

Is Merida a Gay-Friendly City? Everyday Experiences of Gay Male Lifestyle Migrants

¿Es Mérida *gay-friendly*? Experiencias cotidianas de hombres homosexuales migrantes de estilo de vida

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the daily and social experiences of a group of gay-men, lifestyle migrants, in the city of Merida, Yucatán (Mexico), to determine if they face discrimination or if they live in a city that can be considered gay-friendly. Through the concept of lifestyle migration, supported by semi-structured interviews and field observation in the historic center of the city, the contrasting aspects of Merida in terms of acceptance of the LGBTQ+ population are studied. It is concluded that for the study group the city is openly gay-friendly with factors such as their purchasing power and foreigner status contributing to their acceptance.

Keywords: 1. lifestyle migration, 2. gay-friendly city, 3. daily life, 4. LGBTQ+ population, 5. Merida, Yucatán.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se analiza la experiencia cotidiana y social de un grupo de hombres homosexuales, migrantes de estilo de vida, en la ciudad de Mérida, Yucatán, para determinar si son blanco de discriminación o si viven en una ciudad a la que se le puede considerar *gay-friendly*. A partir del concepto de migración de estilo de vida, con apoyo de entrevistas semiestructuradas y observación de campo en el centro histórico de la ciudad, se estudian los contrastes de Mérida en términos de aceptación de la población LGTBTT+. Se concluye que para el grupo de estudio la ciudad es abiertamente *gay-friendly*, pues su poder adquisitivo y su condición de extranjeros son factores que favorecen su aceptación.

Palabras clave: 1. migración de estilo de vida, 2. ciudad *gay-friendly*, 3. vida cotidiana, 4. población LGTBTT+, 5. Mérida, Yucatán.

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INTRODUCTION

Inserted in globalizing trends, the city of Merida is part of a North-South migration dynamic known here as lifestyle migration. Over the last couple of decades, the city has become an attractive destination for its beauty, culture, history, but above all for the quality of life it offers to new residents coming mainly from the United States and Canada, and to a lesser extent, from Europe. This type of migration is a phenomenon targeting many destinations in the world today: Cuenca in Ecuador (Hayes, 2018), Goa in India (Korpela, 2018), Algarve in Portugal (Torkington, 2010), Boquete in Panama, and Penang in Malaysia (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018), to mention just a few examples. In Mexico, Merida can be counted among other destinations such as San Miguel de Allende in Guanajuato (Santos Victoria et al., 2018), Ajijic in Jalisco (Ceja Bojorge, 2021), Mazatlan in Sinaloa, and Cabo San Lucas in Baja California Sur (Lizárraga Morales, 2008).

According to the 2020 Population and Housing Census (INEGI, 2021), it is estimated that 4 452 Americans reside in Yucatán. However, this number is not entirely accurate, as there is a floating population entering the country as tourists with a permit to stay for six months, dispensing them from registering in the census or in the National Registry of Foreigners. In fact, local authorities estimate that there are around 10 000 Americans residing in the city of Merida (Castillo, 2019).

It should be mentioned that lifestyle migrants constitute a rather heterogeneous group. To this regard, Osbaldiston (2015) argues that the lifestyle and the ideal of a better life of these migrants responds to their belonging to quite peculiar social groups. For his part, Bantman-Masum (2015a) asserts that lifestyle migration in Merida is quite heterogeneous. When it comes to the economic aspect, although the author recognizes that the vast majority can be categorized as middle class, she still found great variety among them, from those in precarious situations to those she identified as a restricted group of real estate agents and quite influential developers. On the other hand, this author also analyzed another very particular group of foreigners in the city of Merida, whom she called lifestyle transmigrants, referring to those who have lived in at least four different countries before. These are migrants who perceive geographic mobility as a life ideal (Bantman-Masum 2015b).

Within the great heterogeneity found among lifestyle migrants, a very particular group can be identified in the city of Merida: that of LGBTQ+ population in general and, more specifically, gay men; this group has not been the subject of study in that city and has been little studied in the world at large (Egan et al., 2011; García Escalona, 2000). This article analyzes the daily life and social life of migrant gay men in Merida in light of the *lifestyle migration* concept (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). It is assumed that the motivations of most of the foreign gay men who come to live in Merida are the same as those of other lifestyle migrants: a more relaxed life with certain economic advantages, as well as the possibility of living in a safe and friendly city. However, for the study group, another vitally important motivation that adds up is the fact that Merida is now a much more open and tolerant city for this type of migration. This is the reason why one of the main questions in this research is whether in their everyday life gay male lifestyle migrants are subject to discrimination in their new place of residence or if, conversely, the capital of the State of Yucatan can be classified as a gay-friendly city.

This article is divided into four parts. In the first section, a conceptualization is made and the methodology supporting the analysis is described. The second part contextualizes Merida in order to understand the different nuances of a city perceived by migrants as gay-friendly. The third section addresses the daily life of gay migrant men in the city, as well as their daily activities and experiences. The last section analyzes the social life of this migrant group, so as to understand the way it unfolds: whether it takes place within an exclusively gay community or, in a broader sense, among lifestyle migrants, or integrated into Yucatecan society.

