



Twenty minutes off the coast of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, Isla Holbox is a less visited natural wonder.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MALORNY, GETTY IMAGES

Visit this beautiful Mexican island with no car in sight

Go barefoot on pristine Isla Holbox, the Yucatán's best-kept secret.

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When you arrive on Isla Holbox, the first thing you'll notice is the greeting party: Cotton candy-colored flamingos wading in the shallow, six-mile-wide lagoon that separates the island from mainland Mexico.

The second is the lack of paved roads. Other stretches of the Yucatán Peninsula—which comprises the [Mexican](#) states of Yucatán, Quintana Roo and Campeche, as well as parts of Belize and Guatemala—are crisscrossed with roads and clogged with traffic. But most *holboxeños* get around the car-free, 26-mile-long island by bike, and the white-sand beaches see only a fraction of the six million visitors that crowd nearby Cancún and Cozumel.



The sun sets over a dock on Isla Holbox. Though a large development project was proposed in recent years, fishermen have retained their right to use the beach, preventing the construction of towering hotels.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALICIA VERA, REDUX

This fishermen's haven has been touted as the new Tulum, and while you'll see similarities (yoga studios, quartz bowl meditation), travelers don't come here to be seen—they come to get lost.

Holbox (pronounced hol-BOSH, meaning "black hole" in Maya) began attracting tourists a decade ago, and locals have since fought to stave off mega-resorts, [the *Washington Post* reports](#). There are no cars, no postal service, no banks, and no high-rises (buildings are not permitted to top 40 feet). Electricity reached the island in 1987, and even now, visitors should expect spotty cell and WiFi signals. Google Maps doesn't recognize the sandy pathways that function as informal streets, meaning you really should leave your phone behind and live in the moment. ([Related: This charming Dutch village doesn't allow cars.](#))



Dive into nature

Isla Holbox is part of Yum Balam, [Mexico's largest ecological reserve](#); nearly 75 percent of the island is a jungle of wild mangroves and empty beaches. The surrounding sea once swallowed up Spanish galleons; it's said that pirates looking for freshwater later settled on the island, which was inhabited by a few Maya families, [writes the *Financial Times*](#).

Days on Holbox revolve around the water. From June through September, [whale sharks](#) swim through the Gulf's phytoplankton-rich waters, and visitors can take a sea safari to watch them feed. Operators including [VIP Holbox Experience](#) offer snorkel sessions ([at a safe distance from the whale sharks](#)), with a guest-to-guide ratio of two-to-one. Sail to nearby Isla Pájaros to see the 150-plus species of birds, including frigates and flamingoes, that flock there to nest.



Whale sharks—massive, mysterious fish—swim through the waters near the island. From a safe distance, visitors can watch the animals feed on plankton during peak season from June to August.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN J. SKERRY, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

At sunset, the entire island seems to congregate at the pier to watch the fiery show. On moonless nights, the beaches twinkle with bioluminescent phytoplankton, sometimes glowing even brighter as kayakers' paddles stir the shallows.

Sip & stroll

Vibrant murals cover the wooden façades of shops and restaurants “downtown,” made up of a few blocks of sandy streets. The main drag—Calle Tiburón Ballena, or Whale Shark Street—divides the beach from thatched-roof boutique and family-run *hotelitos* and open-air eateries housed in palm frond-topped *palapas*. Only a small stretch of the skinny island is actually inhabited, and without the influx of international hotel chains, Holbox never feels overrun with tourists.