



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Covering 758,449 square miles (1,964,375 square kilometers), Mexico is about three times the size of Texas, or one-fifth the size of the United States. It shares its northern border with the United States and its southern border with Guatemala and Belize. Mexico is rich in natural resources, including oil, natural gas, gold, silver, and coal. Temperatures and rainfall vary with elevation and region. The north is generally dry and hot, and there is a large desert region. Humidity is higher in the southeast, where tropical jungles are found, and along coastal areas. Rain falls mainly in the summer. The high and cooler central plateau, where Mexico City is located, is bounded by two mountain ranges: the Sierra Madre Oriental and Sierra Madre Occidental. Mountains, including some volcanoes, cover two-thirds of the country.

History

Mexico's history boasts a long line of advanced indigenous civilizations whose accomplishments rival those of the Egyptians and early Europeans. They built huge empires, were skilled artisans, and created accurate calendars. The Olmecs were among the first inhabitants of the area. Around 2000 BC, the Mayan Empire built incredible cities throughout North and Central America, but the empire began to decline in the 10th century and eventually fell. The Aztecs were the last great empire, conquered by the Spanish in 1521. While the Spanish assimilated some aspects of the native cultures, the destruction of these civilizations was widespread.

Spaniards brought Christianity to the land and ruled until the 19th century.

Mexico was one of the first countries to revolt against Spain. Led by a priest named Miguel Hidalgo, the drive for independence began in September 1810 and ended in 1821. A constitution was adopted in 1824 and a republic was established. However, Antonio López de Santa Ana took power in 1833 and ruled as a dictator. During his regime, Mexico diminished in size as it lost territory comprising Texas and much of the current western United States.

Santa Ana resigned in 1855 and Benito Juárez became president. In 1861, French troops invaded Mexico City and named the Austrian archduke Maximilian the emperor of Mexico. Forces under Juárez overthrew Maximilian in 1867. Dictator Porfirio Díaz came to power in 1877 and was overthrown in 1910, when Mexico entered a period of internal political unrest and violence. That period, which ended in the 1920s and produced a new constitution, became known as Mexico's social revolution.

Political unrest continued in the 1930s, but the situation stabilized in the 1940s. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) emerged as the national leader in 1929; it ruled the country as a single party and restricted political dissent for many years. Many changes did take place, but none challenged the PRI's domination. Elected in 1988, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada. After his term he fled the country because of allegations of corruption.

Events in the mid-1990s helped weaken the PRI's power: The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) staged a

1994 rebellion in the state of Chiapas to protest government policy toward indigenous peoples. Charges of corruption against high-level government officials and the 1994 assassination of a PRI presidential candidate shocked the ruling party. The PRI replacement candidate took office in 1994 but immediately encountered an economic and currency crisis. In 1997, the PRI lost control of the lower house in Congress for the first time since its founding. In July 2000, Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN) was elected president, ending more than 70 years of PRI control of the government. Felipe Calderón was declared the winner of presidential elections in July 2006, winning by the smallest margin in Mexican history. Opposing candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador did not accept the court decision granting Calderón power. Calderón has cracked down on the drug trade while attempting to curb rising drug-related violence, and opposes the 700-mile (1,125 kilometer) barrier being built across the U.S.-Mexico border by the United States. In 2009, an outbreak of swine flu killed dozens and led to temporary closures of many businesses and schools.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Mexico's population of 112.5 million people is growing at about 1.12 percent annually. Roughly 60 percent of the population is of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage. Roughly 30 percent belongs to various indigenous groups. Most of these are descendants of the Mayans and Aztecs. About 9 percent is of European ancestry. Most Mexicans tend to identify with their indigenous and Spanish heritage. Over 75 percent of the population lives in urban areas. Mexico City, the capital, is one of the largest cities in the world; its metropolitan area has a population of almost 22 million. Guadalajara and Monterrey are also major population centers.

