

XCARET

A Sacred Paradise



Photos: Xcaret Eco-Archeological Park

Nestled in a jungle full of natural wonders, Xcaret, the Caribbean's most spectacular eco-archeological park, is one of the Cancún-Tulum area's main tourist attractions.

In Maya, Xcaret means "little inlet." Originally a pre-Hispanic Mayan port in the late Post-Classical Period (from A.D. 1200 to 1400) called Polé. Ships sailed from Polé to nearby Cozumel Island and the sanctuary of Ixchel, goddess of fertility. Pilgrims came to the port from all over to ritually purify

their bodies and souls by bathing in the *cenotes*¹ and *temascales*² before sailing for the sanctuary. Polé's location turned it into a prosperous center of highly organized trade with far-off areas; at the same time, it benefited from the expansion of Cozumel's booming economy.

The Spanish Conquest put an end to the Cozumel sanctuary and trade along the coast. What remains of the

port, apparently abandoned in the sixteenth century, however, is preserved in the archeological area of Xcaret Park. The area measures about 800 meters along the shore and 500 meters inland.

Everything has been done to preserve the natural attractions and the archeological heritage of the area. All modern roads and buildings were planned to preserve this harmony.

The visitor enters the park through a replica of the Labná Arch, an example of Post-Classical Mayan architec-

¹ Deep pools of water found in the Yucatan Peninsula. [Translator's Note.]

² Ritual herbal steam baths. [Translator's Note.]



Xcaret has become one of Mexico's visitors' favorite spots.

*On the coral-lined shore
that extends to the open sea,
the motion of the waves turns tidal pools
into natural jacuzzis.*

ture. The museum, built in the shape of a pyramid, exhibits models of the most important Mayan settlements (Uxmal, Palenque, Chichen-Itzá, Cobá and Tulum, among others) and a beautiful mosaic mural recreation of what pre-Hispanic Xcaret must have looked like. It also presents temporary exhibits of paintings and sculpture by local artists. An outdoor stair-

way leads to a look-out point which boasts a panoramic view of the jungle, the Caribbean and Cozumel Island on the horizon.

NATURAL WONDERS

The visitor to Xcaret can delight in a series of natural wonders:

Underground River. One of Xcaret's unique attractions is its underground river. Visitors float 530 meters down its crystalline waters, crossing *cenotes* and prehistoric caverns, canals and tunnels. Natural light illuminates shells and coral dating back thousands of years.

The Blue Lagoon. A labyrinth of transparent salt-water canals is dotted with rocky islands teeming with local flora and fauna. Visitors can swim or just sit and enjoy the birds and the exuberant vegetation.

The Inlet. The original port opposite Cozumel is today a natural, coral-lined aquarium full of multi-colored fish. On the coral-lined shore that extends to the open sea, the motion of

Tortoises, fish, birds, butterflies, bats and a myriad of plants and flowers native to the region live and reproduce here in their natural habitat.

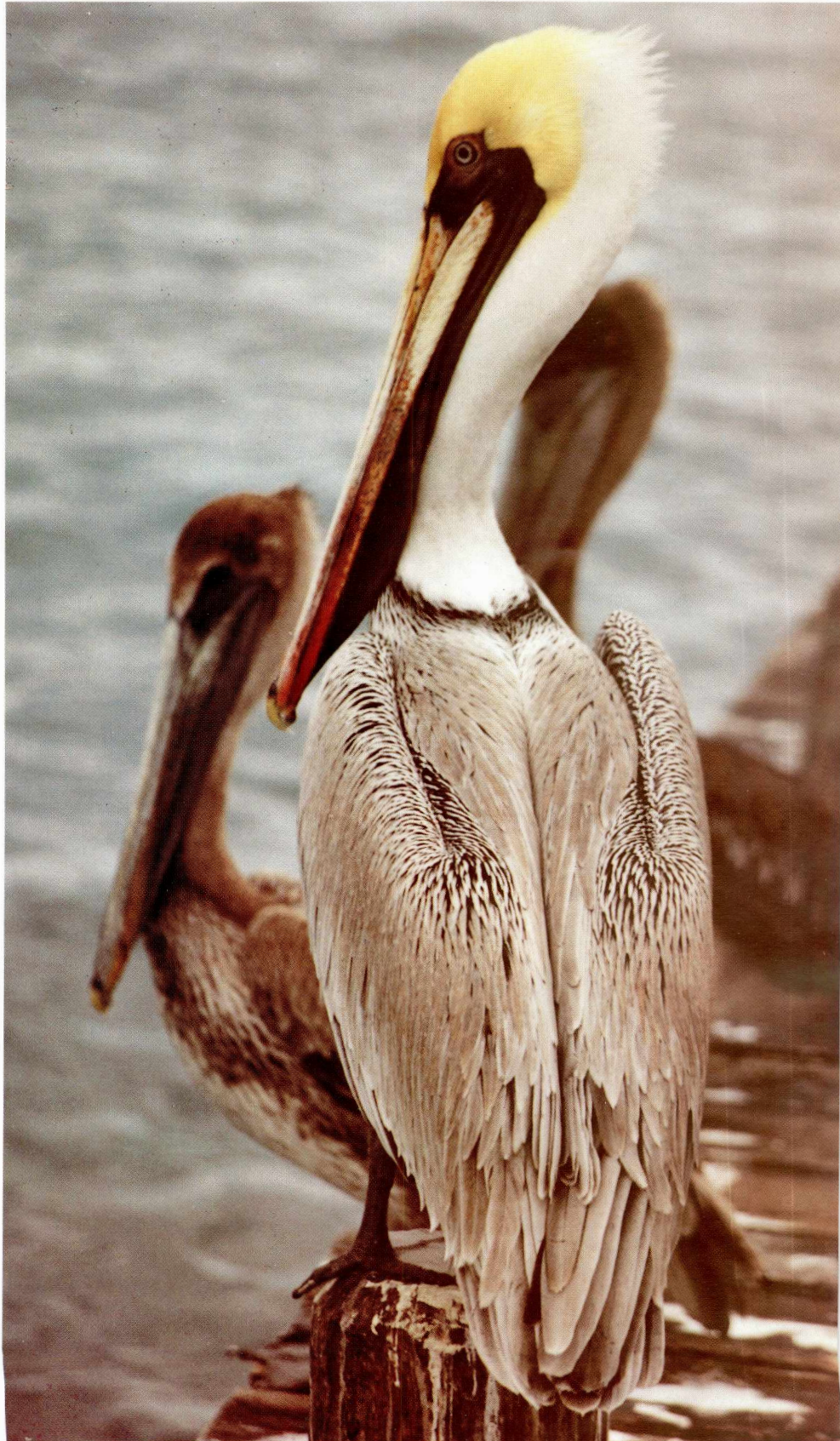
the waves in tidal pools give swimmers the benefits of a natural jacuzzi.

