

## Cozumel a diver's paradise

# Cruise reveals Mexican isle's once-hidden charm

COZUMEL, MEXICO — You can learn a lot about a destination during a one-day stopover aboard a cruise ship. Our first port of call aboard the cruise ship Mardi Gras was Cozumel, on the Caribbean coast of Mexico. It turned out to be the best port of call, because we saw Grand Cayman two days later in the rain and were unable even to dock at Ocho Rios, Jamaica, because of rough weather. That kind of bad luck doesn't happen very often.

Cozumel is an island 12 miles off the Yucatan Peninsula. The people are from the same Mayan stock seen by Cortes and other early Spanish explorers in the 16th century. It was a village known only to a few lucky divers until Jacques Cousteau discovered black coral there in the 1960s.

It is still a diver's paradise. The lagoon of the Sol Caribe Hotel, across a narrow strip of water from our cruise ship, is a "bunny pool" for beginners. The water in the lagoon is only waist high.

More experienced snorkelers make a school of yellow life jackets in the sea beyond the lagoon, getting a face-down view of colored fish, pink conch shells and the coral reef off-shore. Scuba divers go out by the boatload.

Some cruise ship passengers never get beyond this point. Others taxi to San Francisco beach, where you can swim in front of the El Presidente Hotel and snorkel around a plane sunk 30 feet below the surface by a Hollywood



1-of-a-kind traveler  
**Iris Jones**  
contributing travel editor

movie team. The rest of us go by taxi or motor scooter into the town of San Miguel, two or three miles away. The motor scooters cost \$15 a day at the dock. Smart shoppers found them for \$7 a day at the Hotel Lopez on the town square. A taxi into town cost \$3 no matter how many people ride, so most of us waited for other passengers to share the fare.

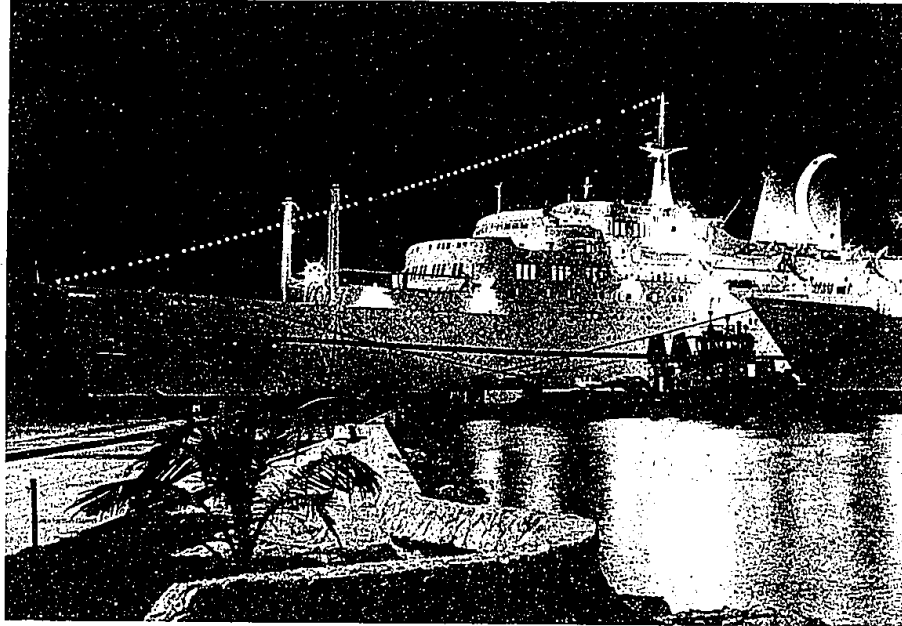
THE HOTELS stretch out on this side of town, most of them no higher than a palm tree. The downtown area of San Miguel runs from the dock and waterfront street about 10 streets back past the town square and the market.

It is a very polite and friendly town. The faces are Mayan, flatter and broader than those seen around Mexico City. From the dock, where a glass-bottom boat leaves every half-hour for the cruise ship docks, the town spreads out in either direction: palm trees, stucco buildings, sand and boats.

The cruise director typically recommends one or two shops in a port of call; usually the better known and most reliable ones, but not necessarily the most interesting shops or those with the best prices. Our most memorable stop was at Bazaar Cozumel, where we found an ex-Detroit called Hazel Mrook managing the store. Hazel came down here 11 years ago and stayed.

She drew us a map marked with places we wouldn't find on our own, especially on the other side of the island: "It's still like Adam and Eve in the garden over there; a few restaurants and ranches, lots of empty beaches, but don't snorkel or swim there unless the beach is marked for it." You can ride a motor scooter around the island easily in a couple of hours or rent a Volkswagen mini-moto for \$30 a day. We explored the restaurants and the people in town instead.

Local people told us that the best restaurants to visit at night were: El Ranchito, good food and service with Mexican decor; Such Is Life, good Mexican food, the best salads on the island, and Mexican jazz musicians and singers; Las Tortugas, Puerto pork chops



MICKY JONES

The cruise ship Mardi Gras makes for a dazzling sight on a balmy night in Cozumel, Mexico. Cozumel was the first port of call on the ship's Caribbean cruise, and it turned out to be the best.

