

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

Driving over the sea of asphalt that now overlays this highland basin, you'd be hard pressed to imagine that, a mere five centuries ago, it was filled by a chain of lakes. It would further stretch your powers to think that today's downtown was on a small island crisscrossed by canals. Or that the communities who inhabited this island and the banks of the lake spoke a patchwork of languages that had as little to do with Spanish as Malaysian or Urdu. As their chronicles related, the Spaniards who arrived at the shores of that lake in the early 1500s were just as amazed to witness such a scene.

Water covered much of the floor of the Valle de México when humans began moving in as early as 30,000 BC. Eventually it started shrinking back, and hunting became tougher, so the inhabitants turned to agriculture. A loose federation of farming villages had evolved around Lago de Texcoco by approximately 200 BC. The biggest of these, Cuicuilco, was destroyed by a volcanic eruption three centuries later.

Breakthroughs in irrigation techniques and the development of a maize-based economy contributed to the rise of a civilization at Teotihuacán, 40km northeast of the lake. For centuries Teotihuacán was the capital of an empire whose influence extended as far as Guatemala. However, unable to sustain its burgeoning population, it fell in the 8th century. The Toltecs, possibly descended from the nomadic tribes who invaded Teotihuacán, arose as the next great civilization, building their capital at Tula, 65km north of modern-day Mexico City. By the 12th century the Tula empire had collapsed as well, leaving a number of statelets to compete for control of the Valle de México. It was the Aztecs who emerged supreme.

AZTEC MEXICO CITY

The Aztecs, or Mexica (meh-*shee*-kah), arrived a century after the Toltecs' demise. A wandering tribe that claimed to have come from Aztlán, a mythical region in northwest Mexico, they initially acted as mercenary fighters for the Tepanecas, who resided on the lake's southern shore, and they were allowed to settle upon the inhospitable terrain of Chapultepec. After being captured by the warriors of rival Culhuacán, the Aztecs played the same role for their new masters. Cocomtli, Culhuacán's ruler, sent them into battle against nearby Xochimilco, and the Aztecs delivered over 8000 human ears as proof of their victory. They later sought a marriage alliance with Culhuacán, and Cocomtli offered his own daughter's hand to the Aztec chieftain. But at the wedding banquet, the ruler's pride turned to horror: a dancer was garbed in the flayed skin of his daughter, who had been sacrificed to Huizilopochtli, the Aztec god of war.

Fleeing from the wrath of Culhuacán, the tribe wandered the swampy fringes of the lake, finally reaching an island near the western shore around 1325. There, according to legend, they witnessed an eagle standing atop a cactus and devouring a snake, which they interpreted as a sign to stop and build a city, Tenochtitlán.

TIMELINE

30,000 BC–1200 BC

Human beings begin to populate the Valle de México, living off the plants and animals around Lago de Texcoco. As the larger game animals start dying off, hunting is gradually replaced by agriculture.

AD 150

World's third-biggest pyramid, the Pirámide del Sol, completed at Teotihuacán. At its height, the city northeast of Lago de Texcoco counted 125,000 inhabitants and practiced intensive agriculture.

1325

Nomadic Aztecs spot an eagle devouring a snake while perched atop a cactus on an island in Lago de Texcoco. The vision was their cue to establish their capital, Tenochtitlán, at this site.

Tenochtitlán rapidly became a sophisticated city-state whose empire would, by the early 16th century, span most of modern-day central Mexico from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico and into far southern Mexico. The Aztecs built their city on a grid plan, with canals as thoroughfares and causeways to the lakeshore. At the city's heart stood the main Teocalli (sacred precinct), with its temple dedicated to Huizilopochtli and the water god, Tláloc. In the marshier parts of the island, they created raised gardens by piling up vegetation and mud, and planting willows. These *chinampas* (versions of which can still be seen at Xochimilco in southern Mexico City) gave three or four harvests yearly but were still not enough to feed the growing population.

To supplement their resources, the Aztecs extracted tribute from conquered tribes. The empire yielded products such as jade, turquoise, cotton, paper, tobacco, rubber, lowland fruits and vegetables, cacao and precious feathers, which were needed for the glorification of the elite and to support the many nonproductive servants of its war-oriented state. In the mid-15th century they formed the Triple Alliance with the lakeshore states Texcoco and Tlacopan to conduct wars against Tlaxcala and Huejotzingo, which lay east of the valley. The purpose was to gain a steady supply of prisoners to sate Huizilopochtli's vast hunger for sacrificial victims, so that the sun would rise each day.

When the Spanish arrived in 1519, Tenochtitlán's population was an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 – far bigger than any city in Spain at that time – and that of the whole Valle de México was perhaps 1.5 million, already making it one of the world's densest urban areas.

THE SPANISH CONQUEST

The Aztec empire, and with it nearly 3000 years of ancient Mexican civilization, was shattered in two short years – 1519 to 1521. A tiny group of invaders brought a new religion and reduced the native people to second-class citizens and slaves. So alien to each other were the two sides that each doubted whether the other was human (the Pope gave the Mexicans the benefit of the doubt in 1537).

From this traumatic encounter arose modern Mexico. Most Mexicans, being mestizo (of mixed indigenous and European ancestry), are descendants of both cultures. But while Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor, is now an official Mexican hero, Hernán Cortés, the leader of the Spanish conquistadors, is seen as a villain, and the native people who helped him as traitors.

The Spanish had been in the Caribbean since Columbus arrived in 1492. Realizing that they had not reached the East Indies, they began looking for a passage through the land mass to their west but were distracted by tales of gold, silver and a rich empire there.

The Aztec ruler at the time was Moctezuma II Xocoyotzin, a reflective character who believed (perhaps fatally) that Cortés, who arrived on the Gulf Coast in 1519, might be the feathered serpent god Quetzalcóatl. According to legend, Quetzalcóatl had been driven out of Tula centuries before but had vowed to return one day and reclaim his throne.

Cortés' Expedition

In 1518 the Spanish governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez, asked Hernán Cortés, a colonist on the island, to lead a new expedition westward. As Cortés gathered ships and men, Velázquez became uneasy about the costs and Cortés' loyalty, and tried to cancel the expedition. But Cortés ignored him and set sail on February 15, 1519, with 11 ships, 550 men and 16 horses. The Spaniards landed first at Cozumel off the Yucatán Peninsula then moved round the coast

to Tabasco. There they defeated some hostile locals and Cortés gave the first of many lectures to Mexicans on the importance of Christianity and the greatness of King Carlos I of Spain. The locals gave him 20 maidens, among them Doña Marina (La Malinche), who became his interpreter, aide and lover.

The expedition next put in near the site of the city of Veracruz. In Tenochtitlán, Moctezuma began hearing tales of 'towers floating on water' bearing fair-skinned beings. Lightning struck a temple, a comet sailed through the night skies, and a bird 'with a mirror in its head' was brought to Moctezuma, who saw warriors in it. Unsure whether or not Cortés was the returning Quetzalcóatl, Moctezuma tried to discourage him from traveling to Tenochtitlán by sending messages about the difficult terrain and hostile tribes that lay between them.

Cortés apparently then scuttled his ships to prevent his men from retreating and, leaving about 150 men on the coast, set off for Tenochtitlán. On the way, he won over the Tlaxcalans as allies. After an unsuccessful attempt to ambush the Spaniards at Cholula, about 120km east of Tenochtitlán, Moctezuma finally invited Cortés to meet him. The Spaniards and 6000 indigenous allies thus entered Tenochtitlán on November 8, 1519. Cortés was met by Moctezuma, who was carried by nobles in a litter with a canopy of feathers and gold.

The Spaniards were lodged in luxury – as befitted gods – in the palace of Axayacatl, Moctezuma's father. But they were trapped. Some Aztec leaders advised Moctezuma to attack them, but Moctezuma hesitated and the Spaniards took him hostage instead. Moctezuma told his people he went willingly, but hostility rose in the city, aggravated by the Spaniards' destruction of Aztec idols.

The Fall of Tenochtitlán

After the Spaniards had been in Tenochtitlán for about six months, Moctezuma informed Cortés that another fleet had arrived on the Veracruz coast. This had been sent from Cuba to arrest Cortés. Cortés left 140 Spaniards under Pedro de Alvarado in Tenochtitlán and sped to the coast with his remaining forces. They routed the bigger rival force, and most of the defeated men joined Cortés.

Meanwhile, things boiled over in Tenochtitlán. Apparently fearing an attack, Alvarado's men struck first and killed about 200 Aztec nobles trapped in a square during a festival. Cortés and his enlarged force returned to the Aztec capital and were allowed to rejoin their comrades, only to come under fierce attack. Trapped in Axayacatl's palace, Cortés persuaded Moctezuma to try to pacify his people. According to one version, the king went on to the roof to address the crowds but was mortally wounded by missiles; other versions say that the Spaniards killed him.

The Spaniards fled on the night of June 30, 1520, but several hundred, and thousands of their indigenous allies, were killed on the Noche Triste (Sad Night). The survivors retreated to Tlaxcala, and prepared for another campaign by building boats in sections that could be carried across the mountains for a waterborne assault on Tenochtitlán. When the 900 Spaniards re-entered the Valle de México, they were accompanied by perhaps 100,000 native allies.

Moctezuma had been replaced by his nephew, Cuitláhuac, who then died of smallpox brought to Mexico by a Spanish soldier. Cuitláhuac was succeeded by another nephew, the 18-year-old Cuauhtémoc. The attack started in May 1521. Cortés resorted to razing Tenochtitlán building by building, and by August 13, 1521, the resistance ended. The captured Cuauhtémoc asked Cortés to kill him, but was denied his request.

1487

The Aztec king Ahuizotl has no less than 20,000 prisoners sacrificed for the dedication of Tenochtitlán's newly rebuilt main temple, the Templo Mayor.

1519

A small group of Spanish explorers led by Hernán Cortés arrives on Mexico's Gulf Coast, then makes its way through the sierra, entering Aztec Tenochtitlán on November 8.

1521

Cortés' men, bolstered by 100,000 native allies, conquer the Aztecs. After razing Tenochtitlán to the ground, they set about establishing their own capital, Mexico City, upon the ruins.

1531

On December 12, a vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe appears before indigenous peasant Juan Diego on Tepeyac Hill at the site of an Aztec religious shrine.

1629

Torrential rain leaves Mexico City submerged under water for five years, until 1634, when the drainage canal is finally expanded and improved. Residents either flee for higher ground or take up rowing.

1810

After declaring independence from Spain at Guanajuato, the priest Miguel Hidalgo leads 80,000 troops to Mexico City. They defeat the loyalist forces outside the capital, but the War of Independence continues for another 11 years.

