



Mexico's magical island
Cozumel

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SCOTT JOHNSON



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Cozumel

Cozumel combines the great reefs that one might find at the best dive spots around the warm Mexican Gulf waters with the laid back island life, where everything is close enough...

CLOCKWISE: Seahorse hides among fronds of soft coral; Octopus changing color for the camera; Tobaccofish hovers over purple coral on the reef off Cozumel

PREVIOUS PAGE: A diver explores the bright orange and gold colored sponges and coral growth of the reefs off the island of Cozumel

Yes, I know, Cozumel must have already been reviewed several times since you took up scuba diving, but the fact remains, that it is still one of the Caribbean's top destinations for diving enthusiasts from all over the world—from the novice to the very knowledgeable—and now it's safe again to go there, as Mexico has been cleared off the CDC's travel warning list for swine flu. It's time once again to enjoy the treats of this enchanting tropical paradise.

Cozumel combines the great reefs that one might find at the best dive spots around the warm Mexican Gulf waters with the laid back island life, where everything is close enough with a short taxi ride or a pleasurable bicycle tour. Indeed, the island has few routes, and a great set of beaches and coves. Almost every place offers gentle waves lapping warm sands. And there is always a beach bar or "tienda" around where you can get great refreshments at very low prices—an "honest-to-God" diving paradise, but then, you already knew that!

What can we say? Good ol' Jacques Cousteau baptized Cozumel as ze most beautiful div-

ing spot in the world, back in the 60s. Who are we to discredit the old master?

Since the French sanction of Cozumel as a divers' paradise on Earth—and just to make sure it sticks—the Mexican authorities established a huge marine park for the preservation of local flora and fauna as well as the means of income, based on sports tourism, that is the lifeline of the island.

Palancar Reef

There are many areas for scuba enthusiasts to choose from, but a great start is the internationally renown Palancar Reefs located between the Playa del Carmen coastline and the western side of



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COUNTER-CLOCKWISE:
Blue Tang; Lizardfish;
Gray angelfish (inset)

the island. This sheltered section has the clearest water. The best spots are a mere 20-30 minutes ride away, depending on where you start from.

El Arrecife Palancar (Palancar Reef), stretching for many kilometers on the western side of the island, is where divers can find amazing coral formations and a 'horseshoe' of coral heads, making for some of the world's finest underwater scenery with a stunning 70m (230ft) visibility range.

A haven for underwater photographers, Palancar is populated by many sea turtles (as large as they come), groupers, nurse sharks and the elusive "Palancar Catfish"—a crazy sight, if you can spot it hiding under the coral. Depths range between an easy 12 meters (40ft) at the north end, called Palancar Gardens, to more than 24 meters deep (80 ft), providing pros opportunities for fantastic deep-water diving.

There are some opportunities for great cavern diving, such as Devil's throat at 42 meters (139 ft) down at the south end called Punta Sur. See the video of it on YouTube.com at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ECFvuLBUNA&feature=fvw>. There are enough brightly colored fish and anemones to fulfill any underwater photographer's dreams.

Palancar Reef is as popular among divers as it can be, therefore its much-lauded coral formations are in constant peril. Visitors must purchase a wrist band pass and acknowledge the marine park regulations—one of them being the mandatory use of bio-degradable sunscreen lotion.

Cozumel

Many well-known brands offer such products, and it is in your best interest to get a few bottles at home, as prices on the island tend to be a trifle steep, and stocks aren't always plentiful. Boat rides to the diving spots on the reef are under a mile away from the shore (over one kilometer), so the best choice is to sign up for a day cruise or charter a boat from a local tour agency.

Sea life

Cozumel has so much underwater wild life that it is hard to mention every one of them, so I selected three I liked best—sites I think you will want to keep a lookout for and snap a few great shots of to show the folks back home. The variety of fish and other wondrous animals, apparently more than 250 species to choose from, might not be too apparent at first, but the more you dive, the better it gets!

Sea turtles

Here's one marine animal you can count on having a "tête-a-tête" with. Cozumel is full of them, some of which are quite large specimens, idly searching for their next meal and will cruise by you at a leisurely speed, not minding much to what's going on around them. And that is the great thing about these cute turtles—you really feel like a spectator of nature's great drama when you are with them. But fight the urge to piggyback a lift on one of them. They look sheepish, but have great beaks that can snap a coconut to piec-

