

Mammal watching on Cozumel Vladimir Dinets, July 2012

Cozumel is a large flat island off the eastern coast of Yucatan. Most visitors to the island are either cruise ship passengers or scuba divers (although we found scuba diving to be totally disappointing there).

Despite being very close to the mainland, Cozumel has a distinctive fauna which includes an endemic harvest mouse and a few highly distinctive subspecies of larger mammals, often considered full species. Unfortunately, mammals are generally rare on the island, probably as a result of boa constrictor introduction by Hollywood filmmakers.

The island can be accessed by ferry from Playa del Carmen (passengers only) or from Punta Venado a few km south (cars). Watch for coatis and Yucatan squirrels around Punta Venado ferry terminal. Bottlenose dolphins are often seen during the crossing, and sometimes from the island's beaches. One you get to the island, ask for Big Yellow Beach Map in one of the cheaper hotels; it is the best map of island roads available.

The western coast of the island is mostly developed, but the rest is almost entirely covered with semi-dry secondary jungle, swamps and mangroves. There are few tall trees left after devastating hurricanes of the last 30 years, and the woods are pretty dense.

A road goes around the island, except for the northern part. Actually, in many places it is two roads going parallel within 5-50 m of each other: the new one (running more inland) and the old one (almost unused and better for wildlife viewing). Near the S tip of the island, the roads pass by the entrance to Punta Sur Eco-Park (Km 29). The park is said to have a few raccoons and coatis, but the entry is expensive, and the vegetation is the same as outside the park. 1-2 km west of the park entrance, the old road passes by a huge seiba, the largest remaining tree on Cozumel. This spot is the best for Cozumel harvest mouse, and also good for birdwatching (i. e. for Cozumel vireo). The stretch of the roads along the E coast is closed at night, which is unfortunate because it passes by sea turtle nesting beaches which should be good for raccoons and coatis. At Km 40, there is a turnoff for the island's garbage dump (Spanish needed to arrange entry). The dump is where I saw a coati; it should also be the best place for the island's undescribed race of gray fox (if it's not yet extinct), but arranging nighttime access might be tricky.

Another road goes from San Miguel, the island's only city, along the NW coast, past the sewage treatment plant, and ends at the pier from which boat trips to Isla Pasion, a small offshore islet, leave. That road is the best place to look for the island's famous dwarf raccoons at night (bring weapon-grade insect repellent!), although theoretically they can be encountered almost anywhere on the island. It is also good for the island subspecies of white-footed mouse. Isla Pasion is boa-free, and reportedly has tame coatis (trips can be arranged through local hotels).

There are a few small Maya ruins scattered around the island. The largest one, San Gervasio, is a tourist attraction (closed at night together with the access road). It has a small colony of Bonda mastiff bats in one of the temples. San Miguel, and particularly Playa del Carmen, have black mastiff bats flying around at night.