

# The Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico

## A Caribbean Sky Tours Adventure

by John T. Kounis  
photos by George A. Kounis



**T**he Cessna 206 ahead stood out clearly against the blue-green water as it turned to fly up the beach. As I banked my Cessna 185 to follow its lead, I could see the texture of the sandy sea bottom through the crystal-clear water below. To my left, the crescent-shaped beach stretched for miles without a single building, vehicle, or person in sight. The rest of the island we were flying over was covered by dense jungle or shallow marshes. After a few minutes, a voice crackled over the radio, “I see the airstrip; I’ll make a low pass and check out the surface.” The Cessna ahead descended toward a long rectangular clearing in the trees. After the pilot confirmed the runway was in good condition, we landed on the narrow strip of dirt in the clearing. At the end of the strip, the tiedown area was a grass rectangle lined with conch shells. The “terminal” consisted of two small buildings with thatched roofs and a few palm trees.



Courtesy The Exploreal



Dave Hirschman flies with Rick Gardner and Pia Hilbert of Caribbean Sky Tours along the Yucatan coast near Punta Pajaros, south of Tulum. They are flying en route to Kohunlich with its ancient Mayan ruins, and The Exploreal eco-resort (above).



After landing at Isla Holbox (bottom), pilots can relax by the pool at Xaloc Resort (left), enjoy lobster pizza at Restaurant y Pizzeria Edelyn (above), and even swim with whale sharks (below).

My travel companions—my brother George and dog Woody—and I had just arrived at Isla Holbox, an uncharted airstrip on an island off Mexico's Caribbean coast, just one of many stops on a custom tour arranged for us by Caribbean Sky Tours. Run by husband-and-wife team Rick Gardner and Pia Hilbert, the company organizes and conducts aerial tours of the Yucatan Peninsula for private pilots. Based in Cancun, the owners possess an intimate knowledge of both the aviation system and the best destinations throughout the peninsula. Rick, who has eight years of flying experience in Mexico and is a CFI, conducts pilot briefings and handles aviation, customs, and immigration issues. Pia has lived in Mexico her entire life and has worked with Mexican firms in public relations capacities; she handles transportation, lodging, dining, and other logistics.

### Flying to Isla Holbox

Our planning for the day trip to Isla Holbox began the previous night over dinner. Rick showed us our route on ONC charts he provided, (1:1,000,000 charts that

are similar to U.S. WACs). We would fly along the east coast north from Cancun past shallow lagoons to the northern tip of the peninsula. Holbox is a private airstrip not depicted on the map, so Rick gave us the coordinates out of the *Pilot's Guide to Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula*, a comprehensive guide covering 44 airports. (Rick wrote this guide and provides it to all trip participants. It is also available through their website for \$60, (786) 206-6147 or (866) 420-9265, [www.caribbeanskytours.com](http://www.caribbeanskytours.com).)

On the flight north, Rick reminded us over the radio, "Keep an eye out for flamingos. You'll find them in the shallow parts of the lagoons." We saw the flamingos just like he promised; they were easy to spot against the brownish-green marshes.

After landing, we were greeted by Alberto Saab, owner and operator of the Holbox airport and long time friend of Rick and



Courtesy Caribbean Sky Tours

Pia. He also owns a convenient four-room beachside hotel across the street and was proud to give us a quick tour. Soon, our guide Victor Velazquez arrived... clad in just shorts and a shirt. A fascinating fellow, he was a famous violin maker and had traveled to many countries in that capacity. "When I came to Holbox 20 years ago, I threw away my watch and my shoes," Victor explained. "I haven't needed them since." Our taxi was essentially a stretch "limo" version of a common golf cart, that seated up to eight passengers and had larger off-road tires. We drove on unpaved roads past the central plaza and along the seafront of town—all eight blocks of it. Buildings painted in pinks, greens, reds, and blues added color and brightness to the town.

We felt as if we were in a town from a half-century ago, yet Victor lamented the progress. "When I first arrived, there was no television and no electricity on the island. People would congregate in the square and talk. When it got dark, they would sleep, so everybody awoke early. Today, people stay home and watch television. Nobody is up at 4 a.m. anymore."

