Mexico
(United Mexican States)

Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 758,449
Area (sq. km.): 1,964,375

Mexico is a little smaller than Saudi Arabia, or about three times the size of Texas. 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

Indigenous Peoples and Colonization

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 AD 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.

Independence

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.

Political Transitions and Revolution

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 of social change, which ended in the 1920s and produced a new constitution, became known as the Mexican Revolution.

The Rise and Fall of the PRI

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 amid

allegations of fraud, 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 and the implementation of NAFTA. 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 the party's 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. In July 2006, Felipe Calderón (of the PAN) was declared the winner of presidential elections marked by street protests and legal battles. He defeated opposing candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador by the smallest electoral margin in Mexican history.

The Drug War

Calderón cracked down on the drug trade while attempting to curb rising drug-related violence. His strategy was to rely on the military, rather than Mexico's underpaid and highly corrupt police force, to increase security and target cartel leaders. During Calderón's six-year term, the military arrested two-thirds of the country's most-wanted drug kingpins. However, these arrests often created power vacuums that bred violence, as those in the cartels' middle ranks vied for leadership positions and organizations splintered into rival groups. In all, more than 60,000 people were killed in drug-related violence between 2006 and 2013 and tens of thousands disappeared. Politicians and journalists have often been targeted. Toward the end of Calderón's time in office, vigilante groups began emerging in an attempt to provide the security for citizens that the government could not.

When PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto became president in 2013, he shifted the focus of Mexico's war on drugs away from the top-down strategies of the past toward a greater emphasis on social programs meant to prevent young people from joining criminal organizations, which is part of Peña Nieto's larger goal to develop the economy and attract foreign investment. The drug trade remains an enormous problem, however. Composed of 12 major cartels, the largest of which are the Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel, it employs at least a half a million people, makes up 3 to 4 percent of Mexico's gross domestic product (GDP), and since 2007 has been responsible for over 80,000 more deaths in the country.

Hopes for the Future

Despite the violence that plagues its society, Mexico has cause for hope thanks to a large and growing middle class, an open and increasingly competitive economy, and strengthened democratic institutions. President Peña Nieto aims to capitalize on these strengths as he pushes for reforms in politics, education, telecommunications, and the economy.

Recent Events and Trends

• **Junk food tax passed:** October 2013 saw the Mexican congress pass new taxes on sugary drinks and junk food in an effort to change dietary patterns that have resulted in rising obesity and diabetes rates among the Mexican population.

• **Vigilantes legalized in Michoacan:** In January 2014, Mexican troops were deployed to Michoacan state after vigilantes clashed violently with members of the Knights Templar cartel. Earlier in the month, self-defense groups had taken over much of the Michoacan territory previously held by the Knights Templar. The government responded by granting the vigilantes temporary legal status as part of official units called Rural Defense Corps.

• **Oil sector reformed:** In August 2014, the government passed a law that will open up Mexico's oil industry to foreign oil companies. Previously, the state-owned company Pemex had a monopoly on the country's oil. Lagging production by Pemex prompted the Mexican government to make the change.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Population: 120,286,655
Population Growth Rate: 1.21%
Urban Population: 79%

Roughly 60 percent of Mexico's 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.

The majority 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 21 million. Guadalajara and Monterrey are also major population centers. Though many Mexicans continue to immigrate to the United States in search of work and an increased standard of living, the cooling of the U.S. economy since 2008 and improving opportunities in Mexico have slowed migration rates and caused a growing number of Mexicans to return home.

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, including Tzotzil and Tzeltal (Mayan dialects), Nahuatl (Aztec), Otomi, Zapotec, and Mixtec, are still spoken in parts of Mexico. Most people who speak an indigenous language also speak some Spanish. Indigenous languages and Spanish are often used jointly in rural schools that serve large indigenous populations, such as those located in the states of Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca. English is taught at secondary schools, but competence in English is rare in most areas.

Religion

The majority of Mexicans (83 percent) are Roman Catholic, although many do not attend church services regularly. This is especially true of younger generations. 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, especially in rural areas.

