

LEVELED Book • Z

# M Is for Mexico

*Great tales from Mexico*

A Mayan pyramid  
rises from the  
tropical forest  
at Uxmal

MEXICO



Come on in, the water's fine



MEXICO

Written by Amy Weber

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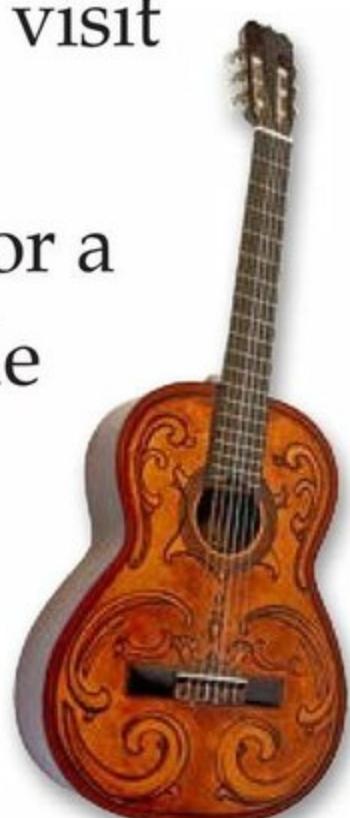
## My Travel Brochure

*By Juan Rodriguez*

*Ms. Brown's Fifth Grade Class*

Welcome to Mexico! I am so glad you have come to visit my beautiful country. Mexico has a lot of rich history and culture. The people who live here are very kind, and their hospitality is out of this world!

There is so much here to see and do. The question is not what you want to do, but whether you will have the time to do it all. You might want to relax on the shores of Mexico's many beaches or visit some of our wonderful museums, historic sites, or ancient **ruins**. You could even go for a horseback ride in the mountains, a boat ride through the wetlands, or listen to local **mariachi** music. Whatever you want to do or see, Mexico has something for you!



## The Land

Let's begin our tour by learning a little bit about Mexico's **geography**. Mexico is located at the southern part of North America. The United States is its neighbor to the north. Guatemala and Belize are its neighbors to the south. The country is divided into North and South, just like the Americas. In southern Mexico, most states have large rural areas with a large farming population. The northern states are wealthier than the southern states and are mostly urban and industrialized.



More than half of the country's population lives in the central part of the country. This area is what is called the *Valley of Mexico*. Mexico City, Mexico's capital, is in the valley. In 2010, it was one of the twenty largest cities in the world! About 8,873,017 people lived in the Mexico City area while about 112 million people lived in the entire country of Mexico.

### Five of the World's Top 20 in 2010 (Population within city limits)\*

1. Shanghai, China	19,836,133
3. Mumbai (Bombay), India	12,478,447
6. Moscow, Russia	11,514,300
13. Seoul, South Korea	9,820,171
16. Mexico City, Mexico	8,873,017

