



DESTINATION MEXICO

Mexico is the fourth largest country in the western hemisphere. It is bordered by the United States on the north, the Pacific Ocean on the west, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea on the east, and Guatemala and Belize on the south. It is characterized by an extraordinary diversity in topography and climate and is crossed by two major mountain chains, the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental. The high central plateau between these two mountain ranges historically funneled most of the human population toward the center of this region.

Facts at a Glance

Full country name:	United Mexican States
Area:	761,602 sq mi
Population:	106,202,903 (2005 estimate)
Capital City:	Mexico City
People:	90% Mestizo (mixed European and Native American ancestry) 8% Native American 2% European and other
Language:	Spanish
Literacy:	92%
Religion:	89% Roman Catholic 6% Protestant 5% Other (including Judaism)
Government:	Federal Republic
President:	Vicente Fox Quesada
Monetary Unit:	Mexican Peso

Weather/Climate

The climate throughout much of Mexico is characterized by high temperatures and moderate to low rainfall. The highland climates vary considerably with elevation, but the central plateau generally has a moderate climate with few extremes of hot or cold. Mexico City, for example, has an average July temperature of 63° and an average January temperature of 54° F. Cities at lower elevations on the plateau have somewhat warmer climates. The northern and central areas of the plateau are arid and semiarid, with the drier regions receiving about 12 inches of rainfall annually. Rainfall increases in the southern regions of the plateau, which receive about 20 to 26 inches of rainfall annually, with most of it typically falling in the summer.

People

At the time of the Spanish conquest in the early 1500s, numerous advanced Native American civilizations existed in Mexico. Among the most important were the Maya, who resided in the southern and southeastern part of what is now Mexico, including the present states of Chiapas Quintana Roo, and Yucatán. Central Mexico was dominated by the Aztecs, who had developed an extensive capital surrounded by a lake at Tenochtitlán, Mexico City's present site.

The Spanish ultimately conquered the Native American civilizations and extended their control over the entire region, calling it New Spain. Unlike British settlers in North America, the Spaniards quickly intermarried with the indigenous people, producing a growing population of *mestizos*, or people of mixed European and Native American ancestry. By the end of the 19th century, mestizos had become the largest ethnic group in the population.

After World War II (1939-1945), which saw the beginning of a period of sustained industrial growth, Mexicans migrated rapidly from rural communities (under 2500 population) to large urban centers. Many of these people moved to the Distrito Federal, or Federal District, which includes the capital of Mexico City and was home to approximately one-fifth of Mexico's citizens in 1997. During this postwar period the relatively unpopulated northern states also attracted numerous immigrants, as the economic base of frontier cities such as Ciudad Juárez and Monterrey grew rapidly.

Religion

During the colonial period, the Spanish colonizers imposed the Roman Catholic religion on the indigenous population. They did not permit the exercise of any other religions, including Protestantism and Judaism. Consequently, the population has remained largely Catholic, although in practice Native American and rural versions of Catholicism differ considerably from the typical European and urban forms of the religion. These differences occurred because rural and indigenous peoples were never fully converted to Christianity, and because local priests and bishops tolerated the combination of some indigenous practices with the rites of Catholicism.

Mexico's 1917 constitution guarantees freedom of religion. Major constitutional reforms in 1992 eliminated many of the severe restrictions on the Catholic Church and other religions. Reforms included the repeal of measures that had prevented clergy from voting.

About 90 percent of the Mexican population identifies itself as Catholic, but in recent years Protestant religions have become more important, particularly in rural regions and among Native Americans. Most of the growth in Protestant religions has occurred among evangelical sects.

Way of Life

Mexicans place a high value on family and traditional values. Although women make up an increasingly large portion of the labor force (about one-quarter in the mid-1990s), many women continue to work within the home. Children, especially in middle- and upper-income homes, typically remain at home longer than their counterparts in the United States. There are vast differences, however, in the daily lives of Mexican women depending on income level. Women in middle- and upper-income households typically have outside help with childcare, cleaning, and meal preparation. Women in poor and working-class households often work both inside and outside the home, with many of them working at more than one outside job.

The typical Mexican dresses similar to people in Europe and the United States, as fashion in Mexico is influenced by international trends. Rural families dress in more traditional clothes, and the indigenous dress worn by many Native Americans often distinguishes them from mestizos who generally wear European-style fashions.

Mexican food is unique and diverse, but income level and social class differences often affect culinary customs. The basic diet of working-class Mexicans relies heavily on corn or wheat tortillas, along with beans, chili peppers, and tomatoes. Middle- and upper-income Mexicans consume a wide array of dishes, influenced by trends in the United States and Europe. Ready-made products such as cold cereal, either produced in Mexico or imported into the country, are often found in Mexican kitchens. Mexico has one of the most highly-developed carbonated beverage industries in the world, and per capita consumption of soft drinks is high.

Mexicans enjoy many of the leisure activities found in the United States, including television, movies, rock concerts, and sports. Soccer is the most popular national sport and many Mexicans attend traditional bull fights.

Social Issues

Mexico is characterized by sharp class and social divisions. A small upper class controls much of the country's property and wealth while the majority of Mexicans live in poverty. Between 1996 and 2002, Mexico made progress in its poverty reduction efforts, particularly on extreme poverty, but poverty remains a basic challenge for the country's development. In 2002, half of the population lived in poverty and one fifth in extreme poverty

The Mexican standard of living is well below the US. The minimum wage is 40 pesos per day, about \$4 US Dollars. Mexico's recent economic problems have hurt middle- and lower-income families much more than they have hurt wealthy families. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Mexico's highest income groups increased their overall wealth, while the earnings of poor Mexicans

declined significantly. For lower- and middle-income families, this often meant that they had to reduce their already limited spending on food and other basic necessities.

Many poor Mexicans have little or no access to health care and live in housing that lacks one or more basic amenities such as electricity, running water, or sewerage. Although the quality of housing has improved considerably since 1970, in the mid-1990s approximately 12 percent of Mexican households remained without electricity, 11 percent lacked running water, and 26 percent were without sewer facilities. Many children also suffer from malnutrition and drop out of school early in order to begin earning money for their families.

In addition, Mexico's rapid population growth has severely strained government services, especially education and health care. This growing population has placed tremendous pressure on the government and economy to create new jobs. The economy in the 1980s and 1990s has not been able to create enough jobs to keep up with population growth. Economic conditions have prompted thousands of skilled and unskilled workers to migrate north to the United States in search of employment.