

Living the Good Life in Cozumel By Lisa Arcella

Cancun is a huge draw for many vacationers looking for fun, sun and great food. But I will always opt for the stunning beauty and quiet charm of its sister island, Cozumel.

Cozumel often finds itself as simply a day trip or a brief cruise ship stopover on many itineraries, but you will never regret opting for a longer stay. From my perspective, the tiny, 30 mile long island has it all: proximity to the historic ruins and amenities that Cancun and the Riviera Maya offers, plus unbelievable natural beauty, crystal-clear aquamarine waters and so much to explore above the sea and below.

Any journey to Cozumel begins at San Miguel and its Central Plaza, aptly known as El Centro! Most of the island's restaurants, hotels, stores, and dive shops are concentrated in or around this area. This is also where cruise ship visitors tend to congregate, visiting dozens of craft and jewelry stores during the day. At night though it's a gathering spot for locals and visitors to mix and take in nightly free concerts. The crowd was there to see a great guitar trio during my first evening, and although many people spontaneously started dancing, I was afraid my moves would have me instantly deported!

Instead I opted to save myself from embarrassment and plan for several days of non-stop adventure, and of course plenty of tan-time too.

Where to Stay:

The Cozumel Palace is only 15 minutes from downtown and a great all-inclusive choice for every traveler's needs. Purified water, 24 hour room service and being situated on a magnificent coral reef were all huge selling points for me. You can literally walk out of the door of your room and experience the most amazing snorkeling experience of your life. <http://www.palacecozumel.com>

If being closer to the action of Cancun is more appealing, I would check out the Gran Caribe Resort (<http://www.playaresorts.com/Gran-Caribe-Cancun>), another top notch all-inclusive, with a lovely beach and great restaurants. From Playa del Carmen its about a 35 minute ferry ride from the mainland to Cozumel.

What to do:

The Joy of Chocolate Tour—

Chocolate junkies (myself included) find this tour at the Kaokao Chocolate Factory a divine experience! (<http://www.kaokaochocolatefactorytour.com>) Not only can you learn about how the Mayan civilization developed that delicious beverage we now know as hot chocolate, you will even make (and eat) your own chocolate bar with the help of a master chocolatier.

Mexico Park & Chankanaab Park

Mexico Park is a great place to get an overview of Mexican history and they have very cool replicas of iconic Chichén Itzá, ancient Aztec, Maya, and Totonac pyramids (<http://www.discovermexico.org>). Nearby Chankanaab, is a fun beach and adventure park, where you can see dolphins and sea lions and a beautiful botanical garden (<http://www.cozumelparks.com>).

San Gervasio Ruins

Cancun may claim Tulum, but there are preserved ruins Mayan ruins in Cozumel at San Gervasio. Historians believe that this is the site of the sanctuary of Ixchel, goddess of fertility. (<http://www.inah.gob.mx/es/zonas/101-zona-arqueologica-san-gervasio>) FYI THIS LINK IS IN SPANISH

El Cielo Cozumel

Once you visit, there will be no doubt in your mind why locals call this “Heaven.” I visited a local tour operator to take me to the boat accessible only area. It was well worth the trip. A shallow reef, soft white sand dotted with star fish and sting rays at arms length make this an ideal place to snorkel.

Punta Sur Park

I like renting a moped, one because they’re fun and two because it allows for access to areas not always accessible by car. I hopped on and headed over to the East side of the island. Called the “Wild Side,” the swimming is decidedly more dangerous, but the views are not to be missed. The best Eco Preserve on the island is at Punta Sur on the southern tip. The park has a huge lighthouse that can’t be missed, but keep an eye out for aligators and pink flamingos that also call this area home. (http://www.cozumelparks.com/eng/punta_sur.cfm)

Palancar Reef

Full disclosure—I’m not a diver. I do know however that Cozumel is a mecca for lovers of the sport and any seasoned visitor here will tell you that one of the best spots to visit is Arrecife Palancar (Palancar Reef), where horseshoe shaped coral heads allow for spectacular sea life viewing and exploring.

Horseback riding

Easily the best thing I did during my last visit to Cozumel was to head out to Rancho Buenavista and take a fantastic ride through jungles and along the beach on the back of a horse. The guides carefully help you find the horse that’s right for you and of course

they know the territory like the back of their hands. It was so exciting to see a huge orange iguana staring back at me during a venture through the forest.

Where to Eat:

There are so many great places to eat on Cozumel. One of my favorites is **Casa Denis**. Situated in a little yellow house just a stone's throw from the plaza, it offers This little yellow house yummy Yucatecan dishes like *cochinilla pibil* (spiced pork baked in banana leaves). (<http://www.casadenis.com>)

Alfredo di Roma inside the Hotel President InterContinental is a really good Italian restaurant where they will create authentic Fetticcine Alfredo right at your table! (The inventor was the current owner's grandfather). Be sure to make a reservation if you decide to visit. <http://www.alfredodiroma.rest/historia/>

For inexpensive and delicious Mexican food, I loved **Burritos Gorditos** in San Miguel. The shrimp burrito is literally a dream come true. There aren't a lot of seats and there is no alcohol served but definitely worth the trip.

Coconuts is a really fun place to discover when you head out of town. It's super casual, with reggae playing in the background and some of the best cervezas, fish, fajitas, and garlic shrimp you will ever taste.