



**Cozumel
Mexico
12-19th September 2004**

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Trip Report by Matt Worsley

The underwater photographs are courtesy of Wayne and Shirley Klatt, from Corpus Christi, TX, who were fellow divers staying at the dive shop and diving on the boat. I'm reproducing them here with permission but they are © W.A. Klatt (2004). (Wayne/Shirley: if you ever read this then thank you very much, for the diving, the photos, and the coffee whilst we waited for Ivan!)

Sunday 12th September

This report is definitely pushing the definition of a "Club Trip"; it consisting of only me, hijacking the end of a free work trip to the US. Let me off though, because Cozumel is such a beautiful diving location I figured it was worth the chance to let you know just why this place is so worth coming to.

I left New Orleans, LA early Sunday morning and got the short flight to Houston, TX, and, from there, the two and half hour hop across the Gulf of Mexico to [Cozumel](#). The Island is located just off the north-eastern coast of the Yucatán Peninsula in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo. It's about 30 miles long and 10 miles wide but is only a short ferry crossing away from the mainland (the ferry runs regularly from Cancún). Most of the island is untouched jungle - you know, the proper sort of jungle, with squawking parrots and vines and stuff (or so I'm told). The eastern side is essentially one long white beach with big Atlantic waves, whilst the western side contains the only town (San Miguel de Cozumel) and the majority of the hotels, dive centres and holiday homes.

I was staying and diving at [Roberta's Dive Eco-Cozumel](#) which is right next to the sea at Casa del Mar, about 5 minutes in a taxi south of the town centre. The little hotel is more or less brand new and has quite a few basic but very nice rooms, there's also a swimming pool and tabled area. Across the road is the dive shop and little quay where the boat departs from. The dive centre and hotel is very well-run and 2-tank boat dives go out most mornings and afternoons. There are some very good packages for diving+accommodation. A handy extra advantage is that shore dives are free - you can go up and pick up a cylinder whenever you fancy jumping in to have a look round the reef located just offshore.

I arrived around lunch time and after getting some very tasty tacos from the restaurant just next door I spent the afternoon sitting around in the hammock (every room has at least one and they're definitely recommended). I headed into the town later with one of the other guests for some dinner that night. The weather was beautiful... that is until a very large and very wet thunderstorm arrived soon after we'd finished eating... it also seemed to be getting a bit windy...

Monday 13th Septembe

The place was uncharacteristically hectic this morning as I dragged myself out of bed for some breakfast (included in the price). People were busily boarding windows and doors up! If they didn't have a suitable piece of plywood then pieces of wood, plastic or even internal doors were being hastily nailed into position. Deckchairs and tables were being moved or tied-down; lights and signs being taken down; sunbeds piled up in the corner; and, the sea was rather devoid of boats - not suprising really because it looked like the English Channel on a bad day, not the tropical mirror-surface it had been the day before.

The Mexican Government had issued a hurricane warning for hurricane Ivan, slowly heading in our direction having completely ignored all predictions to turn and head north, and having already caused serious damage and loss of life to several of its earlier targets. The hurricane was exceptionally powerful with a very low pressure of only 910 millibars and rated as a category 5 storm. Hmmm. I'd never been scared of the weather before. Until now. But with the airport closed and all harbours shut-down there weren't a lot of options apart from optimism and black coffee.

After the windows had been boarded we spent the rest of the morning gaffer-taping any remaining panes and moving anything that could get blown away. Extra water and candles were handed about and the hotel guests were moved into the most protected rooms. So that was that, simply a case of fingers crossed and waiting for Ivan to arrive, which was going to be sometime that evening/night.

It got windy. It got very windy, but luckily Ivan turned north and by some miracle the "wings" of the hurricane that actually got to Cozumel were considerably weaker than expected. By 9pm the wind was a very strong gale, blowing very steadily from the west - directly off the sea onto

us. The sea was pretty grim, with some humongous waves crashing ashore. I was watching from on top of a road-bridge, maybe 40 feet above sea level but was still getting fairly wet - and periodically drenched - from the breakers hitting the sea-wall below. The road, whilst technically closed to non-essential travel, was packed with locals who'd come to witness the fury.

Tuesday 14th Septmeber

Well we'd survived. Ivan had moved northerly enough to ensure that the island never saw any hurricane-force winds and everything seemed to have remained unbroken. The sea still looked like something you'd see in a washing machine but that was expected to settle down over the course of the day. We'd also cunningly avoided most of the rain too, so there was no flooding either.

