

A REAL TASTE OF THE YUCATAN

Merida, long known as the heart of Mexico's Yucatan culture, offers a surprising menu of things to do – and foods to eat – that you don't always get in other parts of this Latin American country. BY DOUG O'NEILL

My mission, as I concocted it on the eve of my trip to Merida, was simple: I'd empty every peso from my pocket until I tasted the perfect taco. No suburban barrio or tree-shaded *calle* (street) would go unexplored until I chowed down on the taco of my dreams; one that would deliver the optimal punch of lime with the tongue-searing bite of chopped jalapeno, layered with chili-infused beef and other secret ingredients, all on a soft corn tortilla. If the potty-mouthed chef Gordon Ramsay – who introduced the British palate to his version of beef tacos with wasabi mayo – could devote serious effort to a taco conquest, so could I.

I imagined my culinary sleuthing would go like this: I'd don dark glasses, perhaps with a fedora perched on my head (no clichéd sombrero for me), and sidle up to patrons in a local taqueria: "Psst, amigo, where can I get the best taco in town? Not the Taco Bell version. I want the real thing." I would then seal the deal with a knowing wink and my rudimentary Spanish translation of, "I'll make it worth your while." And therein would lie the route to my gourmandise pot of gold.

I had no idea my quest would be derailed so quickly with barely a shrug from a Meridian (as residents of Merida call themselves) within hours of my arrival in this historic city on the Yucatan Peninsula, known for its Mayan Temples, colonial architecture and signature white limestone buildings.

"Taco? Why would you want to eat

tacos? Certainly, my friend, they're good," said my host Ismene during lunch at La Chaya Maya, a restaurant near the Plaza de la Independencia city square that specializes in local cuisine. "But why tacos when there's so much more? Try some of this." She scooped two spoonsful from a banana-leaf wrapped dish called *cochinita pibil* onto a plate and slid it across the table. I gingerly ate a mouthful and was immediately lost – carried off by the surprising flavours of succulent pork marinated in sour Seville orange juice and spice, enhanced with helpings of pickled red onion, black bean purée and handmade tortillas. By the time I was into my second bite, Ismene and two of our table mates had launched into a spirited debate about which Yucatan dishes I had to try next: *panuchos* (crispy corn tortillas filled with black bean puree, shredded turkey, lettuce, cucumber, tomato, onion and avocado); *sopa de lima* (shredded chicken swimming in a lime-heavy broth); *poc-chuc* (thin slices of marinated pork which are charbroiled and garnished with piquant tomato sauce, pickled onions, lettuce, black beans, avocado and served with tortillas); *queso relleno* (a hollowed-out mound of Edam cheese, stuffed with meat or poultry, peppers, onions, tomatoes, raisins, capers, olives, and herbs and spices); and the choices went on.

I suddenly appreciated the words of author John Steinbeck, who enjoyed long visits to Mexico during his writerly life: "The best-laid plans of mice and men oft go astray..."

I had come to Merida with a pre-set

plan of what I thought I should eat and do, and so inspired by earlier visits to Mexico, I had tacos on my mind. But here's the rub: the Yucatan Peninsula differs from other parts of the country, and there's a night-and-day contrast between the culturally-rich Merida and the resort-friendly beach destinations like Cancun, only three hours away by car.

Just as the food options differ, so too do the tourist experiences on this strip of land separating the Gulf of Mexico from the Caribbean Sea. With Merida as your base, it's easy to tour the Mayan pyramids and temples at the archaeological site of Chichen Itzá (one of the New Seven Wonders of the World), explore the sacred cenotés whose deep pools of water hold such myth and mystery for the Mayans, take a riverboat ride down La Ria de Celestun to admire

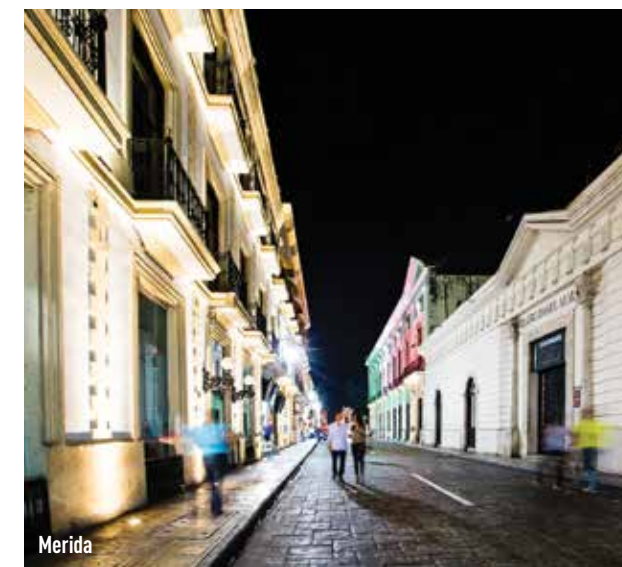


Cochinita pibil

Visit Mexico

the thousands of flamingoes or wander the quiet (and walkable) colonial city of Valladolid. There are beaches too, of course. The white-sand stretch of coastline at Celestun is the perfect spot to round-off a day of sight-seeing – and eating (thumbs-up to the ceviche and octopus at beachfront La Palapa Restaurant) – before heading back to nearby Merida.

Table talk during my last dinner there, an alfresco meal at the highly-recommended Apoalo restaurant in *Cerro Santa Lucia* (Santa Lucia Park) turned once more to *cochinita pibil*. Only weeks earlier, the Yucatan regained the Guinness World Record for cooking the largest *cochinita pibil* in history – one that required 6,600 kilograms of pork. And to think that I came close to missing this succulent local dish!



Merida

WHEN YOU GO

BEST TIME TO VISIT: Between November and March.

HOW TO GET THERE: WestJet flies into Manuel Crescencio Rejón International Airport in Merida.

WHERE TO STAY: Casa del Balam Hotel, a distinguished property and one of the oldest in Merida.

BEST TACOS: OK, if you really must: Try the *tacos el pastor* (lots of pineapple and pork) at Wayané, a taco stand in Colonia Aleman on Calle 15.

LEARN HOW TO COOK: Coco Cuisine is a hip start-up of brother-and-sister team Alonso Sergio Gonzales Alonso and Anna Lucia Munoz who host a back-yard cooking school – with wine.