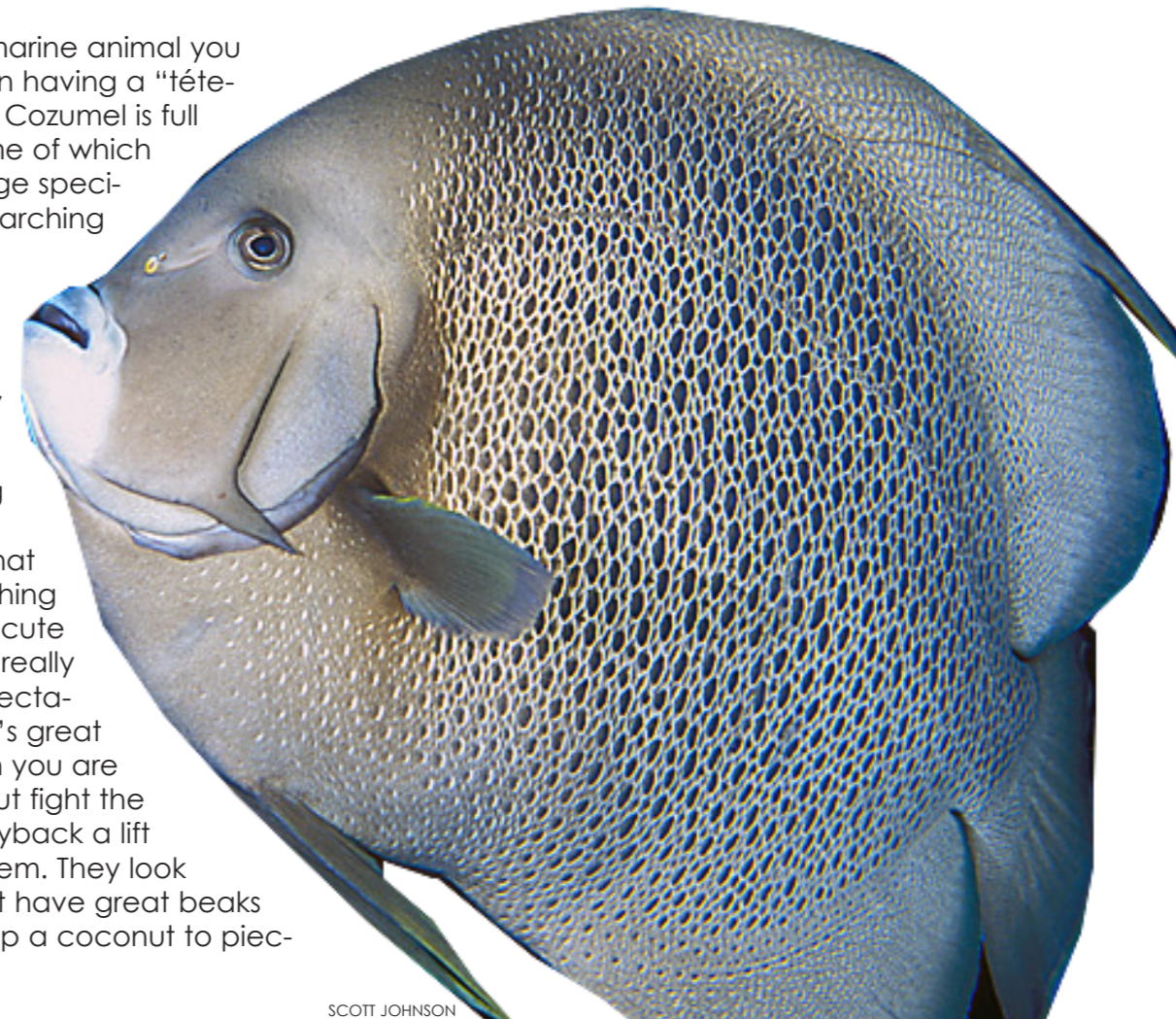


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Underwater photographer with friendly green moray eel



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Diver swims through a school of silversides (above); Cozumel Catfish, otherwise known as the toadfish (right); Local map illustration of the island of Cozumel (far right)

es, let alone your pinkies. Besides the danger of injury to oneself, there is also the risk of injury to the animal. The first rule of the responsible diver is to look only, don't touch—leave the wildlife alone. and don't harrass the critters.

Sea turtles have been around forever and consider Palancar their own backyard. Hence, they are one of the main protected species in the area. They have a sanctuary on the south end, where nests are kept under surveillance and have their own



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Diver investigates a giant sponge formation. RIGHT: Angelfish

protection program.

If you want to witness the miracle of baby sea turtles hatching and dashing off to sea, just contact the Turtle Salvation Program at the Cozumel Volunteer Connection office, located at 602-B (upstairs) Raphael Melgar Avenue right next door to the Naval Base. The program's director, Rodrigo Navarro, along with several committee members and dedicated volunteers, are doing whatever they can to keep the Turtle Salvation Program going with what little



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Barracudas

Nasty looking, long fairly compressed, elongated bodies covered with small, smooth scales led by large mouths with fang-like teeth... Sounds scary? Like sharks, barracudas have a bad, although undeserved, reputation. Rare and unproven reports of unprovoked attacks are known, however, the fish are sea scavengers and will respond to shiny objects. So, if you are sporting a bellybutton ring, it pays not to dangle it in front of these lighting fast beasts.

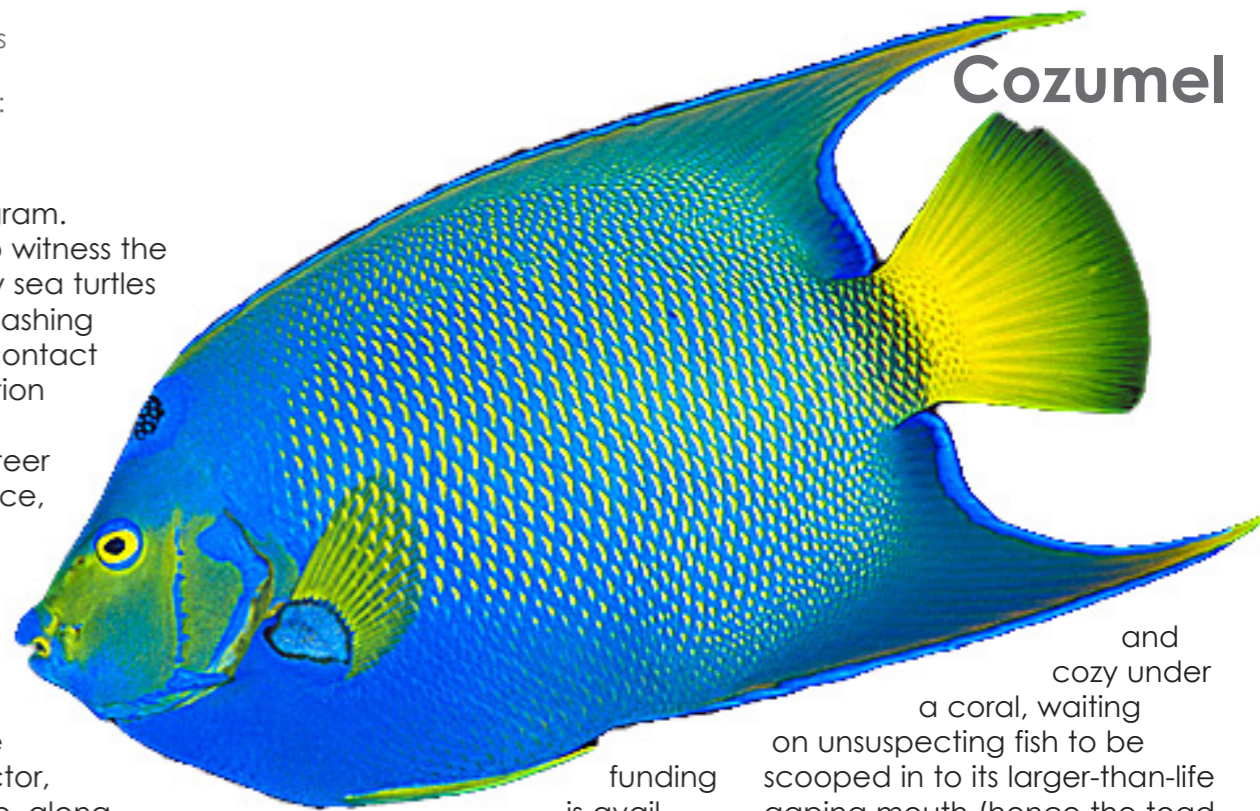
Cozumel Catfish

Cozumel Catfish (a.k.a. toadfish) are Cozumel's endemic catfish and a sight to be seen. Bearded, freaky-looking, striped like a yellow bug-eyed zebra, the catfish favors holing up, safe



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you managed to see one. Ask your dive guide to keep a look-out—it's a real treat!



