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ALL YOU NEED TO PLAN YOUR PERFECT TRIP



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# Off the Beaten Path Cozumel

## Cozumel, 3 Days

### Table of contents:

Guide Description	2
Itinerary Overview	3
Daily Itineraries	5
Cozumel Snapshot	12

# Guide Description



**AUTHOR NOTE:** Cozumel is one of Mexico's destinations that really does have the best of both worlds. Tourists come and go daily by the boatload, and you can see why as this is one of the world's best diving/snorkeling destinations. Fortunately, it's also surprisingly easy to get away from the crowded spots on this little island. With a short trip away from the main tourist strip, you'll be able to enjoy Cozumel in tranquility and peace. The beaches, ruins, and landmarks are less glamorous than some of those on the mainland, but that just means that they're less visited and better preserved.

# Itinerary Overview

things to do  
restaurants  
hotels  
nightlife

## Day 1 - Cozumel

**DAY NOTE:** For your first look at the island, rent some scooters in the morning. There are separate scooter roads along many of the highways, and plenty of rental places around town. If you're up for it, this is one of the best ways to see the countryside as you travel. Head down the west coast from San Miguel to get a look at some of the pristine beaches, and stop at Paradise Cafe at the southern end of the island for lunch. Relaxed and laidback, the Paradise is the best place to get you in the vacation state of mind. They also happen to have some of the best seafood on the island, ready to be washed down with a cold local beer. After lunch, take a private horseback tour at Rancho Buenavista. Although somewhat touristy in appearance, this is actually an amazing local experience that serves as a memorable introduction to Cozumel's natural landscape and history. The guides are all local and several are of Mayan descent, and all of them combine personal lore with historical facts for descriptions of the ecosystem, wildlife, and ancient ruins. With a private tour, too, you'll be free from other travelers to enjoy a more personal excursion. For a perfect place to sit back over dinner after all that riding, stop into El Moro in San Miguel, a Cozumel institution patronized by locals for decades. It's not hard to figure out why after you try one of their incredible shrimp dishes or a different local specialty. The Hacienda San Miguel is a lovely colonial-style property with a tranquil garden courtyard, less than a block from the ocean and many San Miguel attractions but still with a secluded feel. The staff is one of Hacienda's main charms, who will go well out of their way to help you with suggestions, directions, or anything else you might need. Try to get a second floor room facing the street for better views and a private balcony.



### Paradise Café

Reggae, beer and beachside hammocks



### Rancho Buenavista

Horseback tours to Maya ruins



### El Moro

Seriously good food



### Hacienda San Miguel

Affordable, elegant suites in San Miguel

the northeastern part of the island, starting with Cozumel's most impressive Mayan ruins at San Gervasio. Once a sacred site for worship of the Mayan fertility goddess, it was a place of frequent religious pilgrimage. There are guides about who can be hired for small fees, but the placards outside the structures give enough information for casual visitors and you can more easily explore the surrounding area, where you might happen upon some unmarked ruins. Another draw for this archaeological site is the spectacular reptilian wildlife, as technicolor iguanas several feet long frequent the ruins, and you might even glimpse a python. There are a few small tourist shops here, which actually can have better prices and merchandise than stores in other parts of the island if you're looking for a souvenir. Continue east from San Gervasio for a stop at some of the eastern beaches. Most are too rough to swim in, but Chen Rio is one of the few exceptions, with completely sheltered areas for a quick snorkel or swim. The facilities here are pretty basic and the food is overpriced, though, so head a bit north to Punta Morena, where the fresh seafood and casual fare are way underpriced, and the laidback surfer vibe is perfect for a relaxing lunch. Continue north along the coast, a scenic drive where you'll get to see some of Cozumel's non-tourist life and its most beautiful but unswimmable beaches, until you can't drive anymore. Only accessible by 4WD vehicles, the ride out to Punta Molas is rugged but it's worth it when you get to this remote spot. There used to be restrictions about where you could and couldn't go here, but not anymore so you can just explore the area and climb the old lighthouse for a breathtaking view of the ocean, jungle, and some smaller Mayan ruins around the point that you might otherwise have missed. The ride out and back can take awhile, so you'll probably be ready for dinner after you get back into San Miguel. Los Otates is just 2 or 3 blocks off the tourist strip, but there's nothing but authenticity at this place, where you can be adventurous to try tongue or brain tacos, but can also just get some seriously delicious burritos, tacos, and beer on the cheap. Try the gringas, a house specialty, as well as some of their incredible fresh salsas. It doesn't look like much from the outside, but this is definitely one of San Miguel's best food joints, as evidenced by the large numbers of locals who stop here.



### Playa Chen Rio

Snorkeler's haven



### Punta Molas Faro

Northern point lighthouse



### Los Otates

Taco joint with special local dishes

## Day 2 - Cozumel

**DAY NOTE:** One of the easiest ways to get around the island is to rent a car for the day, and you'll need a 4WD car for the trip to Punta Molas. Take the whole day to discover the sights of

# Itinerary Overview

things to do  
restaurants  
hotels  
nightlife



## Hacienda San Miguel

Affordable, elegant suites in San Miguel

## Day 3 - Cozumel

**DAY NOTE:** Rent a car or some scooters for another day to get around the island. You can't go to Cozumel and not journey down to see its most spectacular sights: the coral reefs. The best place to do this is on the southeastern end of the island, at one of the many spots inside the Parque Marino de Cozumel. Some of the diving/snorkeling spots can be really crowded, as a lot of dive operations tend to bring their groups to the same spot. However, there are several ways to uniquely explore this underwater paradise, including a new type of combination snorkeling/diving called "snuba". Since it still hasn't quite caught on yet, you can get a private trip out with a dive instructor, who gives you a brief introduction course to the equipment, which is simply an oxygen tank that stays on the surface, and there's a line to a small mask that allows you to breathe underwater without the complications of scuba diving. This allows you to out to some of the more remote reef spots in the park without taking a lengthy certification course. Of course, if you're already SCUBA certified, there are plenty of operators who can take you out on a more serious diving tour, too. Either way, Cozumel's underwater flora and fauna are not to be missed. On the way back north along the western coast, stop by Playa Corona, a quiet and less-frequented beach spot that's a wonderful place to stop for a couple of the amazing tacos and cold beers offered by the little cafe on the sand here. There's also some great snorkeling in the shallow water just feet off the beach, if you're up for a little more underwater viewing. Otherwise, just relax on the sand and take a break. You can try out some more of the beaches along the coast here on the way back to San Miguel if you want to, but be aware that this is prime tourist area and will probably be busy. A nice alternative is to get back into San Miguel in the early afternoon and take a walk around town to see some of the local sights. There are a couple of galleries with amazing examples of traditional Mayan art, such as the Mayan feather, which features oil paintings on bird feathers. You can also find some fascinating local history at the two museums, Museo de la Isla de Cozumel, a small and more typical history museum, and the Pax museum, a more unique take on exhibiting the past with huge displays of musical instruments, ceremonial masks, and other indigenous artifacts. In the evening, snack on some deliciously fresh seafood at Los Moros del Morito, where you'll definitely need a little Spanish since this place is nearly exclusively frequented by locals. Then, take a stroll around Playa Central, where there is usually some live music being played around the square as well as some hopping local nightlife.