Everyone spent the day getting back to normal - returning everything to its proper order and unboarded/unbathing/untying. Apart from that it was an incredibly dull day - lazying around reading and sunbathing (yep it was already back into the 30's and clear skies). Reports were abound of yet another hurricane out in the eastern Caribbean but that aside everything was looking hopeful for a day of some of that planned diving tomorrow.

Wednesday 15th September

Calm sea, beautiful sunshine and low winds equals fantastic day and finally some diving. After the customary breakfast of fresh fruit, cereal, toast and coffee we sorted out gear and by 9.40 were speeding past the cruise ships southwards towards the reefs. The reefs run along the western and south-western shores and start from the moment you dip your toes in the sea, out to a mile or so from the coast. This morning we were heading out to **El Paso del Cedral Reef (Cedar Pass)**, so-named for the adjacent grove of cedar trees on the shore. It's only a short ride on the high-powered little boats but with kit ready-assembled and suits on we could just sit and enjoy the ride.

I'll start with the sea: you roll off the boat in your shorty automatically braced for the shock of the freezing water (it's instinct for a UK diver!), and then you go splash, and realise it's just a big bath! A big, warm, blue bath. Next thing is to pull your kidney dump and go down - Cozumel might be picturesque but divers on the surface are liable to get pulverised at any moment. (A number of fatal accidents have happened here so don't hang around anywhere above 3m, and make sure you ascend on or close to a DSMB.) You then look down, and provided you don't suffer from vertigo, get the next incredible view; white sand, sculpted by the current, intersperced with enormous chunks of coral. If you're lucky there'll already be eagle rays soaring around beneath you, or maybe a barracuda or two cruising around. If you're out on one of the deeper reef walls the next trick you can try is a dive-bombing descent down to 30m and see just how happy you can make yourself ;-)

The beauty of small, fast boats is that you avoid the grief of two-dozen-tourist-diver mobs. That said today we'd actually been on a slightly larger boat than normal and were a group of seven plus the guide Martin. The coral is amazing - from enormous fans to colourful anenomes. It's surrounded by every conceivable colour of fish - from shoals of yellow and blue snappers to parrotfish, surgeonfish, huge groupers, barracuda, not to mention the morays, starfish, lobster and tiny hermit crabs. The pinnacles themselves are very impressive, with the added bonus of a multitude of short-to-moderate swim-throughs. Now the beauty of tropical is diving is (a) you don't get cold and (b) you don't seem to need oxygen any more, the result being you get 60-70 minute dives and still climbing out with 50-100 bar!



Fish (excuse my ignorance), and a lobster.

I climbed back onboard the boat. The best way to do this is to keep kit on; if you de-kit in the water and pass it up to the boat, then by the time you get onboard you'll find the Mexican boat-driver has already managed to tie a knot in the long hose and is just about to replace the wet dust cap to the first stage - if you're really unlucky he'll have undone and lost the wing-nuts. It being a largish boat today we stayed on board out on the reef. Surface intervals are normally only an hour and consist of homemade (and very tasty) cake plus bottled drinks or water.

Second dive was **Tormentos Reef** which is a long narrow reef consisting of tall coral heads and rock outcrops with white sand stretching out to either side. The reef is aligned with the south-to-north prevailing current and the dive is a good drift. In fact, most dives in Cozumel are

relatively quick drifts, with currents in which you are often unable to do more than stay stationary if you swim against them. The reef was a busy place, with some big shoals of snappers and wrasse. There were a couple of huge lobsters sat under a rock. I think lobsters must be fairly rare here because the guides always seem to get very excited about them whereas I was a bit more like, "erm.. it's a lobster... who cares?" The next creature was way more interesting: a 2m nurse shark gliding along the side of the reef. Unfortunately it was heading up-current and was still a good 15m away so didn't get too good a look, but still, it was impressive.



A nurse shark swimming upcurrent on the deeper edge of the reef.