Language

Spanish is the official language. The Spanish spoken in Mexico is somewhat unique in pronunciation and idiom uses. One characteristic is the abundant use of diminutives to express small size, endearment, or politeness: *chico* (small) becomes *chiquito*, *abuelo* (grandfather) becomes *abuelito*, etc. As many as one hundred indigenous languages are still spoken in parts of Mexico, including Tzotzil and Tzeltal (Mayan dialects), Nahuatl (Aztec), Otomi, Zapotec, and Mixtec. Most people who speak an indigenous language also speak some Spanish. English is taught at secondary schools, but competence in English is rare in most areas.

Religion

The majority of Mexicans (77 percent) are Roman Catholic, although many do not attend church services regularly. The Catholic Church has greatly influenced the culture, attitudes, and history of all Mexicans, and Catholic holidays are celebrated widely. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the patron saint of Mexico and a national symbol. According to legend, she appeared several times to an indigenous man named Juan Diego in December 1531. Other Christian churches are also

active in Mexico; some are growing quite rapidly.

The Mexican constitution was drafted during the revolution in an attempt to transfer power from the Catholic Church to the people. It guaranteed freedom of worship but banned public displays of worship and forbade churches to own property or exist as legal entities. In 1992, the law was changed, endowing churches with more legal rights. Although many officials ignored the previous restrictions, the new law relieves tension between the state and various religions—without forcing the government to endorse a specific church.

General Attitudes

Mexicans value friendship, humor, honesty, hard work, and personal honor. They also respect individuals who use their ingenuity to solve daily problems. Social status is measured by wealth, family name, and education. *Machismo*, the ideal of a strong, forceful man, is still prevalent. The elderly are respected, particularly in indigenous communities. Mexicans are patriotic and generally proud of their country, despite its challenges. They may call people from the United States *americanos* or *norteamericanos* but may sometimes remind U.S. citizens that Mexico is also part of North America. The most common term used to refer to English speakers from the United States is *gringo*, a Spanish word meaning foreigner.

Mexicans traditionally have had a relaxed attitude toward time, although this is changing in urban areas. Generally, they believe individuals are more important than schedules.

Personal Appearance

Most Mexicans, especially in urban areas, wear clothing that is also common in the United States. Many indigenous groups wear traditional clothing—either daily or for festivals. In some areas, a man wears a wool poncho (*sarape*) over his shirt and pants when it is cold. He also may wear a wide-brimmed straw hat. Rural men and professional men in the north may wear cowboy hats, boots, and jeans. Rural women wear dresses or skirts, often covered by an apron. They may use a shawl (*rebozo*) to carry a child, cover the head or arms, or help support water buckets carried on the head. Fabric designs and colors can be characteristic of a specific region. People often dress up for special occasions.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Mexicans usually greet with a handshake or nod of the head, although friends commonly embrace. People may also shake hands while saying good-bye. Women often greet with a kiss on the cheek, and men may greet close female friends in the same way. Common verbal greetings include *Buenos días* (Good morning), *Buenas tardes* (Good afternoon), *Buenas noches* (Good evening/night), and *¿Cómo está?* (How are you?). A casual greeting is *Hola* (Hello). Mexican males often make *piropos* (flirtatious personal comments) in passing to females, to which the females generally do not respond.

Mexicans commonly have more than one given name and two last names (e.g., *José Luis Martínez Salinas*). The

next-to-last name comes from the father and functions as the official surname, while the final name is from the mother. Coworkers address one another by professional title followed by the first surname (e.g., *Doctor Martínez*). Acquaintances or coworkers without a title are addressed as *Señor* (Mr.), *Señora* (Mrs.), or *Señorita* (Miss), followed by the surname. Respected elders often are addressed as *Don* or *Doña*, followed by a given name.