\*Source: GeoHive,  
from most recent actual  
or estimated figures

## Mexico's States

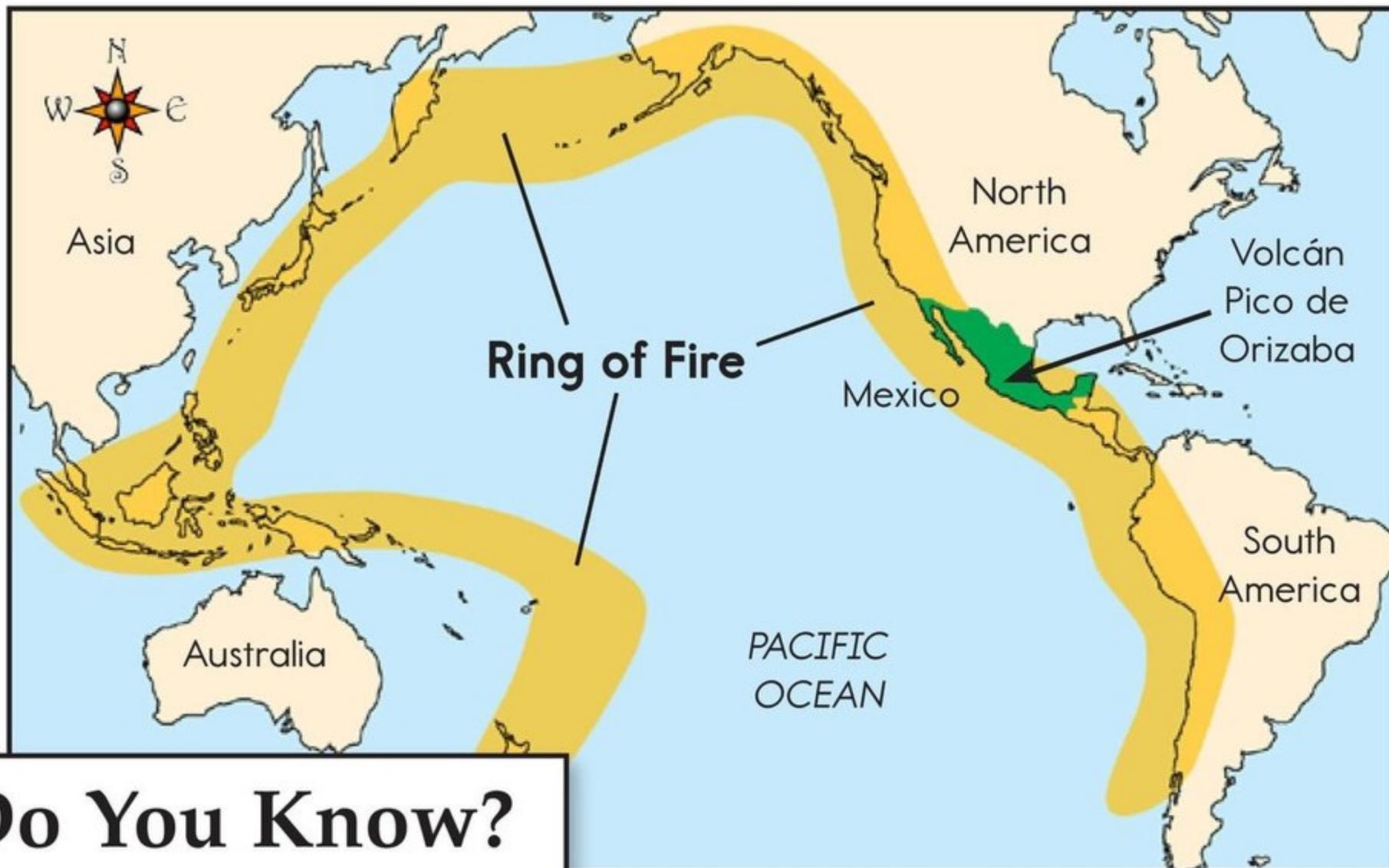


The land in Mexico covers 756,066 square miles (1,972,550 sq km). How big is that? Well, you could fit about five countries the size of Mexico into the United States. I bet you didn't know that Mexico has states, too. It has 31 states and a federal district. All of these areas have totally cool places to visit! Mexico's blue water and landforms are as diverse as its people and culture.



Mexico's many unique **landform** regions include the Mexican plateau, the central plateau, Gulf Coastal Plain, Pacific Coastal Lowlands, southern highlands, Chiapas Highlands, Tabasco Plain, the Yucatán Peninsula, Sierra Madre Occidental and Sierra Madre Oriental, and the Sonoran Desert. If you review that list, you'll notice that very few sound alike.





## Do You Know?

Volcán Pico de Orizaba has not erupted since 1687. No one climbed it until 1848. The volcano is the third highest in North America. Do you know what the first two highest points are?

Since Mexico is a diverse land, it ranks third in the world for the most varied plant and animal species. Did you know that Mexico is also in the "Ring of Fire"? That means that it is located

in an area where volcanoes in the Pacific Ocean are very active. I hope you will take the time to visit Mexico's Volcán Pico de Orizaba. This is a fascinating **dormant** volcano and the country's highest point. It rises to 18,406 feet (5,610 m).



From cities to rural areas, from deserts to rainforests, from wetlands to canyons, Mexico has every kind of environment you're looking for! Let's explore more about my country.

## When to Visit

One thing to keep in mind is that Mexico's climate along the coast is hot and humid. If you don't like hot and humid weather, you should plan your trip from October through May. Of course, the temperatures are almost always milder inland and in the mountains. If you love dry weather, try visiting Baja California or the Sonoran or Chihuahuan deserts. It is dry in these places year-round.



## My Country's History

Before the Spanish defeated the Aztecs in 1521, Mexico was part of what is called *Mesoamerica*. The Olmecs, Maya, Teotihuacán, Toltec, and the Aztec peoples lived in Mesoamerica for a long time before the Spanish arrived. This period of history is called the *pre-Columbian* period. You can visit some of the buildings they left behind such as temples, pyramids, and even ball courts!

The Aztecs were the most powerful of the pre-Columbian **civilizations**. After the Spanish arrived and **conquered** the Aztecs, not only did the people change, but also our land. Spain sent some of its people to live here. The Spaniards made the **indigenous** people become Catholics. They had to learn Spanish and Latin, and many of the native languages disappeared. Today Spanish is the official language of Mexico. Mexico was a **colony** of Spain until 1810. Many Mexicans revolted against Spain, and in 1821, Mexico officially won its independence. It is now a **republic**.

### Explore More

In addition to the Aztecs, the Olmecs, Maya, Teotihuacán, and Toltecs also lived in Mesoamerica. Find out more about these cultures and civilizations by searching the Internet or your local library.





Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán, capital of the Aztec Empire

## Mexico City

Now, let's begin our tour of some of the great cities to visit. We'll begin in the heart of Mexico—Mexico City. When the Aztecs ruled, it was called *Tenochtitlán*. Many of the ancient ruins in and around Mexico City were built by the Aztecs. The *Templo Mayor* (Great Temple) was actually the site of the capital of the Aztec **Empire**. It was built during the 1300s and 1400s. The Spanish tried to bury it, but in 1978 the amazing temple's ruins were uncovered. It is now a museum.

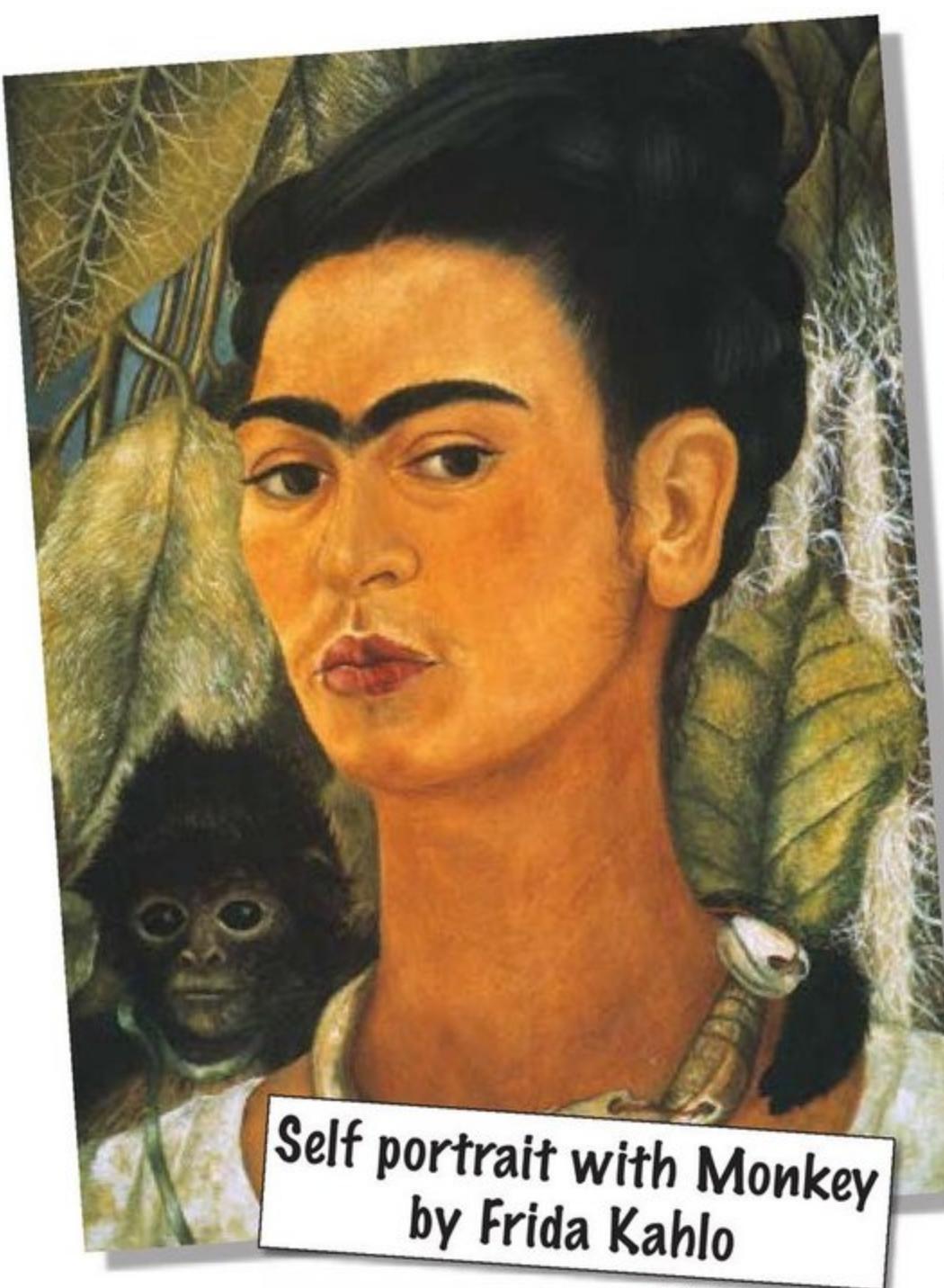
In Mexico City, there are also many beautiful things to see that were built under Spanish rule. **Cathedrals** and other examples of Spanish architecture are all over Mexico City. The largest cathedral in Latin America is Catedral Metropolitana. Would you believe it took nearly 300 years to build?

