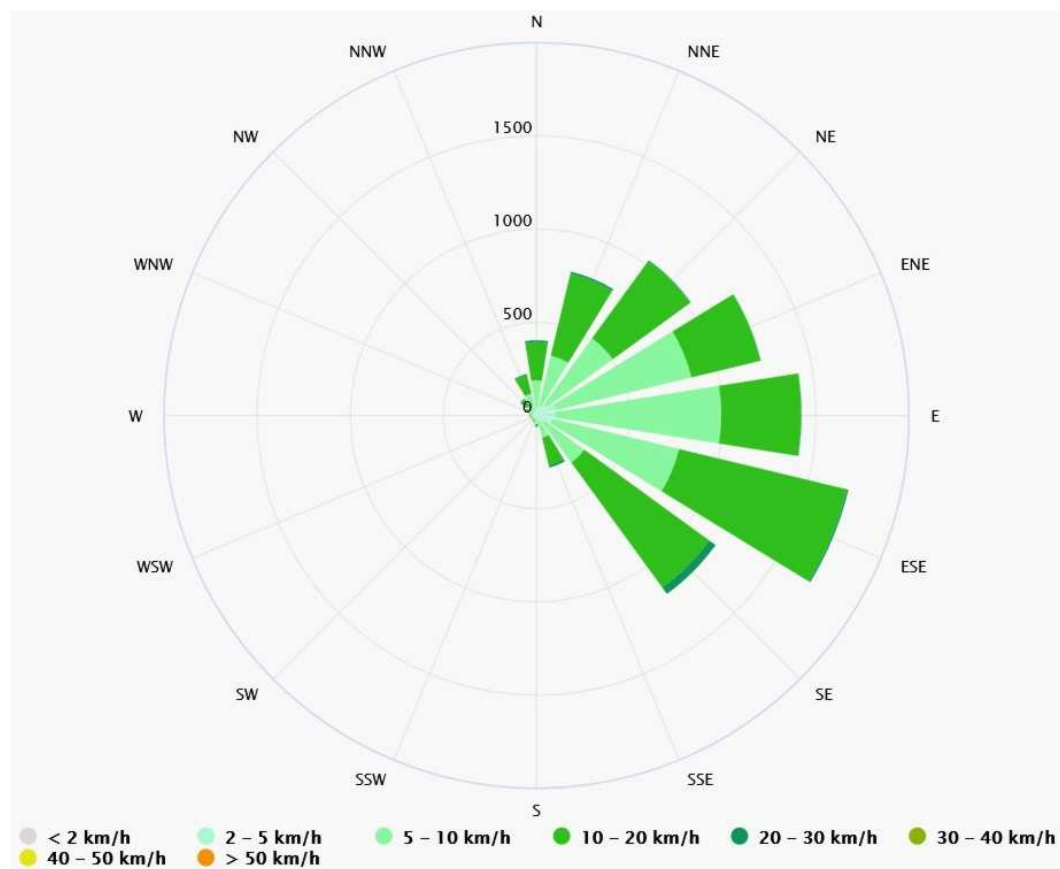


Yucatecan Cemeteries

Cemeteries in small towns in Yucatan are usually located in the west-southwest corner of the town. That is because there is wind that is said to bring sickness from the west, or more exactly, from the west-southwest. It is an unusual direction for the wind to come, and thus air from the cemetery is less likely to be felt in town. For verification of this feature: as one drives along the local Route 180 from Mérida to Cancun the first sign that one is entering a town is the presence of a cemetery, usually on the south side of the road, meaning that the cemetery is located west-southwest of the town center.

As a side note: in towns and what are now cities which have had tremendous growths, for example Mérida and Cancun, the cemeteries have been swallowed up and now instead of being beyond the limits of the populated area are now surrounded by housing. In Mérida, the Cementerio General, which used to be at what was the southern most end of Calle 66, is now surrounded by housing. Incidentally, that end of Calle 66 went through the Red Light district. Perhaps an ironic last journey for men and perhaps a painful last journey for women.



The wind rose for Mérida, showing little wind out of the south-southwest.

Because of the physical nature of the surface land in Yucatan, especially in the northwestern portion of the peninsula which consists of exposed limestone, there are very few areas where there is enough soil deep enough to bury the dead. However, throughout this region there are ancient house mounds every hundred meters or so. These house mounds were built beginning about 2,000 years ago and were occupied and added to on and off until the coming of the Spanish. The house mounds consist of raised platforms, the surface of which are usually about one meter above the surrounding area. The size of these mounds is generally about ten meters by ten meters. The mounds are generally made of the loose rock fill gathered from the surrounding area and then layered over with either mud or lime to create a smooth living area.

House mounds have a long history of being used as burial sites because at least in these one can be assured of being able to dig to the depth necessary to bury the dead. Thus, it is not surprising that present-day cemeteries are often located on house mounds. For example, the cemetery in Kom Chen¹ is located on what is actually a pre-Columbian complex which extends southwesterly beyond the stone wall which encloses the cemetery and culminates in a structure which was some three meters higher than the surrounding area.

Because of the limited burial area in the cemetery it is a custom to exhume family members after two years to make way for other members of town. The family of the deceased is obligated by the town to disinter their family member after two years which is the amount of time it takes for nature to do its work, leaving only bones, and for those people who are buried in synthetic clothing, their clothes. Often, for lack of money, the bone box is not immediately constructed and so the bones are bundled up and hung in the little building where corpses are prepared for burial. If the bundle hangs there for too long the cemetery caretaker will throw the bundle over the back wall, making it an excellent place for medical students to gather complete skeletons.

Our house in Kom Chen was located two blocks away from the cemetery and the people around us were by and large the poorer folk of the town because no one else wanted these lots. In any case, when the wind came from that direction people felt that they were in danger of getting sick. The medical recipes state as much; that the chikin ik (west wind) brings phlegm and other respiratory diseases. Another disease-bearing wind, Xaman caan (literally "northern sky" but meaning wind out of the north) is also thought to bring sickness, namely the common cold, because the xaman caan does bring cold winds.

¹ Properly: Kom Cheen, from "kom" = hallow, depression, sinkhole and "cheen" = well. There is indeed a "kom" which has a "cheen" in it not too far north of the town center.



Entrance to the Cemetery at Kom Chen



Photo showing the building used for preparing the body for burial and also used as a place to store recently disinterred bones while awaiting the construction of the bone boxes known as osarios, some of which can be seen to the right of the receiving building. Along the left-hand side of the road leading into the cemetery are the bone boxes of the well-to-do of Kom Chen. In many of these the bodies of the dead are placed to molder away without having to go through the process of decaying in the burial and then being exhumed.

The following are photos showing where a coffin has been exhumed, the coffin itself next to the back wall of the cemetery, and the bone boxes where the bones of the disinterred are placed.