CAPITAL OF NUEVA ESPAÑA

Establishing their headquarters at Coyoacán, on the southern shore of the Lago de Texcoco, the Spaniards had the ruined Tenochtitlán rebuilt as the capital of Nueva España (New Spain), as the new colony was called. The city's central plaza (today the Zócalo) was laid out next to the former site of the Aztecs' Teocalli. Beside the plaza Cortés had a palace (today the Palacio Nacional – the presidential palace) and a cathedral built.

From this capital, the Spanish sent out expeditions to subdue not only the rest of the Aztec empire but also other parts of Mexico and Central America that had not been under Aztec control. By 1600 the territory ruled from Mexico City stretched from what's now northern Mexico to the border of Panama (though in practice Central America was governed separately).

COLONIAL GOVERNMENT & SOCIETY

The Spanish king Carlos I denied Cortés the role of governor of Nueva España, and the crown waged a long, eventually successful struggle through the 16th century to restrict the power of the conquistadors in the colony. (Cortés returned disillusioned to Spain in 1540 and died there in 1547.) In 1527 Carlos I set up Nueva España's first *audiencia*, a high court with governmental functions. Then in 1535 he appointed Antonio de Mendoza as the colony's first viceroy, his personal representative to govern it. Mendoza, who ruled from Mexico City for 15 years, brought badly needed stability, limited the worst exploitation of indigenous people, encouraged missionary efforts and ensured steady revenue to the Spanish crown.

By 1550 the city emerged as the prosperous, elegant capital of Nueva España. Broad, straight streets were laid out along the Aztec causeways and canals. Indigenous labor built hospitals, palaces and a university according to Spanish designs with local materials such as *tezontle*, a red volcanic rock which the Aztecs had used for their temples. The various Catholic orders (the Dominicans, Augustinians, Franciscans and Jesuits) had massive monastic complexes erected.

While the Spaniards prospered, the conquered peoples declined disastrously, less because of harsh treatment than because of a series of plagues, many of them new diseases brought over from the Old World, such as smallpox and measles. The native population of the Valle de México shrank, by most estimates, to less than 100,000 within a century of the conquest.

The indigenous people's best allies were some of the monks who started arriving in Nueva España in 1523 to convert them. Many of these were compassionate, brave men; the Franciscan and Dominican orders distinguished themselves by protecting the local people from the colonists' worst excesses. The monks' missionary work also helped extend Spanish control over Mexico. Under the second viceroy, Luis de Velasco, indigenous slavery was abolished in the 1550s. Forced labor continued, however, as indigenous slavery was partly replaced by African slavery.

Building continued through the 17th century but problems arose as the weighty colonial structures began sinking into the soft, squishy lake bed. Furthermore, lacking natural drainage, the city suffered floods caused by the partial destruction in the 1520s of the Aztecs' canals. Lago de Texcoco often overflowed, damaging buildings, bringing disease and forcing thousands of people to relocate.

Urban conditions improved in the 1700s as new plazas and avenues were installed, along with sewage- and garbage-collection systems and a police force. This was Mexico City's gilded age. But

the shiny capital was mainly the domain of a Spanish and criollo (people born of Spanish parents in Nueva España) elite who made their fortunes in silver mining. The masses of indigenous and mixed-race peasants who served them were confined to outlying neighborhoods.

INDEPENDENCE

Spanish king Carlos III (1759–88), aware of the threat to Nueva España from British and French expansion further north, sought to bring his colony under firmer control and improve the flow of funds to the crown. He reorganized the colonial administration and expelled the Jesuits, whom he suspected of disloyalty, from the entire Spanish empire.

In 1804 the Spanish crown decreed the transfer of the powerful Catholic Church's many assets in Nueva España to the royal coffers. The church had to call in many debts, which hit criollos hard and created widespread discontent. Then, in 1808, France's Napoleon Bonaparte occupied most of Spain, and direct Spanish control over Nueva España evaporated. Rivalry in the colony between peninsulares (those born in Spain and sent by the Spanish government to rule the colony in Mexico), who remained loyal to Spain, and criollos, who sought political power commensurate with their economic power, intensified. Criollos began plotting rebellion.

On October 30, 1810, some 80,000 independence rebels, fresh from victory at Guanajuato, overpowered Spanish loyalist forces just west of the capital. But they were not sufficiently equipped to capitalize on this triumph, and their leader, Padre Miguel Hidalgo, chose not to advance on the city – a decision that cost Mexico 11 more years of fighting before independence was achieved.

After independence, Mexico was ruled by a long succession of short-lived governments, with an ongoing struggle between proreform liberals and antireform conservatives. The presidency was occupied repeatedly by General Antonio López de Santa Anna, who is best remembered for losing large chunks of Mexican territory to the USA. It was under Santa Anna's watch that the Mexican–American War broke out, following the US annexation of Texas. During the conflict, US troops briefly captured Mexico City after a fierce battle at the Ex-Convento de Churubusco in Coyoacán.

The liberal government that finally replaced Santa Anna in 1855 attempted to dismantle Mexico's conservative state and break the economic power of the church. Under the reform laws instituted by President Benito Juárez, the monasteries and churches were appropriated by the government, then sold off, subdivided and put to other uses. This anticlerical stance precipitated the internal War of the Reform between the liberals and conservatives. The liberals won, but in 1862 France's Napoleon III decided to invade a weakened Mexico. Despite a May 5 defeat at Puebla (still celebrated every year as Cinco de Mayo), 130km east of Mexico City, the French occupied Mexico City in 1863. The following year Napoleon installed the Austrian archduke, Maximilian of Hapsburg, as emperor of Mexico. Juárez and his government retreated to the provinces.

Maximilian and his wife, Empress Carlota, moved into the Castillo de Chapultepec (instead of the Palacio Nacional on the Zócalo, traditional residence of Mexico's heads of state). They had Paseo de la Reforma, still the city's grandest boulevard, laid out to connect Chapultepec with the city center. But their reign was brief. Under pressure from the USA, Napoleon withdrew his troops and in 1867 Maximilian – a noble but naive figure – was defeated and executed by republican forces at Querétaro, 215km northwest of Mexico City.

1824

After the overthrow and execution of Emperor Iturbide, the Constitution of 1824 is adopted, declaring Mexico a republic with a representative legislature and a popularly elected president.

1833–55

Mexican presidency changes hands 36 times, with 11 terms going to one general, Antonio López de Santa Anna.

1847

During the Mexican–American war, US forces invade Mexico City, storming Chapultepec Castle. Six heroic teenaged Mexican cadets perish rather than surrender, assuring their place in martyrdom.

1877–1911

Porfirio Díaz rules Mexico with an iron fist for three decades. The city is transformed by Díaz' infrastructure projects and monuments, but his repressive government sets the stage for the revolution.

1900

Grand drainage canal finally completed, 300 years after its inception, finally drying up the Lago de Texcoco and greatly reducing the threat of floods in the sealed Valle de México basin.

1910

Francisco Madero runs against Díaz for president. Díaz throws his opponent in prison and wins the race. After Madero is released, he declares Díaz' presidency illegitimate, thus launching the Mexican Revolution.

THE PORFIRIATO

Mexico City entered the modern age under the despotic Porfirio Díaz, who ruled Mexico for most of the period from 1877 to 1911 and attracted much foreign investment. Díaz ushered in a construction boom, building Parisian-style mansions and theaters, while the city's wealthiest residents escaped the center for newly minted neighborhoods toward the west like Roma and Polanco. Some 150km of electric tramways threaded the streets, industry grew, and by 1910 the city had more than half a million inhabitants. A drainage canal and tunnel finally succeeded in drying up much of Lago de Texcoco, allowing further expansion.

Díaz kept Mexico free of the wars that had plagued it for over 60 years, but at the price of political repression, foreign ownership of Mexican resources, and appalling conditions for many workers. Wealth became concentrated in the hands of a small minority. Such extreme economic disparity led to the Mexican Revolution, a confusing sequence of allegiances and conflicts between a spectrum of leaders and their armies, in which successive attempts to create a stable government were wrecked by new outbreaks of devastating fighting.

THE REVOLUTION

When rebels under Francisco 'Pancho' Villa took Ciudad Juárez on the US border in May 1911, Díaz resigned. The liberal Francisco Madero was elected president in November 1911, but found himself in conflict with more radical leaders, including Emiliano Zapata in the state of Morelos, south of Mexico City, who was fighting for the transfer of land from large estates to the peasants.

In February 1913 two conservative leaders – Félix Díaz, nephew of Porfirio, and Bernardo Reyes – were sprung from prison in Mexico City and commenced a counterrevolution based in La Ciudadela, a building 700m south of the Alameda Central (Map p64). This brought the Decena Trágica, 10 days of fierce fighting, to the capital. Thousands were killed or wounded and many buildings were destroyed. The fighting ended only after US ambassador Henry Lane Wilson negotiated for Madero's general, Victoriano Huerta, to switch to the rebel side and help depose Madero. Huerta became president; Madero and his vice president José María Pino Suárez were executed.

The unpopular Huerta himself was soon deposed and the revolution devolved into a confrontation between the liberal 'Constitutionalists,' led by Venustiano Carranza, and the forces led by populist Villa and the radical Zapata. But Villa and Zapata, despite a famous meeting in Mexico City in 1914, never formed a serious alliance, and the fighting became increasingly anarchic. Carranza emerged the victor in 1917, but in 1920 former allies including Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles ran him out of office and had him assassinated. The revolutionary decade had devastated the economy – starvation was widespread, including in Mexico City – and an estimated 1.5 to two million Mexicans, roughly one-eighth of the country's population, had lost their lives.

RECONSTRUCTION & GROWTH

The 1920s ushered in peace and a modicum of prosperity. The postrevolution minister of education, José Vasconcelos, commissioned Mexico's top artists – notably Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco – to decorate numerous public buildings in Mexico City

ECHOES OF TLATELOLCO

Nineteen sixty-eight marked a pivotal moment for Mexican democracy. Perhaps due to the subversive mood of the era, unrest was rife and students took to the streets to denounce political corruption and authoritarianism. Mexico had been chosen to host the Olympics that year, and President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz was anxious to present an image of stability to the world. Known for his authoritarian style, Díaz Ordaz employed heavy-handed tactics to stop the protests, in turn generating further unrest from a broader coalition of middle-class *capitalinos* (residents of Mexico City).

On the afternoon of October 2, a week before the Olympics were to begin, a demonstration was held on Tlatelolco's Plaza de las Tres Culturas. Helicopters hovered overhead and a massive police contingent cordoned off the zone. Suddenly a flare dropped from one of the choppers and shots rang out, apparently from the balcony that the protesters had made into a speaker's platform. Police then opened fire on the demonstrators and mayhem ensued. Later, government-authorized newspaper accounts blamed student snipers for igniting the incident and reported 20 protesters killed, although the real number is acknowledged to be closer to 400. News of the massacre was swept under the rug and the Olympic Games went on without a hitch.