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND METHODOLOGY

For some years now, the issue of migration from the north started to be analyzed from different conceptual perspectives, such as second home tourism, international retirement tourism, senior tourism, residential tourism/residential migration, or retiree migration (Mantecón, 2017). For this research, the concept of lifestyle migration, coined by Benson & O'Reilly in 2009, is used as it is the one that best suits the needs and objectives set forth, taking into account that, within the study group, in addition to retired or retired migrants, there are also economically active people (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). One of the most important motivations for migration of this kind is consumption and not production or employment opportunities, as is the case with other types of migration. In this sense, lifestyle migration is understood as a movement of people of all ages who generally belong to the middle class in industrialized countries, and who have sufficient economic resources, even higher than the majority of the population of the city to which they migrate. These are people who decide to travel individually and voluntarily abroad, seasonally or permanently, looking for a more meaningful and relaxed life. Mancinelli (2021) points out that lifestyle migration is an amalgamation of freedom, lifestyle and consumption as a result of the "reflexive project of the self" (p. 5). Authors who have addressed this social phenomenon agree that lifestyle migration has at least three basic principles: privilege, a combination of lifestyle and identity, and tourism (Mancinelli, 2021). These will be discussed in more detail throughout this article.

As mentioned above, the objective is to analyze the experience of gay male lifestyle migrants in the city of Merida, based on their daily and social life in order to know if they are targets of discrimination or if, conversely, they live in a city that can be considered gay-friendly. According to Adihartono (2021), gay-friendly cities have places, policies, people, and/or institutions open and welcoming to gay people. These cities provide a supportive environment for the relationships of gay people, respect their preferences, and are non-judgmental. This author also points out that a gay-friendly city usually provides a space that offers anonymity and freedom of action (Adihartono, 2021). This idea has firmly established that the big city is the "natural and desirable" place for LGBTQ+ people; however, Adiego et al., (2019) pointed out the need to also make visible and study sexual diversity in other geographies and sociocultural contexts. It is in this logic that this article analyzes the experience of a particular group of gay male migrants that is not determined by the big city, but rather circumscribed to a medium-sized Mexican city of no more than one million inhabitants.

The following section will address the process of openness and tolerance towards the homosexual community, as well as the contrasts in the city of Merida during the last decades. To better understand this process, it is necessary to take into account information from the 2014 State Survey on Discrimination (Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Estado de Yucatán [CODHEY], 2014) which pointed out that in Yucatán 83.7% of homosexual people suffer discrimination, which is a quite high percentage. As previously stated, the analysis was conducted based on the everyday and social life in the new place of residence of lifestyle migrant homosexual men, for which Magendzo's (1999) concept of negative discrimination was used. This is an everyday social practice rooted in very specific attitudes and actions where prejudices are deployed against groups of people who are different.

To this regard, Ciccarelli (2004) pointed out that daily life should be understood as everything that is produced and reproduced during the 24 hours that make up the day, that is to say, the set of events and gestures that constitute the social reality of people. Everyday life is the way in which the time of a day is spent, what makes up the routine. For his part, Elias (1995) asserted that people's daily life is part of the structure of the social layer to which they belong. In the case of the study group, this is positioned within the middle class and the article analyzes how the interviewees, in their daily life at their new place of residence, tend to reproduce the dispositions and tastes for certain activities that define their lifestyle. Under the premise that "the reality of everyday life is continually reaffirmed in the interaction of the individual with others" (Berger & Luckmann, 1979, p. 187), special emphasis is placed on the experiences of the interviewees so as to find out if they are subject to discrimination or rejection because of their sexual orientation.

As for social life, Berger & Luckmann (1979) define it as the broad and coherent insertion of an individual into the objective world of a society. For these authors, primary socialization occurs from childhood and is difficult to disarticulate because of its strong affective load, while secondary socialization is the insertion of the individual into underworlds whose partial realities contrast with that "base world" (p. 194). Here, socialization takes place through mutual identification, where relationships are more formal and also more "artificial." Resocialization, on the other hand, takes place when there is a radical transformation in an individual's daily reality, which in this case takes the form of migration to another country. In this process, it becomes necessary to adjust to the laws established in the new context. Berger & Luckmann (1979, pp. 204-205) stated that socialization always takes place in the context of a specific social structure, and produces identities that are easily recognized in a society: "everyone knows who everyone is and who the others are."

In terms of methodology, it is important to note that the results presented here are part of a broader research in which lifestyle migrations have been studied, as well as the processes of touristification and gentrification that have taken place in the historic center of the city of Merida. During this research, the databases of official webpages such as the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), the Government of the State of Yucatan, and the Municipality of Merida were reviewed.

Fieldwork was also conducted in the historic center, as well as more than twenty interviews, some face-to-face and some virtual, with migrants, Yucatecan residents, and some key informants.

For example, this article included the testimony of Ricardo, who is the owner of the only travel agency in Merida whose service focuses exclusively on promotional packages for homosexuals.

