

TRAVEL

ART HAS NO BORDERS IN MEXICAN CITY OF MERIDA

BY PETER MALDEMAN
New York Times

On a sultry November afternoon in Mérida, Mexico, I sat with my friend David Serrano on the terrace of Apoala, a Mexican-fusion restaurant on the Plaza de Santa Lucia, tucking into Flores de Amarrillo-zucchini blossoms stuffed with Oaxacan cheese — and people watching. David, a Mexican by birth and a Mérida resident by choice, deftly picked out the vacationers (in short pants, like myself,

because of the heat) from the locals (in long pants, like David, because of the insects).

An elegant blond woman in slacks drifted over to the table to say hello to David — Elena, he explained, a fashion designer from Milan. A few minutes later a tanned couple, the husband leaning on a cane as a result of a riding accident, dropped by — Ralf and Yvonne, the Germans who run the Yucatán Polo Club. After lunch we stopped at K'Xocolati — the chocolate store next to the restaurant run by two Belgians — and bumped into Carmen, a painter from Mexico City, and Marcela, a Yucatecan artist who got out her phone to show me pictures of the sculptures she makes from sisal fiber.

So it goes in Mérida, the capital of Mexico's Yucatán state and a magnet for creative souls from both sides of the border and beyond: They come from the United States and Can-

ada, Mexico City and Europe, lured by the city's un-Disneyfied Mayan and colonial heritage. Among the expats artists James Brown and Jorge Fardo, designers Laura Kirar and Marjorie Skouras, and chefs Jeremiah Tower and (until his death in 2016) David Sterling. Just don't call it the next San Miguel de Allende.

"People go to San Miguel to retire," David, acting as both my host and tour guide during my first visit to the city, said back in the car. "Here you come and work. I think the heat wakes you up."

The heat — or maybe it was the food — was having the opposite effect on me. But our Uber driver, Israel, a Yucatecan of Lebanese descent, cranked up the AC in his Dodge Neon. The radio was also rousing: Israel blasted KIIS FM ("You're the One That I Want") as he negotiated the narrow streets lined with tall colonial houses in sherbet colors back to David's place.



Casa Lecanda, two blocks from Paseo de Montejo, in Mérida, Mexico.

We had spent the morning driving around the centro histórico. Mérida, named for the ancient Spanish city, was founded in 1542 by the conquistador Francisco de Montejo y Leon on the site of the Maya city of T'ho. On La Plaza Grande (the main square) David pointed out the Catedral de San Ildefonso and the Casa de Montejo, both constructed of stone from the ancient pyramids and temples, both dripping with Renaissance ornamentation. "You see the Roman influence, just as there was the Roman influence in Mérida, Spain," David explained. "The French came later."

On cue, Israel had turned up the Paseo de Montejo, the city's main artery, and suddenly we were sur-

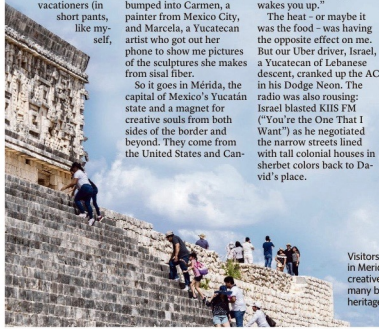
rounded by palm-shaded mansions in the Beaux-Arts style — the trophy homes of the 18th- and 19th-century millionaires who made their fortunes producing henequen (or sisal) from the agave plant. The rich Yucatecans rejected Hispanic culture in favor of all things French, and Paseo de Montejo bears more than a passing resemblance to a street in old New Orleans, which happens to be a sister city.

The pale blue exterior of the 200-year-old house in the Santiago barrio that David and his partner, Robert Willson, bought a few years ago is reserved, almost anonymous. Inside it looks the way you might imagine a casa restored by two guys who used to run one of Los Angeles' pre-

mier design showrooms would look. There are 20-foot beamed ceilings and boldly patterned concrete floors, terra cotta sphinxes and French chairs made of steel and twine. The lush scent of plumeria wafts from the courtyard, where a Finesse-inspired mural overlooks a turquoise pool.

"People come here and visit ruins and conote the first time," David had told me, "look at houses the second time, and buy a house the third time." Happily for first-time visitors, more than a few of those who return and buy renovate their homes as boutique hotels or rentals. Hotel Diplomat,

SEE MERIDA, TM



Visitors climb the Mayan ruins of the Governor's Palace in Mérida, Mexico. The capital of the Yucatán attracts creative types from around Mexico and across many borders, drawn by its Mayan and colonial heritage and, for some, its path to the future.

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MÉRIDA

down the street from David's place, is one of the more intimate B&Bs, with just four rooms, while Casa Lecanda, two blocks from Paseo de Montejo, is one of the more luxe ones. Urbano Rentals offers several meticulously restored town homes in the centro histórico.

I repaired to my guest room, settling in for a siesta on the steel canopy bed. An Olivia Newton-John/John Travolta ear worm had worked its way into my head, but at some point I dozed off. When I awoke my room was dark, and rain pelted the roof — a steady, cooling volley punctuated by rumbling thunder.

CROSSING FRONTIERS Luckily Israel's musical tastes were varied. The next morning, he was playing Mexican techno. In a light drizzle we set off for the ruins of Uxmal, a Maya city 50 miles south of Mérida, known for its ornate Puuc-style architecture and its fine state of preservation.