Throughout the city you can see painted or sculpted art by famous Mexican artists. One of the most well-known is muralist Diego Rivera. From 1929 to 1935, he painted **murals** showing Mexican history in the courtyard of the *Palacio Nacional*, or National Palace.



The site of the palace has been home to many rulers. Moctezuma, who was an Aztec emperor, lived on the same site before the Spanish conquest. After the Spanish conquest, it was home to Spanish **conquistador** Hernán Cortés. Today, the offices of Mexico's president are inside. The palace faces the Plaza de la Constitución (Zócalo). This is one of the world's largest public squares.

Mexico City's largest park is another major attraction. This was where the Aztecs used to spend their summer vacations! You can spend a part of your vacation at Bosque de Chapultepec, too. You can visit a zoo or botanical garden, buy a balloon or a snack, and then visit museums or art galleries and not even leave the park!



**Self portrait with Monkey  
by Frida Kahlo**

There are other art museums and centers throughout the city, including the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño, Museo Mural Diego Rivera, Museo Frida Kahlo, and many, many more. Frida Kahlo was one of the first successful female painters in

the world. She was married to Diego Rivera. My favorite painting of hers has a monkey in it!

However, if shopping is what you want to do while in Mexico City, you won't be disappointed at the *Bazar del Sábado* (Saturday Market) in the Plaza San Jacinto in the San Ángel neighborhood. You can buy Mexican fruits, vegetables, or even candy, at the Mercado de la Merced.

**Candy at the Saturday Market**



## Central and Southern Mexico

Just northwest of Mexico City, you can find more great examples of Spanish colonial architecture. Sometimes this area is called the *Colonial Heartland*. It is also the heart of Mexico's rich agriculture. The Spanish built many cities and towns here because of the silver deposits. If you visit the city of Taxco, southwest of Mexico City, you can find many beautiful silver shops.



Spanish colonial architecture

Farther west there are many beaches. One place known for its beaches is Acapulco.

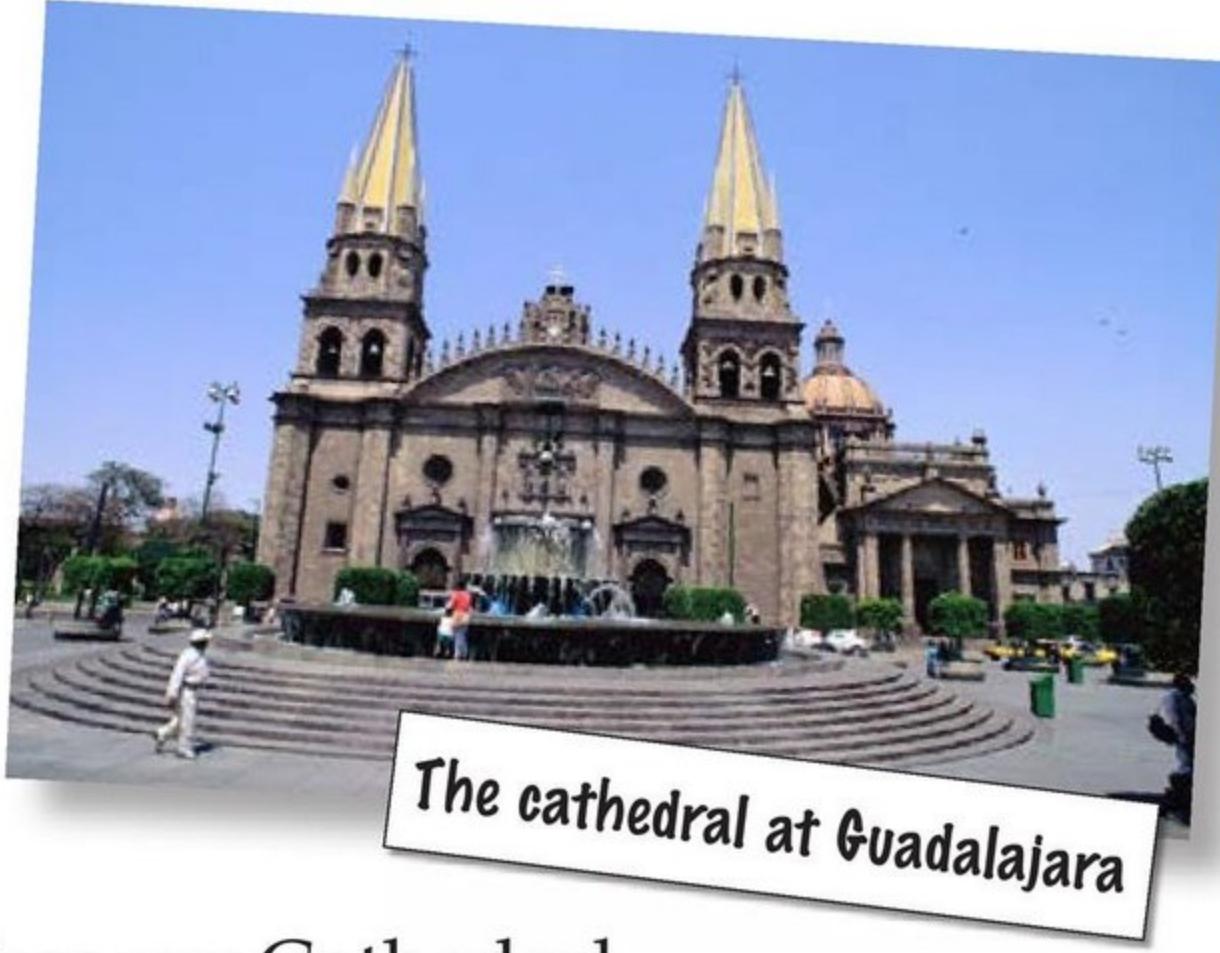
Decades ago, Puerto Vallarta became a popular beach resort for Hollywood stars.

