

Travel Facts

ACCOMMODATION

Virtually all of the hotels on or near the beach cater to divers. Condominiums are also available, and tend toward luxury.

The most expensive hotels are located along the waterfront as you would expect. They generally have every amenity usually found in similar international facilities around the world, including swimming pools, air-conditioned rooms, restaurants and gift shops. Many luxury hotels have dive shops on the premises, most with easy entries and exits (such as concrete steps) at the waterline so you can go diving right in front of the hotel.

More simple, no-frills (or few-frills) hotels are within several blocks of the plaza, near the center of San Miguel. Some are air-conditioned, some have restaurants (and are within easy walking distance to dozens of other restaurants), and all are much less expensive than the luxury hotels. The simpler hotels usually do not have dive shops on the premises, but nearly all have some working arrangement with dive shops, so you can organize equipment rental and boat diving through them.

Because all the reefs mentioned in this book are south of town, hotels to the north of town are decidedly less desirable for divers. The boat rides are longer the farther north you go, and a few operators will not pick up guests staying north. That means worrying about missing the boat in the morning and salty, wet taxi rides at the end of the day.

A few problems seem to crop up again and again for divers on Cozumel. Most are related to lodging. Making reservations in Mexico has always been a bit tricky. Although most hotel owners are honest and try to do a good

The hotel row south of town is popular with divers because of the convenient dive sites just off the beach



job, we've heard enough stories about rooms going to the highest bidder – or dive boats suddenly being too full to accommodate everyone in a group – that we feel compelled to offer some advice on the matter.

Reservations made from the US by a dive store, reputable dive travel specialist, or tour wholesaler nearly always work out. These higher-volume purchasers account for a lot of business and have much more leverage than an individual traveler does. Furthermore, dive packages are usually prepaid. Dive operators and hotels who work with larger purchasers are assured that they will suffer no financial loss even if the client doesn't show up, so have no need to 'overbook' (sell more rooms or boat slots than they have available).

On the other hand, people sometimes don't show up when they're expected. Their plans change, they miss their flights or taxis, and so forth. Overbooking has been one strategy for dealing with the potential loss of revenue. At worst, giving away an individual traveler's room or failing to provide a dive package is unlikely to cost the resort more than a shouting match at the front

desk, and perhaps a protracted squabble with a credit card provider.

If you prefer to make your own reservations, ask around first to select a decent dive operator and a hotel with a good reputation. Confirm your reservations by fax, email, or registered mail. Pay with a credit card so that you can dispute the charges if the worst happens, but expect the best and you'll most likely get treated fairly and with respect.

Above all, it is important to bring copies of all replies and/or receipts with you to present to the hotel and dive operator. This will help you avoid getting into an argument about who said what, and when.

TRANSPORTATION

Air

Cozumel has a surprisingly busy international airport, with numerous direct flights from other parts of Mexico and the US. Flights from Europe are usually routed via the US, Mexico City or Cancún, an even busier airport with frequent connections to Cozumel. If you're having a hard time getting a good deal on a flight to Cozumel from Europe or the United States, look for a bargain fare to Cancún and then catch a commuter flight to Cozumel from there.

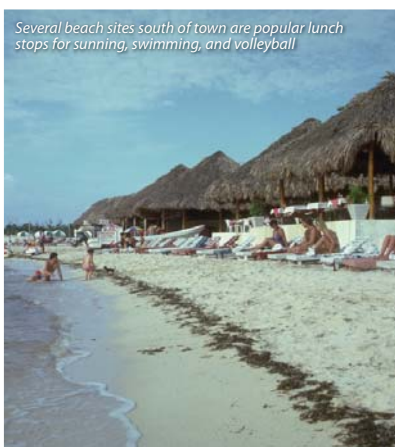
Once you land, take one of the many shuttle vans from outside of the Customs area to your hotel; taxis are not allowed to pick up incoming tourists. In 2006, a ride to town cost \$10.

Ferry

It is easy to get from the mainland to Cozumel or vice versa. Passenger ferries make many runs daily from Playa del Carmen to Cozumel. A one-way trip takes about 30 minutes. Car ferries depart from Puerto Morelos daily (times subject to the season and weather conditions).



