

# Destination Cancun

## The Yucatan Peninsula hot spot serves up vacation essentials from A to Z

By Gail Ross, For Postmedia News October 14, 2011

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The basics of a great beach vacation seem simple enough. There should be sun, sand and surf, along with good food, plenty of optional activities and ample opportunity to sit back and relax.

Delivering the right mix of those elements isn't an easy job, but Cancun is one destination that gets it right.

Because the city was designed to be a tourism mecca, plenty of planning took place to ensure the needs and desires of visitors could be met. It works so well, other destinations often use Cancun as a model to see if they've got the tourism basics in place.

So what are the ABCs of giving visitors what they want? Just scan down the alphabet for a peek into what makes Cancun a top choice for sunstarved Canadians each winter.

A is for adventure. Cancun serves up dozens of opportunities to enjoy everything from zip-lining and swimming with dolphins to sailing, snorkelling, scuba diving, jet skiing and fishing. Billionaire Sir Richard Branson can attest to the adventure opportunities here; earlier this year, he swam into the mouth of a whale shark while diving with these gentle giants.

B is for the birds. It's easy to get to know a few feathered friends, with 546 bird species found on the Yucatan Peninsula, along with 125-plus species of mammals and hundreds more marine animals.

C is for caves and cenotes (natural sinkholes), which add a unique dimension to a visit here. Swimming in these underground pools is wonderfully refreshing; taking in three of the longest underwater cave systems in the world - all near Cancun - is unforgettable.

D is for dance, specifically the Mexican hat dance. It's become a source of national pride and many Cancun resorts feature the dance as part of nightly shows.

E is for Ekab. Like most Mexican cities, there's a story behind this city's name. While Cancun is the Mayan word for a nest or pot of snakes, the centre was first called Ekab, which means black earth.

F is for festivals. There are dozens of celebrations throughout the year, paying tribute to everything from food and jazz music to sailing and the solstice.

G stands for guacamole. This avocado dip just tastes better when you're in Mexico, as do a variety of other tempting treats including enchiladas, tamales and the fresh salsa pico de gallo.

H is for the Hotel Zone, a 27-kilometre stretch of beach surrounded by the Caribbean Sea on one side and a gentle lagoon on the other. More than 32,000 hotel rooms grace the city and some of the hotels, like the Ritz-Carlton, are downright heavenly. No wonder Tom Cruise and Jennifer Lopez love it here.

I is for Isla Mujeres, a smaller island about 20 minutes away from the hotel zone. Zip around the island on a scooter or enjoy turtle spotting.

J is for Jacques Cousteau. The famed marine biologist discovered the Palancar coral reefs, just off the nearby island of Cozumel, in 1961. He called the area one of the world's top locations for scuba divers.

K stands for Kukulcan Plaza. With its approximately 300 stores, it's the ideal place to shop for crafts, silver and beach wear. There's a bowling alley, too.

L is for lobster and a vast array of other fresh seafood dishes served up in dozens of local restaurants.

M is for the Mayan people. The mysteries of this indigenous group make the area come alive with history, stories and myth. Experts say there could be up to 2,700 ruin sites in the area; several of the restored areas, such as Chichen Itza, are true world treasures.

N stands for nightclubs. Cancun has a thriving club scene, including the wild Coco Bongo, Senor Frog's and Dady'O. Go. You'll feel young again, especially after a tequila slammer.

O represents "off the beaten path." There's no shortage of ways to create your own journey in Cancun, with a visit to the jungle ranking as one of the best.

P stands for pool. The hotels of Cancun boast some of the world's most mesmerizing infinity pools. When you're visiting here, you'll definitely want to spend time near the ocean, but an icy beverage at the pool is a good way to switch up the day.

Q is for Quintana Roo, where Cancun is located. Granted statehood in 1974, it is the youngest of Mexico's 31 states and features four separate ecosystems: tropical jungle forests, savannah, mangrove forests and coral reefs.

R stands for rebuilding. Cancun needed to rebuild its beach after Hurricane Wilma struck in 2005. About 95 million cubic metres of sand was hauled in to complete the task.

S is for sunshine and sand. There are more than 240 sunny days each year and the white sand is flour-soft.

T is for three. That's how many people lived in Isla Cancun when the Mexican government began developing it as a tourist destination in 1970. An additional 117 people lived in a nearby fishing village. Today, more than 700,000 make their home here.

U stands for the world's largest underwater museum. A series of 400 life-size sculptures have been installed on the ocean floor here and are aweinspiring. They're good for the environment, too, since they act as an artificial reef and help sustain the ecosystem.

V represents the city of Valladolid. Many of the buildings here were constructed in the style of Spanish Colonial architecture, which is a change of pace from the modern structures of Cancun. It's a great stop on the road to Chichen Itza, especially if you're looking for authentic Mexican cuisine.

W is for weddings. More than 46,000 couples tie the knot here each year and thousands more honeymoon, just as country stars Miranda Lambert and Blake Shelton did earlier this year.

X marks the spot of two great ecoadventure water parks in the area - Xcaret and Xel-Ha. Various water sports, animal encounters and entertainment are available at both, making them two of the most popular attractions.

Y is for the Yucatan Peninsula, where Cancun is found. The peninsula divides the Gulf of Mexico from the Caribbean Sea.

Z stands for Zzzzs. Take a siesta. Relax in a hammock or on a beach chair. After all, you're on holidays in Cancun - the consummate vacation destination

IF YOU GO:

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