There are numerous theories as to what actually occurred that October day. But the generally accepted version is that the government staged the massacre, planting snipers on the balcony to make it seem as if the students had provoked the violence. Many Mexicans viewed the killings as a premeditated tactic by the government to suppress dissent, permanently discrediting the postrevolutionary regime.

Four decades later, the Tlatelolco massacre was still recalled bitterly by a generation of Mexicans after an investigation authorized by President Vicente Fox, the country's first opposition-party president in modern history, failed to yield any new revelations. Meanwhile, a new museum was inaugurated beside the scene of the carnage (see p116) to commemorate and document the epochal incident.

with vivid, semipropagandistic murals on social, political and historical themes. This was the start of a major movement in Mexican art, with a lasting impact on the face of the city.

Following the Great Depression, a drive to industrialize attracted more money and people, and by 1940 the population had reached 1.7 million. Factories and skyscrapers rose in tandem with the population surge in the following decades. But the supply of housing, jobs and services could not keep pace, and shantytowns appeared on the city's fringes as Mexico City began to grow uncontrollably. Economic growth continued in the 1960s, but political and social reform lagged behind, as was made painfully evident by the massacre of hundreds of students in the lead-up to the 1968 Olympic Games (see the boxed text, above).

Mexico City continued to grow at an alarming rate in the 1970s, as the rural poor sought economic refuge in the capital's thriving industries, and the population of the metropolitan area surged from 8.7 to 14.5 million. Unable to contain the masses of new arrivals, the Distrito Federal (DF; Federal District, the geographic entity that comprises Mexico City's territory) spread beyond its boundaries into the adjacent state of México, which eventually became more populous than the DF proper. The result of such unbridled growth was some of the world's worst traffic and pollution, only partly alleviated by the metro system (opened in 1969) and by attempts in the 1990s to limit traffic. On September 19, 1985, an earthquake measuring over 8.0 on the Richter scale hit Mexico City, killing at least 10,000 and displacing thousands more. Still, people kept pouring in.

Today the metropolitan area counts an estimated 22 million inhabitants, around a fifth of the country's population. Though growth has slowed in the last decade, there are still some 100,000

1910–20

Almost two million die and the economy is shattered in the Mexican Revolution. As fighting degenerates into factional struggles, popular revolutionary heroes Francisco 'Pancho' Villa and Emiliano Zapata are superseded by the liberal constitutionalists.

1917

A new constitution is drawn up, guaranteeing civil rights for all Mexicans and recognizing the nation's indigenous identity. Freedom of speech and the press are also declared.

1985

On September 19, an earthquake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale strikes Mexico City, killing thousands and destroying numerous buildings. Emergency relief effort is led by citizens as city government fails to address the crisis.

1997

Mexico City gains political autonomy; opposition party candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas becomes first popularly elected mayor in city's history.

2000

National Action Party (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox elected president, releasing Mexico from one-party rule after seven decades. Popular politician Andrés Manuel López Obrador elected mayor of Mexico City.

2006

López Obrador is defeated in presidential election by PAN candidate Felipe Calderón. Marcelo Ebrard becomes mayor of Mexico City.

newcomers and 150,000 births annually. Mexico City is the industrial, financial and communications center of the country; its industries generate a quarter of Mexico's wealth, and its people consume two-thirds of Mexico's energy. Its cost of living is the highest in the nation.

POSTMILLENNIAL OPTIMISM

The year 2000 marked a watershed in Mexico's political development. After 70 years of continuous rule by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI; Institutional Revolutionary Party), an opposition candidate, Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN), was elected president. Furthermore, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (commonly known as AMLO), a member of the left-leaning PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution), was elected mayor of Mexico City. Under López Obrador's administration, the face of the capital began to change for the better, starting with a massive renovation of the Centro Histórico. Financed in part by Carlos Slim (the world's richest man as of 2007), the city launched renovations of the zone's cobblestone streets and building facades, installing new lighting, bolstering security and sweeping thousands of unauthorized vendors from the streets. Similar face-lifts have been performed on the Paseo de la Reforma corridor and in the Alameda Central area. The urban landscape has been further transformed by a wave of new construction, attributed to low interest rates, a stable currency and renewed attention by foreign investors. Among the more architecturally impressive new structures are the new Foreign Relations Secretariat building (p66), alongside the Alameda Central, and the 59-storey Torre Mayor (p73), Latin America's tallest building.

The DF's notorious smog has been significantly curtailed thanks to tougher emission controls, while traffic congestion has been relieved by the construction of elevated highways along various sections of the city's freeways (a project that was poignantly documented in the 2007 film, *In the Pit*). Meanwhile, the installation of the metrobus along Av Insurgentes, the city's principal north-south corridor, has displaced an unruly, polluting fleet of buses, further reducing congestion (though the increased volume of vehicles on the road somewhat offsets those improvements). Crime, though still a persistent concern for *capitalinos* (residents of Mexico City) and visitors, has significantly dropped off since the 1990s.

PRD candidate Marcelo Ebrard won a sweeping victory in Mexico City's mayoral elections of 2006, consolidating his party's grip on the city government. Also registering an overwhelming takeover of the Federal District's legislative assembly, the PRD passed a flood of progressive initiatives, including the sanctioning of gay unions and the legalization of abortion and euthanasia. Though Ebrard doesn't inspire the sort of fervor demonstrated by AMLO's followers, his work may have longer-lasting effects. Whether due to the city's recently won autonomy or the country's exhilaration after being released from the grip of seven decades of one-party rule (see p36), the turn of the millennium marked an improvement in Mexico City's mood.

Not content with having a safer, cleaner city, current Mayor Marcelo Ebrard is also striving to make the DF a more fun place, providing a slew of new recreational options for stressed-out Chilangos. Every Sunday morning, skaters and cyclists have the run of Paseo de la Reforma and other thoroughfares that have been closed to auto traffic. The city has poured truckloads of sand alongside various public swimming pools to create 'urban beaches,' much to the delight of residents who lack the means to get to the coasts. And during the winter holidays, an enormous ice-skating rink is installed on the Zócalo, with thousands of pairs of skates loaned free of charge.

ARTS

It's hard to think of Mexico in black and white. This is a country where dazzling color is never far from view. Just as the dull green skin of a fresh fig is peeled to reveal a seductive crimson flesh, so an otherwise drab urban street can suddenly explode with color from a mural, a market store or a vividly painted building. The capital's art world is similarly heavy hitting and dynamic, reflecting the lifestyle and extremes of society here, where wealth and poverty stand side by side in edgy and controversial partnership.

While Diego Rivera is considered equal only to Picasso in terms of his range of painting technique and style, it is Frida Kahlo who has achieved global cult status and helped publicize Mexican art. Many of today's tourists have included DF on their itinerary quite simply because

they cannot admit to anyone back home that they missed seeing the Museo Frida Kahlo (better known as the Blue House; see p96) on their trip to Mexico or, of course, genuinely want to enjoy the experience firsthand. Inevitably, they subsequently discover that this is only scratching the canvas' surface as far as the depth and richness of the city's art world is concerned. Art is, in general, also very accessible in Mexico City with museums exhibiting grand works of historical art, as well as contemporary art galleries that easily equal those in New York or London in terms of cutting edge innovation. And then there are the murals which are both proudly displayed in palaces and museums, as well as in obscure corners all over the city (see the boxed text, p26).

Mexico's heritage in the arts extends to its literature and music; the latter ranging from the traditional folk of the southwest to the Latino ska of the city. Music is played at any excuse and every occasion, ranging from the cheerful cacophony of several mariachi bands touting for business (simultaneously) in Plaza Garibaldi to the blind man on the metro selling pirated CDs of the latest Lila Downs release. Dance is similarly an important part of Mexican culture, particularly the traditional indigenous dances enjoyed at fiestas and which can be experienced in all their glory at the Palacio de Bellas Artes' *Ballet Folclórico de México* performance (see p180).

PAINTING

Mexico City is a fabulous destination for art buffs. Since pre-Hispanic times, remarkably talented painters have lived and worked here. Many of them share a love for vibrant colors, clearly displayed in their dramatic landscapes, portraits and murals. More recently, the city has become a base for international artists clearly stimulated by the light, the colors and the culture. There are numerous museums and galleries where you can enjoy Mexico's paintings, both past and present.

Pre-Hispanic

The earliest Mexican murals, found at Teotihuacán, are outstanding. Here, within a reconstruction of a temple, is the sumptuous *Paradise of Tláloc* mural which depicts, in detail, the delights awaiting those who died at the hands of the water god Tláloc. The people of Cacaxtla near Puebla (AD 650 to 900) also left some vivid murals depicting battle scenes. The surviving art of the Aztecs (circa 1350 to 1521) is more sculpture than painting, but some frescoes survive. The Maya of southeast Mexico and Guatemala, at their cultural height from about AD 250 to 900, were ancient Mexico's most artistic people and created some marvelous multicolored murals and pottery. They have undoubtedly inspired subsequent generations of artists, sculptors and muralists across the country.

Colonial Period

Mexican art during Spanish rule was heavily influenced by the colonizers and became chiefly religious in subject, though portraiture grew in popularity under wealthy patrons. The Academia de San Carlos, founded in Mexico City in 1783 by Spanish royal decree, had its students learn by copying European masterworks. The 18th-century painters Juan Correa and Miguel Cabrera were leading figures of the era in Mexico. Correa was one of the most accomplished and productive painters of his era, undertaking many important religious commissions, including that of the famous Virgin of Guadalupe (the patron saint and beloved icon of Mexico City). Although you have to travel to Santa Monica, California to view this emblematic painting, examples of Correa's work can be viewed at Mexico City's Metropolitan Cathedral. Miguel Cabrera was an equally famous painter of his time, favored particularly by the Archbishop and of the Jesuit order, earning him many commissions. His style follows that of the Spanish painter Bartolomé Estéban Murillo, with a sureness of touch lacking in the more labored efforts of many of his contemporaries. In 1753 he founded and presided over Mexico's first Art Academy. Stunning examples of Cabrera's work can be found at the Church of San Francisco Javier, the Jesuit monastery in Tepotzotlán.

Independent Mexico

Juan Cordero (1824-84) began the modern Mexican mural tradition by expressing historical and philosophical ideas on public buildings. The landscapes of José María Velasco (1840-1912)

captured the magical qualities of the country around Mexico City before it was swallowed up by urban growth.