Gestures

Mexicans typically stand close to each other while talking. They often use hand and arm gestures in conversation. Indigenous peoples may be more reserved around foreigners or Mexicans from big cities. A person can indicate “no” by shaking the hand from side to side with the index finger extended and palm outward. The “thumbs up” gesture expresses approval. Tossing items is offensive; one hands items directly to another person. If someone sneezes, a person may say *Salud* (Health). If passing between conversing individuals is unavoidable, it is polite to say *Con permiso* (Excuse me). It is considered important to say *Gracias* (Thank you) for any favor or commercial service rendered.

Visiting

Mexicans are very hospitable. Unexpected visitors usually are welcomed and served refreshments. Refusing refreshments may be considered impolite. Unannounced visits are fairly common, but as more people get telephones, it is becoming common to call ahead to ensure the hosts are home. Mexicans enjoy conversing and socializing with relatives or friends. At a dinner party, the meal might not be served until after 8 p.m. because people work late and enjoy socializing before eating. Guests are expected to relax and do not offer to help the host unless it is evident some help is needed. They stay for conversation rather than leave directly after the meal. It is considered rude to depart without taking leave of the hosts. On special occasions such as Mother's Day, gifts are important and in some areas serenading is still popular.

Eating

Although schedules for eating vary, many Mexicans eat four daily meals: a light breakfast, an early lunch, a main meal in the late afternoon, and a light snack called a *cena* or *merienda* at night. The main meal may consist of soup or salad, main dish, and dessert (*postre*). Eating as a family is common. Urban professionals often eat meals at restaurants or street-side stands. Food purchased on the street usually is eaten at the stand where the item is bought. It is inappropriate for adults to eat while walking on the street. Spicy food is called *picante*, while hot (temperature) food is called *caliente*. *Picante* dishes are often eaten with bland foods such as bread, tortillas, or rice to relieve the burning sensation. When eating, Mexicans keep both hands above the table. Some foods are eaten with utensils, while others are eaten by hand or by using pieces of tortillas to scoop food. Meals usually are not rushed. One should always ask to be excused when leaving a table or room.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Except in urban areas, where the trend is to have smaller families, Mexican families generally have more than three children. Family unity and responsibility are high priorities. The divorce rate is relatively low, partly because of the dominance of the Catholic faith, which does not approve of divorce. In many families, the father is the leader and provides economic support, while the mother is responsible for domestic duties. However, in some ethnic groups the mother is the leader, and more women from almost all groups are entering the formal workplace. Rural men and women often work together in the fields. A household, especially in rural areas, may include members of the extended family. Children generally live with their parents until they marry and sometimes after they marry.

Housing

Most Mexican dwellings, especially in urban areas, are box-like, rectangular buildings with few frills and little greenery. People try to make up for the lack of lawn outside by hanging lots of flowers and plants on the walls. Because of earthquakes, people in both urban and rural areas now build houses using cement blocks and steel bars, which are often left protruding out of the roofs. Building a house is generally done in stages. Often, Mexicans will buy a site, put down the foundations, and sometimes build one big multipurpose room. They'll continue the project as the money becomes available.

Mexicans typically decorate their walls with pictures of ancestors, wedding and graduation photos, and religious art, especially of the Virgin Mary. In poorer urban homes, the sleeping area may be separated from the rest of the house only by a curtain. Rural dwellings used to be made from adobe or stone, materials ideally suited to the Mexican climate. The recent move to urban-style cement and brick buildings has come at a cost. Such homes are like ovens on hot summer days and refrigerators on cold winter nights.

Dating and Marriage

When dating, a young man often meets the young woman at a prearranged place rather than picking her up at her home. However, parental approval of the activity and of the boyfriend is important. In some rural areas, it is considered a mark of poor character for a young woman to go out alone after dark, so a young man may call on her at home. Many people marry first in a civil ceremony and then in a church, following Catholic traditions. Wedding celebrations include music, dancing, games, and food. Common-law marriage is also practiced and recognized. Teen pregnancy is common, and unmarried women tend to keep and raise the child with the help of their parents.

