Mexico
(United Mexican States)

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Mexico is a little smaller than Saudi Arabia, or about three times the size of the U.S. state of Texas. It shares its northern border with the United States and its southern border with Guatemala and Belize. Deserts separate Mexico from the United States. In central Mexico, there is a large plateau, and jungles are found in the far southeast. Much of the country is covered by mountains, which include the Sierra Madre Oriental and Sierra Madre Occidental mountain ranges. Earthquakes are a common threat in Mexico, which sits atop the boundaries of three tectonic plates: the North American, the Cocos, and the Pacific plates. Mexico is rich in natural resources, including oil, natural gas, gold, silver, and coal.

Temperatures and rainfall vary with elevation and region. The deserts of the north are usually dry and hot. The high central plateau, where Mexico City is located, is cooler and tends to get a lot of rain during the summer. Humidity is higher in the southeast jungles and along coastal areas, where rain falls more often.

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. By 500 BC, the Maya Empire had built incredible cities in southern Mexico and Central America, but the empire began to decline in the 10th century AD and eventually fell. Following the fall of the Maya Empire, the Aztecs rose to power and built soaring temples, developed a writing system, and created an accurate calendar.

In the early 1500s, Spanish explorers came to Mexico. Following years of fighting, the Aztecs were conquered by the Spanish in 1521, and Mexico became a colony of Spain. 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 y Costilla, the drive for independence began in September 1810 and was achieved 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 after a series of interim presidents, 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 1911, 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

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.

In the 1990s, charges of corruption against high-level government officials and an economic crisis weakened the PRI's power. 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.

The Drug War

Felipe Calderón (PAN), who was elected president in 2006, cracked down on the drug trade while attempting to curb rising drug-related violence. He relied 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.

When PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto became president in 2013, he put a greater emphasis on social programs aimed at preventing young people from joining criminal organizations. The drug trade remains an enormous problem, however. There are several major cartels, the largest of which are the Sinaloa, the Jalisco New Generation, and the Zetas, which employ hundreds of thousands of people and continue to be largely responsible for Mexico's high rate of violence.

Modern Mexico

Despite the violence that plagues its society, Mexico has seen progress in recent years thanks to a growing middle class, an open and increasingly competitive economy, and strengthened democratic institutions. Ensuring that all Mexicans benefit from this progress remains a challenge. Andrés Manuel López Obrador was elected president in 2018 on his third attempt by tapping into voters' frustrations with traditional political parties and by promising to tackle longstanding problems like poverty, economic inequality, corruption, and violence.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Roughly 62 percent of Mexico's population is of mixed Spanish and Indigenous heritage. Roughly 28 percent belongs to various Indigenous groups, most of whom are descendants of the Maya and Aztecs. About 10 percent is of European ancestry. Most Mexicans tend to identify with their Indigenous and Spanish heritage.

Most the population lives in urban areas. Mexico City, the capital, is one of the largest cities in North America; its metropolitan area has a population of over 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, hostile attitudes toward immigrants in the United States and improving opportunities in Mexico have slowed migration rates and caused a growing number of Mexicans to return to Mexico.

Language

Spanish is the most widely spoken language, and Mexico has the largest population of Spanish speakers in the world. 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.

More than two 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 Yucatán. English is taught at public and private schools, but competence in English is rare in most rural areas.

Religion

Most Mexicans (78 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 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 law relieves tension between the state and various religions—without forcing the government to endorse a specific church.

General Attitudes

Most Mexicans value friendship, humor, hard work, personal honor, and honesty. Nevertheless, corruption is a fact of life at nearly all levels of society. For many Mexicans, social status is measured by family name, education, and wealth,

which is respected even when that financial success is achieved through illegal means. In general, Indigenous Mexicans are more hesitant than other Mexicans to flaunt wealth or accomplishments in public, and they tend to be more appreciative of reserved and humble behavior.

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.

Despite Mexico's challenges, Mexicans tend to be patriotic and proud of their country. Though divided on many issues, Mexicans will often put aside their differences and unite for the good of the country during times of crisis. Many Mexicans will also fight publicly 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. Complaints about government or social institutions are also communicated through political cartoons, graffiti, speeches, pamphlets, and the internet.

