

One intrepid writer takes a walk on the wild — and sometimes mild — side of this striking strand.

It's debatable whether floating in these pristine waters restores the soul, but Cancún's beaches couldn't be more pleasing to the eye.

Cancún, naturally

BY JB BISSELL

If you glean nothing else from my story, remember this: the Caribbean water off the shore of Cancún really *does* look like all those postcards you've received from friends who've been there. It's turquoise and it's stunning. This is of particular importance because it's a not-so-subtle reminder of what truly makes this popular Mexican destination wonderful: the region's natural beauty.

Too often Cancún is discussed in terms of greens and fairways, restaurants and shopping centres, and bars and nightclubs. Yes, those places exist, and, for the most part, they live up to the hype. Big names such as Jack Nicklaus, Greg Norman and, of course, Robert Trent Jones Jr have designed championship-calibre courses here. Shopping and

dining run the gamut from street-corner kiosks to elegant, high-end experiences. As for the nightlife, it's legendary with the university-aged merrymaker set.

But that water ...

My favourite memory from our most recent trip to Cancún was a simple afternoon spent relaxing on the soft sand and frolicking in the gentle waves. We were on holiday with another couple, Ted and Heather, and had been reading and dozing for an hour or so since lunch. From her beach chair, my wife, Michelle, asked, "Is it time to cool off a little?"

"Sounds good", we answered before making our way into the surf. Nothing out of the ordinary happened — we played catch, chatted about the books we were reading and

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posed for a few silly photographs. At one point, Heather tried to explain how floating in the open water naturally retunes one's mind and body. Something about electromagnetic fields, currents and the moon's gravitational pull. I don't know. But we all tried it, floating for as long as we could, with our eyes closed, totally giving in to that turquoise sea.

I'm not sure if I returned, but I was definitely rejuvenated, and I can still close my eyes and remember that afternoon as if it were yesterday.

Still, unless you're into some pretty serious holiday meditation, electromagnetic flotation only goes so far. It's my favourite memory, yes, but it's certainly not the only worthwhile nature-based activity.

Park Central

Indeed, the area around Cancún is famous for its ecological theme parks, places where every level of explorer can experience Mother Nature in quasi-controlled environments. At Xcaret — located in the Riviera Maya, the stretch of coast just south of Cancún — visitors can observe a kaleidoscope of countless blue, yellow, green and red fish at the Coral Reef Aquarium without getting wet, or snorkel with nurse sharks in a lagoon setting. In all, Xcaret boasts some

40 attractions, including a whimsical Butterfly Pavilion, a sea turtle exhibit, spider monkey and jaguar refuges, a short jungle walk and much more.

Garrafon Natural Reef Park isn't as big, but what it lacks in size is definitely made up for in location. Situated on the island of Isla Mujeres, about a 25-minute boat ride from Cancún, Garrafon offers snorkelling, swimming and kayaking, as well as bicycling.

With a constant flow of taxis and tour buses along Kukulcán Boulevard — the main thoroughfare through the Hotel Zone — you'd probably never think to ride a bike anywhere near Cancún, but Garrafon's guided two-wheeled tours are the ideal way to survey the sights of Isla Mujeres, a decidedly more easy-going locale with barely a fraction of the motorised traffic. Pedal past spectacular vantage points, and you'll eventually get to Punta Sur, where 20-metre-high (60 feet) cliffs rise from the sea. In a destination with so many sandy beaches and so much lush foliage, the craggy rock faces seem wonderfully, beautifully out of place.

Aquanauts

Which is almost exactly how I describe scuba diving to the uninitiated. Breathing oxygen from a tank and

swimming with the aid of fins and goggles, we humans are out of place beneath the water's surface. And yet, it's such a magnificent experience.

Cancún's coast offers some splendid reef diving, and there's a cool wreck — an old C-58 minesweeper — a short trip out. But we decided to try something quite different.

