

Cozumel

*Not bound to swear allegiance to any master,
wherever the wind takes me I travel as a visitor.*

~ Horace 65 - 8 BC

The garlands of reef around Cozumel were discovered many years ago by divers and snorkelers who flocked here for the indescribable beauty of life undersea and a visibility reaching 250 feet. Later, cruise ships began an annual migration like huge pregnant white ducks to the docks of Cozumel. Now both the reefs and the seafront downtown become crowded with divers and cruise passengers making the most of their time here.

Positioned somewhere between the resort atmosphere of Cancún and the laissez-faire attitude of Isla Mujeres, Cozumel casts a magical spell over anyone who sets foot on shore. The island somehow manages to absorb a daily dose of tourists and still maintain a charm all its own; it is only about 5% developed. Beyond the tourist mecca are spectacular natural wonders and a relaxed lifestyle. The ancient Maya called the island Ah Cuzamil Peten, "Place of Swallows."



MYSTERIOUS MAYA: *Maya women made a pilgrimage to Cozumel to honor Ixchel, goddess of fertility and the moon.*

It was here that Spanish warrior Hernando Cortéz landed in 1518 in an expedition that would develop into the conquest of the continent. He found friendly natives – as do tourists who disembark nearly 500 years later. Cozumel became a port of call for Caribbean cruise ships after Jacques Cousteau filmed its amazing reefs in the 1950s. Now, an average of 600 cruise ships visit the island annually. It's also a favorite hop-over for tourists from Cancún.

You can "do" Cozumel in a day or spend a month and still not "do" everything. The reasons for the island's popularity are obvious: sparkling emerald waters that hold a coral coat of many colors and a population of warm and friendly Cozumeleños make the island a natural place to be.

The island's official website is www.cozumel.net.

Orientation

◆ Getting Around

San Miguel (population 69,000) is the only city on Mexico's largest island at 47 km (28 miles) long and 15 km (11 miles) wide. With a maximum elevation of 45 feet, the island sits 18 km (11 miles) offshore from Playa del Carmen. Two **ferry services** – a car ferry from Puerto Morelos and a people ferry from Playa del Carmen – serve Cozumel from the Yucatán mainland.

AUTHORS' TIP: *Buy your ticket for the ferry from Playa to Cozumel (US \$9) from several ticket booths near the dock. The ticket booth on Cozumel is at the dock entrance. The boat runs frequently and takes about a half-hour. In windy weather, take a Dramamine beforehand.*

San Miguel also has an international **airport** with some direct flights landing from the States and several 15-minute connecting flights from Cancún (call Aerocozumel, ☎ 998/884-2000). The airport is on the island's north end.

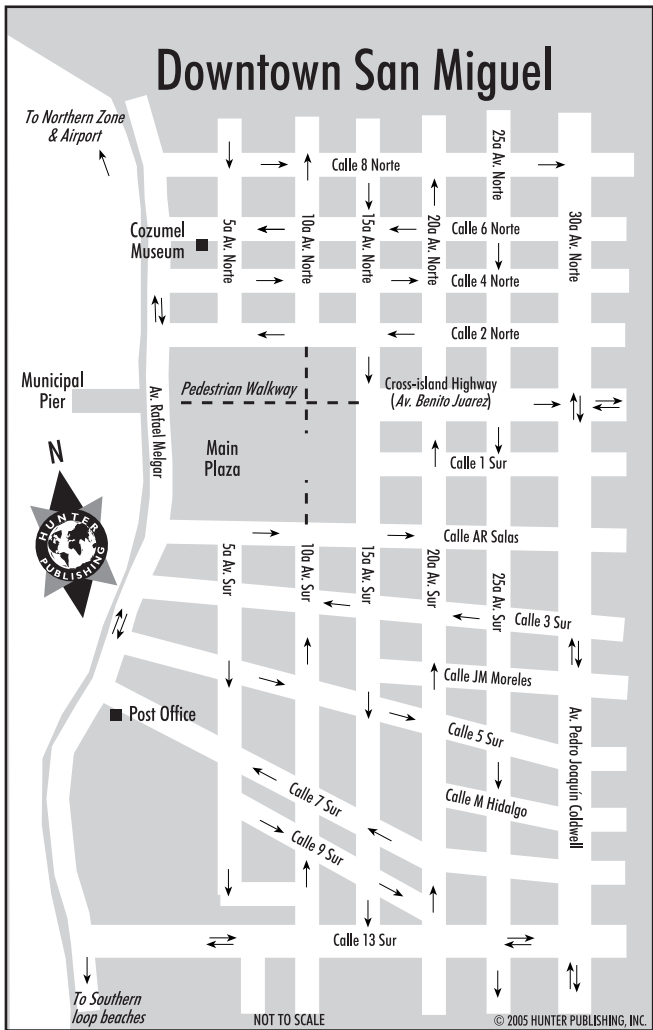
The scrub brush jungle covers the northern half of the island, which is virtually uninhabited. The southern portions, the interior and the entire windward east coast also have few inhabitants. A road loops the entire southern part along the sea, then cuts back into town, dividing the island in half, while a coastal road follows the northern shore to its end. The concentration of population in San Miguel makes for some interesting expeditions and explorations far from the madding crowd.

