Cozumel – Island of the Swallows

From sparkling turquoise water and glowing orange sunsets to jewel-toned parrot fish and waving green palm trees, the island of Cozumel is an artist’s palette of colors waiting to be discovered.

For families, Cozumel is a paradise filled with adventure. On shore, iguanas drape lazily across tree branches, their claws dangling harmlessly while they siesta in the sunshine. Long-tailed brown anoles dart under leaves and bushes when startled and pelicans patiently roost on pilings waiting to fill their pouches with a sea snack. Underwater, a myriad of colorful fish swim among the coral – powder blue tangs, queen angelfish, yellow and black striped sergeant majors and spotted eagle rays.

Though severely damaged by Hurricane Wilma in October 2005, Cozumel remains a wonderful vacation spot. The citizens of the island have worked hard to bring back the beauty of the island and are justifiably proud of their efforts. New and rebuilt hotels have a luxurious feel, fountains and palms blow in the breeze and island hospitality, as always, is welcoming.

According to Victor, snorkel guide on El Principe, the coral was badly damaged and will be slow to recover, but surprisingly there are more fish, turtles and other sea life than before, making snorkeling even more exciting. Just ask my husband and kids. On our snorkel trip, we swam beside two sea turtles, floated amid a school of yellowtail snapper, gazed in wonder at bluehead wrasse picking at the coral and snapped a close-up photo of a nurse shark. There’s enough to do in Cozumel and nearby on the mainland to keep you busy for several vacations!

Cozumel has long been considered one of the world’s best scuba and snorkeling sites. From many hotels on the island, simply sit on a beach chair right outside your room, pull on your mask and flippers and wade in to begin exploring Cozumel’s underwater beauty. The water is calm and crystal clear, making it the perfect place for children of all ages to snorkel or just splash in the gentle, lapping surf. We saw skates, blue tangs, parrotfish, triggerfish, chromis, damselfish and spotted eagle rays within 100 yards of shore. It was wonderful to wake up, have a leisurely breakfast, pull on your snorkel gear and go for a swim with the morning sun dancing on the water.

Ready for more adventure? Try a snorkel boat, like the El Principe, to get to the famous reefs like Palancar and Columbia, where the variety of fish will astound you. It is worth the trip to see one of nature’s gifts. Or, go to Chankanaab National Park. With changing facilities, a snack bar, restaurants, a botanical garden, replicas of Mayan ruins, and a great beach, Chankanaab, Cozumel’s Natural Landmark, is a place to visit (www.cozumelparks.com).

Have you ever had a water fight with a dolphin? Let me tell you, it’s exhilarating! At Dolphin Discovery, watch your children’s eyes as they get their first kiss from a dolphin, hold out their arms to hug this amazing 300 lb. wonder and touch its supple skin. After this experience, you and your children will look at life a little differently. You’ve swum with a dolphin. Dolphin Discovery (www.dolphindiscovery.com) has several locations in Mexico, including one in Chankannab Park.

If you’re ready to try something dry, there are lots of options. We spent an afternoon exploring Cozumel’s history at Museo de la Isla de Cozumel. My kids loved locating armadillos and monkeys camouflaged in the flora and fauna display, seeing money from around the world, and getting a closer look at tools from long ago. There are ancient Mayan

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ruins dotting the island and jeep adventure tours for off-road fun.

Can you bargain hunt with the best of them? Then try your skills at the Market, located behind the town square. But beware; you might come home with more than you “bargained” for. We ended up with a senorita dress, silver-spangled sombrero, matching ukulele and an onyx chess board. Don’t ask.

When you are worn out from shopping, tempt your taste buds with local flavor at one of the many restaurants around the square. Or watch the street artists light up the night. You’ll be astounded at the paintings they can create using a piece of cardboard, cans of spray paint and a lighter.

If you have a truly adventurous family, try a tour to the mainland, where you can visit thousand year old Mayan ruins or swim in the world’s second largest natural “aquarium.” You have to be ready to get up early to catch a ferry to Playa del Carmen and won’t get back until late, but the journey is worth it. Jump off the Cliff of Courage, surface in a cave or be surrounded by a circling school of fish at Xel-Há, a Mexican natural wonder (www.xel-ha.com). It has been a special place since Mayan times. Come find out why. At Tulum, you’ll marvel at Mayan structures built over 1,000 years ago. Once a thriving coastal city, Tulum is situated above the aquamarine waters of the Caribbean, mingling history and majesty. We were awed by the skill of the ancient builders, who lined up doorways to view the Solstice, built towering pyramids and carved faces in the corners of the buildings. A once in a lifetime experience.

Visit Cozumel. Paint your own picture from the colors of paradise.
Before you travel to Cozumel, get advice from an expert. Nannette Maxwell, co-owner of Crest Travel Agency, shared these tips with us:

✵ Passport requirements for travel to Mexico are changing and passports may be required for everyone. Check www.travel.state.gov for the latest information. Be sure to get passports well in advance of your trip.

✵ Make several copies of the following – the picture page of your passport, credit card information (number and lost card telephone) and flight information. Keep some spare copies tucked in your suitcase and be sure to leave one copy at home with someone who can send you the information if needed.

✵ Before your trip, notify your credit card company of your travel dates so they expect charges from a foreign country. Many companies are on the lookout for credit card fraud and will “freeze” a card with unusual charges.

✵ Bring lots of $1 bills for tips. As well, the US dollar is welcome everywhere, so it is not necessary to exchange money.

✵ Check with your medical insurance provider regarding coverage for international travel.

✵ If you plan to rent a car, be sure to get Mexican rental car insurance. Many US insurance companies do not cover international rental.

✵ Ask the hotel staff if the tap water is safe for drinking and if they make ice with purified water. When you are off-resort, always drink bottled water or drinks without ice.

✵ If you plan to call home during your trip, buy an international phone card before you go for much better calling rates. Also look for internet cafes where you can use the internet for a nominal charge. This is a great way to stay in touch during your trip. Many hotels also offer internet terminals for their guests’ use.

✵ Bring plenty of sunscreen with you. US sunscreen is less expensive and of higher quality that what you can buy in Mexico. Apply sunscreen regularly. The sun is strong even in the winter, so you will burn very quickly. Seal sunscreen in a zip-top bag for travel so that it doesn’t leak in your suitcase.

✵ Bring disposable underwater cameras for great photos under the sea.

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