The years before the 1910 revolution saw a break from European traditions and the beginnings of socially conscious art. Slums, brothels and indigenous poverty began to appear on canvas. The cartoons and engravings of José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913), with his characteristic *calavera* (skull) motif, satirized the injustices of the Porfiriato period and were aimed at a much wider audience than most earlier Mexican art. Gerardo Murillo (1875–1964), known as Dr Atl, displayed some scandalously orgiastic paintings at a show marking the 1910 centenary of the independence movement.

The Muralists

In the 1920s, immediately after the revolution, education minister José Vasconcelos commissioned leading young artists to paint a series of murals on public buildings to spread awareness of Mexican history and culture and impel social and technological change. The trio of great muralists were Diego Rivera (1885–1957), David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974), and José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949).

Rivera's work carried a clear left-wing message, emphasizing past oppression suffered by indigenous people and peasants. He had an intense interest in native Mexico and tried hard to pull together the country's indigenous and Spanish roots into one national identity. Typically, his murals are colorful, crowded tableaux depicting historical figures (like Cortés) and events or symbolic scenes of Mexican life, with a simple, clear-cut moral message. They're realistic, if not always lifelike. To fully appreciate Rivera's subtleties you need some knowledge of Mexican history and, preferably, a guide or some know-it-all friend to explain the finer details.

Siqueiros, who fought on the Constitutionalist side in the revolution (while Rivera was in Europe), remained a political activist, spending subsequent time in jail and leading an attempt to kill Leon Trotsky in Mexico City in 1940. His murals lack Rivera's detailed realism but convey a more clearly Marxist message through dramatic, symbolic depictions of the oppressed and grotesque caricatures of the oppressors. Some of his best works are at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Castillo de Chapultepec and Ciudad Universitaria.

Orozco focused more on the universal human condition than on historical or political specifics. He conveyed emotion, character and atmosphere. More of a pessimist than Rivera or Siqueiros, by the 1930s Orozco grew disillusioned with the revolution. Some of his most powerful works, such as those in the Palacio de Bellas Artes, depict oppressive scenes of degradation, violence or injustice but do not offer any simplistic political solution.

Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco were also great artists. A number of their portraits, drawings and other works can be seen in various art museums in Mexico City.

The muralist movement continued well after WWII. Rufino Tamayo (1899–1991), from Oaxaca, was relatively unconcerned with politics and history but absorbed by abstract and mythological scenes and the effects of color. Many of his works, some of which are held in the Palacio de Bellas Artes, are easily identified by his trademark watermelon motif (his father was a fruit seller). Juan O'Gorman (1905–82), a Mexican of Irish ancestry, was even more realistic and detailed than Rivera. His mosaic in the Biblioteca Central at Mexico City's Ciudad Universitaria is his best-known work, though atypical of his usual style.

Other 20th-Century Artists

Mexico City-born Frida Kahlo (1907–54; see the boxed text, [opposite](#)), physically crippled by an accident and mentally tormented in her tempestuous marriage to Diego Rivera, painted anguished, penetrating self-portraits and grotesque, surreal images that expressed her left-wing views and externalized her inner tumult. After several decades of being seen as an interesting oddball, Kahlo struck an international chord in the 1980s, almost overnight becoming hugely popular and as renowned as Rivera. Thanks to the 2002 Hollywood biopic *Frida*, she is now better known worldwide than any other Mexican artist.

Since WWII, Mexican artists have moved away from muralism, which they saw as too didactic and too obsessed with *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness). They opened up Mexico to world trends such as abstract expressionism, op art and performance art. The Museo José

FRIDA & DIEGO

A century after Frida Kahlo's birth and 50 years after Diego Rivera's death, the pair's fame and recognition are stronger than ever, both internationally and within Mexico. In 2007, a retrospective of Kahlo's work at the Palacio de Bellas Artes attracted more than 440,000 visitors. Though attendance at the Rivera survey that followed was not so phenomenal, the show reminded visitors that the prolific muralist had been an international star in his own lifetime. Their memory is inseparably linked, and both artists were frequent subjects in each other's work.

Diego Rivera first met Frida Kahlo, 21 years his junior, while painting at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, where she was a student in the 1920s. Rivera was already at the forefront of Mexican art and a socialist; his commission at the school was the first of many semipropagandistic murals on public buildings that he was to execute over three decades. He had already fathered children by two Russian women in Europe, and in 1922 married Lupe Marín in Mexico. She bore him two more children before their marriage broke up in 1928.

Kahlo was born in Coyoacán in 1907 to a Hungarian-Jewish father and an Oaxacan mother. She contracted polio at age six, which left her right leg permanently thinner than her left. In 1925 she was horribly injured in a trolley accident which broke her back, right leg, collarbone, pelvis and ribs. She made a miraculous recovery but suffered much pain thereafter and underwent many operations to try to alleviate it. It was during convalescence that she began painting. Pain – physical and emotional – was to be a dominating theme of her art.

Kahlo and Rivera both moved in left-wing artistic circles and met again in 1928; they married the following year. The liaison, described as 'a union between an elephant and a dove,' was always a passionate love-hate affair. Rivera wrote: 'If I ever loved a woman, the more I loved her, the more I wanted to hurt her. Frida was only the most obvious victim of this disgusting trait.' Both had extramarital affairs.

In 1934, after a spell in the USA, the pair moved into a new home in San Ángel (see [p100](#)), with separate houses linked by an aerial walkway. After Kahlo discovered that Rivera had had an affair with her sister Cristina, she divorced him in 1939, but they remarried the following year. She moved back into her childhood home, the Casa Azul (Blue House; [p96](#)), in Coyoacán and he stayed at San Ángel – a state of affairs that continued for the rest of their lives, though their relationship endured, too. Kahlo remained Rivera's most trusted critic, and Rivera was Kahlo's biggest fan.

Despite the worldwide wave of Fridamania that followed the hit biopic *Frida* in 2002, Kahlo had only one exhibition in Mexico in her lifetime, in 1953. She arrived at the opening on a stretcher. Rivera said of the exhibition, 'Anyone who attended it could not but marvel at her great talent.' She died at the Blue House the following year. Rivera called the day of her death 'the most tragic day of my life... Too late I realized that the most wonderful part of my life had been my love for Frida.'

Luis Cuevas in Mexico City's Centro Histórico was founded by, and named for, one of the leaders of this movement.

Contemporary Art

The unease and irony of postmodernism found fertile ground among Mexico's ever-questioning intelligentsia from the late 1980s. Today the city has an increasingly exciting contemporary art scene. The many privately owned galleries that have sprung up display an enormous diversity of attempts to interpret the uncertainties of the early 21st century (see [p184](#) for listings). Some of the most progressive can be found in the Roma and Polanco districts. Contemporary Mexican artists are mostly ironic individualists who can't be categorized into movements or groups.

The best way to catch up on the art scene is to visit some of the better contemporary galleries. You can also check out the Arte Mexico website (www.arte-mexico.com, in Spanish), which has a calendar of exhibitions, information on artists and galleries, maps and more.

SCULPTURE & PUBLIC ART

The Paseo de la Reforma, based on the Champs Élysées in Paris, is lined with monuments, fountains and statues of Mexican heroes. Most prominent of these is the Monumento a la

top picks

MODERN ART MUSEUMS

- Museo de Arte Moderno (p79)
- Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil (p102)
- Museo José Luis Cuevas (p56)
- Museo Sala de Arte Público David Alfaro Siqueiros (p83)
- Laboratorio de Arte Alameda (p65)
- Museo Rufino Tamayo (p81)

Independencia (Monument to Independence; p73), affectionately known as Angelito, a gilded statue of a winged Victory set atop a 45m-high column. It's a location for demonstrations and sporting and national celebrations.

Throughout the summer of 2007, locals watched in bemusement as the Angelito was joined by an altogether more whimsical series of 'street furniture': art pieces not just to look at, but to sit on. Benches and seats are made from bronze or stone, crafted into all sorts of wonderful wacky shapes by a team of local and international sculptors. There's *Reflecto*, on the corner of Génova and Reforma, which features a double bench, one atop another, and an upside-down seated man. On the corner of Río Marne, US sculptor Naomi Siegmán's creation *Sientate, Estas en Tu Casa* (Sit Down, You're at Home), a conventional-looking three-piece suite including crumpled cushions, made from bronze. Others feature a two-headed sphinx, a silhouetted seated couple, and the ingenious *Semilla de Descanso* (Seed for Sitting), complete with central 'pod'.

Visit them firsthand by taking a wander down the Paseo de la Reforma's sculpture stretch, from Angelito to the *Monumento a Cuauhtémoc* (Monument to Cuauhtémoc), in the comfort of knowing that there will be plenty of seating space en route.

FOLK ART

Mexicans' artisanship and love of color, beauty, fun and tradition are expressed most ubiquitously in their myriad appealing *artesanías* (handicrafts). The highly decorative crafts that catch the eye in shops and markets today are counterparts to the splendid costumes, beautiful ceramics and elaborate jewelry used by the ancient Aztec and Maya nobility. Many modern craft techniques, designs and materials are easily traced to pre-Hispanic origins. The areas producing the most exciting crafts are still mostly those with prominent indigenous populations, in states such as Chiapas, Michoacán, Oaxaca and Puebla. Happily all these are available at many of the various craft markets and *artesanía* stores in Mexico City.

Crafts to look out for include masks and bark paintings from the southern state of Guerrero, painted lacquer ware on gourds or scented wood from the remote town of Olinaláa, polished wood carvings made into dramatic human and animal shapes from the Seri people of Sonoro,

HIDDEN MURALS

So broad was the muralist movement's canvas that it sometimes seems not a wall has gone uncovered. With murals showing up in markets, libraries, metro stations and restaurants, Chilangos naturally grow indifferent to the presence of these grandiose artistic statements in their midst. Sure, you've seen the tableaux at the Palacio Nacional and de Bellas Artes, but some lesser-known murals are worth seeking out, and tracking them down is half the fun.

