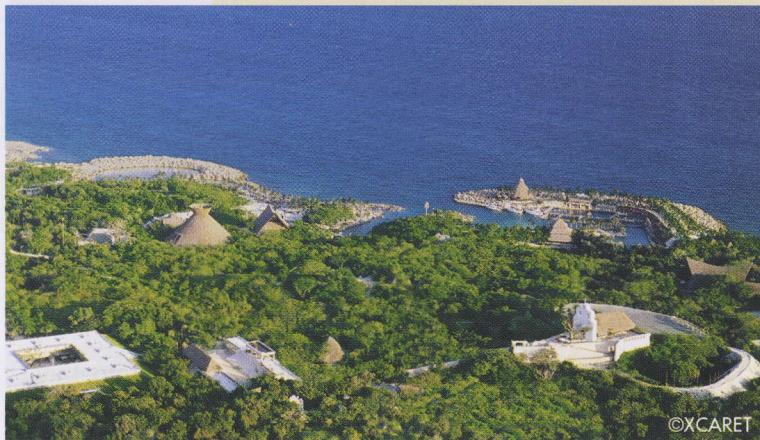


Places 95 Xcaret, Mexico: ecotourism

The Xcaret Eco-archaeological Park (Figure 20.21), on the Yucatan peninsula, won the Sunday Times Readers' Award in 1999 as the project which they considered was the most successful in protecting or improving the quality of the local environment. Xcaret is located (Figure 20.22) 72 km south of the mass tourist resort of Cancun and 270 km east of the former Mayan settlement, and now a Heritage City, of Chichen Itza (Figure 20.23). Xcaret is built on the ancient Mayan port of Pole (the Mayan civilisations in northern Yucatan lasted from about AD 900 to 1200). The five families who began the venture in 1990 had two main aims: to support Mexican science, and to encourage ecofriendly tourism. The latter was to be achieved not by preaching to visitors but by allowing them to relax in beautiful surroundings and to learn, almost by accident, the value of the ecosystem on show, and about the scientific work being done (compare Places 80, page 526).

Figure 20.21

Xcaret



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Visitors to Xcaret are encouraged to arrive by bus or taxi, to avoid huge areas of car parking. At the entrance, they are asked to hand over any suntan oil (as this pollutes the sea-water) and are given a small bottle of ecofriendly (though less effective as a sunblock) lotion (it is only SPF 8). The inlet, home to thousands of multicoloured fish, is ideal for snorkelling, the warm, calm, crystalline waters for swimming, and the sandy beaches for relaxing. Two underground rivers, illuminated by sunlight streaming through natural holes and openings in the rock, allow tourists to explore the world's largest system of underground channels. Visitors, having been informed that touching coral can be enough to kill it, are taken to off-shore reefs in small boats. People are encouraged to swim with 30 bottlenose dolphins, albeit in a fairly enclosed area, following an educational introduction to their behaviour, habitat and influence on humans. There is a wild bird breeding centre (many are endangered species), a butterfly pavilion, botanical gardens (dedicated to preserving and reproducing species of local plants) and a coral reef aquarium. In the archaeological zone there is a museum with scale models of the principal Mayan cities (including that of Chichen Itza).

At night 'visitors are led to witness secret Mayan ceremonies in the depths of caverns lit only by candlelight. Guided by moonlight, one must walk through the jungle to the pulsating rhythms of a percussion group playing in front of a candlelit Mayan temple. The show's finale, in the open air theatre, includes a famed folkloric ballet. Xcaret shows that you can combine care for the environment with having a good time.



Figure 20.22

Location of Xcaret



Figure 20.23

Chichen Itza