

**Inga Eumann's Blog**

**Partner: UQR**

**Core theme: SEEMIS**

## **March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011 - Arrival in Cozumel, Quintana Roo, Mexico**

Dear everybody!

First of all I would like to present myself. My name is Inga Eumann, I am a student of the Master's program "Sustainability Economics and Management" at the University of Oldenburg. In line with the compilation of my Master's thesis I am carrying out a research stay of 10 weeks at the University of Quintana Roo, unit of Cozumel.

The main objective of my stay is to conduct interviews with different actors concerning, in the broadest sense, the issues urban and regional development, development cooperation, destruction of biodiversity and coastal ecosystems and the impacts of mass tourism in general. Using the most emphasized results from the interviews as well as from literature research and the look at statistical data in situ the thesis aims at providing concrete recommendations for the island of Cozumel, its local administration and its people in order to prevent further ecological, social and economic damage and may be even to revoke some of the damage already made. The thesis is supposed to be a conceptual work applicable to other places with similar conditions.

I arrived here on Cozumel last week on the 8th of March. The responsible within the network of "Developing Sustainability", Luis Mejía-Ortíz had arranged everything perfectly for a pleasant arrival. When I was still in Oldenburg I could ask him whatever concern came to mind concerning both organizational issues (such as housing, the university, transport etc.) and those with regards to the content of my thesis and stay, and he would always be able to clear up my worries. The same has continued since my arrival to Cozumel. Last and this week I had the opportunity to discuss the content of my thesis with various professors from different subject areas; all of which provided very valuable information to me. After finalizing defining the approach of my thesis this week I will begin to conduct interviews with respective other actors.

The unity of Cozumel houses the division of sustainable development being divided into two main areas: the department of the social and business studies and the department of sciences and humanities that each group different academic areas.

The former contains the area of tourism offering three different degrees, the area of business administration qualifying with three degrees as well and the area of Technology and Informatics (two degrees). The department of sciences and humanities then consists of two academic areas which there are the area of sciences with the degree in natural resources and the language area offering two different degrees concerning the English language.

In order to provide further information for future foreign students with regards to the content of the degrees, I will assist some courses during the upcoming weeks of my stay here. They will mainly be related to the topics of sustainable tourism and natural resources.

One quick advice for students interested in taking classes at the UQROO and having them recognized at their home university, the semester start and end much earlier here than in Germany (I don't know how this is concerning the rest of the partner universities), so did the summer term already start at the end of January.

Some last words concerning atmosphere, people and environment here in Cozumel: it is very easy to adjust to the new surrounding yet people are very open, friendly and helpful. As well the academic as also the

private environment makes me feel very comfortable. In my next input I will give some information to the island of Cozumel, its main and only small town San Miguel de Cozumel and differences and similarities with other places to experience. Some photos in order to get a picture of Cozumel...

## **March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011 - Living in Cozumel**

In this entry I will give you some information on Cozumel, some general data as well as information relating to the living situation here.

Cozumel Island, as you can obviously observe on Google maps, is located very close to Caribbean Coast of the Peninsula Yucatán in the south of Mexico. The nearest other cities are Playa del Carmen, where the ferry transportation to Cozumel leaves from, Tulum, a small city just an hour south from Playa del Carmen, and Cancún, which is a car-drive of about one hour and a bit to the north of Playa del Carmen.

The ferry transportation between Cozumel and Playa is very frequent, every two hours leaves one in each direction. The only aspect slightly inconvenient is the fact that ferries are only operating during the day, the first one at 6 or 7 o'clock in the morning and the last one leaves from Playa to Cozumel at 10 o'clock at night. This also contributes to the fact that Cozumel is a little quieter at night as for example Playa, leaving it mainly to the local community and the tourists that are staying in the hotels and resorts located to the south of Cozumel's capital San Miguel de Cozumel. The main tourism on the island is cruise tourism which sends the tourists to the island throughout the day picking them up again in the late afternoon/early night, while tourist staying a longer period of time are of much less frequency. As the cruise liners are arriving at the moles on the malecón (which is the seafront street) and most of the hotels in the city of San Miguel are as well located on the waterfront, the 3 to 5 streets closest to the sea are mainly occupied by souvenir shops, more expensive restaurants orientated to tourism, bars with a more international flair etc. The local community comes here for work, as almost a 100% of the population is employed in the tourism sector, while they live in the part of town located towards the island's inland. Here one can find much more typical "Cozumelian" businesses, shops, bars and restaurants. Also the shape of construction changes: higher and larger buildings (mainly hotels and apartment houses for vacation) close to the sea make room for smaller buildings where the local community lives. Even though, the impression you get of the urban surrounding does as well depend on what area of San Miguel you are looking at, as also the individual's purchasing power is related to size and shape of its respective home. But in Mexico, in smaller towns and villages, houses usually have fewer floors by having a larger base area than for example in Germany.

