

# Isla Blanca

## *So close and yet so far away*

Walking along with the waves lapping at your feet, it's amazing that you have this paradise to yourselves. The sand is soft and white, the sea a delicious shade of turquoise, and palm fronds sway in the balmy breeze.

Less than an hour away, the beaches, restaurants and bars of Cancún are bustling with the activity of thousands of tourists. You left that behind when you drove past the resorts and up a sandy little road. That's where you found this hidden gem.

Out here you're in a different world. You can stroll along this brilliant beach immersed in the beauty of nature, with no cars, no hotels, and just the sound of the waves. As the Mexicans say, "*muy tranquilo!*"



## *1969: Cancún was an island with just 3 people*

Back in the 1960s, Cancún was a skinny little island of dunes, separated from the mainland by an enormous lagoon. The mainland was wild, with jungles, swamps, and colorful birds. The island had glorious beaches by a sparkling sea, but almost no one saw them. Just three men lived here, caretakers for a coconut plantation.

Mexican President Diaz Ordaz wanted to boost tourism by creating a new resort destination. They selected Cancún as the spot, and began work in 1970. This was an enormous undertaking. They cut through mangroves and filled in wetlands. They built the tourist zone on the island (hotels, restaurants and shops), the residential district on the mainland (houses, churches, and schools), and bridges between them.

In just a few years they turned the jungle into a brand new city. In 1974 the airport and first hotels opened, and the rest is history. Today, 3 million visitors a year enjoy these sandy shores.

But at Isla Blanca, if you walk up the beach a bit, the people disappear. Gaze around, and imagine... Just a few decades ago, this is what all of Cancún looked like.



## *It's two beaches in one*

You didn't need a ferry to get to Isla Blanca. This "island" is really a narrow spit of land with water on both sides, an easy drive from Cancún.

On one side you see the luminous hues of the Caribbean Sea rolling onto a soft, sandy beach. Just steps away, on the other side, you find the placid waters of Chacmuhuc Lagoon. It's shallow and sheltered, perfect for kids to splash and play.

As the sun sinks lower it casts a spellbinding glow over the water. Day users pack up to head home, while a lucky few get to spend the night here, camping on this big, beautiful beach.

## *Those wonderful trade winds*

Yucatán beaches never reach the scorching high temperatures that can hit inland locations. Along the coast, the ocean breeze keeps things cooler, thanks to the remarkably reliable trade winds.

The "trade winds" were so named because sailing cargo ships counted on their predictability to navigate the oceans. Sometimes captains would head off in seemingly the wrong direction, because they knew that would let them pick up an airflow that would carry them to their destination.

That breeze you're feeling carries a hint of distant lands. From the shores of Africa, these winds blow across the Atlantic and through the Caribbean, before finally reaching the beaches of the Yucatán.

## *Kites + boards = thrills*

Aside from cooling things off, these predictable winds are also prized by kiteboarders. Athletes stand on a specialized board, while steering a high-flying kite attached to their harness. When they catch the wind they fly across the water, and can make some astonishing jumps, too.

First patented in 1977, this new sport caught on like wildfire. Major manufacturers joined the field in 1999, and today there are over a million kiteboarders worldwide.

"Kitesurfing" is basically "kiteboarding" with waves. Isla Blanca, with the surf on one side and a calm lagoon on the other, offers both. It's a great place to try this exciting sport, or you can just enjoy the show!





## Adventure How To

### Adventure level

Day trip      Beach camping

This is very close to Cancún. If you rent a car, a day trip is easily done.

Camping on the beach is an amazing experience and a bigger adventure, requiring more time, gear and preparation. Learning to kiteboard is an adventure, too!

### Where it is

Isla Blanca is on the northeast coast of the Yucatán peninsula. It's in the state of Quintana Roo, less than an hour north of Cancún.