## Parque Marino de Cozumel

National underwater park



## Playa Corona

Snorkel in tranquility



## Museo de la Isla de Cozumel

Maya artifacts and Spanish relics



## Pax

A musical history of Mexico



## Mayan Feather

Portraits on tropical feathers



## Moros del Morito (Los)

Mexican cuisine with international flair



## Hacienda San Miguel

Affordable, elegant suites in San Miguel

# Day 1 - Cozumel

## QUICK NOTE

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**contact:**

<http://thisiscozumel.com/content/view/452/79/>

**location:**

Costera Sur Highway, Km 33  
Cozumel QR 77600

**hours:**

M-Su 10:30a-Dusk

## 1 Paradise Café

**DESCRIPTION:** With live reggae music daily and plenty of cold beer, this restaurant seduces diners with its relaxed atmosphere. A popular lunch spot with divers and beachgoers, the restaurant is in the middle of nowhere; at the southeastern tip of the island. It's the perfect place for a snooze in a hammock. The dress is beach casual and shoes are optional. The food is simple beach fare. © wcities.com



Paradise Cafe

**contact:**

tel: +52 987 2 1537  
<http://www.buenavistaranch.com/>

**location:**

Avenue Rafael Melgar & Calle  
11 Sur  
Cozumel QR 77600

**hours:**

Noon-4p M-F, 11a-3p Sa

## 2 Rancho Buenavista

**DESCRIPTION:** There are few ways more satisfying than exploring Cozumel's lush tropical forest on horseback. This ranch offers a four-hour guided tour to the smaller Maya ruins found inland on the island. Bilingual tour guides will point out areas of interest and help identify the flora and fauna seen along the way. Riders of all levels—including beginners—are welcome. The admission fee includes drinks and transportation to and from the ranch. All tours leave from the Acuario restaurant. © wcities.com



buenavistaranch.com

**contact:**

tel: 52 987 872 3029  
<http://thisiscozumel.com/content/view/424/46/>

**location:**

Calle 75 Norte #124  
Cozumel Q. Roo 77600

**hours:**

Daily 1p-11p

**3 El Moro**

**DESCRIPTION:** El Moro is an out-of-the-way place that has been around for a long time and has always been popular with the locals, who come for the food, the service, and the prices -- but not the decor, which is orange, orange, orange, and Formica. Get there by taxi, which will cost a couple of bucks. Portions are generous. Any of the shrimp dishes use the real jumbo variety when available. For something different, try the pollo Ticuleño, a specialty from the town of Ticul, a layered dish of tomato sauce, mashed potatoes, crispy baked corn tortillas, and fried chicken breast, topped with shredded cheese and green peas. Other specialties include enchiladas and seafood prepared many ways, plus grilled steaks and sandwiches. © Frommer's



Photo courtesy of El Moro

**contact:**

tel: 1 866 712 6387 (US Contact)  
fax: 52 987 872 7043  
<http://www.haciendasanmiguel.com>

**location:**

Calle 10 Norte #1500  
Cozumel Q. Roo 77600

**4 Hacienda San Miguel**

**DESCRIPTION:** This coral colored townhouse is built in the hacienda style with studios centered round a tranquil garden and fountain. Both the one and two bedroom suites are individually named and decorated with rustic Mexican furniture. All have kitchenettes and either patios or terraces. Just steps away from the delightful Museo de la Isla de Cozumel and a few blocks north of all shops and services along Avenida Rafael Melgar, it offers a reasonably priced private sanctuary tucked away from the downtown hustle and bustle. © wcities.com



Hotels.com

# Day 2 - Cozumel

## QUICK NOTE

**DAY NOTE:** One of the easiest ways to get around the island is to rent a car for the day, and you'll need a 4WD car for the trip to Punta Molas. Take the whole day to discover the sights of the northeastern part of the island, starting with Cozumel's most impressive Mayan ruins at San Gervasio. Once a sacred site for worship of the Mayan fertility goddess, it was a place of frequent religious pilgrimage. There are guides about who can be hired for small fees, but the placards outside the structures give enough information for casual visitors and you can more easily explore the surrounding area, where you might happen upon some unmarked ruins. Another draw for this archaeological site is the spectacular reptilian wildlife, as technicolor iguanas several feet long frequent the ruins, and you might even glimpse a python. There are a few small tourist shops here, which actually can have better prices and merchandise than stores in other parts of the island if you're looking for a souvenir. Continue east from San Gervasio for a stop at some of the eastern beaches. Most are too rough to swim in, but Chen Rio is one of the few exceptions, with completely sheltered areas for a quick snorkel or swim. The facilities here are pretty basic and the food is overpriced, though, so head a bit north to Punta Morena, where the fresh seafood and casual fare are way underpriced, and the laidback surfer vibe is perfect for a relaxing lunch. Continue north along the coast, a scenic drive where you'll get to see some of Cozumel's non-tourist life and its most beautiful but unswimmable beaches, until you can't drive anymore. Only accessible by 4WD vehicles, the ride out to Punta Molas is rugged but it's worth it when you get to this remote spot. There used to be restrictions about where you could and couldn't go here, but not anymore so you can just explore the area and climb the old lighthouse for a breathtaking view of the ocean, jungle, and some smaller Mayan ruins around the point that you might otherwise have missed. The ride out and back can take awhile, so you'll probably be ready for dinner after you get back into San Miguel. Los Otates is just 2 or 3 blocks off the tourist strip, but there's nothing but authenticity at this place, where you can be adventurous to try tongue or brain tacos, but can also just get some seriously delicious burritos, tacos, and beer on the cheap. Try the gringitas, a house specialty, as well as some of their incredible fresh salsas. It doesn't look like much from the outside, but this is definitely one of San Miguel's best food joints, as evidenced by the large numbers of locals who stop here.

