FREE VACATION PLANNING GUIDE

All-Inclusive Cancun

How to choose the right resort: adults-only or family, Hotel Zone or Riviera Maya, what all-inclusive really covers, airport transfers, the best months to go and how tipping works.



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WELCOME

Hi, I'm Thomas.

Cancun is one of the easiest warm-weather escapes from New York. The flight is short, the water is that unreal shade of turquoise, and an all-inclusive resort means you can stop making decisions the minute you arrive.

The catch? There are a *lot* of resorts, and they are not all the same. Some are lively and full of kids. Some are quiet and adults-only. Some sit on a busy strip of beach in the Hotel Zone, and others are tucked away an hour south in the Riviera Maya. "All-inclusive" can mean different things from one resort to the next.

This guide is the conversation I have with every client before we pick a resort. Work through it and you'll know exactly what to look for. I checked the entry rules and seasonal details here against official sources as of November 2026. Rules can change, so always confirm before you go.

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SECTION 1

Where to stay

"Cancun" usually means the whole stretch of coast you can reach from Cancun International Airport (CUN). Where you stay on it shapes your whole trip.



Illustrative map, not to scale. Drive times are rough estimates from CUN and depend on traffic and your exact resort.

NORTH · ABOUT 30 TO 45 MIN

Costa Mujeres

Newer, quieter, resort-only stretch north of the city, facing Isla Mujeres. Calm feel, fewer things nearby.

ABOUT 20 TO 40 MIN

Cancun Hotel Zone

The famous strip between the lagoon and the sea. Walkable restaurants, shopping and nightlife, and the shortest transfers.

SOUTH · ABOUT 30 MIN

Puerto Morelos

A laid-back fishing town with a protected reef offshore. A sweet spot: close to the airport but calmer than the Hotel Zone.

ABOUT 45 TO 60 MIN

Playa del Carmen

A lively town with a walkable main street and ferries to Cozumel. Many big resorts sit just outside town.

ABOUT 1.5 TO 2 HOURS

Akumal and Tulum

Further south, with cenotes, sea turtles and seaside Maya ruins. Tulum also has its own international airport, so check flights into both.

THOMAS'S TIP

If this is a short trip (four nights or fewer), I usually steer clients to the Hotel Zone, Costa Mujeres or Puerto Morelos. Every hour in a van is an hour you're not on the beach.

SECTION 2

Hotel Zone or Riviera Maya?

This is the first big decision. Neither one is "better." They're just very different vacations.

	Cancun Hotel Zone	Riviera Maya
The vibe	Energetic and convenient. High-rise resorts lined up along one long beach.	More spread out and relaxed. Many resorts sit on large, lush grounds.
Getting there	The shortest transfers from CUN.	Longer rides, from about 30 minutes to two hours.
Off the resort	Restaurants, shopping and nightlife close by, plus ferries to Isla Mujeres.	Cenotes, Maya ruins, eco-parks and small beach towns.
The water	North-facing beaches near the top of the "7" tend to be calmer. East-facing beaches can have strong surf.	Offshore reef protects many beaches, so the water is often calmer, though it varies by spot.
Best for	Shorter trips, groups of friends and travelers who want to go out.	Longer stays, couples, families who want space and explorers.

Quick quiz: which one sounds like you?

Lean Hotel Zone if...

- [ ] You have four nights or fewer
- [ ] You want to walk to restaurants and nightlife
- [ ] You'd rather not spend time in a van
- [ ] You like a bit of buzz around you

Lean Riviera Maya if...

- [ ] You're staying five nights or more
- [ ] You want quiet, space and greenery
- [ ] Cenotes and ruins are on your wish list
- [ ] You plan to stay put and unwind

THOMAS'S TIP

On any beach, follow the warning flags and the lifeguards. Caribbean surf can change quickly, even on a sunny day.

SECTION 3

Adults-only or family resort?

This one decision changes the whole feel of your vacation, from the pool deck to the dinner room.

Adults-only

Quieter pools, more romantic dinners and an easy, unhurried pace. Great for honeymoons, anniversaries, friend trips and anyone who just wants a break.

- Minimum ages vary (often 16 or 18), so check the resort's policy
- Many have a lively side too, with swim-up bars and evening shows
- "Adults-only" sections inside family resorts are a middle ground

Family resort

Kids' clubs, splash areas, family suites and menus everyone can agree on. Parents get to relax because the kids are happy and busy.

- Kids' club ages, hours and sign-up rules vary by resort
- Some have water parks or teen lounges, others keep it simple
- Check that your room category fits your whole family

Questions I ask before recommending a resort

- [ ] **Who's traveling, and how old will everyone be on the travel dates?** Ages decide kids' club eligibility and room occupancy.
- [ ] **What does a perfect day look like?** Pool and a book, or activities from breakfast to bedtime?
- [ ] **How important is food?** Count the à la carte restaurants and ask how reservations work.
- [ ] **Do you need connecting rooms or a suite?** A "request" is not the same as a confirmed room type.
- [ ] **Is anyone celebrating?** Honeymoons and milestone birthdays shape the choice.
- [ ] **Any mobility, dietary or medical needs?** Large resorts can mean long walks. Ask about room location and accessibility.

