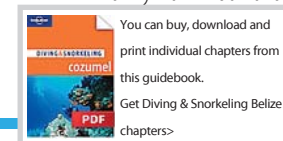


Blue chromis graze on a constant source of planktonic food brought by the prevailing current that bathes Cozumel



Introduction

This guide will acquaint you with a variety of dive sites and provide information that you can use to help decide whether a particular location is appropriate for your abilities and intended dive plan.

Hardcore divers who travel fully suited-up with fins, mask, snorkel and BC, and expect to leap directly from the plane into the water, will find this information detailed on a dive-by-dive basis in 'Diving in Cozumel.'

Novice divers and snorkelers will also find a good selection of shallower sites in more protected water.

The 'Diving in Cozumel' and 'Diving Accident Management' sections discuss both routine and emergency procedures.

Photographers and budding marine biologists will want to refer to 'Marine Life,' which describes some of the most abundant and interesting creatures likely to be seen in Cozumel, and summarizes legal regulations pertaining to divers. Note that these regulations can

change over time, so before you go diving, check with the local dive professionals to make sure that nothing you are planning to do will bring the law down on you.

Sooner or later, even the most fatalistic divers have to come out of the water. In some places, depending on the shore-based facilities, this can be cause to rejoice or weep. Perhaps you have been to other locations that offered fine diving but could have been improved if everything above the waterline was scraped off and started over. This most assuredly is not true for Cozumel. Although the diving in Cozumel is spectacular, taking the time to let your gear dry will give you an opportunity to enjoy one of the most charming islands in the Caribbean.

'Cozumel Practicalities' offers a brief description of the island's history, geography, scenery, natural history, and some general information on accommodations, services other than diving, shopping, and other useful tips.



Under overhangs live many different sponges, such as these encrusting orange sponges and the large barrel sponge viewed by this diver



Facts about Cozumel



Several charter boats specifically cater to snorkelers and visit the more shallow reef sites
Photo: Carolyn B. Martin

HISTORY

Cozumel Island is located near the eastern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo. The island is about 30 miles (48km) long and 10 miles (16km) wide. Due to its proximity to the mainland, the center of Mayan culture, the island was under Mayan influence for many centuries. Even today, many residents of Cozumel show a striking resemblance to carved and painted images of Pre-Columbian Mayans, and many locals still speak a Mayan dialect as well as Spanish. The Mayan ruins of El Castillo Real and San Gervasio are found in the jungles on the island, although the most famous and spectacular archaeological sites are on the mainland (Chichén Itzá, Cobá, and Tulum). These sites can be visited on one-day tours from Cozumel; reservations for tours can be made at almost any hotel or at the airport.

The island has long been a favored spot for travelers. In pre-Conquest times it was a religious center for Mayans, and was subsequently visited by such notables as Hernán Cortés (who conquered Mexico for Spain during the 16th century). A number of pirates took advan-

tage of the abundant fresh water on the island and the calm, deep waters near the western shore to anchor and rest between raids.

In 1841, John Stephens, a New York lawyer and amateur archaeologist, explored the Yucatán mainland and Cozumel on a quest for clues about the origins of ancient Mayan cities. He and John Catherwood, an illustrator and surveyor, dragged Daguerrotype photo equipment around in blazing sun, chopped vegetation away from ruins so they could be drawn, chased snakes and ran from them, photographed and explored. His account, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán*, was published in 1843 and is still in print (the Dover Press unabridged version is by far the best available edition). He wrote this about Cozumel:

'Amid all the devastations that attended the progress of the Spaniards in America, none is more complete than that which has swept over the island of Cozumel. When I resolved to visit it I was not aware that it was uninhabited... The whole island was overgrown with trees, and except along the shore or within the clearing around the hut, it was impossible to move in any direction without cutting a path...we came upon what might well be called an iron-bound coast, being a table of rock rising but a few feet above the level of the sea, washed by every storm, until it had become porous and full of holes, and the edges stuck up like points of rusted iron.'

More recently, the island has been visited by thousands upon thousands of tourists and divers seeking clear, warm water. Today Cozumel has a most unusual blend of cultures, successfully integrating divers with the resort industry of modern Mexico and the local Mayan heritage.



