

Alabama woman finds Cozumel an economical destination for all ages

By Mary Shelton Reynolds
Special to The Daily

This Christmas season my family is headed to Cozumel, Mexico, for some family relaxation. Our "gift" to each other is a memorable vacation with time to enjoy ourselves and reflect on the reason for the season.

For some of us, it is our seventh visit to Mexico's largest inhabited island in the last three years, yet no one is saying, "Not Cozumel again!" Instead, I hear, "We love that place." We have traveled with bird-watchers, divers, outdoorsmen, beach lovers, history buffs and shoppers ranging in age from 8 to 80, none of whom were disappointed in the adventure.

Our favorite way to get to Cozumel (and the most economical way) is by cruise ship. The trip itself is a five-hour drive (340 miles from Decatur) to the Port of Mobile, quick processing to get on the ship (much easier than at most airports), a day at sea getting to Cozumel, a day to enjoy activities on the island, a day at sea back to Mobile, and the drive home. (Parking the car is convenient at the cruise terminal for about \$15 per day.) Right now, rates on Carnival's Elation are as low as \$299 per person for an interior stateroom on a four-day cruise with one stop in Cozumel. This price includes food and entertainment for the four days.

If you want to see what local life is like in Cozumel, hire a taxi to drive you around the island. Just outside the pier area, we found an excellent driver, who spoke good English, for about \$25. In about three hours, we walked on three types of beaches (sandy, rocky and manmade), visited the nesting areas of sea turtles, drove through residential areas where locals eat, shop, attend school and church, and learned about our driver's family life.

Meanwhile, two adults and all the children went swimming with the dolphins near a downtown pier (a cruise ship excursion). Later, the dolphin group took a taxi for about \$14 and joined us at Chankannab Park. Admission to the park is about \$10 per person. Some of us sat on the beach, some went snorkeling, some went iguana/bird watching and some investigated the lagoon.

For serious sun worshippers, snorkelers and beach party fans, clubs like Corona or Paradise Beach are a short taxi drive from the pier. The spots are generally free, but you are expected to purchase food and drinks. Closer to the pier, El Cid timeshare sometimes offers a day pass including lunch and drinks if you spend 45 minutes touring the facility.

Diving excursions and outdoor adventures such as mountain biking, horseback riding, hiking and ATV tours are available. Fishing enthusiasts can book a half-day bone fishing trip with a local captain. Golfers can play a round at the Cozumel Country Club.

For serious history buffs, ancient Mayan ruins like San Gervasio are available for exploring on Cozumel, and more spectacular Mayan ruins are located on the mainland. Depending on your arrival and departure times, you can take a ferry (about 35 minutes and \$7) to Playa del Carmen on the mainland for a bus excursion to Tulum to visit fascinating ruins.



The lagoon at Chankanaab Park in Cozumel is perfect for children who love fish, and the snorkeling area is easy to navigate.

We took an all-day, all-inclusive shore excursion to Tulum and Xel-Ha guaranteed by the cruise line for around \$130 per person. Xel-Ha is a natural "aquarium" that has been developed into a tourist haven. You can swim with the dolphins, go snorkeling or enjoy the ambiance of the five open-air restaurants.

For those who love haggling and finding one-of-a-kind pieces, shopping in Cozumel can be rewarding. The downtown area near the cruise pier offers everything from fine jewelry to local art objects. A traditional market (El Mercado) is at Avenida (Avenue 25) and Rosada Salas. While the waterfront stores have set prices, many of the local shops will bargain with you. You can function with just U.S. dollars, but it helps to have a few pesos for the smaller shops. You sometimes get a better price with pesos.

We have found Cozumel to be clean, safe and friendly. While it's not a good idea to drink water (except the bottled variety) or to buy food from street vendors, the restaurants in the San Miguel area are great choices for lunch, snacks and drinks. The drug problems in other areas of Mexico seem far away from Cozumel, and we have never felt tense or scared there. Simple, common sense behavior is all that is necessary.

Cozumel offers so many things to do that you can choose activities to fit your budget and personal interests every time you go.

Mary Shelton Reynolds of Lincoln is a freelance writer and travel enthusiast.

On the Net

www.cozumelmycozumel.com

World Travel Market the premier global event of the travel industry took place from the 8th to the 11th of November.