If you get tired of the beach, you can visit a pre-Columbian site in Colima. Colima has been rebuilt over and over again because frequent earthquakes continually damage it.

Guadalajara is the country's second largest city after Mexico City. There are many great places to visit in Guadalajara.

There is the city's famous Cathedral, which took more than two **centuries** to build. You can take a short walk from the Cathedral and see a lot of Spanish colonial architecture.

But like many regions in Mexico, you can also just enjoy being outside! The country's largest lake, Laguna de Chapala, is a great place to go boating. You may want to check out the waterfalls, tropics, and mountains at Huasteca Potosina. I recommend that you take a boat ride to see Tamul waterfall. It drops 344 feet into a canyon!

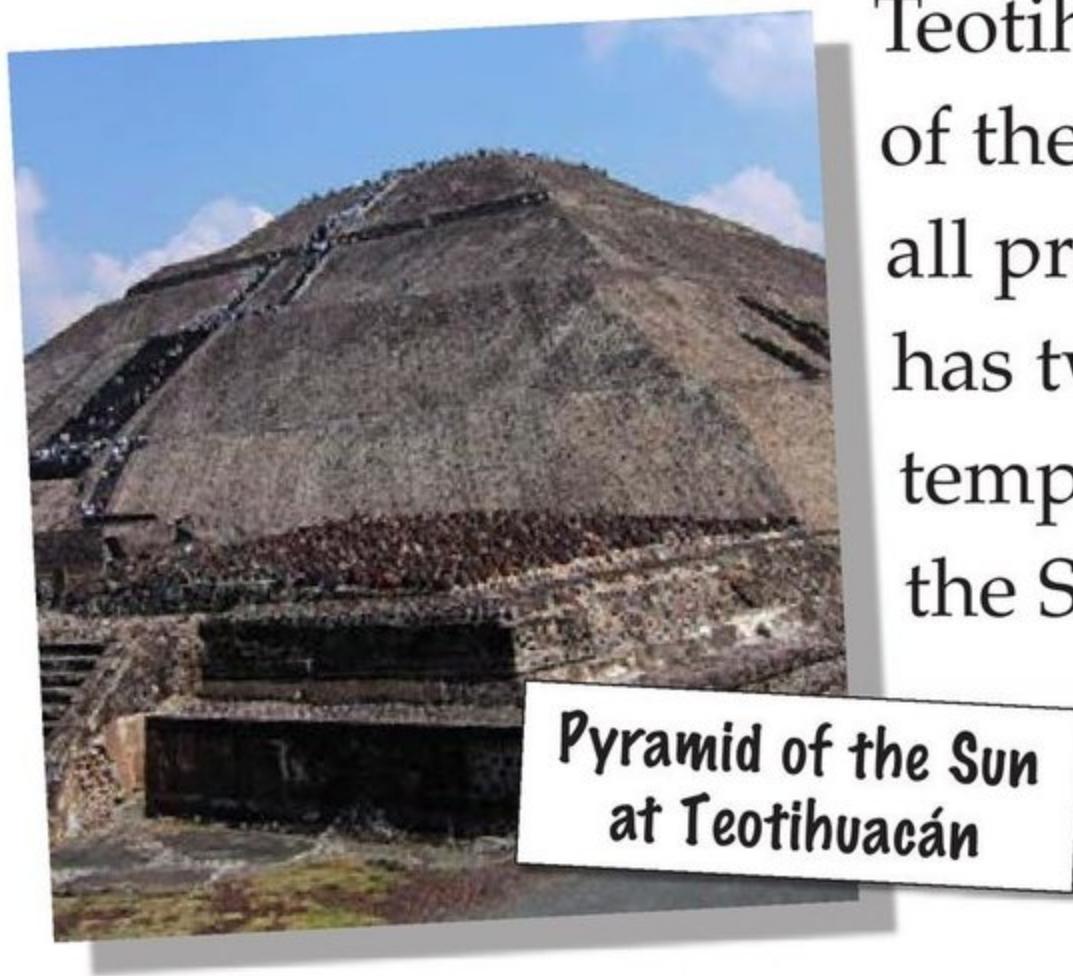


*The cathedral at Guadalajara*



*Fishermen at Laguna de Chapala, Mexico*

Central and southern Mexico have many ancient ruins of pre-Columbian civilizations.



Teotihuacán is probably one of the greatest examples of all pre-Columbian cities. It has two great ancient temples: the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, which people visit more than any other pre-Columbian site.

