

Travel and Adventure: A serene getaway to the 'Island of Women'

by Lesley Sauls

ISLA MUJERES, Mexico - Nothing is more appealing on a short, cold winter day than the idea of a vacation to somewhere sunny and warm. My friends and I had decided on Cancun until we discovered a nearby tropical gem, FIT FOR A FEAST - Isla Mujeres boasts a public market where freshly squeezed orange, tangerine and grapefruit juices are sold along with vegetables, meats and tortillas. CNS Photo by Lesley Sauls. TURTLE TOWN - Children love La Tortugranja, the turtle farm where they can feed endangered green turtles and white loggerhead turtles that have been rescued, hatched and raised to be released into the ocean. CNS Photo by Lesley Sauls. ISLAND SOUNDS - Musicians at Cockteleria Mininos complement a Mexican seaside lunch on Isla Mujeres. CNS Photo by Lesley Sauls. LOCAL LEGEND - The 19th century pirate Fermin Mundaca pledged his elaborate home and gardens on Isla Mujeres to unsuccessfully win the love of a local teenager, La Triguena. CNS Photo by Lesley Sauls. LAID TO REST - Lovesick pirate Fermin Mundaca's grave is nestled among others that brightly celebrate the lives of the people whose remains are placed in the Isla Mujeres cemetery. CNS Photo by Lesley Sauls. IN HONOR OF IXCHEL - In hopes of a healthy pregnancy, Mayan women came to Isla Mujeres to honor the goddess Ixchel hundreds of years ago. CNS Photo by Lesley Sauls. SHOPPING SCENE - Colorful shops line cobblestone streets on Isla Mujeres, and smiling shopkeepers offer any trinket, souvenir or personal necessity. CNS Photo by Wayne Sauls. BEACH BAR - Refreshments served from a beach-side palapa make the tropical experience complete on Isla Mujeres. CNS Photo by Lesley Sauls. Isla Mujeres. While Cancun has been providing beauty, rest and opulence for almost 50 years, the "Island of Women," three miles off its coast, has been the real draw for centuries.

We found a base for our explorations with a woman who rents her island residence to weary travelers in search of a comfortable ocean-side setting for a tropical vacation. Aptly named Xanadu after the mythical garden of Kubla Kahn, the property is peaceful and serene. Swinging on a hammock under a rooftop palapa with the sound of the surf crashing in the distance was exactly what we had in mind when we left the snow and ice behind us.

Evenings, as I stood barefoot in the kitchen making tacos with shells still warm from a tortillaria, fresh sea breezes blew gently into the dining, living and bedrooms. Pico de gallo made with vegetables and cilantro from a neighborhood market and flickering candlelight turned our homemade Mexican feasts into celebrations of island colors, flavors, sounds and smells.

When it came time to discover Isla Mujeres, we found the locals warm and inviting. In search of limes for our first island dinner, we unsuccessfully poked into several vividly painted shops. Finally, a store owner listened patiently as I explained our problem in my meager Spanish. She called over her shoulder to her husband, and he brought five limes to sell from their own kitchen.

In the town square, families gathered to enjoy a pop-jet fountain and watch children playing chase and tossing balls to each other. Vendors offered tacos, drinks and warm pastries from pushcarts. Narrow cobblestone streets were lined with shops that offered jewelry, souvenirs and necessities. Cigars were sold alongside dresses, bracelets and colorful pottery, and shop owners were eager to help us find exactly what we wanted to bring home as a memory of the island.

Tucked deep in the corner of town was a public market. Four little sidewalk restaurants made meals with fresh vegetables and the combination of spices that make Mexican food unique and savory. Other shops sold T-shirts, dresses and wood furniture, but the real prize at this market was tucked quietly behind the tables and trinkets. Through iron gates we found a dark building that opened into bright stalls of grocers and butchers where the warm scent of steaming, fresh tortillas wafted through the air. There we met Rafael, who became our friend as we visited him frequently for fresh orange, tangerine or grapefruit juice that he squeezed daily and sold cheaply by the liter.

