

# Colonial Merida:

## Spanish Gem In A Necklace Of Mayan Splendour

> By Habeeb Salloum

Some years back, I asked a friend, after he had made a long trip to the Yucatán, Mexico's famous land of Mayan pyramids, "What was the most memorable place you visited during your travels?" Without hesitation, he replied, "The beautiful white city of Mérida. It is a Spanish gem, set in a necklace of Mayan splendour." His words formed a picture which lingered in my mind for years.

Now as I walked this city's streets, intrigued by the old structures with their Moorish flair, I remembered his description of this Andalusian-like town. However, I found that his words did not, in a sense, reflect reality. The whiteness has faded with the years and the traffic was maddening, but many of the buildings with their grandiose façades, carved wooden doors and archways, concealing exquisite marble tiles and lush gardens, reminded me of Andalusia. One could easily see that this city of 1.5 million has retained much of its colonial charm, but not the whiteness for which it was once renowned.

The capital of the Yucatán and that state's key commercial centre, Mérida's origin goes back to 1542 when it was erected by the Spanish atop the ruins of the Mayan city of T'hó (Place of the Fifth Point) indicating that it was the centre of the universe - the spot between the cardinal points. This pre-Hispanic past has haunted the city ever since. Even though it looks more European

than any other city in Mexico, it remains very Mayan.

For centuries, Mérida, named by the Conquistadors for its name-sake in Spain, was the main stronghold of Spanish colonialism in the land of the Maya. In its heyday, it was the wealthiest state capital in Mexico. Today, the city is cosmopolitan and crowded, full of history and romanticism. It is the cultural centre of the Yucatán. Mérida's attributes have become magnets, drawing people from the four corners of the world. Visitors take pleasure in its diversity of people and its wealth of colonial architecture, but not in its madding streets choked with cars and buses. Nevertheless, it is easy to explore the old city on foot. Almost all of Mérida's historic buildings are within walking distance of the Zócalo - the city's centre which is green and shady, reflecting a Moorish touch.

The severe fortress-like oldest Cathedral in the Americas, built from the stones of the Mayan temple; the Palacio de Gobierno

with its 27 gigantic murals, narrating the strife-filled history of the Yucatán Peninsula; the colonial-style Palacio Municipal; and the 1549 Casa de Montejo, the former home of the conqueror of Yucatán and the oldest colonial structure in Mérida, all edge the Zócalo.

However, due to the horrendous traffic, Sunday is the only day on which one can enjoy the city. All day long on Sundays, the downtown streets are blocked to traffic and one can sit in outdoor cafes or stroll in peace, relishing the Colonial-Andalusian architecture of the old town while being entertained by folkloric performances, concerts and serenades in the streets.

Strolling the streets during my first Sunday in Mérida, it seemed to me that half the population of the city was promenading around the Zócalo, dressed in their finest, while the other half, with a sprinkling of tourists, was watching colourful folkloric groups in the surrounding streets. It was a world of colour and excitement. ▶



الكبة والحمص هما الآن طبقان مكسيكيان  
Kubbah & Hummus-Now Mexican Dishes



الكبة- طبق مكسيكي  
Kubbah -Now a Mexican Dish



أوراق العنب المحشية- طبق مكسيكي  
Stuffed Grape Leaves-Now Mexican Dish

From the Zócalo, I walked north along Calle 60 to Calle 47 where I turned to Paseo de Montejo, Mérida's broad and elegant tree-lined 'Champs Elyses'. The city's most fashionable thoroughfare, is edged by many 19th century millionaires' mansions, banks, hotels, restaurants and leads to Progreso with its beaches - the nearest sands to the city, some 36 km (22 mi) away.

From this European-like boulevard, it was a leisurely ride by a horse-drawn carriage, costing \$10. an hour, to the Mercado Municipal (Municipal Market), for most visitors a major attraction. Mayan women vendors, offering their handicrafts and other wares, occupied almost every inch of this massive and pungent market. Like the majority of other tourists, I relished the flavour of a people whose civilization had been eradicated centuries ago yet they still exist and even thrive. Centuries after the Conquistadors the Yucatán remains a stronghold for the country's indigenous population. Apparently, as the guides say, "The occupation was never really completed."

Some of the most impressive ruins of these peoples' ancient cities lie within a two hour drive from the city. Mérida is an ideal base for excursions to the great Mayan cities of Uxmal and Chichén Itzá and many other archaeological sites in the Yucatán - often called the door to the Mayan world.

For our first taste of these ancient cities, we drove to Dzibilchaltun (place of writing on stones), 23 km (14 mi) northeast of Mérida. In pre-Hispanic times, it was an important commercial hub and a major centre of Mayan culture. One of the most ancient of the Central American Indian cities, with a history going back 3,000 years, it is believed to be the longest occupied of the Mayan sites. Covering 65 sq km (25 sq mile) area and once having a population of 40,000, it is renowned for its House of Seven Dolls - a primitive type Mayan observatory that served as a guide to the time of seeding and harvesting.

We roamed through the ruins, marvelling at the genius of the ancient Mayan builders, then left for the nearby beaches of Progreso with its long stretches of clean-white sands and 7 km (4.5 mile) long pier - the second longest pier in the world. Built, in the main, for cruise ships, it is an ideal stop for these liners carrying tourists who may wish to visit the nearby Mayan ruins. Tourism in this port is now a flourishing



**Sunday Festival**

احتفال يوم الأحد



**Facade of Building** واجهة مبنى

industry. The once tranquil fishing village is now a town of more than 50,000.

At Progreso's Pelicanos Restaurant, as we relished the tasty creatures of the sea, I recalled my exploration of a colonial city, Mayan ruins and sunny beaches like the one before us - all tourist drawing cards to Mexico's Yucatán Province and its Andalusian-like capital of Mérida. ■

### How to Get There:

Mérida has an airport with good connections to Mexico City.

### Facts About Mérida :

1) In the city of Mérida, streets are almost always congested. A small car rents for around \$60 per day - less if you bargain or if you are not fussy about the auto.

2) The official Mexican currency is the peso currently trading at around - 11 pesos to a US dollar – 9.4 pesos to a CDN dollar.

3) The usual tips for baggage handlers and bellboys is \$1.00 per suitcase; maids \$1.00 per day and 50 cents for washroom attendants.

4) Mérida has the best shopping in the Yucatán in handicrafts which include hammocks, belts, sandals, henequen bags, guayabera shirts and many other artisan products. Casa de Artisans is the place to buy high quality handicraft articles.

5) The authentic Yucatán dishes are sopa de lima, a soup made from chicken, tortilla and lime juice; puchero, a vegetable and meat stew; pollo pibil, marinated chicken cooked in banana leaves; papadzules, tacos stuffed with hard-boiled eggs; and salsa de chile authentic Yucatán food, customers are entertained in a cenote (underground river) with realistic Mayan folklore.



**Balloons Seller**

بائع البالونات

6) If one has time to spare, there are 8 museums in Merida- don't miss Museo de antropología e historia.

7) When you leave Mexico there is a 'Departure Tax' of about \$18.00 US per person but this tax is usually included in your airline ticket.

### For Further Information, Contact:

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