*Flights from several points of origin land daily in Cozumel
Photo: Carolyn B. Martin*



Several beach sites south of town are popular lunch stops for sunning, swimming, and volleyball

Car & Moped Rentals

If you plan to rent a car or moped, you'll need your home driver's license, as well as a major credit card or a giant wad of cash to show you can pay for any damage to the vehicle. Rental cars can be arranged by almost every hotel or condominium, but it is not uncommon to have every car on the island reserved. The safest procedure is to reserve a rental car through an international company represented in the US or Europe, depending on where you live. Most of the larger companies have offices at the airport; some also have offices at the luxury hotels. Driving is on the right-hand side of the road, with the likely possibility of ar-

rest and detention in case of an accident, so be on the defensive, obey all traffic signs and laws (ask the rental agency for a summary) and be sure to buy enough insurance.

The larger hotels and a number of highly visible shops in town (within a block of the plaza) rent mopeds. You'll recognize them by their huge signs and the fleets of motorbikes parked in front. Be aware that not all the roads are in good shape – some are narrow and you'll be sharing space with buses, trucks, cars and, perhaps, farm animals – so keep your eyes open and your speed down. If you run off the road, there's plenty of cactus waiting for you.



Mexican hand crafted items tend to be very colorful.
Photo: Carolyn B. Martin

Taxis

Although you can rent a car to get to shore diving locations or to shops, taxis are abundant and fairly inexpensive, and you may find it convenient to leave the transportation to them. Taxis can be found easily at both the start and end of a dive at hotels. Taxis sometimes park at hotels to wait for business, and the hotels can always call a taxi for you while you're dripping dry! Don't worry about carrying money with you to cover the cabfare at the end of a dive; if you ask first, cabs will generally wait while you run inside your hotel to get your money. After all, your gear is probably in the taxi trunk, so they're not going to fret about you stiffing them.

In theory, the cost of a taxi ride is fixed within town and along the hotel strip, and the prices should be posted in each cab, but take a moment before you jump into a cab to check on the price as well as the driver's ability (or willingness) to make change. If you only have a \$20 bill with you on a \$10 ride, for exam-

ple, some drivers will claim they cannot give you any change because they don't have any other money with them.

If you want to go around to the eastern side of the island, though, renting a car is preferable. You'll want to stop to have a beach all to yourself, and you almost certainly won't be able to summon a cab to pick you up later. There are few public phones outside town other than in hotels, so before you go adventuring, tell someone where you're going and when to expect you back, and make sure you can change a flat tire!

PRACTICALITIES

Foreign Exchange

Nearly all of the hotels, stores and restaurants on the island are used to dealing with foreigners. In addition to the American divers, cruise liners dock at Cozumel nearly every day, disgorging thousands of tourists, mostly from the States. Consequently, credit cards and US dollars are accepted nearly everywhere at close to the official exchange rate. It's not really worth the trouble to try and get a few cents more by standing in line to exchange dollars at the bank unless you really want to carry around a lot of cash, which is rarely a good idea. Currency other than US dollars or pesos may present problems, however, and a bank visit may be required. You can buy pesos at many banks and airports in the US as well as in Mexico in case you want to get this out of the way in advance.

Language

Even if your Spanish is rusty (or nonexistent) you'll have no problem getting what you need on the island. Cozumel may be the easiest place in Mexico to visit if you don't speak Spanish, although any attempts to communicate in Spanish (even high-school Spanish!) will be graciously received and encouraged.

Dining

Most restaurants have menus in English and Spanish, and almost every restaurant, store, and hotel has someone on staff or within reach who speaks English. Restaurant dining therefore will present no unusual challenges to visiting divers. Seafood is the island specialty – fresh conch, lobster and fish are served proudly by most restaurants. Though temperatures remain warm all year, the dress style all over the island is diver-elegant (ie t-shirts or light sports clothes), and you won't need to take your tie or dinner jacket anywhere unless you really want to impress someone who isn't a diver. Otherwise, save the space in your luggage and leave your formal clothing at home.

