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Plantel Matilde, an arts center rising in the jungle was conceived by Javier Marin, 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).

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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.

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 Canada, Mexico City and Europe, lured by the city's un-Disneyfied Mayan and colonial heritage. Among the expats: the artists James Brown and Jorge Pardo, the designers Laura Kirar and Marjorie Skouras, and the 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.”

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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.”

On cue, Israel had turned up the Paseo de Montejo, the city’s main artery, and suddenly we were surrounded 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.

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

"People come here and visit ruins and cenotes 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](#), down the street from David's place, is one of the more intimate B & B's, 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 historico.

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.

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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 500 AD 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 Ballcourt. 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 passed 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," David observed when I told him about it back in the car.

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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 spanking 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 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 purée, 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."

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Traditional Yucatecan cuisine, on the other hand, weds Mayan ingredients (corn, chilis, pumpkin) with culinary contributions from Spain (pork, lard, Seville orange) and other parts of Europe. Mr. 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.

Meals can go on for hours here. We were in Tatamar 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.

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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

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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 Israel navigated a series of narrow village roads lined with shacks in taffy colors and teeming with mototaxis, pedestrians and dogs that seemed oblivious to both.

Hacienda Subin is a romantically crumbling 18th- and 19th-century Moorish-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 year and a half ago, are living in a pool house they built while they painstakingly restore the main buildings. “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 Chablé Resort and Spa, in Chocholá — 38 modern casitas, each with its own pool and hammock, on the jungled grounds of the former henequen estate Hacienda San Antonio Chablé. As for Hacienda Subin, Richard and Laura are rehabbing its factory building as a multipurpose space for community events.

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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.

After a full day my host had planned a casual dinner back in town. But this was Mérida: the meal, at a simple cantina called Catrin, was a long, festive, Mezcal-fueled affair. Richard and Laura showed up, as did Marcela, the sisal sculptor. There was Jason, an artist from Chicago, and Kate, from Poland, who did hair, and Ross, from New York, who works in real estate.

We passed around platters of cactus salad and vegetarian flautas and empanadas. The conversation returned to Mérida's recent growth. Not everyone shared David's and Carlos's enthusiasm for the changes. Jason grouched about the traffic and noise. Ross said the Levi's plant was polluting the water with toxic dyes.

"We need Ross just to make sure it's not all puppies and rainbows here," said Laura. "If you quote me make sure you say it was after a couple of tequilas." Laura also opined that anybody looking for "a good place to be creative" still couldn't do better than Mérida — a point disputed by no one.

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