Life Cycle

Most Mexican babies are baptized. The performing of this religious ritual is the focus of a major social event attended by numerous family members, friends, and *padrinos* (godparents). Although, legally, a Mexican girl does not reach

adulthood until she turns 18, her *quinceaños* (fifteenth birthday) has traditionally marked that transition. The *quinceaños* is part religious ceremony, part big party.

There are exceptions—usually among rich families in the big cities—but most Mexicans do the bulk of their mourning in their homes and bury their dead within 24 hours of death. On the way to the cemetery, female mourners dressed in black carry white flowers. Nine days of community prayer in the home of the deceased follows the burial. When these days are over, a cross is carried to the cemetery and placed on the deceased's grave.

Diet

Staple foods include corn, beans, rice, and chilies. These typically are combined with spices, vegetables, and meats or fish. Some foods and dishes are regional, but others are common throughout the nation. Cornmeal or flour tortillas are eaten everywhere. Other common foods include *tortas* (hollow rolls stuffed with meat, cheese, or beans), *quesadillas* (tortillas baked or fried with cheese), *mole* (spicy or sweet sauce served with meat), and *tacos* (folded tortillas with meat or other filling). Popular soups include *pozole* (pork-and-corn soup), *birria* (goat soup), and *menudo* (spicy tripe soup). *Enchiladas* are tortillas filled with meat and covered in a chili sauce. *Tamales* are cornmeal dough stuffed with meat, cheese, fruit, or other filling; they are wrapped in a corn husk or banana leaf and steamed. People often make homemade fruit drinks, but commercially produced soda is everywhere. Popular “Mexican” foods and restaurants in the United States usually are very different from those found in Mexico.

Recreation

Fútbol (soccer) is Mexico's most popular sport; the national team has competed in several World Cups. Bullfighting draws the next highest number of spectators. Professional wrestling (*la lucha*) has a large following. Popular participation sports include baseball, basketball, tennis, and volleyball. Mexicans enjoy their own form of rodeo called *charreada*, which is often accompanied by a fair-like atmosphere. Many recreational activities include music and dancing. Daylong *fiestas* and weeklong festivals nearly always feature fireworks, feasts, and bullfights. Watching television is a favorite leisure activity, especially in urban areas. *Telenovelas* (soap operas) are especially popular.

The Arts

Song and dance are integral to Mexican society. Originating in Mexico, *mariachi* music has found many international audiences. *Mariachi* bands vary in size but generally consist of a singer, violins, trumpets, and various guitars. *Corridos*, songs that tell stories, and *ranchera* are other forms of traditional music. Mexico has become a major recording and distribution center for the Americas. Dancing, such as the *jarabe tapatio* (Mexican Hat Dance), often accompanies traditional music and *fiestas*. Revolutionary themes dominated all types of art the first half of the century and remain important today. For example, brightly colored murals commissioned by the government in the 1920s and 1930s decorate many public buildings. Diego Rivera and other

Mexican artists inspired muralist movements worldwide. Museums feature the art of ancient civilizations as well as fine art. Textiles, pottery, and silverwork are popular and can be seen in many markets.

Holidays

National public holidays include New Year's Day; Constitution Day (5 Feb.), which also marks the beginning of *Carnaval*, the week of parties and parades that precedes Lent; Birthday of Benito Juárez (21 Mar.); Labor Day (1 May); *Cinco de Mayo* (5 May), which celebrates an 1862 victory over the French; Independence Day (16 Sept.), which is marked by a presidential address and *El grito* (the cry of freedom) on the evening of 15 September; Columbus Day or *Día de la Raza*, which celebrates indigenous heritage (12 Oct.); Revolution Day (20 Nov.); and Christmas Day. Many offices close for a half day on Mother's Day (10 May), when schools sponsor special festivities.

