Mexico News
DAILY

Capital One Shopping

Coupon codes found!

Capital One Shopping is a free browser extension that applies coupon codes in seconds.

Apply Codes

Why Holbox is Mexico's perfect island paradise

Stewart Merritt July 5, 2024

6

The quiet island of Holbox offers tranquility, nature and comfort to visitors. The sleepy sandbar has garnered a reputation for sustainable tourism and is untouched by the commercial development that has plagued the rest of Quintana Roo. (Rosie Buller)

Share

A thin strip of sand on the northern tip of the Yucatán peninsula, Holbox is an attractive draw for the traveler looking for a Caribbean paradise free of the tourist hordes of Cancún and Tulúm. While the island is certainly geared toward tourism, the scale of the operation here is such that you feel like you are a somewhat discreet traveler, someone in-the-know and perhaps more enlightened than those masses lined up in front of Señor Frogs in Cancún. Travel guides to Holbox are still quite rare, and the island still has the feel of the Mexico of 30 years ago.

This is an island with outstanding natural beauty, a marrow-deep chill, superlative dining options, and a range of accommodations for the eco-minded traveler. The following is an account of some of the best places I stayed and ate over the course of a recent trip with my fiancé.

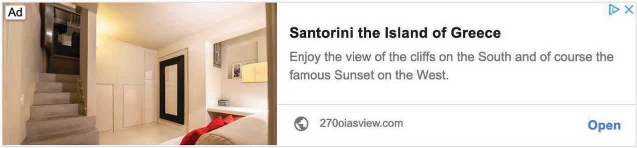
El Tuk-Tuk
Don't Panic!! It's Organic Vegan Ice Cream

The underdeveloped island – which has no proper roads – is a paradise for those looking to get back to basics. (Rosie Buller)

Getting to Holbox

Should you decide to come via bus, ADO has comfortable daily service from Cancún and Mérida to Chiquilá. If you want to get to Holbox as quickly as possible and in style, there is a small airport on the island, and Holbox Air offers private charters on small Cessna and Piper planes to destinations around the Yucatán peninsula.

If you choose to drive, Highway 180D from Cancún or Mérida is a smooth trip, though one that perhaps feels longer for its flat terrain and utter lack of landmarks or scenery. Once you turn off towards the port town of Chiquilá, beware the final stretch of Highway 5, as it is littered with bathtub-sized potholes capable of doing serious damage to your car (or, worse, your relationship). I can still hear my fiancé's "Cuidado! Watch the road!" reverberating in my ears.


Ad

Santorini the Island of Greece

Enjoy the view of the cliffs on the South and of course the famous Sunset on the West.

270oiasview.com Open

Any travel-related discord is soon forgotten, however, once you arrive in Chiquilá and board a ferry. Two ferry services leave every 30 minutes, both fast and cheap, offering outdoor seating that gives that tingling anticipation feeling as the island comes closer into view.

Once you arrive on the island, a line of golf cart taxis will be waiting to take you to your destination, with fixed rates depending on where you're headed. Not only are the golf carts a fun reminder you are no longer on the mainland, but taxis on Holbox have virtually none of the pushy salesmanship you see in other, more commercialized areas of the Yucatán region.

Where to stay on Holbox

Don't let the lack of commercialization fool you, though; Holbox has plenty of luxurious hotels for travellers who want some comfort. (Casa Cat Ba/Tripadvisor)

That fact is reflective of a larger reality: for an island whose main source of revenue is tourism, Holbox is mercifully free of the commercial, one-size-fits-all mass tourism found in other popular resort areas. Instead of giant high-rise hotels, the traveler has options that run from funky hostels to chic boutiques to small, five-star beachside resorts. In order to get a feel for the range of accommodation on offer, we decided to try a sample of all three.

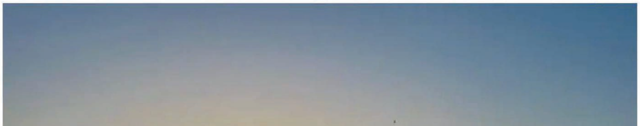
There are many reasons why staying in a hostel is a great travel option affordability, ease of making friends, the communal vibe. Hostel Tribu checks every box. The hostel sits one block off the beach and features a charmingly funky design, group activities ranging from full moon kayak excursions to twerk classes, open mics on the second-floor bar, and a restaurant serving inspired fusion cuisine. Owner Davide Coggi creates a welcoming atmosphere and — importantly for an island business — has committed to reducing the hostel's waste with an innovative composting program.