Concerning accommodation prices, I cannot really give general information, as it depends a lot on where you decide to stay. If you have the possibility, I highly recommend staying with a family, as you get to know how the local daily life works. There are as well guest houses and some hostels, but for a longer stay I am pretty sure that it would get expensive and you pretty much miss the opportunity of integrating with Mexican people. Shared student flats basically do not exist because the Mexican students normally live at home with their family until they start working and rent an apartment by themselves or they move with their boyfriend/husband. As I told you in my last entry I am staying in a family home; the accommodation was organized by Luis Mejía and I am pretty sure that also in the future it would be possible to organize accommodation through the UQROO. I have a big room with my own bathroom in a house that is located pretty centric in Cozumel. They also lent me a bike so I can easily get to the university, my interview partners etc. and even to the beach.

Having a bicycle is very practical here yet the town is not very big, the island is flat and as well the streets in the town as the bigger ones crossing the island are in good shape. If you don't have a bike you could try to find a collective bus, which are busses that do not have regular stops but pick passengers up wherever they

are waving at the driver. It's a little hard to figure out the routes they are taking and there are not too many of them. The other alternative would be to use a taxi for transportation. Something that is just normal for the local population. But you have to take care as in spite of being very cheap for locals the taxi driver is allowed to charge to a tourist up to five times the price a local pays, charging for passenger not for taxi. So you should always ask how much it is before you get on. It obviously also helps a lot if you speak good Spanish as they suppose that you are here for a longer stay and easier accept you as a local person. But the fact is that it is regulated by law and there exist a much lower price for locals on almost any kind of transportation, except the overland buses.

In general, I think it is very important to have a good knowledge of the Spanish language when arriving to Cozumel. Yes, many people speak English, as they have to due to working in the tourism business, but when you are in the university or other places where there are usually only Mexicans it is indispensable to be able to communicate in Spanish. All classes are taught in Spanish, except the English language classes obviously. And especially if you come to Cozumel for carrying out research, the literature you find in the library, particularly the one on locally and regionally relevant issues, is mainly in Spanish.

Also travelling it is much easier finding your way around when you know the language. I experienced that myself when I took advantage of last Monday being a national holiday and travelled down the Caribbean coast just to the border with Belize. Comparing it to a travel I did some years ago in Central America when I did almost not speak a word of Spanish this was so much more relaxing, being able to ask everything you want to, you are able to learn much more about people and culture. I went to see Chetumal, which is a town almost on the border than Mahahual, a small very easy-going village and Tulum which still maintains great parts of the Mayan culture. I wanted to find out more about the culture roots of the Peninsula Yucatán and Cozumel being one of the parts of Mexico the strongest shaped by the Mayan before the Spanish conquistadors arrived. By visiting for example the ruins of Tulum I got a good impression of the Mayan, but even though, as archeological sites generally are prepared so much for tourism it is still a little hard to imagine how the people back then actually lived...may be I will get a better idea when visiting the small village (it is composed of may be 3 to 4 houses only) and ruins of El Cedral which is located in the inland of Cozumel. There they celebrate a traditional festivity on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May (the day of Santa Cruz) which may also help to feel a little more of the atmosphere back then.

Hopefully next time I will be able to upload some photos which will make it much easier for you to picture what I am talking about ☺

### **March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011 - Some images of Cozumel and its surroundings**

Today I just want to provide you with some pictures of the place. For the moment I only uploaded some of Cozumel's capital and the island's landscape. Soon some images of other parts of the Yucatán Peninsula, I took when travelling to Chetumal, Mahahual and Tulum, will follow as well as some pictures concerning projects I participated, the university etc....



Malecón looking south from the mole where the ferry Cozumel - Playa del Carmen arrives



Ferry landing stage in Cozumel



Looking north from the ferry's landing stage



A home of the local community



Street just around the corner of the house I am staying at



Typical Mexican snack bar for take-out food



Church Corpus Christi in Cozumel



Cozumel's landscape outside of San Miguel



Medium heights plant cover, due to the hurricanes typical for the island

## April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011 - An Update!

As promised I will give with this entry some more close-up information on Cozumel, provide pictures from my trip south and I also want to give an update on the work on my thesis.