The neighboring lagoons, Victor explained, are home to 40,000 flamingos from April through October, and large whale sharks arrive in summer; you can see dolphins frolicking in the water year round. On the beach, kite surfers readied their gear for a day on the waves, while others were just walking hand-in-hand, taking in the beauty.



Caribbean Sky Tours includes Holbox on their summertime Whale Shark Adventure fly-ins. A boat tour to see whale sharks is included; brave passengers can jump into the water to swim with these gentle giants. The largest fish in the sea, whale sharks can reach lengths in excess of 40 ft. but have no teeth; they eat plankton by filtering them from the water. Fly-in participants stay at a beachfront resort, usually Xaloc Resort, [www.holbox-xalocresort.com](http://www.holbox-xalocresort.com), or Villas Delfines, [www.holbox.com](http://www.holbox.com). Both resorts have bungalows set among palm trees, connected by walkways that wind their way on the sand. Each bungalow has an outside deck, and either one king or two queen beds. Guests relax on recliners around a swimming pool, or on the beach in front of the resort.

We wrapped up our visit with a meal at Restaurant y Pizzeria Edelyn, which specializes in lobster pizza—a lobster-lover's dream, piled high with the fresh crustaceans.

### The Yucatan Peninsula

Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula is in the southeastern corner of Mexico, about 350 nm southwest of Florida. Although known for its beautiful Caribbean beaches, the area has much more to offer. Once the site of a thriving Mayan civilization, the peninsula is dotted with Mayan ruins. The 16th century saw Spanish settlement, Caribbean pirates, and turmoil as colonists and natives vied for dominance. The Spanish Colonial cities of Mérida and Campeche on the west coast still represent the architecture and style from that era. And of course, the legendary beaches at Cancun and Cozumel draw tourists from the world over.

Though the Yucatan is close to the U.S.—just a short flight from Texas or Florida—many pilots are apprehensive about flying there, due to a lack of familiarity with the aviation system, language barriers, and possible concerns about over-water flying. Caribbean Sky Tours helps pilots deal with those issues and concentrate on what's important: having fun. They conduct several escorted group tours annually that begin in Brownsville, Texas, or Key West, Florida, last seven to ten days, and visit two to four

Caribbean Sky Tours owners, Rick Gardner and Pia Hilbert, are Cancun residents experienced in Mexican flying and travel.



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cities on the peninsula. Rick and Pia accompany the group in their Cessna 206, handling both ground and aviation logistics. Some trips focus on Spanish colonial history or Mayan civilizations; others concentrate on adventure travel or simply relaxing on the beautiful Caribbean beaches. The company also offers custom tours, as well as a trip planning service for those who want to go on their own, but would still like to take advantage of Rick and Pia's experience and insight, (786) 206-6147 or (866) 420-9265, [www.caribbeanskytours.com](http://www.caribbeanskytours.com).

Since this was our first trip to the Yucatan and we had time constraints, we asked Caribbean Sky Tours to customize a tour so

that we could see a little of everything. We based out of Cancun and made day trips to destinations between 40 and 220 nm away.

### Cancun

It's possible to spend your entire vacation in Cancun, and many tourists from around the world do just that. The center of tourist activity in the area is "Hotel Row." This 15-mile-long stretch of multi-story resort complexes is on a narrow peninsula separated from the mainland by a lush, green lagoon. Across the peninsula, the contrast with the clean white sand beaches and the light blue Caribbean waters is striking. Along with hotels, you'll

find myriad dance clubs, restaurants, and shops. Everything from parasailing to golfing is available at your doorstep.

Longtime Cancun residents, Rick and Pia know the best—and often little-known—places. After arriving at the airport, we drove past resort after resort, but then pulled off the road and stopped at a relatively deserted spot. We descended a steep staircase and found a spacious deck built out over the waters of a large lagoon. A log structure supported a thatched roof, but there were otherwise no walls, and the gentle sea breezes blew across the deck. A couple of yachts were tied to a pier extending into the water. On the deck were a half dozen or so tables set with white tablecloths. This was J.C. Capitan restaurant, known primarily to locals and boaters, since it is not easy to see from the road. We enjoyed a local specialty, soft fish tacos seasoned with garlic, while reviewing the plans for our upcoming flights.

