

LIKE A LOCAL: COZUMEL, MEXICO

WORD COUNT: 811

HED: Cozumel ~ Island of Swallows

DECK: Close the guidebooks and let a local lead the way.

By Kandy Stahl

We made the move to Cozumel in 2010, selling everything we owned in Texas and never looking back. I retired from the life of a university professor/administrator, but my husband maintains his company via the internet. The relaxed pace of life and the beautiful waters surrounding the island are unrivaled, and the people are genuine. Here are my tips on ways to enjoy your time on our diverse island.

Tourist Tips

The primary industry of Cozumel is tourism; there is certainly no lack of experiences. Beach clubs are very popular, but a memorable experience for the entire family is found at Chankanaab Park. Start with a traditional Mayan steam bath; reservations needed. You'll leave this spiritual experience relaxed, with a sense of well-being. Swim with dolphins, stroll through the Pre-Hispanic ruin replicas, walk through botanical gardens. You may also want to swim in the ocean and try snorkeling.

The east side of Cozumel is more primitive, with no electricity. A nice day at the beach can be had at one of the more local east-side beach bars. Chen Rio is very popular among the locals as it has some large, protected inlets for swimming in the ocean with no worries of riptides or dangerous currents. The restaurant serves a nice variety of dishes to please everyone in the family.

Off the Beaten Path

In July, 2015 Cozumel hosted artists from around the world who participated in Sea Walls: Murals for Oceans. 36 murals were painted on buildings around the island. See the real Cozumel while viewing some magnificent murals; maps are available to guide you.

Alternatively, you could sign up for the Cozumel Bar Hop. This tour has a guide who shares the history of Cozumel as you travel from the west to the east side. Stop at four different beach clubs and have a free shot of their signature drink. But, don't feel like you must consume alcohol. If you want to eat, each has a nice menu. This is a nice way to see the "wild side" of the island.

If It's Free, It's For Me

Benito Juarez Park is in the heart of downtown. Recently renovated with water fountains, benches and trees, there is shopping all around if that strikes your fancy, and there are loads of wonderful restaurants. This park is great for people-watching, relaxing and having a great time.

How Not to Look Like a Tourist

Oh my goodness ... do not walk around with a balloon hat on your head from a popular bar! We call that the "tag and release program;" you're tagged with balloons so all the shops you pass spot the tourist! The other dead give-away, especially for women, is walking around town wearing your bathing suit and maybe a cover-up. The same goes for men in their swim trunks or Speedos. If you wouldn't do it at home, don't do it in Cozumel.

Eat Around the Town

Fear not the street vendors! For a uniquely Mexican dish, try the esquites (Mexican corn salad). The churros are divine if you want something a little sweeter. And, if you have the chance to eat the cochinita, do it! As for a really local restaurant, it has to be Otates. Great tacos, frijoles charros especial (you'll be spoiled for life), guacamole and pozole (a wonderful soup) are all memorable.

Whatever you do, don't ____ .

Don't be afraid to try your Spanish. The locals appreciate the effort and will often politely correct you. Mispronunciation could be mildly embarrassing, but it's great to make the effort. Example: cocina (ko-seen-a) means kitchen. Pronounce it as ko-cheen-a and you just said something about a girl who gets around. Not likely what you meant, I'll bet.

The Best \$10 You'll Ever Spend

On this one, I'll return to the food. You can easily eat at Otates and other truly local restaurants for less than \$10/person!

Icebreaker

Cozumeleños are a very proud people. If you really want to talk with them, ask them what they like most about Cozumel. You'll likely get a bit of history along with a good sense of the culture.

Photo Ops

As you walk along the malecon (the oceanfront), there are many wonderful statues with beautiful ocean backgrounds.

Gotta Have It

Avoid the usual fare that you see in every shop (sombreros and maracas). Homemade leather sandals and huaraches can be found in places like Déjà Vu, a great little shop near Punta Langosta with beautiful jewelry hand made by a trustworthy artisan. For nice clothing, check out Los Cinco Soles.

For the Jeopardy File

The east side of Cozumel is a protected turtle sanctuary for Loggerhead and Hawksbill turtles. From May through September, females come ashore at night to lay their eggs.