



Yucatán State & the Maya Heartland

POP 1,955,600

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Why Go?

Sitting regally on the northern tip of the peninsula, Yucatán state sees less mass tourism than its flashy neighbor, Quintana Roo. It is sophisticated and savvy, and the perfect spot for travelers more interested in cultural exploration than beach life. Sure, there are a few nice beaches in Celestún and Progreso, but most people come to this area to explore the ancient Maya sites peppered throughout the region, like the Ruta Puuc, which will take you to four or five ruins in just a day.

Visitors also come to experience the past and present in the cloistered corners of colonial cities, to visit *henequén* haciendas (vast estates that produced agave plant fibers, used to make rope) lost to time or restored by caring hands to old glory, and to discover the energy, spirit and subtle contrasts of this authentic corner of southeastern Mexico.

When to Go

➔ Every vernal and autumnal equinox, visitors at Chichén Itzá can witness the appearance of a shadow serpent figure on the stairs of the site's iconic pyramid, El Castillo.

➔ Nature lovers flock to the estuary of the Celestún biosphere reserve during migration season to check out the colonies of flamingos and other bird species that congregate there; August and September are ideal.

➔ Beat the heat from November to March, especially if you're planning on visiting inland cities such as Mérida; northerly winds, known as *nortes*, keep the coast nice and cool in the afternoon.

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Kinich (p176)
- ➔ La Chaya Maya (p152)
- ➔ Manjar Blanco (p152)
- ➔ Casa Peon (p171)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Luz en Yucatán (p150)
- ➔ Nómadas Hostel (p150)
- ➔ Pickled Onion (p162)
- ➔ Hotel Celeste Vida (p171)

MÉRIDA

☎ 999 / POP 830,700

Since the Spanish conquest, Mérida has been the cultural capital of the entire peninsula. At times provincial, at others *'muy cosmopolitano'*; it is a town steeped in colonial history, with narrow streets, broad central plazas and the region's best museums. It's also a perfect place from which to kick off your adventure into the rest of Yucatán state. There are cheap eats, good hostels and hotels, thriving markets and other goings-on just about every night somewhere in the downtown area.

Long popular with European travelers looking to go beyond the hubbub of Quintana Roo's resort towns, Mérida is not an 'undiscovered Mexican gem' like some of the tourist brochures claim. Simply put, it's a tourist town, but a tourist town too big to feel like a tourist trap. And as the capital of Yucatán state, Mérida is also the cultural crossroads of the region, and there's something just a smidge elitist about it: the people who live here have a beautiful town, and they know it.

History

Francisco de Montejo (the Younger) founded a Spanish colony at Campeche, about 160km to the southwest, in 1540. From this base he took advantage of political dissension among the Maya, conquering T'ho (now Mérida) in 1542. By decade's end, Yucatán was mostly under Spanish colonial rule.

When Montejo's conquistadors entered T'ho, they found a major Maya settlement of lime-mortared stone that reminded them of the Roman architecture in Mérida, Spain. They promptly renamed the city and proceeded to build it into the regional capital, dismantling the Maya structures and using the materials to construct a cathedral and other stately buildings. Mérida took its colonial orders directly from Spain, not from Mexico City, and Yucatán has had a distinct cultural and political identity ever since.

During the Caste War, only Mérida and Campeche were able to hold out against the rebel forces. On the brink of surrender, the ruling class in Mérida was saved by reinforcements sent from central Mexico in exchange for Mérida's agreement to take orders from Mexico City.

Mérida today is the peninsula's center of commerce, a bustling city that has been growing rapidly ever since *maquiladoras* (low-paying, for-export factories) started

cropping up in the 1980s and '90s, and as the tourism industry picked up during those decades as well. The growth has drawn migrant workers from all around Mexico and there's a large Lebanese community in town.

Sights

Plaza Grande & Around

Plaza Grande is one of the nicest plazas in Mexico, and huge laurel trees shade the park's benches and wide sidewalks. It was the religious and social center of ancient T'ho; under the Spanish it was the Plaza de Armas, the parade ground, laid out by Montejo. There's a crafts market on Sunday, and dance or live music nearly every night.

A ceremony is held daily marking the raising and lowering of the Mexican flag.

Catedral de San Ildefonso CATHEDRAL
(Calle 60 s/n; ☎ 6am-1pm & 4-7pm) On the site of a former Maya temple is Mérida's hulking, severe cathedral, begun in 1561 and completed in 1598. Some of the stone from the Maya temple was used in its construction. The massive crucifix behind the altar is **Cristo de la Unidad** (Christ of Unity), a symbol of reconciliation between those of Spanish and Maya heritage.

To the right over the south door is a painting of Tutul Xiu, *cacique* (indigenous chief) of the town of Maní paying his respects to his ally Francisco de Montejo at T'ho. (Montejo and Xiu jointly defeated the Cocomes; Xiu converted to Christianity, and his descendants still live in Mérida.)

In the small chapel to the left of the altar is Mérida's most famous religious artifact, a statue called **Cristo de las Ampollas** (Christ of the Blisters). Local legend says the statue was carved from a tree that was hit by lightning and burned for an entire night without charring. It is also said to be the only object to have survived the fiery destruction of the church in the town of Ichmul (though it was blackened and blistered from the heat). The statue was moved to the Mérida cathedral in 1645.

Other than these items, the cathedral's interior is largely plain, its rich decoration having been stripped away by angry peasants at the height of anticlerical fervor during the Mexican Revolution.