Shopping

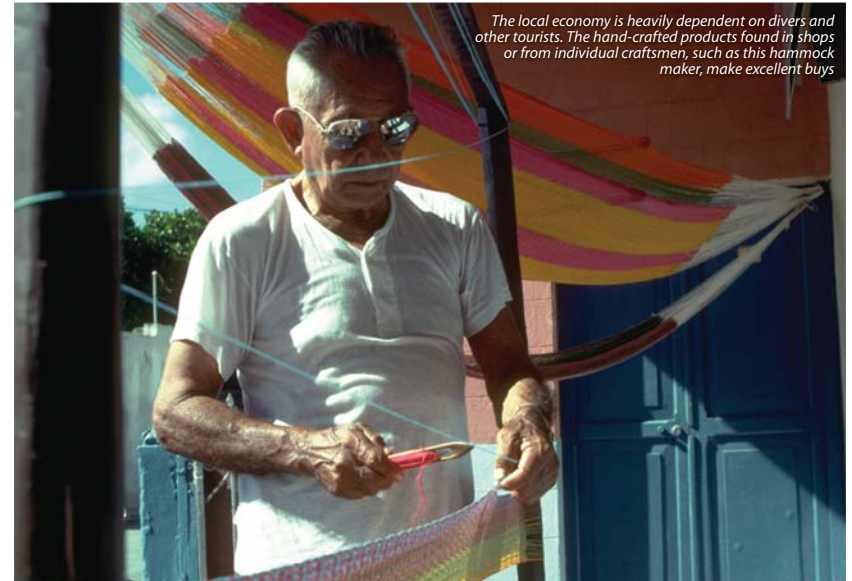
Most consumer goods, such as canned or packaged food at markets, are imported from the US. Consequently, don't expect any bargains on American products whatever the peso/dollar exchange rate may be. These goods are

purchased with dollars and shipped from the US into Mexico (picking up some taxes along the way). Shops are used to catering to post-dive munchie fits, and most food stores sell Danish cookies, fancy Dutch and Swiss chocolate bars, and similar commodities. (Make sure they haven't melted before leaving the store.)

Many Mexican souvenir items are available, and the best buys may be had on these. As in other Mexican locations, high-quality sterling silver jewelry, handmade blankets, hammocks, serapes, carved onyx chess sets and

US Consular Agent

If you have an emergency that requires official US Government intervention, there is a Consular Agent in Cozumel at Offices 8 and 9, on the second floor of the Villa Mar Mall on the main square in San Miguel, between Melgar and 5th Avenue. The office phone number is ☎ 872-4574.



The local economy is heavily dependent on divers and other tourists. The hand-crafted products found in shops or from individual craftsmen, such as this hammock maker, make excellent buys.



Food and snacks can be found in local markets and larger grocery stores
Photo: Hannah R. Lewbel

figurines, and simulated pre-Columbian pottery are sold by most shops. Caveat emptor is the rule of thumb, although the stamp 'sterling' on silver can almost always be relied on, as its use is controlled by the Mexican government. Bottles of natural vanilla extract are also popular souvenirs, since in the States nearly all vanilla flavoring (vanillin) is synthetic. Expect to bargain for souvenir-type items – the original asking price is perhaps double the final selling price, but don't bother haggling in any of the department stores or markets selling imported goods.

Lots of souvenirs seem to be designed mainly for divers, such as carvings of sea creatures and turtle-shell combs, rings and bracelets. Sea turtles are on the Endangered Species List, however, and it is illegal to import any turtle-shell items into the States and many other countries. Customs will seize them (and you, if you try to sneak them in) upon your return.

DOCUMENTS

Non-US citizens should contact their nearest Mexican embassy or consulate for details on traveling to and from Mexico.

Currently, the US Department of State (www.travel.state.gov) recommends US citizens carry a valid passport in order to 'avoid delays and misunderstandings' when boarding flights in Mexico. In theory, an official certified (embossed-seal) birth certificate or a Naturalization Certificate and a government-issued official photo ID such as a state ID or driver's license should be enough. In practice, it doesn't always work that way. This may change in the near future if the US requires passports for re-entry to the States.

If you're bringing along any minors who are not accompanied by both parents, things are more complicated. Refer to The State Department website for details. Assuming that your



Snorkeling is available along most of the western shore of Cozumel
Photo: Carolyn B. Martin

All major hotels in Cozumel are located on the water with easy swimming and snorkeling access
Photo: Carolyn B. Martin



documents are in order, on arrival in Mexico, you'll be issued a Mexican Tourist Permit. Don't lose it! You'll need the permit to leave Mexico, and may be asked to show it at any time by Mexican officials. When you leave Mexico, you'll turn in your Tourist Permit along with a departure tax (\$13) if you fly out. Some airline tickets may include the departure tax in the fare; when you check in at the airport, ask the ticket agent to see if your departure tax has been prepaid.

C-CARD

Unless you have your diver's certification card with you, you will not be able to rent tanks or charter boats from any reputable operator. In other words, no card, no diving, no fun. Be sure to bring your dive log, too, so that you can show dive operators how much (or how little)

experience you have before jumping into the water.

Cozumel is no place to pretend you have more experience than you do. If you haven't dived in high-current environments or along steep dropoffs, make sure your operator knows this in advance and takes it into account before you go diving.

