

ISLA MUJERES

By Allen Cox, Tacoma, Washington, U.S.A.

On the 30-minute ferry crossing from the Yucatan Peninsula's Puerto Juarez to tiny *Isla Mujeres*, I am struck by the brilliance of the colors sailing past. Where I come from, these are the colors of expensive modern art and glossy magazines.

The unblemished white sand floor of the Bay of Mujeres reflects a cobalt sky to produce a neon canvas of turquoise. Ahead, a pastel *pueblo* hugs a sugary beach. Silhouetted against a cloudless sky, nearly motionless frigate birds face the wind, suspended like kites, their wings outstretched and their long tail feathers streaming behind them. A pelican fashions his body into a missile and plunges into the bay, emerging a moment later with a good-sized catch flopping into his pouch. I suddenly want fish for dinner.

Isla Mujeres, or simply "Isla" to her fans, is a sliver of limestone, 5 miles long and a half-mile wide. This little island rests easily in the Caribbean, looking back toward the high-rises of Cancún, a world away. Isla Mujeres has been home to a variety of cultures: ancient Maya, modern Mexican and Caribbean.

In October, 2005, Isla suffered from one of the worst hurricanes in its recorded history: Hurricane Wilma. During that hellish three-day battering, nearly anything not made of brick was wrenched apart by the unforgiving winds and tossed carelessly out to sea. Besides fishing, tourism is Isla's livelihood, and the local economy was crushed. The islanders, in a massive clean-up effort, wasted no time in restoring services, bulldozing mountains of beach sand from the streets and repairing damaged buildings. Today they once again stand ready to welcome visitors with open arms.

Those making the pilgrimage to Isla do so to worship the sun and the sea. But for centuries, the island's Maya pilgrims venerated *Ix Chel*, Maya goddess of the moon and fertility. In 1517, Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, the commander of the first Spanish expedition to set foot on the island, discovered several small figurines of the goddess and named the island Isla Mujeres, or Island of Women. For three centuries following Córdoba's visit, the island languished, an uninhabited outpost visited only by pirates and an occasional fisherman. When piracy dried up in the mid-19th century, local fishermen deemed it safe to fish Isla's waters, and soon the *pueblo* sprang up.

In the 1950s and 60s, word got out of a fabled tropical island with pristine beaches and swaying palms, where dining like royalty on lobster and sea tortoise cost a mere pittance. Tourists seeking freedom from the herd found their way to Isla. Some stayed. Isla's Playa Norte, the classic tropical beach of picture postcards, became a mecca of laid-back, topless abandon.

Since those days, the island's population has topped 13,000 and lobster can no longer be had for a pittance. But compared to the mega-resorts of nearby Cancún and Playa del Carmen, the scale remains small and the pace relaxed. It is still the quintessential small town, tropical island paradise in an unrivaled natural setting.

"I think of music as a menu. I can't eat the same thing every day."

-Carlos Santana, Mexican Musician (1947-)

DEEP SEA FISHING

By Katie Hale

Isla Mujeres is a place frozen in the past—a place where many people catch their dinner for the night in the brilliant turquoise waters offshore and let their fishing nets dry under the warm Caribbean sun.

This fishing village is a great place for the novice to try their hand at reeling something in—not only does Isla Mujeres offer great opportunities for trawling, it offers cheaper charters than nearby Cancún. International fishing tournaments are held on the small island each year, drawing thousands of experts and amateurs alike.

Although the fishing is great around the Yucatán, the best fishing in Mexico can be found in the Sea of Cortés. The narrow sea between the Baja Peninsula and the Mexican mainland is home to more than 900 species of fish and marine mammals. This sapphire jewel is one of the best places in the world for deep sea fishing and the serious angler should not miss the opportunity to drop a line in the rough waters.

Here marlin, sailfish, grouper, tuna, roosterfish, dorado, snapper and grouper grow to record sizes. If you don't have your own yacht, hire a charter deep sea fishing boat for the day. Prices usually include crew, insurance, fishing tackle and the preparation and/or storage of your catch.

And whether you wrangle that marlin or don't get one single bite, you will not come away empty handed. The beauty of the seascape, the salty smell of the ocean, the cool breeze, and the feeling like you are alone in the world will make your day of fishing—or simply watching—all worth it.