Xcaret, Xel-Há, and Costa Maya ([www.delphinusworld.com](http://www.delphinusworld.com)).

Dolphin Discovery also operates in the area, at Isla Mujeres, Puerto Aventuras, and Cozumel ([www.dolphindiscovery.com](http://www.dolphindiscovery.com)).

[pics DolphinCancunDreams1650, DolphinCancunDreamsUnder5, DolphinPAventurasDDAbrazo, DolphinRMDelphinus19, DolphinXcaret3]

**Snorkeling / diving.** Sister Lisa could spend the whole week on the teeming reefs, hanging with neon tropical fish, vibrant coral colonies, and graceful sea turtles.

Garrafón, a private park for casual snorkelers, perches atop a coral reef that borders Isla Mujeres, visible from the hotel zone. Catch the ferry from Cancún's Puerto Juárez or Playa Tortugas. US\$65-189 ([www.garrafon.com](http://www.garrafon.com)).

South of Cancún, we can swim, snorkel, dive, kayak, or windsurf in Puerto Morelos National Marine Park, protected from ski boats, fishing lines, and progress generally. Only permitted boats and captains can go onto this section of the Great Maya Reef, biggest in the West. The Asociación de Prestadores de Servicios Acuáticos represents qualified dive operators ([www.diverivieramaya.com](http://www.diverivieramaya.com)).

Xel-Ha is a big natural aquarium an hour south. The cool snorkeling spot mixes salty tropical fish with freshwater rivers, cenotes, and caves. US\$35-53 ([www.xel-ha.com.mx](http://www.xel-ha.com.mx)).

[pics SnorkelPuntaVenado37, SnorkelRMFamilyBeach963, SnorkelXelHaSnuba5, DiveAkumalCoralPillar, DiveAkumalCoralsMyHouse, DiveAkumalPezPiedra, DiveAkumalTurtle3, DiveRMCenote2PD,

DiveRMCenotePeople2697, SwimRMCenoteWoman2933,  
AkumalYalKuStatue17, SwimAkumalYalKuStatues20]

**Spa.** Elia would tour the spas to immerse in steam, submit to massage, and enjoy a facial after a hard day of leisure. Spas range from the grand marble palace in a five-star resort, to the humble *temazcal* in rustic Tulum.

*Temazcal*, the traditional Mesoamerican sweat bath with herbs, promotes perspiration, revs up metabolism, accelerates heartbeat, and speeds circulation. The cozy chamber looks like an earthen igloo. Fire stays to the east, where the sun god arises. The door opens to the south, pathway of the dead.

When Spaniards arrived, they were appalled that men and women entered together naked. So they destroyed the baths, but *temazcal* is back.

[pics , SpaPlayacarVRLounge26, SpaPlayacarVRModifyle,  
SpaPlayacarVRProductos, SpaRMBereniceForehead86,  
SpaRMBereniceLounges90, SpaTulumAzulikBeachFer66,  
SpaTulumAzulikFer49, SpaTulumAzulikMudMaria82,  
SpaTulumAzulikScrubMar170, SpaTulumSeaBereniceTub253,  
SpaXcalacocoIkalMar4, SpaXcalacocoIkalMarTemazcal]

**Go lf.** Brother Daniel could play a different golf course every day. Nine upscale courses — soon to be 12 — make the Mexican Caribbean a world-class golf destination. Layouts snake through jungles, mangroves, and beachfronts, around ancient Maya sites, with occasional cenotes plopped amid fairways. Perennial golf weather and challenging courses lured the PGA Tour this year, its first time in Mexico.

Links dot the coast from Playa Mujeres in the north to Puerto Aventuras in the south. Greens fees range from US\$60 (twilight) to \$250 (deluxe), including carts and often food, beverage, and transportation.

Cancún Golf at Pok Ta Pok and Hilton Cancún sit right in the hotel zone. Playa Mujeres (Cancún) is the newest. El Camaleón (Playa del Carmen) hosted the PGA Tour ([www.cancungolf.org](http://www.cancungolf.org)).

[pics GolfPlayaCarmen22, GolfPlayaCarmenCamaleon1B, GolfPlayaCarmenCamaleon4, GolfPlayaCarmenCamaleon15, GolfPlayaCarmenCamaleon101, GolfPlayaCarmenCamaleonNorm, GolfPlayaCarmenMayanRe1, GolfPlayacarMoonFlamboyen6]

**Fishing.** Tío Tomás — who could finally get a visa — would fly-fish all week. Waters teem with snapper, jack, bonito, wahoo, kingfish, mackerel, and shark all the time, and sailfish, marlin, tuna, and dorado from March to June. Spin- and fly-fishermen snag pompano, permit, tarpon, snook, and bonefish.

