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# Mexico



Written by Jesse Brett

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# Mexico



## Where Is It?

In the southern part of North America lies the country of Mexico. It is found between the United States and the countries of Belize and Guatemala.

West of Mexico is the Pacific Ocean. On the eastern coast is the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf of California divides the main land area of Mexico from the Baja (BAH-hah) Peninsula. Mexico also includes some islands. These lie along the east and west coasts.



A monument to war heroes greets visitors as they enter Chapultepec Park (bottom). The park includes history museums (top left) as well as lakes (top right).

Mexico City, one of the oldest cities in North America, is the capital of Mexico. It sits in a **basin** surrounded by mountains and is home to more than nineteen million people.

Mexico City contains many beautiful parks. Chapultepec (chah-pool-te-PEK) Park is the largest. It contains a zoo, gardens, fountains, museums, lakes, and forests.

## People

Thousands of years ago, American Indians lived on the land that is now Mexico and built amazing civilizations. Then, Spanish explorers came to Mexico in 1517. By 1521, the Spanish had conquered the region, and Mexico became a colony of Spain. As a result, about two thirds of modern Mexico's people are **mestizos** (mes-TEE-zohz). This means they are the descendants of both American Indian and European ancestors. The other third of the population consists of American Indians, Spanish descendants, and other people who have come to the country.

Today, Mexico has a population of more than 120 million people. Most Mexicans speak Spanish. More people speak Spanish in Mexico than any other country in the world. Some people speak American Indian languages. Most of the population lives in cities.



More than three fourths of Mexico's people live in cities.

Mexico is rich in natural resources such as oil and silver. It exports tons of coffee, sugar cane, and cotton throughout the world each year. The country is also famous for its art and artists. Painting, sculpture, and dance have a long and rich history in Mexico.



## Do You Know?

Mexico is famous for its large paintings called *murals*. One of its most famous muralists was Diego Rivera. In this famous mural, he shows the Zapotec and the Mixtec, two American Indian groups of ancient Mexico, at work making jewelry from gold and precious stones such as jade and turquoise. The mural, along with many others, is in the National Palace in Mexico City.

## Mexico's Landforms



### Land

Mexico has many mountain ranges, and some mountains are also volcanoes. The highest mountain is a volcano 5,700 meters (18,701 ft.) high named Pico de Orizaba (PEE-koh day OR-ee-SAH-bah). Mountains run along the west, east, and south. Mexico also has **canyons** that reach amazing depths. Copper Canyon in northern Mexico is known for being larger than the Grand Canyon.

The center of the country is a **plateau**. The raised, flat land makes it ideal for building roads and towns. Most people live in this area.

Two peninsulas, the Baja and the Yucatán, jut into the ocean. The Yucatán Peninsula is made of limestone that has dissolved away over thousands of years in some places. The result is spectacular caves, including underground caves filled with water called **cenotes** (sih-NOH-teez).

The Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts stretch across northern Mexico. The Sonoran Desert has more types of plants than any desert in North America.

Warm, wet **rainforests** cover parts of southeastern Mexico. These forests are home to many different types of plants and animals. Mexico's coastal lowlands contain **lagoons**, marshes, and swamps. Past the eastern coast lies the Caribbean Sea.

Mexico does not have many lakes and rivers, but one is very well known because it forms the border between Mexico and the United States. Mexicans call this river the *Rio Bravo del Norte*, which means “wild river of the north.” People of the United States call it the *Rio Grande*.

