



The Yucatan Peninsula on the east coast of Mexico juts out into the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf. It is one of the ancestral homes of the Maya who settled here about 4,000 years ago. The Yucatan's nearness to the islands of the Caribbean and the Maya's contacts with distant cultures made it a trading center, but it also produced a way of life that valued scholarship, artistic creativity, and sophistication. Within the Mexican state of Yucatan you will find the most impressive concentration of Maya ruins and some of the finest colonial cities, including Merida which is the capital of the Yucatan. The Yucatan is also lined with coastal communities that are famous for their beaches and wild life.



The story of how the Yucatan got its name represents one of the classic encounters between Europe and the Americas. As the first Spanish explorers came ashore they were greeted by a group of Maya. The head of the Spanish expedition, in Spanish, asked the Maya what they called their land. The Maya replied "Yucatan" which roughly translates as, "I'm terribly sorry but I don't understand what you're saying." And from that day forth this part of Mexico has been known as "I don't understand what you're saying," or Yucatan for short.

At about the same time the Roman Empire was falling, the Maya were standing up. They started building magnificent temples devoted to the god of rain. Their palaces and municipal buildings are considered to be as impressive as the structures of ancient Greece, Rome or Egypt.

The Maya had a natural appreciation for both mathematics and astronomy and were fascinated with the idea of measuring time. They developed one of the earliest and most accurate calendars and eventually ended up worshiping time—their entire life was controlled by a time-based bible. The book told them when a particular god wanted something done and god help you if it didn't happen.



Mayan agriculture was highly advanced. Among its biggest crops were corn, chili peppers, runner beans, tomatoes, and cacao. The cacao beans were

used not only to make chocolate but also as a form of money.

The Maya were the largest indigenous group in the Americas. In addition to living in Mexico, there were Maya communities in Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. They lived with rigid class distinctions. Those who had it flaunted it and those who didn't, didn't. And to make sure you knew who had it and who didn't the nobility flattened the skulls of their children so you could tell them from the masses.

The general population who were not part of the privileged classes lived in thatched wooden huts, an architectural style that is still found throughout rural Yucatan. The huts are oval and made of wood frames. The walls are filled in with branches and the spaces between the poles are filled with mud. The roof is made of waterproof palm leaves. The whole thing is about the size of a one-car garage.

### HAMMOCKS OF THE MAYA

Like their post-Columbian ancestors, present-day Maya prefer hammocks to beds—having a gentle breeze circulating completely around you is their form of air conditioning. When Columbus first saw a hammock, he was so impressed that he ordered a version as a space-saving bed for his sailors. The idea was quickly accepted by European fleets and for the past five-hundred years hammocks have been part of navy gear. The trick to sleeping in one is to sleep on the diagonal. That way when you wake up in the morning you won't be shaped like a pretzel.



Today, Merida is the center of Maya hammock making. If you are buying one it's helpful to know that nylon is better than cotton and silk is the best of all—the larger the hammock the more comfortable. And the more end strings used to produce a given hammock the better—fifty is a minimum, anything less will not be strong enough.

### UXMAL

Uxmal was once the intellectual and cultural center of the Maya in the Yucatan. Today the site is one of the important tourist attractions of the area. Juan Carlos Delgado, who is of

100% Maya decent, was the official guide who took me on a tour of the site. We started with the Pyramid of the Magician which is also called the Pyramid of the Dwarf. According to legend, this pyramid was built in only one night by a dwarf with supernatural powers. In actuality, it consists of five temples, each built on top of one another during a period of fifty-two years. The building was the center of worship for the rain god Chac and you can see representations of him throughout the building. Uxmal is considered to be the purest example of Maya architecture but very little is known about its history. At about 900 A.D. it was abandoned—probably as the result of a military invasion.



## SWIMMING THE CENOTES

The Yucatan rests on a giant sheet of porous limestone covered by a thin layer of soil. There is a considerable amount of rainfall during the rainy season but all of it quickly drains away through the soil and the limestone. As a result there are no above ground lakes or rivers in the state. But the entire region is crisscrossed with underground rivers.

When a section of the earth above an underground river collapses an underground waterhole is formed. They're called cenotes. There are thousands of them in the Yucatan and some are hundreds of feet deep. Most of the ancient Maya cities in the northern Yucatan were built near cenotes. The Maya believed that they connected our world with the secret and magical world beneath the waters. Today they are no longer a source of water for drinking and farming but an ideal sheltered swimming hole for locals and tourists.

## MÉRIDA

Merida is the capital of the Yucatan and the center of Merida is a small park called the Plaza de la Independencia. On Sunday the plaza is filled with handicraft stalls, musicians and food



vendors. The rim of the plaza is lined with confidenciales—s-shaped love seats—where, at least in theory, confidential conversations can take place.

