Introduction

This student survival guide describes as completely as possible the Merida program and tries to anticipate the questions you have about studying in Yucatan. Since you will want to make the most of this educational opportunity, it is important that you understand how the program is designed, what it has to offer and just how it can be integrated with your educational objectives.

The student survival guide’s most important purpose is to help you understand the goals of the Yucatán Program: to acquire a broader perspective of the world and an understanding of another culture by living in another country; to learn how to cope with different sets of attitudes, values and beliefs; to study formally and informally the history and culture of another people; to come to terms with essential differences.

The Central College in Yucatan program is viewed with high esteem in our host state. For more than 30 years our program has not only opened the door to cross-cultural understanding and language learning for North American students seeking an unusual study abroad immersion experience; it has also been the mirror of Central College's values and mission to pursue academic excellence in education, as well as to form responsible citizens committed to community involvement. Our positive community presence in Yucatan has convinced numerous Yucatecan students to spend their study abroad year at our campus in Pella.

The Yucatan Study Abroad program offers a distinct aspect of study abroad. On selecting this program, you are embarking on an adventure that will challenge your flexibility and patience. To learn about “the other” is never easy and sometimes uncomfortable. However, on realizing acquisition of culture survival skills at summer’s end, you are equipped to compare cultures and understand people anywhere in the world using these same skills. Your own cultural “backpack” will have been enhanced and your worldview expanded, forever enriching life in unexpected ways.

You should know that the information here is the result of many years of experience in Mérida and has been modified and adjusted each year by students, directors and the staff of The Central College study abroad office. We also offer advice and help with your pre-departure plans. We wish you the best of luck! Please do not hesitate to call, e-mail, or write the Central College study abroad office if you have any questions.

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Required Travel Documents

*Passport/Visa*
A valid US passport is required for travel to your program. A tourist visa will be issued upon arrival at your point of entry into Mexico. Your passport should be valid for up to six months past your anticipated departure date. Application for a passport should be made at least **three months before departure.** If you don’t already have a passport, you should apply for one immediately. To obtain a passport application and to review all of the requirements for obtaining a passport, please check online at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov).

**What if your passport is lost or stolen abroad?**
Should your passport be lost or stolen abroad, report the loss immediately to the local police and to the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate. If you can provide the consular officer with the information contained in your passport, it will facilitate issuance of a new one. Therefore, keep a photocopy of the issue page of your passport in a safe place. Leave a second copy of the passport with a relative or friend at home.

For the most recent updates on the travel documents and visas please check the U.S. Department of State’s travel website at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov).

*Mexican Tourist Card*
During your plane ride from the U.S. to your destination in Mexico, you will be presented with paperwork (2 forms) required by Mexican immigration and customs. Be sure to fill these forms out completely and accurately. You can often find assistance in filling out the paperwork in the airline’s on-board magazine or ask a flight attendant. One form is for immigration and will be the first you present. The second is for customs and must be presented upon reaching the red light after passing immigration and collecting luggage.

***The small piece of paper that is torn from the long immigration form is your Mexican Tourist Card. All visitors MUST have this card. It validates your legal presence in Mexico. The card is your identification in Mexico and is your official permit for your stay. You MUST turn this card in when you leave Mexico. You will not be allowed to leave the country without it. Keep it with your passport.***

Flight Arrangements
One of the early considerations in planning your time abroad is to make travel arrangements. Please consult the Program Calendar in your online account before scheduling flight arrangements. Check with several airlines, travel agents and websites – it’s a good idea to shop around for the best deal! Do not assume that the first price you hear is the best — fares may vary by several hundred dollars. For more information check out the ‘What to Know Before You Go’ section in your online acceptance packet.

Merida Program Academic Information
All students will participate in intensive Spanish language classes during the summer session. Each student’s skills and abilities will be evaluated prior to placement in an appropriate course level.

***Local transportation to and from events as well as excursions that are part of specific course work, is not included in tuition.***
Grades
Courses given at Central College House will have U.S. standard credits and grades. Final grades are sent directly to the Central College registrar who forwards them to your home college at the end of the summer.

Books
Most books or reading packets will be available in Merida. Any books that will not be available in Merida will be listed in your online account.

Packing
Merida is a large, well-supplied city, so do not over pack. You will be able to find most common necessities there. Be aware that because of humidity and heat, you may want to change clothes more often, and that during the rainy season (fall term), your laundry may not dry as quickly. You will want to make sure that most of your clothing is 100% cotton since synthetic fabrics don’t breathe as easily. As a rule shorts are not acceptable street attire in the city of Merida or the surrounding pueblos, but they are acceptable within your home, the beach and on some field trips. Be sure to pack a few pairs. You will also want to bring exercise/workout clothes.

In general, Yucatecans dress up more than most U.S. students. Keep this in mind while packing. Dress pants or a nice pair of jeans, heels/dress/skirts are the rule, not the exception for evening outings. Some ideas for packing:

Women: casual skirts, Bermudas, capris, pants (not too heavy), T-shirts, tank tops, blouses, dresses, jeans, a swimsuit, one or two dressy things for parties or special events and a sweater (evenings and winter months can be chilly).

Men: casual wear, t-shirts, pants (not too heavy), swim trunks, a sweater, tennis shoes, one pair of dress shoes, a good pair of sandals and a sweater (evenings and winter months can be chilly).

