

History of Merida & Culture

Merida was founded by the Spaniard Francisco de Montejo "El Mozo" on January 6, 1542. When the Spaniards arrived, Mérida was a large Mayan city known as T'ho, located where the Main Plaza is now. It was conquered by the Spaniards, who tore down all the pyramids and used the large stones for foundations of the Cathedral of San Ildefonso (1556-1599), the oldest Cathedral on the American continent.

The Cathedral, located in the eastern part of the square, is only one of many interesting places in Merida. Directly opposite the square is the Palacio Municipal (1735), the city hall of Merida. In the southern part of the city is found Casa de Montejo (1542), the former home of the conqueror of Yucatan. The Government Palace (1892), on the north side, is home to 27 murals by Fernando Castro Pacheco illustrating the violent history of Yucatan.

One of the greatest influences in Yucatecan history is that of the henequen plant, also called sisal (after the Yucatecan city of Sisal from where shipments from the continent departed). This plant became "green gold" because of the wealth it produced for the area's haciendas in this area. At the beginning of the 20th century because of the henequen or sisal trade, Mérida was home to numerous millionaires who built their lavish homes on Paseo de Montejo, and their impressive haciendas scattered throughout the jungle around Mérida.

It is a fabulous way to discover some of these mansions, many of which have been completely restored, and some whose romantic decay is food for the imagination.

For centuries, geography made it difficult for Yucatecans to communicate with the rest of Mexico. As a result, architectural and cultural influences from Europe, the Caribbean, and New Orleans were just as strong or stronger in the city's growth. To this day, the people who live here consider themselves Yucatecans first, and Mexicans second. If you look closely, you'll find T-shirts with Proudly Yucatecan stickers.

Yucatan is one of the quietest and safest states in Mexico, with a climate like that of Florida or Cuba. Yucatecans are good, calm, hospitable, and have strong roots and traditions. They proudly take their city, known as "The White City", not only because of the predominance of limestone as a building material, but also because its streets, squares and parks are cleaned every day.

For all its calm and cleanliness, Merida has become a famous place for families from other Mexican states. Many people have moved from Mexico City, where crime, pollution, and overcrowding are ever-growing problems. Crime is not tolerated in Merida, and as such, it has its distinction from the city with the lowest percentage of crime per capita in Mexico.

The Mayans of Yucatan, a living culture

When we talk about Mayans, you probably imagine those who built the pyramids that we continue to admire. We want to tell you that the Mayans today are a community with a living culture. You can find men and women living in towns and communities in all municipalities, including Mérida, the capital city of Yucatán.

Some have maintained the millenary traditions, the Mayan language and clothing, especially the huipiles in the case of women. It is enough to take a walk in the markets of the Historic Center of Mérida to find proud mestizos carrying a huipil with embroidery of multicolored flowers, a true beauty.

The traditional Maya, mainly those who live in towns outside of Mérida, have maintained some ceremonies related to the important moments of life: birth, marriage, planting, among others. To receive a new member of the family, they turn to midwives, Mayan women who accompany pregnant women during childbirth in a natural way and have a certification from the Mexican Ministry of Health to carry out their activities.

They also usually perform the ceremony of the "Hetzmeek" so that the newborn can acquire skills through the presentation of utensils related to trades such as a hammer, a *coa*, a book, a needle, etc. Traditional Mayan Weddings are also characterized by being performed by a shaman and under a rite of union with nature.

To honor the gods related to the sacred natural elements (fire, water, earth, and air), rituals are performed before and after the harvest season. In addition, faithful to the millenary heritage of the knowledge of herbalism and are treated with natural teas to cure practically many diseases, with a "huesero" (bone healer) in case of a fall and if the symptoms require special treatment, a shaman can guide them from a more spiritual and symbolic perspective.

You may wonder about the Mayans of today... Several continue to engage in agricultural activities on their own plots, mainly in the planting of papaya and citrus fruits and beekeeping. Following the artisan heritage, they are also dedicated to the elaboration of wooden crafts and to make typical embroidered garments; Meanwhile, there are those who work as tourist service guides and speak Mayan, Spanish and even English.

There are also Mayan men and women who have been adapting some recent customs, especially in the cities of Yucatan. They no longer dress in traditional clothes and have

incorporated technology and all the modernities for the home that you can imagine. Of course, family continues to be the central axis of their lives, maintaining ties and closeness when choosing a house or building. Don't be surprised if you find the whole family living on the same street, grandparents, parents, children and even cousins.

Many have studied university degrees, managing to stand out as doctors, engineers, writers and teachers, to name a few professions.

As you will see, today's Mayans have found in diversity the preservation and evolution of their culture, preserving wisdom, as well as incorporating new practices according to the new times.

By Fernanda Pacheco Yucatecan tourism specialist, ventured into the fascinating world of writers and content creation. Willing to show the world the purity of Yucatan.