It should also be noted that our research is qualitative and with a phenomenological approach—this understood as “the study of phenomena as they are experienced, lived, and perceived by man” (Martínez, 2009, p. 21), in which social reality is conceived as something constructed from the subjectivity of the protagonists, and where the relation that the person makes of his own experiences is fully respected.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the homosexual lifestyle migrants whose testimonies were used for the elaboration and analysis of this article. The semi-structured interview technique was used with questions oriented towards the five chosen themes: 1) life before migration; 2) the decision to migrate and geographical movement; 3) daily life, understood as routine and possible experiences of discrimination or rejection because of their sexual orientation; 4) social life, understood as the reconstruction of socialization in their new place of residence; and 5) homosexual community life in the city of Merida.

The high value of the semi-structured interview is in that it allows a great deal of flexibility to adapt to the characteristics of each interviewee. In this case, all the participants are men: one of Spanish nationality and the others U.S. citizens, although not all of them were born in that country. It is worth mentioning that for the sake of the anonymity of the informants, pseudonyms were used to identify them throughout the text. The sampling was non-probabilistic, and the snowball method was employed. However, it was not an easy task to find homosexual migrants who agreed to be interviewed. It could be said that only 40% of those contacted agreed to be interviewed. The other 60% refused, either for lack of time, lack of interest, or simply because they did not want to talk about their life as a homosexual migrant in the city of Merida. In his extensive ethnographic experience, Hayes (2021) asserted that, broadly speaking, lifestyle migrants are always willing to tell their stories and talk about the construction of their new lives; however, this was not the case for the specific group who collaborated with this research.

Table 1. Interviewees

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Occupation	Age	Date of the interview (2021)
Arturo	Mexico	Teacher	48	May 12
Bruno	Puerto Rico	Retired	58	September 27
Saúl	Puerto Rico	Retired	65	June 25
Mike	United States	Retired	65	June 21
Donald	United States	Retired	58	June 21
Paul	United States	Retired	78	June 25
Thomas	United States	Real Estate	59	September 22
Matt	United States	Real Estate	61	December 3
Iker	Spain	Real Estate	42	July 1

Source: Own elaboration.

In addition to the interviews conducted, this research is also supported by sources obtained from the Internet. For example, a gay male couple (Dave and Travis) were found on the video platform YouTube, who in 2020 decided to move from Los Angeles to Merida and created a channel named “Café con Leche” in which every week they publish a video with information about their life and activities in Merida and Mexico. This video series was an important reference for the analysis (Café con Leche Travels, 2021a). Likewise, some articles were found in digital magazines and newspapers that were very useful because they contained some testimonies related to the topic of study.

IS MERIDA A GAY-FRIENDLY CITY TODAY?

In the 1990s Merida began to undergo an accelerated urban and demographic growth that still continues to this day. This process can be explained as a consequence of an increasingly globalized Mexico, integrated to the outside world (Ramírez Carrillo, 2014). In this sense, it can be observed that the population heterogeneity of the city has increased in the last 20 years due to the arrival and settlement of new national and international residents such as those who make up the small but colorful study group: lifestyle migrant gay men.

As a matter of fact, Merida is quite attractive to this group due to the availability of cheap developable land, a tropical and permissive environment, quality public services with attention in English, architectural and heritage beauty, as well as relatively low living costs, when compared to other Mexican cities. Merida makes possible for these migrants a life with certain luxuries, as their purchasing power is favored by the exchange rate for those who receive a pension in USD, and for those who work remotely and are paid in USD.

The question is thus whether Merida can really be considered a tolerant and open city to the LGBTQ+ community. The first thing to consider is the size of the community. According to data from the 2021 National Survey on Sexual and Gender Diversity, Yucatan is the second state in the country with the highest percentage of population aged 15 years and over that openly declared to be part of the LGBTQ+ community (8.3%) (INEGI, 2022). However, the answer to our question does not seem to be so evident, as it is observed that during the last 30 years there have been some contrasts and evolutions.

Although there were already demonstrations to vindicate homosexual expressions in Merida since the 1970s, it was not until the 1990s that the first civil associations began to emerge to defend the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. In 2001 the Yucatan State Congress for the first time gave the opportunity to several homosexual groups to set forth their demands on human rights, discrimination, and HIV-AIDS before the legislative branch. A couple of years later, motivated by the unjustified arrest of a leader of the LGBTQ+ movement, the first gay pride march took place Merida (Pasos Tzec, 2015). Although this march was facilitated by the then mayor of Merida, Ana Rosa Payán Cervera, it should be mentioned that several aldermen of the Merida City Council opposed to it, arguing that it was “disrespectful to the morals and good customs of *Meridanos*” (Boffil Gómez, 2003, para. 20). However, the following marches after that were joined by more civil associations, increasing thus the number of active participants. Some, like the one in 2004,

were supported by the presence of the general director of CENSIDA³ and the president of the Human Rights Commission of the State of Yucatan. The year after, the main speaker was the general director of the Mexican Institute of Sexology (Pasos Tzec, 2015).

