

Cozumel: Legends of Ixchel

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Trails across eastern Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula were once dotted by Mayan women making ritual pilgrimages to their holy island of Cuzamil. At the coastal cities of Tulum and Xel-Ha they joined sister pilgrims from as far away as Honduras to paddle canoes across the 12-mile channel to the island. After spending three days in sauna-like purification huts, they prayed and made offerings – often little straw images of children – at the shrine of their goddess of love and fertility.

The goddess' name was Ixchel (eee-shell). She was said to be fond of sparrows, and her island was full of them. In Mayan, Cuzamil means place of sparrows.

Millions of women are believed to have made pilgrimages to the island over the centuries from as far back as 700 A.D. The long journeys ended in 1519 when Hernan Cortes and his army showed up on Cozumel (as the Spanish called it) to begin their conquest of Mexico.

Why Cozumel? Besides being a quick sail from the Spaniards' New World headquarters in Cuba, Cortes had heard there was lots of gold on the 30-mile-long island. There wasn't, and a week or so later the bearded strangers packed up and sailed away, eventually to start the invasion way down the country's eastern coast at Veracruz.

But they left something behind: smallpox. Within a few years, it had killed all but two dozen of the island's 40,000 villagers. Cozumel stayed more or less unsettled until the mid-1800s, when it was repopulated by Mayan refugees from a bloody war on the mainland.

Visitors are back

Today, millions of visitors are again coming to Cozumel – not in canoes, but on jetliners, cruise ships and 600-passenger cross-channel ferries. Cruiseliners make over 950 stops a year at San Miguel, Cozumel's main city, ranking the island as Mexico's most-visited cruise port.



Besides grabbing bargains in the duty-free shops and tanning up on powdery, white-sand beaches around the island, many tourists hop into jeeps for a short ride inland to the two-square-mile sanctuary of Ixchel at San Jervasio. Chances are, few are aware that their jeep caravans are bouncing along a paved road covering the centuries-old footsteps of the Mayan pilgrims

Not all of the visitors to San Jervasio (entrance fee: US\$6.75) are there for sightseeing. "Even today," notes a local historian, "we still find straw figures and other offerings at Ixchel's shrine from time to time."



Tourists should be aware that the ruins at San Jervasio and at other historical sites on the island pale in comparison to the archaeological wonderlands on the mainland, such as Tulum. And there's no towering pyramids on Cozumel as you'll see at the Yucatan's inland power-sites of Chichen Itza, Coba and Uxmal.

Visitors to Cozumel also won't find the round-the-clock action enjoyed by spring breakers and other fun lovers just across the channel at Playa del Carmen and up the Yucatan coast at Cancun.

Raul Marrufo, director of the Cozumel Promotion Board, says: "You'll find that in Cozumel, things happen comfortably, with a purpose...even if that purpose is to do nothing at all."

Even shopping is a laid-back process on the island. You won't see tour hawkers or timeshare salesmen on the streets of San Miguel, and chances are you won't be hustled by merchants outside their shops. "It's all part of our culture, handed down from generation to generation," explains Marrufo, himself a native of the island.



Day-visitors return to the docks loaded down with duty-free booty, many of the women decked out in Mayan dresses (huipiles) and shawls (rebozos). Men often come back sporting embroidered cotton shirts (guayaberas) and woven Panama hats. Some opt to puff away on Cuban cigars sold all over the city.

Cozumel's treasure chest



The Spanish invaders didn't spot them – they probably sailed right over them – but as things turned out, Cozumel really is loaded with treasures: The island is ringed by 30 coral reefs rated among the most spectacular diving sites in the world.

Popular sites scattered around the reefs offer scuba divers and snorkelers a panorama of swaying gardens, sunken galleons, tunnels, rare trees of black coral, limestone caves and steep walls plunging to the ocean floor. Darting through the virtually transparent blue waters – so clear there's up to 200 feet of visibility – are over 500 kinds of fish, everything from nurse sharks to large angelfish.

Among the reefs' adventures, divers can explore huge mounds of bolones (coral heads, some as large as a two-car garage) at Chankanaab Park, face off with great groupers and moray eels at Tormentos or descend 120 feet into the brilliant green abyss of San Francisco. Palancar, the most famous site, is a magnificent mountain of coral heads crowned with red gorgonian fans and enormous yellow sponges.

Getting there

Airlines fly nonstop to Cozumel from major U.S. gateways such as Denver, Houston, DFW and Atlanta, among others. Visitors staying in Cancun and along the Riviera Maya can cross the channel on jet-powered water ferries that make hourly runs to San Miguel from the mainland city of Playa del Carmen. The trip takes a little over a half-hour each way.

Also, a commuter airline called Mayair makes frequent 25-minute hops between Cancun and Cozumel.

Staying there

Cozumel offers two dozen tourist class hotels, all told with 3,600 rooms. They range from large resort properties to small boutique inns.

More info: Visit the Cozumel Promotion Board at www.islacozumel.com.mx or the Cozumel pages of the Mexico Tourism Board's site, www.visitmexico.com.

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