Another night, we did visit the tourist center of Cancun for a night on the town right in the middle of the action. Entertainment, shopping, and partying were in ample supply, as was good dining. La Casa de las Margaritas restaurant is a traditional Mexican restaurant built and decorated in the style of an old colonial hacienda. We dined at tables in an interior courtyard serenaded by live marimba music and Mexican singers performing on a central stage. Entrées were seasoned with local spices, such as chicken breast in mole sauce and beef filet marinated in sun dried pepper sauce. Excellent margaritas accompanied our meals; they were made with just about any kind of Tequila you could ask for and came in a variety of flavors, [www.lacasadelasmargaritas.com](http://www.lacasadelasmargaritas.com).





Courtesy, Secretaria de Turismo, Campeche

Above: Some trips include excursions to the Mayan ruins at Calakmul.

Below left: Expansive luxury resorts line the beach on Cancun's "Hotel Row."

## Ancient Civilizations

Our first flight was along the east coast to see Mayan ruins. South of Cancun, the Yucatan coast is densely forested right up to the water. Short, rocky cliffs and narrow beaches are all that separate the jungle from the sea. About 58 nm south of Cancun, we came across some stone structures in a clearing on a bluff overlooking the water. The main structure has steep steps on one side and is right at the cliff edge. We learned these are the ruins of the Mayan walled city of Tulum that dates to the 13th century. Just a ten-minute walk away to the northwest is an airport with a 6,000-ft. paved runway. It is a day-trip destination on the Mérida-Cozumel Fly-In, which includes a guided tour of the ruins. Participants in the Riviera Maya Memorial Day Fly-In also visit, spending the night at a hotel in Tulum, and touring the archaeological site as well as nearby underground caverns.

Our fuel stop was Chetumal Airport (MMCM), which is about as far southeast as you can get and still be in Mexico. In fact, the threshold for 7,244-ft. Runway 28 is only about 4,500 ft. north of the border with Belize. The field was bustling, as some Mexican Air Force C-130s were flying patterns, while others were loading soldiers and equipment. After landing, Rick went off to handle our paperwork and flight plans. He knew the airport *comandante* and his assistant personally, so the procedures ran smoothly and quickly (they even handled us before completing the flight plans for the air force pilots).

Roscoe Turner – Famous Race Pilot



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Caribbean Sky Tours' upcoming trips also include overnight stays at The Explorean, and the resort is definitely worth it. Their 38 suites are in separate structures around the property, so that each feels isolated. Master suites fill an entire building with a private garden in the back and a large deck out front with a small private pool, ceiling fans, and a hammock to wile away the hours. From your deck, all you can hear is the wind whistling and the tropical birds in the trees. The Explorean is an all-inclusive adventure resort with daily activities such as mountain biking, kayaking, and hiking. One excursion that sounded especially interesting was a night kayaking trip by

After landing at Kohunlich (above), pilots can tour ruins of a Mayan city deep in the jungle (right), and stay at The Explorean eco-resort (below).



The next leg took us 28 nm inland to the uncharted Kohunlich Airstrip, deep in the jungle. After departure, we over-flew Laguna Bacalar, known as the “lagoon of seven colors.” This is where mineral-laden freshwater mixes with saltwater, forming a kaleidoscope of color. In some places, the water was a brilliant turquoise; in others, it was deep blue, milky-white, or even reddish. All this contrasted with the dense jungle that extended right to the water's edge.

West of the lagoon, there were no roads or towns to use as landmarks, just a large landscape of rolling hills covered in dense vegetation, so the GPS was crucial. The airport appeared as a long beige rectangle hacked out of surrounding dense vegetation. The jungle encroached closely on the strip, so it was nearly impossible to see it unless we were lined up with the runway. Flying downwind was just a guess, since we couldn't see the strip.