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, hard work, personal honor, and honesty. Nevertheless, corruption is a fact of life at nearly all levels of society. Mexicans respect individuals who use their ingenuity to solve daily problems. Social status is measured by wealth, family name, and education. However, most Mexicans are careful not to flaunt wealth or accomplishments in public, as doing so is considered to be in bad taste. Instead, a reserved and humble attitude is appreciated. Correspondingly, arguments are usually kept private.

This is not to say that Mexicans will not publically fight for a cause they feel strongly about. In fact, in the tradition of revolutionaries like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, Mexicans frequently engage in protests, boycotts, and other social movements to bring about improved living, working, and public health conditions. Some demonstrations draw thousands of people. Complaints about government or social institutions are also communicated through political cartoons, graffiti, speeches, distributed pamphlets, and the internet.

Although Mexico faces challenges, Mexicans are patriotic and are generally proud of their country and its *mestizo* identity. The *mestizo* mix of Spanish, indigenous, and African heritage created by colonization has given birth to unique cultural traditions in music, food, dance, dress, language, and social values. However, some Mexicans believe that this concept of mixed racial unity draws attention away from the way race affects social hierarchies, with those of primarily Spanish descent often found at the top of the social ladder and those with more indigenous or African backgrounds at the bottom.

Mexicans 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 term for English speakers from the United States is *gringo*, a Spanish word meaning foreigner.

Machismo, the ideal of a strong, forceful man, is still prevalent. The elderly are respected, particularly in indigenous communities. 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. Youth often don jeans, T-shirts, and tennis shoes, while older generations tend to dress more formally.

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. In the south, men may wear a *guayabera* (a decorative shirt of light fabric that hangs to just below the waist).

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. Women in particular are careful about their appearances and tend to wear a lot of makeup. Golden jewelry is popular. Earrings are usually worn daily, while bracelets, necklaces, and rings may be reserved for important social events.

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. Mexicans use *usted*, the formal version of "you," when greeting a person of higher rank and the more casual *tú* with those of their own age or social position.

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. Outside of urban centers, men may open doors for women.

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 visitors may 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 through handshakes, kisses, and (for close relationships) embraces. 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, a main dish, and dessert (*postre*) or coffee. Eating as a family is common. Urban professionals often eat meals at restaurants or street-side stands. *Cocinas rapidas* are small restaurants that offer such diners a filling meal for an inexpensive price. 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 (such as *tacos*, for example) are eaten by hand or by using pieces of tortillas to scoop food. Meals usually are not rushed and may last up to two hours. One should always ask to be excused when leaving the table.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

Whereas several decades ago seven children used to be the average, today most Mexican families—especially those in urban areas—have two. Rural parents usually have more than three children. A household, especially in rural areas, may include members of the extended family.

Immigration of one or more family members to the United States or elsewhere to work is common and has mixed effects on the family unit. While remittances sent to Mexico serve to better support households there materially, long absences from loved ones and unstable work and living conditions abroad often weaken family relationships.

Parents and Children

Family unity and responsibility are high priorities, with family ties representing lifelong commitments of mutual support. The eldest male child in particular is expected to care for his parents in old age and support his siblings if parents cannot do so. Specifically, this may mean providing housing for his parents and financing his siblings' educations by paying their university tuition or purchasing their books and uniforms. Because male children—especially the oldest son—are seen as carriers of their families' legacies, they are often favored during childhood. Children generally live with their parents until they marry and sometimes after they marry.

Gender Roles

In many families, the father is the leader and provides economic support, while the mother and daughters are responsible for the domestic duties of cooking, cleaning, sewing, and childcare. Additionally, female family members often encourage the use of native indigenous languages in the home, keep cultural traditions alive, and participate in religious ceremonies. The father represents masculine sensibilities and often strives, through example, to instill moral character in his children. Girls are often encouraged to display femininity in their dress and disposition, while boys are encouraged to play sports and spend time with male role models. In some ethnic groups the mother is the leader, and more women from almost all groups are entering the formal workplace: 45 percent of women now work outside the home. Rural men and women often work together in the fields.

Though women in urban areas of central and northern Mexico have long enjoyed access to education, their rural counterparts—especially those in the south of the country—have only recently been able to do so. Women throughout the country are still struggling to achieve social equality and access to positions of power. Activists and government organizations strive to provide women with the skills necessary to compete with men in political and social arenas. But even though Mexico may appear to be a dominantly male-run society, behind the scenes, women play important roles in facilitating the progression of government, business, science, and technology.

