# Yucatan's lost hacienda trail

*(Image credit: Egle Gerulaityte)*



***By Egle Gerulaityte*** 26th July 2022

**Hundreds of plantations once symbolised the peninsula's wealth but were abandoned in the 1950s after a sudden downturn of fortune. Over the years, the jungle has taken them back.**

*Article continues below*

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As I made my way through thick jungle vegetation, I caught a glimpse of a crumbling stone wall slowly being overtaken by creeping vines and alamo trees. The wall surrounded what must have once been an elegant courtyard. It was part of a larger hacienda, one of the many vast and magnificent estates that had been built with the wealth of Yucatan's 19th-Century henequen-rope industry, all now a ghost of their former glory.

I chanced upon these ruins while on a motorcycle trip across the Yucatan Peninsula. I'd expected the focus of my bike expedition to be the area's better-known claims to fame, its cenotes and ancient Maya sites, but a local guide led me off the main roads and into the lush jungle to show me another layer of Yucatan's history and heritage: the abandoned henequen haciendas.

Though few travellers know of them, there are hundreds of these haciendas in the peninsula, many of them spanning thousands of acres. They once symbolised the peninsula's wealth and power but were abandoned in the 1950s after a sudden downturn of fortune. Some of the ruins are visible from the side of the road, while others require the keen eye and local knowledge of a guide; and whereas some have been left for nature to take back, a few have been reclaimed for a second life.

Over the course of two days, I mapped out a **165km loop** of backcountry roads just south of Merida and drove my motorcycle to four different haciendas, each with their own unique history and in states varying from broken-down decay to beautifully renovated.

As I passed the town of Homun, some 60km south-east of Merida, the highway gave way to sleepy settlements where the streets were still unpaved, and the jungle had woven itself into the roads. The heat and humidity were punishing, and the stillness of the countryside felt eerie as I approached the first historical hacienda on my makeshift trail: **Kampepén**.



*Hacienda Kampepen offers a small campsite and guided walks along a 1.2km trail dotted with ruins, cenotes and caves (Credit: Egle Gerulaityte)*

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The 19th Century was an age of incredible wealth in Yucatan thanks to the locally grown henequen agave plant, which was ideal for making rope and therefore an essential commodity for building ships and grain-farming machines. The henequen fibres were so durable that Yucatan attracted **more US investment** than any other region during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, the period when wheat production and ship building flourished in North America, and Yucatan twine was in high demand. As henequen production boomed, the plant earned the name "green gold", and Yucatan became the richest state in Mexico. By 1915, more than 70% of land in Yucatan **was used to grow and process henequen** and **more than 1,200,000 bales of the plant were exported**.

During this period**,** the haciendas grew in enormous size and complexity, with sprawling grounds that included plantations, henequen-processing plants, churches, stores and workers' quarters. In many aspects, they were autonomous countries within the country; some even had their own currency and their own laws.

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Not surprisingly, these haciendas were run by wealthy landowners of Spanish origin who wielded immense power over indigenous Maya peoples and often forced them into labour against their will.

"The indigenous workers were tied to the haciendas by debt they'd inevitably accumulated," explained Laura Machuca Gallegos, historian and researcher with the **Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology, Yucatan**. "In some of the estates, the landowners really cared for their workers, but in others, the conditions were so bad the descendants of the hacienda workers speak of that period as slavery."



*The henequen agave was ideal for making rope and therefore an essential commodity for building ships and grain-farming machines (Credit: Egle Gerulaityte)*

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When the Mexican Revolution arrived in the 1920s, it **brought significant changes**: the exploitation of indigenous peoples became unacceptable and the new regime's land reforms broke up the massive estates controlled by the elite few, confiscating most of the henequen fields. In addition, the US began looking for alternatives to free itself from **dependence on Mexican henequen**, and then the Great Depression slowed commerce. By 1938, **Yucatan lost its dominance in the henequen industry** and the era of wealth ended. The haciendas fell to poverty, and by the 1950s, most were completely abandoned and left to erode.