Rick and Pia had arranged for a van to the Mayan ruins at Kohunlich, near the airstrip. The ruins comprise several huge stone structures constructed between 300 and 900 AD. We were fascinated with our guide's stories of life here more than a thousand years ago. He showed us the field where ball games were played for important events, such as before going to war, before a crucial harvest, or when rain was needed. Warriors would compete against each other with a three-to-four-kilogram rubber ball. Archaeologists have differing versions of the outcomes of such games, but most agree it was deadly to somebody. According to our guide, the winners—usually the best athletes and the best warriors—would earn the “honor” of being decapitated so their blood could be offered to the gods. One member of our party, Dave Hirschman, joked how in today's society, Michael Jordan would have been sacrificed to the gods a long time ago. At the Temple of the Masks, the tallest pyramid in the complex, many sculptures are remarkably well preserved, despite their age. Some of the original color remains on the stones. Best of all, since this area is so inaccessible, we had it almost entirely to ourselves.

We wrapped up the day with lunch at The Explorean, an eco-tourism resort perched on a hill south of the airport. The best view is from the pool at the top of the hill, affording you the luxury of relaxing in your recliner and seeing only water and jungle to the north. The restaurant is on a large, covered deck decorated with Mayan-style sculptures.

moonlight that ends in a secluded clearing where the staff caters a delicious dinner by firelight, [www.theexplorean.com](http://www.theexplorean.com).

## Colonial Mexico

The arrival of the Spanish in the Yucatan marked the beginning of the end of the Mayan civilization. The Spanish founded colonies and established trade routes for transporting gold, jade, and other precious items back to Europe from the New World. Piracy increased, giving rise to the fabled “Pirates of the Caribbean.” One of the first colonial outposts was the walled city of Campeche, built in 1540 on the west coast of the Yucatan, about 217 nm west-southwest of present-day Cancun. Over the years, it was attacked by pirates, and each time, it was fortified to fend off future attacks. By the late 17th century, a wall with eight bastions and three gates surrounded the city. Today, the historic part of the city looks much as it did in colonial times. In fact, Mexican government regulations require renovations in the center of town to retain the Spanish Colonial style.

On our flight to Campeche, Rick planned the route to pass over the famous Mayan ruins at Chichen Itza. The terrain west of Cancun is entirely flat, making Chichen Itza easy to spot. The main tall, white pyramid rose prominently over the surrounding landscape, its east-facing side illuminated in the rising sun. Participants on the Campeche-Cancun Mayan Adventure Fly-In land on the 9,186-ft. runway at nearby Chichen Itza Airport (MMCT), and tour this famous archaeological site.





Continuing westward toward Campeche, the history of the area became apparent from the air. Our route took us over the Puuc region, which is dotted with pyramids and Mayan settlements among small, rolling hills. Rick advised me to keep an eye out when flying over this area. If a hill looks just a little too symmetrical, it might be a Mayan ruin reclaimed by the jungle and simply not yet excavated or even discovered.

Campeche Airport (MMCP) has an 8,202-ft. runway, full facilities, and a reputation for being one of the most convenient airports on the peninsula with friendly staff and fast service. Traffic was light and the tower let us do just about anything we wanted, including a left 270-degree turn onto final so we could take pictures during the approach. The airport *comandante*, another friend of Rick's, gave us an impromptu slide show on his laptop of his family and other airplanes that had visited the airport. He was visibly proud of an American-registered Pitts Special that had landed a few months earlier. It is difficult to imagine a more GA-friendly airport manager!

Our tour began at the Fuerte San Miguel, a fort south of town with panoramic views

The colonial city of Campeche is rich in history, with military forts (below), and a town center that evokes the period with cobblestone streets and colonial style (right). Above: Fine dining at La Pigua restaurant.

of the harbor and city center. The fort's museum included cannon barrels and other relics from the Spanish period, as well as Mayan artifacts, such as the tomb of Mayan King Garra de Jaguar that was excavated at Calakmul, along with his jade jewelry, burial cloths, pottery, and other artifacts. In the teeth of another skull on display, small holes had been drilled so that tiny jewels could be placed in each tooth. The rest of our tour focused on the center of

Campeche, a finely restored colonial town. Entering through a stone arch, we drove on cobblestone streets past brightly colored buildings adorned with antique streetlamps.