Chankanaab National Park, south of town, may have some crowds but is a great place to snorkel, sun and see a botanical garden. The western shore beaches – both north and south of the main pier – are very beautiful. The northern section is mostly hotels and private homes of the wealthy; to the south are the “public” beaches.

Unlike other Mexican towns, Cozumel has no public buses. Besides taxis (a good choice when going direct from one place to another), three types of personal transportation are available: **motorbikes**, **bicycles** and **cars**, including four-wheel-drives. Taxis have no meters so negotiate your fare first.

Many major hotels rent motorbikes or cars and every street corner downtown near the dock has men hawking rentals. Cozumel's excellent roads combined with long stretches of wilderness make a motorbike ideal – and they even come with automatic shifts. The prices on vehicles are pretty much the same between companies, especially near the dock, but you could try going direct to some of the shops in town or waiting until the ferry is empty and the crowd disbursed before negotiating. It's illegal to ride a scooter/moped without a helmet. Also, a rental vehicle may not come with insurance, so check first.

Cozumel has excellent roads and enough to see and do to keep occupied, even if it's nothing more than floating around in the warm Caribbean waters.



The street layout in Cozumel makes it easy to know where you are... once you get used to it. **Av. Rafael Melgar** is the main road running along the western waterfront. There you'll find La Caleta, a new state-of-the-art lighthouse built to guide cruise ships. Roads running north and south, parallel to the water, are **avenidas** and those running perpendicular to the sea, east and west, are **calles**. The sole exception to this is **Av. Benito Juárez**, which cuts San

Miguel and the island into northern and southern halves and should be a calle, but is not.

Streets north of Juárez are marked *norte* and have even numbers (2, 4, 6, etc.). All the *calle*s south of Juárez are *sur* and are given odd numbers (3, 5, 7, etc.). Vehicles traveling north and south are supposed to have the right of way, while those traveling east and west are required to stop on every corner. Drive very carefully and look before you go.

❖ PARKING PROBLEMS

Parking can sometimes be scarce in town. Don't park by red curbs – they're "No Parking" zones. Your car or moto could be towed or the license plate removed (so that you pay a fine at the rental agency).

Practicalities

COMMUNICATION: There are several **Internet cafés**. Those closer to the ferry dock are more expensive. You can make calls and send faxes and e-mail from the **Calling Station**, ☎ 987/872-1417, Av. Melgar at Calle 3 Sur, open until at least 10 pm daily.

CONSULATE/IMMIGRATION: There's a new US consulate office on the Plaza Principal (☎ 987/872-4574 or 872-6152). To extend your tourist card here, visit the *Migración* office in the Palacio Municipal (☎ 987/872-0226).

FERRY SCHEDULE: (Playa to Cozumel) 6, 8, 9, 10, 11 am, 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11 pm. (Cozumel to Playa) 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 am, noon, 2, 4, 5, 6:30, 8, 10 pm.

GROCERIES: A good **bakery** is **Panificadora La Cozumeleña** on Calle 3 Sur and Av. 10 a.