Cozumel is an island 12 miles off the Yucatan Peninsula in the Caribbean. The people are from the same Mayan stock seen by Cortes and other early Spanish explorers in the 16th century. It was a village known only to a few lucky divers until Jacques Cousteau discovered black coral there in the 1960s. And the divers have been coming back ever since.



MICKY JONES

Mexican musicians perform during lunch in Cozumel. Although one side of the island is built-up, with hotels, fine restaurants and even discos, the other side offers a more primitive environment, with lots of open beaches.

under a rain roof on an open patio, and Casa Denise, where you need advance reservations and a minimum of six diners for the Yucatan food (no menu).

Rolandi's Pizzeria, where an Italian family taught local Mayans how to cook their food, has "great spaghetti, lasagna, salad, pizza dough bread and sinful desserts." Pepe's is very popular among the tourists. So is the San Francisco restaurant, several miles out of town, "where you can get shrimp shish

kebabs and live music for about 450 pesos" (\$3).

THE YOUNG are very lively at discos called Scaramouche, Hippopotamus and Grips (Grips has a good restaurant, mixed menu). And young to not-so-young throng to Carlos 'N' Murphy's, one of a chain of funky restaurants in Mexico.

You go up the crooked stairs in a wash of sound to Carlos 'N' Murphy's music and laughter from the bar end of the room, the clink of dishes from the dining end. Young tourists crowd around tiny tables, drinking margaritas and Mexican beer. It's a great meeting-and-mingling place under a ceiling draped with T-shirts from around the world.

A man with a glass wine decanter goes around the room sending streams of red wine into any willing customer's mouth, and sometimes down the customer's neck.

Back aboard the Mardi Gras, we found a disgruntled group returned from an all-day, expensive tour to Playa del Carmen and then to the single Mayan ruin at Tulum. Savvy tourists in Cozumel go by air instead to Chichen Itza for about \$25, where they can wander a whole Mayan city in ruins. Either way, Mayan ruins are a major attraction in the Cancun-Cozumel area.

For information on the Mardi Gras, contact Carnival Lines or your travel agent on Cozumel, your travel agent or the Mexican Government Tourism Office, 233 N. Michigan, Chicago, Ill. 60601.

## Cruise is rated best vacation value

A cruise is probably the best value today for your vacation dollar. With one payment, you can cover your air fare, floating hotel, more food than you can eat, transportation to several ports-of-call, and a variety of entertainment to suit most any taste.

Best of all, because you're in the care of an experienced captain and crew who see to your safe transportation all the way, you only have to unpack once. Your only extra expenses will be bar bills, laundry, shore excursions, personal purchases and tips (which normally average less than 5 percent of your cruise fare).

We recently returned from a Caribbean cruise aboard Royal Caribbean Cruise Line's new M/S Song of America and can recommend her to you without qualification. The newest ship afloat (until mid-May, when Holland America's Nieuw Amsterdam appears on the horizon), she's one of the first of several great new vessels built (or under construction) primarily for the American market (cruising the Caribbean, Mexican Riviera, West Coast or Alaska). For the first-time cruiser or a veteran of many voyages, she's sure to be a favorite.

SONG OF America departs her home port of Mi-

ami every Sunday for calls at the three most popular ports in the Bahamas and Caribbean. In Nassau, we enjoyed a glimpse of the easy-going Bahamian lifestyle, with visits to various historical sites, shopping in the vivid native market near the dock, and the option of several hours lounging on an inviting white sand beach.

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, we found a completely modern resort city with English spoken nearly as much as Spanish. We strongly recommend a visit to Old San Juan (easy walk from the dock) with its elegant colonial architecture, faithfully restored El Morro Fort, and excellent shopping. St. Thomas, while known primarily for its bargains from all over the world, also has some of the most breathtaking vistas in the Caribbean. Megan's Bay is considered by many seasoned travelers to be one of the most beautiful beaches in the islands.

THE SHIP itself, though, proved to be our favorite "port-of-call." Her 703-foot length and 11 decks encompass a self-contained resort city with a staff large enough to maintain a ratio of one to every three passengers. One of our favorite spots aboard, the Viking Crown Lounge, a bar and observation area unique to RCCL ships, encircles the funnel at

120 feet above sea level. It can accommodate about 150 people and guarantees an overall view of the ship and surrounding ocean that makes it the most popular spot aboard for a sunset cocktail.

Song of America staterooms are compact (as they are proving to be on most of the newer ships), but very well arranged, and we found ours to be more than adequate for the short time spent there. The food is good to excellent, and the service proved to be of the high standard already established on RCCL's other three ships, the Song of Norway, Nordic Prince and Sun Viking. Dress is generally casual, with two or three "dress-up" nights where a cocktail dress and coat and tie are the accepted norms. Black tie is appropriate, but certainly not mandatory.

Fares range from \$1,085 (per person-double occupancy) for an inside stateroom during the off season to \$1,945, the seasonal rate for an outside suite. For more information, contact your travel agent or Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, 903 South America Way, Miami, Fla. 33132. The toll-free number is (800) 327-4366.

— Mary and Richard Magruder

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