**contact:**  
tel: +52 987 872 0972

## 1 Playa Chen Rio

**location:**  
Costera Este Highway 3.5  
miles north  
Cozumel QR 77600

**DESCRIPTION:** The clear waters of this windward beach are protected by a large rock formation in the bay. Boasting the safest swimming on the windward side, this beach is often dotted with beachcombers and campers. Enjoy a lunch of ultra fresh fish or seafood at the Chen Rio Restaurant and linger to enjoy the spectacular sunsets. From San Miguel, head east along the Costera Sur highway to Parque Punta Sur, then turn north for 3.5 miles until the restaurant sign. © wcities.com



Lena Hyde

**location:**  
Puna Molas Road  
Cozumel QR 77600

## 2 Punta Molas Faro

**DESCRIPTION:** Located at the extreme northern tip of Cozumel, this lighthouse offers a tranquil spot to enjoy an inspiring vista of land, sea and sky. Due to its acute isolation it is also a popular spot with bird-watchers and campers. The jagged shoreline makes swimming somewhat dangerous but there is excellent beachcombing and the panoramic view from the lighthouse will make you forget the difficult hike you must make to reach here (The dirt road is inaccessible by car). Along the way you will pass the ruins of Castillo Real. © wcities.com

**contact:**

<http://thisiscozumel.com/content/view/263/46/>

**3 Los Otates**

**location:**

Avenida 15 between Calle Salas and Calle 3  
Cozumel QR 77600

**hours:**

8pm to late.

**DESCRIPTION:** Los Otates, traditional maize tortilla tacos with a variety of delicious meat fillings. Local rustic atmosphere. Other local specialties also available. An old favorite with locals in Cozumel and particularly busy late at night. Perfect for someone who wants something different - try ox tongue tacos, spicy sauces, cold beers and homemade desserts. © wcities.com



Cozumel Climbing  
Adventure Park

**contact:**

tel: 1 866 712 6387 (US  
Contact)

fax: 52 987 872 7043

<http://www.haciendasanmiguel.com>

**4 Hacienda San Miguel**

**location:**

Calle 10 Norte #1500  
Cozumel Q. Roo 77600

**DESCRIPTION:** This coral colored townhouse is built in the hacienda style with studios centered round a tranquil garden and fountain. Both the one and two bedroom suites are individually named and decorated with rustic Mexican furniture. All have kitchenettes and either patios or terraces. Just steps away from the delightful Museo de la Isla de Cozumel and a few blocks north of all shops and services along Avenida Rafael Melgar, it offers a reasonably priced private sanctuary tucked away from the downtown hustle and bustle. © wcities.com



Hotels.com

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### location:

Costera Sur Highway  
Cozumel QR 77600

## 1 Parque Marino de Cozumel

**DESCRIPTION:** The reef surrounding the southern half of the island has been declared a national marine park covering 85% of Cozumel's dive sites. Second largest in the world, this reef starts in Mexico and extends down to the Gulf of Honduras. There is no better place for diving in the Western Hemisphere. When diving look but don't touch the reef or disturb the sea life. © wcities.com



wcities

### contact:

tel: +52 987 872 0972

### location:

Zona Hotelera Sur  
Cozumel QR 77600

## 2 Playa Corona

**DESCRIPTION:** This is a little jewel of beach about nine kilometers outside of San Miguel. It has the same magnificent snorkeling found at Parque Chankanaab but with fewer crowds. You can have a relaxed visit, rent some snorkel gear to check out the tropical fish and underwater plant life, drink beer and feel like a local. A small shop on the beach sells snacks and rents snorkel equipment. © wcities.com



wcities

**contact:**  
tel: +52 987 2 1475  
<http://www.cozumel.world-guides.com/>

**location:**  
Avenida Rafael Melgar at  
Calle 4  
Cozumel QR 77600

**hours:**  
10a-6p

### 3 Museo de la Isla de Cozumel

**DESCRIPTION:** Housed in what was once Cozumel's first luxury hotel, this museum has exhibits on the history and natural environment of the island. Displays on the ground floor explain Cozumel's ecosystems including the mangroves and coral reefs as well as local conservation issues. Upstairs, ancient artifacts found at local Mayan ruins are juxtaposed with relics of the Conquistadors. Native pottery and stone tools augment this historical exhibit. Another presentation on the second floor examines Cozumel's cultural and economic development throughout the 20th century. The museum also has the excellent Del Museo cafe. Guided tours are available. © wcities.com



wcities

**location:**  
Ave Benito Juarez and Ave  
15 Norte  
Cozumel QR 77600

**hours:**  
9a-6p M-Sa

### 4 Pax

**DESCRIPTION:** This combination musical museum and store has a collection of instruments from Mexico, Central and South America. Owners Manina and Alejandro Alvirde estimate there are 784 instruments from 37 countries in their collection including ancient Mayan flutes, Spanish guitars and an assortment of other intriguing instruments. The shop sells hand made duplicates of the originals, handcrafted items and music of the Maya and other indigenous cultures. © wcities.com

**contact:**  
tel: +52 987 869 0548

**location:**  
Avenida 5 and Calle 2 Norte  
Cozumel QR 77600

**hours:**  
10a-10p M-Su

### 5 Mayan Feather

**DESCRIPTION:** The art of painting on feathers is a Mexican art that is dying. This gallery/shop is the only one on this coast still producing oil paintings on the feathers of indigenous tropical birds. Well-executed paintings can be as small as a hummingbird's feather or as large as an Eagle's. Style and skill change according to the artist but there is a great deal of fine choices, all framed. This is an unique souvenir and buying one of the painted feathers helps keep this craft alive. © wcities.com