LAUNDROMAT: **Laundromat Margarita** is on Av. 20, near Calle 3 Sur.

MEDICAL FACILITIES & DOCTORS: There are several English-speaking doctors. Try **Dr. Lewis** on Av. 50 (☎ 987/872-1616). There's the **Medical Center** on Av. 20 Norte No. 425 (☎ 987/872-2929) and a 24-hour tourist **Medical Service** on Av. 50 between Calles 11 and 13 Sur (☎ 987/872-0912). Call an **ambulance** at ☎ 987/872-0639. A diver's **decompression chamber** is on Calle 5 Sur off Melgar, ☎ 987/872-2387.

MINI GOLF: The cute **Cozumel Mini Golf** has 18 holes up and down a little hill at the corner of Calle 1 Sur and Av. 15, US \$6, kids \$4.

MONEY MATTERS: There are several **banks** around offering money exchange (usually in the mornings) and two money change booths are located on the square. The **American Express** representative is at the Fiesta Cozumel, Av. Melgar No. 27 (☎ 987/872-2262).

PHARMACIES: There are several pharmacies in town, including one on the plaza, another at the *zócalo* near the Hotel Lopez and a 24-hour one at the **Medical Center** on Av. 20 Norte No. 425 (☎ 987/872-2929).

POLICE: The police are reached at ☎ 987/872-0092 or 987/872-0409 in the Palacio Municipal on Calle 11 Sur. Dial 060 or 066 for emergencies.

POST OFFICE: The post office is on Av. Rafael Melgar at Calle 7 Sur.

SHOPPING: Cozumel and shopping are synonymous. Your first stop should be downtown in the shopping area around the main square. In the **Plaza del Sol** facing the square are a number of flea market gift and souvenir shops that offer good prices with bargaining. The **open-air flea market** has long been a staple for people getting off the cruise ships. It's located across the street from the old cruise ship dock, the southernmost pier. Brand new **Punta Langosta** has been built like an American mall across from the new cruise ship dock almost in the middle of downtown. It has over 75 upscale shops and restaurants. One of them is **Los Cinco Soles**, whose more established store is to the north of the ferry pier on Av. Melgar. It has the best quality and overall selection for gifts. All along the waterfront and Av. Melgar are other stores that cater to cruisers, some of which offer very interesting things.

SPA: Caribbean Massage, Av. 5 South between Calles 3 and 5, offers everything soothing. Swedish massage, aromatherapy, mud wraps, facials, manicures, waxing, haircuts and styling, even a sunburn treatment are given in a spotlessly clean parlor. Make appointments at ☎ 987/872-5068. Open 9-8 pm. Around the block on Calle 5, between Melgar and Av. 5 Sur, is **Spa del Sol** (☎ 987/869-1194), which offers relaxation and therapeutic massage, aromatherapy, and beauty treatments in their facility or at your hotel.

SUPPORT GROUPS: English-language **AA** and **NA** meetings are held Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 6 pm at the Hotel Colonial, corner of Av. 5 and Calle 7 Sur (☎ 987/872-1007).

TOURIST INFORMATION: This can be obtained from the **Tourism Office** (☎ 987/872-7585, www.cozumel.net). Climb the less-than-clean stairway in the middle of the Plaza del Sol building that faces the central plaza. We were more pleased with the help provided by the **Hotel Association** (☎ 987/872-3132) on Calle 2 Norte, between Avenidas 10 & 15.

TRANSPORTATION RENTALS (A PARTIAL LIST)

Company	Telephone, location	Available vehicles
Aguila Jeep & Moto	☎ 987/872-1190, Av. Rafael Melgar south of ferry	Motorcycles, bikes, Jeeps, cars
Budget Jeep & Auto	☎ 987/872-0903, Av. 5 @ Calle 2	Jeeps, cars
Masha	☎ 987/872-1096, 5ta Av. @ 3 Sur	Motorcycles, bikes
Localiza	☎ 987/872-2111	Cars
Avis	☎ 987/872-0099, airport	Cars
Rentador Cozumel	☎ 987/872-1120, Hotel Flores	Motorcycles, bikes
Less Pay	☎ 987/872-4744, Hotel Barracuda	Jeeps, cars
Auto Rent	☎ 987/872-0844, La Ceiba Hotel	Jeeps, cars

Beaches

*For thousands of years the seekers have come....
And they still come to Cozumel.*

~ Legends of Old Mexico, Father Oveido Hernandez, 1847

The windward eastern beaches are rocky, dramatic, impressive, gorgeous and – with a few exceptions – too rough and dangerous for swimming. These are best suited to beachcombing and shell collecting. The leeward western beaches feature picture-book white sand, gentle lapping waves, warm emerald-green water and a series of vibrant living reefs. These are the beaches for good swimming, snorkeling and diving.

