

The History of Merida

There were three Spanish [conquistadors](#) named "[Francisco de Montejo](#)": Francisco de Montejo "el Adelantado" ("The Lieutenant", the eldest); Francisco de Montejo y León "el Mozo" ("The Boy", his son); and Francisco de Montejo "el Sobrino" ("The Nephew"). Mérida was founded in 1542 by Montejo y León ("el Mozo") and named after the town of [Mérida](#) in Extremadura, Spain. It was built on the site of the [Maya](#) city of [T'hó](#) (/t'χo'/), which was also called Ichkanzihóo or Ichcaanzihó (/iʃkan'siχo/; "City of Five Hills") in reference to its [pyramids](#).



Carved Maya stones from ancient T'ho were used to build the Spanish colonial buildings which are numerous in downtown Mérida; these stones are visible, for instance, in the walls of the main cathedral. Much of Mérida's architecture from the colonial period through the 18th century and 19th century is still standing in the *centro histórico* of the city. From colonial times through the mid-19th century, Mérida was a walled city intended to protect the [Peninsular](#) and [Criollo](#) residents from periodic revolts by the indigenous Maya. Several of the old Spanish city gates survive, but modern Mérida has expanded well beyond the old city walls.

Late in the 19th century and the early 20th Century, the area surrounding Mérida prospered from the production of "[henequén](#)". For a brief period, around the turn of the 20th century, Mérida was said to house more millionaires than any other city in the world. The result of this concentration of wealth can still be seen today. Many large and elaborate homes still line the main avenue called [Paseo de Montejo](#), though few are occupied today by individual families. Many of these homes have been restored and now serve as office buildings for banks and insurance companies. Korean immigration to Mexico began in 1905 when more than a thousand people arrived in Yucatán from the city of Incheon. These first Korean migrants settled around Mérida as workers in henequen plantations.

By the beginning of the 1900s manufacturing activities were mainly soap, tobacco products, leather, soap, molasses, and rum. Completed in 1911 by Camilo and Ernesto Cámara Zavala, "Las Casas Gemelas" (The Twin Houses), are two side by side French and Spanish style mansions that remain from the early 20th Century. They are two of only a few houses that are still used as residences on Paseo Montejo from that era. They are owned by the Barbachano and Molina Méndez families. During the [Porfiriato](#), the Barbachano house held cultural events that hosted artists, poets, and writers. In the mid-1900s, the Barbachanos hosted aristocrats including Princess Grace and Prince Ranier of Monaco, as well as first lady of the U.S., [Jacqueline Kennedy](#).

Mérida has one of the largest *centro histórico* districts in the Americas (surpassed only by [Mexico City](#) and [Havana, Cuba](#)). Colonial homes line the city streets to this day, in various states of disrepair and renovation; the historical center of Mérida is currently undergoing a minor renaissance as more and more people are moving into the old buildings and reviving their former glory.

In August 1993, Pope [John Paul II](#) visited the city on his third trip to Mexico.^[6] The city has been host to two bilateral United States – Mexico conferences, the first in 1999 ([Bill Clinton](#) – [Ernesto Zedillo](#)) and the second in 2007 ([George W. Bush](#) – [Felipe Calderón](#)).

In June 2007, Mérida moved its city museum to the renovated Post Office building next to the downtown market. The Museum of the City of Mérida houses important artifacts from the city's history, as well as an art gallery. Mérida hosted the VI Summit of [Association of Caribbean States](#), in April 2014.

Mérida is the cultural and financial capital of the Yucatán Peninsula, as well as the capital city of the state of Yucatán. In recent years, important science competitions and World events have been held in Mérida – FITA [Archery](#) World Cup Finals, the International Cosmic Ray Conference, a Physics Olympiad, etc.



House of Montejo in a 19th-century lithograph



Mérida city center in 1981



One of Merida's twin mansions "Las Casas Gemelas"