So what was Teotihuacán? It was once a place where about 125,000 people lived in about AD 400. And it is also the name of the people who lived there. Kind of confusing, huh? At that time, it was one of the world's largest cities.

Monte Albán in the state of Oaxaca was a city of the Zapotec people. You can visit what was their ceremonial site on top of a mountain! At one time, this was also a cultural center for the Olmec and the Teotihuacán.



### El Tajin in Veracruz



## The Gulf Coast and Yucatán Peninsula

Moving out to the tropical plains and jungle of the Gulf Coast, we find land that was once home to several pre-Columbian cultures, including the Maya, Olmec, and Totonac. Olmec artifacts are all over this region, especially in the Parque-Museo de La Venta.



Mayan hieroglyphics

You can visit ancient pyramids at El Tajin. This was a major religious center for the Totonac who lived here between AD 900 and 1150. Or you can check out Quiahuitlán, a hilltop city where some 15,000 Totonac people once lived.



The Mayan ruins at Chichén Itzá are the best preserved of anything the Maya left behind. There are temples, Mexico's largest ancient ball court, and an observatory. The Maya were fascinated with looking at the stars, just like me! They even had their own writing system. Uxmal is another Mayan site that you should visit. Most of the Spanish cities and towns in the Yucatán were actually built on top of Mayan ruins.

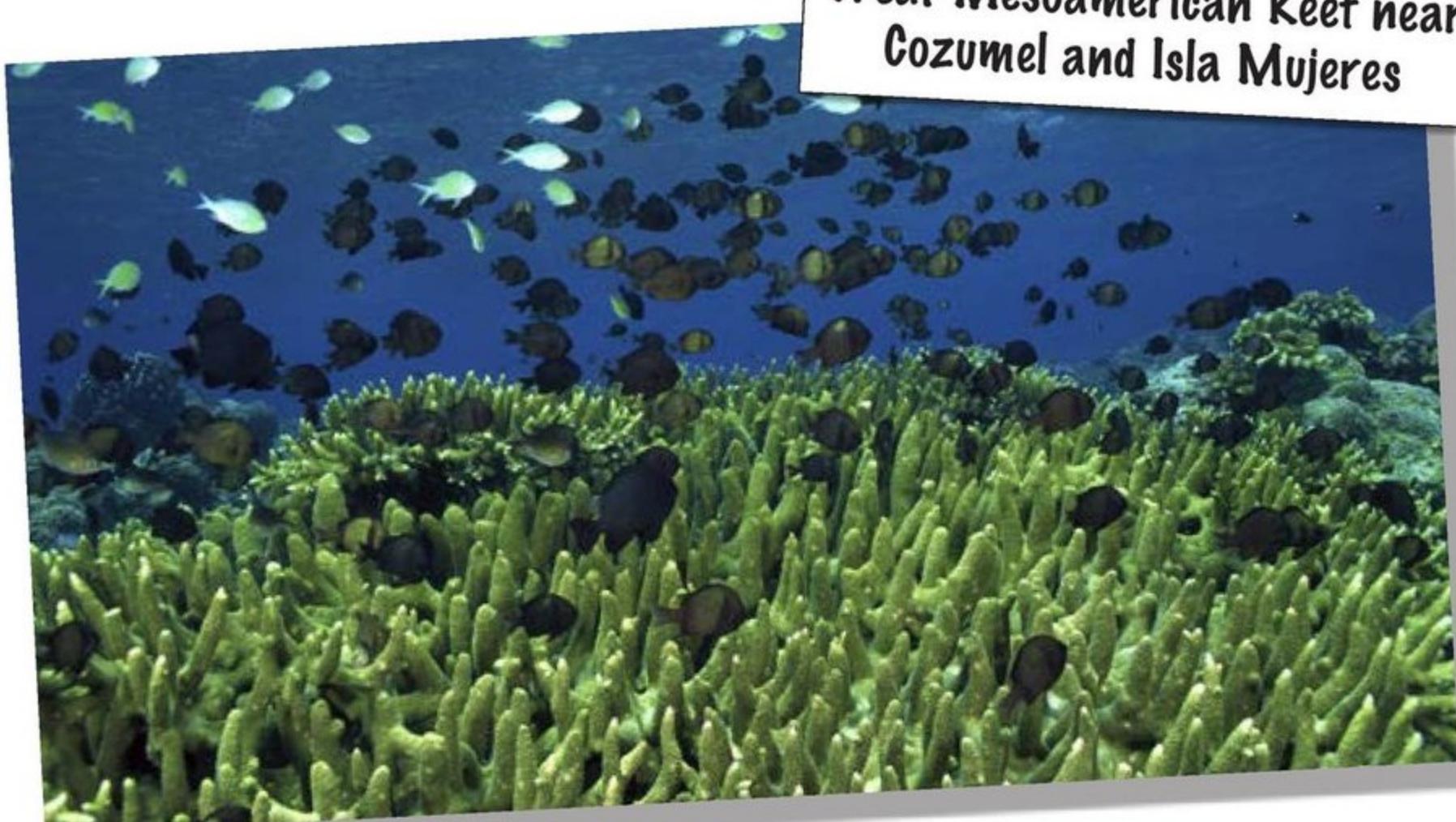
What other cool things are there to see and do on the Gulf Coast? Just about everything! There are many museums, cathedrals, and churches. Don't forget to stop in the city of Veracruz! The waterfront promenade and arcades are a lot of fun.

