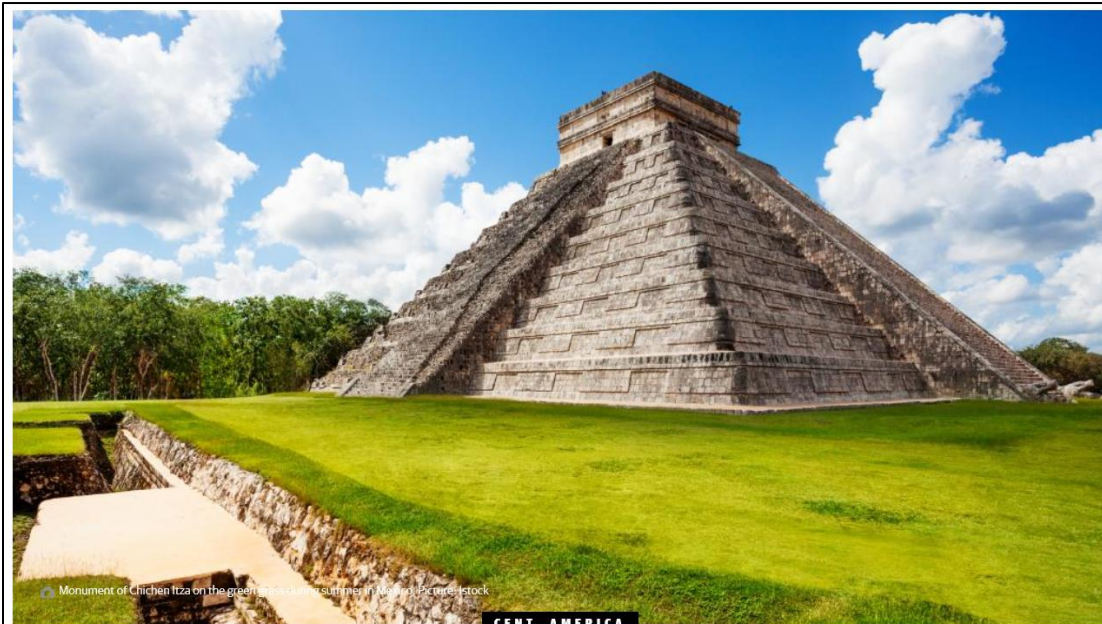


# ESCAPE



## FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD, MERIDA IS MEXICO'S SANCTUARY

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Looking at a map of Mexico, you might pass off the state of Yucatán as too remote, too far away. And you'd be right: nestled in northwest Mexico, on a peninsula facing the Gulf, getting there usually requires a stopover in Mexico City en route to the capital, Merida. But it's the sense of isolation that visitors find so appealing — Merida's raw wilderness a perfect antidote to Mexico City's urban jungle.

Yucatán peninsula is located on the flip side of Cancun, a spring break favourite for North Americans. Spared the party crowd, Merida instead draws artists and second homeowners craving a slower pace of life. Fans of American reality TV series *House Hunters* might recognise it as the location of a few flips, filmed here and tightly edited into one-hour episodes to show the laborious process of converting Spanish colonial fixer-uppers into beautiful (vacation) homes with ease.

Built on the Maya city of T'ho, Merida is near major archaeological sites including Chichen Itza and Uxmal, a smaller ruin, but closer in distance and less crowded with tourists. There are also beaches and biosphere reserves — three in this state — worth the drive to see colonies of pink flamingoes and sweeping sea views. Summers are scorching: There's no escaping the blazing sun and muggy jungle but it's nothing a swim and margarita can't fix.

### **DAY ONE**



📷 Colourful Mexican colonial buildings in a city street. Merida, Mexico. Picture: istock



Spend the day exploring Merida, a charming town with cobbled streets extending from the town's heart, Plaza de la Independencia. The historic centre is walkable and pretty, lined with low-level Spanish colonial buildings painted the colours of Pantone swatches. On the way to coffee shop Manifesto (Calle 59 #538 X 66 Y 68, Barrio de Santiago, Centro), you might pop into Coqui Coqui Perfumeria run by contemporary landscape architect and perfumer Nicolas Malleville ([coquicoqui.com](http://coquicoqui.com)); and Casa Catherwood gallery ([casa-catherwood.com](http://casa-catherwood.com)), named for the English explorer Frederick Catherwood who, along with American explorer John Lloyd Stephens, discovered the ruins of Copán, Uxmal, and Chichen Itza in the early 1800s.

