



Yucatán Adventures

Activities enliven
the Cancún area
Story and photos by Rob Dunton

I stand waist-deep in a warm lagoon on the northern edge of Cozumel, an island 12 miles east of the Yucatán Peninsula. Balmy winds blow steadily beneath azure skies as small waves lap on sand as soft as confectioners' sugar. Behind me, the Caribbean Sea transitions from jade to turquoise to indigo as the water deepens. Next to me are my fiancée, Susan, and Raul De Lille, a certified kiteboard instructor and owner of local outfitter Kite Cozumel. Formerly an Olympic windsurfer, Raul in 1999 traded fame earned through international windsurfing competitions for the aerial thrills and transportability of kiteboarding, becoming one of the sport's earliest pioneers. Nearly a decade later, Raul is widely considered one of kiteboarding's most gifted teachers, and Susan and I have come to Cozumel to take lessons from him.

"Steady motion—steady power," explains Raul in his calm voice, with a boyish twinkle in his eyes.

My hands steer a bar that controls the enormous kite soaring high above me. The rectangular kite, and its control bar and lines, are all connected to a sturdy harness that I wear like an industrial-grade diaper. I lean back to counter the force of the kite and wind.

The day before, I had spent hours standing in the water making figure eights in the air with the kite, learning how to control the kite's motion, direction and power. Today I practice the move some more, striving to make it second nature. I am without a board at this stage; all I need is the wind, the kite and the turquoise sea.

Before long, I'm ready for "body dragging," an inelegant, though unexpectedly fun, intermediate step in the learning process. Raul tells me to "pull the kite hard and fast into the power zone"—a kiteboarding term for the area where the wind-pull is strongest. Then "off you'll go," he promises.

I pull hard on the control bar, and my

Opposite: The Caribbean Sea surrounding Cozumel is a great spot for kiteboarders.

Right: In Tulum, visitors can tour Maya ruins overlooking the Caribbean, and then enjoy the beach below.

kite dives, pulling me from my feet onto my stomach with a splash. I'm laughing my tail off as I speed along on my belly. After 50 yards, I return the kite to neutral—directly overhead—and march back up the shore for another run.

After Susan and I take turns being dragged for a while, Raul tells us, "It's time for the board." I take the first turn, wedging my feet into the board's padded straps and pulling my knees to my chest as the kite hovers above me. I begin the steady figure-eight motion to gather the wind, then pull hard. The speeding kite pulls me to my feet, and I'm up! For about six feet, anyway. Then down I go with a sloppy splash. Jubilant to have actually ridden on top of the water—if only for a moment—I remount the board to try again.

After three rather unimpressive rides, it's Susan's turn. Our skills blossom under Raul's guidance.

As the sun begins to

set, Raul grabs his gear for a short end-of-lesson demonstration. He hooks in, pops up and races off. As Susan and I wade back to shore, we stare in awe as Raul tears across the water on his board, launching aerial flips and spins with little apparent effort. *Someday*, I think.

After packing up the transport truck, we head back to Casa Viento, a cozy, family-run hotel on the north shore of the island, for some well-earned relaxation.

SEEN FROM SPACE, our planet is so dominated by water that some have said it should be called "Sea" rather than "Earth." Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula and its neighboring islands offer some of the best opportunities I've found to immerse myself in idyllic ocean waters.

The peninsula—a vast, flat limestone shelf—sticks out like a hitchhiker's thumb between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. The natural surroundings are





ProTec's Dario Hernandez swims through a tunnel while diving Palancar Reef near Cozumel.

perfect for water sports ranging from snorkeling to windsurfing to deep-sea fishing. The labyrinthine underwater cave systems near Tulum, about 80 miles south of Cancún, are so spectacular that they attracted film crews from IMAX for the making of *Journey Into Amazing Caves* (2001). Those who simply want to relax in the tropical sun have miles of soft white beaches to enjoy.

The warm, clear waters and coral reefs of nearby Cozumel have made the island one of the world's most popular dive spots. Cozumel is also an emerging destination for kiteboarding, due to its steady winds and appealing beaches.

In addition, throughout the region are ancient cities built by the Maya, whose innovations include a complex calendar system and advanced astronomy. Approximately 350,000 Maya still live on the peninsula, about half in small villages. While many Maya have moved to cities, such as Cancún, to find work, increasing numbers are finding ways to stay in their villages and bring tourism to them.