**location:**  
Ave 35, 356, intersects at 3  
Sur and Morelos  
Cozumel QR 77600

**hours:**  
Noon-10p M-Su

### Moros del Morito (Los)

**DESCRIPTION:** This well-hidden local favorite is a diamond in the rough. The house specialty is a large seafood platter, but the restaurant also serves standard Yucatan cuisine, including Enchiladas, Taquitos and Fajitas. Be sure to bring your appetite, because the portions are large enough to feed two people. Located on the back streets of San Miguel, the restaurant is hard to find on your own, but all the taxi drivers know the way. © wcities.com

**contact:**  
tel: 1 866 712 6387 (US  
Contact)  
fax: 52 987 872 7043  
<http://www.haciendasanmiguel.com>

**location:**  
Calle 10 Norte #1500

### 6 Hacienda San Miguel

**DESCRIPTION:** This coral colored townhouse is built in the hacienda style with studios centered round a tranquil garden and fountain. Both the one and two bedroom suites are individually named and decorated with rustic Mexican furniture. All have kitchenettes and either patios or terraces. Just steps away from the delightful Museo de la Isla de Cozumel and a few blocks north of all shops and services along Avenida Rafael



Hotels.com

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Cozumel Q. Roo 77600

Melgar, it offers a reasonably priced private sanctuary tucked away from the downtown hustle and bustle. © wcities.com

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# Cozumel Snapshot

## Local Info

Cozumel, made popular by celebrity marine researcher, Jacques Costeau, in the early 1960's, is Mexico's largest populated island and lies about 70km south of Cancun. To get there from the Cancun airport, drive 45 minutes south to Playa del Carmen and take a 30-minute ferry ride from the pier, which is located 2 blocks south of Avenida Juarez. This arrives in San Miguel, the main town on the island, with many hotels, bars, and restaurants near the pier; or, within a taxi (lined up near the docks) ride to one of the uncrowded beaches on the island. The other option is to fly in to the Cozumel Airport.

Maya settlers who worshiped the moon and fertility goddess, Ixchel, were the original inhabitants of the island. Since then, foreigners from all parts of the world including the Spanish conquistador, Cortés, French pirate Jean Lafitte and British pirate Henry Morgan, the U.S. Air Force, and more recently, thousands of United States ex-pats and cruise ships have thrown anchor off the shores of Cozumel.

Today, most people come to Cozumel to dive and/or snorkel. It has an enormous variety of underwater life, visibility of 40m or more, and an abundance of dive shops and expert guides. A two-tank dive costs around \$75. A few recommended dive sites are: Santa Rosa Wall – full of tunnels, corals and fish, Arrecife Cantarell – usually has loads of eagle rays, Palancar Shallows – possible to see black coral, and is also suitable for snorkeling, and Colombia Gardens – in addition to being good for snorkeling, is shallow with considerable lighting to view the many sponges and corals.

Do you want a different kind of sport? In addition to diving and snorkeling, Cozumel has a Nicklaus Design golf course, kitesurfing instructors and rentals, and offers yacht charters, fishing, sailing and parasailing.

If strolling or touring is more your style, shopping and people watching is available at all hours of the day throughout San Miguel de Cozumel. Walk along Avenida Rafael Melgar, which runs along the waterfront and is where the ferry docks, and you will find everything from diamonds and Cuban cigars to t-shirts. The avenue has

kilometers of stores, bars, restaurants, and clubs. This is the most tourist-filled street on the island. To get away from the cruise ship crowds on the days they are in port, either stay inside, or rent a vehicle or take a taxi to one of the white-sand beaches, parks, or Mayan ruins on another part of the island.

To choose a place to stay on Cozumel, one must, of course, consider price. Cozumel offers hotel rooms from \$25 to \$900 per night. Next, one should consider location. The main choices are north of downtown, downtown, and south of downtown. The first location offers villas and condos, all-inclusive resorts, and moderate to expensive hotel options. This area is quiet, near the golf course, and a quick taxi-ride to town. Though there are beaches on this side, they tend to be rocky and with strong currents. The downtown area consists of cheap to moderate hotels and vacation rentals, and it is convenient to restaurants and stores. The negative side is that, though the water is within walking distance, the beaches must be reached by taxis or rental vehicles- motorcycles and cars are easily rented in town.

The last area, south of downtown, can be divided into three parts. The closest section to town tends to be congested because of the cruise ship piers. This part offers moderate hotels that cater to divers and more expensive, all-inclusive hotels; and, it is a close taxi-ride to stores and restaurants. The rest of the southern area is quieter and mostly contains expensive, all-inclusive resorts, beachfront vacation rentals, and beach clubs. Most of Cozumel's best beaches are located here, but it is far from town, and taxis are pricey to this area.

Two important travel tips: an underwater flashlight is useful for seeing the variety of corals when diving, and take bug repellent (only the biodegradable kind is allowed in some areas) to the beaches.

© NileGuide

## History

Cozumel has a history that spans three epochs and three different cultures. During the time of the ancient Maya, the island

was known as Ah-Cuzamil-Peten—Land of the Swallows. From 300 CE until the arrival of the Conquistadors in the 15th Century, Cozumel was an important trade and religious center. Merchants came to buy the salt and honey produced on the island. The Maya considered salt and honey more valuable than gold. Historians believe the El Caracol ruin was built as an ancient lighthouse to guide these travelers safely ashore.

Cozumel was also the religious center for Ixchel (Lady Rainbow), the Maya goddess of fertility, pregnancy and childbirth. Ixchel is one of the most important gods in the Maya religious pantheon as she is the mother of all other gods and rules not only over life and death but the moon and bodies of water. Every woman in Mesoamerica was required, at least once in her life, to make a pilgrimage and place an offering on Ixchel's altar. Pilgrims departed the mainland from what is now Carmen Beach and Tulum, making the treacherous channel crossing in open canoes. Today, the remains of Ixchel's altar and ceremonial center can be seen at the San Gervasio ruins.