Housing

Exteriors

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 their homes by hanging lots of flowers and plants on their exterior walls. 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. Because of earthquakes, people in both urban and rural areas now build houses that do not exceed two storeys and that are constructed of cement blocks and steel bars, which are often left protruding out of the roofs. In urban centers, especially Mexico City, complexes called *vecindades* contain 10 to 12 small one- to two-storey low-income housing units connected by a shared patio. In deeply impoverished areas, houses may be made from cardboard and other found materials.

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. Thanks to remittances from emigrants, the occasional spacious, architecturally designed modern house may be seen in poor rural villages.

Interiors

Houses usually have one to three bedrooms, though in poorer urban homes and in many rural ones, the sleeping area may be separated from the rest of the house with only a curtain, if at all. A multipurpose room used for visiting, cooking, and dining is common. Virtually all homes have electricity. Toilets, showers, and laundry areas may be located in a corridor separate from the main house, making it easier for multiple families living in the main house to share these facilities. Most lower- and middle-class families wash their clothes in stone sinks and hang them to dry in the sun. Few rural homes are equipped with indoor plumbing.

Standard furnishings include a couch, dining table, refrigerator, television, and music player. Mexicans typically decorate their walls with pictures of ancestors, wedding and graduation photos, and religious art, especially of the Virgin Mary.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Because young people usually spend most of their academic careers in the same group, they tend to form deep relationships—some romantic—with their peers in school. Couples might also meet at community social events, cafés, clubs, and bars. 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. Elsewhere, couples frequent movies, beaches, bars, and nightclubs. They may also spend time strolling in a central plaza or park. Public displays of affection are the norm when family members are not present.

At the beginning of a romantic relationship, small tokens such as flowers, candles, stuffed animals, or poems are often exchanged to express interest or love. Some men express a deeper commitment to a love interest by hiring a *mariachi* band to perform love songs to his girlfriend (and her family and neighbors) outside of her home.

Marriage in Society

Men and women usually marry in their mid-twenties, though in rural areas they may be much younger. Most men still follow the tradition of asking the woman's parents for permission to marry. An engagement period allows the bride and her family to prepare for the wedding.

Common-law marriage is recognized, though it is not commonly practiced. Those involved in such a relationship have some parental duties and financial obligations toward each other if the union is dissolved. Although not common, in Mexico City and the state of Coahuila, it is officially legal for same-sex couples to marry and adopt children, while same-sex civil unions are legal in a couple of other states. In rural areas, attitudes tend to be more conservative.

The divorce rate is relatively low, partly because of the dominance of the Catholic faith, which does not approve of divorce. Teen pregnancy is common, and unmarried women tend to keep and raise the child with the help of their parents.

Weddings

Many people marry first in a civil ceremony and then in a church, following Catholic traditions. These two events usually occur within days of each other, with the civil ceremony generally attended by immediate family members only and the church ceremony open to both family and invited guests. A celebration follows that includes dancing, games, gift-giving, and traditional Mexican dishes like *mole*, goat, and *pozole*. Less affluent families may conduct a civil ceremony only and forgo costly festivities.

Life Cycle

Birth

Friends and family members hold parties for expectant mothers a few weeks prior to the woman's due date. Here they provide gifts, food, and entertainment to celebrate the impending arrival of the baby. Some traditional indigenous midwives believe that pregnant women should not be exposed to extremes in temperature, spicy food, or physical activity because doing so will hinder the birthing process. These midwives, often found in southern Mexico, use holistic practices to assist the woman in labor. Women living in urban areas or rural regions where such facilities exist usually give birth in modern hospitals. A nurse will typically pierce a baby girl's ears the day of her birth. Grandparents play a key support role during a baby's early days.

Most Mexican babies are baptized. The performing of this religious ritual is the focus of a major social event attended by the child's *padrinos* (godparents) and numerous family members and friends.

Milestones

Although legally a Mexican girl does not reach adulthood until she turns 18, her *quinceaños* (15th birthday) has traditionally marked that transition. Often an extravagant and costly event, the *quinceaños* is part religious ceremony, part big party. It begins with a special Mass, after which family and friends gather to celebrate with food, music, and dance. The birthday girl wears an elaborate gown and what is often her first pair of high-heeled shoes. She is escorted by a group of young men with whom she dances after one waltz with her father. She may receive a special doll as a way of saying good-bye to her childhood.