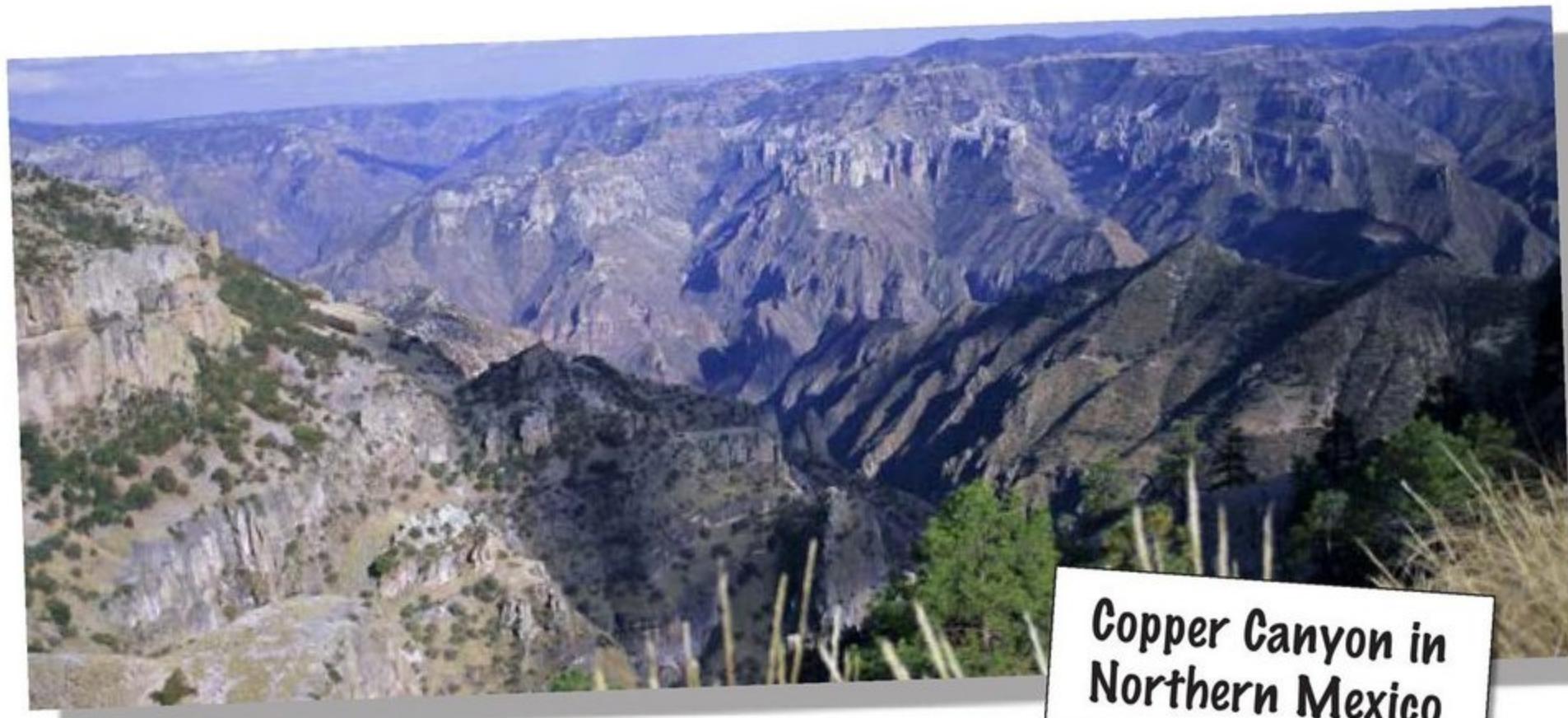


Like the Colonial Heartland, this region is also a center for agriculture. Sugarcane, cacao (yum!), and coffee are grown here.

*coffee beans*

The Yucatán Peninsula is also well known for its white sand beaches, and has plenty of them considering it's surrounded by water on three sides, like Baja California. The world's second longest barrier reef (after Australia's) is located near the islands of Cozumel and Isla Mujeres. It is a popular place to snorkel and scuba dive. Cancún is probably the most popular spot to get a suntan. This region is well-known for its breathtaking natural wells called cenotes. Probably the most visited one is the Cenote de Dzitnup near Valladolid. Can you believe that it was discovered only a half century ago?





Copper Canyon in  
Northern Mexico

## Northern Mexico

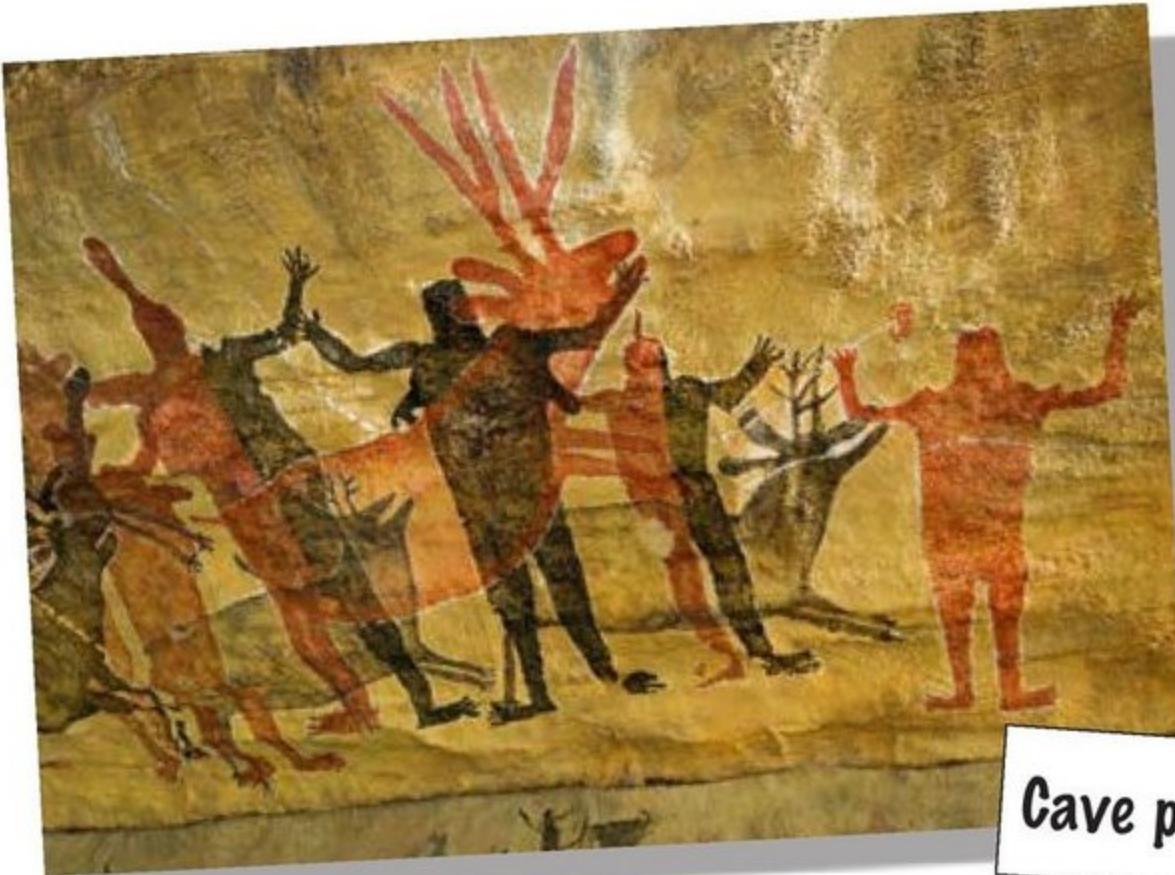
Many of Mexico's deserts, mountains, and canyons are located here. You might have heard of the Grand Canyon in the United States, but did you know that Copper Canyon is even bigger? It is more than one mile deep and part of the Sierra Madre Occidental range. You can take a train to get a close-up view of this deep canyon, its waterfalls, and lakes. The indigenous people who live there are famous for the drums and violins they make.