Mexicans also tend to be proud of the country's 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 and generally lighter skin often found at the top of the social ladder and those with more Indigenous or African backgrounds and generally darker skin at the bottom.

Personal Appearance

Most Mexicans follow the latest fashion trends and wear clothing that is also common in the United States. Brand-name clothes are valued, and counterfeit versions of popular brands are common. Secondhand clothing, much of which comes from the United States, is common among poorer and rural Mexicans. While casual clothing is popular among Mexicans of all ages, 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 may wear dresses or skirts, often covered by an apron. They may also 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. Earrings are usually worn daily, while bracelets, necklaces, and rings may be reserved for important social events. Once widely popular, gold jewelry is now closely associated with drug cartels.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Mexicans usually greet with a handshake or nod of the head, although family and close friends commonly embrace. People may also shake hands while saying good-bye. Women often greet each other with a kiss on the cheek, and men may greet female relatives or close female friends in the same way. Mexicans commonly make eye contact with and smile at strangers passing by.

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). Some Mexican males, especially blue-collar ones, make *piropos* (pick-up lines or sexually suggestive 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. While conversing, eye contact is customary. They often use hand and arm gestures in conversation. Indigenous peoples may be more reserved around foreigners or Mexicans from big cities.

To get someone's attention, Mexicans usually wave and often whistle. 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. Pointing an index finger just below one's eye is a warning to be careful, but pointing at others with an index finger is considered rude in most situations. A person may show that something is expensive by making a fist and extending the index finger and thumb to form a C-shaped gesture. To indicate stinginess, a person may bend an elbow and tap or rub it with the hand. Tossing items is considered 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. Men will often open doors, carry heavy items, and give up their seats on public transportation for women.

Visiting

Mexicans have a reputation for being very hospitable. Unannounced visits are fairly common, but visitors may call ahead to ensure the hosts are home. Visitors usually are welcomed and served refreshments. Refusing refreshments may be considered impolite. Guests will often bring drinks, desserts, or flowers. On special occasions, gifts are important, and in some areas serenading is still popular. Guests are expected to relax and do not offer to help the host unless it is evident some help is needed.

Mexicans tend to 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 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 on the cheek, and (for close relationships) embraces.

Eating

Although schedules vary, Mexicans typically eat three main meals daily: a hearty breakfast, a main meal in the afternoon (between 2 and 4 p.m.), and a light snack called a *cena* or *merienda* in the evening. 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 eat many of their meals at restaurants or street-side stands. Families are more likely to eat at restaurants only on the weekends. *Cocinas rapidas* are small restaurants that offer 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 usually inappropriate for adults to eat while walking on the street. Fast food is a popular option for low-income Mexicans. Tips of 10 to 15 percent are customary in restaurants that have servers.

People are expected to wait until everyone is served before eating. 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 generally 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 around two. Rural parents usually have more than three children. A household often includes members of the extended family, though nuclear families are becoming more common among younger people in urban areas. A majority of Mexican children are born out of wedlock.

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 many families benefit materially from remittances sent to Mexico, long absences from loved ones, unstable work, and sometimes poor 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. Mexican children generally have few responsibilities outside of studying. Mothers sometimes help their children with homework. Even though most Mexican parents are generally lenient with their children, corporal punishment is not uncommon and is socially accepted. Children generally live with their parents until they marry and sometimes after they marry.

Adult children are expected to take care of their elderly parents, as nursing homes carry a stigma. 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.

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: about 46 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. Some rural dwellings are made from adobe or stone, materials ideally suited to the Mexican climate, but urban-style cement and brick buildings have become more common in rural areas.

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.

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 and most have 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

Getting married is an important goal for most Mexicans, especially women. On average, 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.