◆ Along the Leeward Shore

The beaches north of the pier downtown on the leeward side of the island are also sublime, especially around **Playa Azul**. They are less accessible because of all the private homes and hotels. The strange unfinished lighthouse-looking structure near the marina is part of a mansion, connected with the main house by a tunnel under the road. Rumor has it (as told to us by a grinning security guard) the eccentric owner killed his family and himself there.

Following the leeward loop about nine km (5.5 miles) south of town brings you to **Chankanaab National Park**, a lagoon and botanical garden set along the shore. The garden features over 400 plant species. The lagoon used to be connected to the sea through underground passages. Those waterways have now collapsed, creating a living aquarium with over 60 different aquatic species. Sand beaches, restaurants, a museum, plus snorkel and dive areas with rental and lessons are available in the park. In the water, fish hang out waiting for food scraps and the snorkeling among them is wonderful. The park is also a marvelous place to relax in the sun or shade in picnic areas. Chankanaab boasts the new Dolphin Discovery, an exciting half-hour interactive swim with dolphins (see below, page 113).

The beach just before Chankanaab is **Playa Corona**, with a fresh fish and Mexican food restaurant and snorkel rental. **Playa San Francisco**, the beach south of Chankanaab, is very popular with cruise tourists who stop for lunch and a swim. It's one of the best beaches in Cozumel. **Playa Sol**, (☎ 987/872-9030, www.playasol.com.mx), a bit farther south, has become a big-time tourist destination from its more humble beginnings. It now boasts a huge, beachside palapa restaurant with Mexican buffet, a zoo and lots of gift-buying opportunities. Snorkeling, diving (to their own imitation sunken Maya city), swimming, and most watersports are available. Exaggerated entrance fee. **Playa del Cedral** is opposite the turn for the inland village and small El Cedral ruins. It's a public park with a tiny seafood restaurant. **Playa Palancar** is opposite the famous reef of the same name. It features a restaurant and good swimming. There are a number of these beautiful beach spots and restaurant combinations along the east coast road.

◆ Along the Windward Shore

After a long ride through the jungle bush you come to the **Paradise Café**, a reggae bar along the rough, west-coast windward side. A right leads to the **Punta del Sur**, a recently created nature preserve and park around the secluded beaches at the **Punta Celerain Lighthouse**. The lighthouse is now the **Museo de Navegacion**, with displays themed to ships and the sea. A comfortable bus takes visitors from the information center on a guided tour of the natural area, providing binoculars to see the wildlife and vistas from *mirador* towers along the road. The Late Postclassic Maya ruins at the southernmost tip, **El Caracol**, while small, are quite charming. Embedded with rows of conch shells that call in the wind, the diminutive building is one-of-a-kind in Maya architecture. Admission to Punta Del Sur is around US \$15, which includes the tour. A large restaurant is planned.



MYSTERIOUS MAYA: *Some historians theorize that Maya architects arranged conch shells to “sing” when the wind blew.*

Just north of the sharp turn at the Paradise Café is a **blowhole** in the rock, a great place to get wet and a fun photo op if the tide is in. The road runs north from here along the rugged rocky windswept coastline.

The next site of interest is **El Mirador snack bar**, a tiny place with outdoor tables among the dunes. As you drive the road there are plenty of herons and pelicans to be seen in the wild.

Pretty **Playa Bonita** has an eatery and allows beach camping. Farther along, **Chen Rio beach**, with an excellent little seafood restaurant, is shielded by rocks that form a cove and break up the waves. It's great for swimming and snorkeling and a peaceful place to stop and eat, swim or just hang a hammock. A left turn at the end of the long road is required to return to San Miguel, past the San Gervasio ruins. To continue north on the dirt road to Puntas Molinas requires a four-wheel-drive and some stamina.