The Auditorium. A natural, shell-shaped proscenium arch gives the auditorium perfect acoustics. Visitors can schedule their trips to see performances which take place on a stage carved in rock and set beside the underground river.

The Xcaret Underground. Wandering through this underground labyrinth of paths is an adventure that will take the traveler to the heart of the Mayan people.

SPECTACULAR FLORA AND FAUNA

Tortoises, fish, birds, butterflies, bats and a myriad of plants and flowers native to the region live and reproduce here in their natural habitat. With the supervision of park personnel, visitors can get close to some of the animals:





Everything has been done to preserve the archeological heritage of the area.

- The wild bird house has both exotic species and local birds on display;
- The botanical garden and greenhouse are in a protected part of the jungle with its own, more humid, microclimate, permitting a great variety of native plants and trees to survive in their original form. Experts have classified and labeled the plants for visitors.
- The House of Bats and the Valley of Butterflies have hundreds of live specimens.
- Marine tortoises are bred in a special area where baby white tortoises are protected and researched for a year and freed when mature.
- The tropical aquarium exhibits marine habitats of most of the ecosystems of the Caribbean Sea, particularly the coral reefs. Touchpools, supervised by a biologist, allow visitors to touch starfish, rays, marine cucumbers and spiders and octopi.
- Another hands-on activity is the dolphin pool, one of Xcaret's special attractions, where visitors can swim with the dolphins.

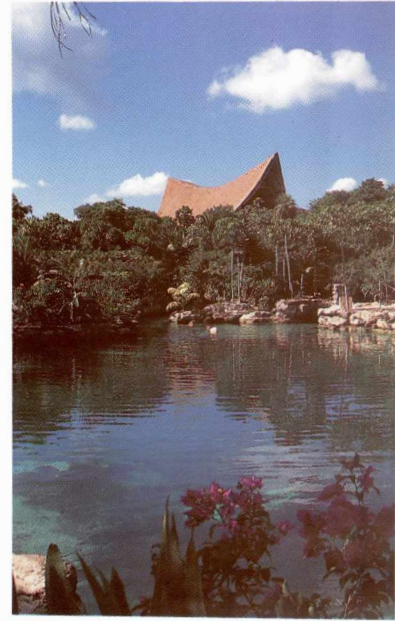
OTHER ATTRACTIONS
AND SERVICES

Visitors can also learn to scuba dive and snorkel; they swim in the surf or take a



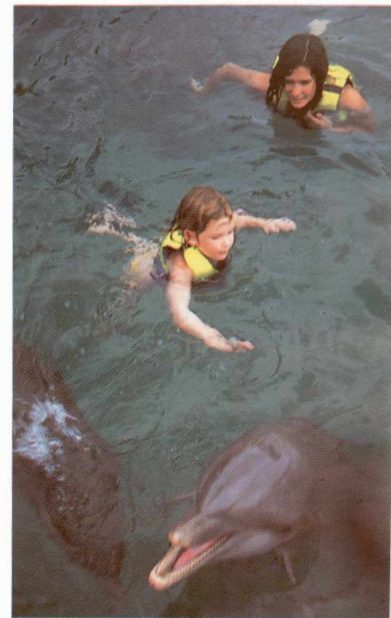
The Underground River, one of Xcaret's unique attractions.

Visitors float 530 meters down the crystalline waters of the underground river, crossing cenotes and prehistoric caverns, canals and tunnels.



The Blue Lagoon.

The dolphin pool, enjoyed by children and adults alike.





What remains of the pre-Hispanic Mayan port Polé is preserved in the archeological area of Xcaret.


guided horseback tour through the jungle and the archeological site.

In the Mayan town, where indigenous people from the area make and exhibit crafts, visitors are treated to a view of traditional houses, *palapas*, built with techniques and materials specific to the region.

The park has restaurants, bars, shops, and dressing rooms with showers, bathrooms and lockers. There is also

an information office and a first aid center.

Picturesque air-conditioned buses take visitors back and forth from Cancún.

The beauty of Xcaret fully justifies the billboard outside the Cancún airport: *When in Xcaret, don't miss a visit to Cancún!* 

Elsie Montiel
Assistant Editor