Death

After the death of a loved one, most Mexicans do the bulk of their mourning in their homes, where friends and family of the deceased gather to eat and drink. Upper-class families in urban areas may instead gather in funeral homes or in small chapels. Typically, the body is buried within 24 hours of death. On the way to the cemetery, female mourners dressed in black carry white flowers. In rural communities, a band composed of guitars, trumpets, drums, and harps may accompany mourners to the cemetery. 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.

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead, 1–2 November) is a holiday celebrated each year to honor the spirits of deceased family members. In the home or at the graveside, altars for the dead are adorned with food, beverages, and the relative's favorite objects. These offerings are left out for the spirits to sample from as they pass by on their yearly tour of earth. The holiday is not only a time to pray and reflect but also one to drink, eat, laugh, and share stories about deceased loved ones.

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

Sports

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. Other activities vary by region: surfing, diving, and swimming are popular in coastal areas; hiking in mountainous ones; and horseback riding in northern ranch states. Mexicans enjoy their own form of rodeo called *charreada*, which is often accompanied by a fair-like atmosphere.

Leisure

Watching television is a favorite leisure activity, especially in urban areas. *Telenovelas* (soap operas) are especially popular, and men often gather on weekends to watch televised soccer games. Urban youth enjoy spending their free time in shopping malls, where they go to movies or chat with friends. Women throughout the country enjoy making various crafts. In the southern states, young girls embroider designs on tablecloths, dresses, and quilts, sometimes selling these goods in central markets.

Many recreational activities include music (such as *salsa*, *cumbia*, *merengue*, and *ranchera*) and dancing (traditional regional dances include Flor de Piña, Danza de los Viejitos, and Jarabe Tapatio). Daylong *fiestas* (parties) and weeklong festivals nearly always feature fireworks, feasts, and bullfights.

On weekends, families and friends enjoy gathering informally in parks or by a river, lake, or beach. Individuals bring food and drink to share and spend the day talking, playing games, and enjoying their natural surroundings. Meeting for a chat in the *zócalo* (town square) in the evening or on Sunday is popular among all age groups. Children enjoy activities such as jumping rope and games like marbles and hide-and-seek.

Vacation

Middle- and upper-class families often vacation along the beaches of Acapulco and Huatulco. Veracruz is a popular port-town destination with strong ties to Mexico's Afro-Caribbean heritage. Archeological sites such as Teotihuacán, Monte Alban, and Uxmal attract many vacationers, as do the colonial cities of Morelia and Oaxaca. Oaxaca is home to a popular cultural festival, Guelaguetza. Many Mexicans also visit the International Cervantes Culture Festival, in Guanajuato, and the Morelia International Film Festival. When official holidays fall on Thursdays, Fridays, or Mondays, Mexican workers enjoy *puentes*, or extended weekends, that are often used to vacation or visit relatives.

The Arts

Song and Dance

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 music recording and distribution center for the Americas. Dances, such as the *Jarabe Tapatio* (Mexican Hat Dance), often accompany traditional music and *fiestas* (parties).

In Mexico City, the Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts) features the famous Ballet Folklórico de México (Mexican Folklore Ballet), and the National Autonomous University of Mexico hosts a philharmonic orchestra that has been performing classical music for over 70 years.

Visual Arts

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, and the muralist tradition continues in Mexico today.

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.

Film

The period spanning the 1930s to the 1950s was known as the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. Notable directors such as Emilio Fernandez and Luis Buñuel influenced filmmaking during this time.

In the 1990s, Mexican film again flowered. This era, dubbed the New Mexican Cinema, saw directors like Alfonso Arau and Alfonso Cuarón create important films such as *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) and *Y tu mamá también* (2001). In recent years, Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, and Alejandro González Iñárritu have directed successful films within the American and British film industries as well; in 2014 Cuarón became the first Latin American director to win an Oscar, awarded for his film *Gravity* (2013).

Holidays

National public holidays include New Year's Day; Constitution Day (5 Feb.), which also marks the beginning of *Carnaval*; 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 to 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. 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, called *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.