The good participation of collectives had a break when, in 2008, several civil associations announced that they would disassociate themselves from the gay march because it appeared to them to have lost its original objective by dedicating itself to business promotion and making unilateral decisions. This conflict within the LGBTQ+ collective caused the 2009, 2010, and 2011 marches to have very low participation from both civil associations and the general public. The fracture within the collective reached its peak in 2012, when it was announced that an *alternative* gay march would be held. However, this never took place, as one of the main promoters of the original march suddenly passed away. This event brought the two conflicting groups back together, and so the idea of a single march that would include both of them was revived. From 2013 onwards, the good relations between the members of the collective led to a new increase in the number of participating civil associations and the presence of the public in the marches, which continued to be held annually (Pasos Tzec, 2015).

The 2019 gay pride march in Merida had for the first time the participation of several national LGBTQ+ artists, reinforcing its image and its presence in various local and national media. It is also notable that the importance of this collective is visible in Merida beyond the marches, having become a worldwide symbol of gay-friendly cities (Adihartono, 2021).

Pasos Tzec (2015) mentions some of the festive, cultural, academic, and vindictory events held by LGBTQ+ movement in Yucatan, such as the First State Day against Homophobia in Yucatan in 2006; the 2007 Sexual Diversity Forum organized by the NGO Amnesty International; and the Third University Forum on Homosexuality organized by students of the Autonomous University of Yucatan (Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán [UADY]). The author also pointed out that in the same year, the campaign against homophobia entitled *¡Reacciona, con la homofobia perdemos todos!* (React! We all lose with homophobia!) organized by the Secretary of Health of the Government of the State of Yucatan was carried out, headed by deputies and state officials. Other examples of the visibility of this collective can be found within the framework of Gay Pride Month 2021, when for the first time, ornamentation alluding to the gay community were placed in a chain cafeteria located in one of the most modern shopping malls in Merida. For its part, a national department store (Liverpool) set up a clothing section in the men's area with LGBTQ+ flag colors and motifs. Although this is common in many other globalized cities, seeing clothing advertising explicitly aimed at the gay segment in a department store that is frequented by middle-class Merida families was, until then, unusual.

Not everything in Merida, however, has been in favor of civil organizations, marches, and cultural events: just when it seemed that the Yucatecan authorities were sensitized to these issues, in 2009 the State Congress approved (with 24 out of 25 votes) reforms to the Civil Code that

³ Acronym in Spanish for Centro Nacional para la Prevención y Control del VIH y el Sida (National Center for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control).

prohibit abortion and equal marriage (Pasos Tzec, 2015). This initiative was promoted by the conservative organization Red Pro Yucatán (Pro Yucatan Network), thus blocking the first attempt to legalize same-sex marriage in the state. The reforms to the Code defined marriage as the union of one man with one woman, thus discarding the proposal presented a year earlier by a group of civil society organizations, inspired by the approval of equal marriage in Mexico City.

At the national level, in 2010 the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation recognized the constitutionality of equal marriage in Mexico, and declared that prohibiting same-sex marriage was unconstitutional and an act of discrimination. This encouraged activists to hold sit-ins in 2011 and 2013 in front of the Yucatan state government palace, to demand better public policies and laws that would guarantee their rights and eradicate discrimination, as well as to demand for equal marriage to be approved in the state Congress. Still, the laws at the state level went against the grain, as in 2012 the Family Code for the State of Yucatan included, once again, in its Articles 49 and 201, the definition of marriage and concubinage as the union of one man and one woman, leaving out any other form of family (Decree 516 of 2012). However, in March 2013 a Yucatecan male couple filed and won an injunction against Article 49 of the local Family Code that prevented them from marrying. A federal judge declared that said article violated the Constitution and international treaties and ordered the Yucatan Civil Registry to record the marriage of this homosexual couple (Pasos Tzec, 2015). After this case, jurisprudence was created in such a way that several same-sex couples were able to get married in Yucatan by means of an *amparo* proceeding.

Civil organizations did not give up and filed a lawsuit against the Yucatan State Congress for violating the rights of same-sex couples by prohibiting them from marrying. In this regard, Pasos Tzec (2015) noted, “This was the first time at the national level that a state constitutional mechanism would be used to fill a claim against a regulatory body and demand that said body correct an omission” (p. 134). A year later the lawsuit was declared inadmissible by a majority vote in the Constitutional Court of the State of Yucatan, again denying the possibility of legalizing same-sex marriage (Dorantes Alcocer, 2015, p. 8).

It was not until August 2021 that the Congress of Yucatan approved same-sex marriage, as the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation declared unconstitutional the secret votes that the Congress of the entity issued in 2019; as such, the legislative process had to be repeated, where this time 20 votes were issued for and five against same-sex marriage. The pressure of conservative groups to the local Congress no longer had the same effect by holding open votes. Article 94 of the Political Constitution of the State of Yucatan (Constitución Política del Estado de Yucatán, 2023) was reformed to define marriage as an institution established through the free and voluntary union of two people with equal rights and obligations. Visibility first, and respect for their rights later, were the achievements of the LGBTQ+ collective through hard work and social struggle.