Some students also prefer hiking boots for climbing pyramids and exploring ruins.

Useful items: sunglasses (a must!), a camera and extra memory cards. Extra batteries for cameras have proved useful for many students. Bug spray, sunscreen and aloe or some type of sunburn relief also come in handy after a weekend at the beach. Electronics are much more expensive in Merida, so if you plan to use an electronic device (such as a laptop) this is much better purchased in the U.S.

Living with host families
Your host family will provide you with towels and bedding. They will take care of laundering those items, but in general, students will not have access to the family’s washing machines for their personal items. The program director will arrange pickup and delivery of laundry one time per week. Turnaround time is normally 24 hours. Cost is about $2.50 US per kilo.

For more packing tips, check out the ‘What to Know Before you Go’ sheet in your online acceptance packet.

Housing
Students who study in Merida during the summer will be housed with host families. The host families have been carefully selected and most have a long history of receiving students in their homes. With your host family you will be able to experience the family aspect of the host culture. Living with a host family is a wonderful opportunity to immerse yourself in the language and daily life in the Yucatan.
Arrival
Merida has an international airport with regular flights from the U.S. to that airport. We recommend that all students fly into Merida or Cancun. Flying into Cancun is cheaper than flying into Merida, and is only a 4 hour bus ride from Cancun to Merida, with a fee of about $20. We recommend avoiding a connection in Mexico City. The Mexico City airport is a bit confusing and may cause trouble for inexperienced travelers. Many airlines offer flights that go directly from Houston, Miami, Atlanta or Dallas to Merida.

Regardless of your itinerary, at your first Mexican port of entry (Mexico City, Cancun or Mérida) immigration officials will check your identification and stamp your tourist card (obtained on the plane). After collecting your luggage, you will be asked to press a button that looks like a stoplight. If the light is green, you will pass through. If you happen to get a red light, be prepared to open your luggage and allow the customs officials to check your bags. Mostly they are looking for fresh food items, drugs, etc. Be sure that all your prescription drugs are in bottles from the pharmacy, clearly labeled and you will have no trouble. When you arrive at the Mérida airport and have gone through customs and immigration, walk to the front of the airport and outside. On your left will be a ticket stand; you may purchase tickets for a taxi to the college house. Transportation from the airport to Casa Central is about $15 per taxi. Just tell (or show) the ticket agent the address located in the ‘Introduction’ section.

The agent will charge you the correct fare. If the driver or baggage attendant helps you with your luggage, you should be prepared to tip a couple dollars or the equivalent in pesos, depending on how much luggage you have. Upon arriving at the college house, ring the bell that is just inside the gate. Be sure to enter at the gate on Calle 20 and not at the large brown door on Calle 31. Both are entryways to the house, but the gate on Calle 31 is not used. The night watchman (portero), or one of the house employees, will help you in with your bags. Please do not tip them; a “muchas gracias” will do just fine. DO NOT leave your baggage on the street unattended.

Local Transportation
Public transportation is inexpensive and safe way to travel. A taxi to the house from the airport costs around $15 USD and no more than $5.00 USD from downtown. The city buses cost about 55 cents. Buses also can take you to the beach, outlying villages or major ruins inexpensively.

Communication
Mail
Receiving packages can take 2-6 weeks. Even if living in homestays, letters and packages should be mailed to the Central College House address exactly as listed in the Introduction. Receiving packages through the mail usually takes less time than a letter. Any packages you receive may be subject to examination by customs, and possibly a duty or special import permit. Used clothing in any package will cause serious problems, as Mexican law does not permit entry of used clothing. Avoid these problems if possible, bringing plenty of prescription medicines, etc. If you must have an item shipped, it is fine to have it delivered through the US Postal Service.

E-mail
You are welcome to bring a laptop to Merida. Wireless service is available in many restaurants and public spaces in Merida. Your home stay may not have internet service available.

Skype
The best way students have found to communicate is via Skype. It is a very affordable way to speak to friends and family via the internet. Visit www.skype.com to set up a free account and to learn about using the program.
Good Communication Management

Communication with your friends and family at home is easy and accessible through the internet and cell phones, but this can be both a blessing and a curse. While these lines of communication allow you to stay in touch, they can also interfere with your adaptation to the local culture and give you an easy out when you’re feeling homesick. Below is a basic list of Dos and Don’ts for managing your communication home:

- Do call your family to assure them you have arrived safely at the program site.
- Do remember to call or answer for all pre-arranged phone calls.
- Do use the internet to stay in touch by email or start blogs to share with those at home.
- Don’t use the phone as your first line of defense for problem solving. Think, make a plan and solve your own problem—this is a step toward independence!
- Don’t make calls from hotel phones. There is usually an expensive surcharge.
- If you do call home when you are feeling down or during a problem, be sure to call them back to let them know you are feeling better or the problem is solved.
- Limit your time on the internet. Don’t use the internet as a way to avoid your new surroundings. Spend your time developing friendships with those around you!

For more information on communication, check out the ‘What to Know Before you Go’ sheet in your online acceptance packet.

In case of an emergency, call the program director first! Do not call someone in the U.S. first in case of emergency.

Map

It’s good to know as much about your host country as possible before you go abroad. Here is a map to familiarize you with the area.