## History

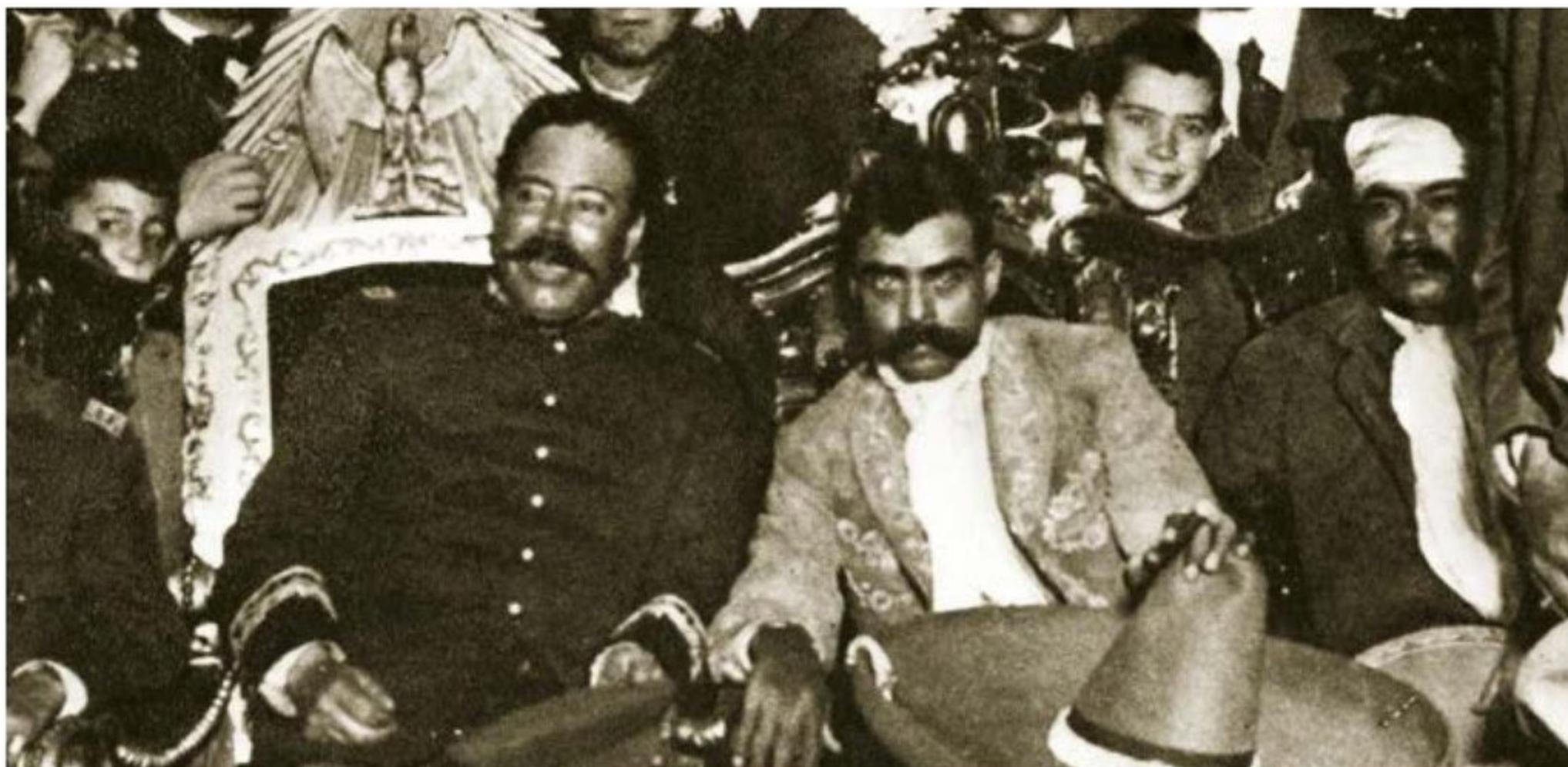
The earliest people in Mexico were American Indians. One of the most well known is the Mayan people. The Maya built great cities, temples, and pyramids without the help of the wheel or animals. They also created beautiful works of art, studied the stars and planets, and developed a calendar.



Visitors to Mexico can see *El Castillo* (kahs-TEE-yoh), a pyramid built by the Mayan people long ago.

