

# Yucatán State



A wild undercurrent, writhing like a liquid goddess, resides beneath the scrub jungle, pyramids and rolling hills of Yucatán state. You feel her tides as you walk beneath the towering Maya pyramids of Chichén Itzá and Uxmal, imagining the rich waves of history, slaughter, deceit, fame and famine that rolled through these mighty power centers. She ebbs and flows in the intact colonial cities of Mérida, Valladolid and Izamal as *huipil* (woven tunic)-clad *mestizas* mingle with trendy students, factory workers, tourists and the wealthy elite as they ply the streets of the peninsula's modern-day cultural crossroads. She gurgles and spits and purges and pulls in the bird-clogged estuaries along the coasts, and underground in the vast system of caves and cenotes (limestone sinkholes) that pock the region.

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-bumming. 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 southern Mexico.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at colonial architecture, take a few Spanish-language courses or attend a free concert in **Mérida** (opposite), the cultural capital of the peninsula
- Find out why they named **Chichén Itzá** (p181) the 'seventh modern wonder of the world,' or why **Ek' Balam** (p191) should have at least made the list
- Scan the salty horizon for flamingos, harpy eagles and crocodiles among the mangroves of **Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún** (p175) or **Ría Lagartos** (p193)
- Bump your way through the countryside on a horse-drawn train cart, stopping to dive into the sparkling azure riffs of the cenotes of **Cuzamá** (p170)
- Spin off the tourist track to the less-visited areas around **Valladolid** (p188) and the remote archaeological sites of the **Ruta Puuc** (p167)



■ POPULATION: 1,818,900

■ AREA: 39,340 SQ KM

# MÉRIDA

☎ 999 / pop 780,000

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 hub 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 the people who live here. They've got 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 (see boxed text, p170), 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 War of the Castes (p32), 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 benefited greatly from the *maquiladoras* (low-paying, for-export factories) that opened in the 1980s and '90s, and the tourism industry that picked up during those decades. This success means the town grows more each year, with immigrants flooding in from all around Mexico. There's even a large Lebanese community in town. This still being the provinces, locals refer to the Lebanese as Turks.

## ORIENTATION

The Plaza Grande, as *méridanos* (residents of Mérida) call the main square, has been the city's heart since the time of the Maya. Though Mérida now sprawls several kilometers in all directions, most of the services and attractions for visitors are within five blocks of the Plaza Grande. Following the classic colonial plan, the square, holding the cathedral and seats of government, is ringed by several barrios (neighborhoods). Each barrio has its park and church (side by side), usually bearing the same name: for example Iglesia de Santiago is next to Parque de Santiago in Barrio de Santiago. Locals orient themselves and often give directions referring to the barrios.

Odd-numbered streets run east-west; even-numbered streets run north-south. House numbers may increase very slowly, and addresses are usually given in this form: 'Calle 57 No 481 x 46 y 48' (between streets 46 and 48).

From 8pm Saturday to 11pm Sunday, Calles 60 and 62 are closed to motor vehicles between Plaza Grande and Calle 55.

## INFORMATION

### Bookstores

**Librería Dante** (☎ 8am-9:30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) Calle 59 (☎ 928-36-74; Calle 59 btwn Calles 60 & 62); Plaza Grande (☎ 928-26-11; cnr Calles 61 & Calle 62) Has a small selection of paperbacks in English, as well as some guidebooks, and a large selection of archaeology books in English, French, German and Spanish. The company has other branches throughout the city.

### Emergency

**Emergency** (☎ 066)

**Fire** (☎ 924-92-42)

**Police** (☎ 925-20-34)

**Red Cross** (☎ 924-98-13)

**Tourist police** (☎ 924-00-60)