



Cheap Charlie's COZUMEL VISTOR'S GUIDE



Welcome to your Cozumel vacation! Here's some important info that will help make your vacation more fun & hassle-free. Please feel free to contact us for more info.

MEXICO though only a couple of hours away by plane, Mexico can sometimes seem a very foreign place for visitors. It's important to keep in mind that things will be different - after all, that's why you're going on vacation - and that you shouldn't expect things to run exactly as they do "back home" (things in Mexico rarely run with the precision of a Swiss watch!) Be assured that Mexico and Cozumel welcome visitors, and that you will be treated with warmth and friendly hospitality during your stay. Spanish is the main language spoken on Cozumel, though English and Maya are widely understood. It's not necessary for you to speak Spanish, but if you try to communicate even just a few words in Spanish - such as gracias, por favor, adiós, etc. - you'll find that your efforts are greatly appreciated.

DOCUMENTATION Proof of citizenship is essential! U.S. citizens must have one of the following:

- Valid passport. Expired passports are not acceptable.
- Certified government-issued birth certificate with raised seal, accompanied by photo ID.
- Naturalization documents accompanied by photo ID.

Minors under age 18 must travel with both parents, or with their notarized written consent (we will provide you with the appropriate form on request). Airline tickets and documents must be in the same name (or you must carry additional documentation to explain any discrepancy, such as a marriage certificate). Non-U.S./Canadian/Western European citizens may need a visa to enter Mexico. No vaccinations are required. PLEASE be sure that you are carrying correct documentation - you will not be able to board your airplane without it. NOTE: passports will be required to visit Mexico as of Dec 31, 2007.

FLIGHT INFO Airlines sometimes make last minute changes to flight itineraries. For this reason & for your own peace of mind, it is VERY IMPORTANT that you call your airline 72 hours (if this is different for your airline, we will tell you) prior to departure to reconfirm your flight times and flight numbers in each direction. International flights require check-in at the main airline ticket counter (NOT the gate!) at least 2 hours prior to departure. We also recommend calling again 24 hours before departure, for extra peace of mind. If you are flying directly to Cozumel from a US gateway, you will be able to check your luggage all the way to the island. If Cancun is your first entry point into Mexico you will retrieve your luggage and clear immigration & customs in Cancun. There's a ferry between Playa del Carmen (30 miles south of Cancun) and Cozumel, which leaves every hour or so from 5:00 am through 11:00 pm. Take Riviera Bus (about \$8 each way) from the airport to Playa del Carmen (also departs hourly, more or less). The ferry pier is down the hill and across the square from the bus station (you can buy tickets for the ferry at a small booth next to the pier).

ENTERING MEXICO When you check in for your flight, or on the plane, you'll be given a Mexican "Tourist Card." All passengers require their own tourist cards. Complete both the top & bottom sections (and sign the back of the form) before you land in Mexico. As you clear immigration, you'll show this and your proof of citizenship to the agent. After he signs it and stamps the card, you'll keep one part and he will keep the other. Keep this in a safe place; you'll need it to leave the country. Lost paperwork can be remedied, but at considerable hassle. If you lose your tourist card, get to the airport several hours before departure, and ask airline or immigration personnel what to do. You'll also complete a customs declaration form (one per family). Customs officials will ask you to press a button on a stop/go "traffic light." If the light turns green, you're waved through; if it lights red, your bags will be subject to a brief inspection. Carrying any contraband, like guns or drugs, is a **very** bad idea - Mexico has very serious laws regarding their possession.

TRANSPORTATION Getting to your hotel: by law, taxis cannot pick people up at the airport. Instead, go to the glass booth near the terminal's exit doors, where you can purchase transit to any area of the island (the cost depends on where you're going) - just tell the attendant the name of your hotel. Walk outside, and wait in the appropriate shuttle line for your hotel (the hotel names are posted). EXCEPTION - if you purchased a charter air/hotel package (example: Funjet or Adventure Tours), your transfers may be prepaid. We'll tell you if they are). Rental vehicles are easy to rent once you're on the island. Vehicles come in all shapes, sizes and states of repair. Check the vehicle before you drive away, as you will be held responsible for any damages when you return it. We recommend buying the local insurance offered with your rental. If an accident occurs you'll be glad you didn't try to save a few bucks. Taxis are everywhere, and you'll use them to get around. Cheap & often exciting. They don't have meters, so you're charged a standard rate. Ask the price first if you're not comfortable with this.