TIPPING

Tipping in Mexico is similar to tipping in the US. The range for excellent service is 15% to 20%, and the trades relying on tips are those traditional ones that cater to travelers (waiters and waitresses, cab drivers, hotel staff, dive guides, etc.). Be sure to check your hotel or restaurant bill to see if service is included (*servicio incluido*) in the charges; if it is, no tip is expected though you could 'round up' if the service was exceptional.

LA TURISTA

Perhaps a word of advice on sanitation might be welcome here, given the cost of a diving vacation and the unhappiness of having to sit out a dive due to illness. Throughout most tropical countries (Mexico included), it's good practice not to consume unpurified water (ask for *agua purificado* or carbonated mineral water, *agua mineral con gas*) or ice cubes not made from *agua purificado*. You can further limit your chances of difficulties by avoiding salads or uncooked vegetables. Also, avoid frozen popsicle treats and peel all fruit before eating it.

The safest bet is not to drink ANY non-carbonated water, even if it appears to have been bottled, whether or not it has a fancy label on it. Hotel employees have been known to refill commercial mineral water bottles with city water from the garden hose tap, then recap and resell them to sell at high prices to hotel guests.

If worse comes to worst and you catch Montezuma's revenge, you'll want to get to the nearest pharmacy (*farmacia*) for relief. A pharmacy within the large market-department store at the northeast corner of the plaza can dispense whatever you need. Paranoid divers often carry a medical kit set up by their own doctor, with a few 'just in case' prescriptions, taking into account the possibility of catching the *la turista* on the road.

FIRST AID KIT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Marine Series of Adventure Medical Kits (www.adventuremedicalkits.com) are particularly good because their contents are modularized in color-coded waterproof bags (Medications/Stings, Wound Care, Fractures/Sprains, Stop Bleeding/Shock) and include easy-to-follow instructions for each module.



Remember to streamline your gear, as has this diver, for protection of fragile marine life



Listings

Gorgonians extend into the current to filter plankton from the water



DIVE SERVICES

In previous editions, we have recommended you dive only with operators that are affiliated with the privately owned Buceo Medico Mexicano (BMM) recompression chamber in San Miguel. However, the meaning of 'chamber affiliation' is no longer clear, and as of April 2006, there were three different chambers in town.

The following list of dive operators is provided for your convenience but should NOT be taken as a recommendation by the authors that you use any one of them, or that you do not use an operator who is not on the list. Look at their own websites and/or e-mail them for current contact information, which often changes. Many of these operators have recently started to post US phone numbers on their websites, which can save you the cost of a long-distance call to Mexico if you're in the States before you go.

Abc Cozumel:
www.cozumel-diving.net/luis
Albatros Charter:
www.cozumelscuba.com

Aqua Safari:

www.aquasafari.com

Aqua World:

www.aquaworld.com.mx

Black Shark:

www.blackshark.net

Blue Angel:

www.blueangel-scuba.com

Blue Bubble Divers:

www.bluebubble.com

Blue Note:

www.bluenote.com.mx

Bottom Time Divers:

www.bottomtimedivers.net

Buena Ventura:

www.gocozumel.com/ventura

Caballito Del Cbe:

www.seahorsecozumel.com

Caribbean Divers:

www.caribbeandiverscozumel.net

Cozumel Corona:

lin@prodigy.cozumel.com

Cozumel Equalizer:

www.cozumequalizers.com

Cozumel Sport:

www.cozsports.tripod.com/sep4

Deep Blue:

www.deepbluecozumel.com

Del Mar Aquatics:

