

Scuba diving, post-Wilma

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COZUMEL, Mexico — Veni, vidi, vomiti — I came, I saw, I puked. Or perhaps it would be more politically correct to say I fed the fish.

Between the wind and the waves, I wasn't the only motion-sick scuba diver on the rocking boat. Fortunately, four months after Hurricane Wilma, there were still plenty of fish to feed in Cozumel Reef National Marine Park.

My husband, Mark, and I had been planning our Yucatan vacation for almost a year. When Wilma hit on Oct. 21, 2005, we worried there would be nothing left to see — underwater or topside. After all, Wilma's eye passed over Cozumel and then traveled through the marine park to Playa del Carmen with 140 mph winds before heading north to Cancun.

We needn't have worried. Cancun wasn't on our agenda, though scuba diving off Cozumel's shore was.

Hard-core scuba divers often stay on dive-focused Cozumel, Mexico's only Caribbean island, 19 miles southeast of Cancun. We, however, opted for a few days in Playa del Carmen, just west of the island. Tank-Ha Dive Center is the only Playa dive shop with direct boats to the marine park (others take the ferry to Cozumel first). The 45-minute boat ride took us near Cozumel's port area, where several cruise ships have already returned with tourists.

Venturing south along the Cozumel coast, the scene grew more devastated. Trees knocked down, windows gone, and very few tourists. It was clear that four months after Hurricane Wilma, the southern end of the island had not made much progress.

A year after Wilma, however, the recovery is almost complete. "The resorts and town are in great shape — kudos to the government and the resort owners for their efforts to get things back up and running as quickly as possible," said Jim Lyle, a frequent Cozumel visitor from Hermosa Beach, Calif. "In May, the trees were mostly bare of leaves. By August, the island was beginning to turn green again."

While motion sickness is an occasional nuisance when scuba diving, the rough Caribbean Sea meant I wasn't alone in my affliction. Several others who rarely get seasick joined me in tossing their breakfasts overboard. Note to self: no more eggs with spicy salsa before diving.

With frequent high winds and rough seas, the reefs are used to strong currents. Perhaps that's why there wasn't as much reef damage as one might expect from the hurricane,

which wrecked so many man-made structures. "The reefs have been subject to repeated blows from storms for thousands of years," said Lyle.

While Wilma cropped some sea fans and dislodged corals (especially in shallow waters), sea life has returned to normal, according to dive instructor and Akumal Dive Shop co-owner Pablo Diaz.

Our first dive was at the Palancar reef, in the waters near southwestern Cozumel. The ocean floor's wave action was strong, not surprising since dives in Cozumel are drift dives. The surf carries the divers with the current, while the boat follows along, meeting the divers when they pop up out of the water.

On the sea floor, though, we didn't notice any of the destruction of areas above. At the Palancar Caves, we dove down 80 feet, seeing turtles, schools of fish and a bat ray. We swam through small tunnels and gazed at colorful corals and sponges that survived the storm.

A veteran, though, would notice more during the year's recovery. Lyle, who has more than 500 Cozumel dives under his weight belt, said that the deeper reefs, including Palancar, lost a few large sponges on the reef wall, but were less affected by the storm than shallower areas to the north.

In the north, "a lot of sand was deposited on the sponges and coral, like powdered sugar on a doughnut," he said. "There's noticeable damage to corky fingers and other vertical growth."

While the currents have now dusted the sand off the sponges and corals, the hurricane's sand redistribution had an advantage: "the exposure of some wonderful swim-throughs and tunnels that now pierce the coral walls and buttresses," he said.

Fish life has even changed for the better. "We did find some newcomers to the island," Lyle said, including banded jawfish, sailfin blennies and nudibranchs, or sea slugs, which he hadn't seen before.

It's not just the fish appearing. "What you did hear about was the immediate rejuvenation of the barrel sponges in a time that for us seems off season," said David Tomlinson, owner of Abyss Dive Centers in Tulum and Playa del Carmen.

Akumal and Tulum's reefs, about 80 miles south of Cancun, were relatively unscathed. "There were little pockets of what I call reef garbage in 1 percent of the dive sites," said Tomlinson, explaining that reef garbage is broken coral that collects in a reef pocket due to minimal surge activity. "This happens with a hurricane or without — it's the natural evolution of the waves and currents," he said.

"Our regular customers were relieved that when they went diving this year they saw few changes in Playa del Carmen and Tulum," Tomlinson said.

The Yucatan is well known for its cenotes, natural sinkholes into underground rivers, which are popular with divers. Just after the storm there was some initial water discoloration from tannic acid and mangroves, and water levels rose up to 8 feet higher. But within a few weeks, the system flushed itself out.

Mark and I dove in the Dos Ojos cave near Tulum, with pristine conditions and no noticeable damage. Tomlinson confirmed our observation. "The caverns were fine," he said. "There was no damage."

While residents certainly don't look forward to any more hurricanes, life as usual has continued under the sea.

"The damage that was at first noticeable on the coral reefs of Cozumel is fading rapidly," said Lyle. "Cozumel remains one of our favorite dive destinations."

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