

MÉRIDA

By Allen Cox, Tacoma, Washington, U.S.A.



The Maya city of *Tihó* once stood where Mérida stands today. In the early 16th century, Spanish invaders laid a relentless 14-year siege to Tihó. The Maya fiercely defended their city, but it finally fell; defeated survivors were forced to build their conquerors a new city out of the rubble of the old. In 1542, the colonial city of Mérida was born of Maya stones, sweat and blood.

Evidence of the conquest is still visible throughout Mérida's historic center. Stones inscribed with Maya motifs are imbedded on the south façade of La Iglesia de Jesús on Parque Hidalgo, giving silent testimony that they once graced the temples of other gods. After more than 400 years, the most telling artifact still stands above the door of the conquest-era Casa de Montejo facing the Plaza Mayor: relief sculptures depicting Spaniards in full battle armor trampling Maya heads under their boots. The Maya figures in the sculptures appear to be crying out in pain: some believe the Maya artisans who created them willfully fashioned the wailing figures in an eternal scream so their voices would never fall silent.

Today's Mérida, the official and cultural capital of the Yucatan, is a vibrant, urban center where traditional Maya and contemporary Mexican cultures overlap. Even though its population has exploded to almost one million, the city retains a friendly atmosphere that welcomes visitors and invites exploration.

The vast municipal market, a few blocks from the Plaza Mayor, is a maze of stalls and shops that beckon visitors to spend the day browsing. After dark, people head outdoors, and the Plaza Mayor, Paseo de Montejo, Parque Hidalgo and Parque Santa Lucia are the spots to be seen. On many evenings, the latter offers free concerts, dance performances, or public readings by nationally renowned poets. In the city's graceful historic center, streets are lined with colonial-era mansions that have been carefully restored to house stylish boutique hotels, restaurants serving Yucatecan and international cuisines, shops, galleries, museums and private residences.

The city experienced a post-colonial building boom in the 19th century, a time when wealthy hacienda owners built European-style mansions along the Paseo de Montejo, making Mérida the "Paris of the Tropics." One of the most opulent of these mansions, a grand Italianate structure, now houses the *Museo de Antropología e Historia*, a must-see, displaying artifacts and exhibits on pre-conquest Maya civilization.

Not only is Mérida itself a fascinating and lively city to visit, but some of the most important archaeological sites in the world lie only a few hours away. Among them are Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, Kabah and Edzna. No visit to Mérida would be complete without a day or overnight trip into the surrounding countryside to explore the ruins. The nearby pueblos of Maní, Ticul and Izamal give visitors a first hand view of small town Yucatan life and the more traditional lifestyles of the Maya who live there.

LUCHA LIBRE

By Katie Hale

A huge arena is crowded with everyone from grandmothers to children holding cotton candy. Small horns held by fans sound and the excitement is palpable. The lights dim and out come two masked, shirtless men full of energy and anger, ready to take each other to the mat.

Lucha libre was born in the early 1930s when Mexican businessman Don Salvador Lutteroth Gonzalez witnessed a wrestling match in Liberty Hall, Texas and decided to bring American wrestlers south of the border, successfully introducing a new sport to Mexico. Lucha libre, or free wrestling, is much like WWE SmackDown!, but with more tradition, history and pomp. The sport itself is also more complex, consisting of more rapid moves and flying leaps.

A luchador (wrestler) can win by pinning his opponent to the mat for the count of three, knocking him out of the ring for a count of 20, making him submit, or by disqualification. However, one on one (*mano a mano*) matches are rare, and crowds usually are told which pair (*pareja*), trio, or foursome (*atómicos*) to root for as each side is identified as the good guys (*técnicos*) or bad guys (*rudos*). When teams fight against one another, the winner is decided by two out of three falls. To make viewing and fighting more dramatic, sometimes matches have wagers attached. Luchadores can bet their masks; the loser is unmasked and must reveal his true identity. The longer a luchador goes without unmasking, the higher his reputation and standing. If masks aren't bet, hair is, and the loser must shave his head for all to see.

Lucha libre is now one of the hottest spectator sports in Mexico, and is gaining popularity around the world in places like Japan and the United States. The sport has even inspired those with political messages to get involved, dressing up as crusaders like Super Ecologist and Super Barrio and advocating their causes with a rapt audience at hand. One of the most important components to lucha libre are the masks. The luchadores wear masks representing animals, Gods, heroes and other characters. Often in public the luchador will be seen with his mask on—it not only is part of his guise during work hours, but becomes part of his identity.

The most famous wrestler, Santo, who fought for decades and starred in over 50 Mexican films in his prime, was buried in his mask, proving the inseparable bond between the real luchador and the superhero persona displayed in the ring.

Pushing lucha libre into the mainstream was the 2006 Jack Black film, *Nacho Libre*, a spoof based on a real luchador. However, for more of an authentic insight into this wild sport, check out *Lucha Libre: Life Behind the Mask*, a documentary following three generations of Mexican wrestlers living in Los Angeles and their struggles with duty and ambition inside and outside of the ring.