📍 GPS: 21.32963, -86.79829

### How to get there

#### Drive planning

- ▶ Cancún to Isla Blanca - 32 km (20 mi), 45 minutes

#### Directions

- ▶ From Cancún's hotel zone, take Blvd Kukulcan towards the city
- ▶ Turn right (north) onto Ave Bonampak
- ▶ Continue north past the Punta Sam ferry dock and some large resorts

- ▶ When the pavement ends, continue on the wide, graded, sandy dirt road
- ▶ At the end, there's a rope across the road where you pay the entry fee

#### Without a car

There's no public transportation. You could take a taxi, but unless you also pay him to wait for you, it could be difficult to get back to town. It's best to have a car.

### When to go

#### Season to visit

Hurricane season is June to November. The last of these massive storms to strike Cancún was Hurricane Dean in 2007. Even if it misses you, a hurricane can bring heavy rains to a vast area.

The dry season is winter and spring, when people from cold climates love escaping to sunny Cancún. The wet season is summer and fall, with the most rain in September and October. August is the hottest month, with highs near 35C (95F).

Isla Blanca is better known among locals than tourists, so hot or not, it's busiest during the summer. That's when school is out and

families head to the beach.

#### Timing your visit

Weekends and holidays are the most popular times. For a more peaceful beach experience, try for weekdays, and avoid major holidays like Semana Santa (the week before Easter).

### Site details

When you arrive, an attendant collects the fee, then lets you through to the lagoon side. There's ample space there for parking on hard-packed sand. Overnight camping (RV or tent) is allowed - just let them know when you enter.

On weekends and holidays, this is a popular family place. People bring coolers of drinks and snacks, and spend the day. But if you walk just a short way up the beach, you can find a quiet spot for a romantic picnic.

A small restaurant sells casual fare, and you may also see vendors walking the beach selling cut fruit and snacks. Everything closes about 6p.

Note: The police sometimes stop drivers leaving Isla Blanca who have had too many cervezas.

#### Prices

- Day use = 35 pesos per car
- Camping = 200 pesos (includes day use) And just put in a bunch of stuff here to make sure the hanging indents work properly.
- Bathrooms = 10 pesos
- Beach chair rental = 150 pesos

Whether you're an experienced kiteboarder or you want to try it out for the first time, the following places have lessons and equipment rentals. It takes time to master, but a day can give you a taste. They're both just a short way before the beach entrance.

#### Ikarus Kiteboarding Center

Equipment rentals and classes. The first kiteboarding school in Mexico.

📍 GPS: 21.32217, -86.80837  
→ <http://www.kiteboardmexico.com>

#### I-Ride Surf School

Equipment and classes for kiteboarding, windsurfing, and stand up paddle boarding.

📍 GPS: 21.31736, -86.80556  
→ <https://www.i-rideadventures.com>



### Where to stay

This is a short enough drive from Cancún that you can easily return to your hotel for the night. If you want to stay longer, there are options:

#### Isla Blanca Camping

If you've got the gear, you can camp on the beach. On weekdays in the off season, you may even have the place to yourselves at night - an amazing feeling. No electricity, hookups, or other facilities. (200 pesos)

📍 GPS: 21.32963, -86.79829

#### Isla Blanca B&B

Just a bit south of Isla Blanca beach, this is a 2-story house facing the sea. 6 rooms with private baths, shared kitchen, living room, dining room, and rooftop terrace. Home of I-Ride Adventures. (\$90 USD and up)

📍 GPS: 21.31736, -86.80556  
→ <http://islablancabnb.com>

### Be prepared

- ❑ Plan ahead. There are no stores out here, so buy whatever you need before leaving Cancún. There are also no gas stations, so make sure you've got enough for the round trip.

## Adventure How To

- ❑ **Food and drink.** You can pack a picnic lunch, bring drinks and snacks, or eat at the casual restaurant (daytime only).
- ❑ **Beach things.** Bring swimsuits, towels, beach mats, beach chairs, sand toys, etc. There's little shade, so an umbrella is helpful.
- ❑ **Basics.** Camera, sunscreen, sunglasses, and a sun hat. Insect repellent is a good idea. As long as the breeze is blowing, you won't see many mosquitoes, but they may come out if it dies down.
- ❑ **Extras.** This is a good place to fly a kite, and binoculars are handy for watching birds or kiteboarders.
- ❑ **If you're camping.** Consider sand stakes for a tent, since regular stakes don't hold well in sand. Also bring plenty of fresh water to rinse off after swimming.

