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MAYAN MYSTERIES

After centuries of civilization, innovation and reinvention, the Yucatán continues to delight, and deliver. By Paul Gallant

I've heard the cenotes of the Yucatán Peninsula called "sinkholes," a term which does a tremendous disservice to the fairy-tale beauty of these natural wonders. As I descend into the cathedral-sized cenote at Tsukán Santuario de Vida, tiny birds zip around the icicle-shaped stalactites high above my head, while beams of sunlight glitter on the deep blue water. I feel like I'm in a movie — a romance or an adventure, depending on the mindset.

There are perhaps more than 8,000 cenotes scattered across the Yucatán peninsula, that thumb of Mexico that divides the Gulf of Mexico from the Caribbean Sea. Some, like Tsukán, have been developed to provide sumptuous spa-style experiences, while some are rarely visited by anyone other than locals. Both mysterious (were they created by an asteroid crash? Are they, as Indigenous beliefs hold, gateways to the underworld?) and practical (they have been a source of water for the Maya people for millennia), cenotes are a perfect symbol of the Yucatán: you cannot comprehend the magic until you experience it first-hand.

I first visited Yucatán state and its capital Mérida, a city of about 900,000 people, about a dozen years ago and was impressed by the colourful culture. I loved local culinary delights — like the smouldering *cochinita pibil* (pig cooked underground in a steaming, fiery stone-lined-pit until beyond tender) and the crunchy refried *panuchos* (a refried, fried tortilla topped with pulled turkey, beans and pickled onions) — along with the folkloric dancing that took place many evenings in the Plaza Grande (the city's main square). Though Mexico has many well-preserved colonial cities worth exploring, Mérida is one of the only ones close to the coast; it's just a 45-minute drive from the *centro histórico* to the beachside community of Progreso and an hour to the former port town of Sisal, designated a *pueblo magico* (magic town) for its history and proximity to outdoor adventure. For me, Mérida was the Mexican destination that didn't force a choice between culture and nature.

Overshadowed by the Riviera Maya — the flashy mega-resort region about a

four-hour drive away in the neighbouring state of Quintana Roo — Mérida felt, at first, like a well-kept secret, its charms somewhat provincial. The ornate late-19th-century and early-20th-century mansions along the city's elegant Paseo de Montejo, built from fortunes made from the export of *henequén*, an agave plant used to make rope, seemed like reminders of a past golden era.

Since that first visit, though, Yucatán has become increasingly cosmopolitan and outward-looking, as local entrepreneurs, alongside investors and creative types from other regions of Mexico, the United States and Canada, have flocked here. Attracted by the state's reputation for being the safest in Mexico, the high quality of life and the friendly easy-going local culture, incoming residents have added layers of sophistication to an already rich culture.

In 2018, Mexico City designer Mónica Calderón and her husband, architect Ezequiel Farca, launched Casa Escuela here, a multidisciplinary space dedicated to art, design, wellness and local cuisine and culture in what was an abandoned 1919

ROOTED IN REINVENTION

Nestled in the Mayan Forest just 40 minutes from Mérida, sits Chablé Yucatan, a five-star spa retreat. As the 750 acres unfold before visitors, the gems hidden within reveal themselves at the perfect pace — luxuriously.

Built up from the ruins of a historic henequen hacienda, the completely restored property recalls the elegance and sophistication of the past. With 40 casitas and villas, each with a private plunge pool, two on-site restaurants helmed by two of Mexico's top chefs: Chef Jorge Vallejo and Resident Executive Chef Luis Ronzóna, a world-class spa designed around a private cenote (complete with Mayan-Inspired treatments that harness the power of Mérida's ancestral techniques and herbal ingredients), recharging becomes delightfully inevitable.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Cenotes across the Yucatán Peninsula offer a unique swimming experience for visitors and a way for the Maya people to connect to their ancestors. Photo: Alamy. THIS PAGE (from top): Wood and natural stone highlight Chablé Yucatan's entrance to its spa; colonial-era mansions, built during the henequén boom, line Paseo de Montejo, a major thoroughfare in Mérida. Photo: courtesy of Chablé Spa.

building. In 2020, Mexico City entrepreneur Heladio Najera Zarco opened Salon Gallos, a resto-bar-gallery-cinema venue that's chic and fitting of a metropolitan centre. And just this year, Kansas City chef Ted Habiger, who focuses on farm-to-table fare, introduced the open-fire-themed restaurant Anima on the city's emerging culinary row to rave reviews.

In Mérida's ritzy northern neighbourhoods, sleek new shopping centres like

City 32 are popping up to serve the needs of expats and transplants from other parts of Mexico who are relocating to the many transplanted communities being built there. Some new residents are forgoing the city altogether, buying and renovating sprawling properties in the towns, villages and countryside, using the city itself as a place for supplies and nights out.

The proximity to Cancún, which hosted almost nine million international visitors

last year, has influenced the current Yucatán development boom. Destinations like Valladolid, one of the state's largest cities and located about halfway between Mérida and Cancún, have done an excellent job of offering an alternative to cookie-cutter experiences. Valladolid's Colonté Hotel Origen, for example, is a 10-room boutique property tucked behind a remodelled traditional Maya home, featuring a low oval outer wall topped by a steep thatched roof. Though these homes are often described in a way that places them in history, these sustainable structures still provide housing today in communities across the peninsula. Colonté's clever use of the form as the entrance to a stylish urban oasis feels like a modern celebration of the achievements of Maya society. Valladolid's tidy colonial grid layout, its Indigenous cultural influences, its cenote Zaki right downtown and its proximity to the Maya ruins at Chichén-Itzá — the most famous of 18 major archeological sites in the state — makes it a synthesis of so much of what makes Yucatán special.

This time in the spotlight seems unlikely to end soon. A passion project of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, El Tren Maya — a railway encircling the peninsula — is scheduled to go into operation later this year. Though there have been delays, when it does finally launch, the service will improve transportation across five states, and make many parts of Yucatán much more accessible.

It will be a mixed blessing. The magic of this destination deserves to be widely celebrated and embraced. But for those of us who feel they'd personally discovered something magical, Yucatán will become a much more poorly kept secret. □