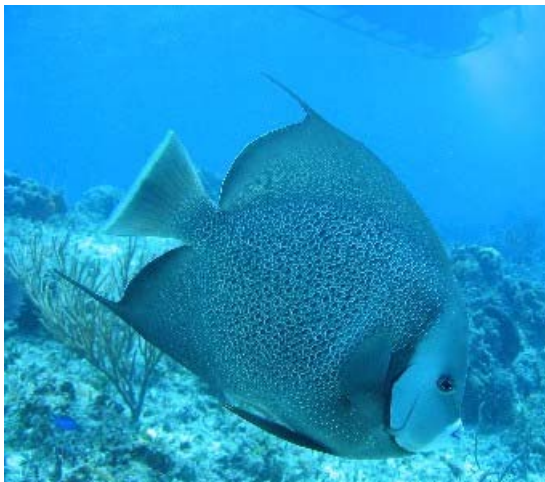
Today was Mexican Independence Day and there was a massive celebration at the Municipal Plaza in the town. The place was packed full of food stalls selling tacos and tortillas etc - the smell was too much to resist. They also had a big stage with true Mexican-style dancing entertainment. Apparently there were some fireworks later on, though I'll never know after falling asleep in the hammock at 10'o'clock!

Thursday 16th September

First reef today was one of my favourites, **Colombia Pinnacles**, consisting of vertical coral towers that start at about 20m and just disappear down into the abyss. Each tower is covered in life, with huge gorgonians (fans) with a wide variety of fish in crevices.

This reef, more than the others, is really 3-dimensional - you spend as much time looking up and beneath you as you do forwards. The bottoms of the coral towers have many small-to-medium-sized swim-throughs. The darkness of some of the tunnels is home to squirrelfish and glass sweepers, along with the odd barracuda. The current today was unusually weak - when I've before on Colombia the drift was really quite strong, and there can be some powerful upwards and downwards eddies as the current wraps around the pinnacles.

After we'd dropped down to 30m and toured the swim-throughs, we spent the next hour working through the pinnacles, ascending slowly as we did so. The fish are more colourful at shallower depths (the tops of the pinnacles are around 20m), with plenty of parrotfish, snappers, barracuda, butterfly fish and wrasse. The thing I'll remember most (after the scenery) are the beautiful pairs of angelfish; Emperor (blue and yellow), grey (many shades with flecks of black) and French angelfish (black/dark grey with yellow flecks).



A beautiful grey angelfish and, on the right, a beautiful French angelfish (plus not-quite-as-beautiful diver in the background :-)

The dive guide Juan sent a blob, as usual, towards the end of the dive and divers make their own ascents and any necessary safety stops. Buddy-to-buddy ascents are (slightly worryingly) rare to see, but maybe it isn't so surprising given the incredible visibility. The warm water and clarity are certainly deceptive: it's easy not to appreciate the depth nor the fact that divers can quickly get too far apart. When diving in Cozumel you also need to be very aware of boats. This is more of a problem on shore dives where the boat-drivers are less likely to be diver-aware as they career into the harbours. I'd strongly recommend you take a DSMB, so that you can guarantee an ascent beneath a

surface marker. Do sensible deco at 6m but then don't spend too long reaching the surface - keep it safe but your priority is not to hang around and become a statistic.

Our afternoon dive was at **Punta Tunich**, an impressive backbone of reef interspersed with large coral plateaux. The current was steady and really quite strong, easily a couple of knots in the gullies. The fish were huge on this dive, and as well as the angelfish, parrots and wrasse there were some humongously-sized groupers (don't know what kind I'm afraid but they were bigger than me!). Close into the reef and in the narrow grooves were squirrelfish and damselfish. Moray eels (especially green morays) are very common here and I saw several on this dive. One eel in particular was huge, with its head out of one hole and a tail out of another. We know for sure this was the same moray when Juan tugged at the tail...!

Max depth was only 20m but unfortunately the reef doesn't go much shallower than 15m which can be very frustrating when you need to head shallower (the problem of nice long Caribbean dives is that your computer starts totting up the deco quite rapidly on the afternoon dives). Deployed a blob (the dive guide wanted to see a reel in action having never used one before - his DSMB consisted of a length of line which he wound around his slate), and did all the necessary stops looking down onto the reef, drifting amongst the jacks and barracuda.

I whittled away the afternoon reading a book and visiting the small internet cafe just up the road. I'd been quite keen to do a night dive on the small reef next to the dive shop and Wayne and Shirley (fellow divers at the centre) said they'd be up for one too. Air cylinders for shore dives are free from the shop so we picked up what we needed earlier that afternoon before coming back late afternoon to kit up. The site is generally referred to as **Airplane Flats** because of the wreck of a sea-plane that lies 50m or so offshore (just short of the international cruise-ship piers). We didn't get far enough on the dive to visit the plane but to be honest it isn't that impressive (think Gildenburgh albeit warmer and clearer).