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and cozy under a coral, waiting on unsuspecting fish to be scooped in to its larger-than-life gaping mouth (hence the toad reference) as the next meal. It can move very fast when attacking, and you rarely see it outside its lair. Cozumel has this unique species as their local attraction, and you'll be glad funding is available. If you are feeling grand, you can help, too. Just check out the information at www.cozumelinsider.com/TURTLESEE and make your donation.

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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR RIGHT: Spotted goatfish; Black seahorse; Yellow seahorse wraps its tail around purple sponge; Yellow stingray emerges from the sand of the sea floor; Yellow seahorse swimming through fronds of soft coral

You can probably book your daily dives at a very convenient location—by the pool, near the snack bar, and so on...



Diving menu

There is a little something for all tastes in Cozumel. As you will probably stay in either a small inn or a large all-inclusive hotel, you'll find that there are hundreds of dive operations that will be able to take you to all the best spots. Unsurprisingly, there is a trade-off between one type and another, so descriptions of each follow to give you an idea of what's available.

All you can eat buffet

Ever been to one of those places where the host sets up a long table piled with goodies up to the roof? Customers pay a 'reasonably cheap' fixed fee and can then help themselves to as much food as they wish to eat in a single meal. Depending on the customer, that can get ugly.

Well, diving can be pretty similar to this in some areas. Like buffet menus, a very big dive operation can offer you a reasonable price for a couple of scuba tanks, but there is a catch—you don't get to choose where you 'eat' each

day; everybody gets the same meal. Not that it matters much, as Cozumel has more than 20 spots to choose from and all of them very, very nice.

Typically, divers are told what sort of dive profile each boat will provide, the main difference being deep versus shallow, so you can be sure to keep those N₂ bubbles under control. These big operations are usually associated with a big hotel or resort, and you can probably book your daily dives at a very convenient location—by the pool, near the snack bar, and so on.

I dived with Dive Palancar, a very professional outfit located within two of the largest Occidental Hotels on Palancar Beach. Customers can get instructed at all levels with PADI, NAUI and SSI. The operation offers guided tours, deep-sea fishing trips, snorkeling outings, and even private tours. Ask for Radames Solis—he'll set you up.

Dive Palancar has been around for many years, and their crew is very experienced. Dive Palancar's dive masters are a great group, and I had

nice chats with several of them: Pingo, William, Sergio, Lobo and the rest of the gang. Most of the team are bilingual professionals, but if you manage some Spanish, they will be happy to tell you a

few colorful stories.

Specialty bistrô—diving à la carte

Dining in a smaller, off-the-beaten-path restaurant can bring excellent surprises.



