

# Mexico

*A Reading A-Z Level Y Leveled Book*  
*Word Count: 1,523*

LEVELED BOOK • Y

# Mexico

## Discussion Questions

### Cause and Effect:

What are two effects of Mexico being located on the Ring of Fire?

### Analyze:

How does El Castillo show that the Maya knew many things about the solar system?

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Written by Rebecca Ruiz

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## Glossary

<b>aqueducts</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	artificial channels that carry water from place to place (p. 10)
<b>artisans</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people who are skilled at a craft or trade (p. 7)
<b>basin</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a depression, or low area, in the surface of the earth (p. 5)
<b>cenotes</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	deep natural wells created when surface limestone collapses and exposes groundwater (p. 9)
<b>conquistadores</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	Spanish word for conquerors; men who conquered areas of the New World for Spain in the sixteenth century (p. 11)
<b>gorges</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	long, deep valleys surrounded by higher land (p. 9)
<b>indigenous</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	native to a certain region (p. 6)
<b>matadors</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the Spanish word for <i>bullfighters</i> (p. 7)
<b>mestizos</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people of European and American Indian ancestry (p. 6)
<b>mural</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a large work of art, usually a painting, created directly on a wall (p. 6)
<b>Ring of Fire</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a region bordering the Pacific Ocean that has active volcanoes and frequent earthquakes (p. 8)
<b>ruins</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the remains of something destroyed (p. 12)

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Front and back cover: Many people visit Mexico to see Mayan ruins,  
such as these at Palenque in southern Mexico.

Title page: This mural, titled *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda*,  
was painted by the famous Mexican painter Diego Rivera.

Page 3: The quetzal lives in the high-altitude forests of southern Mexico.

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Countries Around the World  
Level Y Leveled Book  
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**Mexico**

**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





Folk dancing is a popular pastime in Mexico. The styles differ from region to region.

### Conclusion

From its native civilizations, to the Spanish conquest, to revolution and democracy, Mexico is a country with a rich history. Its artistic traditions and ancient ruins tell the long and fascinating story. The country is also one of geographic contrasts. Desert and rainforest, mountain and canyon—all are found in this amazing land.



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## Mexico



### Where Is It?

Mexico, a country in the southern part of North America, lies between the United States and Central America. In the north, it shares a border with the United States. In the south, it shares borders with Guatemala and Belize. Mexico also includes some islands. These lie along the western and eastern coasts. Mexico is three times as large as the state of Texas in the United States. To the west of Mexico lies the Pacific Ocean, and to its east lies the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf of California is between the main land mass of Mexico and the long fingerlike area that juts from its northwest coast, called the *Baja Peninsula*.

The Mayan ruins at Palenque (pah-LEN-keh) overlook the surrounding jungle from a mountain forest that provides a home for wildlife such as toucans and monkeys. Palenque contains remarkable architecture, sculpture, wall carvings, tombs of ancient rulers, and even a water system. Writings and symbols carved on tombs and buildings helped scientists understand the history of the city.

The ruins of Teotihuacan (tay-oh-tee-wah-KAHN) are located near Mexico City. Scientists are not sure where the people of Teotihuacan lived before they built the city. However, scientists do know that it was one of the largest in the world at the time it was built. Teotihuacan has two main pyramids. The larger is the Pyramid of the Sun; the smaller is the Pyramid of the Moon. The city also includes great temples, palaces, and even apartment complexes. From studying the site,



The Pyramid of the Sun is the most noticeable feature of Teotihuacan.

scientists know that like the Aztec and Maya, the people who built Teotihuacan sacrificed people to their gods.



## Landmarks

Mexico is a favorite place to travel for tourists from all over the world. Visiting its ancient **ruins** is one way to step back into the country's history. Chichén Itzá (chee-CHEN eet-SAH), the best-known Mayan ruin, is located in southeastern Mexico. Chichén Itzá was built at the site of two large cenotes, where religious offerings, including precious gems, metals, and even people, were thrown to honor the Mayan god of rain. The Maya began building the city around the AD 500s, and when it was complete, it included an observatory for studying the stars and planets, a ball court, temples, and a pyramid today called *El Castillo*.

El Castillo, or the Castle, is 24 meters (79 ft.) tall, and each of its four sides contains ninety-one steps. Added together, the number of steps totals 364—the number of days Earth takes to orbit the Sun. By the time the Spanish arrived in Mexico, the Maya had left Chichén Itzá. The jungle covered it for the next three hundred years. In the 1800s, people found the city and began to study it.



El Castillo is also known as the Pyramid of Kukulcán. Kukulcán is a Mayan snake god.



The center of Mexico City contains the Metropolitan Cathedral. Construction began on the building in the late 1500s.

Mexico City, one of the oldest cities in North America, is the capital of Mexico. Home to more than nineteen million people, the city sits in a **basin** surrounded by mountains. Long ago, the land that the city sits on was a lake bed later drained to build the city.

Mexico City's modern and historic structures make it an interesting combination of old and new. The center of the city contains hundreds of buildings that date as far back as the 1500s. The city also includes floating gardens, which are artificial islands that ancient people used to grow crops such as corn and beans.