Puerto de Abrigo in the northern part of San Miguel de Cozumel

Some aspects concerning Cozumel that I still didn't talk about are for example opening and working hours. Usually the universities offer two different class turns; which means that you can study the same career both in the morning and in the evening, but once decided for one of the turns the student supposedly sticks to it. Classes start at 7 in the morning and go on until 1 pm. The afternoon turn starts at 4 pm just until 10 at night. As you can easily observe, this could mean that a professor, as the same ones are teaching classes both in the morning and the afternoon, finishes one day at 10 pm and then the following day has to get up very early again in order to teach a class at 7 in the morning. Usually they are able to choose their class schedule deliberately but it is obviously not always possible to fulfill everybody's wishes. The rest of the university personnel work hours much more common to what we know from Germany: they normally start at around 9 in the morning and leave the university campus at around 5 or 6 pm.

This coincides with the opening hours of most of the companies, retail and basic businesses such as post offices, banks or the local administration. And just as we are talking about banks...it's not at all problematic to get cash with your German or foreign bank card in Cozumel (or Mexico in general). You should just contact your home country bank before leaving; in my case I can withdraw cash in any VISA plus ATM with my saving accounts bank card without any commission. And if you have a credit card you can use it in almost all larger establishments, obviously in the small 14-hours shop around the corner or the place that sells take-away food I uploaded a picture of in my last entry this will not be possible ;-).



Cash machines can be found almost everywhere, as well in the supermarkets which are extraordinarily large here in Cozumel reminding me strongly of the ones to be found in the USA. Apparently there exist no type of cookie produced anywhere in North America that cannot be bought in a supermarket in Cozumel. There are open every day, even Sunday, from 9 am until 10 pm. Both opening hours and product selection surely are so extensive due to tourism.

Also the food offered in the bigger restaurants or bars in Cozumel often indicates US-American influence. But there are the smaller and more local cafeterias and restaurants that will prepare you the typical Mexican meals such as tacos, enchiladas, nachos etc., whatever you order it can surely be put inside of a tortilla and if not you do it anyways. People are able to eat between 10 to 15 tortillas in just one meal!

Pricewise it again depends much on where you go, but in general it is much cheaper to eat in a restaurant or have a drink in a bar or club than in Germany. The clubs are usually so-called CantaBars, which appear just the same as a normal disco anywhere else but as it is called bar you don't pay any entrance fee and then there is karaoke! A DJ puts on music and just like this in the middle, you almost don't notice it, someone is taking the microphone and starts to sing. They are really good, supposedly that's why you don't notice the difference between the Mexican pop music and some doing karaoke ;-) But back to the prices things have here in Cozumel. Again due to tourism Cozumel is not the cheapest place in Mexico, but still concerning the everyday life you can live, as I said in one of my former entries, with around 500€ a month paying rent and everything else. Definitely much more accessible comparing prices with Germany are products, first of all clothing and electronic devices, imported from the USA, something somehow logical.

Finishing up I would like to mention very positively the conditions for investigation I am experiencing here. Everybody, from whatever ambit is quite interested in taking part in my research by giving me an interview, facilitating information or by simply answering my questions about Cozumel. It is necessary to emphasize that having the UQRoo backing me up opens doors! Yet I am researching only for academic purposes institutions and NGOs as well as the local administration or businesses are willing to cooperate. Usually Luis prepares an official letter from the university that explains briefly my research topic and purposes which I then pass on to the respective interview partner; not more than 3 days later I already have an appointment arranged.

Also did many of the people I contacted so far offer me to assist one of the projects they are carrying out, e.g. I was able to accompany one of the environmental education programs prepared by environmental department of the municipal administration: we took a relatively big group of kids from primary school to plant mangroves in an area where reforestation is pressing.

Now the promised pictures of Chetumal, Mahahual and Tulum and also one of Playa del Carmen as the image is just so beautiful.



Typical driving snack bar and the malecón of Chetumal



Another local home, this time in Chetumal



Administrative building Chetumal: "Always moving forward", but the state of the building...