WEATHER Balmy breezes all year, with rare cold snaps (60s) in the dead of winter. Highs April-November: 90s, December-March: 80s. Lows usually in the 70s. Light jackets are a good idea in the winter.

LUGGAGE Most airlines enforce a 3 bag limit, including one carry-on. Checked bags are generally limited to 50 pounds each (charter flights may differ). Pack lightly - Cozumel is informal and tropical, and you'll be living in swimsuits and sunglasses most of the time. Some items to remember: several swimming suits, mostly t-shirts, shorts and casual wear, comfortable shoes, flip flops, sunscreen, sunglasses, hat, windbreaker or light jacket. As a safety precaution, don't pack your valuables in checked luggage (or just leave non-essential valuables at home. You're going to a very casual island!) Security regulations prohibit using locks on your bags - instead, use tie-wraps to secure them.

MONEY Most people spend \$50-100/day, allowing for cocktails, eating out and shopping, but you might bring extra. Credit cards are accepted in larger stores and restaurants. There are ATMs on the island, though sometimes sporadic service means you can't depend on them for your cash needs. ATM withdrawals are paid in pesos. Small bills are very useful. If you use Traveler's Checks, keep a record of your traveler's checks' serial numbers in a safe and separate place. Although dollars are accepted everywhere it's a good idea to use pesos as much as possible; that makes change counting and life in general much easier. Money may be changed at your hotel, at banks and exchange houses (look for signs saying "Casa de Cambio") and restaurants. The official exchange rate, as of Spring 2006, is about 10.5 pesos to one U.S. dollar. Expect exchange rates on the street to be "rounded down."

TIPPING Of course, tipping depends entirely on the quality of service you receive. Waiters and bartenders get 15-20% of the bill. Dive boat personnel: about \$5 for a two-tank dive; a few \$\$ for a one-tank dive boat (usually paid to the divemaster, who will split the tips with the rest of the crew.) Some people prefer to tip daily, since boat crews and divemasters may change from day to day. Your hotel maid will appreciate \$1 or so per day, left in the room upon departure (some larger hotels are now adding bellman and maid tips to your bill; you pay these miscellaneous charges when you check out). Wages are very low in Mexico, and many people depend almost entirely on your tips to earn a living... if you're pleased with the service, consider tipping a bit extra.

CRIME is almost unheard of on the island. You're safe walking on Cozumel most anywhere, anytime. Still, take sensible precautions... as you would anywhere. Don't leave valuables lying around, and don't flash large amounts of cash in public. Your hotel has a safe-deposit service for your valuables - take advantage of this, for your own peace of mind. There may be a nominal charge for the use of in-room safes.

ELECTRICITY 110 volt, 60 cycle, same as in the U.S. Occasionally, blackouts do occur. They're usually brief, and can be kind of fun, if you let them. Voltage spikes wreak havoc with sensitive equipment, like laptops; be sure to bring a surge protector!

EATING & DRINKING Cozumel's water supply comes directly from underground wells. The contamination problems common in other areas of Mexico are rare, but drinking water from the tap may subject you to different bacteria than you're used to... so we recommend that you not take the chance. Instead, use bottled water, which is provided at your hotel and widely available, for drinking AND tooth brushing. Also available: soft drinks (U.S.-type and more exotic flavors), juices, beer and stronger liquids. Locally produced booze, like tequila, mezcal and rum, is reasonably priced, but imported liquor can be very expensive. Water & ice served in most restaurants is purified. You'll find food of every kind on the island, from seafood, burgers, Mexican, Italian, Chinese, and almost anything else you can think of. As a general rule, the further you get from the waterfront, the more authentic (and cheaper!) the food gets.

NIGHT LIFE lots to choose from...

- Carlos 'n Charlies - a Cozumel tradition... the cervezas flow & the night gets wild. Downtown, waterfront. Adjacent is Senor Frogs, another popular watering hole.
- Neptuno Disco - fun & dancing.
- Sunday night fiesta in the town square - all the locals come to socialize and dance.
- Shopping - the stores stay open late in Cozumel.
- Walking Melgar street (along the water) or hanging out at a sidewalk cafe on the square - great for people watching.