- El Agua, El Origen de la Vida** (*Water, Origin of Life*; Map p78; Bosque de Chapultepec; admission M\$10; ☎ 10am-6pm Sat) Diego Rivera painted this series of murals, *Fuente de Tláloc*, for the inauguration of the Chapultepec water works (near Lago Menor). These were built in the 1940s to channel the waters of the Río Lerma, 62km west, into cisterns to supply the city. Experimenting with waterproof paints, Rivera covered the collection tank, sluice gates and part of the pipeline with images of amphibious beings and workers involved in the project. Though technically only open Saturdays, the guard can sometimes be persuaded to let you in, for a tip.
- Velocidad** (*Speed*; Map p64; Plaza Juárez, Av Juárez; M Bellas Artes) Originally designed for a Chrysler factory, this 1953 work by David Siqueiros represents the notion of speed through the kinetic figure of a female runner. The mosaic canvas was transplanted to the west entrance of the Plaza Juárez complex as part of the Alameda development project.
- Historia de México** (*History of Mexico*; Map pp48-9; Mercado Abelardo Rodríguez, cnr República de Venezuela & Rodríguez Puebla; M Zócalo) The large Abelardo Rodríguez public market, east of the Zócalo, became a canvas for a group of young international artists in the 1930s under the tutelage of Diego Rivera (he paid them 13.5 pesos per square meter). One of the most intriguing (and best preserved) works, created by Japanese artist Isama Noguchi, is a dynamic three-dimensional mural sculpted of cement and plaster that symbolizes the struggle against fascism. It's located in the community center, upstairs from the northeast corner of the market.
- El Perfil del Tiempo** (*Profile of Time*; Map p105; Metro Copilco, Línea 3 platform; M Copilco) As any metro rider is aware, the walls of many stations were illustrated by major artists during the 1980s. The Copilco station, at the eastern entrance to UNAM, features this work by Durango artist Guillermo Cenicero. Covering 1000 sq m – the largest of any metro mural – it surveys the history of world painting, from Spain's Altamira cave paintings to Mexico's modern masters, and also includes scenes from the conquest of Mexico.

KITSCH & RETRO COMEBACK

Whether loved or reviled, indulged or condemned, the kitsch factor is alive and well in Mexico City. Stick around a while and you may seriously want to consider trading in that Corona beer T-shirt for a NaCo one (see p127), and shift your urban chic into high gear. Cruise the shops and boutiques in Roma and Condesa to see what stylish kitsch is all about: the boutiques here sell everything from Melissa-brand jelly shoes (born in Brazil in the '80s) to shiny lacquered bags with bright floral (or similar) motifs.

More kitsch Mexican must-haves include leopard- or tiger-skin-print blankets à la Elton John, puce-pink papier-mâché dolls wearing glittering tiaras (the deliciously camp boy dolls are especially hard to find), and – a real delight if you come across them – black-velvet paintings, ideally picturing a voluptuous pinup girl or the Last Supper. Some of the folk art here falls into the kitsch-without-trying category, like Día de Muertos clay figurines such as pop-up skeletons in coffins and gaudy pink-haired burlesque-style gals with cigarette holders, cleavage and heels.

As for interior design, the retro look is total at the achingly cool La Bipolar cantina (see p165), owned by Mexican heartthrob Diego Luna of *Y Tu Mamá También* fame. Ceiling lights are revealed to be neatly sliced tin buckets, walls are studded with plastic crates and the tables are good old wooden butcher blocks.

At least they don't serve you those famous Mexican beans that just can't keep still on the plate...now they really would give you a dose of kitsch indigestion!

handmade guitars from Paracho in Michoacán, and jewelry and metalwork from Taxco and Oaxaca.

There are several city shops where you can find excellent quality *artesanías* from various regions in Mexico (see the boxed text, p128).

DANCE

Indigenous Dance

Traditional indigenous dances are an important part of many Mexican regional fiestas. There are hundreds of them: some popular in many parts of the country, others danced only in a single town or village. Many bear traces of pre-Hispanic ritual. Some have evolved from old fertility rites. Others tell stories of Spanish origin. Nearly all require special colorful costumes, sometimes including masks or enormous feathered headdresses.

Since most people in Mexico City have left behind their country roots, such traditional acts are rare. An exception is the Conchero, a recreation of a pre-Hispanic central Mexican dance performed daily to booming drums by groups in the Zócalo. Excellent performances of traditional dances from around Mexico are staged by the *Ballet Folclórico de México* (see p180).

Latin Dance

Latin-Caribbean and South American dance and dance music – broadly described as *música afroantillana* or *música tropical* – have become highly popular in Mexico. Basically this is tropical-style ballroom dancing, with percussion, guitars and brass providing infectious rhythms. Mexico City has a dozen or more clubs and large dance halls devoted to this scene; aficionados can go to a different hall each night of the week, often featuring big-name bands and performers from the Caribbean and South America (p171).

One of the more formal, old-fashioned varieties of Latin dance is *danzón*. Originally from Cuba, *danzón* is associated particularly with the port city of Veracruz. To look the part, high heels and a dress are de rigueur for women, as is a Panama hat for men. Steps are small, movement is from the hips down, and *danzón* can be danced only to *danzón* music. If you head down to the **Parque Ciudadela** (Plaza de Danzón; Calle Balderas, opposite the crafts market; M Balderas) on a Saturday afternoon, you will see the dance enacted by a lively group of locals.

Cumbia originated in Colombia but now calls Mexico City home. It also has set steps, but is livelier, more flirtatious and less structured than *danzón*; you also move the top half of your body.

Salsa developed out of the 1950s New York introduction of jazz to cha-cha-cha, rumba and *son*, brought by immigrants from Cuba and Puerto Rico. Musically it boils down to brass (with trumpet solos), piano, percussion, lead vocals and chorus – the dance is a hot one with a lot of exciting turns.

Merengue, primarily from Colombia and Venezuela, is a cumbia-salsa blend with a hopping step: the rhythm catches the shoulders, and the arms go up and down. The music is strong on maracas, and its musicians go for puffed-up sleeves.

MUSIC

In Mexico City live music may start up at any time on streets, plazas or even buses or the metro. The musicians play for a living and range from full mariachi bands to ragged lone buskers with out-of-tune guitars and sandpaper voices. Mariachi music is perhaps the most 'typical' Mexican music of all. Originating in the Guadalajara area, it features trumpeters, violinists, guitarists and a singer, often dressed in smart cowboylike costumes. Mexico City's Plaza Garibaldi is one of its main adopted homes.

Mexico has a thriving pop-music industry. Its outpourings can be heard live at fiestas, nightspots and concerts. Local CDs are available in music shops and cheap bootleg vendors. The latter are certainly cheaper (around M\$15 per CD) but carry the risk that your purchases may not work. To find out about live music in Mexico City, see [p170](#).

Rock & Hip-Hop

Due to its proximity to the USA's big Spanish-speaking market, Mexico, in particular Mexico City, is one of the most important hubs of Spanish rock and hip-hop. Talented and versatile local bands such as Café Tacuba (see the boxed text, [opposite](#)) and Maldita Vecindad have taken their music to new heights and international audiences, mixing a huge range of influences – from rock, hip-hop and ska to traditional *son*, bolero or mariachi.

Local to Monterrey but well known to Mexico City concert goers are the hip-hop twosome Plastilina Mosh (a kind of Mexican Beastie Boys), hip-hoppers Control Machete, the Britpop-like Zurdoz and metal-hip-hop band Molotov, which attracts controversy with expletive-laced lyrics in a mix of Spanish and English.

Still one of the country's most popular bands is Jaguares, mystical Def Leppard-type rockers who spearheaded the coming of age of Mexican rock in the 1980s. Then there's the more contemporary goth-glam favorite, Víctimas de Doctor Cerebro, with a new release at the end of 2007, and a consistent favorite on the US concert circuit.

Probably best known worldwide of all Mexican bands, however, is Maná, an unashamedly commercial band with British and Caribbean influences, reminiscent of the Police. Not to be forgotten also are El Tri, the grandfathers of Mexican rock (not dissimilar to the Rolling Stones), who after more than 35 years are still pumping out energetic rock and roll.

Regional Music

The deepest-rooted Mexican folk music is *son*, a broad term covering a range of styles that grew out of the fusion of indigenous, Spanish and African music. *Son* is played on guitars plus harp or violin, with witty, often improvised lyrics, usually performed for a foot-stamping dance audience. The origin of mariachi music was the *son* of Jalisco state in western Mexico. Particularly celebrated *son* musicians include violinist Juan Reynoso from the hot Río Balsas basin southwest of Mexico City; harpist La Negra Graciana from Veracruz, who plays *son* which is particularly African- and Cuban-influenced; and Los Camperos de Valles from the Huasteca region in northeast Mexico, a trio composed of a solo violinist and two guitarists who sing falsetto between soaring violin passages. The independent recording label Discos Corasón is doing much to promote *son*. One place you can buy its CDs is the Tianguis Cultural del Chopo ([p123](#)).

Ranchera is Mexico's urban 'country music.' Developed in the expanding towns and cities of the 20th century, it's melodramatic with a nostalgia for rural roots: vocalist-and-combo music, sometimes with a mariachi backing. Eugenia León, Juan Gabriel and Alejandro Fernández are among the leading contemporary *ranchera* artists.

Norteño is country ballad and dance music, originating in northern Mexico but popular countrywide. Its roots are in *corridos*, heroic ballads with the rhythms of European dances such as the polka or the waltz, which were brought to southern Texas by 19th-century German and Czech immigrants. Originally the songs were tales of Latino-Anglo strife or themes

ICONIC TACUBA

For all those whose idea of Mexican music conjures up some drunken rendition of *La Cucaracha*, Café Tacuba is a tour de force to be reckoned with. The band began humbly enough in the '90s: four friends who played rock music in the garage of a house in their upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood, Satélite, north of the city. Fortunately the guys ditched their first long-winded name: Alicia Ya No Vive Aquí (after the '70s Martin Scorsese film) in favor of Café Tacuba, after a coffee shop near the Zócalo which opened in 1912 and had its heyday in the 1950s when it represented the traditional Pachuco music scene.

A good choice, perhaps: Café Tacuba's music is both far removed from, and intrinsically related to, traditional folk music (think DVD to good old vinyl). Their initial self-titled release was a blueprint of what was to come with its fusion of innumerable music styles, from punk and ska to electronic and hip-hop, with a healthy spicing of regional Mexican music like bolero and *ranchero*. The only similarity between some songs was lead singer Albarrán's distinctive nasal vocals. This was far more sophisticated stuff than the *rock en español* style of Ricky Martin and Enrique Iglesias, and by 1996 the cult following was crossing borders.

In 2004 the band won a Grammy for Best Latin Rock/Alternative Album for *Cuatro Caminos*, which was also featured on several Top Albums of 2003 charts, including *Rolling Stone*, the *New York Times* and *Blender Magazine*. In 2005 they performed a special show in Mexico City's Palacio de Deportes, which became the basis of their subsequent *Un Viaje* release.

More than 15 years since the days of deafening suburbia, the band has evolved to become a more challenging, mature and earnest-sounding ensemble. Their October 2007 album *Sino* they describe as being 'an extension of *Cuatro Caminos* with more guitar presence and acoustic drums.' Despite the contradiction in the title, music critics have greeted it with a thumbs-up *si*, believing it may well lead to another Grammy award and still more global recognition for the band.

from the Mexican Revolution. The gritty modern ballads known as *narco-corridos* deal with drug-runners, coyotes and other small-time crooks trying to survive amid big-time corruption and crime, and with the injustices and problems faced by Mexican immigrants in the US. The superstars of *norteño* are Los Tigres del Norte, now living in California, but who play to huge concerts on both sides of the border.