Same-sex marriage is explicitly legal in Mexico City and in several states. In June 2015, the Mexican Supreme Court ruled it discriminatory for states to deny same-sex marriages, effectively legalizing the practice throughout the country. Same-sex couples who are denied marriage licenses in their states must seek injunctions from district judges, who are now required to grant them. The federal Mexican government is seeking to officially legalize same-sex marriage nationwide.

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.

Because marriage is a major milestone for Mexicans, many families spend a great deal of money on the wedding reception, which typically includes food, music, dancing, and games. Traditionally, the bride's family pays for the reception and the "post party," an informal celebration that is usually held the day after the wedding. The groom usually pays for the wedding ceremony (such as flowers, church fees, etc.), the rings, the bride's dress, and the honeymoon. 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 *fiesta de quince* (15th birthday party) 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.

Death

After the death of a loved one, most Mexicans do the bulk of their mourning in funeral homes or in small chapels, though some rural Indigenous Mexicans may mourn in their homes. Typically, the body is buried within two or three days 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.

Common dishes 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-hominy 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.

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 libre*) 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 popular, and men often gather on weekends to watch televised soccer games. 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. Listening to music and dancing is popular among Mexicans of all ages.

On weekends, families and friends enjoy gathering at home or in restaurants. Meeting for a chat in the *zócalo* (town square) in the evening or on Sunday is popular among older rural men. Daylong *fiestas* (parties) and weeklong festivals nearly always feature fireworks, feasts, and bullfights.

Urban youth enjoy spending their free time in shopping malls, where they go to movies or chat with friends. Many young people also like to exercise at the gym. Young children enjoy outdoor activities such as riding bikes, going to nearby parks, and playing hide-and-seek; popular indoor activities for children include playing video games, browsing the internet, and dancing to music.

Vacation

Full-time employees usually receive up to two weeks of paid vacation. When official holidays fall on Thursdays, Fridays, or Mondays, Mexican workers enjoy *puentes* (literally "bridges"), or extended weekends, that are often used to vacation or visit relatives. Middle- and upper-class families often vacation along the beaches of the Pacific and Caribbean. Archeological sites such as Teotihuacán, Monte Albán, Uxmal, and Chichén Itzá 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.

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 Tapatío* (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 since 1936.

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

Holidays include New Year's Day (1 January); Constitution Day (5 February); Birthday of Benito Juárez (third Monday in March); Labor Day (1 May); Independence Day (16 September), which is marked by a presidential address and *El Grito* (the cry of freedom) on the evening of 15 September; *Día de la Raza* (Day of the Races), which celebrates Indigenous heritage (12 October); Revolution Day (20 November); and Christmas Day (25 December). Many offices close for a half day on Mother's Day (10 May), when schools sponsor special festivities.

Major religious holidays include Saint Anthony's Day (17 January), 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 August). During the period known as *Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead (1–2 November), families gather to celebrate life while they honor the dead. Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe (12 December) and *Noche Buena* (Christmas Eve, 24 December) 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 January), 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*. Many who live 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 December) 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

Structure

Mexico is a federal presidential republic of 32 states operating 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). 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 four main political parties: the right-wing National Action Party (PAN), the centrist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), and the left-wing National Regeneration Movement (MORENA). From 1929 to 2000, Mexico's political landscape was dominated by the authoritarian style of the PRI. However, Mexico has since transitioned into a competitive multiparty system.

Mexico faces some major challenges, including violence, the illicit drug trade, and widespread corruption. Political parties have been accused of voting fraud, decreasing the legitimacy of the country's democratic system. Though many Mexicans blame the government for these problems, they also expect the government to fix them.

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, which are generally upheld. However, political and social activists and journalists sometimes face threats and violence from the government and criminal organizations.

Few Mexicans have confidence in their government. Corruption is widespread, and efforts to curb it have been slow. Bribery is considered necessary when interacting with Mexico's underpaid public servants and intricate bureaucracy;

the practice costs the economy a significant portion of its gross domestic product (GDP) yearly. Yet despite these challenges, most Mexicans are politically engaged and regard their political affiliation as an important part of their identity.

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. Voting is considered a duty for adults 18 and older but is not enforced.