NO SWIMMING either! Enough said
Photo: G. Lewbel

NATURAL HISTORY

Both Cozumel and the peninsula are low-lying terraces of limestone covered with jungle. The limestone is derived largely from coral that has been solidified and compressed into hard rock during the eons. You can see the fossilized imprints of shells and corals from ancient reefs that make up the limestone if you look carefully along the shore. Much of the coast of Cozumel, especially along the western side, has no sandy beaches but is made up of eroded limestone or ironshore (the 'iron-bound coast' John Stephens referred to). On the eastern side, sandy beaches cover the ironshore in many areas. The limestone is porous,

retaining rainwater like a sponge and slowly dissolving. As a result, a halo of fresh water is sometimes seen in the ocean near some spots on the coast. The jungle is dotted with fresh-water springs, caverns, wells, and pools (cenotes), which may contain brackish or fresh water depending on the level of the water table and the amount of seawater intruding through passageways in the rock. At the southern tip of the island, salt marshes create a swampy environment that attracts and holds tourist vehicles like a magnet.

The island is separated from the mainland by a channel only 12 miles (19km) wide. On most nights, if you look to the west, you can see the lights of the

Yucatán coast from the shores of Cozumel. Most of the mainland coast is still solid jungle (yes, the real kind with hanging vines, venomous snakes, and parrots and monkeys in the treetops); the only clearings are an occasional ranch or farm and the cenotes.

Cozumel's native plant and animal life is similar to that of the mainland, although there are some species such as the Cozumel raccoon, the Cozumel whiptail lizard and the Cozumel thrasher (an extremely rare bird) not found anywhere else.

If you go hiking on Cozumel, take mosquito repellent – lots of it! Also, look out for snakes and stinging insects such as wasps and ants. In particular, don't sit or stand on or near fire ant hills. Fire ants are small, ordinary-looking ants that will come boiling out of their homes if you disturb them, and crawl all over you and sting and bite. They are to other ants what chili peppers are to tomatoes.

Cozumel also has boa constrictors, non-venomous large snakes that are native to the mainland but were introduced to the island by a film crew making a movie there in 1971. They have spent the past few decades eating up as many birds, lizards and small mammals (including some of the dogs and chickens on ranches) as they can hold.

American crocodiles are another predatory part of the Cozumel landscape. You are likely to find them hanging out in or near the ponds on the golf course at the Cozumel Country Club just north of town, or at the Parque Punta Sur, an ecological park near the southern tip of the island. The park has walkways and trails, observation towers, etc.

Wherever you go on the island, it's wise not to stray too close to wetlands, ponds, or streams, especially if they're muddy or large, or if it's hard to see the bottom, and don't go near any 'floating logs.' These are true crocodiles, not alligators – which tend to be much more aggressive – but there are also reports

Angel and butterfly fish species commonly occur in pairs



of this species reaching 21ft (7m) in length, and they are a *lot* faster than they look.

CLIMATE

Due to the rather constant temperature of water currents that sweep around the island, the climate on Cozumel is predictable, although not entirely stable.

The average annual air temperature is about 80°F (27°C), and you can expect temperatures in the high 80s to low 90s F (about 32°C) in July and August, and in the mid-70s F (about 24°C) in December and January. Water temperatures range from about 77° to 82°F (25° to 28°C). However, December and January can see cold fronts from the mainland that create windy, cloudy and cold weather. A cooling breeze usually blows day and night. Afternoon thundershowers are common but seldom last more than an hour. Fall sometimes brings hurricanes to the Caribbean, but their

paths usually bypass Cozumel to the east. Cozumel doesn't always escape unscathed, however. Several major hurricanes have scored direct hits on Cozumel in recent years, notably Hurricane Emily in July 2005 and Hurricane Wilma in October 2005.

COZUMEL ISLAND TODAY

More than half of the western-facing shore of Cozumel has been developed into a dense strip of modern hotels along a single road that runs within a few hundred feet of the beach. The strip is separated from the jungle by the road. Taxis patrol this strip day and night, dueling with brave tourists on mopeds.

The hotel row runs north and south from San Miguel de Cozumel, the only town on the island. New resorts have also sprung up near the southern tip of Cozumel, much closer to the prime reefs (Palancar, Colombia and Santa Rosa) than the hotels in town. San Miguel



Every day several cruise ships arrive with passengers eager to visit the shops and restaurants of San Miguel
Photo: Carolyn B. Martin

What about Wilma?