As can be seen, the context of Merida has been characterized by such marked contrasts between conservative and progressive visions, and not only at the legislative level. While it can be affirmed that part of the population in Merida accepts and/or tolerates the LGBTQ+ community, there is still a sector of society that does not, as on several opportunities civil society has also publicly

demonstrated against equal marriage in the so-called March for the Family organized by the Red Pro Yucatán (Llanes Salazar & García Moreno, 2023). Perhaps the most representative year for such clash was 2016, as on September 10 the city of Merida saw two parades taking place, one by the conservative society against equal marriage and another by the LGBTQ+ collective, the latter calling their march *Besatón (Kissathon)* (Redacción El Universal, 2016). Several authors argue that people who discriminate against sexual minorities generally hold conservative ideas, are very religious, hold negative attitudes towards women, and strongly adhere to the hegemonic model of masculinity and division of sexual roles (Toro-Alfonso, 2012).

It is paradoxical that, on the one hand, there are groups in Merida that do not want to fully acknowledge the rights of homosexuals and even display discriminatory attitudes, yet on the other hand there is a Merida that receives and accepts lifestyle migrants who are homosexuals, who come from industrialized countries and who have made the city their new place of residence. To delve deeper into how this came to be, it is necessary to analyze some of the pulling factors found by the study group, that were decisive to make the decision to migrate and settle in Merida.

Before leaving their countries of origin, all of the interviewees researched on the Internet to learn about the characteristics of the city and all of them, without exception, arrived with the preconceived idea that Merida is a gay-friendly city, as there is a lot of international publicity that anticipates the city as the ideal place to live for people like them. For example, a quick search on the Internet for information about gay Merida turns up pages such as *Living in Mexico (2007-2008)*, which states that Merida “is becoming a charming home to an ever-increasing number of gay couples in search of a tranquil place in the sun to call home” (par. 1) Also, *Gay Travel (n.d.)* describes Merida as “a rising star for the LGBTQ+ traveler.” Similarly, the digital magazine *Advocate.com* featured an article entitled *Surprising and Gay-friendly Merida (The Advocate, 2008)*.

One aspect that the gay lifestyle migrants interviewed encountered upon arriving in Merida has to do with consumption, since the city—and especially the historic center—has experienced certain socio-spatial transformations that have favored the offer of products and services for a new sector of the population that has been gradually settling in the city (Dávila Valdés & López Santillán, 2021). Thus, interviewees found a growing supply of gay-friendly services in Merida. Most of these services were found to be intended for recreation and leisure, and many of them are closely linked to tourist activity. Although these businesses are not aimed exclusively at the gay market, the fact that their owners are openly gay—some of them are part of our study group—makes these establishments more inclusive in terms of sexual diversity. These businesses include small hotels, bars, restaurants, cafes, art galleries, a culinary school, a travel agency, and several real estate agents. Most are located in the historic center of the city and their clients are generally other lifestyle migrants.

When it comes to nightlife, the city has undergone important changes, since for many years gay bars and nightclubs were pushed to the outskirts of the city. However, nowadays one can find these types of businesses within the historic center area, although—according to what was observed in the fieldwork—the presence of lifestyle migrants in such places is anyway rather marginal. In fact,

all interviewees stated that their nighttime recreational consumption is more related to conventional restaurants, bars, galleries and cafés than to gay nightclubs.

It should be noted that the presence of these gay migrant consumers in the city of Merida has had an economic impact that is sparking the interest of the more conservative establishments, although still with certain reservations. For example, when interviewing Ricardo, who owns the company Merida Gay Tours, he commented that there are hotels, restaurants, and bars with more conservative local owners who also want to receive the economic benefits of the gay community, but “do not want to offer anything special for them, not even represent them in their advertising,” that is, they want the money from the LGBTQ+ community but are reluctant to openly advertise themselves as gay-friendly (Ricardo, personal communication, June 3, 2021).

DAILY LIFE OF GAY MALE LIFESTYLE MIGRANTS

Regarding the economic income of the study group, it should be noted that the interviewees would be middle-class in the United States, and the same applies to the one who was born in Spain. To address privilege as one of the basic elements of lifestyle migration, mention will be made here of the economic advantages that gay men have in having higher incomes and fewer people depending on them, which allows them to live with certain comforts and in an advantageous situation. Paul, for example, acknowledges that he was already privileged back when he lived in New York with a “high-end” job and the opportunity to retire at age 55 (personal communication, June 25, 2021). According to Rae (2016), in the U.S. Department of the Treasury report published in 2016, married homosexual couples earned more on average than their married heterosexual counterparts, not to mention when compared to the female gender. That is, “two men make more [money] than a male-female couple and certainly more than two women together” (Rae, 2016, para. 7). These economic privileges also migrated with the interviewees. Iker recounts that all of the foreign gay male couples he knows in Merida have greater economic resources than heterosexual ones, something he has been able to ascertain through their ownership of real estate both in Merida and in their place of origin (Iker, personal communication, July 1, 2021).