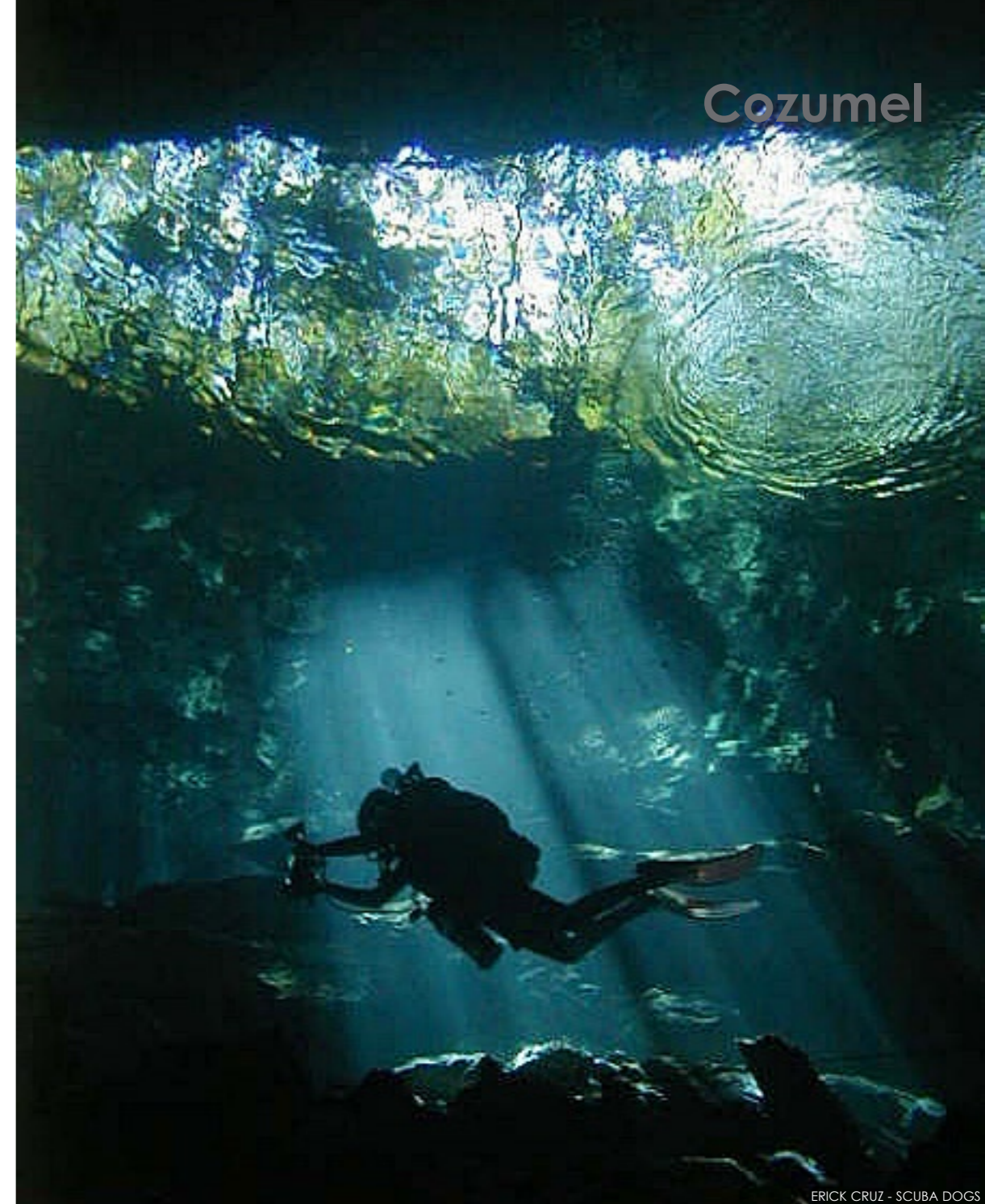


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Diver submerges in a cenote for a cave dive; Onlookers at Plata Forma cave site; Underwater videographer catches some underwater rays in a cenote



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The chef is usually the owner himself—a professional with great experience, who takes you under his wing every step of the way.

Diving with a smaller operation in Cozumel can be as special. He or she knows every reef, has been to every spot on the island, and can give you a marvelous private tour. All that know-how usually comes from working a number of years with other dive operations before opening up a shop.

This professional will go the distance to provide a quality experience that does not necessarily translate into luxury but certainly great experiences for the client—a special taste of the island's underwater scenery, especially when it takes you away from the crowds.

For some divers, being on a

choose and chat about how, where and when one is going to dive is priceless. And—more often than not—such dives are worth every penny of the slightly higher fees paid. Also, for those “absolute” beginners in diving, there is much to be said when you have a personal guide all to yourself and get to choose your destination.

Our prize chef was Erick G Cruz, ScubaDogs' Dive Operation owner. Cruz took us under with his wing and conducted our dives with extremely professional dexterity. He is one of the very few DAN instructors on the island, besides being an accredited instructor for PADI and NAUI. There are not just reefs on the menu, but you can also find the occasional great “cenote” experience

smaller, less crowded boat and having the option to

—just what you might be looking for. Cruz knows the way.

If you get the opportunity, have a nice cup of coffee with Cruz after your dive. He has many stories to tell, and knows all about the diving industry on the island, as well as the coast. I've discovered that “decompressing” over a nice cup of java, makes Cozumel's easy pace seem like it has slowed down time, itself.

Who's who?

I am very picky about whom I dive with, and I usually never repeat a mistake, unless I have no choice. But I would definitely dive again with both operators, Dive Palancar and ScubaDogs. If you think you want to give them a try, here is their contact information: Divepalancar.com and ScubaDogs at: erickdivers@hotmail.com

Some great spots

Cozumel has lots of great spots for

scuba as well as snorkeling. Just about any place can provide marvelous experiences for all tastes, levels and wallets. But a few of these are especially recommended, and I have had the opportunity to visit some of them personally. Most require a short boat ride and are accessible from your average hotel, resort and dive club, as most are located along the west coast.

Some dive spots are classified in two categories: “shallow” and “deep”. Some of the deeper areas will have great walls that offer a smaller variety of sea life but much greater thrills, as over the edge, you can glimpse a very deep drop indeed while circling towering coral reef formations.

Brief accounts of the dives I managed to do follows. Rest assured, there is much more to be seen.

Colombia (Deep)

Great coral turrets starting at 15 meters deep (49ft) on a white sandy bottom behind which a bottomless abyss looms. It's a thrill to hover over it and a superb photo setting—just be careful not to drop your underwater camera, for there is no chance to go get it without the use of a deep sub! Here, one can find a variety of fish life including large sea turtles, rays and a few nurse sharks that will occasionally pay a visit.

Colombia (Shallow)

At only ten meters deep (30ft), divers will see a colorful coral garden with abundant marine life—too many species to count. It's an excellent spot for the snorkeling and scuba enthusiasts alike. This is where I met the (in) famous Cozumel Catfish—a weird cross between a zebra, a yellow brimmed sombrero and a cross-eyed toad. It is as elusive as it is ugly, but you gotta love the little guy!



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Blue-striped grunt; Porkfish and grunts school together; Diver sheds torch light on giant sponges on a reef wall; Spotted moray eel (inset); Diver with green sea turtle cruising the reef off Cozumel

groupers, some large octopus (fun to follow and see change colors and shapes!), a lot of lobsters, many kinds of morays, some holed-up nurse sharks and wandering sea turtles. Very warm waters, but bring a windbreaker for that speedy ride home afterwards.

We reached about nine meters deep (30ft), and saw scattered islets of coral and sponges amid a flat sandy bottom. Over the reefs, there is always an abundant marine life, which will include groupers, sea turtles and rays. My buddy was a novice diver, and she felt very much at ease. We just followed the currents and relaxed.

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Palancar "Horseshoe"

Starting at seven meters (25ft), this spot has beautiful marine life, large coral formations, and a lot of large sponges before sloping down to the ocean floor. We dove around the coral turrets and through a few caves around 30 meters deep (99ft) and saw a few lonely turtles passing by. Clear waters!