In October 2005, Hurricane Wilma pounded Cozumel and the Yucatan coast. Over several days, the cyclone destroyed buildings, signs, trees, cars and just about anything else that wasn't made of reinforced concrete – plus some things that were. Here's the unvarnished truth about (immediately) post-Wilma Cozumel from a visiting diver's perspective, as we saw it.

There were indeed a lot of damaged buildings on the island. Many hotels – especially the high-rise, high-profile ones – had their windows and doors blown out, and sustained a lot of water damage. Some buildings on the shore were literally shredded, some sad piles of cinder blocks and twisted sheet metal lay where stores used to be, and wooden buildings were simply blown away.

On a more positive note, residents and visiting teams of workers were feverishly rebuilding whatever they could, and tearing down and replacing whatever was beyond repair. Construction crews were everywhere and the main town, San Miguel, was jumping. Dive operations, restaurants and bars were open and seemingly back to normal and all necessary services appeared to have been restored. At the present pace, within a year or so, San Miguel will look better than it did before the hurricane.

So what about the underwater scene? Taking the long view, severe weather has occurred in the Caribbean for millenia, and the reef community has evolved to handle hurricanes. There were some visible changes at dive sites compared to pre-hurricane conditions. Dive sites near the big hotels 'absorbed' a lot of debris, and even the offshore reefs had plenty of palm fronds and other wind and water-borne junk dumped on them. Numerous coral heads were broken in pieces on the bottom, and many of the big barrel sponges that lined the drop-offs of Cozumel have, well, simply dropped off. On the other hand, many other groups such as gorgonians (sea fans), smaller corals, and smaller sponges have fared well, even in shallow water.

Any good coral biologist will tell you that exposing new substrate increases diversity, as dominant, space-hogging animals are removed and clear spots are exposed for new larvae of other species to settle. While the reefs won't return to pre-Wilma conditions for hundreds of years, you can now see the new reefs being born in Cozumel. Many fortunate animals and plants are colonizing the remains of their predecessors and competitors, taking advantage of the situation to start over and do things their way.

used to be a typical small Mexican town in some respects, with tiny shops, narrow streets and a pretty central plaza. In the last few years however, San Miguel has had to come to grips with its international position as the main service center for an island besieged with divers and in particular, hordes of tourists from cruise ships, year round. By and large, it has made the adjustment gracefully. There are many small, inexpensive hotels in town, within walking distance of the plaza. Nearby, there are restaurants ranging from cheap to trendy and fairly expensive, several department stores

and markets, liquor stores, a number of dive shops (look for the red and white divers' flag everywhere), car and moped rental agencies, and the ever-present Mexican curio and handicraft shops interspersed with condominium sales people.

The larger hotels outside town have their own shops and restaurants, and it's possible to spend your entire vacation without venturing into town if you stay in one of the beachfront resorts. You'll be missing a good bet, though, if you don't go into town at least one evening to shop and look around.

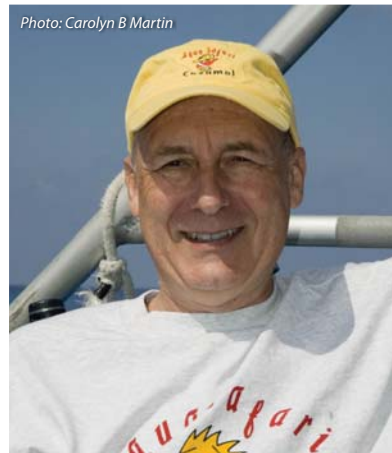


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Photo: Carolyn B Martin



LARRY R MARTIN

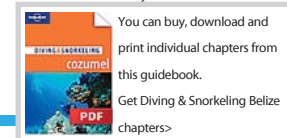
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FROM THE AUTHORS

For logistical, editorial, and moral support for the fourth edition of this book, we thank Bill Horn, Donna Mena and Sheryl Shea (Aqua Safari, Cozumel); Robbie Shumaker (Fort Worth, Texas), Kelly Cooke (Tender Corporation), Robert Bruins and Tom Phillipp (Aqualung America), Jim Clymer (Suunto), and Frances Rodriguez (Henderson Aquatics). We are also grateful to Hannah Rebecca Lewbel for serving as a model for this edition, and Carolyn Martin for additional topside shots.



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