SUSAN AND I are so entranced with kiteboarding, we could easily spend a month honing our skills, but with only one day remaining on Cozumel, we choose a different water activity. A certified scuba diver, I plan a guided-diving trip through area outfitter ProTec Cozumel. Susan, who doesn't dive, rents a car to circle the island. She stops to snorkel in the calm reefs on the

leeward side and to play in the refreshing spray from blowholes on the windward side.

I meet Dario Hernandez, the barrel-chested divemaster and chief of operations for ProTec Cozumel, at a small marina. Dario is a Cozumel native who has been diving for more than 25 years.

As the boat leaves the marina, we prep our gear, suit up and arrive shortly at Palancar Reef, a mile offshore. The three-mile reef—which became famous after Jacques Cousteau touted its beauty in the 1950s—is full of colorful coral, rock formations and tunnels.

We drop into the clear turquoise water at a site called Palancar Caves and kick down to the reefs 70 feet below. The water is a comfortable 79 degrees. Dozens of species of vibrant coral await us, interspersed with purple and orange sponges and soft gorgonian sea fans. I watch a lone gray angelfish nibble at coral as a school of yellow snapper passes by. We weave in and out of deep buttresses and swim through tunnels, caverns and caves. After 45 minutes, we surface exhilarated, eager for our next dive.

Our small boat motors north to the submerged *Felipe Xicotancatl*, an admiral-class gunboat built in 1944 that was intentionally sunk in 2000 to create a reef and dive site. From the surface, I can see the dark silhouette of the 180-foot vessel resting on the sand 82 feet below.

Geared and ready, we follow the mooring line to the boat's deck. We glide over the bow, then kick toward the stern to inspect the sizable propellers. Schools of tiny, silvery fish huddle around the ship.

We turn on our flashlights and enter the

DETAILS

WHERE TO STAY

CASA VIENTO, The Country Club Estates, Cozumel; 52-987-869-8220; www.casaviento.net; private rooms from \$95 per night. Casa Viento is a family-run specialty hotel with beautiful rooms and a pool, two blocks from the beach.

DESEO, 5a Avenida and Calle 12, Playa del Carmen; 866-978-0891 (U.S.); www.hoteldeseo.com; from \$180 per night. This boutique hotel, located in the heart of the pedestrian zone, offers a lively lounge scene (be ready for late-night music).

AZULIK, Carretera Tulum-Ruinas, Km 5, Tulum; 888-898-9922 (U.S.); www.azulik.com; from \$255 per night. The 15 eco-friendly beachfront villas have no phones or electricity, and candles provide romantic lighting.

WHERE TO EAT

YAXCHE MAYA CUISINE, Calle 8 between avenidas 5a and 10, Playa del Carmen; 52-984-873-2502; www.mayacuisine.com. A beautifully appointed restaurant that serves amazing dishes inspired by Maya cooking traditions, as well as traditional entrees from the state of Yucatán.

ACTIVITIES

KITE COZUMEL, Casa Viento hotel, Cozumel; 52-987-103-6711; www.kitecozumel.com. Longtime kiteboarder Raul De Lille provides expert instruction.

PROTEC, with locations in Playa del Carmen, Cozumel and Baja California Sur; 52-984-803-1168; www.protecdiving.com. A specialty outfitter for small dive charters and advanced divers.

encrusted hull. Hallways, chambers, galleys and storage rooms interconnect like a maze, dimly lit by sunbeams from the surface. I kick through a narrow corridor, float up a stairwell and exit the hull to find a 3-foot barracuda hovering peacefully a few feet above the deck.

We spend most of an hour exploring the bridge, captain's quarters and passageways in the interior. Then we return to the dive

boat for a ride back to the marina.

AS WE BID COZUMEL a reluctant adieu, a short ferry ride carries us to bustling Playa del Carmen, about 40 miles south of Cancún. The town is an international melting pot with a distinctive Mexican flair, where exotic, open-air restaurants mix with chic boutique hotels and stylish nightclubs.

After checking in at Deseo, a hip, modern hotel and lounge, we enjoy a superb dinner at Yaxche Maya Cuisine, a restaurant renowned for its traditional regional entrees. Susan and I select two dishes from the dozens we want to try. One is *cochinita pibil*, shredded pork marinated in sour orange and *axiote*, a local spice blend, and baked in banana leaves. The other is *xamán ha*, locally caught fish stuffed with vegetables and wrapped in *chaya* (tree spinach) leaves, then poached in white wine and cream. Both are fantastic.