Economy

Economic Sectors

Service industries employ the highest proportion of Mexicans and create the largest part of the gross domestic product (GDP), 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, but as production has lagged, the government has opened the oil sector to foreign investment and foreign bidding on exploration rights. Tourism brings in several billion dollars each year. Remittances from Mexican emigrants working in the United States are an important source of income. More than half of the Mexican workforce is part of the informal economy.

Free Trade

Since 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada came into effect, the economy has increasingly relied on a growing manufacturing sector. 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 has 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. In 2018, the leaders of Canada, Mexico, and the United States agreed to a deal, the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), that would revise important areas of NAFTA, including agriculture, auto manufacturing, and labor rights.

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. Mexico was one of four founding members of the Pacific Alliance with Peru, Colombia, and Chile, enabling the free movement of goods, people, services, and capital among member nations and allowing the regional group to compete more successfully with China, Europe, and NAFTA countries.

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 42 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

Some Mexicans own personal cars, especially in urban areas, but the majority of people rely on public transportation. Buses and minibuses are plentiful and relatively inexpensive. Mexico City has a subway system. Taxis are numerous. The highway system has grown steadily in recent years, 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 and numerous international airports, including those in major cities like Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey as well as those serving tourist hubs like Acapulco, Cancún, and Cozumel. To help reduce traffic congestion and pollution, 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, and cellular phones have become common. High-speed internet is available in major cities and towns. Rural areas have internet access, but internet service remains prohibitively expensive for many people in these areas. Numerous radio and television stations and daily newspapers serve the public. Although freedom of the press is constitutionally protected, it is not respected in practice. Journalists routinely face harassment, intimidation, and violence from corrupt government officials and members of criminal organizations. Mexico is one of the world's deadliest countries for journalists, a problem that has worsened in recent years.

Education

Structure

Education is compulsory for fourteen years. After six years of primary education and three years of basic secondary education, students enter one of two tracks: a technical education program or a preuniversity program. Those who choose a preuniversity program then specialize further.

Access

Most students attend public schools. Attendance is not enforced, and schools may require that students pay some fees. Students who do attend regularly face class sizes of about 30 students, poorly maintained buildings (which may lack drinkable water and electricity), and low-quality state textbooks. Though resources vary by region, access to technology tends to be limited in primary and secondary grades. Some students, mostly ones from middle- and upper-income families, attend private schools, which usually have better facilities and educational outcomes.

Mexico has enacted educational reforms aimed at improving the quality of teaching and curbing corruption. Nevertheless, Mexico continues to have one of the most corrupt education systems in the world. A huge portion of its

education budget is siphoned off by administrators and teachers who are not actually working.

School Life

Curriculum used to be dominated by rote learning, but collaborative group projects that involve hands-on learning and community engagement have become the norm. Common courses include English, Spanish, indigenous languages, mathematics, science, history, geography, civics, art, technology, and physical education. Midterm and final exams are used to test student knowledge. Cheating is widespread among Mexican students and usually goes unpunished.

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 two to six years. The mostly free National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), in Mexico City, is prestigious, though few 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 recent decades, 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.

About 30 percent of Mexicans are overweight or obese, conditions that have contributed to quickly rising rates of heart disease and type 2 diabetes, which are the leading causes of death in the country. Mexicans drink more carbonated beverages than any other citizens in the world. In 2014, Mexico implemented higher taxes on sugary drinks and junk food to discourage dietary choices that have contributed to these lifestyle diseases.

In late February 2020, Mexico reported its first cases of COVID-19, a serious respiratory illness that had previously spread in China and around the world. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador was criticized for downplaying the threat early in the country's outbreak, failing to quickly require social distancing, and reopening the economy even as infections continued to rise.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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

Country and Development Data

Capital	Mexico City
Population	130,207,371 (rank=10)
Area (sq. mi.)	758,449 (rank=13)
Area (sq. km.)	1,964,375
Human Development Index	76 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	74 of 162 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	$17,900
Adult Literacy	96% (male); 95% (female)
Infant Mortality	12 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	72 (male); 78 (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
www.culturegrams.com