



TOP, clockwise: See the sights by hiring a horse-drawn carriage in Izamal, Mexico.

Live music accompanies folkloric dancers in Merida, Mexico.

Take in an evening sound and light show at the cathedral in Merida.

The facade of Casa Montejo depicts the early Spanish conquistadors.

| ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

## EDUCATION AND ENTERTAINMENT

# Explore the cultural side of Mexico

### TALES FROM THE ROAD



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Most visitors to the Yucatan Peninsula flock to Cancun and the Maya Riviera along the east coast, home to famous beaches and resorts, but for a taste of authentic Mexico, it's best to head inland.

It's also easy to do. Merida makes an excellent base, about 4.5 hours west of Cancun on a comfortable express bus (less than \$30).

Founded in 1542, Merida reveals its history at every turn. The imposing San Ildefonso Cathedral on the main square is the oldest church anywhere on the Ameri-

can mainland.

Facing another side of the square, the ornate mid-16th century Casa Montejo has an elaborately decorated facade depicting the glories of Spanish conquistadors.

Across the square, the state government building features a gallery dominated by massive murals by famed artist Fernando Pacheco. They depict the story of the region from the time of ancient Maya to present day.

Free events abound in Merida from the excellent bilingual walking tour of the historic city centre to free entry to many museums, galleries, and historic sites.

In addition, the city sponsors free daily cultural activities. Depending on the day, there might be music, folklore dancing, handcraft displays, re-enactments of the ancient Mayan ball game or sound and light shows.

Long famous for its public events, Merida kicked things up a notch this year when it was named the

2017 Cultural Capital of America.

Besides the city itself, Merida is surrounded by a wealth of nearby attractions from many important ancient Mayan ruins to early colonial sites.

One highlight was visiting the small historic town of Izamal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, an hour away by bus.

What sets Izamal apart is that almost every building is painted a brilliant mustard yellow. Dominating the town is the imposing Convent of San Antonio de Padua, completed in 1562, and built on the site of former Mayan structures.

It has long been an important place of pilgrimage, with the Pope visiting here a few years ago.

Izamal looks as if it is dotted by hills, unusual in pancake-flat northern Yucatan. However, they are all remains of Mayan pyramids and structures, mostly unexcavated.

One has the largest base of any pyramid on the peninsula.

While it is easy to visit Izamal on a day trip, we decided to spend the night in this small friendly town. Evening was the nicest part of the day, with temperatures cooling to the mid-20s, tour buses long gone and lights giving a magical glow to the ancient yellow buildings.

We timed our travels to be back in Merida for the weekend, the best time for a visit. On Sunday, streets near Plaza Grande, the main square, are closed to traffic, food stalls pop up everywhere and the area takes on a carnival atmosphere.

One street becomes a stage with free performances throughout the day. It's folkloric dancing that draws the most crowds, including men in their brilliant white outfits and women wearing distinctive

intricately embroidered dresses.

After the last performance in the evening, another orchestra takes the stage and the street turns into a massive public dance hall.

At the same time, a hubbub of activity continues in Plaza Grande. This is a great place to experience how important the centre square is in the life of Mexico. People come in the evening to relax and visit, kids run around and play, and lovers smooch on more secluded park benches.

A fire and brimstone evangelist urges everyone to repent, while wandering vendors hawk everything from cotton candy to popcorn and toys to tempt the kids.

In short, it's a slice of Mexican life on a pleasant, warm evening.

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