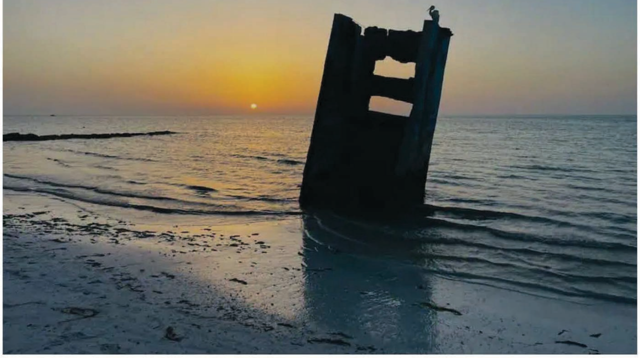
Hotels in Holbox
from $57
Book Now
Hotels in Portofino
from $235
Book Now
Hotels in Zihuatanejo
from $58
Book Now
Compare Hotel Prices
KAYAK.com

gorgeously decorated rooms and common spaces. Each of the six rooms has a balcony with a view west over the sea, perfect for watching the sunset turn the clouds from popcorn puffs to a color closer to the pink of Holbox's flamingos. Take it in with a passion fruit mezcalita in your hand.

Beyond the gorgeous setting and the comfort of the rooms what stands out about Casa Cat Ba is the easy-going, charismatic hospitality of the staff. Hotel manager Ivette told me she hopes guests "feel like family from the moment they arrive" and leave feeling like the place is a "home away from home" — true on both counts in our case. For the eco-minded traveler, Casa Cat Ba is a smart option as well, as they display a commitment to mitigating their impact on the island's fragile ecosystem, with as close to zero waste operation as can be imagined. Oh, and the breakfasts were fresh and varied every morning. Eating the best avocado toast of your life as the sun rises over the Caribbean is a moment you won't soon forget.

Ad by Lite
Here Are 97 of the Coolest Gifts for 2024





Sunrise and sunsets on Holbox are a dream. (Rosie Buller)

We stayed three nights in Casa Cat Ba and were sad to leave, but our next stop proved to be a delight: Las Hamacas Club de Playa on the eastern edge of the main beach. This is the spot to go if you want a bit more privacy from the bustle of downtown Holbox. The small resort is everything you could want in a dreamy escape, with an attentive smiling staff, spacious rooms with modern amenities and private balconies with a view of the sea. There is a large pool for guests only, with a swim up bar serving some of the finest cocktails on the island. The restaurant has both spectacular views and serves contemporary seafood and grill cuisine. A sand bar just off the shoreline makes for a picturesque spot to catch the sunset, as the numerous selfie stick wielding influencers can attest.

On our last night on the island, we thought we'd try something romantic for dinner. We asked around town for a good date night spot, and the locals told us to go to Parador 33, a cozy, open-air spot tucked away from the bustle of the main street.

Dinner on Holbox is also as good as you might expect, with restaurants like Parada 33 offering delicious food and wine options. (Holbox Travel)

Here, the mood was familial, with barefoot kids mingling with the stray cats underfoot, and yet it remained intimate with low lighting, the best wine list we saw on the island, and an innovative menu. A highlight was the steak, cooked in an outer shell of rosemary-tinged dough which, cracked open tableside, revealed a tender cut of meat. A glass of malbec was the perfect pairing here.

For some, lying on the beach all day and watching the sunset is what vacation is all about. For the more active-minded traveler, the island has a range of activities. A dominant westerly wind means kiteboarding is an option, and there are a plethora of schools for lessons and rental gear. The yearly whale shark season attracts visitors who wish to see these giant fish up close. Personally, we swam great distances every morning, following the current east to west along a string of buoys a half kilometer offshore.

The end of a trip can be a jarring experience. For us, it was an alarm clock blasting us into get-away-day reality at 6 a.m., the somber shuffle out of our room at Las Hamacas, the waiting golf cart cab. As we bounced through the sand streets on the way to the ferry we watched the sunrise over the sea, not a trace of wind over the glassy surface. As we were dragged into the nagging concerns of the mainland — getting the car out of the parking, the coming highway tolls, the potholes — the mind couldn't help but try to stay in the moment, enjoying the last view of the island's beauty.

Stewart Merritt is a professor and freelance writer based in Mérida. A native of California, he has been visiting Mexico his entire life, especially the Pacific coast, where he likes to surf. This summer he will marry his Yucatecan fiancé.

6 COMMENTS

Have something to say? Paid Subscribers get all access to make & read comments.

Subscribe Today!

MND_YOU MAY ALSO LIKE

The ultimate guide to the districts of Mexico City

Bethany Platanella

July 6, 2024 0

Travel writer Bethany Platanella fearlessly traverses every inch of the capital to bring you the first installment of this comprehensive breakdown of Mexico City.

Over 300 flights canceled in Cancún and Tulum as Beryl hits Mexico

MND Staff

July 5, 2024 0

The Tulum airport grounded all airplanes for three days as the storm bore down on the Yucatán Peninsula.

Mexico's Tourism Ministry names 12 new 'Magical Neighborhoods'

MND Staff

July 2, 2024 5

San Jose del Cabo, Tepic and Tlalnepantla are among the cities whose historic neighborhoods were recognized by the Tourism Ministry this week.

#1 Car Scratch Tool Easily Erases Any Scratches And Dents Instantly...

NanoSparkle