

Xcaret Eco-Park - A Jewel of Mexico's Maya Riviera Coast

It is a challenge to describe **Xcaret** (pronounced Ish-careet). In fact it is probably impossible to do so in anything less than a book. Its 80-hectare/200-acre site, fronting on the turquoise blue waters of Mexico's Maya Riviera Caribbean coast 74 kilometres drive south of Cancun, conjures up images of Disney theme parks, long lineups and crazy crowds, lots of plastic, metal and cement. Happily, none of these elements define Xcaret which is as remarkable as it is beyond description. It is also a great model for corporate and social responsibility rolled into a very entertaining and educational package.

Though water is the most important natural element of the site, featuring lagoons, pools of different sizes, and refreshing underground rivers, I never had a minute all day to poke my toe in the water - so much was there to see and experience on land. Through the entrance gates, visitors are relieved of their sunblock and tanning lotions temporarily because they are bad for the water and the marine life abundant in the park. Biodegradable sunblock is provided so as not to pollute the water which is quality tested daily throughout the site.

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With each carefully-orchestrated display, optional tours and special events, children and adults alike are gently taken on an educational odyssey that showcases local environments and wildlife species characteristic of the Quintana Roo coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. Xcaret is home to around 4,000 species of local and many rare or endangered plants and animals. All aquatic exhibits are linked to the sea so water is constantly flushing. Hours dissolve away in the fascinating butterfly conservation pavilion which studies the biological cycles of 51 species in the region and intensely breeds 15 of them among 80,000 cultivated host plants. Sea turtle conservation is another huge mission as are programs to research and care for endangered coral reefs and a number of marine mammals.

Cultural restoration has been the other keystone of Xcaret since it opened in 1990. The authentically-costumed and carefully-researched stories of pre-Hispanic Mayan culture are performed around intimate natural backdrops throughout the park during the day, and as part of the spectacular show staged each evening. The Mayan Village is alive with artisans who create traditional wood objects, weavings, ceramics and garments, all for fair prices, and there are several Mayan archaeological temple sites dating back one thousand years or more. No need to create replicas here when you have the real thing!

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If I had to pick three highlights during a whole day and evening intense with highlights, they would be the amazing display of riding skill by a team of Mexican horsewomen in fabulous ruffled dresses and sombreros, the seven terraces of the Mexican village cemetery with 365 completely different grave decorations authentically reproduced from throughout the country, and a 2 hour evening cultural performance in the covered amphitheater with multiple stages and non-stop act changes. Though the show is included in the park's admission ticket, I opted for the bonus of a delicious three-course meal with wine served during the show in a special front row section of the amphitheatre (US\$39 adults; \$19.50 children).

It is impossible to visit, never mind absorb, all that Xcaret has to offer in a single day. If vacationing at Cancun, Playa del Carmen or further down the Quintana Roo coast, the solution has already been

anticipated by Xcaret which offers a second day at half price as long as guests buy the additional ticket on the first day of their visit. This second-day ticket may be used up to seven days later.

The eco-theme park is open 365 days a year, from 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. in summer and from 8:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. in winter. One-day adult entry is US\$79; children are \$39.50. The only things not included are a few optional tours and activities such as swim with dolphins, sea trek, snuba, snorkeling tour, or the evening show three-course dinner. Book on line and get 10% off everything.

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