Palancar Gardens

Reaching a maximum

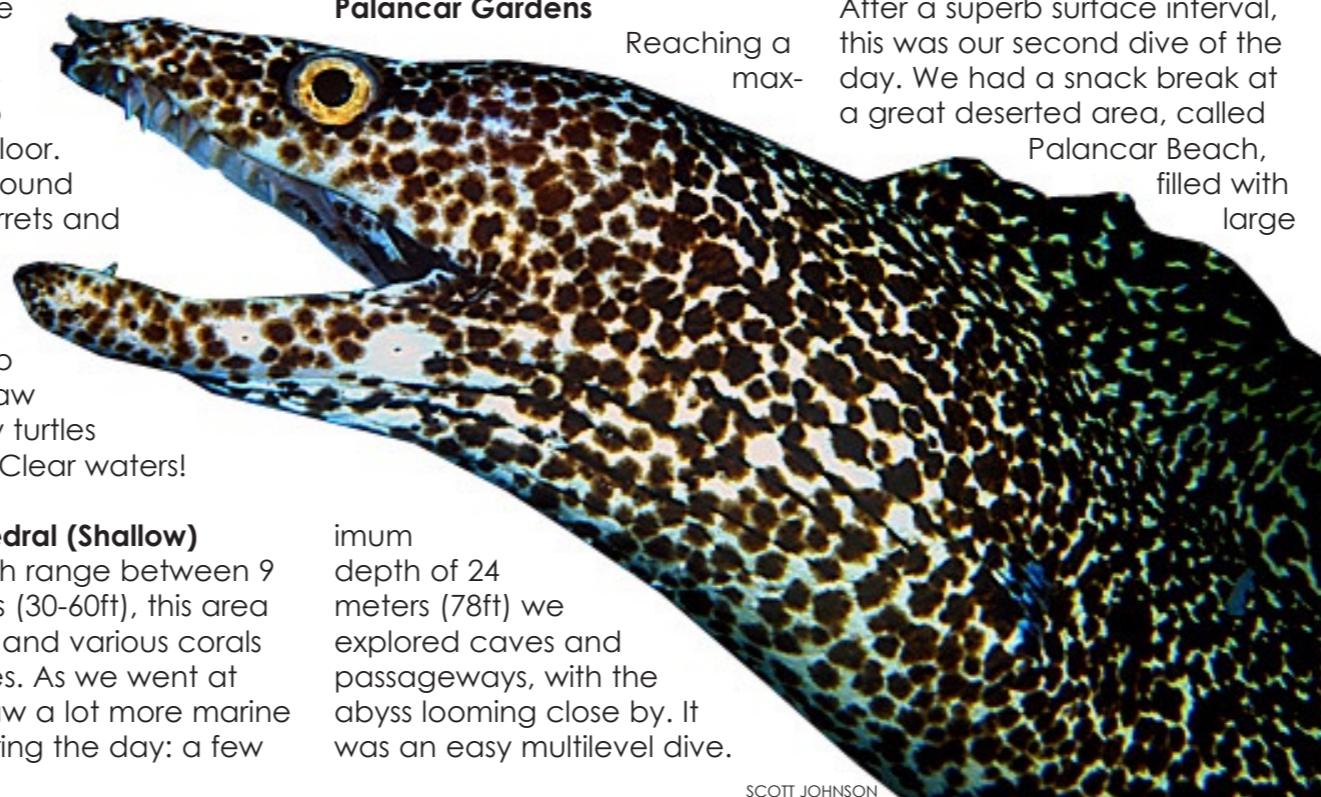
La Francesa

After a superb surface interval, this was our second dive of the day. We had a snack break at a great deserted area, called Palancar Beach, filled with large

Paso del Cedral (Shallow)

With a depth range between 9 to 18 meters (30-60ft), this area has colorful and various corals and sponges. As we went at night, we saw a lot more marine life than during the day: a few

imum depth of 24 meters (78ft) we explored caves and passageways, with the abyss looming close by. It was an easy multilevel dive.



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empty shells that covered the sands and the pier. Surreal!

The dive was terrific. We met no less than six nurse sharks and a very large Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*) with the thickest neck I've seen in some time.



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La Francesa has small sand hills covered with scattered coral and sponges, where you can find a lot of sea turtles, rays and nurse sharks. The spot is not very adequate for the novice, or inexperienced divers, as there are strong currents and A LOT of fire coral (as I can personally testify to my chagrin). Depths between 12-24 meters (40-80ft).

Santa Rosa Wall

The area features small coral ridges, caves and—you guessed it—abounding marine life.

Another strong current and fire coral spot, Santa Rosa starts at 12 meters (40ft) and then slopes into—you guessed again—the abyss.

Palancar Ladrillos

This was a very large wall, with really amazing canyons. We stayed at 28 meters (92ft) average, where there was not much of a current. We didn't see a lot of marine life around, other than a few wondering lobsters and smaller species (their day off?). The geological formations, however, are a spectacle in themselves, and the complex navigation requires an experienced guide. Watch out for the corals' sharp edges; be sure to wear a nylon skin or even some light exposure suit, despite the very warm waters.

CLOCKWISE: Octopus changing colors as it hides in a nook along the reef; Diver and Queen angelfish in coral encrusted passage; Curious moray eel under large sponge greets diver

Punta Dalila

This was the first time I've ever seen nurse sharks doing anything other than sleeping or strolling. A couple of them actually hunted down a group of fish and ate most of the poor things on the spot. I don't think I will ever see that again. No one else on the group seemed to have noticed it. Life goes on.

Amid plenty of coral and large sponges, we spotted a lot of wandering angelfish, surgeons, groupers, parrotfish (some big ones) and boxfish. This is another strong

current and fire coral area, with depths ranging between 9-18 meters (30-60ft).

"It's all in the wrist!"

Mexican conservation law charges a visitation fee of 20 pesos for all marine protected areas. Besides wearing your wrist band, make sure to request and keep your proof of payment to ensure your money will go where it should.

Due to their intensive use and ecological importance and frailty, most of the reefs surrounding the Cozumel Island, and some lagoons

Cozumel

BEWARE OF THE STINGING HYDRA MONSTER FROM THE DEEP

Slim Fire Coral cousin is no feeble foe.

A close relative of the fire coral, this hydroid colony animal is found all over Palancar Reef, and believe me – its sting hurts!

Divers should beware of diving too close to the coral (how's your buoyancy control these days?), as these hydroids are usually nothing more than a thing black bush, often invisible, until you brush past it. The pain is quite immediate and shocking, although not serious.

The affected areas can become quite itchy (whatever you do, fight the urge to scratch it!) and, depending on each individual's skin sensibility, will take quite some time for the marks to go away, long after the itching ends. Of course, if you are a dumbbell like me, you will get a kick of parading your "war scars" to more novice divers.