## Zennie tips

Navigation. My GPS apps didn't know about all the new construction going on.

You may find things that don't exactly match, like a roundabout that shows 3 roads on your device, while you see 4 roads in front of you. Just remember your goal is north, and don't enter the resorts.

- ☉ Sand driving. Just before you get to the beach entry, there's a short stretch with some soft sand. Don't stop. Keep some momentum, and you'll be through it quickly. Once you reach the lagoon side, it's hard packed, and easy for driving.
- ☉ Watch the tide. Don't park anywhere that looks wet, because it may be covered with water later if the tide comes up. Stick to the drier parts of the beach.
- ☉ Go now! It's really remarkable that you can be alone on a beautiful beach like this, so close to Cancún. With all the development going on, it's just a matter of time before this place disappears. See it before it's too late!

## Something extra - Tikin Xic

Tikin Xic is a delicious fish dish that's a Yucatán Maya specialty. Achiote is a key ingredient. Also called annatto, this is a seed that gives dishes a pungent flavor and a bright red-orange color.

For Tikin Xic (also spelled Tin-Kin-Xic), achiote is mixed with chiles, cumin, cinnamon, oregano, cloves, garlic, orange juice and lime juice. This pasty marinade is applied to the fish, and left to work its magic.

After marinating, the fish is wrapped in banana leaves with pickled onions, then grilled or roasted. It comes out moist and tender, with a rich, spicy flavor. This is a beautiful place to try it.



The road to Isla Blanca



# Flamingos

## *A shocking streak of pink*

As your lancha slices through the water, you notice a thin stripe of neon pink floating in the distance. It's startling, brilliant, and looks completely out of place, like someone took a slender paintbrush to the placid scene in front of you.

Getting closer, the pink line turns into a flock of rosy flamingos standing and feeding in the shallow waters. Thousands of these elegant birds make their seasonal home here, and it's a thrilling sight.

Your boat driver cuts the engine so you can float quietly and observe these long-legged birds. Every once in awhile something triggers a group to take off. They fly with neck and legs fully extended, and honk like geese as they wing their way overhead. Now that's something you'll never see in a zoo!

*Lanchas wait to take you to the flamingos*

## *The secret life of mangroves*

You're here for the flamingos, but the shallow estuaries they love are a haven for other wildlife too. Your boat passes dense forests of mangroves, with their tangled root system stretching high above the water.

Crocodiles lounge on the banks and you spot one old monster just lying in the sun, like he's waiting for his prey to come to him. They're deceptive, though. When they want to, these prehistoric reptiles can move with surprising speed.

Your guide points out a stately tiger heron sitting on a broken stump with its latest catch. Snowy white egrets perch along the shore, staring intently into the water. It's all part of this unusual and beautiful ecosystem the flamingos call home.

## "Snowbirds" of the Yucatán

Just like some humans, the Yucatán flamingos have their summer home and their winter home, and move back and forth between the two every year.

Their winter home (December to March) is near the small town of Celestún, on the western side of Yucatán state. There's a skinny peninsula with a beach on one side that stretches for miles along the Gulf of Mexico. On the other side is the mangrove estuary where the flamingos come to mate.

For the summer (April to November) the birds move to the eastern side of the state, near the peaceful fishing town of Rio Lagartos. It's a scenic place with an enormous inlet where the flamingos nest and raise their young.

## Mangrove tunnels and magic mud

The flamingos are the undisputed stars of the show, but there's more.

At Celestún the boats take you into a wonderful tunnel through the mangroves. It's an eerie feeling, floating here surrounded on all sides. You can follow a boardwalk into the forest to reach a fresh water spring. Brave souls go for a swim here, but watch for crocodiles resting nearby.

At Rio Lagartos most boats stop at Baño Maya, an area with special mud that's purportedly good for your skin. You can slather yourself with mud, and let it work its magic on the boat trip back. At the end there's a freshwater pool to rinse it all off.