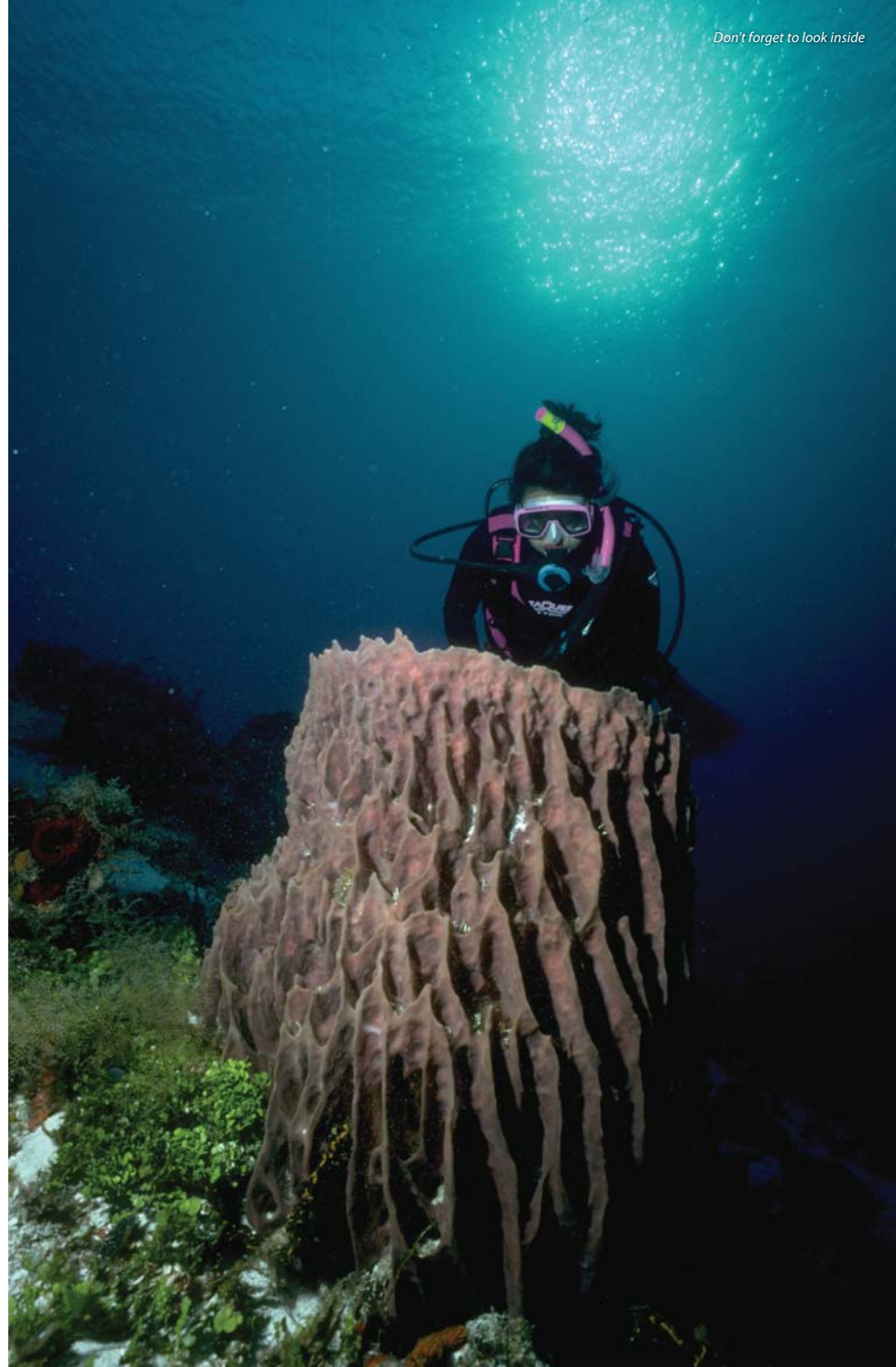
www.delmaraquatics.net

Once again, take a dive light



Diamante:
www.divepalancarcozumel.com
Dive House:
www.divehouse.com
Dive Paradise:
www.diveparadise.com
Dive with Martin:
www.divewithmartin.com
Diving Adventures:
www.divingadventures.net
Dressel Divers:
www.dresseldivers.com
Eco Divers:
www.cozumel-diving.net/ecodivers
el Dorado:
www.comcoz.com/eldoradohtml
Flash Adventures:
canul82@todito.com
Hernan Bacelis:
hernanbacelis@hotmail.com
Ixtabay Divers:
www.xtabaydivers.com
La Tortuga:
scubatortuga@yahoo.com
Mantaraya Divers:
www.mantaraya.com
Marina Playa Mia:
betasail@hotmail.com

Pelagic Ventures:
www.pelagicventuresr.com
Roberta's Scuba:
www.robertasdiveecocozumel.com
Sand Dollar Sports:
www.sanddollarsports.com
Scuba Cozumel:
www.scubaclubcozumel.com
Scuba Du:
www.scubadu.com
Scuba Gamma:
www.scubagamma.com
Scuba Shack
www.robertasdiveecocozumel.com
Sea Scuba
www.islacozumel.net/divingseascuba
Sea Urchin Dive:
www.seaurchindive.com
Snorkel Center:
snorkcen@prodigy.net.mx
Staff Divers:
www.scubastaffdivers.net
Studio Blue:
www.cozumel-diver.net
Yucatech Expeditions:
www.yucatech.net



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