Among those interviewed, two main groups were identified. The first is made up of retirees, that is, those who come with a fixed retirement income, which implies a fully insured monthly salary in USD. The other group is made up of those who are not under a pension plan and are therefore still in the need to be economically active. Most of those interviewed who are not retirees, have been in the real estate business since they arrived in Merida and have lived in the city the longest. Matt has been in the business for 19 years, Iker for 13 years, and Thomas a little over five years. It should be clarified that the real estate business is not something exclusive to homosexual migrants, on the contrary, already for some years Bantman-Masum (2015a) pointed out that this was an economic activity in which lifestyle migrants in general excelled, especially in the central area of the city. Despite the constant and increasing competition among real estate agents, none of the three interviewees showed any economic concern. On the contrary, there were those said that

their work situation is now much more relaxed than when they were newcomers, due to the level of income they now have.

According to the economically active interviewees, the economic situation—both theirs and that of the gay men they know—is not something that implies any problem or concern in their daily lives, even for the younger ones. Such is the case of David and Travis, who recently arrived in Merida and have dedicated an entire chapter on their YouTube channel to tell how they resolve the economic aspect, emphasizing that they are not retirees (Café con Leche Travels, 2021b). David and Travis, who describe themselves as artists—one is a singer and the other a writer—have become content creators on the Internet, deploying all of their skills to generate enough income to live in Merida, and to travel frequently to different destinations around the country. They acknowledge having been influenced by other foreigners living in Mexico who make a living by, in addition to their videos, providing online services. David works remotely for a U.S. company in the customer service department. He says that what he earns would not be so good in his home country, but in Merida it suffices for a two-bedroom, three-bathroom apartment. Travis, for his part, launched an online copywriting business that has allowed him a really good income stream in USD, since his clients are all from the United States. He also started a weekly newsletter that, although free, has resulted in some people showing him support financially (Café con Leche Travels, 2021b).

For the retired interviewees, their economy is also not a problem or a source of concern; perhaps the difference for them is that they now have more free time, while the other interviewees spend most of their days working. Paul takes Spanish classes, Mike and Donald go to the gym, Saul enjoys watching TV and shopping at the malls and Costco. Bruno runs three miles every morning and says his life is so relaxed now that it takes him three weeks to do a load of laundry. All of them used to travel a lot as part of their new activities in retirement, but due to the pandemic they stopped doing so, and as of the time of the interviews they had not yet resumed their traveling activities. It is worth remembering that tourism is one of the basic principles of lifestyle migration (Mancinelli, 2021) which, as part of the habits of the middle class, reflects the desire of these migrants to make travel a daily practice.

As mentioned earlier, Merida has an international reputation as a gay-friendly city, and so this aspect was a key focus of our interviews. The objective was to get a closer look at the daily experiences of gay lifestyle migrants, and to better understand the contrasts of a city like this. The first observable thing is that these migrants do not need local social recognition, since most of them obtain such within the group of lifestyle migrants.

As will be seen in the next section, these migrants are able to lead their lives very much on the fringes of the conservative and traditionalist society of Merida; they do not need to interact with the locals in terms of work or recreation. In this regard, on the Internet we found the testimony of Mitch, who claims to have chosen this city because it is gay-friendly and because he could also dedicate himself to real estate without ever having had any problems with Merida society (Fields & Fields, 2015). Likewise, Dave and Travis stated that they have not had any problem being homosexuals residing in Merida, although they have the impression that the fact of being

foreigners helps them in that regard: “it might be different if you are Mexican” (Café con Leche Travels, 2021a, 11m59s).

The same is true for our interviewees, as none of them have had any unpleasant experiences of homophobia in the city of Merida. Certainly, all of them agreed that with their partners they do not usually have public expressions of affection, assuming that this way they are less exposed to any type of aggression. It is worth adding that this was also confirmed in the social spaces visited in the city. It can be stated that the research group shows itself publicly in accordance with socially accepted gender stereotypes, that is, they are not “obvious” or “effeminate” individuals, according to the terms used by Bobadilla Domínguez (2013, p. 128) when analyzing the case of Aguascalientes.

According to the analyzed experiences, the city of Merida and “Yucatecans appear to have no real concerns with gay foreigners” as ascertained by the testimony found in an electronic magazine of a Canadian man with more than 10 years of residence, who says he has never had any problems in Merida (Fields & Fields, 2015, para. 24). Conflicts arise, according to this informant, when foreign migrants become involved with the children of Yucatecans, as he mentions having met a considerable number of middle-aged homosexual foreigners who have entered into relationships with younger Yucatecan men (Fields & Fields, 2015). The latter was something that also caught the attention of Arturo, who in interview commented that “those who are single and not yet single” hang out with Yucatecan youngsters (personal communication, May 12, 2021).