MONTEZUMA'S REVENGE though stomach troubles do sometimes occur, most people don't experience any trouble. To avoid "traveler's diarrhea" we recommend:

- Moderation in eating and drinking at all times.
- Avoid excessive fatigue - relax, and take it easy.
- Don't drink tap water. Also use bottled water to brush your teeth.
- Avoid eating from street vendors' stalls, & limit greasy/spicy foods, if you're not used to them.
- Squirt lime juice (a natural anti-microbe agent) on food, especially salads and vegetables.

Notice how restaurants almost always give you a lime wedge on your plate? If you do experience "intestinal distress" Kaopectate or Pepto-Bismol may help (available locally, but you might consider bringing some with you), or try Lomotil or Immodium In extreme cases, ask your hotel to call a doctor: they will make "house calls" to your hotel room.

IMPORTANT: DRINK LOTS & LOTS OF WATER IF YOU GET DIARRHEA!

SHOPPING Cozumel is a duty-free port, and there are bargains everywhere (on some items, up to 30% below US retail). Most shops open around 9 am, close for siesta around 1 pm, and reopen from 5-9 pm, more or less. Bargaining is not as active as in other places in Mexico, like Acapulco or Tijuana, but is practiced. U.S. Customs allows you to bring back \$400 in merchandise duty-free, with 1 liter of liquor. Silver is usually a good buy. Cuban cigars are available if you're so inclined; remember that it's illegal to bring them back into the U.S. For food, toiletries and a sometimes surprising assortment of other articles (cheap vanilla, for example), try the larger stores like Chedraui (across from Plaza las Glorias) and San Francisco supermarkets. Prices for onyx items can vary widely, shop around for the best deal.

PROBLEMS Staff at the hotels and dive shop will be able to help you resolve almost any problem that comes up. If you're unhappy with your hotel room for any reason, tell the front desk or manager, and ask them to resolve the situation.

IMPORTANT: if you believe you are being charged unfairly for something, get a receipt and the name of the person who insists on payment - otherwise there is no recourse for getting your money back! And while we're on the subject of problems...

TIMESHARES there are battalions of people selling timeshares on Cozumel, swarming like fleas with one intention: to separate you from your money. We're not in a position to evaluate any specific timeshare deals - but we can tell you that we've heard from many people who were conned into buying something they didn't really want or need... and who later regretted their purchase and were not able to get their money back. Or the people who bought and paid for timeshares, only to find that they weren't able to stay in the hotel they were promised - or who found that their timeshare company went bankrupt and their timeshare became worthless - or those who found that the service and maintenance charges attached with their timeshare added up to more than they would have paid for a standard hotel stay. Not that all the deals are bad, but **BUYER BEWARE**. The booths that say "Information" in the plaza are timeshare nests... walk near them and you'll be invited to breakfast, promised a free jeep, or anything else to get you to subject yourself to several hours of a high pressure sales tactics. You may also be approached in some hotels on the island ("come to our free tour of the property!"). If you don't want to be bothered, tell them you already have a timeshare, ignore them completely, or pretend to speak only Balinese.

COMMUNICATIONS Telephone service has improved greatly in Mexico in the last several years, but can still be unpredictable and frustrating at times. Pay phones are widely available, and some public phones offer international long distance with a credit card (but rates vary widely, and some people report getting stuck with **EXTREMELY HIGH** bills from these phones). Calling the US is almost always cheaper if you use a US carrier, like AT&T. Dialing 01-800-462-4240 will connect you with an AT&T operator in the U.S. (check with your carrier for access numbers before you leave home). Some pay phones require a nominal amount (about US\$1.50) to make this connection; others are free. Hotels are beginning to charge for this connection as well; ask first. In any case, direct-dialing from your hotel room can result in **BIG** phone charges: hotels may double or triple the rates you would pay from a public phone.

Some cellular phones work in Mexico - check with your provider in the U.S., and ask about charges first (expect about \$2 a minute, generally)

Here are some useful phone numbers. To dial from USA and Canada, direct-dial 011-52-897 then the local number listed below.

- Allegro - 872-3443
- Barracuda - 872-0002
- Occidental Grand - 872-9730
- SCUBA Club - 872-1800
- Iberostar - 872-9900
- Hotel Cozumel - 872-2900
- Fiesta Americana - 872-2622
- Presidente - phone 872-0322
- Reef Club - phone 872-9300
- Villablanca Hotel - 872-0730

THINGS TO DO when not diving, eating, drinking, sunning, napping, diving, or telling "big fish" stories...