On the east side of the Plaza is the Cathedral San Ildefonso. It was built during the second half of the 1500s and designed to double as a fortress. It was also the first Catholic cathedral built on the American

mainland. Like many churches in the Yucatan the architecture is austere—plain rough worked limestone.

The most valued object in the Cathedral is a 10-foot tall statue known as Christ of the Blisters. Legend has it that the statue was made from a tree that had been stuck by lightning and burned through an entire night but was never destroyed. When a second fire engulfed the statue it developed a few

blisters but once again survived. It is considered to have miraculous powers.

On another side of the square is the Governor's Palace which was built in 1892 and still houses the executive government of the Yucatan. Along the walls are a series of murals painted by Castro Pacheco, a local artist who depicted the Maya history in his murals.

On the corners of many buildings in Merida you will notice plaques with paintings of people, animals and other objects with their Spanish names underneath. They were put up during colonial times to teach Spanish to the natives.

## FORTUNES OF FIBER

For thousands of years the Maya have been growing henequen which is a spiky relative of the agave plant. Agave was once used to make a mildly alcoholic beverage, today it is used to make tequila. Henequen was used to make rope.

During the late 1800s, European planters began to grow henequen and convert it into rope. The leaves are cut from the plant and processed to produce a strong natural fiber. Europeans called the fiber "sisal" which is the name of the gulf coast port from which the henequen was shipped. At the end of the 1800s and early 1900s the demand for sisal in Europe



## WHAT TO DO IN THE YUCATAN

### CELESTÚN FLAMINGO RESERVE

70 KM WEST OF MÉRIDA

[WWW.YUCATANTODAY.COM](http://WWW.YUCATANTODAY.COM)

### BALAM-BEH TURISMO DE AVENTURA (ADVENTURE TOURS)

CARLOS SOSA ESTRADA — DIRECTOR

CALLE 46 NO. 471-A x 55 y 57

MÉRIDA, YUCATAN

+52 99 86 6596

[BALAMBEH9@YAHOO.COM.MX](mailto:BALAMBEH9@YAHOO.COM.MX)

### UXMAL

50 KM SOUTH OF MÉRIDA

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and the United States was so great that the plantation owners became enormously wealthy. The height of the boom came during The First World War when the demand for rope was greater than the supply. At the time, Merida had more millionaires per capita than any other city in the world. There are still a few factories left but they only operate a few days a week—their output goes to craft shops to make rugs and handbags.

## SHOPPING

One of the best places to shop for local crafts is the government craft shop in Merida. They have representative works from all over the Yucatan—reproductions of traditional jewelry designs—earrings, pins and necklaces from the Colonial period, bags made from sisal and dyed in tropical colors and lots of pottery and glasses to hold the local beer.


They also carry the white dresses embroidered with bright colors that are called huipiles and have been worn by Maya women since the 1500s, when the Franciscan missionaries arrived and started preaching modesty. Simple, light, loose fitting and traditionally made of cotton—they are well suited to the hot climate. I couldn't resist buying one for my granddaughter.



## WHAT TO EAT

The sisal wealth is gone but part of its impact is still around, especially when it comes to eating and drinking. The Maya were some of the great cooks of Mesoamerica and once you have a tradition of good cooking in place and you add big money you end up with a recipe that usually produces excellent restaurants.

The food here is a mixture of native Maya and Spanish influences. They season much of their food with a standard blend of herbs and spices. The mixture is spread on pork,



### WHERE TO EAT IN THE YUCATAN

**LA MISION DE FRAY DIEGO**  
CALLE 3 NO. 235 X 32A Y 34  
COL. PENSIONES C.P. 97219  
MÉRIDA, YUCATAN  
TEL: +52 99 20 2772

**LOS ALMENDROS**  
CALLE 50 NO. 493  
MÉRIDA, YUCATAN  
TEL: +52 99 28 5459

chicken or seafood which is grilled, steamed or braised.

One of the best meals I had was at the restaurant in La Mission de Fray Diego which is housed in a 17th century villa in the center of town. It's small. It's charming. And the food is good. I started with a lime soup made with a base of chicken stock and seasoned with lime juice and coriander. Onions, tomatoes, chopped chicken and pieces of fried tortilla are part of the recipe. The main course was barbecued pork seasoned with bitter oranges and served with a tomato sauce, roasted onions and black beans.

The second restaurant that was top notch was Los Almendros. This place has been around since the early 1970s and is a favorite with local businessmen at lunch and families at dinner.

At Los Almendros "what you see is what you get". There is a photograph of each dish on the wall and on the menu. Even if your native language is Esperanza you can be pretty sure of what you're ordering.

