



# Yucatán State & the Maya Heartland

POP 2 MILLION

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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

- ➔ The region's cultural mecca hosts the month-long Mérida fest in January, which celebrates the founding of the city. It's also the coolest time of the year – an important consideration when visiting the capital.
- ➔ 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.
- ➔ Beat the heat from November to March, especially if you're planning on visiting inland cities, plus they're ideal months for flamingo-watching in Celestún.

## MÉRIDA

📍 999 / POP 780,000

Since the Spanish conquest, Mérida has been the cultural capital of the entire Yucatán 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 events happening 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 Mérida: 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 Francisco de Montejo (the Younger). There's a crafts market on Sunday and dance or live music nearly every night.

#### ★ Casa de Montejo

MUSEUM

(Museo Casa Montejo; [www.casasdeculturabana.mx.com/museocasamontejo](http://www.casasdeculturabana.mx.com/museocasamontejo); Calle 63 No 506, Palacio de Montejo; ☎10am-7pm Mon-Sat, to 2pm Sun) **FREE** Casa de Montejo is on the south side of the Plaza Grande and dates from 1549. It originally housed soldiers but was soon converted into a mansion that served members of the Montejo family until 1970. Today it houses a bank and museum with a permanent exhibition of renovated Victorian, neorococo and neorenaissance furnishings of the historic building.

Outside, take a close look at the facade, where triumphant halberd-bearing conquistadors stand on the heads of generic barbarians (though they're not Maya, the association is inescapable). Typical of the symbolism in colonial statuary, the vanquished are rendered much smaller than the victors; works on various churches throughout the region feature big priests towering over or in front of small indigenous people. Also gazing across the plaza from the facade are busts of Montejo the Elder, his wife and his daughter.

#### Museo de Arte Contemporáneo

MUSEUM

(Macay; 📞999-928-32-36; [www.macay.org](http://www.macay.org); Pasaje de la Revolución s/n, btwn Calles 58 & 60; ☎10am-6pm Wed-Mon) **FREE** Housed in the former archbishop's palace, the attractive Museo de Arte Contemporáneo holds permanent exhibitions of Yucatán's most famous painters and sculptors, as well as revolving exhibitions of contemporary art from Mexico and abroad.