If you are looking for great beaches and resorts, like Cabo San Lucas, then Baja California is the place for you. It is a peninsula, so water is around three of its sides. In the winter, you can even spot whales swimming along the shore as they migrate south!

Cabo San Lucas  
in Baja California

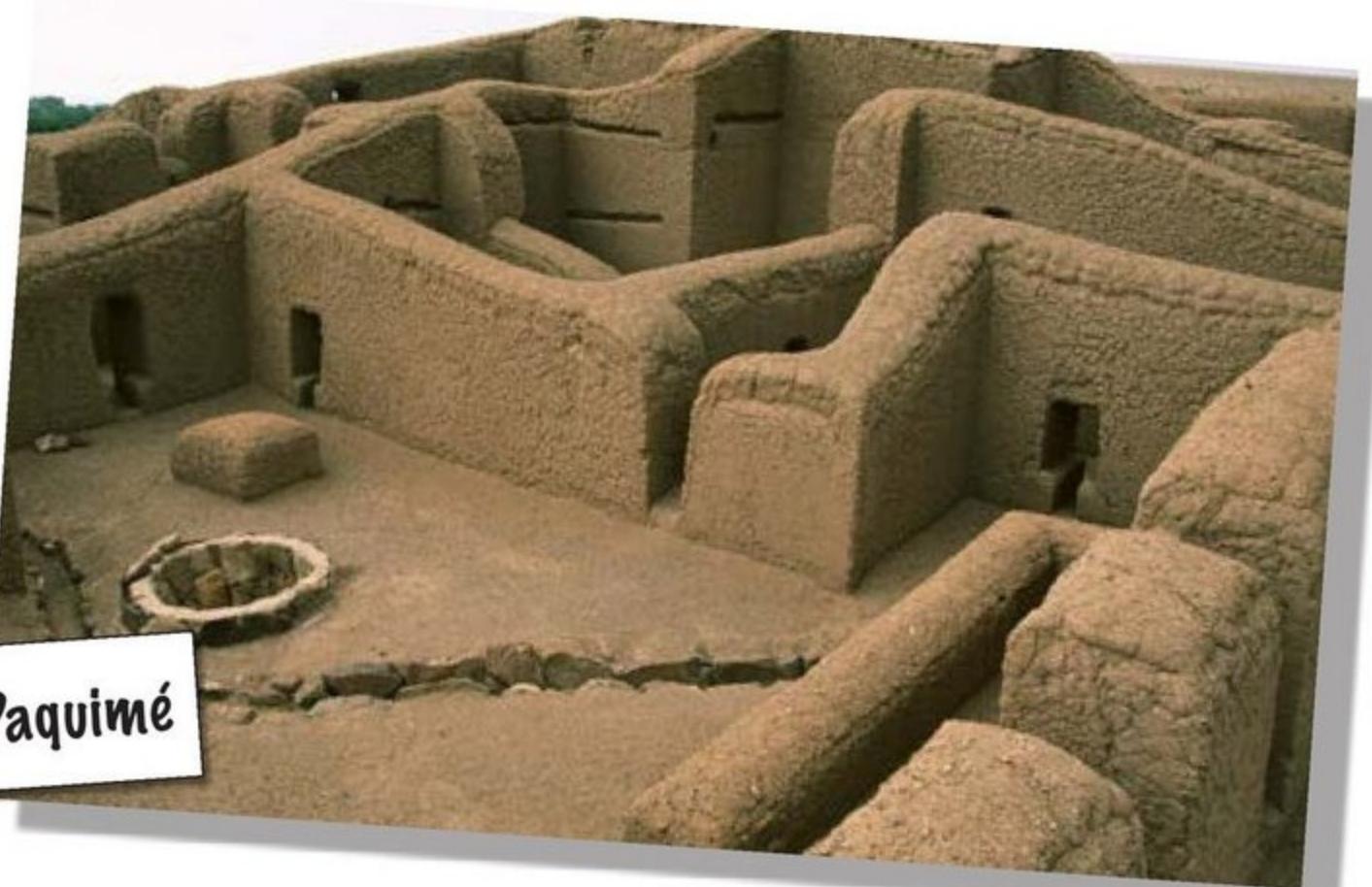


You won't find any Aztec ruins in Baja. Why? Because the Aztecs did not live here! But you can find some ancient cave paintings. Many believe the ancestors of the Cochimi painted the cave pictures. They show people and animals in black and red.



Cave paintings at Baja California

Probably the most amazing ancient ruins in this region are the adobe buildings at Paquimé. Adobe is a brick made with mud and grass. Often many bricks were used to create buildings that look like today's apartment buildings. Between the 900s and 1300s, more than 3,000 people lived in adobe buildings near the Casas Grandes river. No one really knows what happened to the people who lived there.