Events

Carnival, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, is a hugely festive holiday bash with masquerades and dances. The island comes alive for this, by far the biggest event of the year, with some parties running all night long. Floats, prepared by hotels, restaurants and clubs, give the parade a Mardi Gras style. Street dancing competitions occur during the entire week. The “Comparas” groups are judged on originality, style, color and execution. All the balls and fiestas are open to the public, but you must buy tickets ahead of time on the square above Chico's.

A free open-air **concert** is held every Sunday, 7-10 pm, in the main square.

In May is the **Feria de Cedral**, when Cozumelños celebrate the first Catholic mass in Mexico, said at the El Cedral ruins. Contact Cozumel Tourism at

☎ 987/872-7585. “Everyone, including Chaplain Juan Diaz, participated in the simple ceremony,” wrote one of the chroniclers of the event. “This was done in a way to avoid insulting the local pagan priest and designed to make no enemies among the natives.”

After the Cedral Fair, everyone goes fishing. There are three big tournaments during May and June. Check out www.islacozumel.com.mx or www.cozumel.net for dates.

Night Spots

*Come a little bit closer, you're my kind of man
So big and so strong.
Come a little bit closer, I'm all alone
and the night is so long.
~ sung by Jay and the Americans*

A large number of island visitors return to their cruise ships by the early evening. After the ships weigh anchor and light up their rigging as they sail off, the nightlife in Cozumel begins. Although it is not quite as much a party town as Cancún – perhaps because alcohol and diving don’t mix – it still swings.

The hottest eating, dancing, “ass-kicking,” but touristy, party place is **Carlos and Charlie’s** roof dance and grill restaurant, near the ferry dock on Av. Melgar. It’s up a steep set of stairs that guarantee a problem coming back down after a few drinks! Dine on the terrace overlooking the harbor and the main drag below. When Carlos closes at 1 am the sleepless from Seattle may wander over to find you at **Joe’s**, a crowded bar and live-music super party place on Av. 10 between 1 & 3 South; or at **Raga**, the live reggae, salsa and rock music Caribbean restaurant and bar, on Av. Salas between 10 and 15. It opens at 10:30 pm. The oceanfront drive boasts a popular **Hard Rock Café** and a **Planet Hollywood**, both smaller and more intimate than their Cancún counterparts.

Follow the sounds of singing to **Tony Rome’s** (Av. 5 next to Black Shop Dive Shop north of the plaza, ☎ 987/872-0131), where Tony Rome himself croons relaxing music with two shows nightly at 7:30 and 9:30. Tony’s is a required stop for any true Cozumel experience. With open-neck shirt and gold chains, he looks like a caricature of a lounge singer – perhaps because that’s what he was in the States, headlining for years in casinos in Las Vegas and Atlantic City. Smile at his style if you must. When the South Jersey native begins to sing, you’ll fall over at his wonderful voice and you’ll find yourself singing along with the standards. Tony’s offers good ribs, good times and loaded drinks. Say hello from us.

Black and White, a restaurant/piano bar/nightclub that draws a hip local crowd, is near the central downtown area. Head east on Juárez four blocks from the plaza and turn right at the Pemex on Av. Pedro Joaquin (30 a). Go four blocks more to the happening bar. Cool, baby.

The disco dance floors can become very crowded in Cozumel. **Neptuno Disco**, five blocks south of the plaza along the water, fills with a good mix of locals and tourists who love to dance and mingle. They have huge TV screens and a sharp laser light show.

Adventures & Attractions

*There is a third dimension to traveling,
the longing for what is beyond.*
~ Jan Myrdal, *The Silk Road*

◆ Attractions

The **Cozumel Museum** opened in 1987 in an airy building along the seafront, 2½ blocks north of the main plaza. It presents local archeological history in four *salas*, exhibition halls, on two floors. The well-arranged museum is open 9 am to 8 pm daily. No flash photography is permitted. It has a good **coffee shop** upstairs.