The next morning, Susan and I head south to the small, tranquil area of Tulum, our base for the remainder of the trip. We check in at Azulik, an eco-resort comprising 15 oceanfront villas with waterfront decks, without phones or electricity. Think Swiss Family Robinson, luxury-style. We drag ourselves away from our comfortable bungalow to explore some of the region's archaeological wonders at Tulum and Cobá.

THE RUINS OF TULUM stand on a cliff overlooking the Caribbean. The city was built as a sacred site and port for the larger city of Cobá, 26 miles to the northwest. When Spanish explorer Juan de Grijalva's expedition sailed past Tulum in 1518, the city was still in use. Tulum is thought to have been abandoned by the end of the 16th century.

As Susan and I walk among spectacular ruins, our guide explains how the ancient Maya incorporated their vast astronomical knowledge into the city's design. We find out that many of their structures were built to incorporate, or capitalize on, celestial events, such as sunrise during the summer solstice and sunset during the winter solstice.

As we wander the grounds, we are once again drawn to the sea. Two beaches flank the towering ruin of El Castillo (The

Castle). We choose one of them, and find it filled with sunbathers and families frolicking in the ocean. We take a dip to cool off from the tropical heat. Then we explore the rest of the grounds before heading to Cobá.

Until at least the 14th century, Cobá was a vast city-state covering nearly 30 square miles. Only a small portion has been restored. Stretches of jungle separate most of the ruins, so Susan and I rent bikes for a few dollars when we arrive.

We ride in the shade of the jungle canopy along a series of elevated stone-and-plaster roads called *sacbé*. Cobá has relatively few visitors, making it easy to reflect on the community that used to inhabit the site. The few buildings that have been reconstructed convey a sense of time: Weeds grow through cracks in the stone, and the jungle seems ready to take over.

As dusk approaches, we climb the 100-plus steps of the great pyramid Nohoch Mul. Rising nearly 140 feet, it is one of the tallest Maya structures on the Yucatán Peninsula. Our guide explains that since the limestone peninsula is flat, every forested hill we see in any direction is presumably a Maya ruin awaiting excavation.

That night, as the moon lights the sea, we relax in our private hot tub, the exterior of which is a hollowed-out tree trunk. Tomorrow brings one of the most anticipated activities of our trip: cenote (sink-hole) diving and snorkeling.

Because of the Yucatán Peninsula's porous karst landscape, rivers run underground instead of on the surface, creating a complex cave system. Cenotes are the access points to the magical underwater world that lies within the peninsula.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Susan and I meet Patrick Widmann, a lean, jovial divemaster from ProTec's Playa del Carmen location. We leave the main highway and drive into the jungle on a rugged road to a cenote called Dos Ojos (Two Eyes).

When our truck arrives at a small dirt lot, Susan is guided into a vine-covered sinkhole that resembles a small sunken coliseum overgrown with vegetation. On one end, a broad, shallow cave features stalactites hanging over a pool of clear

water in hues of blue and green. She puts on her snorkeling gear, turns on her flashlight and kicks into the freshwater pond that flows imperceptibly into the limestone shelf. Then she moves from the broad, sunlit opening into the shadowed darkness in the rear of the cave to explore the varied chambers and passageways within.

With dive gear strapped on, I walk down a flight of rocky steps to a smaller cave filled with emerald-tinted water. Patrick and I plunge into the still pool.

Beneath the surface, I can see dark tunnels and caves spreading out in every direction; stalactites and stalagmites turn the cavernous space into an organic cathedral. Sunlight through the trees creates dancing beams of light below the surface. I feel as if I've entered an interstellar portal, or stepped through Alice's looking glass into another world.

Armed with powerful underwater flashlights, we dive down into a channel that grows darker the farther we move away from the cave's entrance. Our lights illuminate cave systems formed many millennia ago. We swim through narrow tunnels into massive chambers, through ravines and channels, and along the bottom of a second pool—the other “eye” of Dos Ojos, where Susan is. I see snorkelers above, and wonder which one of them is Susan exploring this amazing formation.

After 45 minutes, Patrick and I return to our initial cave through a separate passageway, having completed a grand circle. We rise to the surface as if from a dream, moving from one reality to another; yet in this part of Mexico, reality is as remarkable as a dream. I make a mental note to book a month next time. ▲

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GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines serves Cancún daily. Book tickets at alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAAIR. For a complete Alaska Airlines Vacations package, go to the Web or call 800-468-2248.