Isla Mujeres is 4.5 miles long, and to explore the farther reaches, it is necessary to rent a golf cart. A set of wheels allowed us to visit an aquarium where sea turtles are hatched and raised in incrementally larger tanks until they are large enough to be released back into the ocean. Children tossed pellets of food to hungry white and green turtles of varying sizes, and signs around the property explained the threats and possibilities for the endangered species.

Just down the road from the turtle farm is a legendary hacienda called Vista Alegre that was built in the mid-1800s. The story says that a pirate named Fermin Mundaca came to the island and began building an estate that eventually covered almost half of Isla Mujeres with elaborate gardens, wells, orchards and livestock. Eventually Mundaca fell in love with a local teenager known as La Triguena (the brunette) and

pledged his home and property to woo her affection, but without success. Now open for public tours, the gardens are home to monkeys, snakes, iguanas and other small animals for tourists to enjoy.

Back in town the tale continues with a visit to Mundaca's grave. La Triguena, it is said, married a local boy, and Mundaca soon died of a broken heart. The pirate's above-ground tomb is marked with bitter words of lost love that he carved along with a skull and crossbones before his death: "As you are, I was. As I am, you will be." The burial place is tucked among dozens of brightly decorated graves that honor and celebrate the people entombed within. Colorful flowers, photographs and candles drew me in, and I spent an hour absorbing the physical and emotional warmth of love displayed there.

On the other end of the island, life had been celebrated in another way centuries before Mundaca came to Isla. More than 500 years ago, the Mayans honored Ixchel, the goddess of the moon, childbirth and medicine. The southern tip of Isla Mujeres is also the easternmost point of Mexico. On this promontory a Mayan ruin stands in proud honor of Ixchel, and the name of the island comes from the idols and statues of the goddess that Spanish explorer Fernando de Cordoba found on the island in 1514. He discerned that women came to the island to honor this powerful "Lady Rainbow" when they desired healthy pregnancies.

Now people come to the island to enjoy the white sand beaches, brilliant blue water, myriad dining establishments and a relaxing pace of life. Just a short ferry ride away is the bustling city of Cancun, where fine dining, spa treatments and activities abound. It was fun to look across the bay at the glamorous and energetic young city, but I had found my bliss in a comfortable chair on an ancient beach where I read my book in peace, sipped Rafael's fresh tangerine juice and listened to the sounds of tropical music drifting over the rhythm of the dazzling teal waves.

IF YOU GO

Transportation: Taxi from Cancun International airport to Puerto Juarez, about \$42. UltraMar ferry from Puerto Juarez leaves every 30 minutes and costs about \$7 round trip.

Golf carts are the safest form of independent transportation and rent for about \$60 for a 24-hour period. Bike rentals are about \$10 per day, moped rentals about \$40 per day. Taxis are another inexpensive option.

Accommodations: Visit www.islabeckons.com, www.lostoasis.net or www.vrbo.com to find private homes available for rent. Prices vary by season. Expect to spend at least \$200 a night for a two-bedroom oceanfront home.

Hotel rooms can be found from \$25 to \$250 per night on the island. Visit www.isla-mujeres.net. In choosing your location, keep in mind that because of recent hurricanes, the northwest corner of the island now has the best beach in town.

What to do: Captain Tony is well known on the island for his snorkel tours to El Farolito reef for less than \$20 per person. Visit www.isla-mujeres.net/capttony/home.htm.

Many scuba centers on Isla Mujeres cater to SSI, PADI and NAUI divers. Bring your certification card along, and only dive with a company that promises to reference your experience level. Dives cost roughly \$60 per two-tank dive. Visit www.diveislamujeres.com and www.isla-mujeres.net/cruisedivers/cruisehome.htm.

Varying packages allow for touching, snorkeling among and being towed by dolphins. The encounters cost up to \$100. Visit www.dolphindiscovery.com.

On the southwestern shore of Isla Mujeres, Garrafon Park offers an all-inclusive day of snacks and drinks with water toys, snorkeling reefs and interesting caves to explore for \$50 a day. For an additional \$5, snap into a zip line and whiz across the waves.

Helpful hint: Stop in to Digame phone service on the island for an extremely informative and user-friendly map of Isla Mujeres for \$8 or order one online before you travel at www.cancunstore.com.

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