Major religious holidays include St. Anthony's Day (17 Jan.), when children take their pets to church to be blessed; *Semana Santa* (Palm Sunday–Easter Sunday); Corpus Christi (May or June); and Assumption (15 Aug.). During the period known as *Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead (1–2 Nov.), families gather to celebrate life while they honor the dead, sweep graves, build special altars to honor the newly dead, and place items on graves to accompany spirits on their journey to heaven. Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe (12 Dec.) and *Noche Buena* (Christmas Eve) are so popular that most offices and businesses honor them as public holidays. Christmas celebrations begin on 16 December with nightly parties (*posadas*) and end on Day of the Kings (6 Jan.), when most children in central and southern Mexico get their presents.

Each town also has an annual festival that includes a religious ceremony, meal, and dance. Many people try to return home for these events.

SOCIETY

Government

Mexico's federal republic of 31 states and one federal district operates under a central government led by a president (currently Felipe Calderón). While states technically are autonomous, the central government controls sectors such as education, security, and national industries. A president can serve only one six-year term, and a legislator cannot serve two consecutive terms. The legislature is composed of a 128-seat Senate and 500-seat Chamber of Deputies. Voting is considered a duty for adults 18 and older but is not enforced.

Economy

Service industries employ the highest proportion of Mexicans and create the largest part of the gross domestic product, although heavier industries such as mining, manufacturing, and petroleum are also important. Pemex, owned by the Mexican government, is one of the world's largest oil companies. Tourism brings in several billion dollars each year. One-fifth of the labor force is employed in agriculture.

The economy has seen some growth since 1993, when Mexico signed NAFTA with the United States and Canada. NAFTA lowered trade barriers and increased number of *maquiladoras* (border industries), where U.S. investment employs Mexican labor. Economists are divided on how much NAFTA may have helped Mexico's economy. Although some sectors have grown, others, such as agriculture, have been harmed by competition from duty-free, heavily subsidized products from the United States. In addition, *maquiladoras* have drawn some criticism for not meeting typical U.S. guidelines for wages, safety, and environmental regulations. Mexico also has entered free-trade agreements with the European Union, much of Central America, and Israel. The 2008 economic crisis, which started in the United States, spread to Mexico, bringing a sharp decline in exports to the United States, tourism, and remittances sent home by those who have left Mexico. The government has taken steps to reduce unemployment and stem inflation.

Most Mexicans have access to basic resources; however, economic opportunities are fewer among the indigenous, rural, and southern populations. About 40 percent of Mexicans live in poverty. The currency is the Mexican *peso* (MXN).

Transportation and Communications

Personal cars are common in urban areas, but the majority of Mexicans rely on public transportation. Buses and minibuses are plentiful and inexpensive. Mexico City has a fine subway system. Taxis are numerous, but many operate illegally. The highway system has grown steadily over the last decade, and Mexico has an extensive system of roads, although many remain unpaved or semi-paved. Most people use the private bus system for intercity travel. There are several domestic airlines. Communications are well developed and modern, although many rural families do not have telephones in their homes. Numerous radio and television stations and daily newspapers serve the public.

Education

Education is compulsory and free between ages six and fifteen. However, attendance is not enforced and schools may require that students pay some fees. These obstacles have contributed to the literacy rate, which is about 91 percent nationally, being lower among indigenous and rural populations. After six years of primary education and three years of basic secondary education, students may enter one of two tracks: preuniversity education (three years) or a technical education program (two to three years). Obtaining a university degree takes from three to seven years. The essentially free National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) is prestigious; only one-third of all applicants pass its entrance exams. Enrollment has increased rapidly in the last decade.

Health

By law, all citizens have access to medical services free of charge at government-operated facilities. Medical facilities are good in large cities but limited in remote areas. Traditional remedies and the use of herbs are common in rural

areas. Sanitation and access to safe water are problems in some regions. Air pollution is a serious problem in big cities.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	112,468,855 (rank=11)
Area, sq. mi.	758,449 (rank=16)
Area, sq. km.	1,964,375

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	56 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	68 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$13,200
Adult literacy rate	87% (male); 85% (female)
Infant mortality rate	18 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	74 (male); 79 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).