The island was first discovered by Spanish conquistadors in 1518 when Juan de Grijalva who was blown off course on his way back from Cuba. Grijalva's present to the island can still be viewed in the Church of San Miguel. He mentioned the island to Hernán Cortés, who arrived the next year in search of gold. Instead he found two shipwrecked Spaniards. Geronimo de Aguilar and Gonzales Guerrero had been living on the island with the Maya for over 15 years, first as slaves but finally as citizens of the community. Legend has it that de Aguilar was so happy to be rescued that he jumped from shore and started swimming towards the Cortés' ship when it was still 20 miles away. Guerrero chose to remain on the island with his Maya wife and family. Aguilar, bitter about his treatment by the Maya, helped the Conquistadors set up a military base on the island to wage war on them. Guerrero, on the other hand, died defending his adopted community. It is interesting to note that while de Aguilar is

## Cozumel Snapshot continued

considered a hero in Spain, it is Guerrero who is revered in Mexico. His offspring, known as the Mestizo, are considered the founders of the Mexican race. By 1570 most of the Maya population were dead, murdered by the Conquistadors or killed off by disease. By 1600 Cozumel was abandoned.

By the early 17th Century pirates had discovered Cozumel. The dashing Henry Morgan used the island as a stopover during his raids around the Caribbean between 1658 to 1688. Another legend on the island has Jean Lafitte, who caroused the waters near Cozumel between 1814 and 1821, hiding from his pursuers in the safe harbors of the Passion Island. Both pirates were responsible for sinking a number of cargo ships, some of which can still be seen in the briny depths just off the northern shore close to Molas Point Lighthouse (northern lighthouse). Cozumel remained uninhabited until 1847, when 20 families fleeing the Spanish backlash over the Maya rebellion during the War of the Castes settled on the island and founded El Cedral. Many of their descendants are still living on the island. Cozumel soon settled into a forgotten island community.

In the late 19th Century a new candy put Cozumel back on the map. In 1880, a Mexican general, Antonio Lopez de Santa, imported a ton of chicle to the States after noticing the natives of Mexico and Central America chewing this gummy sap from the zapote tree. He gave it to Thomas Adams who tried to create rubber with it but instead came up with chewing gum. When Frank and Henry Fleer coated their gum with sugar and called it "Chiclets," chewing gum became the most popular candy in America and the demand for chicle reached an all time high. Men called chicleros were hired to find the zapote trees and process the sap into gum that was shipped to chewing gum factories in New York. Cozumel again became an important port, with ships stopping to pick up the chicle gathered from all over Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, Belize and Costa Rica.

When the Chicleros began clearing Cozumel's jungle, they discovered long forgotten ruins. Soon archaeologists began visiting the island to document the new discoveries. When the market for chicle crashed due to the invention of the airplane and synthetic chewing gum, Cozumel went back to being an almost deserted island. Its only export became copra - the dried kernels of coconuts that contain coconut oil. More on Cozumel's trade and shipping history can be seen at the navigational museum in the Celarain Point Lighthouse.

During World War II, the American military landed on the island and set up a submarine base and airfield. Unfortunately, in the process they dismantled most of the Maya ruins without realizing what they were destroying. In the 1950s Cozumel became a resort town for wealthy Yucatecos who came to the island to fish, sunbathe and escape the heat. A display in the Cozumel Island Museum outlines the history of the founding families and the very first luxury hotels.

In 1961, Jacques Cousteau did a dive along the reefs and came away so impressed with what he saw that he introduced Cozumel to the world on his popular television show. In 1974, when Cancun was being built and Quintana Roo was finally a state of Mexico, rather than a territory, Cozumel became a popular dive destination. And after that — as they say — the rest is history.

©

### Hotel Insights

Divers searching for a place to flop after exploring the renowned coral reefs, families seeking all-inclusive sun and fun, and business travelers on the prowl for conference facilities will all find a wide range of accommodation in Cozumel. Visitors can choose from 3,600 rooms in a diverse mix of hotels, resorts, condos and bed-and-breakfasts on the island.

### Diving

One third of Cozumel's annual million visitors come to dive among the vast coral reefs, underwater caves and ancient

wrecks, so there is no lack of scuba-friendly hotels. Resorts close to the famous Palancar Reef just off the southwestern shore offer some excellent dive packages that cater to divers. Both the mid-priced Fiesta Americana Cozumel Reef and the affordable, all-inclusive Allegro provide easy access to Cozumel's spectacular reefs.

Families looking for a resort suited to all ages will enjoy the most southern hotel, the Iberostar Cozumel. Rooms are compact but have private terraces with hammocks. The beach here is wide and a bit rocky, but has an excellent dock and well-equipped water sports center with sailboats, kayaks, windsurfers and a dive club. Divers with family in tow will adore the kid's club, as the staff works hard to entertain the little ones.

The perennial favorite for most divers is the budget Casa Del Mar. This hotel, 10 minutes south of San Miguel, has been set up for divers with equipment rinse rooms, large storage lockers and on-site dive operation alongside a water sports center. Another popular hotel for diving is the Hotel Lorena.

### Luxury

La Ceiba, fifteen minutes from San Miguel in the southern hotel zone, is a small complex set up for dive clubs and corporate groups alike. A small plaza with shops is located under a verdant ceiba tree (the legendary Mayan "tree of the gods"). Inside, the hotel has a laid-back atmosphere, a pool and great snorkeling just off its large pier. The reefs start right in front of the hotel and the closest dive site is the Plane Wreck, a 40-passenger airliner blown up and sunk for a 1977 Mexican disaster movie.

The chic Playa Azul Hotel entices discerning travelers to the north end of the island. This small hotel offers sophisticated service amidst lush gardens and Jacuzzi suites with ocean views. Close by is the exquisitely decorated Coral Princess Hotel & Resort. The lobby with its wrought-iron sculptures and fountains resembles a small art gallery. Villas come equipped with full

## Cozumel Snapshot continued

kitchens and living rooms that open up onto oceanfront terraces with a view of the deck.

### For Business

The stylish Presidente Inter-Continental Cozumel attracts business clientele with its business center that includes three meeting rooms for up to 200 people and banquet facilities serving superb food. Plants, shrubs and trees fill the lobby, giving the hotel a jungle-like atmosphere, and its close proximity to Chankanaab National Park means you can swim with dolphins on your lunch breaks.

In the North Hotel Zone, the largest all-inclusive resort on the island, El Cozumeleño Beach Resort, lures business travelers with facilities that include a convention center, large meeting rooms for up to 700, and a state-of-the-art media center. The resort's family-friendly ambiance encourages the business traveler to bring the spouse and kids along.