- **IF** you rent a bike or moped, but PLEASE be careful. Cars and truck enjoy - really enjoy - the right of way over bikes, mopeds and pedestrians. Moped accidents are unfortunately quite common - look both ways twice, and please wear helmets.
- Walk around town to check things out! Cozumel is filled with interesting locals and visitors. Get out of the tourist area to get a real feel for the local culture. Hidden treasures like graveyards and local markets are tucked around town away from the town square.
- Rent a car and drive around the island. The windward side has some of the world's most beautiful beaches, but be careful of the undertow at some beaches, if you plan to swim. From town, drive east on Juarez Street. This cuts across the island to the other side (about 20 minutes - make sure you have gasoline, since there are no gas stations out of town. When you get to the ocean, make sure to stop at Mezcalitos or Coconuts, great laid-back bars with hammocks and tables in the sand. Don't try to drive north of Mezcalitos. The road's terrible, you'll get stuck, and insurance is void there. Taxis also offer a half-day "round-the-island trip," worth considering if you're planning to have a beer or two.
- Go snorkeling and shore diving at La Ceiba, Villablanca, Chankanaab Park, Fiesta Americana - pretty much anywhere between downtown and just south of the Fiesta Americana.
- Mayan ruins on the island are at San Gervasio and El Cedral. Don't expect large, intact structures. It's best to have a guide who can bring the ruins alive with stories.
- Visit the Cozumel Museum, just north of the square on Melgar Avenue (the waterfront road).
- Sun - a great tan awaits you. But watch for sunburn, which can happen quickly. Bring sunscreen (which can be expensive locally). "Sunday nights - the town fiesta, popular with locals and visitors, is held in the main square. Music, dancing.

OFF - ISLAND EXCURSIONS

- Visit ruins of Mayan civilization - The best sites, like Tulúm and Chichén Itzá, are on the mainland, and require a full-day trip.
- Tulúm, considered among the most beautiful of Mayan sites, is located high on a cliff overlooking the Caribbean about half an hour drive south of Playa del Carmen. Take the 45 minute ferry ride at Cozumel's town pier (about \$8 one-way) across to Playa del Carmen. Bargain for a taxi or rental car (several agencies are located near the pier). Bring your bathing suit for a dip in the ocean as touring Tulúm is quite hot.
- Chichén Itzá was the most important civic and religious center of the Mayan world. It's a three hour (one-way) bus ride from Cancun or short flight from Cozumel. The plane trip is about \$175 for flight and a several-hour guided tour. Consult a Cozumel tour agency or your hotel for information and ask about any additional airport taxes ahead of time. .
- Playa del Carmen - this small town is filled with Mexican charm. It is a short 45 minute ferry ride from Cozumel (about \$8 one-way). Filled with lots of shops and restaurants, it is located on a beautiful white beach.
- Xcaret (pronounced ish-ca-RET) - this ecological water park is filled with enough activities to fill a day. It is located 5 km south of Playa del Carmen. (www.xcaretcancun.com)
- Xel-Ha (pronounced shell-HA) - another beautiful ecological water park located between Playa del Carmen and Tulúm along the mainland coast www.xel-ha.com.mx
- Cenote diving around Akumal - some of the world's most famous caverns and caves are located in this area, and they are spectacular! The crystal-clear fresh water is filled with stalagmites and stalactites. Guides through the cavern (not cave) are given by certified cave instructors. Openwater certification is required (cavern certification is not necessary).

AND A FEW MORE SUGGESTIONS:

- Be at the airport AT LEAST 2 hours before departure time.
- Remember to reconfirm flights by calling your airline before departure.
- Have your proof of citizenship documents handy. Know where your money is at all times.
- Register new cameras and other valuables with US customs before leaving the U.S.
- Essential medicines and irreplaceable items are best kept with you in carry-ons.
- Don't pack nonessential valuables in carry-on luggage.
- An easygoing attitude and a smile are the most important things you can bring with you to Mexico.
- Your vacation begins the moment you walk out your front door. Enjoy!
- Use our advice as a starting point for your own exploration, and you'll find that great sunsets, exhilarating diving, and the beautiful waters of the Mexican Caribbean are only the beginnings of a great vacation.