Ancient ruins at Paquimé



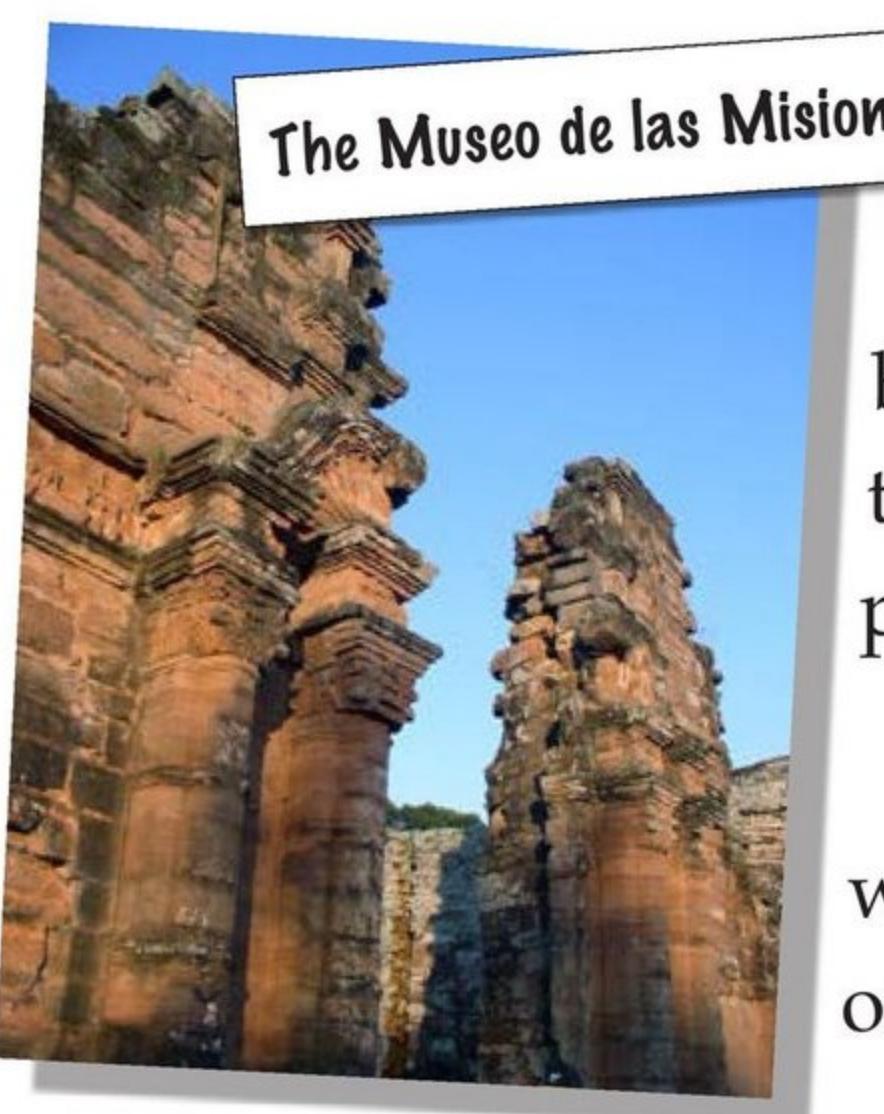
A whale dives, showing its tail in the Sea of Cortés.

If you're not interested in ruins or the beach, you may enjoy whale watching in a boat. In Guerrero Negro, blue whales are often spotted along the Sea of Cortés. If you get seasick, you can visit them and many other sea mammals on land at the nearby Laguna San Ignacio, Bahia de Magdalena.

There are also many old Spanish missions in this region. One you can visit is called San Ignacio. It is a mission church from the 1700s. The Museo

de las Misiones is part of Misión Nuestra Señora de Loreto. The Spanish built the missions in an effort to convert the indigenous people to Catholicism.

I think you have to agree with me: Mexico has much to offer you—so come visit!



## Quick Facts About Mexico

### People

Ethnic groups: Mestizo/Amerindian (90%), white (9%), other (1%)

Religion: Roman Catholic (89%), Protestant (6%), other (5%)

Languages: Spanish, Mayan, Nahuatl, other

### Government

Chief of State: President Enrique Peña Nieto (since 2012)

Congress: Senate: 128 seats;  
Chamber of Deputies: 500 seats

### Economics

Currency: peso



Natural resources: petroleum, silver, copper, gold, lead, zinc, natural gas, timber

Workforce: agriculture (4%), industry (27.2%), services (68.9%)

Farm products: corn, wheat, soybeans, rice, beans, cotton, coffee, fruit, tomatoes; beef, poultry, dairy products; wood products

Industries: food and beverages, tobacco, chemicals, iron and steel, oil, mining, tourism

Exports: manufactured goods, oil, silver, fruits and vegetables, coffee, cotton

[Source: 2005 CIA World Fact Book, Encyclopaedia Britannica]

## Glossary

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<b>cathedrals</b>	large churches (p. 12)
<b>centuries</b>	periods of time made up of a hundred years (p. 15)
<b>civilizations</b>	organized and developed societies (p. 10)
<b>colony</b>	an area or a country that is ruled by another country (p. 10)
<b>conquered</b>	attacked another country or group and won control of the land (p. 10)
<b>conquistador</b>	a Spanish conqueror (p. 12)
<b>dormant</b>	not active (p. 8)
<b>empire</b>	an area or number of countries that is controlled by one ruler (emperor) (p. 11)
<b>geography</b>	the natural features of Earth's surface (p. 5)
<b>indigenous</b>	native to the area (p. 10)
<b>landform</b>	a physical feature, such as a mountain, on Earth's surface (p. 7)
<b>mariachi</b>	traditional Mexican music dating back to the 1800s (p. 4)
<b>murals</b>	paintings on walls (p. 12)
<b>republic</b>	a country in which the government includes a president and elected representatives (p. 10)
<b>ruins</b>	what is left behind after something has been destroyed or damaged (p. 4)

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**PRONOUNCIATION GUIDE:**

Teotihuacán (tay-oh-tee-wah-KAHN)  
Tenochtitlán (tay-nohch-teet-LAHN)  
Oaxaca (wah-HAH-kah)  
Quiahuitlán (kee-uh-weet-ZLAN)  
Cenote de Dzitnup (si-NOH-tee day ZEET-nup)  
Valladolid (bah-lyah-doh-LEED)

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