Uxmal, population 20,000, give or take, was founded about A.D. 500 by Chac Uitzil Hun, I learned from my guide, Fabio, a Yucatecan with a mouth full of gold and a wicked sense of humor. We made our way around the Pyramid of the Magician, the site's tallest structure, to the grass-covered Ball-

court. Competitions here generally concluded with a human sacrifice, Fabio said, doing a little pantomime of the victor having his heart ripped out and offered to the gods, his gold teeth sparking in the mist.

We climbed the steep stone steps to the Governor's Palace, whose massive mosaic facade boasts 103 masks of the rain god Chac (no cenotes nearby). As we peered a group of German tourists sharing a joint, one of them lost her footing on the steps. "Careful," Fabio warned. "We lost someone here yesterday."

"They say that to everyone, I told him about it back in the car."

After touring the oldest remnants of Yucatán civilization, we set out for its newest frontier. Many of the affluent Mexicans moving to Mérida are settling not in centuries-old casas in town or haciendas in the country but in the sparkling new suburbs of el norte — a long swath of gated communities and giant malls to the north of the city. Our destination was a restaurant called Tatemar in Plaza La Isla, a just-opened 180-store mall developed by Carlos Slim, the richest man in Mexico (and an investor in The New York Times).

Carlos Arnaud, who owns the Oaxacan-flavored



Dining outdoors at Apoala, a Mexican-fusion restaurant, in Mérida, Mexico.

Tatemar with his sister Sara, steered us to a table overlooking La Isla's artificial lake and handled the ordering: grouper with guacamole, octopus with maize puree, pork and shrimp tacos. "Here in the Yucatán, Mayan culture was untouched until the Spanish," he said, joining us at the table. "Oaxaca is more of a melting pot, so you carry the tradition of cooking with corn and beans, but in a different way, using chocolate and moles."

Traditional Yucatecan cuisine, on the other hand, weeds Mayan ingredients (corn, chiles, pumpkin) with culinary contributions from Spain (pork, lard, Seville orange) and other parts of Europe. Tower, the chef, who has lived in Mérida for the last decade, haunts the city's food stalls for fried pork belly and other Yucatecan staples. Gringos who want to master time-honored recipes like pavo en relleno negro (roasted turkey in charred chili sauce) can take classes at Los Dos, the cooking school founded by David Sterling.

Mexico can go on for hours here. We were in Tatemar until sundown, feasting and chatting. David and Carlos spoke in glowing terms about Mérida's rapid growth. When he arrived here four years

ago, David said, there were seven Starbucks; now there are 18. "The first wave of discovery was like 10 years ago," Carlos noted. "Tulum went through all the stages of growth in five years. You can't grow there like you can here because of the size."

When we left the mall the sun was sinking below a stand of tamarind trees. Suddenly there was an explosion of bird chatter — the evening song of blackbirds known locally as X'Kau — a reminder that, for all the golf courses and Porsche dealerships, we were still in the jungle.

Among Mérida's best exhibition spaces, Lagala, Galería La Eskalera, the Fundación de Artistas, and Centro Cultural La Cupula are all in the centro histórico. La Cupula, a sprawling garden-linked complex, hosts music, dance and theater performances as well as exhibitions. A show of David's recent paintings happened to be up when I was in town, so we swung by the morning of my last day in the city. "Predictions and Sortileges" is a series of canvases, executed in white acrylic on brightly painted backdrops, about fortune telling. We paused in front of a painting of a female medium with a pair of birds on her head, surrounded by a faithful audience. "She gets power telling people what they want to hear," David explained. "Like Trump."

We had been asked to lunch at the country hacienda of Laura Kirar, the designer, and her husband, Richard Frazier. So we picked up a roasted chicken at a roadside stand, and Irelad navigated a series of narrow village roads lined with shacks in tarty colors and teeming with mototaxis, pedestrians and dogs that seemed oblivious to both.

Hacienda Subin is a romantically crumbling 18th- and 19th-century Monisth-style compound on 40 acres in the jungle. Like the other haciendas in the area it was once part of a henequen ranch. Laura and Richard, who moved here from New York full-time a

The Catedral de San Ildefonso in Mérida, Mexico.

year and a half ago, are living in a pool house they built while they painstakingly restore the main building. "It's like children," Richard said, pouring coffee sweetened with agave nectar. "You don't know what you're getting into until it's too late."

Dozens of the sisal haciendas outside Mérida have been renovated as resorts. One of the newest and poshest is the Chabré Resort and Spa, in Chochola — 38 modern casitas, each with its own pool and hammock, on the jungled grounds of the former henequen estate Hacienda San Antonio Chabré. As for Hacienda Subin, Richard and Laura are rehabbing its factory building as a multi-purpose space for community events.

Expatriate colonies can be insular, but Mérida's outlanders are establishing deep roots here. On our way back to the city we stopped at Pintar! Matilde, a 99,000-square-foot arts center rising like a modern acropolis in the middle of the jungle. Conceived by Mexico City sculptor Javier Marín, Matilde serves as a campus for international art students and local schoolchildren as well as a studio and exhibition space for the artist.



Octopus with maize puree served at Tatemar in Mérida, Mexico.

LOS CABOS