Prevention is the name of the game, so dash off to your local diver outlet and purchase that sleek looking dive skin you had your eye on – the water in Cozumel is so warm that you will need little else.

A smart measure is to check with your local physician and take along some skin lotion to treat any unavoidable encounters with this sea monster—after all, they are on their home turf.

Gymnangium longicauda, Feather Hydroid. 3 1/2 to 12" tall. Thin, close-spaced individual branches with whitish branchlets. Found worldwide in tropical seas. <http://www.wetwebmedia.com/hydrozoans.htm>



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Gaping spotted moray eel



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also prevent littering and try to use oil drip-free engines on their vessels. These operators deserve your patronage. It will be a great incentive for current operators to maintain healthy environmental practices, but will encourage more

Cozumel

operators to follow suit. When you go diving, one thing you mustn't forget is to apply sun-block lotion, lest you'll catch those strong rays while on board and turn into a lobster by dinner time. But be sure to choose a bio-degradable, oil-free brand, as the residue of regular makes can very hazardous to the coral's pres-

ervation. A few extra dollars can go a long way to keeping the reefs healthy.

During the dive

Once you dip those fins in that clear-blue sea, you'll drift right down to the bottom, avoiding the stronger surface currents. That is when you will need to make sure to maintain good buoyancy control, and avoid contact with corals and other marine life. Try and keep an average of five meters (15ft) distance, and you'll still be able to see a lot. Touching the reef might damage it, and, depending what you get in touch with, yourself as well. Resist the urge to feed the



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fishes, and make sure all your dive gear is securely attached and not dangling behind you. Needless to say, don't go swimming through reef caves, avoid stirring sand and never stand, rest or hold on the reef. That is why the use of gloves and knives is strictly forbidden.

During surface intervals

While you swap through those great photos you and your dive mates took, try and have a chat about your performance during the dive and ways to improve it. After all, practice makes perfect.

After the dive

Make sure to thank your dive guide for enforcing sound preservation practices. Before you step on dry land, don't forget to contribute to the crew's tip, which will always help the cause. While shopping, refuse to purchase any souvenirs made from coral or other

Big grouper checks out awestruck diver

SPACE INVADERS

Lionfish are invading the reef and creating havoc among the local fish population.

Lionfish, originally from the Pacific Ocean, are an aggressive species that usually take charge of the coral where they settle around. In Cozumel, these foreign animals have no natural predators, and are laying waste to what is easy prey for them: the local fishes.

By the time we left Cozumel, our dive operator alone captured three different specimens. There is a rising concern for both the maintenance of the marine fauna and the safety of divers, unaccustomed with the hazards involved.

The lionfish's dorsal spines, loaded with venom, are normally used as a defense mechanism. Although not "ordinarily" fatal for humans, the sting of a lionfish is extremely painful and can cause everything from headaches to vomiting and even breathing difficulties. If you are a scuba diver and you spot one while diving off Cozumel, be very careful, do not try to touch it or capture it. It is a better idea to call on the attention of your divemaster and have them immediately contact the marine park authorities, so that it can be captured.

Here is a NOAA - sponsored documentary about capturing these misguided creatures: It describes the steps taken to study this phenomena and guidelines for the general public on what to do if you spot on.



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Large grouper hides under a ledge; Diver and giant sponge (right)

the south side, are part of a national preserve since 1996. Tourism is the main engine that keeps the economy of the island afloat, but it is also the major threat to its preservation. Receiving around 1,500 visitors per a day, Cozumel needs everyone's cooperation in order to maintain its reefs healthy. Below are a few tips for you to show how responsible a diver you are and promote sustainable use of the reefs.

Dive preparation —choosing your operator

There are many dive operators in Cozumel, and a great deal of them officially contribute to reef conservation programs by way of providing thorough orientation lectures to their clients and making sure that they follow the rules. They



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marine life. Never eat in establishments that won't keep endangered or fragile marine life species off their menus.

Currents Ahoy!

Cozumel diving requires good buoyancy control, as all spots will have moderate to strong currents. Drift diving is a skill that you definitely want to have before wetting your fins. Therefore, it is strongly advised to either hone your abilities or invest in a short diving specialty course at home before taking off to Mexico.

I speak from experience. I was there with my girlfriend, and she is somewhat a novice, although quite capable. But she

LEFT TO RIGHT: Luscious nob of healthy corals and anemone; Gray angelfish plucks coral; A Coney grouper sports its spots and stripes

was not ready to sink beneath the waves fast enough (and within safety ranges, of course) to follow the guided group. We ended up drifting away, some ten meters (30ft) below the surface and—as the currents are stronger at shallow depths—we soon were separated so far apart that I had to call the dive and go back up.

What followed you can well imagine: I had to call the circling boat to pick us up, lost one precious dive (that's a lot if one considers that we were only there a week) and

she gave me hell about it—like it was my fault? It was indeed a tough call to make, as we saw, from above the waves, several nurse sharks swimming by. It would have been a great dive, no doubt. But safety comes first, so we decided to take a personal guide next time around until she could acclimatize herself. If you have to do that on site, it can get a tad expensive.

It goes without saying that I went diving by myself most of the time, and I would have liked to share those precious moments with her. Therefore, whatever your dive certifications are, if you are diving with a friend or significant other, remember that your buddy should have the same skills as you do. If any of you are not comfortable with drift diving, try and fix that beforehand.

Topside attractions

Visit the ruins of Cozumel and make the Indiana Jones in you a happy camper.

Cozumel Island, like the coastal Quintana Roo area, has a few archeological sites that will interest those with a weakness for the ancient world. Visiting tourists have a choice of ruins and sites that are unique to the island such as La Palma—an 800-year-old Maya ruin—and Castillo Real—an inspiring 1200-year-old ruin overlooking the Caribbean Sea, El Cedral and San Gervasio. Their availability and current restoration efforts provide an important understanding of the ancient history and culture of the



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Cozumel

island.

In town, beside the main church, is an Hispanic relic. There is also the Museo de la Isla Cozumel (Cozumel's Island Museum), located near the city's ferry docks. It's a nice tour to do between meals and the mandatory knick-knack shopping at local tiendas (Cinco Soles is a must, if you are shopaholically inclined—just have an intervention team prepared).