Mexico City also contains beautiful parks, including Alameda Park, the city's oldest. Now surrounded by modern hotels, skyscrapers, and museums, Alameda Park was created in 1592. Chapultepec Park, the city's largest park, contains fountains, museums, a zoo, and lakes.

## People

The **indigenous** people of Mexico were groups of American Indians. In 1519, Spanish explorers arrived in Mexico, and it soon became a Spanish colony. As a result, about two thirds of Mexico's people are descended from both American Indian and European ancestors, and are called **mestizos**. However, groups of American Indians still make up about one sixth of Mexico's population.

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

Mexico's people have a long and rich artistic history. The ancient peoples created stunning works of art that decorated their temples and other buildings. Modern artists have also continued the traditions in painting, sculpture, and architecture. One of the most well-known Mexican art forms is the **mural**.



An ancient Aztec statue of a god stands in the middle of a museum in Mexico City.

When the **conquistadores** (kohn-kees-tah-DOH-res), which means “conquerors” in Spanish, came to Mexico in the 1500s, they brought with them the diseases of smallpox and measles. The native people had never been exposed to these diseases, and the results were devastating. Scientists think that about twenty million people were living in Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest. By 1600, barely one million remained.

For the next few hundred years, the Spanish ruled Mexico. In 1821, the country won its independence from Spain after years of war. However, freedom did not mean that all Mexican people were fairly treated. Most people were farmers, yet farmers owned almost none of the country's land. Almost all farmers were poor and uneducated, and they had few rights. Beginning with the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), life started to improve for Mexico's poor. Today, Mexico is a democracy, and although the lives of many people have improved, the country is still generally divided into two main social classes, the rich and the poor.



Leaders of the Mexican Revolution Pancho Villa (left) and Emiliano Zapata (right of Villa).



## History

The earliest people in what is now Mexico were American Indians. Several groups, such as the Maya and the Aztec, developed advanced civilizations with great cities, beautiful works of art, and an accurate calendar that told when to plant crops.



The Maya developed an accurate calendar.

About 700 years ago, the Aztec people arrived in central Mexico and established their capital city, Tenochtitlan (tay-nohch-teet-LAHN), on an island in Lake Texcoco. **Aqueducts**, or waterways, brought water into the city, and canals linked all parts of it. By 1519, the Aztec had built a huge empire of five to six million people. The Aztec thought that because life was the most precious thing people had, it was the most meaningful gift for their gods. As a result, they sacrificed people to their gods. Experts think they may have sacrificed thousands of people every year. In 1519, the Spanish explorer Hernan Cortes arrived in Tenochtitlan, and within two years, enemies of the Aztec had joined with the Spaniards to conquer the Aztec. In 1521, Mexico became a Spanish colony.



Silver from Mexican mines is used to make jewelry.

Ancient peoples of Mexico also created beautiful jewelry made of gemstones and precious metals, and the tradition of jewelry making has continued into modern times. Mexico is the world's leading producer of silver, and many of today's jewelry **artisans** work with this precious metal.

Sports have also had a long—and serious—history in Mexico. One group of American Indians took the lives of those that lost a ceremonial game. Modern **matadors** and participants in rodeos put their lives on the line when they enter the ring. Soccer is another popular sport in Mexico. Although it poses much less danger, Mexicans take it very seriously.



## Do You Know?

Bullfighting is still a popular sport in Mexico. In fact, the largest bullfighting stadium in the world is found in Mexico City. From November through April, crowds of as many as sixty thousand people gather in that stadium to watch matadors pit their skills against bulls.

## Mexico's Landforms



### Land

Mexico is a country of geographic contrasts, with mountains and canyons, deserts and rainforests, mainland and islands. Mountain ranges occupy the western, eastern, and southern regions of the country. Because Mexico sits at the edge of an unstable area called the **Ring of Fire**, some of its mountains are volcanoes. In fact, the highest mountain in the country is a volcano 5,700 meters (18,701 ft.) high.

The earthquakes that happen around the Ring of Fire can cause terrible disasters. More than nine thousand people lost their lives in the Mexico City earthquake of September 1985, and volcanoes erupted in the 1980s and 1990s.

In opposition to Mexico's mountains, its canyons and **gorges** cut deeply into Earth's crust. Northern Mexico's Copper Canyon, known for being larger than the Grand Canyon, is 1,400 meters (4,600 ft.) deep in places.

The Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts stretch across the northern part of Mexico. The Sonoran Desert has more types of native vegetation than any other North American desert—about two thousand different species. Larger than the state of California, the Chihuahuan Desert is the largest desert in North America.

The northern part of Mexico may be dry, but the southeastern part is wet. The area's rainforests contain thousands of species of animals and plants.

Past the eastern coast of the mainland lie Cozumel and Isla Mujeres (EES-lah moo-HAIR-es), two islands known for the brightly colored tropical fish that live in the surrounding ocean waters.

Two peninsulas, the Baja and the Yucatán, jut into the oceans on either side of Mexico. The Yucatán Peninsula is made of limestone that in some places has dissolved away over thousands of years to create caves filled with water known as **cenotes** (sih-NOH-teez).