A stroll down Paseo de Montejo leads to Casa Museo Montes Molina (Paseo de Montejo 469, Centro; [laquintamm.com](http://laquintamm.com)), the street's only beautifully preserved European-style mansion accessible via guided tour, and Palacio Canton (Paseo de Montejo 485, Centro), a lavish two-storey yellow-and-white Baroque mansion now housing The Regional Museum of Anthropology of Yucatán whose rotating Maya culture exhibits recently featured the fascinating Flowers in Mexican Culture show.



Merida city Town hall of Yucatán in Mexico. Picture: Istock

Because it's a bit of a walk back to the plaza, you might take a taxi to hear mass at Catedral de San Ildefonso (Calle 60, Centro), said to be the oldest cathedral in the Americas. Built in 1598 and made of white stone, its Renaissance architecture is stunning. Shops and restaurants are clustered around the plaza, which bustles with life and free activities — mariachi music, Vaqueria dancing, Maya ball games — as the sun goes down.

Bars to check out later include La Negrita Cantina (Calle 62 X 49, 415, Centro) and El Cardenal Cantina ([cantinamerida.com](http://cantinamerida.com)).

## DAY TWO



📷 Pyramid of the Magician in Uxmal, Yucatán, Mexico Picture: istock

In advance, ask your hotel concierge to co-ordinate a tour guide/driver for the road trip to Uxmal, located 84km/1hr 20mins from Merida. Head out early as it gets hot and the area is not under shade. A UNESCO World Heritage site, Uxmal means "thrice built city", referring to its layers of pyramids, and was one of Yucatan's largest cities 600-1000AD. You'll immediately come across Pyramid of the Dwarf (also known as Pyramid of the Magician), a spectacular sight, not only for the structure's size and unique rounded edges, but also for its stacked temples and staircases. The Quadrangle of the Nuns, created in 900AD, features wild decorative stonework inspired by mythology.

Peruse the souvenir shops before heading over the road to Choco-Story (Antigua Carretera Campeche Km. 78), whose detailed study of chocolate making works up an appetite for the real thing. Luckily, the educational tour ends with a traditional hot chocolate demonstration along with tasty samples. On your way out, buy a few locally made chocolate blocks and note the front garden's spiky Henequen agaves: in the 19th century these plants were considered "green gold" for their industrial strength fibre, a key driver of the Yucatán economy until plastic was invented and gained mass appeal.



### DAY THREE



📷 Margaritas in Celestun can be enjoyed for less than \$4 each.

Arrange with your tour guide/driver a pick-up time for Celestun, as it is nearly a two-hour drive from Merida. On the way, you'll cross a bridge over Ria Celestun Biosphere Reserve and its acres of mangroves dotted with flamingoes — stop and take photos, or take a tour by the lagoon. Otherwise, continue to the end of the road, when Celestun appears, a laid-back town with a few good restaurants and bars. Since the main attraction here is the beach, snag a covered table on the sand at Pampanos (Calle 2-4, Benito Juarez), where you'll have a front-row sea view. The margaritas are very good and inexpensive (about \$3.40 each), as are the plates of food — a serving of fried octopus will set you back SMX150 (about \$10).

After a swim, you could arrange an afternoon pamper session at Chable Resort and Spa ([chableresort.com](http://chableresort.com)), 45 minutes from Merida, alluring because it is situated in a lush jungle with a cenote, a natural sinkhole.



📷 Spa entrance, Chable Resort & Spa, Merida, Mexico. Picture: Small Luxury Hotels of the World

In fact, Chable Resort is a beautiful base: the former 19th-century hacienda has preserved what's left of its original framework and brilliantly designed it around 38 stand-alone casitas and two large villas. Each comes with its own pool and hammock, so at the end of a tough day sightseeing, you can retire in comfort, embraced by nature and history.