Banda is Mexican big-band music, with large brass sections. Popular since the 1970s in the hands of Sinaloa's Banda el Recodo, it exploded in popularity nationwide and, more recently, among Hispanics in the US.

An exciting talent is Oaxaca-born Lila Downs, who has an American father and a Mexican Mixtec mother. She has emerged as a passionate and original reinterpreter of traditional Mexican folk songs with a repertoire that also includes *rancheros*, boleros and jazz.

Música Tropical

Though its origins lie in the Caribbean and South America, several brands of *música tropical* or *música afroantillana* have become integral parts of the Mexican musical scene. Two types of dance music – *danzón*, originally from Cuba, and *cumbia*, from Colombia – both took deeper root in Mexico than in their original homelands. The music rests on thumping bass lines with an addition of brass, guitars, mandolins and sometimes marimbas (wooden xylophones). Some *banda* and *norteño* groups throw in a lot of *cumbia*. The leading Mexican exponents were probably Los Bukis (who split in 1995). Kumbia Kings, though based in Texas, are hugely popular in Mexico with their cumbia-rap-pop mix. Also listen out for lively Junior Klan from Tabasco.

Trova

This genre of troubadour-type folk songs has its roots in the 1960s and '70s. Typically performed by *cantautores* (singer-songwriters) with a solitary guitar, it remains popular. Nicho Hinojosa, Fernando Delgadillo and Alberto Escobar are leading artists.

Powerful and popular singers like Eugenia León, Tania Libertad and the satirical cabaret artist Astrid Hadad are sometimes categorized under *trova* but they actually range wildly over Mexican song forms – and are all well worth hearing.

LITERATURE

Mexican authors such as Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo and Octavio Paz produced some of the great Spanish-language writing of the 20th century.

Fuentes, a prolific novelist and commentator born in 1928, is one of Mexico's best-known authors internationally. One of his most highly regarded novels is his first, *La Región más Transparente* (Where the Air is Clear; 1958). It traces the lives of various Mexico City dwellers through Mexico's post-revolutionary decades in a critique of the revolution's failure. *Aura* (1962), which is also set in the city, is a short, magical book with a stunning ending. Set in 2020, *La Silla del Águila* (The Eagle's Throne; 2003) again deals with political corruption and cynicism.

Octavio Paz (1914–98), poet, essayist and winner of the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature, wrote perhaps the most probing examination of Mexico's myths and the Mexican character in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950). Paz' *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid*, published in 1972 in the aftermath of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, assesses the lingering influence of the savage Aztec worldview.

Contemporary writer Laura Esquivel shot to fame with her novel *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989), which was adapted to film in 1993 and became a huge international hit. This book about a frustrating romance is a delight, with each chapter prefaced by a traditional Mexican recipe.

CINEMA & TELEVISION

A clutch of fine, gritty movies by young directors thrust Mexican cinema into the limelight in the 1990s and early 2000s, garnering commercial success as well as critical acclaim after decades in the doldrums. Director Alejandro González Iñárritu caught the world's eye in 2000 with *Amores Perros* (Love's a Bitch), set in Mexico City. He followed this up in 2003 with *21 Grams*, a nonlinear narrative about a car accident, starring Sean Penn. In 2006 he won Best Director for *Babel*, another tale of interwoven plots, starring Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett. Unlike *21 Grams*, parts of this were filmed in Mexico (along with Japan, Morocco and the US).

At the time of research, *Y Tu Mamá También*, Alfonso Cuarón's 2002 tale of two teenagers from privileged Mexico City circles, remained the biggest-grossing Mexican film ever, netting US\$11 million in Mexico and US\$13.6 million in the US.

By 2008 Mexico was producing around 50 films a year, a considerable increase from previous years. Mexico City holds a couple of annual international film festivals (p180).

The Mexican TV market is dominated by Televisa, which operates four of the six nationwide broadcast channels: 2 (El Canal de las Estrellas), 4 (El Canal de la Ciudad), 5 (Canal 5) and 9 (Galavisión). Its rival, TV Azteca, has two main channels – Azteca Siete (7) and Azteca Trece (13). A high proportion of Mexican airtime is devoted to ads, low-budget *telenovelas* (soap operas), soccer, game shows, chat shows, variety shows, movies and comedy. Content tends towards the conservative in that nudity, graphic violence and offensive language are pretty much kept off the screen.

Better than the commercial channels are Once TV (Eleven TV), run by Mexico City's Instituto Politécnico Nacional, which broadcasts intelligent travel, documentary and interview programs and movies, and Canal 22, a culture channel from Conaculta, the National Culture & Arts Council.

Mexico City's cable network is Cablevisión. Sky Mexico is the country's only satellite TV service, available in an increasing number of top-end hotel rooms with the full package of Sky TV programming (in Spanish).

English-language newspaper the *News* and several other Mexican newspapers publish full TV schedules.

top picks

HIT MOVIES

- *Como Agua para Chocolate* (Like Water for Chocolate, 1992)
- *Amores Perros* (Love's A Bitch, 2000)
- *Y Tu Mamá También* (And Your Mother Too, 2002)
- *Frida* (2002)
- *Japón* (Japan, 2002)

ARCHITECTURE

Mexico City's architecture is wonderfully varied and the city hosts some stunning examples of several distinct styles, including pre-Hispanic, baroque, colonial and art deco. Don't forget to look up occasionally when you are walking around (always remembering to watch out for those ever-present pot holes!). The building skyline is intriguingly eclectic, particularly around the Centro Histórico with its concentration of historical buildings, including ecclesiastical architecture and palaces. Architecture and sculpture are often inextricably intertwined, with carving and molding integrated into building designs or used as features in architectural spaces. A number of buildings also feature iconic murals.

Unlike most capital cities, Mexico City is not bound up by inflexible building rules and regulations. While this lack of coordinated planning inevitably spawns some real eyesores, the largely unregulated environment encourages risk-taking, resulting in some of the world's most innovative architecture.

PRE-HISPANIC

The ancient civilizations produced some of the most spectacular architecture ever built. At sites near Mexico City such as Teotihuacán, Tula and Cacaxtla, you can still see fairly intact, large sections of pre-Hispanic cities. Their spectacular ceremonial centers, used by the religious and political elite, were designed to impress with their great stone pyramids, palaces and ball courts. Pyramids usually functioned as bases for the small shrines on their summits. Three of the biggest pyramids in the world – the Great Pyramid of Cholula near Puebla, and the Pirámide del Sol and Pirámide de la Luna at Teotihuacán – are within easy reach of Mexico City.

There were many differences in architectural style between pre-Hispanic civilizations. While Teotihuacán and Aztec buildings were relatively simple, intended to awe with their grand scale, Maya architecture paid more attention to aesthetics, with intricately patterned facades, delicate 'combs' (gridlike arrangements of stone with multiple gaps) on temple roofs, and sinuous carvings.

The Toltecs' fearsome, militaristic style of carving is exhibited at their presumed capital, Tula. Aztec sculpture reflects their society's worldview, with many carvings of skulls and complicated symbolic representations of gods. Earlier, the Olmecs of the Gulf Coast (about 1200 BC to 600 BC) had produced perhaps the most remarkable pre-Hispanic stone sculpture to be found. Most awesome are the huge 'Olmec heads,' which combine the features of human babies and jaguars.

Teotihuacán's typical *talud-tablero* building style, with alternating *talud* (sloping) and *tablero* (upright) sections, was copied by several later Mexican cultures.

What to See

Substantial remains of pre-Hispanic ceremonial centers can be seen at the Templo Mayor, off the Zócalo (p51) and elsewhere in the city at Tlatelolco (p115), Cuicuilco (p115), Tenayuca and Santa Cecilia Acatitlán (p54). But the most impressive sites in the region are outside the city at such places as Tula, Cacaxtla and, supremely, Teotihuacán. The city's Museo Nacional de Antropología (p80) has fine pre-Hispanic sculpture, plus models and full and partial replicas of buildings.

COLONIAL PERIOD

One of the Spaniards' first preoccupations was the replacement of pagan temples with Christian churches. Mexico City's cathedral (p50) stands on part of the site of the Aztecs' Teocalli, its main sacred precinct.

Many of the fine mansions, churches and plazas that today provide oases of beauty and tranquility in Mexico City's bustle were created during the 300 years of Spanish colonial rule. Most were designed using fundamental Spanish styles, but with unique local variations. Some distinctive features include the use of adobe, arches, inner courtyards, plain wall surfaces and tile roofs.

CENTRO HISTÓRICO RECOVERS LOST SPLENDOR

Spearheaded by Carlos Slim, the city's historic centre is undergoing a total revamp. This is not just a cursory brush and scrub up. In the pilot program, 615 buildings were completely renovated and then given the final essential face-lift: their facades painted in coordinating pastel colors which, with the addition of a few strings of washing, would fit happily in the Italian Riviera.

At a cost of some M\$800 million, these buildings are rapidly being transformed into affordable rental apartments, targeted towards young people involved in the arts: photographers, artists, models and publicists. It is hoped that these tenants will help create the kind of boho-chic that typifies fashionable Condesa.

An advisory board to the Historic Center Foundation comprises architects, historians, government representatives and members of the local community and the business world. Apparently, one of the main challenges has been to change people's view of the historic center as being a dangerous place to live. There's nothing like cheap rent to help sway opinion with the rents as low as M\$1500, and a stylish art deco apartment available for M\$3000 a month. Although there are only leases available to date, the possibility of selling the properties in the future is being analyzed.

In the meantime, there is still an awesome 9 sq km of urban dilemma to solve: trash collection, street vendors, chaotic traffic and buildings that sink at a rate of 8cm a year.

At least the funding is far from slim.

What to See

We owe to this period the lovely courtyards of such buildings as the Museo de la Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (p55), the Museo Nacional de las Culturas (p56), the Museo Franz Mayer (p65), the Palacio de Iturbide (p53) and the San Ángel Inn (p102).

RENAISSANCE

This style dominated in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Originating in Italy, it emphasized ancient Greek and Roman ideals of harmony and proportion; columns and geometric shapes like squares and circles predominated.

The usual renaissance style in Mexico was plateresque, a name derived from *platero* (silver-smith), because its decoration resembled the ornamentation that went into silverwork. Plateresque was commonly used on façades, particularly church doorways, which had round arches bordered by classical columns and stone sculpture. Puebla's Templo de San Francisco and the church of the Ex-Convento Dominicó de la Natividad in Tepoztlán are fine examples.

