

An apartment of your own on an island in the sun

BY AILSA FRANCIS, CITIZEN SPECIAL APRIL 4, 2009

Imagine slinging your carry-on bag over a shoulder, walking out of the airport into the Caribbean heat and seamlessly connecting with your pre-arranged private van for a hassle-free drive to the ferry terminal. You slip onto the express boat and find a seat on the upper deck so that you can feel the saltwater spray and stare at the tropical sky.

Stepping onto the dock about 20 minutes later and walking a few blocks to the address marked on your map, you're ushered past a hand-crafted iron gate into your own self-contained studio apartment.

This describes the start of our recent trip to Isla Mujeres and I recommend that you follow these steps to the letter, thereby ensuring your holiday begins and ends with the same degree of psychic tranquillity.

Isla Mujeres (it means "Island of Women" and was named by the Spanish after finding statues of the Mayan moon goddess there) is a small island, only about seven kilometres long and less than a kilometre wide. It sits off the coast of Cancun in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula like Cozumel's forgotten little sister.

The island is small enough so that when you stand in the middle of "Isla town" at its north end, you can see both the rocky shore of the exposed Caribbean sea on one side and the protected ocean waters facing the mainland on the other. But it is also large enough that a day's golf cart rental (or moped, if you aren't easily terrified by the phrase "no insurance, amiga") can take you to a number of "secret" spots along both coasts.

If you're a somewhat discerning traveller like me, you would be wise to consider staying at one of the more tasteful, yet economically priced, small-scale accommodations on the island. I found a jewel called Elements of the Island.

This unique building is four years old and the loving creation of Cesar and Lisa Hernandez, a couple with roots in both Austria (her) and Peru (him). Without the aid of an architect, but with help from a friend, they designed this building (and business, for that matter) in three parts.

The first is at street level; here you'll find a café offering breakfast and lunch, with only about eight to 10 tables inside and out, those outside sheltered by a white canvas awning and an almond tree.

Above this space is a private roof-top patio (complete with Jacuzzi, a lounge bed and teak tables and chairs) that's accessible only to guests staying at the apartments.

Behind the café is an open courtyard garden with banana trees, palms and an unadorned concrete fountain. The building on the other side of the garden contains three studio apartments, each with a long balcony (or patio, depending on the level) and, at the very top, an open-air palapa that's used for yoga instruction.

The apartments have everything you might need, except a telephone, which I do not consider to be a serious transgression.

The kitchenettes are equipped with microwave, refrigerator, toaster, coffee maker, cutlery, glasses and dishes. There are blowdryers in the bathrooms, which also boast rain showerheads and beautiful Talavera ceramic sinks surrounded by natural terrazzo countertops. Each apartment has a king-sized bed, two ceiling fans, a wall-mounted air conditioner, well-positioned bed-side and pot lights, a dehumidifier, a carry-bag with two beach towels and unlimited purified water.

The decor appears equal parts Scandinavian, Asian and Mediterranean -- a combined esthetic that offers a visually serene and physically spare sanctuary. The colour scheme is predominantly white, with dark wood accents; the linens are white cotton, the curtains and slip-covered cushions are made from bleached cotton duck and the muslin drapes, which are knotted around the varnished tree trunks that act as railings on the balcony, flutter in the breeze. The only colourful decorative detail is a section of weathered wooden boardwalk attached to the wall and, in our room, painted deep blue with the silhouette of a sea turtle.

The design is no accident; Cesar tells us that he and Lisa chose the details to not only provide a peaceful escape from the cultural stimulation outside, but also to complement the natural environment.

The couple hopes to make a sustainable difference on this rapidly growing tourist destination. To help stimulate the regional economy, they offer natural and local items for sale including bags made from recycled tarps, organic body-care products made with Neem, organic and free-trade Mexican coffee and other locally produced foods and T-shirts made in Mexico from 100-per-cent combed cotton.

The couple has initiated a battery recycling program on the island; they conserve energy (bed linens are changed every four days, towels every two) and they recycle plastic, cans and paper used in the operation of the café. Lisa offers morning yoga lessons in the panoramic fourth-floor palapa (at a reduced price for guests) and you can purchase an instructional DVD to take home when you leave.

If you're weary of Cancun's frenetic pace and want a more civilized option nearby, consider what Elements of the Island can offer for much less money.

I fell for its serene and tasteful design and proximity to all that Isla Mujeres has to offer (including a picture-perfect beach about two blocks away and an eclectic assortment of restaurants and cafés). I also loved the healthy and inexpensive food on-site (I recommend the organic yogurt topped with fresh fruit and granola or the eggs served with home-made bread and jams for breakfast) and the satisfaction

of knowing that you're contributing to the environmentally and socially-conscious commitment this couple has made to their adoptive Mexican home.

Ailsa Francis is an Ottawa horticulturalist and garden designer who loves to see what grows where, the hotter the better.

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If You Go

Where: Isla Mujeres, Mexico

Cost: High season (Dec. 15 to April 30): \$95 U.S. per night or \$640 U.S. per week

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