Meeting attendees with a taste for true Mexican hospitality enjoy staying at the Casa Mexicana Cozumel for its relaxing atmosphere, wind-swept ocean views and sleek decor. The hotel's downtown location, steps away from the best restaurants and clubs, is also a bonus.

### Value

One budget hotel that is charming and has great views of the ocean is Bahia Suites, situated along the malecón (boardwalk) that runs along the water. A great hotel along the boardwalk and popular with divers and families is Ocean View Hotel. Both attract travelers who prefer to spend their money at restaurants famous for their fresh seafood, or at markets renowned for their jewelry, art and handcrafted textiles.

Hacienda San Miguel, a cozy accommodation choice with a European air, offers quaint townhouses and suites with some of the island's best rates. It is a few blocks from the waterfront, very convenient for going downtown or to the Museo de la Isla Cozumel, a delightful cultural museum harbored in a former hotel.

Those who prefer to save their dollars without scrimping on comfort can check into the one of the many bed-and-breakfasts located throughout San Miguel. The family-friendly Tamarindo Bed & Breakfast is located just steps away from the central plaza, while the stately Baldwin's Guest House is about ten blocks away in a quiet residential neighborhood.

©

### Restaurants Insights

Many of the restaurants on Cozumel serve Mexican fare that focuses on seafood. However, visitors can also enjoy French, Italian, Cajun and Yucatecán cuisine. Fast food chains, including KFC, Subway, Burger King and Baskin Robbins, are in abundance in downtown San Miguel. Street vendors sell everything from corn on the cob to fresh orange juice. If you are really lucky you may come across one selling homemade hottamales.

Cozumel is not a late-night town, since most of its visitors are up bright and early to enjoy the sights or dive the reef. What little nightlife there is on the island is confined to San Miguel. Restaurants along the east coast tend to close at sunset since many do not have electricity. But downtown party goers keep things hopping from the late afternoon until midnight. A few clubs and bars stay open until 2am, along with an elite handful that cater to die-hards and stay open all the way to 5am.

### San Miguel

As the only city on Cozumel Island, San Miguel sees a lot of tourist traffic. During the day the city's numerous restaurants and bars are packed with tourists, many from the cruise ships docked at the international pier or day-trippers from the mainland. Reservations are recommended at those places that accept them. It is a good idea to arrive early at those restaurants that do not accept reservations. Lunchtime, particularly if a cruise ship has arrived, can be the most hectic meal of the day. Most of the fine dining restaurants do not open until the

evening and do not cater to the cruise ship crowd.

Avenida Rafael Melgar is the most heavily traveled street in San Miguel, so naturally the most popular restaurants are clustered here, many with waterfront views. Those in search of fresh tacos head to El Foco, while seafood enthusiasts can be found at Acuario, dining amongst aquariums filled with tropical fish. Jeanie's Restaurant offers hearty breakfasts until 3:30p while the French Quarter brings a taste of New Orleans Cajun cuisine to San Miguel. Pizza lovers will be happy at Nino's Pizza or at Guido's, where the pasta is also fresh and delicious. Java drinkers and people-watchers frequently stop in at Coffee Bean, Zermatt Bakery, or Rock and Java Café to enjoy a cup of coffee, delicious pastries or a quick bite.

Caribbean-style meals in a romantic atmosphere can be found at La Veranda, while Prima offers fresh pastas and salads. The island's Italian ex-patriots hang out at La Cucina Italiana (that includes the chef). Be sure to check out Pancho's Backyard for its delightful Mexican menu geared to the gringo stomachs. Those who like to get off the beaten track will enjoy the innovative cuisine of La Cocay. This small restaurant is considered the best on Cozumel.

Casa Denis, La Choza and El Turix are all recommended for the adventuresome who would like to try Yucatecán dishes like pollo pibil (chicken in banana leaves) or poc chuc (pork steak marinated in a sour orange sauce) and tikin chic (fish in a sour orange sauce). These regional delicacies are world-renowned and shouldn't be passed by.

As for bars, Carlos'n Charlies is generally the most popular as it is in the center of the downtown party circuit. Margaritas and frozen daiquiris are the most recommended beverages at Fat Tuesday, another open-air bar that has a DJ who keeps the joint rocking. The Hard Rock Cafe is part of the Cozumel party tradition, where having a good time is priority number one and T-shirt buying has become a routine custom. Los Dorados De Villa is known for its

## Cozumel Snapshot continued

impressive tequila selection and generally stays crowded until closing. Neptuno Dance Club is another great place to go dancing. For those who would like listen to hot jazz and smoke Cuban cigars, The Havana Club is just the place.

### North Hotel Zone

Just north of San Miguel, there are several fine restaurants worth the 15-minute drive. The Palma Azul beachfront restaurant offers a laid-back atmosphere and casual dining. It's located in the Playa Azul Hotel. Half a block away is the kitschy La Cabana del Pescador, a lobster lover's haven.

### South Hotel Zone

About 10 minutes south brings you to Las Gaviotas, serving seafood and Mexican cuisine at the Sol Cabanas del Caribe. The Ceiba Hotel is home to La Chopa Loca, where Mexican cuisine and piña coladas are the house specialties. For a more laid back option, there's the Hogtown Café.

### Eastern coast

When leaving San Miguel, follow the Costera Sur Highway until it turns north into the Eastern highways. Right at the crossroads is the funky Paradise Café, where margaritas and reggae are a way of life. A few miles further at San Martin Beach is Coconut's Bar and Grill. Located on the island's only hill, it has a spectacular view and offers light fare that is popular with divers and casual diners. The highway ends at Mezcalitos Bar & Restaurant, the quintessential beach restaurant on the dramatically beautiful beach of Punta Este. From here it is a short haul back to San Miguel.

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## Nightlife Insights

As one of the world's premier vacation destinations, Cozumel offers visitors a variety of things to see and do. In addition to a vibrant nightlife, visitors can entertain themselves by shopping, dining, playing mini-golf, visiting ruins, sunbathing, surfing, bird watching, fishing, horseback riding and, of course, scuba diving and snorkeling.