The museum displays the island's range of endangered species, ancient and modern topographical references (Mayan pilgrimage, Spanish conquest, Pirate's den and Social revolutions theatre) as well as artifacts that are relevant to the island's culture, namely pre-Colombian and Spanish colonial and nautical pieces (cutlasses and cannons available). The terrace has a simple yet honest restaurant offering a lovely scenic view. Find it at Avenida Rafael Melgar at Calle 6 Norte, San Miguel.

El Cedral is widely advertised as being the oldest Mayan structure. It still bears a few traces of paint and stucco applied by the original Mayan artisans. However, there is little archaeological evidence left these days, mainly because the conquistadors destroyed much of the original temple structure.

By the turn of the last century, the site was uninhabited, suffering from the elements—the worst event being hurricane Wilma in 2005, which tore much of the



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structure down. Whatever remained of the original structure was rebuilt after the storm.

There are other off-island tourist attractions on the Mayan Coast, just off the ferry boat.

Tulum (Tulum.com)

Tulum is one of Mexico's most well-known archaeological sites, primarily due to its location on top of a 12-meter-high cliff facing a spectacular ocean view. It was one of a series of Mayan towns, shrines, and forts established along the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. Although considered to be a rather small enclosure when compared to other archeological sites,



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Tulum is still the largest fortified area on the Quintana Roo coast.

The name "Tulum", in local Maya dialect (there seems to be several variations), means "wall on the ground", and, in fact, the area is enclosed by a stone wall about three to five meters high and several meters thick. Within this wall lie some 60 well-preserved structures that are gems of Mayan history. The once obsidian-covered walls (obsidian is a black stone created from lava) gave birth to the City of Gold myth, as well as sealing the fate of many a greedy conqueror, not to mention the Mayans themselves.

Tulum's architecture is in fact a wonder of engineering. In specific days of the year marking the solstices, each building will channel the early morning sunrays through a window or hole on the wall of a given structure, and that will create a beam of light that will pinpoint agricultural milestones. To this



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Queen angelfish portrait (left); Playa Bonita enjoys a turquoise blue surf (above); Dive boat off to sea (inset)

day, the timing is quite precise.

Visitors will notice another peculiarity regarding the buildings in the area: each seems

beaches alone will make the trip well worth it.

Xel Ha (Xelha.com)

On the spot where the blue Caribbean waters meet the Yucatan Peninsula's underground rivers was created a natural water park, located right outside of Playa del Carmen. The park includes all the amenities of a family day outing with the natural beauty of a protected habitat for regional marine life, offering great snorkeling, hiking, and exploring of the two local "cenotes" (freshwater sink-holes).



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to be slightly eschewed, as if leaning a bit to one side. That was also done on purpose, as the area was (and is) regularly hit by ocean storms and hurricanes (well known by their devastating effects over the Caribbean Islands). The idea was to build an aerodynamical structure that would hold fast and not be blown away—clever folk, the Mayans.

If nothing else, a visit to the nearby

Chichén Itzá

(Chichenitza.com)

The ancient city of Chichén Itzá was, at its height between 800 and 1200 A.D., the political, religious and military center of Yucatán, and a veritable seat of power



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in the southeastern Meso America region.

A close look at the buildings can show a gradual change in architectural style, starting from the Puuc and culminating with the so-called Mayan Toltec style, given its similarities with those found in Tula—the ancient capital of the Toltecs—and with other sites in central Mexico, such as Oaxaca and the Gulf Coast. Chichén Itzá was a large city and well-populated with citizens distributed around the area. They had relatively easy access to water coming from various caves (Cenotes) of the region.

Located about three hours south of Cancun, this site went under massive



MATHIAS CORVALLO

restoration in 1923, but still has enough uncovered mounds to ensure exploration efforts over the next few decades. To date, more than 18 structures have been excavated and restored, although their usage is still a mystery. Archeologists today can only hypothesize from the evidence uncovered. ■

Cozumel

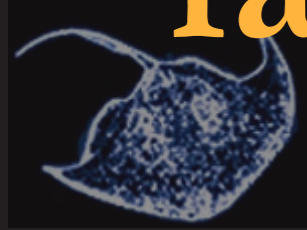


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TOP TO BOTTOM: Ruins at Tulum; Temple of the Frescos at Tulum (left)

fact file

Mexico



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History Cozumel is a well known tourist destination. It is an island located in the state of Quintana Roo, Mexico. It is famed for its sandy beaches, clear water seas and the Palancar Coral Reef National Park (established in 1996). Eons ago, Cozumel was an entirely different place. The island was a sacred area, inhabited by the Mayan people, long before it was visited by Spanish explorer Fernández de Córdoba (1517) and later by infamous (and bloodthirsty) conquistador Hernán Cortes (1519), who was responsible for the subsequent decimation of the local indigenous people. Later on, the area was repopulated and suffered through wars with the French and an even bloodier civil war, until it was "discovered" again by French explorer Jacques Yves Cousteau. While it became a favored scuba diving destination, the island was not extensively developed for tourism until the 1960s. Today, it is also a popular cruise and tourist destination.

Geography The island of Cozumel is found on the Mesoamerican Reef (also known as "Sistema Arrecifal Mesoamericano" in Spanish)—the largest reef system of the Americas, extending nearly 1000 kilometers and located at the Easter tip of the Yucatán Peninsula. The island was formed

by coralline limestone rock and sandy soils, being today the largest inhabited island in Mexico and the Caribbean's premier dive spot. With c.190 sq mi (490 sq km), the island is 48km (30 miles) long from north to south but only 16km (10 miles) wide from east to west. On either side, beaches form a long, white sandy coast washed by gentle waves and transparent waters on its western board, while huge waves crash against the eastern side.

Climate The average daily air temperature on Cozumel is 80°F (27°C). In July-August, the highs range from the upper 80s to the low 90s. (32°C). In December and January, the daytime temperatures average in the mid-70s. (24°C). Winter months: Cold fronts may create windy, cloudy and cooler weather. Afternoon thunderstorms are common, usually lasting for an hour. Water temperatures range from 77°-82°F (25°-28°C) throughout the year.

