

## **Diving in Cozumel**

The sunny island of Cozumel is home to lush walls, protected reefs and some of the speediest drifts in the world - perfect for every level of diver.

### **Highlights**

The Caverns of Punta Sur Reef

This dive site is home to a deep wall, punctuated with intricate caverns and fissures. Tec divers can enter one and follow it 27 m (90 ft), where a fascinating cave complex awaits.

Cenote Diving in Yucatan

With around 6000 cenotes, Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and its extensive subterranean waterways are ideal for experimenting with cavern diving. The popular Cenote Dos Ojos is accessible to most divers.

Bull Sharks in Playa del Carmen

From November to March, get up close and personal with majestic bull sharks as they arrive in Playa del Carmen for breeding season.

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### **Quick facts**

10 km (six miles) off the coast of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula lies Cozumel, the "Island of the Swallows." Barely 50 x 16 km in size, this diminutive island has become a popular scuba diving destination. Cozumel has all the ingredients for a great dive getaway – friendly locals, good food, lively nightspots, towering coral formations, warm water, great underwater visibility and white sandy beaches.

Cozumel is famous among the diving community for its lush walls and high-voltage drifts. The reef system around the island is a part of the

Mesoamerican reef system and is protected by the Cozumel Reefs National Marine Park. As such, it is extremely healthy for a Caribbean reef and is home to 26 coral species and more than 500 species of fish.

Cozumel is suitable for all levels of diver from beginners to Tec divers. In particular, Cozumel is currently ranked as one of the top ten places for advanced diving. This is due to the deep walls and visibility that require extra vigilance. Diving in Cozumel can be completed by speedboat or from shore, depending on your preference.

### **When to go**

It's possible to visit Cozumel throughout the year. For uncrowded sites, book between May and November. For bull shark sightings, consider November to March.

#### December to April

There is no bad time to dive in Cozumel. In fact, the water temperatures remain constant year-round and cool only slightly during the winter months, meaning it's possible to dive approximately 300 days of the year. December to April is considered the best time to visit Mexico and therefore is the most popular time to visit Cozumel. Because the winter months constitute high season, you should make sure to book as early as possible in order to secure the best rate. November to March in particular are the best months for bull shark sightings in Playa del Carmen. On average, water temperatures vary between 78 and 82°F (25 and 28°C) in Cancun.

#### May to November

May to September brings warm waters, uncrowded dive sites and generally calm conditions. This is the best time to dive Cozumel if you prefer warmer conditions. Also note that diving in the Caribbean is possible year-

round. Simply keep an eye on the forecast during the summer and early fall. As an added bonus, the summer months are low season throughout Mexico. At this time, you'll find the best deals on diving and accommodation. If you enjoy uncrowded, Caribbean dive sites, travel to Mexico between May and September.

### **Where to dive**

Cozumel's sites are off its western shore. Novice divers can dive the shallow northeastern sites, while advanced divers should go south to the deep walls.

### **Snorkeling in Cozumel**

Snorkeling is essential to any vacation in Cozumel. From shore, you'll be able to access the island's lush walls and reefs - just be mindful of the strong currents. Local guides will be happy to assist you with a snorkeling expedition by boat into the Cozumel Reefs National Marine Park. There are also trips to the deep sea for snorkeling with sailfish that may interest the more adventurous divers.

### **Best dive sites in Cozumel**

Punta Sur Reef – This is a fascinating, ethereal dive consisting of a deep wall with caverns and fissures. The appropriately qualified may enter one of the larger cavern systems and follow it down a sand chute to 27 m/90 ft where there's a complex system of coral tunnels and caverns that are absolutely bursting with life.

The Devil's Throat – This site is best enjoyed with an experienced local divemaster. The deeper walls have whip corals spiraling out into the depths, and large black corals. There are also small, brightly colored gorgonian sea fans and sea whips, including the devil's sea whip.

Palancar Garden – Divers of all levels will enjoy the slight-to-moderate current that carries them along while exploring the many finger coral formations here. This strip reef is about 20 m/66 ft wide and dissected by many fissures and caverns. Within the many sheltered areas, divers can spot huge stovepipe sponges stretching out from the reef and black coral in the deeper areas. Fish such as juvenile yellow head wrasse hide in the deep yellow tubes at night for protection and sightings of butterflyfish, angelfish, parrotfish and damselfish are frequent.

Santa Rosa Wall – This is a high voltage drift dive along a sheer wall. The wall begins at about 15 m/50 ft and the current carries divers past ledges, overhangs, massive sponges and fire coral. Divers regularly encounter large pelagic fish, turtles and spotted eagle rays.

Columbia Wall – This is a relatively remote site which divers frequently share with eagle rays, turtles and large barracuda. A healthy coral reef crowns a steep drop off, and massive coral pinnacles rise 15 m/50 ft from the bottom. Nurse sharks prowl the reefs and walls, which seem to drop straight down to the infinite depths.

### **What to see**

With the heavy currents that produce the area's excellent drift dives, divers regularly spot a plethora of pelagic species. Be careful not to lose your regulator as you gape at the menagerie of animals that will pass you by. One of the major attractions in the area are the bull sharks that are attracted to the Playa del Carmen's crystalline waters between November and March annually. These sites are an easy day trip from Cozumel.

Eagle rays are another common addition to log books after visiting Cozumel. There's also a chance of spotting green turtles, loggerhead turtles, whale sharks and sailfish during their respective migrations. The healthy Cozumel reefs also play host to a variety of tropical species. Vigilant divers

may spot lobsters, groupers, stingrays, sergeant majors as well as hundreds of colorful fish.

### **Area**

First discovered by the Mayans, Cozumel has long been an attraction for its natural beauty. These native people named Cozumel the "Island of the Swallows". To them, it represented the sacred home of "Ixchel", the goddess of fertility. The women of the tribe would make the arduous journey to the island at least once in their lives to sacrifice a small doll for fertility.

Fast forward a couple of hundred years and the development of facilities on the island during World War II, as well as Jacques Cousteau's declaration of his admiration for the island, secured Cozumel a place on the scuba diving map. Today, Cozumel is one of Mexico's major tourist destinations.

### **Other attractions**

While Cozumel may be famous for scuba diving, it's also a playground of tropical attractions. Sandy white beaches and soothing spa treatments lure travelers into relaxation. Snorkeling and glass bottom boats offer alternatives for non-divers who wish to experience the stunning underwater environments of Cozumel. To learn about the history of the island, be sure to visit the Discover Mexico Cozumel Park and the San Gervasio Mayan Archaeological Site. Don't leave the island without experiencing its famous nightlife or sampling the wonderful cuisine on offer at the seaside restaurants.

### **Getting there**

Cozumel is now home to an international airport that welcomes flights from the United States and Canada as well as regional flights from Mexico City. International visitors may also arrive via cruise ship or private yacht.

For those coming from other destinations in Mexico, it's possible to reach the island via bus and then ferry from Cancun.