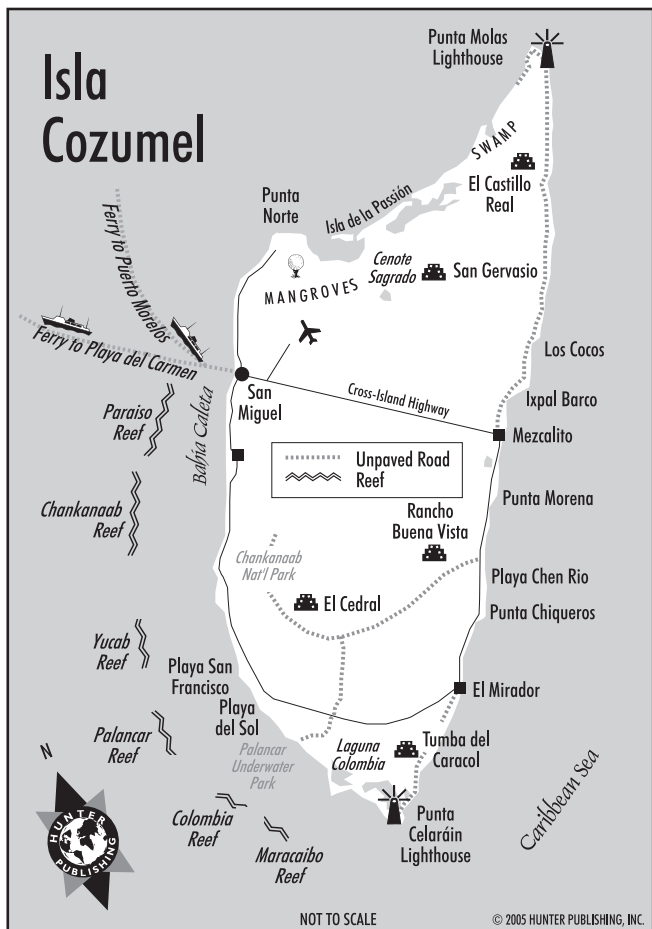
◆ Adventures

WATERSPORTS: It's a no-brainer to guess that adventure activities on Cozumel island center around the water. If you're an experienced diver with PADI certification, there is no end of opportunities. Numerous dive trip operators will take you to the 17 major dive spots offshore, which include a sunken airplane near the La Ceiba Hotel. For a list of approved providers, stop by the **Cozumel Dive Association** on Av. 15 between 2 and 4, ☎ 987/872-5955, www.cozumel.net/diving/anoaat.

Snorkelers can find paradise at **Chankanaab National Park** (www.cozumelparks.com.mx) or off the shores of the beachfront hotels. Either persuasion can rent a boat and guide at the marina near the airport. The park also offers **Dolphin Discovery**, a supervised, hands-on swim with the lovable sea mammals. They are offered at 9 and 11 am and 1 and 3 pm. Make reservations ahead of time, ☎ 987/872-6604, 05, 06, or 07. Cost is about US \$130, for everyone ages eight and up.

FISHING: You can charter fishing boats from **Cozumel Anglers Fleet** (☎ 987/872-0118), **Cozumel Adventures** (☎ 987/872-0489), or **Sportel** (☎ 987/878-0214).

HIKING & BIKING/MAYA RUINS: Hikers and bikers might also like to go to the main Maya ruins, **San Gervasio**. The trails between the sites follow the ancient *sacbeob* (plural of *sacbé*) under the shade of trees. (*Sacbeob* were raised causeways built by the Maya.) It's as much fun to walk around as it is to see the ruins. In 2000 the restoration of the El Ramonal section of the ruins was completed with the help of 40 local Maya families and a grant from American Express.



HORSEBACK RIDING: There are several ranches offering guided horseback trips into the bush. Look for signs at the end of the north beaches, near the Presidente Hotel, and on the leeward side.

GOLF: With a \$200 million investment, the new **Cozumel Country Club** (☎ 987/872-9570, www.cozumelcountryclub.com.mx) is setting world-class standards with its 18-hole championship course set among the mangroves on the island's north end, across the street from the Plaza Azul hotel. Bring a handicap and some insect repellent.