COZUMEL SCUBA DIVING TIPS

DIVE GEAR We provide the tanks, weights, and great dive sites. You bring (or rent) the rest. Remember mask, snorkel, fins, regulator, BC, booties, slate, dive light, depth gauge, bottom timer or watch, computer/dive tables, camera and film (expensive on the island), logbook and weight belt (without weights). A mesh bag packed inside your gear bag for traveling, can be handy for carrying and rinsing your gear while on the island. Bring extra: mask and fin straps, snorkel keeper, batteries. Water temperature varies from about 74 in the winter to the mid 80s in the summer. A light tropical shorty or dive skin is great for summer and fall; you may want more thermal protection in the winter.

NOTE - under a new conservation law, dive knives & gloves are prohibited while diving in Cozumel's waters.

DIVING Diving days usually goes something like this: for morning departures, meet the boat at 8:15 or so (the dive shop or your group leader will advise you exactly when and where), and motor out to the reef for your first dive. It takes 30-45 minutes to get there, depending on the site. Some of the best sites may take a bit longer, but they're worth it! Relax and catch rays, watch for dolphins and flying fish, nap, or whatever.

- The first dive is normally a deeper dive, to 70-100 feet. The deeper reefs and walls are spectacular! After the first tank, you'll spend an hour or more surface interval and have a snack on "standard" trips.
- The second dive is normally 35-60 feet deep. You'll be back at the dock around 1 pm ("fast boats" return around noon). For other than a.m. departures: the shop will advise departure time/place. We'll always brief you on what to expect on every dive.

Drift diving is always practiced, since there's almost always some current. If you haven't tried this laid-back style of diving, be warned - it may spoil you forever! We allow the current to provide the momentum during the dive, keeping kicking to a minimum. The boats follow us, and pick us up as we surface. No more swimming back to the anchor line! (See the next section for more information on drift diving).

For safety reasons, groups stay together throughout the dive, and dive the same profile. We practice no-hands diving to preserve the reefs. Please also streamline your equipment and clip your gauges to your BC. The beautiful corals and marine life are what you came to see, and we'll always point out interesting, exciting and sometimes unique animal life. Remember that your group leader (s) and boat crews are there to help you enjoy yourself, so don't hesitate to ask questions, discuss problems, or make a request. If you feel like skipping a day's diving to pursue other interests, don't feel guilty! This is your vacation, so do what makes you feel happy. So what if you miss those eagle rays and sea turtles? Remember to stay well-hydrated for diving - drink lots of water during your entire trip.

DRIFT DIVING TECHNIQUES as currents usually run south to north, most all diving in Cozumel is drift diving. Just follow your divemaster and the boat will pick up the group at the end of the dive. Stick with the divemaster to see the most exciting creatures. Here are some suggestions.

Entering water from boat:

- All divers must be ready to enter the water at the same time.
- Double check all your gear & speak up if you are not ready.

Descending:

- Physical contact with your buddy.
- Equalize your ears and mask. If your descent is slower than the group, swim slowly down and towards the group. If you don't, the current may separate you from the group.

During the dive:

- A few feet before you complete the descent, adjust buoyancy.
- Always remain neutrally buoyant to avoid touching the coral. Pay attention to your buoyancy. Currents may have sudden upward- and downward-moving eddies.
- Swimming position - head down and fins up. This position makes it easier to avoid kicking the coral with your fins, and keeps you from clouding the visibility for the people behind you by kicking up sand.
- Stopping - fast-moving currents sometimes makes it difficult to stop. There are two ways to maintain a position: turn around and swim into the current, or "hide" behind a large coral head to block the current.
- Stay behind group leader. If you get in front, turn around and swim into the current until leader is ahead.

Ascending:

- Maintain close contact with your buddy when ascending. Currents can separate you from your buddy. Hold on if necessary.
- Continually look at your depth gauge to monitor rate of ascent, and vent BC.
- Never ascend over deeper water; swim diagonally towards shallower areas.
- During precautionary decompression stop, maintain contact with buddy. Once on the surface, **STAY TOGETHER** (grasp arms if necessary) and always, always maintain eye contact with the dive boat!

Exiting from water onto boat:

- If you stay with the group during the dive, the boat will be nearby to pick you up upon ascent.
- If you get separated from the group, the boat might not see you immediately. Signal to the boat that you are okay.
- If no one returns the signal, use your scuba-tuba (inflatable sausage-type position aid) or brightly colored fin to mark your position.
- Wait for the boat. Do not try to swim against the current.
- When the boat comes to pick you up, stay back until signaled to move up to ladder or platform.
- Do not approach boat while motor blades are turning.
- Exit the water following instructions from the boat crew.

Please dive safely and take care of the reefs!