The area's cenotes, inland sinkholes filled by underground, freshwater rivers, may not look like much when observing them from above — think a few trees, some big rocks and gravel — but once you plunge into the crisp and crystal-clear water they become otherworldly. There are a number of them around, and the local scuba shops offer guided outings for both divers and snorkellers. Other outfitters will set you up to abseil into the cenotes where you can then float on an inner tube. We went to the flooded cave system of Dos Ojos, about a 90-minute drive from Cancún's Hotel



Though it's technically not cave diving, navigating the narrow and twisting underwater caverns at Dos Ojos is an awe-inspiring experience.

extent of the scenery, but the stalactites, columns and other various speleothems are utterly fascinating. It was an experience like none I'd had before.

"How was it?" Heather wanted to know when we surfaced where she and Michelle were snorkelling.

"Eerie and peaceful", Ted said. "I felt like a real explorer", I added. It might sound a little cheesy, but it's an apt description. Aside from that white cord Klaus mentioned (which wasn't always visible, by the way), it seemed as though we could have been the first people to swim through some of the places we encountered, which, the more I think about it, really is both eerie and peaceful.

Ancient Wonders

Keeping with the explorer theme, be sure to reserve a day in your itinerary for Chichén Itzá. Yes, I understand that the Temple of Kukulcán, the massive ball court and other impressive ruins are man-made, and therefore may appear to go against my whole focus on the natural beauty of Cancún. But I think an exception can be made for anything that dates back to the seventh century or so.

The simple fact is that Chichén Itzá is the place for Mayan architecture. It's a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. Strolling the grounds is a never-ending source of amazement, from the surrounding cenote water system to the astronomy-inspired construction to the most famous attraction of all, the Temple of Kukulcán. This pyramid was built so that on each equinox, light and shadow create the illusion of a great serpent descending the steps.

Day-trips from Cancún are readily available. It's important to note, however, that they truly are *day*-trips. Chichén Itzá is just shy of 200 kilometres (125 miles) west of the Hotel Zone, and guided return-trip tours generally last about 12 hours. The morning drive is typically broken up with a stop



The Temple of Kukulcán and the Group of the Thousand Columns are just two of many wonders that await at Chichén Itzá.

Good to know. Supposedly, if one is being technical about the whole thing, Dos Ojos isn't truly considered cave diving because no matter where you are, even when navigating one of the underground streams that connects the multiple cenotes, you're never too far from a surface opening. Ted and I don't exactly agree with that assessment, since there were plenty of times when all we could see behind or in front of us were rock walls and ceilings.

And with no plant or animal life to speak of, rock formations are the



ABOVE: At Xcaret, one of Cancún's many eco-themed parks, guests can snorkel with sharks, be enthralled by a multitude of butterflies and marvel at thousands of brightly coloured fish, to name just a few offerings. LEFT: Punta Sur looms over the sea, a craggy presence in the midst of all that aquatic beauty.



at a refreshing cenote and lunch (you might even be treated to a dance performance while you eat).

The return trip is a great opportunity to doze off while trying to figure out why the Maya people would have so abruptly deserted their capital in the 1400s. Or, if you're like me, to write a few postcards to friends. Just be sure to tell them that while the water really is that wondrous shade of turquoise, both Cancún and Chichén Itzá are much more impressive in person. ■

fastFACTS

RESORT DIRECTORY: IntervalWorld.com or pages 195 through 197 and 201

CLIMATE: Average high temperatures hover around 30°C (86°F) through the autumn, and dip just a few degrees in the winter.

DON'T MISS: A dinner cruise. Possibilities range from pirate themed to romantic sailings around Nichupte Lagoon.

CURRENCY: Mexican peso

SALES TAX: The value-added tax in Cancún is 11%.

TIPPING: 10% to 15% is standard in restaurants, but check to see if it's automatically included in your bill; add a few pesos to your fare for taxi drivers.

INTERVAL TRAVEL: IntervalWorld.com

CAR HIRE: Not recommended. Taxis are plentiful and reasonable, and most tour operators will pick you up at the resort.

VISITOR INFORMATION: Cancun Convention & Visitors Bureau +52 998 881 2745 cancun.travel/en

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