A later, more austere renaissance style was called Herrerresque after Spanish architect Juan de Herrera. The Mexico City and Puebla cathedrals mingle renaissance with the later baroque style.

The influence of the Muslims, who had ruled much of Spain until the 15th century, was also carried to Mexico. The 49 domes of the Capilla Real in Cholula almost resemble a mosque.

BAROQUE

Baroque style, which reached Mexico from Spain in the early 17th century, combined renaissance influences with other elements aimed at a dramatic effect – curves, color, contrasts of light and dark and increasingly elaborate decoration. Painting and sculpture were integrated with architecture, most notably in ornate, often enormous altarpieces.

Mexican baroque reached its final form, Churrigueresque, between 1730 and 1780. Named after a Barcelona carver and architect, José Benito de Churriguera, this was characterized by riotous surface ornamentation with a characteristic 'top-heavy' effect.

Mexican indigenous artisans added profuse sculpture in stone and colored stucco to many baroque buildings, while the Arabic influence continued with the popularity of *azulejos* (colored tiles) on building exteriors.

What to See

Mexico City's more restrained baroque buildings include the Plaza de Santo Domingo (p57) and the Palacio de Iturbide (p53) in the Centro Histórico, the Templo de Santiago at Tlatelolco (p115), and the Antigua Basílica de Guadalupe (p116). The Altar de los Reyes in the Catedral

Metropolitana (p51) is an extravagant piece of baroque carving. More exuberant works include the Capilla del Rosario in the Iglesia de Santo Domingo (p57); examples outside the city include the village church of Tonantzintla near Puebla, and the Templo de la Tercera Orden de San Francisco in Cuernavaca. Outstanding Churrigueresque stone carving appears on churches such as the Sagrario Metropolitano (p51) and Templo de la Santísima (p56).

The most stunning example of tiled buildings is the appropriately named Casa de Azulejos (p54) in the Centro Histórico.

NEOCLASSIC

This style was another return to Greek and Roman ideals. In Mexico it lasted from about 1780 to 1830. Spanish-born Manuel Tolsá (1757–1816) was the most prominent neoclassical architect and sculptor. This style of architecture is principally derived from the architecture of Classical Greece, typified by narrow windows, columned porches and crisp, low-relief friezes.

What to see

Don't miss Tolsá's dome and clock tower of the Catedral Metropolitana (p50), the Palacio de Minería (p55) and the equestrian statue *El Caballito* (p70) outside the Museo Nacional de Arte.

INDEPENDENT & MODERN MEXICO

The 19th and 20th centuries saw revivals of many earlier styles, and many buildings copied French or Italian modes.

After the revolution of 1910–20, art deco appeared in buildings such as the Lotería Nacional (p70) and Frontón México. In Condesa you can still see some real gems, particularly around Parque México (p86). From the '30s, architects attempted to return to pre-Hispanic roots in the search for a national identity. This trend was known as Toltecism and many public buildings feature murals and exhibit the heaviness of Aztec or Toltec monuments. It culminated in Mexico City's UNAM university campus of the early '50s, where colorful murals (p106) cover several buildings.

Modern architects have contributed a few eye-catching and adventurous buildings, as well as a large quota of dull concrete blocks. The icon is Luis Barragán (1902–88), who was strongly influenced by Le Corbusier but also exhibited a strong Mexican aesthetic in his use of vivid colors, textures, scale, space, light and vegetation, including small interior gardens. Two big names in contemporary Mexican architecture are Ricardo Legorreta (b 1931), who has designed a slew of large buildings in bold concrete shapes and 'colonial' orangey-brown hues, and Enrique Norton (b 1954), who works on a smaller scale with a lot of glass and steel. Also fast gaining a reputation is Mauricio Rocha (b 1963), who is also an accomplished artist. His transformation of the San Pablo Ozotepec Market in 2004 helped distinguish him as a pioneer in public-works construction. Rocha had an ultralow budget to redesign the 65-stall market in a run-down part of town, and created no-frills concrete-block stalls animated by the sounds and colors of Mexican life. This is not a very safe area; if you do decide to explore here, be cautious and keep your money well out of sight.

What to See

The marble Palacio de Bellas Artes (p63) is one of the finest buildings from the early 20th century. The beautiful Palacio de Correos (Central Post Office; p55) and the Museo Nacional de Arte (p55) were built in the style of Italian renaissance palaces. Luis Barragán's Mexico City home (p80) was made a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2004 and is open to the public as a tribute to his life and work. The Centro Nacional de las Artes (p97) is an example of Legorreta's more contemporary architecture, while Enrique Norton's portfolio includes the fashionable Hábita Hotel (p209).

top picks

NOTABLE BUILDINGS

- Torre Latinoamerica (p65)
- Casa de Azulejos (p54)
- Palacio de Minería (p55)
- Palacio de Bellas Artes (p63)
- Museo Nacional de Arte (p55)
- Sagrario Metropolitano (p51)

ENVIRONMENT & PLANNING

THE LAND

Mexico City is located roughly in the center of the country, about 400km from both the Pacific and Gulf of Mexico coasts. It occupies the southwestern portion of the Valle de México, a highland plateau ringed by mountains and valleys in the Cordillera Neovolcánica, the volcanic chain that runs across central Mexico from east to west. The valley is about 60km across from east to west and 30 to 40km from north to south. Flat as a griddle in the center, the city reaches right up to the surrounding hills to the north, west and south. In the east the hills are further away and the perimeter of the valley is marked by the extinct volcano Iztaccíhuatl and the very much alive Popocatepetl. Once regularly visible from the city, this pair – both of which are over 5000m high – now only can be seen on exceptionally clear days. Here and there the stumps of smaller extinct volcanoes, such as Cerro de la Estrella, rise within the city.

A combination of high altitude (2240m) and tropical latitude gives the city a pleasantly cool, often springlike climate.

Much of what is today the modern metropolis was covered by shallow lakes prior to the arrival of the Spanish conquerors, who unplugged the sealed basin to leave the marshy expanses upon which they built their capital. Only a few patches of water remain east of the city in addition to the canals of Xochimilco in the southeast.

GREEN MEXICO CITY

Environmental Damage

Mexico City is an ecological tragedy. What was once a beautiful highland valley with abundant water and forests now has some of the least breathable air on the planet and only scattered pockets of greenery. It faces the real prospect of serious water shortages in the not too distant future.

Environmental damage in the Valle de México is actually nothing new. As early as the 15th century, king Nezahualcōyotl of Texcoco, alarmed at the valley's dwindling forests, decreed tree cutting in some areas punishable by execution. During the colonial period and the 19th century, a few voices were raised against further clearing of forests on the hills around the valley. It was argued that the lack of trees was partly responsible for the floods that periodically inundated the valley. Draining the valley's lakes, however, was seen as the solution to the floods – work on this began in the 17th century and was largely completed by 1900. As a result the city suffered fierce dust storms in the 20th century. A project to recover Lago de Texcoco's waters east of the airport has somewhat alleviated the situation but airborne fecal matter from sewerless slums remains a concern in the dry winter months.

Air

The city's severe traffic and industrial pollution is intensified by the mountains that ring the Valle de México and prevent air from dispersing, and by the altitude and consequent lack of oxygen. Pollution is at its worst in the cooler months, especially from November to February, when an unpleasant phenomenon called thermal inversion is most likely to happen. Thermal inversion occurs when warmer air passing over the valley stops cooler, polluted air near ground level from rising and dispersing.

Air pollution is blamed for skin problems, nervous disorders, mental retardation, cancer and thousands of premature deaths a year among Mexico City's inhabitants. Industry accounts for some of the air pollution, but the major culprit is ozone. The main ozone producer is generally reckoned to be low-lead gasoline, introduced in 1986 to counter lead pollution, which until then was the city's worst atmospheric contaminant. The reaction between sunlight and combustion residues from low-lead gasoline produces a great deal of ozone.

In an attempt to reduce traffic pollution, many cars in the city are banned from the streets on one day each week in a program called 'Hoy No Circula' (Don't Drive Today). Furthermore, catalytic converters have been compulsory on all new cars sold in Mexico since the early 1990s. But ozone levels have remained high, since Hoy No Circula unwittingly encouraged people to

THAT SINKING FEELING

Strolling around the Centro Histórico, you can't help but notice a rather serious issue: Mexico City is sinking into the ground. The metropolitan cathedral, which appears to be tilting westward, is just the most obvious example. Notice how the facade of the Iglesia de Santa Veracruz, near the Alameda Central, slouches toward the north. That long low building on Calle San Jerónimo, east of Pino Suárez, looks like a train wreck in the making. Step inside the Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Loreto, four blocks east of the Zócalo, and you'll feel as if you've entered a topsy-turvy funhouse. The Palacio de Bellas Artes, an early-20th-century structure, has sunk so far on its right side that you have to go downstairs to pass through what used to be a street-level entrance.

All told, the historic center has dropped some 10m over the past 100 years. But the phenomenon is not exclusive to the center. The entire city has been sinking since colonial times, when the Spaniards got the bright idea of draining the lake that filled the highland basin. The spongy subsoil that remained was hardly the best place to put the capital of Nueva España, much less to erect extremely heavy churches and palaces, whose formidable weight was invariably more than the squishy lake bed could handle. And the problem has greatly intensified over the past 50 years, as an increasingly thirsty city continues to suck water from its underground aquifers before they're adequately replenished, thus removing a crucially buoyant counterbalance to the settling subsoil. The situation is especially worrisome in the heavily populated southeastern district of Iztapalapa, which queasily rests upon what used to be the deepest part of the lake. Because they've sunk well below ground level, houses there face major flooding every rainy season.

To make matters worse, some of the historic buildings in the center are sinking unevenly, causing structural cracks and in some cases total collapse. That's because their sites were previously occupied by older buildings, which compacted the earth beneath them. A good example is the Sagrario Metropolitano, next door to the cathedral, which was built upon the site of the Aztec Templo Mayor.

New technology has addressed the problem to some extent. An ambitious project to prevent the collapse of the cathedral entails the excavation of underground shafts to remove the subsoil at certain key points. Rather than stopping the sinking process entirely, the idea is to allow the higher parts to sink to the same level as the lower ones, thus ensuring the building's structural integrity. And newly built behemoths like the Torre Mayor are anchored by piles drilled deep beneath the subsoil to the underlying bedrock and stabilized by seismic dampers.

buy or rent extra cars to get around the once-a-week prohibition. Mexico City's current mayor, Marcelo Ebrard, has sought new approaches to car-induced pollution (see Urban Planning & Development, [below](#)).

Water

Extraction of groundwater makes the city sink steadily (see [above](#)). Even so, about one-third of the city's water needs to be pumped up at great cost from the Lerma and Cutzamala valleys west and southwest of the Valle de México. Meanwhile the water table is sinking by about 1m per year.

