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NEXT STOP | ISLA HOLBOX, MEXICO

Where the Streets Are Paved With Sand

By [MICHELLE HIGGINS](#)

THE road to Holbox isn't an entirely promising one. Our trip to this small Mexican island began much the way my husband and I had been told to expect: with a ride in a dented van that, an hour after leaving the [Cancún](#) airport, veered off the main highway and onto a dirt path blocked by two men who collected a small fee from our driver before letting us pass through.

Then the van rumbled along the dirt road before hitting a stretch of pothole-covered pavement. Eventually we arrived at the weather-beaten ferry in the scrappy town of Chiquilá that would take us to Isla Holbox, a spit of land six miles off the northern coast of the Yucatán Peninsula.

Forty minutes later, we encountered a landscape with no high-rises, no chain hotels, no A.T.M.'s, only a handful of cars — with most people darting around on [bikes](#), motor scooters and [golf](#) carts — and a dozen or so small hotels within walking distance of the ferry pier.

We were just 93 miles from Cancún, but we felt as though we were light years removed from the huge resorts (and huge crowds) of that popular destination for honeymooners and spring breakers.

“We don't have any big hotels for big crowds who are looking for all-inclusive offers and parties all day long,” said Manfred Pozvek, who together with his girlfriend, Petra Bara, manages Villas Chimay, an eco-hotel on a tranquil speck of beach on the western end of the island.

The couple, who moved to Holbox (pronounced OHL-bosh) from [Switzerland](#) last year after seeing an ad to rent the property in a Swiss newspaper, can switch from French to Spanish to English without a blink and warmly welcome visitors, taking time out from cleaning rooms or other hotel chores to show guests a room and chat about the island.

The trip is “a little bit of an adventure,” Mr. Pozvek said. “But those people who are doing the trip will see that it's worth it.”

Though the island measures about 25 miles in length, it is less than 2 miles wide at its broadest point, and only a small portion is inhabited. The southern part is made up mostly of mangroves, while the northern shore is all beach. The only town is a collection of colorfully painted one- and two-story concrete structures on a grid of about a dozen blocks. Even in town, the roads are made of packed white sand.

About 2,000 people live on the island, working mostly as fishermen or in the tourism trade. On the beach near town, pedestrians must tread carefully, stepping over boat tethers and rolled up [fishing](#) nets. In the late afternoon, pushy pelicans and seagulls congregate around fishing boats anchored just offshore, poised to gobble up any scraps that the fishermen discard as they gut and clean the day's catch.

Whale sharks, the largest of all fish, migrate to the waters off the coast of Holbox from June through September and have become big business as the focus of an increasingly popular day trip from Cancún. For about 800 pesos (about \$73 at 11 pesos to the dollar), tour operators offer the chance to swim with the spotted giants, which can grow to 40 feet long and are said to be gentle.

There were no whale sharks to be seen at the end of January, when my husband, Greg, and I visited the island, but there were plenty of nature tours to nearby cays, [kayaking](#) tours through mangroves and boat tours to Isla de los Pájaros, or Island of Birds, where pelicans, frigates and various migratory birds roost.

The island is pancake flat with scrubby vegetation. At low tide, the receding waters reveal tide pools and ripples in the wet sand. Sandbars emerge like a mirage, a haze blurring the outlines of pelicans and other seafaring birds that congregate on the temporary islets. In January, the potent smell of seaweed wafted up occasionally, but mosquitoes, which we were warned of and prepared for with DEET and citronella candles, were scarce.

Holbox, which means black hole in the Maya language, is said to have been named after a dark lagoon in the southern part of the island. And locals say the Maya considered a freshwater lagoon, Yalahau, about a 20-minute boat ride from the island, to be a sacred fountain of youth.

In October 2005, Hurricane Wilma devastated Holbox, and though the island has largely recovered, evidence of the destruction still remains in spots. A stroll or golf cart ride along the beach takes you past several hotels, some set back farther than others. Nearly all are made with thatched roofs and are no more than two or three stories high. Villas Flamingos, one of the farthest from town on the eastern side of the island, sits next to the skeleton of the former Hotel Pelicano, its first story largely washed away in the storm. Foot-long iguanas now sun

themselves on the broken-tile floor.

On a breezy afternoon in late January, visitors would find the central square mostly deserted, making the rusted stop signs at each corner seem silly. But around 7 p.m., when the restaurants opened for dinner, a steady stream of golf carts and scooters — many piloted by children and carrying more people than they were designed for — brought the plaza to life and gave meaning to the stop signs.

Local children frolicked on the jungle gym of a new playground in the center of town while adults gathered around the edges to chat. And tourists, most of them European, dined on the catch of the day at the various restaurants around the square.

By general consensus, the best restaurant on the island is at Casa Sandra hotel, where diners sip mojitos by candlelight and the Cuban chef visits each table to describe the specials. (Be sure to try Grandma's meatballs for 125 pesos.) Sandra Pérez Lozano, Casa Sandra's owner and a writer, came to Holbox looking for solitude close to nature and in 1999 built her two-story thatched-roof hotel with a full-length front porch and a second-story terrace to take in the ocean.

But the future of the island, she later wrote in an e-mail message, is difficult to predict. "Although we want it to remain in silence," she wrote, in Spanish, "the money and the hotel industry in this region are very powerful and could end this secret wonder of the [Caribbean](#)."

VISITOR INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

If you are traveling from [Cancún](#) by car, take Route 180 toward Mérida to Nuevo Xcan. At the crossroads, take the road to the port at Chiquilá, passing by El Cedral, Kantunilkin and Solferino. The trip takes two to two and a half hours. A taxi from Cancún runs about 700 pesos (about \$64 at 11 pesos to the dollar). At Chiquilá, you can catch a "fast ferry" to the island for 40 pesos a person, which takes 20 minutes, or a slow ferry (40 minutes) for 20 pesos. Any hotel can give you departure times, and most will arrange a transfer from Cancún to Holbox for about \$130 a person round trip, including ferry. Aersaab (52 984-873-0804; www.aersaab.com) offers flights to Holbox from Cancún for \$590 for up to five passengers.

WHERE TO STAY

Villas Chimay (52-984-875-2220; www.holbox.info) is a five-room eco-resort with a solar and

wind energy system. Rooms, with composting toilets and no air-conditioning, start at \$50 a night.

Villas Paraiso del Mar (52-984-875-2062; www.holbox-island.com) offers 36 suites. Junior suites with air-conditioning and TVs start at \$135 a night.

Xaloc Resort (52-984-875-2160; www.holbox-xalocresort.com) has 18 bungalows, not air-conditioned, from \$90.

WHERE TO EAT

Casa Sandra (52-984-875-2171, www.casasandra.com) offers Cuban and Thai-influenced cuisine. For lunch, try the lobster pizza for 300 pesos at Edelin Restaurant (52-984-875-2024) on the town square. The restaurant at Hotel Faro Viejo (52-984-875-2217; www.faroviejoholbox.com.mx) offers good food by the beach; seafood tacos are 550 pesos.

WHAT TO BRING

Cash. There is no bank or A.T.M. on the island. American Express traveler's checks can be changed at most hotels. A flashlight is handy for nighttime walks.

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