## Adventure How To

### Adventure level

Option	Level	Notes
Either location		You can travel to a remote estuary, watch exotic tropical creatures, and stay in a small Yucatán town. And when you're lucky enough to spy a thousand flamingos, it's quite an experience!

### Where it is

Both Celestún and Rio Lagartos are in Yucatán state. Celestún is on the west coast, Rio Lagartos is on the north.

- ☉ Celestún - GPS: 20.86040, -90.39870
- ☉ Rio Lagartos - GPS: 21.59487, -88.15767

### How to get there

#### Drive planning

The driving is straightforward and this is totally doable.

- ▶ Mérida to Celestún = 100 km (62 mi), 1:45 driving time
- ▶ Valladolid to Rio Lagartos = 106 km (66 mi), 1:45
- ▶ Cancún to Rio Lagartos = 250 km (155 mi), 3:20

#### Directions

Celestún is easiest from Mérida. There is a new road under construction, but as of this writing it was far from complete. In the meantime, the small towns along the way can be interesting.

- ▶ In Mérida, get onto the Periférico (ring road)
- ▶ Take highway 281 west to Celestún

- ▶ Follow signs for Celestún and flamingos

Rio Lagartos is an easy drive from Valladolid and not too far from Cancún.

- ▶ From Cancún, take 180D (the Cuota, toll road) to Valladolid
- ▶ Turn north on 295 to Rio Lagartos
- ▶ Tizimín has a bypass to avoid city traffic, but some GPS programs route you straight through town anyway. The bypass is easier.

#### Without a car

Buses for Celestún leave Mérida hourly from the Noreste station on Calle 67, between Calles 50 and 52.

For Rio Lagartos, buses leave Valladolid hourly for Tizimín, from the station 2 blocks

west of the zócalo. Buses from Tizimín to Rio Lagartos run several times a day.

### When to go

#### Season to visit

- From December to March, flamingos congregate at Celestún.
- During the rest of the year, they move to Rio Lagartos.

Out of season, you may see a couple of flamingos. To see flocks of hundreds or thousands, you'll have to time your visit. It's not clear cut, though. Their travel dates shift from year to year, and they don't all move at the same time.

In the summer the coastal towns get busier, with residents of the hot interior escaping to the waterfront. You'll probably want an advance hotel reservation for a summer visit, especially on a weekend.

#### Timing your visit

You are most likely to see large flocks of flamingos early morning or late afternoon. During the day they disperse for feeding.

This means that although a day trip from Mérida or Valladolid is possible, it's not optimal for flamingo viewing. Here's a better alternative.

**Day 1** - Arrive in the afternoon. Stroll around town, enjoy some fresh seafood and spend the night.

**Day 2** - Grab an early boat. After your tour, have lunch by the water then depart.

### Site details

These small towns have an authentic, low key feel. Though tourism is significant to them, they are not tourist towns and there are few hotel and restaurant choices.

Both locations offer flamingo tours. Hours vary, so inquire locally for current times. They use small open boats, seating about 8 passengers. Some guides speak English but most do not.

A private boat is ideal if you have a group but it's expensive for just a couple. It's cheaper to share a boat with other people, but you may have to wait awhile for them to arrange it.

#### Celestún

- Private boat = 1,500 pesos
- Shared = 250 pesos per person

#### The bridge

Many boats leave from the dock by the bridge near the entrance to town. This is closest to the flamingos.

- ☉ GPS = 20.85771, -90.38397

#### The beach

You can also catch a boat from the beach. This involves a longer boat ride but prices are the same, so do whichever is most convenient for you.

- ☉ GPS = 20.85923, -90.40244

### Stretch out or curl up

#### Rio Lagartos

- Private boat = 1,800 pesos
- Shared = Depends on the number of people

#### Balneario Chiquilá

Boats leave from here for flamingos, birdwatching, and fishing trips. There's a large open air restaurant, ample parking, and a freshwater swimming hole.