Protection against intruders (Chetumal but as well anywhere else)



The municipal market of Chetumal (note the flag of Catalonia :-))



This is how you save paper (example from Chetumal)



There are very many of them in Mexico



Mahahual in the early morning



The beach in Mahahual, almost no construction near



View out of the future living room (Mahahual)



Directly out of a catalogue (Mahahual)



Living on Mahahual beach



That is how a real Margarita looks



It's for sale...in Mahahual



Waste management at the beach of Mahahual



The Mayan ruins in Tulum



A closer view of one of the Mayan temples



Iguanas are everywhere, this one on the ruin site of Tulum



Typical impression of the area next to the beach in Tulum



Right next to the one above





The question is "What could possibly be eco-chic?" (and this is not the only place in Tulum "using" eco)



Looking back on the ferry ride from Playa del Carmen to Cozumel

I am actually really sorry that the quality of the pictures is pretty critical, but as I am having trouble uploading bigger sizes probably due to the internet connections...once I am back in Germany the images of high quality will be shown immediately!

**April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011 - Spring Break**

Hey Hey!

Time is going by very fast, as always, and of my stay here in Cozumel there are only four weeks left. Normally this wouldn't seem too short, but taking into account that the Cozumeleños, or may be as well all Mexican people, are a pretty relaxed community...well then maybe one day of time does not equal one day anymore. I'm still positive on the comment that everybody is very willing to facilitate information and that respective interview partners show much interest in my research BUT even though mentality is different than what I know from other places. Actually the say: "one is working while five are watching" which I originally thought strongly applied to Spain, well now I am convinced, is even more suitable for Mexico. This aspect obviously has both a bad and a good side. I think sometimes it's good and even more effective to not take everything (norms, laws etc.) as serious as it is taken, for example, in Germany, but on the other hand, if you are working by a tight schedule it surely becomes important to be able to count on people.

There are two facts that are not helping too much concerning this matter. One is spring break which just started last Saturday and in Mexico has a duration of two weeks; these two weeks being followed by many many holidays at the beginning of May. University actually closes during these two weeks; offices and government officially work but...

And then, just imagine, once spring break and the following free days are over, the summer semesters finishes just before I leave for Germany! (Even though, I will assist some more classes during these more or less two weeks so to give you in one of my last entries details on the courses offered at UQRoo).

The second fact is the recent change of local administration. At the start of April the former city council was almost completely replaced by a new one, in consequence some of the interviews I had already accounted on are not making much sense anymore.

As it seems I will have quite some work left once spring break is over!

A recommendation that rises from that experience is that you should check holiday and vacation dates and try to schedule them in when planning your stay abroad ;-).

A nice side effect of having more free time is that I can write down some more of my ideas for the thesis and that I am able to experience some more of Cozumel, Quintana Roo and the everyday life people are living here. So, today, for example, I just watched the final game of the Spanish league Championship 'Copa del Rey' (no comments on that), except that at least Mexicans enjoy soccer as much as others do), next Sunday I will actually go to a pretty nice Reggae festival in Playa del Carmen and I will probably take some days to do a short travel with some friends. I'll take my camera and this time I'll try to also take some pictures of people not only landscape ;-).

These days temperature has risen quite a lot. Something that will go on until the month of August and that comes accompanied by rising humidity as well. When you look for a room or a flat here, I would highly recommend getting one with air condition if you want to work at home at least from time to time and to secure that the room/flat is equipped with a fridge! Concerning moving around, as I mentioned in earlier entries, a bike is really helpful, because walking really makes you sweat and getting a moped or a car (which also wouldn't make too much sense for a relatively short stay) can result pretty dangerous. People do drive a lot different, signals are not too important instead drivers really communicate with each other giving preference to who comes first even if traffic signs indicate differently. Also do they, for example, use the lights of their car in a particular manner, turning on the left turn light when driving on the right side of any road in order to tell other cars to pass them. That's applied at any time and place, sometimes or often confusing yet one could consider that they just want to switch traffic lanes...

Good weather and increasing free time for the inhabitants of Cozumel also show that the local community is one of many different nationalities. First I thought people were referring to migrants from other parts of Mexico but actually there are also quite a lot of US-Americans, Canadians, French, English etc. permanently living here in Cozumel. On one hand, this obviously has some bad effects on the local traditional culture. On

the other it may be makes the town more accessible for foreigners and especially foreign students to come here...I can assure that at least the university is very open due to being such a small one (about 600 students today) which leads to a more personalized treatment of each student by professors and staff. Also is the university involved (or trying to involve itself) in many aspects concerning Cozumel and its development as well as other city council matters.

That's it for today! Talk to you soon with some more pictures!