We entered at dusk which was a great idea - the daytime-nocturnal changeover in the appearance of the reef was amazing to watch. As the water slowly went from blue-to-purple-to-grey-to-black, you could see the numbers of brightly coloured wrasse and damsels thinning before your eyes. You can pick out shapes darting in the distance but by the time you've swung a torch beam they've gone. Shining a light into a gap in the rocks will reveal all kinds of life; starfish, urchins, sea slugs, cucumbers, dancers and feeding anemones, as well as nesting parrotfish and other daytime fish hiding in the shadows.

We headed out over the rocks and white sand, stopping at the coral towers en-route. Stumbled over a moderately-sized octopus (it's body was dinner-plate sized). At first it was a dark brown colour before shimmering into a bright green-tourquoise. That was before it noticed me smiling at it... whereupon it blushed bright orange and shrunk into the rocks! Charming.



The octopus on the night dive. The green-tourquoise colour was far more vivid than this flash-lit photo suggests!

I spent a fair amount of the dive with no light on. There's something amazingly eerie about just swimming through the darkness, illuminated only by shafts of light from the moored boats and the starlight (max depth was only 9m). After your eyes have adjusted you can pick out intense pulses of blue bioluminescence all around you, as if the whole bottom is speckled with LEDs (not just your ordinary LEDs either - these would need to be the expensive kind!) Swish your hand through the water and it shimmers blue as you disturb the plankton and stimulate more bioluminescence. All quite surreal. If you get bored you can turn the light back on, at which point you can't see where any of the blue pulses were coming from (the creatures themselves are tiny and translucent). What you do notice, however, are all the nocturnal fish and shrimps around you (currently fleeing for their lives since you turned the lights back on!) It's wonderful; if you do ever visit here, make sure you do a night dive.

Friday 17th September

First dive today was out at **Palancar**, the most famous site in Cozumel. It's one of the most southernmost reefs although it still only takes 15 minutes or so in the high-speed boats. It's fairly deep (the wall dive depths are listed as "unlimited") with towering buttresses of coral and expanses of current-sculpted white sand. The omens for this dive looked good when we spotted a turtle within the first few minutes of our descent. Palancar is an enormous reef and we were only diving on one part of it - the outer rocks of the so-called Horseshoe I think, but I'm not sure.

There were shoals of large barracuda but it was the turtles which I'll never forget from this dive. They just look so chilled - I'm tempted to insert a link to *Finding Nemo* here, but I'll refrain - as they navigate around the pinnacles. Wayne got some fantastic turtle photos on this dive, one of which is shown below.



Hey dude - one of the Hawksbill turtles - he's not wearing his sunnies today though.

We pulled up at a nearby jetty and sat at the edge the jungle for our surface interval, eating cake and drinking pop. After an hour we headed out again on the 5 minute ride to **Yocab Reef**. We'd be on Yocab initially but drifting north into **Tormentos** for the second half of the dive.

The dive is shallow - most of the reef is easily seen from 15m or so. The strong current and strong sunshine make for some very bright corals, both hard and soft, and that prompts vast shoals of smaller fish. If I knew more about fish I'd be able to have logged more details than their colour or vague species, but trust me, there were lots. (*Fitz, Ruth, Ellie - if you ever read this then this dive was a many many stars dive on the fishy front.*) There were also lots of "monkey-puzzle corals" too; well that's what I logged them as, not sure what they're called properly.

Irritatingly my computer was getting quite tetchy, even on 36% (nitrox is very reasonably priced and proves very useful given the dive times/depths), so the last twenty minutes or so were spent hovering above the upper parts of the reef to try and avoid running up too many stops. Actually, being above the visual assault can be very cool, especially when there are turtles and eagle rays to look at!

I headed into the town that evening for a very nice meal of fresh grouper, enhanced by a 2-for-1 offer on Sol :-). The sunset was spectacular - hard to do it justice with a camera but my attempt is below anyway. I got a taxi back later that evening, driven by one of the only two female taxi drivers on the entire island (and believe me there're a lot of taxis). Unbelievably, my (appalling) Spanish was somehow good enough for her to assume that I was Mexican (so she explained later). That ended several seconds later, after she'd launched into a full-scale conversation, to which I responded with a "what?" and very puzzled look. For the second half of the journey I became a target for her English practice (I just nodded lots). All very strange.



