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## Travel

## D E S T I N A T I O N

# Cozumel, Mexico

**A strong and growing local conservation ethic ensures the future beauty of this gem of Caribbean diving.**

B Y D A L E  
S A N D E R S

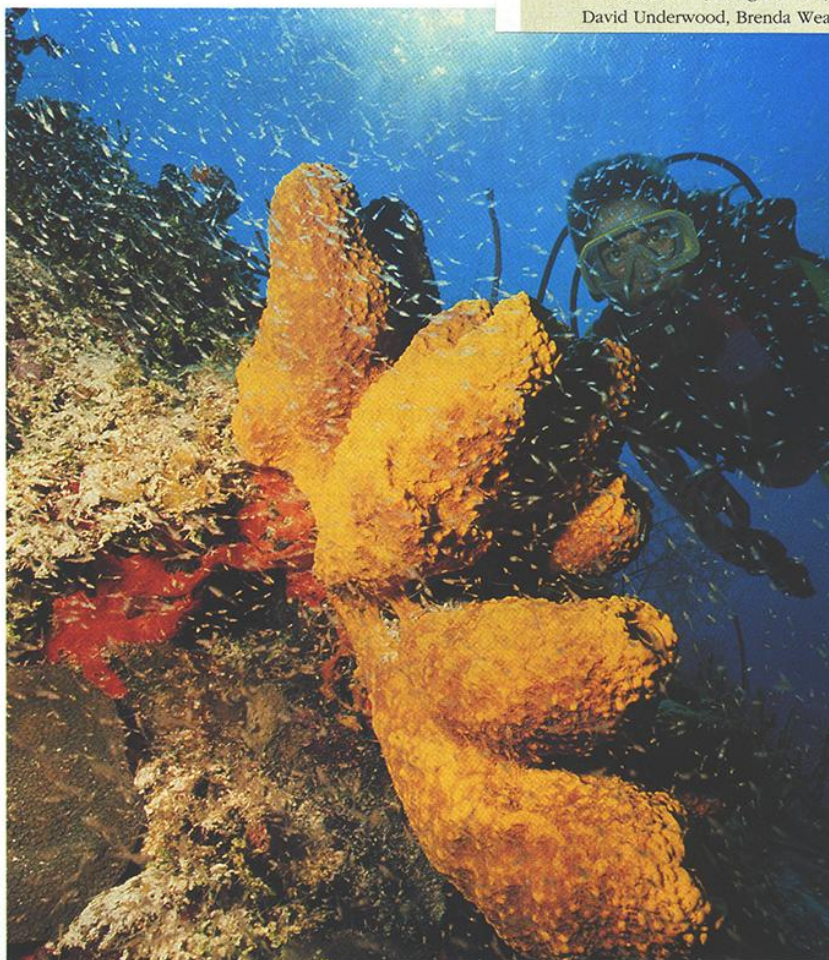
Seemingly in a world of its own, the island of Cozumel sits amid crystalline waters offshore of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula.

This charming pseudo-isolation can lull one into forgetting that the "the land of Coz" is actually a major tourist destination, with two to three ferries arriving per hour; 10 or more inbound flights per day; and up to a dozen cruise ships per week that frequent this island oasis for divers.

Like most other idyllic Caribbean destinations, Cozumel has its unique assets and problems. On the asset side, the island is blessed with one of the most prolific reef systems found anywhere in the world. Dramatic reefs like Palancar, Columbia, Santa Rosa and Paradise are world renowned, each for their own extraordinary profile and marine life.

Perhaps one of Cozumel's most famous dive sites is an ancient mountain of coral known as Palancar Reef. This mile-long system of interconnecting high-profile coral heads, some greater than 100 feet tall, are stippled with huge sponges and deep-water gorgonians.

Other dive sites along the Palancar system include Palancar Gardens, Horseshoe Reef, Palancar Caves, and Deep Palancar. Each section of this reef offers diverse diving from dramatic walls, to interconnecting cave systems or lush coral gardens.



Dramatic coral formations are common throughout Cozumel.

Just south of Palancar, the reef system curves eastward toward the southern tip of the island. It is here, on the reefs known as Columbia, that some of the most exciting diving is found off Cozumel. With a reputation for big fish and swift currents, this area is reputed to be a must for seasoned divers.

The deepest of the sites associated with Columbia is Punta Sur, followed by Columbia Deep and Devil's Cavern. A spectacular second dive on Columbia Shallows offers an inshore coral-studded reef system with a multitude of tropicals.

Without a doubt, the most action-packed dive is found along the Santa

Rosa reef. Here Swiss cheese-like limestone rock and monolithic coral heads are the backdrop to the real attraction — giant black groupers and huge green moray eels. Upon request, and a few pesos for suitable grouper hors d'oeuvres, dive masters will be glad to hand feed these underwater residents.

Adjacent to Santa Rosa, Paso El Cedro's schools of pork fish and glass-eye sweepers swim lethargically in the eddies created by the many undercuts found here.

## TROUBLE ON PARADISE

Over the years, one of the island's greatest assets has been Paradise Reef.