To conclude this section, we will address the complications that the interviewees have found in their daily lives in the city of Merida, which, as can be observed, are not related to the fact of being homosexuals, nor to economic or work issues. Berger & Luckmann (1979, p. 55) assert that daily life is above all a life in the language that is shared with one’s peers, which is why the understanding of language is essential for any reality of daily life. For English speakers, language has perhaps been one of the main barriers, even for those who have lived in Merida the longer, such as Matt, who acknowledges as ridiculous that after 18 years he can understand everything in Spanish, but cannot speak it as fluently as he would like to, despite the classes he has taken (personal communication, December 3, 2021). For Donald, who is desperately and unsuccessfully trying to learn Spanish, it is complicated to even shop, go to the bank, the doctor, or anywhere else, and so he is always looking for someone who speaks English (personal communication, June 21, 2021). This makes it evident that although our interviewees and lifestyle migrants have been able to develop their daily lives in Merida without major problems, language is indeed a barrier when it comes to socializing with Yucatecans.

When directly asked what the most difficult thing is about living in Merida, the answers were the heat, the lack of timeliness, and mosquitoes, in addition to language complications. However, in the interviews they all made it very clear that they are quite comfortable living in the city, and even expressed their willingness to stay there for their lifetime. Not even the dietary restrictions of David and Travis, who are vegans, pose a challenge, as the city today offers sufficient alternatives for this type of consumer.

SOCIAL LIFE: GAY COMMUNITY OR LIFESTYLE MIGRANT COMMUNITY?

From the field observations made so far, it appears that in Merida the foreign gay men community is more numerous—or at least more visible—than that of foreign lesbian women, which does not come as a novelty. Leroy (2005) already pointed out that outside of movements demanding equal rights, lesbian women generally have a more discreet, stable lifestyle, and, referring to the case of Paris, she asserts that they are almost invisible. There are studies that argue that the migration patterns of gay male couples are quite different from the patterns of female couples. Wimark (2014) argues that men tend to be more interested in cities, so they generally move to places with many amenities, while women tend to migrate more to smaller towns.

For the city of Merida, in addition to the observation made by the authors, the interviewees' statements are available. Arturo recalled that there were no women in the gay group social gatherings he attended, only "American men, mostly retired. Over 50 almost all of them" (personal communication, May 12, 2021). When Donald was asked about lesbian women, he replied that he was of the idea that they lived on the beach in Chelem, relating that when he went there, he saw many older lesbian couples in that town (personal communication, June 21, 2021). Thomas, who is in real estate, says that although almost 50% of his clients are gay, in all his years of experience he has only had two or three lesbian clients. He clarifies, however, that a good percentage of his clients have been single women (divorced, widowed, single) but not lesbians (personal communication, September 22, 2021). We found the testimonies of two foreign lesbian women on the Internet: the first one had the impression that they were the only lesbians in the city when she arrived with her partner in 2005. In fact, after 10 years residing in the city, she assures that there is no visible lesbian community. The second woman recounts that among the expatriate community she knows only three lesbian couples (Fields & Fields, 2015).

Throughout the research, it has been evidenced that lifestyle migrants residing in the historic center of the city of Merida tend to have a fairly intense social life, including the group studied in this article. In Merida, within the social context of lifestyle migrants dynamics are quite inclusive, with no concern for sexual orientation, since at events and meetings they can coexist without any kind of distinction. Iker agrees with this sentiment: "it is a very inclusive environment [...] nobody there is surprised because you are gay" (personal communication, July 1, 2021). Mitch's testimony, found on the Internet, makes it clear that one of the aspects he enjoys most about the expatriate community in Merida is that there is nothing special about being gay. "It just seems like the norm. Or maybe not the norm but it's just a non-issue" (Fields & Fields, 2015, para. 14).

There are also meetings exclusively organized by and for gay men that do not include other lifestyle migrants. In interview, Arturo spoke about the meetings he had the opportunity to attend during 2019, just before the pandemic. These meetings were organized once a month in a bar located in the historic center of the city. Arturo recounts that once he had the organizers bring a doctor to speak to them, in English, about the medical services in the city and about HIV. He also said that from time to time a brunch was organized in the restaurant of a boutique hotel, which was attended by a small group of affluent gay men, according to him (personal communication,

May 12, 2021). Iker, for his part, recounted that before the pandemic, every Thursday there was a social event for foreign homosexuals; that there was always something to do in this group (personal communication, July 1, 2021).

Clearly, this type of meeting allows newcomers to meet people, get recommendations of life in the city, and even make friends. This is the underworld of which Berger & Luckmann (1979) speak, which has facilitated our interviewees to build a new daily reality in which they can socialize through mutual identification. For those who live in the center of the city, like Iker, walking along Paseo de Montejo implies a strong likelihood of running into someone they know. Thomas said that when he goes to a well-known downtown restaurant, he knows at least half of the people there. It is clear to him that when he wants to go out and not run into anyone he knows, he has to go to the north of the city, as that is the area where people with a good income live and where the amenities for this type of population are located (personal communication, September 22, 2021).

Iker and Thomas work, live, and spend most of their time in the historic center of Merida. Mike's social life took, however, different paths once the meetings were cancelled due to the pandemic because, although he was able to keep contact with some of them, he comments that many of the gay foreigners he met returned to their places of origin (personal communication, June 21, 2021). The pandemic and the fact that Mike and his partner live outside of the historic center of Merida, places them somewhat on the margin of the dynamics in that part of the city. At the time of the interview, they felt that they had more local than foreigner friends, but that all in all they still had few friends.