CAN'T DECIDE? THERE'S A MIDDLE GROUND

Some family resorts have adults-only pools, quiet zones or club-level areas, and some adults-only resorts sit right next to a family-friendly sister resort. Ask what each side can access before you book.

THOMAS'S TIP

Traveling with grandparents? Look for a resort that's easy to get around, and a room close to the lobby and restaurants. It makes a huge difference by day three.

SECTION 4

What all-inclusive really covers

"All-inclusive" is not a standard definition. Every resort writes its own list, so read the inclusions for *your* resort and *your* room category before you book.

Usually included

- Your room
- Meals at the buffet and many à la carte restaurants
- Snacks during the day
- Most drinks, including house wine, beer, cocktails and soft drinks
- Pools, beach, loungers and towels
- Non-motorized water sports at many resorts
- Daytime activities and evening entertainment
- Kids' clubs at family resorts

Often extra

- Spa treatments
- Premium or top-shelf drinks and wine lists
- Some specialty restaurants or chef's tables
- Motorized water sports and diving
- Off-resort tours and excursions
- Romantic dinners, cabanas and celebrations
- Golf (sometimes included, sometimes not)
- Airport transfers

Worth asking about

- Room service, and whether it's 24 hours
- Minibar restocking
- Wi-Fi throughout the resort
- Dress codes and reservations at dinner
- Access to sister resorts nearby
- Club-level or upgraded room perks
- Whether gratuities are included
- Water parks or kids' areas at a sister resort

LOCAL TAXES AND FEES TO KNOW ABOUT

VISITAX: The state of Quintana Roo (where Cancun and the Riviera Maya are) requires every foreign tourist to pay this visitor fee. Pay it only on the official site, **visitax.gob.mx**, and keep the receipt on your phone.

Environmental sanitation fee: Cancun's local government charges a fee per room, per night, and hotels collect it from guests. Ask how your resort handles it so it isn't a surprise at check-in.

THOMAS'S TIP

Love trying new restaurants? Count how many à la carte restaurants the resort has and ask if they take reservations. On a week-long stay, it really matters.

SECTION 5

Airport transfers and arrival

The first hour after you land sets the tone for the whole trip. A little planning here goes a long way.

From the plane to the pool, step by step

1. **Immigration.** Mexico now records arrivals by air digitally. You'll get a stamp in your passport or go through an e-gate, and there's no paper tourist card to fill out on the plane. If you need proof of your stay, you can download your digital record (FMM) from Mexico's immigration institute (INM).
2. **Baggage claim and customs.** Collect your bags and follow the signs through customs.
3. **Walk past the sales desks.** Inside the arrivals hall, people will offer you rides, tours and "free" gifts, often in exchange for a timeshare presentation. Smile, say "no, gracias," and keep walking.
4. **Find your driver outside.** Pre-booked transfer companies meet you outside the terminal. Look for your company's sign, or your name on one.

Book your transfer in advance

- [ ] Choose a shared shuttle or a private car (better for families and late arrivals)
- [ ] Send your flight numbers so they can track delays
- [ ] Request car seats if you need them
- [ ] Save the company's meeting instructions and contact info offline
- [ ] Confirm your return pickup time a day before you leave

On the way home

- [ ] Check your airline's advice on how early to arrive. For international flights, two to three hours is typical.
- [ ] Add travel time from your resort, especially from the Riviera Maya
- [ ] Leave extra time on busy weekends and holidays
- [ ] Keep passports and medications in your carry-on

THOMAS'S TIP

Your room may not be ready when you land. Pack a swimsuit, sunscreen and a change of clothes in your carry-on so you can start your vacation by the pool while you wait.

SECTION 6

The best months to go

Cancun is warm all year. The real questions are rain, storms, seaweed and crowds.



DECEMBER TO APRIL

Dry season

Sunny days, lower humidity and the most reliable weather. It's also the busiest time, especially the winter holidays, Presidents' Week and spring break. Book early for these dates.

JUNE 1 TO NOVEMBER 30

Hurricane season

The Atlantic hurricane season officially runs June 1 to November 30, and it's usually most active from August through October. Most days are fine, with short afternoon showers, but travel insurance is a must in these months.

MAY AND NOVEMBER

The shoulder months

Often a great balance of good weather and fewer crowds. It can be hot and humid in May, and early November is still technically hurricane season.