- ☉ GPS = 21.59574, -88.14639

#### The waterfront

There are many boats and you'll probably get offers just strolling along the waterfront. Prices are all supposed to be the same (as set by the nature preserve).

- ⦿ GPS = Various

### Where to stay

#### Celestún hotel - Castillito Kin-Nah

Quiet small hotel with a sandy beach, about a mile north of town. Air conditioned rooms with terraces. Swimming pool, hammocks, and wifi. (1,800 pesos)

→ castillito-kin-nah.com

- ⦿ GPS: 20.87253, -90.39423

#### Celestún camping - Villas del Mar

Campground with hot showers, wifi, and palm trees. No hookups but water is available. Free kayaks, horseback riding for a fee. They also have a few modern rooms for rent. (Camping 150 pesos)

→ Celestúnvillasdelmar.webs.com

- ⦿ GPS: 20.853760, -90.402020

#### Rio Lagartos hotel - El Perico Marinero

Small hotel on the waterfront. Clean, basic rooms with AC, some facing the water. Swimming pool, simple breakfast is included. (1,000 pesos)

→ elpericomarinero.com

- ⦿ GPS: 21.59567, -88.15425

#### Rio Lagartos camping - Balneario Chiquilá

Flamingo tours, fresh water swimming hole, and a restaurant with wifi and bathrooms. Dry camping in the parking area. Electricity possible with a long extension cord. (100 pesos)

→ facebook.com/Riolagartoschiquila/

- ⦿ GPS: 21.595740, -88.146390

### Be prepared

- ☐ **Plan ahead.** Advance hotel reservations can be smart, especially for summer weekends and holidays.
- ☐ **Food and drink.** Both towns offer restaurants and small stores. Take a bottle of water on the tour.
- ☐ **Binoculars.** For the birds' protection the

boat drivers don't get too close, but binoculars give you an excellent view. Some boats provide a set to share but it's better if you have your own.

- ☐ **Waterproof bag.** Bring something to keep your camera, phone, and other essentials dry in case there's a rain shower or water splashing during the ride.
- ☐ **Water shoes.** From the Celestún beach you need to wade in to board the boat. Wear shoes that can get wet or are easy to remove.
- ☐ **Cash.** Most places do not take credit cards and you can't count on an ATM. Bring cash with you.
- ☐ **Basics.** Sunscreen, sun hat, insect repellent.
- ☐ **If you're camping.** At Celestún, if you camp at Villas del Mar you can just walk down the beach to catch the boats. At Rio Lagartos, you can camp at Chiquilá and boat tours leave from right there.

### Zennie tips

The flamingos' seasonal dates are not precise and it's especially hard to know where they'll be during transition months.

I visited Celestún in January and saw about a thousand flamingos. It was amazing! Locals told me that in February there could be several times that many.

On the other hand, I went to Rio Lagartos in April (the very beginning of their season) and only saw 9 flamingos. It's not the same as seeing hordes of them, but it's still interesting.

For the best chance of seeing a massive flock, plan your trip for the heart of flamingo season at either location. If (like most people) you have other constraints on your schedule, just play the odds and enjoy what you can see.

### Something extra

#### Rio Lagartos - The pink lagoon

It's not Photoshop - the water really is pink! A big sea salt operation evaporates water in a series of pools. The color changes along the way, becoming bright pink (best on a sunny day).

Boat trips often stop, but not in the best location and it may look more brown than pink. Don't despair. It's a half-hour drive to Las Coloradas, a better spot to see the famous pink shown above. At the village you can't miss it, and a mandatory guide will show you the best views. Floating in the super salty water is no longer allowed.

- ⦿ GPS: 21.60331, -87.99377

#### Celestún - Kayaking in the mangroves

Exploring the mangroves silently and slowly gives you a close-up view of this unusual ecosystem and a new appreciation for its wildlife.

A couple of blocks west of the Celestún bridge is a fishermen's co-op called Manglares de Dzinitun. A guide can pole you on a canoe through twisting passages, or you can take a kayak and paddle yourself.

- ⦿ GPS: 20.85560, -90.39192

*The pink lagoon is quite a sight*