I started with Panuchos—home made tortillas filled with black beans and topped with shredded turkey, tomatoes, lettuce and sliced onion. Next up was Papadzules—tacos filled with chopped hard-boiled egg and served in a pumpkin seed sauce with tomato sauce. And finally, Cochinita Pibil. Pibil refers to the ancient Maya method of pit-roasting meat in a stone-lined hole in the ground. In this case, pork has been rubbed with a mixture of bitter oranges, tomatoes and onions and wrapped in a banana leaf. It ends up being baked and steamed and at the same time infused with the flavors of the spices and the banana leaf.

## SHOPPING IN THE YUCATAN

### CASA DE LAS ARTESANIAS (GOVERNMENT CRAFT SHOP)

CALLE 63 # 503-A X 64 Y 66  
MÉRIDA, YUCATAN  
+52 99 28 6676

### LA CASA DE LOS JIPIS (PANAMA HAT SHOP)

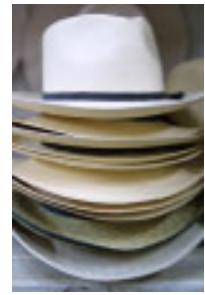
CALLE 56 NO. 526-B  
PASILLO INTERIOR, LOCAL 5  
MÉRIDA, YUCATAN  
+52 99 28 5498

## MILLINERY MADNESS

You don't have to spend much time under the Yucatan sun to appreciate the value of a good hat. Most of the local men and male tourists have succumbed to the baseball cap. But some have held to the tradition of the Panama—the Rolls Royce of tropical headgear and the place to buy one is La Casa de los Jibis, a hat shop in the market of Merida.

Contrary to its name, the Panama hat is not a native of Panama. North American engineers, who went to Panama to work on the canal liked the lightweight local straw hats and began wearing them and calling them Panamas. But in truth, workers in Central America, South America, and Mexico had been wearing them for years. During the 1920s, travelers began wearing them and eventually they caught on in Europe and United States as an item of upscale menswear.

Panama hat making is a complex and delicate task which in the Yucatan is still done by hand in much the same way that it has been done for thousands of years. Once the weaving has begun the straw must be moist which requires a humid environment and lots of water. The finer the weave, the higher the quality. There are pits and caves in the Yucatan where the great Panama hat makers work. They provide a naturally humid environment which is perfect for weaving. The finest examples of these hats are called finos and can sell for over \$1000. The one I bought was \$45 and did an excellent job keeping me cool.



## THE NATIONAL PARK OF CELESTUN

In 1997 Mexico set aside almost 200,000 acres of beach and mangrove jungle and designated the area as the Celestun wildlife refuge. It's of particular interest to tourists because of the flocks of wild flamingos that come to the shallow waters to feed.

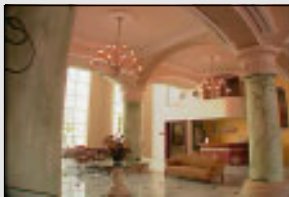
The name Flamingo comes from the Spanish flamenco, which means flaming. It's a reference to the birds' bright orange and electric pink plumage which is the result of the carotene in the algae, larvae, shrimp and other minute life that they eat.

To us, male and female flamingos are identical in appearance but they must have a very reliable way of telling each other apart because when they mate they form a monogamous couple for the rest of their lives which can last up to thirty years.

Just west of the wildlife refuge is the small fishing village of Celestun. It's perched on a narrow peninsula connected to the mainland by a causeway that crosses over a lagoon which is part of the national park. A non-profit organization, Pronatura, works with Celestun's 6,000 residents to help preserve the natural resources while developing the local economy of Maya fisherman and those natural resources are magnificent.



## WHERE TO STAY IN THE YUCATAN



While I was in the Yucatan I stayed at the Hotel Villa Mercedes which is rated as a five-star property. There are only about 80 rooms and suites and it's managed by Edith Chablé who has a great sense of hospitality. When she says you are her guest she means it.

In 1903, the first consul of France bought a villa that had been around for decades and transformed it into his personal residence. It stayed in the family until 1997 when it was transformed into a hotel, but it still has much of the feeling of a grand villa.

She told me that my fear of drinking water in Mexico was unfounded in her hotel. All the water used for drinking including the water used to make the ice, is filtered. And that's true for many of the restaurants in the Yucatan that cater to tourists.

### HOTEL VILLA MERCEDES

AV. COLÓN No. 500 x 60 y 62  
COL. CENTRO C.P. 97000 MÉRIDA, YUCATAN  
TEL: +52 99 42 9000  
[WWW.HOTELVILLAMERCEDES.COM.MX](http://WWW.HOTELVILLAMERCEDES.COM.MX)

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