Carnaval

Carnaval, the week of parties and parades that precedes Lent, is a favorite holiday in Mexico. It is a time of indulgence before the solemn religious holiday that follows. The most popular place to celebrate is in the tropical port city of Veracruz, where thousands of dancers, musicians, and other performance artists gather to parade along the city's seaside boardwalk in elaborate masquerade. At the end of a weekend filled with parties, a king and queen of *Carnaval* are crowned.

Semana Santa

Mexicans look forward to time off school and work during *Semana Santa*. Those in big cities and the central states flock to the coast. Towns also hold *ferias* (fairs), complete with amusement-park rides, games, and food stands stocked with snacks such as *empanadas* (meat, vegetable, or cheese turnovers) and *quesadillas* (tortillas baked or fried with cheese).

Christmas

The *posadas* held during the Christmas season (16–24 Dec.) are another favorite time of celebration. During these nightly parties, families reenact the night when Mary and Joseph searched for lodging (*posada*). The hosts act as innkeepers while their guests act as lost pilgrims seeking shelter. The tradition holds that guests are initially turned away until a pregnant Mary—a woman dressed as the Virgin or a statue of her—is recognized in the crowd. All are then invited into the home to pray and celebrate with song, dance, and food, as well as piñatas for the children.

SOCIETY

Government

Head of State: Pres. Enrique Peña Nieto
Head of Government: Pres. Enrique Peña Nieto
Capital: Mexico City

Structure

Mexico's federal republic of 31 states and one federal district operates under a central government led by a president. The president is the head of state and head of government. The president is directly elected by popular vote to serve only one six-year term. The legislature is composed of a 128-seat Senate and 500-seat Chamber of Deputies. Members of congress are elected directly and through proportional representation to serve terms of either six years (senators) or three years (deputies). Members of the legislature may not serve consecutive terms. Forty percent of party candidates are required to be women. Though the Supreme Court has become more independent in recent years, as a whole the judicial system lacks transparency and is prone to corruption.

Political Landscape

Mexico has three main political parties: the right-wing National Action Party (PAN), the centrist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). From 1929 to 2000, Mexico's political landscape was dominated by the authoritarian style of the PRI but has since transitioned into a competitive multiparty system. The PRI has also adjusted to the new system and works to respond to popular demands. The PRI has formed cross-party alliances in efforts to pass reforms in the areas of education, telecommunications, and economy.

Mexico faces some major challenges, including violence, the illicit drug trade, and widespread corruption. All three major political parties have been accused of voting fraud, decreasing the legitimacy of the country's democratic system.

Government and the People

While states are autonomous, the central government controls education, security, and national industries, among other sectors. The constitution provides for many freedoms including speech, association, and assembly.

Bribery is considered necessary when interacting with Mexico’s underpaid public servants and intricate bureaucracy; the practice costs the economy roughly 10 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) yearly.

Past elections have generally been considered free and fair, though election fraud, including vote-buying and unbalanced media coverage of parties, has been reported. Mexico has no law against giving voters gifts, though the gifts are not allowed to be used to influence one's vote. Violence against electoral candidates by political opponents or gangs, consisting of threats, intimidation, and killings, is common. The government has promised to protect candidates and voters during elections, but many Mexicans have little confidence in their government. Mexico's ban on the reelection of any official tends to put politicians' focus on pleasing party leaders, who control future nominations, rather than their constituents. Voting is considered a duty for adults 18 and older but is not enforced. Voter turnout has increased in the last few elections.

Economy

GDP (PPP) in billions: $1,845
GDP (PPP) per capita: $15,600

Economic Sectors

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. However, the government has moved to open the oil sector to foreign investment. Tourism brings in several billion dollars each year. Remittances from Mexican emigrants working in the United States are an important source of income. Nearly a third of Mexicans work in the informal economy.

Free Trade

The economy has seen some growth since 1993, when Mexico signed NAFTA with the United States and Canada. NAFTA lowered trade barriers and increased the 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, Japan, and Israel, making its economy one of the most open and globalized in the world.

Recession and Recovery

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, and foreign investment has contributed to economic recovery.

Personal Economies

Mexico is home to a growing middle class, and most Mexicans have access to at least basic resources. However, economic opportunities are fewer among the indigenous, rural, and southern populations. About 45 percent of Mexicans live in poverty. Income distribution is highly unequal.