Knowledgeable guides on sturdy boats generally supply rods, reels, lures, and bait. Expect to pay US\$400 for a full-day charter on a 25-foot super panga, or \$650 on a 30-foot diesel cruiser, with five lines, tackle, crew, etc.

[pics FishingPuntaVenadoMan172, BoatPMorelos4]

**Eco-adventure.** Cousin Rony would sample every eco-adventure on the coast.

Down at Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve — 528,000 ha of salt marshes, mangrove forests, reefs, cenotes, and archaeological sites — pumas and jaguars prowl the UNESCO World Heritage site. Kayakers spot dolphins and turtles in Ascension Bay, especially around Christmas, and bird watchers find 350 species.

CESiaK arranges tours and camping ([www.siankaan.org](http://www.siankaan.org)). Guides from local villages, working as Community Tours Sian Ka'an, lead small groups into the reserve for ecotours on archaeology and environment, wild and domestic life, bird

watching, and fly fishing. US\$75-380  
([www.siankaantours.org](http://www.siankaantours.org)).

Hundreds of cenotes pock the Yucatán, opening up the sacred caves beneath. For divers and snorkelers, the sinkholes offer a unique subterranean experience. Aktun Chen offers guided tours to see fascinating stalactite and stalagmite formations, near Akumal. US\$24 ([www.aktunchen.com](http://www.aktunchen.com)).

Xcaret marries nature with culture. The eco-park, less than an hour from Cancún, has snorkeling, rivers, waterfalls, caves, dolphins, and an aquarium. Jungle paths lead to a Maya village, archaeological site, aviary, and sea-turtle area. US\$38-87 ([www.xcaret.com.mx](http://www.xcaret.com.mx)).

We can trot horseback along the beach from Rancho Loma Bonita, south of Puerto Morelos ([www.rancholomabonita.com](http://www.rancholomabonita.com)). Or, Rancho Punta Venado operates from a former cattle ranch and coconut plantation, south of Playa ([www.puntavenado.com](http://www.puntavenado.com)).

The heart-thumping Mayan Zip-Line tour flies adventurers over cenotes and jungles on zip lines, high above the canopy, US\$76-86 ([www.alltournative.com](http://www.alltournative.com)).

[pics CenoteAzulWoman80, KayakRM2173,  
XelHaAerialLagoon, XelHaLagoon59,  
AnimalXcaretJaguarBlack934, AnimalXcaretJaguarSpots932,  
BeachXcaretPool10, ChurchXcaretCapil1,  
HorsePuntaVenadoMan91, ZipLineRMCaribbean]

**Maya culture.** Young José would tour all the ancient sites of the Maya, who created a brilliant civilization with dense cities, splendid art, and complex calendars.

Whoosh! At Tulum, El Castillo suddenly fills the view after you squeeze through the city wall. Stepping back in time, structures still display murals and friezes of deities, priests, and

rituals. It is the only major Maya site right on the coast, 100 km south of Cancún, Mx\$40.

The great Maya city of Chichén Itzá commanded Yucatán for 400 years, peaking in the 11th and 12th centuries. Restored in the 1920s, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the Seven New Wonders of the World, it draws millions.

Three grand structures define the city's central plaza: El Castillo, the most iconic Maya temple; the Grand Ball Court, with its Platform of Skulls; and the Temple of the Warriors, in a forest of columns carved with Toltec soldiers.

Day tours run from Cancún, US\$85 and up, but guests can stay overnight, practically inside the ancient city, in the gracious old Hotel Mayaland ([www.mayaland.com](http://www.mayaland.com)).

Back on the coast, Xcaret unleashes a nightly extravaganza in its theater. It spotlights traditions like the ancient Maya ball game, a combination of soccer and basketball, sometimes played with the ball on fire. A thousand years ago, losers lost their heads. Today, 300 performers wow visitors with music and dance ([www.xcaret.com.mx](http://www.xcaret.com.mx)).

[pics DanceXcaretShow960, MayaXcaretPerformer944, ChichenItzaColumns794, ChichenItzaPyramid779, ChichenItzaPyramid811, ChichenItzaPyramidJM805, ChichenItzaSkulls819, ChichenItzaWarrior810, TulumCliffsBerenice99, TulumSiteCliffs281, TulumSite197, MayaRMKid702]

**Dining.** The gang can regroup each night to explore a fabulous fusion of restaurants — Mexican, Italian, Argentine, Maya, Japanese, Thai, French, Mediterranean, and American. We'll eat too much, drink too much, and sing in public.