### **May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 - Almost the last one...**

So, this will be most probably one of my last entries...sorry for not giving you an update any earlier! The last ten days since spring break ended have been a little crazy. I finally started the survey I am applying throughout the local community carrying it out with the help of Luis, some of his students and some friends of mine. In order to achieve a reliable result around 1.000 people distributed in the different colonias (districts) of Cozumel have to be asked their knowledge of natural resources, protected areas, recycling and tourism on the island. I would have liked to start earlier but as mentioned in my previous entry there wasn't much possibility for anything during spring break, combining the vocational period with electricity failure in the university during the entire two weeks. But anyway, I got about 650 done and there is still a week to go;-)

Also am I by now almost free of interviews, as there are only two more scheduled this week; the last one with urban development still seems very very difficult to get...let's see!

I will now facilitate the course recommendations I promised during one of my first entries. I have been assisting various classes that sounded interesting to me and will hopefully as well to you. There are on one hand some from the area of natural resources and development and on the other some concerning the subject of sustainable tourism. I know that the latter is not a specialty at Oldenburg university, but as I made my Bachelor degree in Tourism management and as this is a pretty important issue here in Cozumel as well as in many other places in developing countries with emerging economies, I considered that I should have a look at it. The following classes could be interesting, you should just have in mind that they are all part of *licenciaturas* which is the Mexican analogue to the German bachelor study. But, I guess this is already known in the university's exchange office.

There is from the area of natural resources for example the course *Ambiente costero y desarrollo (Coast environment and development)*, *Ecología del paisaje (Landscape ecology)* as well as the course *Sociedad, desarrollo y ambiente (Society, development and environment)*.

Course of choice in various degrees is the *Seminario de problemas regionales (Seminar of regional problems)* which is comparable to subjects belonging at the university of Oldenburg to the area of special and regional development.

Also interesting could be *Demografía y geografía económica (Demography and economic geography)* laying a stronger focus on economic aspects.

And last but not least, from the touristic area the course *Turismo y medioambiente (Tourism and the environment)*.

All courses are taught thoroughly in Spanish and grade both participation in class, smaller papers or presentation during the semester and a final exam. Often the final exam is a written exam but it is weighted percentagewise much less than are the final exams in Germany. In consequence participation and work throughout the semester is much more influential on the grade. Many of the courses include field work and short trips.

If you are interested in more detailed information for each course or most of the classes I can send you the respective study program and provide you with some impressions of class dynamics.

I was also informed that there will shortly be introduced different Master's programs subsequent to the each respective Bachelor degree.

Now some pictures of the university and its facilities. Some parts are still under construction, once finished the campus will include besides the buildings with classrooms and the ones with the teachers' offices also sports facilities such as a gym an Olympic Pool.

And then to finish up I will add some more images of Cozumel I took mostly while carrying out the survey. There are also some of the traditional annual fair in the Cedral (a very small village in the centre of the island; the only other settlement on the island besides San Miguel de Cozumel), which was celebrated from April 28th to May 3rd including a fair, concerts in the bullfighting arena (still in use) as well as traditional dancing and some craftsmanship. The 3rd of May was the holiday of Santa Cruz, when the Spanish came to Cozumel and the first mass was celebrated on the island. The celebration of the Cedral shows elements still remaining from Mayan traditions mixed with Catholicism brought by the Spanish conquerors.

Before leaving next Tuesday I will send you at least a quick goodbye!



The university having the entrance area to the right hand side of the picture



The library



One of the teachers' buildings; the one where I share the office with Luis



Our cubicle. My table is the one in front of the window. And, unbelievable but true, behind the separation wall there is Luis laboratory



Some crabs and shrimps Luis is working with. Dead in alcohol.



At the university recycling is intended



The entrance to El Cedral



Nice houses with garden can be found here, they are mainly secondary residences for the ones that can afford it



Statues at El Cedral doing the traditional dance of the festivity



A bumper car that seems way too small for that many cars...and is cleaning necessary?



A very very old 'carrousel'





Also a typical house, but in San Miguel de Cozumel...



...which could be found right next to this one



New construction at town limits, is this really necessary?



A home actually looks like this...

## **May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011 - Goodbye!!**

Hello everybody!

So, as promised I will now close up my blog and say goodbye!

Thanks to all of you for reading and commenting on it. I still appreciate comments and as well questions if you have any. Feel free to write whatever in the comment section!

Tomorrow I will leave Cozumel at around noon and arrive in Germany on Wednesday in the afternoon. I just finished up my luggage and will now, this afternoon, finally get my last interview, yeah!

I hope to see all of you soon, obviously with the ones living in Germany this will be much easier to achieve:-), but this summer I hopefully find the time to also catch up with some of those living abroad!!

One last picture:



In Cozumel it's always Christmas time

See you soon!