The city uses 300L of water a day per person, much more than some cities in Europe, for instance, even though millions of slum dwellers have no running water in their homes. Inefficient use of water by industry, with very little recycling, is partly to blame.

The Valle de México's streams are among the most polluted in the world. Most wastewater, treated or not, eventually leaves the valley northward by a 50km tunnel called the Emisor Central, which leads to the Río Tula, a tributary of the badly polluted Río Pánuco, which enters the Gulf of Mexico at Tampico. The Emisor Central is not big enough to cope with the extra water brought by the rainy season, when backed-up sewage floods some low-lying parts of the valley.

Sinking ground levels break underground pipes, wasting up to a quarter of the city's water supplies and allowing contaminants to enter the supply. Contaminated water supplies spread diseases such as dysentery, typhoid and hepatitis.

URBAN PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

It may be hard to resist the notion that applying green initiatives to Mexico City is nothing more than cosmetic – sort of like telling a terminal cancer patient to cut down his smoking habit...to half a pack a day.

But rather than leave the city for dead, Mayor Marcelo Ebrard is taking a serious look at how the situation can be improved. His Plan Verde, which he presented to *capitalinos* at a referendum

in mid-2007, aims to bring the capital in line with urban environmental trends elsewhere in the world. Most of the measures relate to the city's persistent traffic problems. Taxis will have to switch to alternative fuels or hybrid technology. Funds will be allotted toward mass transit, and more metrobus corridors will be installed with the aim of removing thousands of polluting (not to mention recklessly driven) minibuses from the road and replacing them with low-emission vehicles along dedicated lanes. The bike-riding mayor also wants to see 300km of bicycle lanes installed for two-wheeled commuters. Water is another major concern. The new vision entails the construction of hundreds of wells to capture rainwater as an alternative to sucking it out of the city's aquifers. Other measures aim to streamline the unwieldy trash-collection system and clear the air of unhealthy particulate matter.

Should all these goals be achieved within the 15-year period allotted for the plan, Mexico City's future may brighten considerably. But difficulties may arise due to the current administration's uneasy relationship with federal authorities, who may choose to withhold crucial financing.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Mexico is a federal republic of 31 *estados* (states) and one federal district, with the states further divided into 2394 *municipios* (municipalities).

One of Mexico City's problems is that its governmental system was designed for a place a fraction of its current size. No-one foresaw, back in 1854 when the Distrito Federal was given its present 1500-sq-km limits, that the city would burst these bounds. Yet as early as the 1930s the city started to spread into the neighboring state of México. Today 28 of the state of México's 120 *municipios* are wholly or partly within the city's sprawl. The DF and the state of México are run by completely different administrations – not exactly ideal conditions for planning the megalopolis that straddles their boundaries.

The state of México, with its capital at Toluca, west of Mexico City, is just like the other 30 Mexican states in electing its own governor and Cámara de Diputados (Chamber of Deputies). The DF, however, being the nation's capital, has long been treated as a special case. Back in 1917 it was decided that its governor should be appointed by Mexico's president instead of elected. In 1928, all elected local governmental bodies in the DF were abolished, and the district was placed under the direct control of the national president and his chosen *regente* (governor). The bureaucracy in charge of the city, the Departamento del Distrito Federal, became a department of the national executive government, answerable to the national president.

Things changed radically when President Zedillo opened the post of DF governor – henceforth known as *jefe de gobierno* (head of government) or *alcalde* (mayor) – to popular elections in 1997. The DF mayor has the right to choose the city's police chief and *procurador de justicia* (attorney general), posts that had previously been of the president's choosing. Nevertheless the federal congress still had to approve any debt issues by the DF and retained the exclusive right to impeach the DF head of government. Also since 1997, citizens of the DF have elected local delegates to a legislature, the Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal (ALDF), which meets in the old Cámara de Diputados building at Donceles and Allende in the Centro Histórico. Like the mayoralty, the ALDF has been dominated by members of the left-leaning PRD since its inception.

Administratively, the Distrito Federal is subdivided into 16 *delegaciones* (boroughs). Since 2000, the leaders of the *delegaciones* have been directly elected by their citizenry, making these administrative divisions roughly equivalent to the *municipios* of the 31 other Mexican states.

OPENING MOVES

When National Action Party (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox was elected president of Mexico in 2000, breaking the PRI's hold on the presidency after an uninterrupted 70 years in power, it seemed to herald a new era of openness in the country. To a great extent, that promise went unfulfilled – mainly due to Fox's ineffectiveness as a leader and his inability to enact reforms in an opposition-dominated Congress – but the country was unquestionably moving in a more democratic direction.

Three years prior to Fox's election, the Distrito Federal was permitted for the first time to elect its own head of government, after being ruled by regents appointed directly by the federal

government since 1928. The winner was Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the center-left PRD party, who later lost his presidential bid against Fox. Another PRD candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was elected mayor of Mexico City in 2000, a post he held until 2005, when he too made a run for the presidency.

Capitalinos overwhelmingly approved of López Obrador's performance as city leader. His initiatives included an ambitious makeover of the Centro Histórico (financed in part by Carlos Slim) and the construction of an overpass for the city's ring road. His efforts to collect the revenues traditionally lost to the city government (due to tax evasion and embezzlement by departmental offices) enabled the government to pay off city debts, build schools and hospitals, invest in overdue repairs of the city's water system and provide stipends for senior citizens and people with disabilities. Such spending sprees got the mayor labeled as a populist by his detractors but the majority of Chilangos felt that they were actually getting what was due them for a change.

When López Obrador ran for president of Mexico in July 2006, he continued to receive support from Mexico City, gaining 80% of the DF's votes. But it was not enough to win him the election. In a highly controversial race, PAN candidate Felipe Calderón emerged victorious by the slightest of margins (see the boxed text, below). Born in Morelia, Michoacán, and educated at Harvard University, Felipe Calderón is a longtime PAN stalwart and served in Vicente Fox's cabinet as energy secretary. Consistent with his party's traditional Catholic image, he is socially conservative – he opposes abortion, euthanasia and gay marriage – while economically he is more of a free-market advocate than was his predecessor.

Meanwhile, PRD candidate Marcelo Ebrard won a sweeping victory in Mexico City's mayoral elections of 2006, consolidating his party's grip on the city government. The PRD triumphed in all but one of the city's 16 delegations, Miguel Hidalgo, which includes the prosperous Polanco neighborhood. Also registering an overwhelming takeover of the Federal District's legislative assembly, the PRD seized the day, passing a flood of progressive initiatives. These included the

AN OPEN WOUND

Echoing the US presidential elections of 2000, Mexico had its own cliff-hanger race in July 2006, with similar accusations of an unfair outcome being hurled. But unlike Al Gore, who acknowledged the decision and (momentarily) left the picture, the loser of Mexico's election, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, refused to accept the result and waged a highly visible postelectoral campaign to discredit what he claimed had been a fraudulent victory.

For the first six years of the millennium, AMLO (as he is commonly called) distinguished himself as possibly Mexico City's most popular mayor in modern history, and when he left his post to run for president, he was widely predicted to win by a landslide.

As it turned out, his opponent, Felipe Calderón of the PAN, was declared the winner by a razor-thin margin: around half a percentage point. López Obrador cried foul, claiming widespread ballot-stuffing and behind-the-scenes maneuvering to wrest away what he was calling a substantial victory. Such practices were supposed to have been rendered obsolete since the establishment in the 1990s of a new supposedly impartial electoral watchdog agency, the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE). But the head of the IFE, Luis Carlos Ugalde, was widely seen as politically linked to the PAN candidate, and after Calderón's victory was announced, López Obrador demanded a recount. Ugalde refused, saying there was not sufficient evidence of wrongdoing to warrant a recount, whereupon as many as 100,000 of AMLO's supporters reacted by marching in protest to the Zócalo.

Calderón was sworn in regardless, despite attempts by PRD legislators to physically block the candidate from assuming the post at the Cámara de Diputados (Chamber of Deputies); they were restrained by soldiers. Refusing to back down, the PRD contingent camped out on Paseo de la Reforma to express their discontent, blocking traffic along that major artery for months, but to no avail. After they finally decamped, AMLO continued to claim he was the country's legitimately elected leader and established his own presidential headquarters in Colonia Roma. The candidate even delivered his own state-of-the-union address in parallel with Calderón's. Such dramatic tactics added fuel to his critics' accusations of AMLO's messianic streak, and even some of his most faithful supporters fear that his postelectoral campaign may have irreversibly damaged the candidate's political profile.

But many still doubt the legitimacy of the 2006 presidential election. As if to underline the sense that the outcome was still unresolved and remained an open wound, a documentary film about the process, *Fraude! México 2006*, shown in cinemas in late 2007, was a runaway hit in the capital.

sanctioning of gay unions and the legalization of abortion and euthanasia, all of which were vehemently protested by the conservative PAN, who is pushing for constitutional amendments to reverse the PRD initiatives.

A longtime figure in the DF administration, Marcelo Ebrard served as López Obrador's police chief until he was dismissed by President Fox for choosing not to protect two federal narcotics agents when an angry mob in an outlying area lynched the pair. The incident was a particularly horrendous example of the failure of the municipal and federal entities to cooperate within the city's boundaries. Ebrard's election was thus not a hopeful sign for the future of DF-federal relations. And indeed, he has routinely declined to attend summits with federal officials, ignoring President Calderón's overtures for reconciliation. He seems intent on showing that he's unwilling to accept the president's authority.

Ebrard's public-approval ratings have been strong, if not as overwhelming as AMLO's. Although Ebrard was a staunch supporter during his former boss's widely publicized protests over the allegedly fraudulent outcome of the presidential election, he very soon began to distance himself from AMLO's style of leadership. While López Obrador strove to restore Mexico City's greatness through highly visible public works projects such as the beautification of the Zócalo area, Ebrard has demonstrated an interest in bringing the city in line with current urban trends. The new mayor seems less interested in currying favor with the city's poorer sectors than in uprooting crime, as demonstrated by his decision to bulldoze blighted tenements in the drug-plagued Tepito and Buenos Aires districts. He also seeks to update some of the city's more regressive behaviors by adopting trends in urban design that he's picked up at the conferences in foreign cities he likes to attend. Thus, drivers who've accumulated too many violations can no longer automatically renew their licenses, surveillance cameras have been installed on free-ways, and campaigns have been waged to get drivers to wear seatbelts and to remove illegally parked cars. While AMLO's initiatives may have been more tangible, Ebrard's forward-looking efforts may have longer-lasting effects. He tends not to inspire the sort of fervor demonstrated by AMLO's followers and may have alienated himself from the indigenous population by marrying a white soap-opera star in a high-profile ceremony.

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