Sunset (as if you couldn't tell). Apologies for the slight blurriness, I promise it wasn't lager-induced. I also promise that I've done nothing to enhance the colours - it was beautiful!

Saturday 18th September

I hadn't planned on diving today, given I was flying on Sunday and because I'd asked for a 5-day package; however, since I'd missed out on the first 2 days, and since I'd still be able to (just) manage a 24 hr window prior to departing; I decided I just couldn't resist. Unfortunately, no-one else from the dive centre was getting wet so I ended up on a dive boat operated by another company.

We headed out to **Colombia Deep** for an excellent dive amongst the coral pinnacles. The fish and scenery were as impressive as ever, with some particularly beautiful angelfish and butterfly fish. Also diving from the boat were a couple of just-qualified divers from one of the resorts

further down the coast. They were pretty good since they'd not done many dives but I managed to get more than one bruise in the side of my head, including a nicely flooded mask on the entry to a small swim-through at 30m!

Compared to my first visit to Cozumel (which was last December) we hadn't seen many rays all week which made for a nice surprise when it suddenly darkened and we looked up to the underside of a huge (Eagle?) ray soaring high above the pinnacles. Shame we weren't a bit shallower to get a better look, but it was impressive all the same. The dive guide was of the "poke it" school of tropical diving, which unfortunately meant most things were fleeing in terror before us. One day I'm hoping something might poke/bite/kick him back!

My last dive of the week was on **Dehlila Reef**, which, like most of the second dives is a backbone of coral outcrops. The drift was quite light which meant it was far less work to go upstream and explore the crevices and overhangs. A good thing too, because the reef was absolutely swarming with fish, more so than on any dive that week. Everywhere I looked were snappers, parrotfish, surgeonfish, angelfish, damselfish, wrasse, barracuda, huge groupers, and the list could go on.

I think god was smiling on us for this final dive of the week: it didn't take long before we had a close encounter with a very friendly turtle, plus another one towards the end. Also got a close look at a 2m long nurse shark prowling around the deeper edge of the reef. Very cool. It was a shame to leave as I started ascending up to 12m for a set of careful stops, but it was difficult to feel sad to be leaving after having such a great dive.

Went out for something to eat with one of the staff from the dive centre who took me to a local restaurant. I thought restaurant prices had been very reasonable (can easily have a good meal and drink for 10-15 USD even in the most expensive places), until I saw these; we had a gorgeous meal of soup and then fresh fish and rice for 5 dollars! Will definitely be eating here if (when) I come back to Cozumel.



Me, myself and a f**ing big barracuda (which, for all I know, could well be called Irene).

Sunday 19th September

Got up and said my goodbyes. Hopefully these will be temporary; apart from getting there, Cozumel is great value and remains a truly unspoilt treasure - I hope a true CUUEG trip can be made here before the place turns into the commercial nightmare like that which is the Red Sea. I got a short taxi ride to the airport and indulged in some last-minute shopping - some very hot, luminous green, chilli sauce (*let me know if it meets those stringent HotSauce™ corrosion levels John*) - more booze was tempting but given I was already smuggling twice the legal limit I decided to call it a day!

The flight back to Houston was unevenful, as was the wait in Houston airport for the overnight flight back to Blighty, apart from the ever-so-slightly worrying sight of watching a Continental Airlines flight captain looking at some kind of aeroplane schematics on his laptop, and have an involved discussion with his co-pilot. The night flight back to Gatwick was quite quiet but trying to get to sleep was still difficult, especially after watching the (tragically bad) Van Helsing - my suggestions to Continental are to; (a) install hammocks, (b) make wine free, and (c) get some better movies!

Moral of the Tale: visit Cozumel. I defy anyone not to enjoy diving here. Even if you somehow hate fish, sharks, turtles, rays, corals, 50m visibility, caves, swim-throughs and 29°C temperatures; you'll still like the sunshine (not to mention the very tasty nachos you get as a starter with every meal!).

Supplementary moral: bring a poncho (Sods' Law plus Caribbean depressions can make for a very windy combination); and don't watch the Weather Channel - it can be depressing, scary and often wrong!