Flora and Fauna in Yucatan

Our state is home to several species of animals and plants including white-tailed deer, ocelots, turkeys and jaguars that live in the mountains, pink flamingos and other birds that stay near the mangroves of the emerald coast, magnanimous trees such as the *ceiba*, *flamboyán* and *flor de mayo* that adorn both our cities and rural areas, and turtles, buffaloes and multicolored fish that swim in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

Yucatecan culture

Today's Yucatecan culture is "mestizo", a mixture of Mayan and Spanish, and to fewer other influences such as French, Cuban, Dutch, Korean and Lebanese, which can be seen particularly in our regional cuisine and architecture.

Maya is still widely spoken and has approximately 520,000 native speakers in the state. Even the Spanish spoken in the Yucatan often uses words of Mayan origin, such as "tuch" (navel) and "xix" (the rest of something). Language has a great meaning in the cultural identity of our region.

Over time, the influence of different cultures and the natural beauty of the peninsula have created a destination that has it all.

The most famous things in Yucatan

Walk through the streets of colonial cities and magical towns; visit historic haciendas; swim in the crystalline waters of our cenotes, beaches and springs; explore mysterious grottoes; see flamingos in their natural habitat; dance to the rhythm of bambuco, trova and bolero and eat delicious gastronomy with pre-Columbian roots.

Safety

Yucatan is one of the safest states in Mexico, which for years has been one of the main reasons why both students and their families have sought to establish themselves here as an educational destination.

The seven Pueblos Mágicos of Yucatan

We don't need to tell you that, in our opinion, all Yucatan is full of magic. However, the Mexican government has a program that formally recognizes certain populations when they demonstrate certain characteristics (traditions, history, nature, food, etc.) that make them unique and worth taking the time to get to know. Yucatan officially has seven *Pueblos Mágicos* [Magical Towns], each one of which is venerated for a particular characteristic.

Magical Towns of Yucatan | Yucatan Today

In alphabetical order, we present them briefly:

Espita (spigot)

Magical Town since 2023

At one time this was once the cultural capital of the state, the Athens of Yucatán, and now it is the state capital of leisure tourism. It is an ideal location to serve as a base of operations for your visits to Chichen Itza, Ek Balam, Izamal, Tizimín, Lagartos River, etc., and combines the charm of a traditional village and outstanding lodging options, making this town a haven where time seems to slow down.

Izamal

Magical Town since 2002

Just looking at Izamal one can understand why the Yellow City is one of the first Magical Towns in the country. The yellow of its colonial buildings? Its multiple archaeological sites with free access, nestled in the heart of the city? Its characteristic of being one of the few "Cities of the Three Cultures" in Mexico? The impressive and massive elevated atrium of its convent? You can choose the one you prefer; all are equally valid.

Peanut

Magical Town since 2020

Of the Magical Towns of Yucatan, none says "cultural tourism" as Peanut. Tour its church and former convent, home of the infamous auto-da-fé of Fray Diego de Landa. Marvel at the variety of stingless melipona bees that are raised here. Tour its embroidery workshops, where various techniques passed down from generation to generation are practiced. And, of course, enjoy the legendary poc chuc(roast pork fillet) that is prepared here. You will see that, in Maní, every minute is enjoyable.

Motul

Magical Town since 2023

The nearest Magical Town to Mérida is not far behind with its wealth of history, gastronomy, nature and other attractions that invite you to discover it. There are great contributions of Motul to the world, we could say, because this city has several famous children: the hero Felipe Carrillo Puerto, his sister Elvia Carrillo Puerto, and a recipe that is consumed throughout Mexico: Motuleño eggs.

Sisal

Magical Town since 2020

The only Magical Town of Yucatan that is located on the coast, Sisal is a beautiful beach where you can be in the sea, the natural protection that its wide mangroves offer you an unparalleled visit of nature, your visit to its tourist attractions (historic buildings, beaches, mangroves, water holes and the biodiversity that lives there) is special.

Tekax

Magical Town since 2023

If adventure tourism is your thing, Tekax is the Magical Town for you. The so-called "Sultana de la Sierra" is in the heart of the Puuc state biocultural reserve, between valleys and hills, and on a huge labyrinth of underground caverns. Tekax offers hiking, caving, and off-road circuits on mountain bikes or ATVs, zip lines, rappelling and many other activities that the whole family can do, with different degrees of difficulty. Also waiting for you are the church of San Juan Bautista (the second largest in Yucatan after the Cathedral of Mérida), the alley of the murals and the Hermitage of San Diego de Alcalá, the holy custodian of the city and the murals alluding to its miracles.

Valladolid

Magical Town since 2012

This Magical Town is located right where the different toll roads to Quintana Roo converge, in addition to being very close to Chichén Itzá, an archaeological site declared a wonder of the modern world. However, its location is not what makes it special (although it is undeniable that it brings a continuous flow of visitors). Founded in 1543 (only a year after Mérida), the city of Valladolid has buildings that will take your breath away (such as the Convent of San Bernardino de Siena), spectacular natural attractions (such as the cenotes that are located on its outskirts and in the very center of the city), charming streets (such as the Calzada de los Frailes) and unparalleled gastronomy (it would be impossible to give just one example).

Each of the Magical Towns of Yucatan offers you its own charm, so you can discover it at your own pace. Whether you're drawn to history, nature, adventure, or just the magic of a hidden gem, each of these villages has what it takes to be a unique experience.