

Safety and community come first in scenic Cozumel

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When people ask about my favorite place in Mexico, they're typically surprised by the answer. Oaxaca and Chiapas are at the top of the list. Loreto, Mexico City, Puerto Vallarta, Veracruz and Michoacan all make the cut. But my favorite, as in the place where I'd love to retire? That would be Cozumel, Mexico's largest Caribbean island.

Unfortunately, it's also Mexico's busiest cruise port, which might explain the questioners' puzzled expressions. More than three million cruise passengers arrive annually, spending a few hours in duty-free diamond shops while clasping hourglass-shaped souvenir glasses. Those who tour the island's wild windward side, snorkel above pristine reefs and chat with locals in the plaza and experience a few of the reasons I long to become a cozumeleño.

Safety First

On my first Cozumel trip in 1988 I camped on the sand at Playa San Francisco, a Swiss army knife and bug spray my only defense. If local laws and my aging joints allowed, I would do the same today without fear. Safety is Cozumel's number-one attraction.

Bill Horn moved from Mexico City to Cozumel in 1978 because, he said, "It was safe." Horn owns Aqua Safari one of the island's earliest and most reputable dive shops and is well-known around town. Recently his well-loved 1972 Volkswagen Safari, an island icon, fell victim to rust. Horn found a classic old BMW in Cancún and bought it on a whim. Reality soon set in.

"This is not the time to be driving around in a flashy car," he said, referring to Mexico's drug battles and crime stats. "But I'm safe on this island."

Get the picture?

Purse snatchings and robberies do happen, of course, and travelers should be just as cautious as they would be at home. Drunken tourists stumbling around late at night are tempting targets. But violent crimes are so rare that when they do occur, the rumor mill goes into overdrive for weeks.

The Mexican Army, Navy and Federal Police all have facilities on the island, which served as a U.S. air base during World War II. Cozumel has its own police force as well, and the fancy jewelry shops along the malecón have security patrols 24/7.

"Cozumel is the safest place to visit in Mexico, and is most likely much safer than the city where you currently live," said Ric Hajovsky, who lived on the island from 1977 to 1990. Hajovsky and his wife met on the island and moved to Mexico City and Texas to work in nautical archeology. They recently returned for good.





"We decided to retire and return to where we first met and fell in love, our beloved island of las golondrinas," the swallows for whom the island is named. "Many things have changed since we left twenty years ago, but many are the same. The island is still a safe haven."

Natural Wonders

Naturally, the Caribbean Sea, sparkling white beaches and seemingly endless sunshine are Cozumel's calling cards. The island lies just yards from the Great Mesoamerican Reef, the planet's second largest barrier reef. Diving here is akin to entering a watery Oz filled with magical creatures. Sea turtles and eagle rays glide by in the distance. Giant lobsters click their claws, electric green parrotfish chomp on coral and evil-looking green eels seem to hiss as you glide by with the currents- sometimes gentle, sometimes so rapid you feel like you're missing the show.

You needn't get wet to experience Cozumel's natural wonders, however. The windward coast is wildly beautiful, with turquoise waves crashing against gray limestone hills and isolated beaches. Swimming is not advised in these rough waters, though kiteboarders find the winds especially favorable. Seafood shacks and palapa-shaded restaurants along the coast close at dusk. On summer nights, hundreds of sea turtles lumber onto the deserted sand to dig their nests; baby turtles flee to the sea a few months later. Thanks to persistent volunteer protection programs, the turtles and their nests are relatively safe from poachers. Turtle tours are available through the excellent Museo de Cozumel.

Cozumel's northwest shores are still relatively wild as well, save for an all-inclusive beach park on beautiful Isla Pasión. Birding is amazing in the lagoons in this area, where the conservationists at Mexico Silvestre lead canoeing and photography tours.



Against all odds

During that first trip to Cozumel, I splurged on a pricey lunch at the Presidente Hotel, built by the Mexican government as part of a chain in tourism destinations. You know how some places just feel right? (ō)

Wilma ravaged the entire island. When I arrived a few weeks after the storm the streets were deserted at night and most folks were dazed and depressed. It took a couple of years for the island to recover, but nearly everyone I knew decided stick with Cozumel.(ō)

During the reconstruction, workers built three tiny temples modeled after the island's Maya ruins and left offerings of lettuce and indigenous plants. Gradually, the iguanas returned and multiplied. They now stick close to their fancy digs beside the sea.



Family Traditions

"The islanders still raise their kids with a strong sense of family values," Hajovsky said when listing his reasons for returning to Cozumel. You see families strolling through the plaza on Sunday evenings, shopping together in the traditional mercado and the new Mega super store on weekends and sometimes all riding together on a single motor scooter, the islanders favorite mode of transportation.

This strong sense of family is most evident in El Cedral, where Cozumel's modern-day founders arrived in 1848 during the War of the Castes. Locals say El Cedral's church, located beside a small Maya temple, was the site of the first Catholic mass in Mexico. Some of the original families still own homes and ranches in the rural community, a favorite weekend getaway for cozumeleños escaping the coastal crowds for home-cooked meals and family gatherings.

Cozumeleños celebrate their ancestry with an extraordinary, week-long festival called the Fería Cedral, which ends on May 3, Holy Cross Day, with the Baile de las Cabezas de Cochino (dance of the pig's head).

Descendants of the island's founding families and official guests, decked out in their finest embroidered dresses and guayaberas, enter an enormous tent, sit in front-row seats and watch as costumed groups from Valladolid, Felipe Carrillo Puerto and other mainland communities parade around the tent and perform the impeccably choreographed dance. The performances continue for hours as hundreds of onlookers bake in the hot sun, mesmerized by the catchy music and the dancers' faces and costumes. Gradually children, parents, and grandparents twirl in ever-faster circles, laughing, hugging and perspiring freely.

Meanwhile, other fairgoers are busy with horse races, cockfights, cow-butchered demonstrations and other farm-themed activities. Beer flows freely and the aromas of roasted pork and beef fill the air. It's not necessarily the best event for those with weak stomachs, but is a side of Cozumel few outsiders experience and a glimpse into the island's history and traditions.



A peaceful place

"Cozumel is a city of peace," says Igancio Cureño, director of the Cozumel Promotion Board. He's not just quoting ad copy. In 2009, Cozumel was recognized by the International Committee for the Banner of Peace, a United Nations affiliated organization founded in 1935 to preserve humanity's cultural wealth and celebrate the unity of diversity.

Soon after, 12-year-old Tony Angulo, a cozumeleño of Mayan ancestry, was named Cozumel's Ambassador of Peace. Along with other Mexican children and adults, Angulo sailed aboard the handcrafted trimaran Zamná to New York, Portugal, Egypt, Greece and several other countries. At each port, Angulo presented the banner to peace to other children, spreading a message of world peace.

In 2010, the Committee for 100 Cities for Peace gave Cozumel the Pax Urbis award, citing the island's efforts at promoting peace and tolerance. Such awards don't surprise me in the least.

"The local people, they have a very special feeling to be nice to others," says Cureño, who is married to a native cozumeleño. "It's in their DNA."

Maribeth Mellin has authored numerous Cozumel chapters for guidebooks and received Mexico's prestigious Pluma de Plata for her book *Traveler's Mexico Companion*.

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