As for the social life of the study group, it is worth noting that there is no real social integration in the city of Merida; that is, neither with their Yucatecan neighbors within the context of the historic center, nor with those who share their same socioeconomic level. Alluding to the prominent and wealthy families of the city, Iker says:

It's not that I'm going to hang out with a Ponce or an Abraham, or any of those families [...] I mean, I can meet for business, but it's not like I'm going to go sailing with them on a Sunday (personal communication, July 1, 2021).

However, it should be clarified that this characteristic is not typical of the group of homosexual foreigners, but in general of lifestyle migrants, especially those who settle in the historic center, since it has already been demonstrated in other studies that life there runs in parallel, without much interaction between all-time Yucatecan residents and lifestyle migrants (Dávila Valdés, 2022; Dávila Valdés & López Santillán, 2021). It is important here to address to the urban space of residence, as it is clear that migrants who arrive with children in the city and settle outside the historic center experience somewhat different dynamics as their children go to school and integrate into Yucatecan society. This topic would require another research of its own.

It is complicated to quantify the foreign gay population living in Merida, especially that in the center of the city; however, several aspects can be taken into account that make this population very visible. The first would be the attendance of these homosexual and English-speaking foreigners to the meetings that were organized before the pandemic. The second aspect is derived

from the observation made in the city, since it is common to see male couples walking in the historic center, strolling by in the shopping malls, or shopping in convenience stores. The last aspect is what was commented by the interviewees: Iker said that most of the foreigners he knows are homosexual (personal communication, July 1, 2021); Bruno assured that there are “a lot of them [...] everywhere” (personal communication, September 27, 2021). Matt, for his part, spoke of waves of foreigners who have arrived in the city of Merida, and he places the gay wave as the third one, after those of artists and heterosexual retirees. He claims that more than 50% of his clients are homosexual foreigners (personal communication, December 3, 2021). Undoubtedly, the interviewees, as well as gay foreign real estate brokers in general, have been to an extent also responsible for this third wave.

Despite the growing presence of gay foreigners in the city of Merida, there is not—at least not yet—a defined urban space by and for them. While there are some bars and restaurants preferred by them, these are not exclusively frequented by members of the LGBTQ+ community. The same is true at the housing level, although perhaps, as Thomas recounts, two or three blocks can be identified on 73rd and 55th streets in the San Sebastian and Santiago neighborhoods, respectively, located within the historic center, where several foreign gay couples have settled. Although many of them live in the historic center, it should be noted that this large space is still quite heterogeneous and therefore shared with both all-time Yucatecan residents and other lifestyle migrants who are not necessarily homosexual. The fact that these migrants have not been subject to aggression because of their sexual preferences, and that they generally hold the perception that neither their neighbors nor public opinion discriminates against them, makes spatial segregation of the foreign homosexual community in Merida less of a necessity, which matches what has been observed in other cities, such as Toronto, in Canada (Nash, 2013).

CLOSING REMARKS

The group of homosexual migrants analyzed in this article constitutes an important part of the lifestyle migrant population that has chosen the city of Merida to live in. These migrants are inserted into the larger daily and social dynamic of lifestyle migration in general, with which they share certain privileges, an identity of their own and different from the local one, as well as the desire to make their life more leisure-oriented and relaxed in their new place of residence. It is also important to mention that gay male lifestyle migrants have been, together with heterosexuals, responsible for the socio-spatial transformations that have taken place, especially in the historic center of Merida, which is where the concentration of this migration is greater and where the legal and symbolic appropriation of space are more visible.

In this city, the identity factor of the study group is not limited, therefore, to any specifically gay urban space, as has historically been the case in some large cities of the world such as Paris or Mexico City. In this sense, there does not seem to be a space in Merida where businesses have homosexuals as their main consumers, or where symbols such as the gay flag appear permanently, or where the residents are mostly same-sex couples.

Thus, when asked if the city of Merida is a gay-friendly city, one may state that this qualifier cannot be applied in a generalized way, since there are still certain contrasts, nuances, and above all certain actions by conservative social groups that make the city a space that is not always inclusive for the entire LGBTQ+ population. However, Merida is a mid-size city in which one can already point out at certain policies, institutions, and sectors of society that are open and protective of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. As far as our study group (gay male lifestyle migrants) is concerned, Merida definitely does appear to them as a quite welcoming, gay-friendly city. It is a fact that their condition as foreigners, originating from countries with better conditions of material existence, possessing greater cultural and above all economic capital, places them in an advantageous situation, and so they are far from being a target of homophobic discrimination in the city.

Still, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that this open and tolerant city is not for everyone, as Pasos Tzec (2015) suggested when he stated that there are socioeconomic aspects—and it is believed that especially ethnic ones—that impact the way one is treated, since the reality is not the same for homosexuals in the city who belong to the middle and upper classes than for those who come from more popular strata and are of Mayan origin. Perhaps this differentiation can also be extended to foreigners coming from Latin American countries with a similar or even lower standard of living than the local one, but this is an issue yet to be analyzed.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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