



There's Something About Mérida

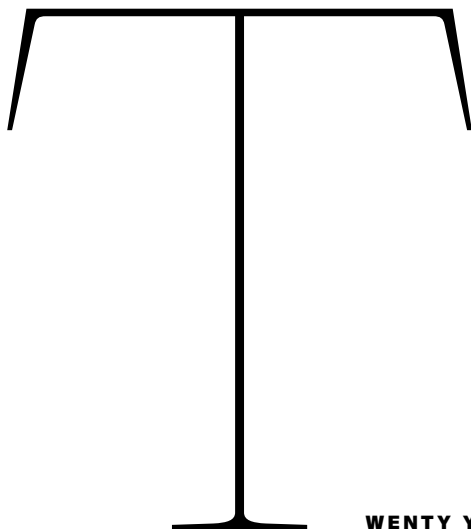
Lured by majestic old haciendas and a vibrant artistic energy, creative visionaries are flocking to the Mexican city—and staying for good.

by Mary Holland Photographs by Alexandra Farias



From far left:
A hammock by
Angela Damman
at the artist's
residence; artist
Laura Kirar's
Hacienda Subin;
perfumer
Coqui Coqui's
L'Epicerie guest
residence.





TWENTY YEARS AGO, the capital of the Yucatán was a beautiful time capsule. Ornate pastel French-style mansions lined Mérida’s grand boulevard, Paseo de Montejo, their elaborate walls and colorful façades hardly changed in the hundreds of years since they were built, save for climbing vines and cracked paint that only enhanced their appeal. Imperfectly preserved—that’s how Cuban American artist Jorge Pardo remembers it being when he first arrived in 2000. “It was amazing to walk through the city, past ruin after ruin,” he recalls. “It’s not a place that represents typical Mexico. It’s different—it’s Yucatecan, it’s Mayan.”

Pardo soon bought a 19th-century hacienda—which, at the time, was little more than a dilapidated shell—and set about bringing it back to life, reconstructing inner gardens and landscaped courtyards and sourcing local ceramic tiles and native plants. It was around the time he completed his new home that he realized he was no longer one of just a few expats in town: An influx of other newcomers had begun to put down their own roots after being drawn by Mérida’s historic architecture, art scene, and raw beauty. “When I began visiting, there were only a handful of people who were coming and going,” he says. “Then six or seven years ago it just amplified.”

What Mérida has experienced since is not so much a transformation as an evolution. When I arrived in the city’s downtown, the Centro, last August, it had been six years since my last visit, and evidence of the boom was everywhere—if I looked hard enough. The colonial buildings I remembered weren’t much different, but fresh coats of paint hinted that something new was hidden behind their walls. In Santa Ana, tucked away behind a lavender exterior, I found La Cúpula, a cultural center opened by contemporary art collector Leila Voight that features regularly rotating exhibits, including a recent Roger Ballen retrospective. An old bus depot was in the process of being rehabbed into a new art space by Steve Hanson, the founder of L.A.’s China Art



Above: Jorge Pardo at his restored hacienda. Right: Laura Kirar's studio at Hacienda Subin. Below: The dining patio at Te Extraño, Extraño.



Objects Galleries, and his wife, Tuesday Yates. A gleaming white 19th-century mansion on Paseo de Montejo bore the sign for Casa T’ho, a shop selling pieces by Mexican designers, such as caftans from Carla Fernández and vintage-coin necklaces from Daniela Bustos Maya. Across from Parque Santa Ana, behind a chipped and signless pilastered exterior, I dined at Mérida-born chef Roberto Solís’s Huniik, which was designed by Pardo and serves modern Yucatecan cuisine.

One of the most significant additions to Mérida is Salón Gallos. Located on a sleepy street in the Centro, behind a set of large rusty doors, the multiuse complex is invisible from outside. But inside, the contemporary space—comprising an exhibition gallery, a restaurant and bar, a stark cement courtyard, and a cinema—reminded me of Mexico City. Perhaps that’s because Salón Gallos was created by someone from the capital: The salon’s owner, José García, moved to Mérida in 2016 for a change of scenery—and a change of pace.

“Mérida is a provincial city, but it’s also very connected and international,” García told me as we sat at a table in his Lebanese-

Mexican restaurant while listening to an afternoon thunderstorm pummel the roof overhead. The gallerist left behind his flagship location in Mexico City to open two establishments in Mérida, with the goal of bringing an artistic enclave of locals and expats together. “We wanted to create a place where you could spend the whole afternoon—see a show, grab lunch, watch a movie. It was really about creating a community,” he said. “There were a lot of creative people and artists here, but not a community.”

Whether García intended it or not, the opening of Salón Gallos helped put Mérida on the art-world map. “When I heard José García was opening a second place in Mérida, I thought, Okay, this is interesting,” says L.A.-based art consultant and curator Sylvia Chivaranond, who has a home in Mérida and is currently developing a multidisciplinary residency in an old schoolhouse in the Centro (she previously worked with the Pompidou in Paris). A collaboration between Chivaranond, creative director Monica Calderon, and architect Ezekial Farca, Casa Escuela will offer monthlong residencies in a renovated building that will also be home to retail and gallery space.



Above: The muraled courtyard at La Cúpula. Left: Josefina Larrain Lagos at Hacienda Sac Chich.

Mérida Essentials

STAY

To stay in an authentic hacienda, book designer Josefina Larrain Lagos's eight-bedroom **Hacienda Sac Chich** (rooms from \$325; haciendasacchich.com) or one of the beautifully curated homes available through **Urbano Rentals** (urbanorentals.com). Just outside of town, perfumer Coqui Coqui's **L'Epicerie** (from \$250; coquicoqui.com) is an exquisite one-room residence with a private pool and gardens.

EAT

Chef Roberto Solís gives classic Yucatecan dishes like sopas a modern spin at **Nectar** (nectarmerida.com.mx) and **Huniik** (fb.com/huniikmid). For a midday alfresco meal of chilaquiles or an afternoon slice of orange cake, the courtyard at **Te Extraño, Extraño** (teextranoextrano.mx) is an ideal spot. Head to **Salón Gallos** (salongallos.mx) for pumpkin flautas with a side of contemporary art. And no trip to Mérida would be complete without a cerveza at **La Negrita Cantina** (fb.com/lanegritamerida), which first opened in 1917.

SEE

Plaza Carmesí has a handful of stores selling local goods like tableware, ceramics, and baskets. At **Casa T'ho** (casatho.com), stock up on caftans, woven pillowcases, and jewelry. Visit **Casa Escuela** to see the artists in residence at work and peruse art books in the shop. Find a range of exhibitions featuring Mexican and international artists at **China Art Objects Gallery** (chinaartobjects.com). And stop by **La Cúpula** (lacupulamerida.org) to catch a live performance in the sprawling gardens.