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## Mérida: A colonial city on the Yucatan has deep roots in Mexican history

Sharon McDonnell 15 hrs ago



Sharon McDonnell photos

Dancers in the main plaza of Merida, a colonial city in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico.

A fan of colonial cities, not artificial tourist enclaves like Cancun, I was looking forward to Mérida. Like Cancun, it's on the tip of the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico. But there all resemblance ends. In contrast to Cancun's glitzy collection of resorts and nightclubs, Merida, three and a half hours west, is a city filled with Mexico's rich history.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Mérida was one of Mexico's richest cities, due to sisal, rope made from the fiber of an agave-like plant; today it is chock-full of crumbling old mansions.

Sisal barons built haciendas in the countryside to make sisal, called "green gold," as they also did for agriculture, cattle ranching and mining. They built townhouses in Mérida itself, borrowing hacienda-style features like huge arches, thick stucco walls, solid wood doors, massive ceiling beams and interior patios. Many facades have Neoclassical details and richly ornamented white stucco friezes above doors and windows.

But boom turned to bust after artificial twine was invented. Thousands of people left Mérida. Poorer people, who moved into the mansions in the historic center couldn't afford to keep them up and they decayed. Sisal's loss is tourists' gain: many were bought for a song and converted to exquisite boutique hotels, often by European or American expatriates.

"There are 40,000 abandoned buildings in downtown Mérida. Major families left for Mexico City," said Alejandro Duneton, a Frenchman from Lyon (by way of Montreal) and owner of the boutique Hotel Hacienda Mérida. "I came 15 years ago, and first bought this as a vacation home."

In my giant bathroom, the size of many San Francisco studio apartments, I fingered the loofah made from sisal, a reminder of the city's changing fortunes.

On a grand boulevard inspired by the Champs Elysees in Paris, Paseo de Montejo, where 10 blocks are lined by mansions, I found a hot-pink mansion, now Rosas y Xocolate, a boutique hotel, whose theme is chocolate. Very fitting: chocolate was discovered by the ancient Mayans, who used it as a drinking beverage, and Yucatan state, of which Mérida is the capital, has the highest number of Mayans in Mexico.

At the Rosas y Xocolate spa, you can have a cocoa-based massage or rub. At its chocolate boutique, you can buy locally-made chocolate bars flavored with pink peppercorns from Veracruz or coffee from Oaxaca. The chocolate firm's owner was a Belgian chocolatier, Mathieu Brees. Fresh-cut roses and pink pillows and throws adorned guest rooms, which featured open-air bathtubs, novel in an urban hotel. Winner of an award from Architectural Digest in 2011 for the best architectural renovation in Mexico, the hotel is owned by a retired Mexican industrialist of Hungarian parentage, Carol Kolozs.

At Casa Lecanda, the whiff of luxury was in every guest room and public area behind this boutique hotel's white facade — literally. Its reception area was fragrant with orange blossoms, its lobby, eucalyptus, scents from Coqui Coqui, a Mérida perfume shop whose owner was an Argentine model of French-Austrian-Basque-Italian ancestry.

Owner Nicolas Malleville achieved his lifelong dream of living in the tropics by owning small boutique lodgings on the Yucatan peninsula; above his shop, a guest room was decorated in Belle Epoque-style, with red-velvet ottomans and a chandelier in the bathroom.

I took a Yucatecan cooking class with a Top Chef Mexico 2016 contestant at Casa Lecanda, whose owner is an Italian, Stefano Marceletti; his American accent derived from his high school and college years in Southern California.

But beneath its veneer of European sophistication, Mérida has solid Mayan roots. I watched women in Yucatecan dress, long white dresses with colorful floral embroidery, dance (with trays of drinks atop their heads, at one point) in Parque Santa Lucia, a square lined by sidewalk cafes and restaurants. It was one of free music and dance performances nightly outdoors in the city.

Mayan ruins surround Mérida. At Dzibilchaltun, less than eight miles away, I swam in a round cenote with lily pads. Better known is Uxmal, a 45-minute drive, and Chichen Itza, a one and a half-hour drive.

Cenotes, or natural sink holes, supplied fresh water to the Mayans, who often used them for ceremonies, believing them to be bridges from the divine to human. There's even a cenote in the Costco parking lot in Mérida, found during construction (not open to swimming, though).

Fittingly, there's a Mayan Museum in Mérida, Gran Museo del Mundo Maya. The museum offers a great overview of the civilization that once ruled southeast Mexico, Belize and Guatemala. Its 1,100 artifacts from archaeology sites include stone sculptures from Chichen Itza and jewelry made from jadeite. Here, too, are gods of the sun, rain and earth, worshiped by peasants, and gods of trade and war, revered by the elite. There's also an exhibit on the importance of maize from which the Mayans believed man was made.

At an excellent museum about chocolate, Choco-Story, located in Uxmal just outside the well-preserved ruins, I learned how it evolved from Mayan beverage to solid bars in Europe, plus oddball facts like how Voltaire, the brilliant Enlightenment thinker, attributed his mental acuity to drinking chocolate-flavored coffee each morning. At a demo, I drank Mayan chocolate, so very bitter I added five sugars before finding it even palatable.

A culinary mystery nagged at me during my stay in Mérida. Dutch Edam cheese was everywhere: in Marquesitas de Queso Bolo (rolled wafers stuffed with “bowl” cheese, topped by caramel sauce) sold by street vendors; in Queso Relleno, a casserole of hollowed-out Edam cheese stuffed with ground pork, raisins, almonds, olives, bell peppers and capers; in Helado de Bola (“bowl” ice cream) and Dulce de Papaya con Queso, candied lime juice-soaked papaya served with shredded Edam. While I’d eaten Keshi Yena, very similar to Queso Relleno, in Aruba, Curacao and Bonaire in the Caribbean, that was perfectly understandable: they were former Dutch colonies. But Mérida wasn’t, so how did this happen?

So, I asked tourism. I learned that, according to a legend, a boat from Holland was forced to dock on the Yucatan peninsula near Mérida due to bad weather in the 19th century; exposed to Dutch cheese for the first time, the locals fell in love. In reality, during Mérida’s sisal glory days, Holland was an active trading partner. Goods were swapped, Edam was introduced, and became popular in local food culture.

Mystery solved.

Sharon McDonnell is a San Francisco-based travel writer. She can be reached at [sharonfmc.com](http://sharonfmc.com).

### If you go

For more information about Merida, see [www.gotoyucatan.com](http://www.gotoyucatan.com).

For Yucatan tourism: [www.gotoyucatan.com](http://www.gotoyucatan.com).

United Airlines flies nonstop from Houston and American flies weekly nonstop weekly from Dallas.

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