### Nightlife

Most of Cozumel's nightlife is in its only city, San Miguel. There is no nightlife on the east coast since the few restaurants there close at dusk. Downtown bars open until the wee hours include the Hard Rock Cafe with its great music and bar along with Carlos'n Charlie's and Fat Tuesdays. Both open-air bars are known for their loud, party atmosphere. Cactus Bar and Restaurant is a recent addition and has quickly become a popular spot to check out the party with its large dance floor and live music. Smoke Cuban cigars while listening to hot jazz at The Havana Club. Enjoy the Sunday Fiesta at Plaza Central, a live open-air concert with Mexican or Caribbean song and dance. The island's oldest disco Neptune Dance Club is opened on the weekends and is quite popular with the locals as well. The laid-back Mariac Hi Bar and the Stadium Sports Bar are both excellent places to people watch or to become aware of the latest sports scores. For those with a more cultivated sense of culture can go to the posh Arrecife and listen to live classical guitar.

The Casa de la Cultura offers local programs of music, dance, theatre and art. Every Thursday evening at the Feria Mexicana there's a folkloric dance performance. If you are lucky enough to be on the island during Carnaval (mid-February to March), you are in for an explosion of music, dance, parades and parties that fill the streets.

The largest movie theatre on the island is now the Cinopolis Complex, just minutes away from downtown San Miguel. It shows the latest Hollywood blockbusters with Spanish sub-titles. Two other, older theatres named Cine Cozumel and Cinel Cecillo Borge, also show English movies.

### Shopping

Shoppers can get easily get their fix at a variety of stores selling Mexican handicraft art, souvenirs, clothing, diamonds and gold or silver jewelry. There are plenty of bargains to be found at the open-air markets just off the square. Both Viva

Mexico and Los Cinco Soles are popular souvenir stops, especially with the cruise ship crowd. Cozumel is famous for its jewelry stores. Among the most visited are Diamonds International and Rachat and Romero, which offer excellent choices in diamonds, gold and silver jewelry. Because Cozumel is a duty-free shopping zone there are some great bargains to be found on luxury items.

### Outdoor Fun

With 285 days of sunshine a year, Cozumel offers endless hours of fun in the sun. There is something for everyone to enjoy on the island.

The Atlantis Submarines adventure is an amazing exploration of the reef, but is very expensive. A more reasonable alternative is a trip aboard the glass-bottomed Principe. Both Natural Adventures and Rancho Buenavista offer horseback riding through the jungle. Tours that explore the island's northern end on ATVs (all-terrain vehicles) can be arranged with Wild Tours or Tarzan Tours.

Deep-sea fishing is also a popular activity. Marathon Deep Sea Fishing will give you a chance to snag a blue marlin or swordfish.

Scuba divers will find plenty of underwater sites to explore. The most popular reefs are on the southwestern side of the island. Paradise Reef, Chan Kanaab Reef, Villa Blanca Wall, Santa Rosa Wall, Palancar Reef and Plane Wreck are just a sampling of what you can expect to find beneath the turquoise waters. There is no shortage of scuba diving companies and tours. There are also none that could be considered inexpensive. Aqua Safari, Caballito del Caribe and Eagle Ray Dive School are some of the more experienced companies on the island.

On the mainland, popular tourist attractions include the famous Mayan ruins of Tulum and Chichen Itza, the natural aquarium Xel-Ha and the 250 acre, eco-archaeological park Xcaret.

Two inexpensive attractions are the San Gervasio ruins and Parque Punta Sur. You will find the most expensive part is

## Cozumel Snapshot continued

the transportation out there. Chankanaab Park is an excellent bargain since your entry fee includes an archaeological park, botanical garden, a museum, a free dolphin show and great snorkeling. A fun family evening can be had at Cozumel Mini-Golf, an 18-hole miniature golf course. For a more educational family experience visit Museo de la Isla de Cozumel, which has historical and natural exhibits about the island. For those on a budget, there is still plenty to do in Cozumel, provided you bring your own snorkel gear. You don't have to pay any entry fee to get onto the beaches since all beachfront is Federal Property with free access to everyone. Plaza las Glorias allows visitors to snorkel as long as they buy something at the bar. Corona Beach has few crowds but good snorkeling. For lots of action you can visit San Francisco Beach or Playa del Sol. You won't find as many swimmers along the eastern beaches due to much heavier surf and a strong undertow. Surfers like to gather at Punta Morena, where the waves are high and burgers are cheap. (Families should take their children to the west coast beaches where the surf is much calmer.) You can also hike along the northern road that starts where the Costera Este Highway ends. The beaches there are wild and beautiful and camping is permitted.

Windsurfing, kayaks and jet skis are available on most of the beaches. However, renting them turns free fun into expensive fun.

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## Things to Do Insights

### Walking Tours of Cozumel

There are three different areas to explore on Cozumel: town, beach and jungle. Town walks center on the plaza and local neighborhoods away from the water. Beach walks take you to either the West or East coast while jungle treks are usually done with an experienced guide.

The best time of day for walks is in the early morning or late afternoon. The mornings are still cool and uncrowded before the invasion of mainland day-trippers and

shoppers from cruise ships. In the late afternoon, the trade winds cool things down, especially on the eastern side of the island, which gets the breeze first. Plan to be indoors at dusk, also known as "the mosquito hour." Evening strolls along the malecon (boardwalk) or around the Plaza Central are pleasant but are riskier on the side streets because of the dangerous combination of no sidewalks and many besotted motorists.

Most of the tourist stores stay open during the afternoon. Mexicans still take their biggest meal of the day between 1p and 4p, so expect things to slow down during these hours. Take your cue from the locals and get out of the afternoon sun. Things wake up again around 5p and stores stay open until 9p, dinner being the lightest meal of the day. There is some nightlife, but Cozumel is not a late-night resort. Dress is casual here, though most restaurants will frown upon short shorts, halters and bikini tops in the evening. Traditional Maya women wear huipiles, a loose white dress with colorful embroidery along the neck, while men favor loose white shirts called guayaberas with light linen slacks. Both are sold in souvenir shops.