MOSTLY SPRING AND SUMMER

Sargassum seaweed

Seaweed can wash up on Caribbean beaches, mostly in spring and summer, and it varies a lot by year and by beach. Mexico's Navy (SEMAR) publishes sargassum bulletins during the season, and many resorts clear their beaches each morning.

THOMAS'S TIP

Have to travel during school breaks? That's fine. Book early, and pick a resort with great pools so a seaweed day or a rainy afternoon doesn't spoil anything.

SECTION 7

Tipping customs

At an all-inclusive, gratuities are often built into your stay, but tipping is still customary in Mexico and is always appreciated by the people taking care of you.

FIRST, CHECK YOUR RESORT'S POLICY

Some resorts say gratuities are included and tipping is optional. A few ask guests not to tip at all. Read your resort's policy (or ask me) before you go, and follow it.

Who people commonly tip

Bartenders and servers

A small tip now and then, especially at à la carte dinners or when someone goes above and beyond.

Housekeeping

Many guests leave a little each day rather than one tip at the end, since staff can change during the week.

Bell staff and drivers

A small tip when they help with your luggage, and for your airport transfer driver.

Tour guides and spa staff

Customary for excursions. At the spa, check your bill first, as a service charge may already be added.

How to tip

- [ ] **Pesos or U.S. dollars.** Both are widely accepted in resort areas. Pesos are the local currency and are often appreciated more.
- [ ] **Bring small bills.** Have a stack of small bills ready, because change can be hard to come by.
- [ ] **Off the resort,** about 10 to 15 percent is customary at restaurants. Check the bill first in case a service charge (*servicio incluido*) has already been added.
- [ ] **Use ATMs inside banks or the resort,** and choose to be charged in pesos when a card machine asks.

A few handy words

Gracias

Thank you. Add *muchas* for "thank you very much."

Por favor

Please. Pair it with a smile and you're all set.

La cuenta

The check, for when you eat off the resort.

THOMAS'S TIP

A kind word goes a long way too. Learn the names of the people who look after you, and mention them in a review or to the manager. It truly helps them.

SECTION 8

Your Cancun planning checklist

Print this page and check things off as you go.

Documents and entry

- [ ] A valid U.S. passport **book** for everyone, babies included. A passport card is not valid for flying to Mexico.
- [ ] Check passport dates now. I like at least six months left as a cushion.
- [ ] Pay VISITAX on the official site, visitax.gob.mx, and save the receipt
- [ ] Traveling with a child without both parents? Carry a signed consent letter as a smart precaution.
- [ ] Not a U.S. citizen? Check Mexico's entry rules for your nationality.
- [ ] Enroll in the State Department's STEP program (free)
- [ ] Buy travel insurance, especially for hurricane season

Before you go

- [ ] Read your resort's all-inclusive list and tipping policy
- [ ] Book your airport transfer, round trip
- [ ] Ask how dinner reservations work
- [ ] Tell your bank and card company you're traveling
- [ ] Check your phone plan for international use
- [ ] Download the resort's app, if it has one

Packing

- [ ] Swimsuits (at least two, so one can dry)
- [ ] Reef-friendly, biodegradable sunscreen. Many eco-parks and cenotes require it.
- [ ] Hat, sunglasses and a cover-up
- [ ] Light, breathable clothes plus one or two nicer outfits for dinner
- [ ] Closed-toe shoes for any restaurant dress codes
- [ ] Water shoes for cenotes and rocky beaches
- [ ] Bug spray and after-sun lotion
- [ ] A refillable water bottle
- [ ] Medications in their original containers, in your carry-on
- [ ] Small bills in pesos or U.S. dollars for tips
- [ ] A waterproof phone pouch

> **THOMAS'S TIP**
> Drink bottled or purified water, which resorts provide, and use it to brush your teeth too. Please don't email passport numbers or card details. We'll handle those securely.

Want me to plan it for you?

Reach out at

travelwiththomastoday.com

I'll help you choose the right area and the right resort for the way you like to travel, compare what's really included, line up your airport transfers and help you pick your dates. No pressure, just a friendly conversation about your perfect week in the sun.

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Official sources (checked November 9, 2026): U.S. Department of State, Mexico international travel information and passport card guidance (travel.state.gov) · Government of Quintana Roo, VISITAX (visitax.gob.mx) · Instituto Nacional de Migración, digital FMM guidance (inm.gob.mx) · Municipality of Benito Juárez (Cancun), environmental sanitation fee · NOAA National Hurricane Center, Atlantic hurricane season · Secretaría de Marina (SEMAR), sargassum monitoring bulletins.

Entry rules, fees, resort policies and inclusions are subject to change. Confirm the latest with official sources and your resort before you travel. Drive times are estimates. Travel With Thomas Today is an independent travel advisor and is not affiliated with any resort or brand mentioned. Illustrations were drawn for this guide; the map is not to scale. This guide contains no AI-generated images.