



Animal House

What happens when scuba-diving parents return to Cozumel, Mexico, with kids in tow? You get six great animal encounters of another kind

IT'S LIKE A REAWAKENING, that stage when your offspring are finally game enough to join you in all the things you loved before you had kids.

My daughters Audra, 7, and Sarah, 5, have picked up snorkelling and snow skiing, but they're still too young to scuba dive. And the wait is killing us.

That's precisely why, on a whim, we decided to take our girls to one of the world's top dive destinations, only without our

dive gear. OK, so you're likely thinking we're either (a) sadistic; (b) wildly optimistic about childcare options; or (c) hell-bent on finding family fun on land.

Actually, it's all of the above. It turns out, Cozumel's topside animals are just as exotic as what's lurking down below. From a child's perspective, Mexico's wildlife seems straight out of Lewis Carroll: animals with fin toes and iridescent feathery friends. Here's what we found on our week away.

Manatees

"They'll eat in any position," said the trainer as my kids fed romaine lettuce to the huggable herbivore floating on its back. We felt its bumpy skin, big belly button and fin toenails that looked just like an elephant's. You know those nail clippings you sweep up at home? They could be a whole lot worse.

Where: Dolphin Discovery in Chankanaab National Park (9.5 km south of downtown San Miguel on Carretera Costera Sur; dolphindiscovery.com/cozumel)

Iguanas

Our visit to the Mayan ruins started out entirely educational. Then, the camouflaged iguanas started slithering out of holes between the bricks.

After the first sighting, the *Where's Waldo?*-like search was on. Then Dad dared the girls to poke their finger in a hole. No takers on the prospect of going to a Mexican hospital.

Where: San Gervasio (15 km southeast of San Miguel, off of Carretera Transversal Highway; cozumelparks.com)

Coati

Is it a cat? A monkey? From the Celarain Lighthouse's viewing platform, we couldn't identify the creature that wandered out of the vegetation below. As stealthily as it appeared, it was gone. Audra was quick to call this critter (a type of raccoon, we discovered) a "ca-monkey," which leaves us wondering what secret names she's given the teachers at school.

Where: Near Celarain Lighthouse in Punta Sur Eco Park (27 km south of San Miguel on Carretera Costera Sur; cozumelparks.com)

Stingrays

Silky black capes of all sizes came swirling around Sarah's ankles, hungry for the herring clamped in her hand. It's so foreign and amusingly awkward to feed an animal whose mouth is hidden on its underside. Especially when its wingspan is bigger than yours.

Where: Stingray Beach (3 km south of San Miguel on Carretera Costera Sur; stingray-beach.com)

Crocodiles

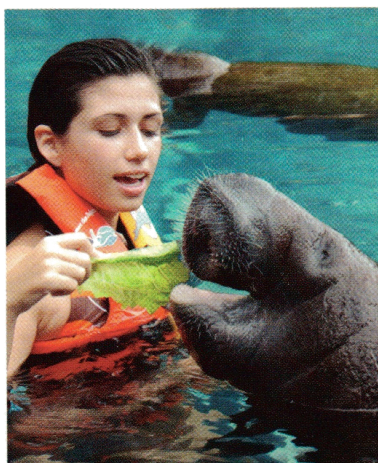
En route to the beach there was fighting in the backseat and impatience in the front. The crocodile diversion, a chance drive-by sighting, couldn't have been staged any better: a murky roadside lagoon, a spiny back and head just above water, and a stench foul enough to shut everyone's traps.

Where: Punta Sur Eco Park (27 km south of San Miguel on Carretera Costera Sur; cozumelparks.com)

Peacocks

We went for lunch at a quiet beach and got sidetracked by a peacock. The kids followed, no, chased the iridescent bird, whose only saving grace was the slowing white sand underfoot. We stopped in our tracks when we realized we were on the roosting grounds of 30 more peacocks. What a colourful revolt it could've been.

Where: Palancar Beach (19 km south of San Miguel on Carretera Costera Sur; buceopalancar.com)



Inside Skinny

Top family snorkelling spot: Chankanaab National Park Half your tribe can snorkel on the world's second-largest reef, while others can swim with manatees, explore replica ruins, eat under a palapa or play on the beach. (fpmc.gob.mx)

Massage on the beach: Carlos' n Charlie's Beach Club Side-by-side massage tables are thoughtfully placed within earshot of both the playground and the lapping waves. (carlosandcharlies.com)

Remedy for big-box store withdrawal: Mega Just south of the downtown cruise ship terminal, this behemoth store has absolutely anything you forget to pack. (Rafael E. Melgar, San Miguel, Mexico; comercialmexicana.com.mx)

Kid-friendly restaurant: Freedom in Paradise Raise a glass to Bob Marley in this all-reggae beach restaurant and bar while your kids can play on hammocks within sight of your table. Bonus: Huge cheese quesadillas. (bobmarleybar.com)

✦ GETTING THERE This month, WestJet flies to Cozumel twice weekly from Toronto.

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