Environment Hurricane season — Cozumel suffered extensive

damage from tropical storms, the latest being in 2005, affecting the economy, public safety, archeological site integrity, the marine reef and the tourism trade. The island keeps bouncing right back, although not without a constant upkeep of its natural and cultural resources.

The island was struck directly by two category four hurricanes during the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season. First to arrive was Hurricane Emily in July. Despite it being a powerful storm, it was the slower moving Hurricane Wilma that caused the most destruction when it hit the island in October.

More significant—and virtually impossible to humanly repair—was the damage to the underwa-

ter marine life. This included both the coral reefs, which suffered particularly at the shallower dive sites, and the fish that inhabit the reefs.

In short, if you decide to be a daring spirit and take the gamble to travel to Coz during hurricane season—that's between June 1 and late October, early November—it pays to visit this webpage: www.cozumelinsider.com/Hurricane. It contains several tips and sound advice for weathering down those storms, just in case.

If the goal is to chomp up some cheap rates, going for potentially sizable discounts offered in this period, it is much better to pick offerings during the official off-

RIGHT: Location of Cozumel Island on global map

BELOW: Location of Cozumel Island on map of Mexico
FAR RIGHT: Diver investigates giant sponge formations on reef wall



season period, from October to December when the weather is not too hot and the chance for a late-arrival storm is unlikely.

Ecology The Conservation Management and Environmental Education effort—established by social programs, parks, museums and community commitment—helps preserve Cozumel's rich eco-heritage to the direct benefit of their population. Founding and monitoring research projects about prioritized species and ecosystems are also a priority.

Among the existing programs, there is the Punta Sur Turtle Camp. It includes 8km of beach for marine turtle nesting with activities in the field that mark the nests, follow the process of incubation, liberation of young hatchings, and the introspection of every brood for the management of statistical data. During the nesting season, student and community

groups are allowed to watch the nighttime emergence process of the hatchings. The Crocodile Conservation Program conducts periodic specimen capture and tagging, as well as morphology measurement data and sex gathering, a census and observation of the population conditions maintained in the Colombia Lagoon Reserve.



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Bird nesting and conservation activities are also performed in order to keep data regarding reproduction and animal general condition in the island.

A permanent fauna and reptile management program works side by side with educational programs distributed among different social groups. They concern solid waste management, proper use of water, different ecosystems on the island and their interaction.





MATHIAS CORVALLO



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ruins at Tulum; Silhouette of sculpture of divers and corals on Cozumel; Detail of sculpture; Sunset at Playa Bonita

Cozumel

in Cozumel, it is no different), but that's not enough. Be very careful when eating buffet style food (especially at all-inclusive resorts)—make sure you eat the food as soon as it is served on the steam tables. It's very easy to get food poisoning from these buffets because they are not kept at the right temperatures and spoil very quickly. Some places will also mix leftover foods with fresh made foods. Bottled water is an

absolute must, even for brushing your teeth. It is also suggested that you eat at restaurants that use bottled water to prepare their food, as well as purified water used in their ice cubes. Bring your own stomach meds just in case.

Hospitals

Cozumel Medical Center, Calle 1 Sur 52 987 872 94 00 English spoken www.centromedicodecozumel.com

Clinica San Miguel Calle 6 Norte, tel. 52 987 872 01 03

Hyperbaric Chamber

Buceo Medico Mexicano Cozumel Recompression Center Calle 5 Sur; tel. 52 987 2 1430

Websites

Tourism Mexico www.visitmexico.com

Tourism Cozumel www.islacozumel.com.mx ■



MATHIAS CORVALLO

Credit cards Most establishments such as restaurants, hotels and rentals will accept most credit cards. Stores will sometimes charge a higher rate for credit card purchases.

Traveler's checks Most tour operators, hotels and restaurants will take traveler's checks, but make sure that your signature is exactly the same on each when signing. Otherwise, you will have a hard time—a legal form of ID will always be required.

ATMs There are a few ATM machines available at banks downtown, but they will only give out money in local pesos.

Exchange Your local bank branch may be found in Cozumel, probably at the airport, in hotels, banks or exchange booths. You'll get the best exchange rates at the banks, but it's not as convenient since you need to find one first. The exchange booths around town tend to have competitive

exchange rates, and that can be to your advantage. Hotels generally have the worst exchange rates. For currencies other than USD, exchange rates tend to be lower than expected.

Health Issues Good news: the CDC Travel Health Warning for Novel H1N1 Flu in Mexico has been removed as of 19 March 2010. However, as Montezuma won't let go of his infamous curse, everyone knows that you "don't drink the water in Mexico" (and

nowhere else in the world.

The waters surrounding the island have an astounding 40- to 50-meter visibility (120-150ft).

Cozumel also has some of the biggest and most spec-

tacular sponge formations in the world, such as the Elephant Ear sponge that can grow as large as four meters (12ft) across. Other sponges, like the Barrel sponge, gain considerable size as well.

On the surface, Cozumel has a number of unusual features and include certain endemic species, such as the dwarf raccoon (*procyon pygmaeus*) and the Cozumel wren (*nasua nelsoni*) Migratory birds, that gave

the island its Mayan name, also rely heavily on the richly productive feeding grounds of the reef, which supports populations of magnificent frigate birds, brown pelicans, olive cormorants, and many others. The prehistoric iguana—the island's ancient guardian—and the crocodile are the state's largest lizards, and there are a host of amphibians. Tree frogs are particularly colorful; their bright hues are a warning to predators.

Currency Mexican Peso (MXN). The U.S. dollar is widely accepted in Cancun and Cozumel, mainly in tourist and hotel areas.

Shopping When should you use dollars or pesos? When purchasing inexpensive items (i.e. at the grocery store), you'll be better off paying in pesos. Otherwise, a higher exchange rate may be used to calculate your bill. Large USD denominations (50 and 100 dollar bills) may be hard to exchange outside of banks.



MATHIAS CORVALLO

Biodiversity Crystal-clear water and an incredibly diverse marine life makes Cozumel's reefs an unforgettable underwater experience. As many as 250 different species of fish can be seen in Cozumel's waters; one of the most spectacular is the Queen Angelfish, possessing bright blue-and-yellow markings and the distinctive blue "crown" on the top of the head. You can even catch a glimpse of the Toad fish found