In the early 1300s, the Aztec people arrived in central Mexico. They built their capital city on an island in a lake. The Aztec were also known as the *Mexica*, and from that name comes the name *Mexico*. The site of the Aztec capital city, Tenochtitlán (tay-nohch-teet-LAHN), would become Mexico City.

The Aztec built a huge empire. In 1519, the Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés arrived in the Aztec capital. Within two years, he and his followers had taken over the land and conquered the Aztec people.



Pancho Villa (left) and Emiliano Zapata (right), were the leaders of the Mexican Revolution.

In 1521, Mexico became a Spanish **colony**. It remained a colony until 1821, when the people fought and won a war to be free from Spanish rule. In the century that followed, many people were poor farmers who struggled to survive. Wealthy Europeans owned 95 percent of the land. Farmers and workers had few rights and received no education. During the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), the people rose up and changed the government. Mexico became a democracy, which helped to improve daily life for the poor.

Today, Mexico is still a land of extremes. There are two main social classes, the rich and the poor, with a very small middle class.



Although the jaguar is active during the day, it hunts mainly at night.

## Animals

Many different types of animals live in Mexico. The jaguar plays an important role in the stories, songs, and prayers of Mexico's ancient Indian people. It lives mainly in the rainforests of Mexico. The largest of all the cat species in North America, it can measure about 2 meters (6 ft.) in length. It has black spots and a roar that sounds like a loud cough.

Unlike many other cats, the jaguar likes to swim, play, and hunt in water. Its main source of food is the peccary, a small, wild member of the pig family. Sadly, the jaguar is in danger of extinction; however, many people are trying to save them.

The sacred bird of the ancient Maya and the Aztec, the quetzal (keht-SAHL) lives in the rainforests of Mexico. Like many types of birds, the male is brightly colored, and the female is plainer in appearance. The male's head and chest are bright golden green. Its back is blue, its belly is red, and its tail feathers can be more than 1 meter (3 ft.) long.



The bright colors of the male quetzal help it attract a mate.

In the mountains of Mexico lives the red-knee tarantula. This large, hairy spider is named for the reddish-orange patches on its leg joints. The legs of this large spider span 15 cm (6 in.). It grows very slowly, and the female spider can live to be thirty years old.



The ends of the red-knee tarantula's legs can detect vibrations, smells, and tastes.



Mexico's Copper Canyon is a popular tourist site, although it is difficult to reach. A train takes visitors through the area.

## Conclusion

Mexico is a country of diversity. It has modern cities and ancient ruins. Deep canyons lie within high mountains. Dry deserts and wet rainforests cover the land. Its long history and natural beauty fascinate people around the globe. If you were to visit Mexico, what would you want to see first?



**Population:** 120,286,655

**Land:** 1,964,375 sq km (758,450 sq. mi.)

**Capital City:** Mexico City

**Primary Language:** Spanish

**Primary Religion:** Roman Catholic

**Currency:** Peso (PAY-soh)



Source: Central Intelligence Agency (July 2014), World Bank

## Glossary

<b>basin</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a depression, or low area, in the surface of the earth (p. 5)
<b>canyons</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	deep valleys with steep sides that are usually formed by rivers (p. 8)
<b>cenotes</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	deep natural wells created when surface limestone collapses and exposes groundwater underneath (p. 9)
<b>colony</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an area or a country that is ruled by or belongs to another country (p. 11)
<b>lagoons</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	shallow, calm bodies of water between a reef and the shoreline or in the center of an atoll (p. 9)
<b>mestizos</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people of Spanish and American Indian ancestry (p. 6)
<b>peninsula</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a long piece of land almost completely surrounded by water (p. 4)
<b>plateau</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a large raised area of flat land (p. 8)
<b>rainforests</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	dense forests, usually in tropical areas, that receive a lot of rain and contain diverse animal and plant life (p. 9)

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Front and back cover Tulum is the site of ancient Mayan ruins on the coast of the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico.

Title page: Traditional dancers in Mexico wear colorful, twirling dresses.

Page 3: Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula includes underground caves like this one.

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Countries Around the World

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