### Exploring the Town: San Miguel de Cozumel

With a little more than 6000 inhabitants and a street grid so logical that you can't get lost, the best way to see the city is to wander about with only the barest of itineraries. Take a stroll around Parque Benito Juarez in Plaza Central or through downtown, where one-way streets befuddle out-of-town drivers and local drivers treat pedestrians as moving traffic cones. Cafes in San Miguel open early and are pleasant places to sit and watch the town start its day. For a nice walk, head east along the Avenida Benito Juarez past the Iglesia de San Miguel, then turn south along Avenida 25 Sur and walk one block to the Town Market and local school. Head east along Calle Adolfo Rosada Salas to Avenida Pedro Joaquin Coldwell and the Baseball Stadium. Keep walking south to Avenida 11 Sur and then turn toward the waters to pass by the island's cemetery on the right and

City Hall on the left. Back in town you can enjoy an excellent breakfast in Museo de la Isla de Cozumel.

### Exploring the Beaches: Chankanaab Park and San Francisco Beach

Chankanaab Park is home to a freshwater lagoon connected to the ocean by a series of underground caves. The lagoon is now closed to swimmers but has a very nice beach and excellent snorkeling with tame fish, underwater statues, sunken cannons and ships. There are also botanical gardens and an archaeological park on-site, with reproductions of the most famous Mayan artifacts. For an extra charge you can swim with dolphins or watch sea lions perform. It is worth the USD7 admission. Though it is crowded at times, San Francisco Beach has two miles of great beach offering a nifty "there and back" hour-long hike with lots of diversions along the way. Enjoy aquatic activities—snorkeling, windsurfing or kayaking—or visit one of the palapa pitstops that serves barbecued shrimp and cold beer. Sunday is the best day to share the beach with locals, without the cruise ship and day-tripper crowds.

### Exploring the Jungle: Parque Punta Sur and Punta Molas

Take a rental car or a cab — for a hefty fee some will drop off and return — to Parque Punta Sur. Located within the park are Laguna Columbia, a lagoon filled with wildlife, El Caracol, the conch-shaped Maya ruin and the Punta Celerain Lighthouse, now a navigational museum. There is excellent snorkeling just off the beaches when the surf is not too strong. The park rents out snorkel gear and kayaks. A superior hike can be found along the 15 miles of rutted sandy road that runs north to where the Costera Este Highway ends. Rental companies will void your insurance if you drive along this road, so it's best to either hike in or take a jungle tour with Wild Tours. Along the way you will see the ruin of Castillo Real. If you can find the right trail, the San Gervasio ruins are just inland. Other trails head back into the forests to hidden cenotes and unexplored ruins. For the hearty hiker there is also a two-day trail

## Cozumel Snapshot continued

that takes you to the northwestern side of the island to Passion Island. If you stay on the road, it ends at Molas Point Lighthouse. The view here is spectacular and worth the hike.

### Staying Safe

When heading out to the jungles, be sure to bring along bottled water and bug repellent (with at least 80% DEET). It is best to wear a wide-brimmed hat, long sleeve shirts and pants, and socks and shoes to minimize exposure to ticks and other biting bugs. Watch for dehydration. The early warnings are dizziness and irritability. Get out of the sun immediately if you start to experience symptoms. As tempting as they look, do not swim in the freshwater cenotes—they are home to hungry, fast crocodiles. Hiring a guide to explore the more untamed parts of the mangroves and forests is recommended. On the beach, be sure to wear a hat and plenty of sunscreen. If you are fair-skinned, stay out of the sun between the hours of 11a until 2p. Leave your valuables in the hotel safe or rent a beach locker.

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## Travel Tips

### Getting There:

#### Air:

Cozumel International Airport (CZM) (+52 987 872 2081) serves the island. There are more charter flights than commercial international flights to Cozumel, so you can try to book a flight with them or get a package deal. Airlines include:

FunJet (+1 888 558 6654/ <http://www.funjet.com>)

Continental (+1 800 231 0856/ <http://www.continental.com>)

US Airways (+1 800 428 4322/ <http://www.usairways.com/>)

American Airlines (+1 800 433 7300/ <http://www.aa.com/>)

Aerocaribe (+52 987 872 0877/ <http://www.aerocaribe.com/>)

Mexicana (+1 800 531 7921/ <http://www.mexicana.com/>)

Aeromexico (+1 800 237 6639/ <http://www.aeromexico.com/>)

### Rental car companies:

Hertz (+1 800 654 3131/ <http://www.hertz.com>)

Thrifty (+1 800 847 4389/ <http://www.thrifty.com>)

Alamo (+1 800 462 5266/ <http://www.alamo.com/>)

Budget (+1 800 527 0700/ <https://rent.drivebudget.com>)

Avis (+52 998 886 0221/ +1 800 230 4898; <http://www.avis.com>)

National (+1 800 227 7368 (US)/ +1 954 320 6600 (Intl)/ <http://www.nationalcar.com/>)

### By Ferry:

Passenger Ferries (from Playa del Carmen):

Barcos México (+53 987 872 1508)

Ultramar (+53 987 869 2775/ <http://www.ultramar.cl/>)

Car Ferries (from the Calica pier):

Marítima Chancanaab (+53 987 872 0916)

### Getting Around:

#### By Taxi:

It is easy and relatively inexpensive to get around the island via taxi. Since fares have been standardized, there is no bartering system and the drivers can't rip you off.

### By Rental Car:

Rental cars are easy to arrange on the island. If you want to pre-book, see the list above.

### By Moped:

Rentals average USD25 a day. Due to the high accident rate, however, they are not recommended, especially since no insurance is offered. It is illegal to drive a moped without a helmet.

### By Foot:

The best mode of transportation on the island is on foot. Be careful as a pedestrian; here traffic will not stop for you.

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## Fun Facts

**Cozumel State:** Quintana Roo **Country:** Mexico

### Cozumel by the Numbers:

Population: 90,000 Elevation: 1030 feet  
Average Annual Rainfall: 47.5 inches  
Average January Temperature: 71 degrees F  
Average July Temperature: 82 degrees F

### Quick Facts:

Major Industries: Tourism Electricity:  
110-120 volts AC Time Zone:  
Central (GMT-6) Country Code: 52 Area  
Code: 987

### Did You Know?

The Mayans were the first to occupy Cozumel settling on the island in the 1st millennium BCE. They considered the island to be sacred and dedicated it to Ix Chel, the Moon Goddess. Many temples were built here and were places of pilgrimage, especially by women seeking fertility.

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