All meals were top notch, but La Pigua, a gourmet restaurant in Campeche, was certainly a high point. To quote our traveling companion Dave Hirschman, "We didn't go hungry on the trip," which is an

understatement. This was not your typical chips-with-salsa and burrito Mexican restaurant. Service was excellent; between each course, plates and napkins were changed by the attentive waitstaff. We enjoyed appetizers of fish pâté and crab legs. For the main course, it was hard to decide between the sautéed shrimp with a rich garlic sauce, or the chilies stuffed with calamari in a spicy sauce. Fortunately, we didn't have to; there was enough for everybody and the airplane had enough useful load to haul us back after that meal.

Caribbean Sky Tours includes overnight stays in Campeche on several of their trips. Dining at La Pigua is included, as are a visit to an archeological site, a city tour, and free time for shopping or strolling around town.

## Island Hopping

A big draw of the Caribbean is, of course, the sea itself, with opportunities for snorkeling, fishing, scuba diving, swimming, or simply relaxing on a pristine white beach.



Courtesy Secretaría de Turismo, Campeche

Several Caribbean Sky Tours trips include a few days at a beachside resort, either in Cancun, the ancient city of Tulum, or on the islands of Isla Mujeres or Isla Cozumel. On our trip, we visited Isla Mujeres, a five-mile-long island that is only about a half-mile wide at its widest point. The south is dominated by rocky coastline with excellent snorkeling, while sandy beaches line the northern shores. Participants on the Caribbean Sky Tours Island Hopper Fly-In spend three days on Isla Mujeres during which they can snorkel in the Garrafon Natural Reef Park, along coral reefs with abundant multi-colored tropical fish, [www.garrafon.com](http://www.garrafon.com), or swim with dolphins, [www.dolphindiscovery.com/islamujeres](http://www.dolphindiscovery.com/islamujeres).

Our flight to Isla Mujeres Airport (MMIM) was short, since it is less than 15 nm north-east of Cancun. The south end of the 3,937-ft. paved runway is surrounded by a





The Yucatan has a wide variety of aviation experiences, from Cancun's full-featured and modern FBO (below), to landing at an airstrip at the edge of a small town on Isla Mujeres, less than 15 nm northeast of Cancun (above).

small lagoon, while the north end stops right at the edge of town. We arrived early in the morning to find the airport deserted. After I landed, I warned Rick that a soldier was pedaling down the runway on his bicycle. Apparently the sound of the landing airplanes had been his cue to come to the airport. After checking our paperwork and collecting the landing fees (less than \$3), we entertained him with our dog Woody's tricks. The friendly reception we received at Isla Mujeres is indicative of the laid-back attitude throughout Mexico.

## Flying Home

All too soon, it was time to fly back to the U.S., so we prepared our life boat and waterproof ELT for the 353-nm over-water flight from Cancun to Key West. Rick filled out our flight plans and customs paperwork, and gave us the documents we would need to enter the U.S. On the way to the airport, we stopped by his office to call U.S. Customs for the official notification.

On Rick's advice, we filed an IFR flight plan, which allowed us to fly right over the west coast of Cuba (VFR flights must

stay farther offshore, outside the Cuban inner ADIZ). En route, Havana Control was professional and courteous. Though we unfortunately could not land, the views of western Cuba were stunning. The water there is very shallow, and the light blue colors extend for miles offshore, with waves crashing on the reefs far from the beach.

The sign of a good trip is when you don't want it to end, and that was certainly the case with this trip. We had a wonderful time, and we spent most of our flight back discussing when we could return again. With our introduction, I know my next trip will include some adventure tours at The Explorean in Kohunlich, and perhaps more time on Cancun's or Cozumel's legendary beaches. Side trips to the beachside Mayan ruins at Tulum, or the ruins deep in the jungle at Calakmul would also be high on my list. I would love to take the Whale Shark Adventure trip this summer to Isla Holbox, and I probably would not be able to resist poking around looking for buried pirate treasure rumored to be on the island. Even so, I think I've already found my treasure in the Yucatan, and it's not buried. It's in the friendliness of the people, the diversity of adventures, and the overwhelming beauty of the peninsula. ■





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