Hacienda tourism is a form of cultural tourism that has developed in Yucatán, Mexico, since the 1990s and is something quite distinct from the two other easily definable modes of tourism in the region: Cancún-based beach tourism, and colonial cultural tourism, based in Mérida. Both of these are, of course, hinged to the other huge tourism draw of the region, namely Maya archaeological sites of international renown. Hacienda tourism geographically, thematically, economically and ideologically mediates the other forms of tourism available in the Yucatán Peninsula as it offers luxury getaways with a historical, cultural flavour to a niche market. Since the late 1990s, the development of hacienda tourism has been occurring on a rather small scale in a tightly circumscribed region. As small scale as hacienda tourism may currently be, its development from the business end is virtually a monopoly. Although there are a handful of independently owned and operated hacienda hotels, these pale in comparison to those under consideration here, which are the jewels in the crown, so to speak, of Yucatán’s ‘hacienda route’: Starwood Hotel and Resorts Worldwide’s Luxury Collection’s hacienda hotels.

Hacienda tourism is not based on the commodification of the ‘Maya’ as a culturally marginal and exoticized Other as in the typical mode of so-called ‘ethnic tourism’ (van den Berghe 1994). There is little emphasis on people as subjects of tourism itself—or ‘tourees’ (ibid.)—in Yucatán’s hacienda tourism. Instead, the focus is destination-driven: the hotel itself. As such, the development of hacienda tourism is centred on property and tied to the restoration of plantation houses and outbuildings that served as production and population centres for the intensive cultivation of a rope-like fibre known as henequen.

Beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, booming through the fin-de-siècle, until waning then dying as a private industry in the first decades of the twentieth century, henequen haciendas—large
centres for the growing and processing of Agave fourcroydes (a hard, sisal-like fibre used in the manufacture of agricultural twine)—dominated the social and economic landscape. From 1860 until the 1930s henequen monocrop production for commercial export product ruled north-western Yucatán, as henequen production climaxed in the 1880s/1890s. As if in a war effort, all land and labour resources of the region were dedicated to producing henequen, most of which went directly to the United States for use in McCormick harvesting machines (Joseph 1982; Joseph and Wells 1982). As land, labour and capital were rolled into intensive production on scores of henequen haciendas, tens of thousands of indigenous Maya people (and others) were forcibly relocated to work the fields as ‘debt-peons’. For them, the great economic expansion that henequen brought to Yucatán in the nineteenth century was de facto slavery. Even if one were to build a luxurious hotel, how, one might ask, do you turn this history into a tourable heritage?

**Haciendas: the other Maya heritage**

Henequen hacienda heritage is the ‘other’ Maya heritage of Yucatán. Hacienda heritage exists ‘under erasure’, so to speak, overshadowed by Yucatán’s monumental archaeological heritage heralding ancient Maya civilization. Yucatán’s hacienda heritage has perhaps been invisible only to the outsider’s eye. In other words, hacienda heritage has been visible to, and lived by, local residents all along. While foreigners’ eyes were drawn to archaeological sites and early tourism development in Yucatán catered to this fascination, Yucatec writer Ermilo Abreu Gomez pointed out both ironically and prophetically in 1940 that ‘a tour of the Maya ruins means a visit to our henequen haciendas’ (Joseph 1982: 228). Alongside its more famous pyramids, Yucatán has many of the hallmarks of a post-colonial landscape, none of which resound as strongly as the hulking and haunting ruins of the casas grandes sitting in the centre of dozens of rural Maya communities, especially in the north-west of the peninsula.

A few years ago, I had the chance to live in one of these haunting and perhaps haunted half-ruined houses (far from a restored luxury hotel!) when I first began to learn about the phenomenon of hacienda hotels. One of the five premier ‘Luxury Collection’ properties was located a couple of towns away from where I conducted extensive ethnographic