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A Guide to the Yucatán—Mexico’s Best-Kept (Non-Touristy) Secret

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Uxmal in Yucatan

Photo: Courtesy of Mary Holland



Far from the maddening crowds of Riviera Maya—but the same distance from New York City—lies the Yucatán, a tranquil part of Mexico that hasn't been trodden by tourists. Rather than mega-resorts offering timeshares and unlimited cocktails, the Yucatán has attractions that make this Mayan region truly unique: the ancient city of Mérida, *cenotes*, archaeological sites, and haciendas. They're the kind of attractions you *want* to see when in Mexico, because you don't travel all this way to just sit at an overcrowded beach, do you?

See the cities:

Going on vacation to a city doesn't always feel like a vacation. One of Mérida's biggest attractions is that it doesn't really feel like a city. Despite being the capital of Yucatán state, it's wonderfully sleepy and moves at the pace of a donkey. Spend a day wandering the ancient streets lined with pastel-colored buildings and you might think you've been transported to the early 1900s, when Mérida was in its prime. You'll be tempted to spend lazy afternoons drifting from one cantina to the next drinking mezcal margaritas, but don't miss out on the city's other attractions, like Mercado Lucas de Gálvez, the city's impressive cathedral, and the Governor's Palace. Then, check into the hotel Casa Azul, a refurbished mansion that dates back to the 19th century. This bright blue building is centered around a serene courtyard, with restored tiles and vintage furniture that was handpicked from all over Mexico.

East of Mérida is the tiny city of Valladolid, which is considered the “mini Mérida.” It's even sleepier than its sister city, with pretty buildings and a whole lot of locals hanging out in palm-filled plazas doing a whole lot of chilling. Take a walk through the city past the cathedral, drop by Coqui Coqui and pick up some perfumes, then join the locals in the square for some chill time. When it's time for bed, book yourself into Coqui Coqui's one-room retreat.

Eat all the food:

Yucatán cuisine is a style of food that is completely unique to the region. One of the most significant attributes is that they use a variety of seeds, which are turned into distinct pastes, such as *achiote*—an ingredient in the Yucatán’s version of mole. The best place to find it? In Mérida, of course. At La Tradición restaurant, one of the region’s most celebrated chefs, David Cetina, tirelessly churns out local dishes. The restaurant is extremely modest and unpretentious, with a homey, old school feel. Don’t expect fancy, fussy food. Cetina’s dishes are big, rustic and traditional—the kind you’d expect to find in the kitchen of your *abuela*.

One of the city’s more forward-thinking restaurants is Apoala, situated in Santa Lucia square. Apoala serves Oaxacan-style food using local ingredients, which results in a sublime culmination of flavors. Go for the house mezcal and the Cobia fillet with pumpkin seed crust, stay for the live performances that take place in the square on Thursday nights. Book a table on the terrace and you’ll be treated to the best seats in the house.

If you can’t stomach any more tacos, consider Mercado 60, one of the newest additions to the city. This hip Smorgasburg-like food market has a multitude of stalls selling everything from pizza to craft beer.

Cool off:

Cenotes are the jewels of the region. These otherworldly swimming holes, which are linked by an underground river system, are unique to the Yucatán and Quintana Roo. There are more than 2,600 of these spectacular sparkling sink holes littered between the two regions, and every single one is different. The larger, more commercial ones can be found with ease (if you've rented a car, they are well marked on the roads), but if you want to go in search of the less-discovered ones—the ones with rickety ladders that lead you into deep, water-filled limestone caves—organize a private tour. If a swimming hole isn't enough, there are many beaches that run along the coastline of the Yucatán Peninsula and Gulf of Mexico. Want a hidden beach? Sisal Beach (about an hour from Mérida) is a low-key fishing spot that's a favorite with the locals.

Get cultured:

The city of Mérida is a deeply cultural place with weekly live performances that take place across the city. On Friday evenings, a street adjacent to the city's main town square transforms into a platform for the ancient Mayan game *pok-ta-pok*. Seeing the players walk onto the street dressed in traditional gear might lead you to believe the performance is a tourist trap. It's not. In the crowd, there are more locals than foreigners, cheering the players as they attempt to strike a ball through a ring without using their hands or feet. Don't leave before the final round, when they set the ball alight and continue to play. It's nail-biting stuff.

Beyond Mérida, the region is home to some of the most important archaeological sites in the country. One of these ancient Mayan cities is Uxmal, a mere hour drive from the city. The impressive pyramid dates back to the sixth century, a fact you might not learn if you don't hire a guide, which can be done at the entrance—these guys are incredibly clued up and eager to share their knowledge. To finish off your historic experience, check into one of the age-old haciendas, which have been refurbished into luxury lodging. Hacienda Temozon, Hacienda San Jose and Hacienda Santa Rosa are three haciendas that have been polished up to perfection, and are fit for *la reina*.