Urban residents buy basic goods in supermarkets and smaller neighborhood stores. Street vendors and open-air markets are common and often open to bargaining. In small towns, weekly market days provide food and other goods. The currency is the Mexican *peso* (MXN).

Transportation and Communications

Internet Users (per 100 people): 43
Cellular Phone Subscriptions (per 100 people): 86
Paved Roads: 36%

Half of all Mexicans own personal cars, which are common in urban areas, but the majority of Mexicans rely on public transportation. Buses and minibuses are plentiful and relatively 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. A small but growing number of city dwellers are turning to bikes to avoid the congested traffic that plagues the country's capital. Mexico City officials have tried to promote biking by instituting a public bike rental program and closing one of the city's major avenues to cars on Sundays.

Communications are generally well developed, though many rural families do not have telephones in their homes. Reforms passed by congress in 2013 aim at making the country's telecommunications industry more open and competitive. High-speed internet is available only in large cities. Slower internet service is generally found in smaller cities. Some Mexicans have access to internet at home, but the service remains prohibitively expensive for many. Numerous radio and television stations and daily newspapers serve the public. The press, once dominated by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), is today independent. However, reporters covering drug-related crimes are frequently murdered—at least 81 since the year 2000. Therefore few traditional media sources cover the topic, making social media an increasingly important outlet for drug-related news.

Education

Adult Literacy: 94%
Mean Years of Schooling: 8.5

Structure

Education is compulsory and free between ages six and fifteen. After six years of primary education and three years of basic secondary education, those students who wish to continue their education may enter one of two tracks: a technical education program (two to three years) or a pre-university education (three years). Those who choose a pre-university program then specialize further.

Access

Attendance is not enforced and schools may require that students pay some fees. These obstacles have contributed to the country's relatively low national literacy rate, which is even lower among indigenous and rural populations.

Students who do attend regularly face class sizes of up to 40 students, poorly maintained buildings, and low quality state textbooks. Though resources vary by region, access to technology tends to be limited in primary and secondary grades. At the university level, however, computer labs, audiovisual equipment, and the like are the norm.

Educational reforms enacted under President Peña Nieto seek to improve the quality of teaching by mandating periodic teacher evaluations, offering increased training, and outlawing the previously common practice of buying and selling or inheriting teaching positions.

School Life

Curriculum tends to be dominated by rote learning. However, some Mexican teachers do focus on collaborative group projects that involve hands-on learning and community projects, which students report on through oral presentations. Midterm and final exams are used to test student knowledge.

Generally speaking, students and teachers have close relationships. They may attend parties at each other's houses to celebrate special events, play on the same intramural sports team, or go on academic trips outside of the classroom together. Nevertheless, students show respect by using the academic titles *licenciado/a*, *maestro/a*, or *professor/a* to address teachers with bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degrees. Amiable relationships are not only expected between students and teachers but also among security guards, cleaning staff, cafeteria workers, and other school employees, as socializing and maintaining a pleasant environment are integral to Mexican academic culture. Students often bring guitars to their campuses, and it is not uncommon to hear singing and laughter fill outdoor courtyards.

Higher Education

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. Other public and private universities are located throughout Mexico. Tuition at public schools is lower than that at private schools. Enrollment has increased rapidly in the last decade, and a growing number of women are entering institutes of higher education.

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. Almost 70 percent of Mexicans are overweight and a third are obese, conditions that contribute to quickly rising rates of diabetes and heart disease.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Mexico, 1911 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20006; phone (202) 728-1600; web site http://embamex.sre.gob.mx/eua. Mexico Tourism Board, phone (800) 446-3942; web site www.visitmexico.com.

Country and Development Data

Capital	Mexico City
Population	120,286,655 (rank=11)
Area (sq. mi.)	758,449 (rank=15)
Area (sq. km.)	1,964,375
Human Development Index	71 of 187 countries
Gender Inequality Index	73 of 148 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	$15,600
Adult Literacy	95% (male); 92% (female)
Infant Mortality	13 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	75 (male); 80 (female)
Currency	Mexican peso

CultureGrams™
ProQuest
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 USA
Toll Free: 1.800.521.3042
Fax: 1.800.864.0019
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