On the tip of Punta Cancún, Paloma Bonita does traditional Mexican cuisine well. Tasty appetasers include fish tacos, breaded Oaxaca cheese, and flavors I can't identify. The four-

chilis fillet mignon is exquisitely tender and smoky (52.998.848.7082).

In Puerto Morelos, the 10-table eatery with the big reputation is John Gray's Kitchen, a place for rack of lamb and a great bottle of wine. Maya dishes have to taste authentic since all the cooks come from the same Maya village. But first, a tart margarita... (52.998.871.0665).

My favorite is traditional Maya blackened turkey, stuffed with ground beef and egg in burnt pepper sauce, tasting of chiles, chocolate, and attitude. A Don Julio margarita and some *panuchos* to start. This means a trip to Yaxche, temple of Maya cuisine, in Playa del Carmen ([www.mayacuisine.com](http://www.mayacuisine.com)).

[pics DineCancunLobsterBeach, DinePBonita3Chefs121, DinePlayaCarmenDiablito5, DineXcalacocoIkalMar6, FoodFCPSpices119, FoodPlayaCarmenWomIce4193, FoodRMPineapple695, BarPlayaCarmenDiablitoSt14, BarPlayaCarmenBodeg20, BarPlayaCarmenDiablito2, BarPlayaCarmenSantaDisco63, BarPlayaCarmenSantaUp21]

**A c c o m m o d a t i o n s .** Exploding Cancún and environs hosted 65,029 rooms at 71-percent occupancy last year. Quintana Roo, this one Mexican state, received 4.6 million foreign visitors — more than Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Costa Rica, Bahamas, or Jamaica.

In the chaotic architecture of Cancún, big-brand resorts line the beach like a Great Wall of Mexico: Barceló, Club Med, Fiesta Americana, Hilton, Oasis, Melía, Hyatt, Inter-Continental, Marriott, Meridien, Occidental, Omni, Riu, Ritz-Carlton....

Some have golf, some have spa, but only one has dolphins, Dreams Cancún. Several rooms at the kid-friendly all-inclusive overlook Delphinus Dreams. Guests on balconies serve as an audience while dolphins launch humans out of the water by their feet ([www.dreamscancun.com](http://www.dreamscancun.com)).

On the mainland hums a real Cancún, with shady parks, affordable accommodations, big-box shopping, and half a million residents. To the south in Riviera Maya, developed 20 years after the Cancún Project, resorts barely peek over the palms by law.

Between the towns sprawl giant all-inclusive compounds dedicated to more rooms, more activities, more water sports, more food, and more booze. All-inclusive resort operators include AM Resorts, Bahía Príncipe, Barceló, Iberostar, Occidental, Palace, Riu, Sandos, Wyndham, and of course, more.

Visitors can find resorts and things to do at the Asociación de Hoteles de la Riviera Maya AC ([www.rivieramayahotels.info](http://www.rivieramayahotels.info)), Cancún Oficina de Visitantes y Convenciones ([www.cancun.info](http://www.cancun.info)), and Fideicomiso para la Promoción Turística de la Riviera Maya ([www.rivieramaya.com](http://www.rivieramaya.com)).

[pics BikePlayaCarmenWoman1034, MarriedPBonitaFerGonz7, PoolPlayacarRHJM645, PoolPlayacarRHJM655, PoolPlayacarRHJM668, ResortPlayaCarmenSL1002, ResortPlayaCarmenSL1005, ResortXpuHaEsenciaWom, ResortXpuHaTerrace16, RoomCancunDreamsPresid, RoomPlayaCarmenMandarin1, RoomPlayaCarmenMandarin2, RoomPlayacarVR302Pano, RoomXcalacocoIkalMarPresA, RoomXpuHaEsenciaHammock, RoomXpuHaEsenciaWom3]

**Events.** Even Cancún has a few holiday traditions. Luxe resorts like the Hilton decorate lavishly. Others sponsor events like the Twelve Days of Christmas at Dreams Cancún, staged from the Eve to Three Kings Day.

Thumping strobe-lighted clubs on Boulevard Kukulcán — Coco Bongo, Dady'O, Dady Rock — go over the top for holidays. Around the corner on Punta Cancún, Azúcar has Cuban bands and Bogart's has friendly games, Cuban cigars, and some mental space.

My own favorite event is the three-night Latin Jazz Festival in Playa del Carmen. It kicks off the season November 29 ([www.rivieramayajazzfestival.com](http://www.rivieramayajazzfestival.com)) and brings out guitar legend George Benson, host group Aguamala, bass player Marcus Miller, and Cuban percussionist Luis Conte.

[pics MusicPlayaCarmenJazz184, MusicPlayaCarmenJazz195, MusicPlayaCarmenJazz9485]

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