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Shaped by Mérida’s Artistic Soul

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.

Plantel Matilde, an arts center rising in the jungle was conceived by Javier Marín, the Mexico City sculptor, and serves as a campus for international art students and local schoolchildren as well as studio and exhibition space for the artist.. Adrian Wilson for The New York Times

By Peter Haldeman

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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 Amarillo — 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 blonde 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 Ki’Xocolatl — 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.

“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.

We had spent the morning driving around the centro historico. 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.”

The wages of progress

Among Mérida’s best exhibition spaces, Lagalá, Galeria La Eskalera, the Fundacion de Artistas, and Centro Cultural La Cupula are all in the centro historico. 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.”



The Centro Cultural La Cupula, a sprawling garden-linked complex, hosts music, dance and theater performances, as well as exhibitions. Adrian Wilson for The New York Times

Expat colonies can be insular, but Mérida’s outlanders are establishing deep roots here. On our way back to the city we stopped at Plantel Matilde, a 39,000-square-foot arts center rising like a modern acropolis in the middle of the jungle. Conceived by the Mexico City sculptor Javier Marin, Matilde serves as a campus for international art students and local schoolchildren as well as a studio and exhibition space for the artist.