"When the industry collapsed, most of the workers remained around the haciendas, founding small pueblos of their own," Gallegos said. "As for the haciendas themselves, they are still owned by private businesses or individuals: they have been sold over and over and over. However, to this day, the hacienda owners are [of Spanish origin], Mexican or foreign – I do not know of any cases where a hacienda belongs to a Maya."



*As henequen production boomed, the plant earned the name "green gold", and Yucatan became the richest state in Mexico (Credit: Egle Gerulaityte)*

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Hacienda Kampepén was one of the most interesting sites along my DIY trail – it's something of an open-air history museum. Owned by Desarrollos Turisticos de Yucatan, a group of local businessmen, Kampepén opened its doors for visitors in September 2018 and offers a small campsite and guided walks along a 1.2km trail dotted with ruins, cenotes and caves.

Built in 1823, the main house boasts a French-style façade with carved stone columns and flagstone floors, but the roof collapsed long ago, and some of the remaining walls are slowly mouldering under vegetation.

Wandering about the grounds, I saw remnants of steam machinery in the henequen processing rooms, but I caught glimpses of Maya influence as much as colonial Spanish. Small stone altars for the *aluxe* – Maya woodland spirits – were built next to old wells.



*Small stone altars for the aluxe – Maya woodland spirits – were built next to old wells (Credit: Egle Gerulaityte)*

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"The name Kampepén itself is of Maya origin: it means "yellow butterfly" in Mayan language," Verónica Ondina Torres Rivas, the administrator of Kampepén, told me. "Approximately 40 people live in this locality, most of whom still speak the indigenous language. Our Maya guides offer walking tours, and in addition to the hacienda history of that time, they also tell stories, legends and Maya experiences, such as that of the aluxe and the *huay-pek,* a sorcerer who turns into a dog, among others."

She noted that the owners of the haciendas were of Spanish origin, "but the Maya presence has always been here, too."

And it continues to be. "Most haciendas that are open to tourists have Maya employees. You could say there are two visions of Maya history, and various shades in between: on one side, some historians focus on describing the poverty, the hacienda oppression and fatalism; on the other side, there are historians who portray the Maya as capable agents. Personally, I believe that Maya were people with agency, and they deserve a story showing how they

mobilised and came together throughout their historical development and now. The haciendas help tell this story."



*There are hundreds of these haciendas in the peninsula, many of them spanning thousands of acres (Credit: Egle Gerulaityte)*

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Some of the haciendas I visited do indeed communicate that complex past, but not all of Yucatan's old plantations were given a second life like Kampepén: Hacienda Uayalceh, just 50km west, has been abandoned completely. As I meandered around the property, I saw bats and birds nesting in the chapel towers, wildflower bushes covering the once lofty galleries, and no locked gates or ticket offices.

In contrast, just a short drive to the north-west, **Hacienda Yaxcopoil** – a cattle ranch–turned–henequen plantation that once sprawled across 22,000 acres – has been converted into a hotel and wedding venue offering rustic stays, walking tours and a dose of history via its machine house with henequen equipment and its Maya gallery of relics found nearby.

There are other estates that have been given a tourism upgrade too, such as **Sotuta de Peón Hacienda Viva**, which combines a luxurious hotel with a throwback historical experience: a museum complete with real-life henequen processing tours "from leaf to twine".

"There is no government effort to rebuild or renovate the haciendas. All efforts, whether it's renovation or transformation into museums, come from private persons or associations," Gallegos explained.

Several other haciendas are scattered in this area of the Yucatan peninsula, and adventurous travellers can find their way to them by asking locals for guidance. Some can be reached by buses or hired taxis, others require a 4x4 vehicle or a motorcycle, but their presence is evident everywhere – from overgrown ruins in the thick, dense woods to crumbling old buildings just outside small villages and towns. A story of power, wealth, oppression and ruin is slowly being replaced by one of rebuilding – and remembrance.

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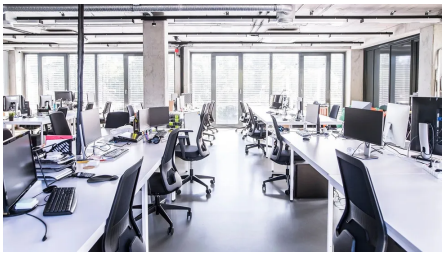
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