History

Mexico's story is always extraordinary and at times barely credible. How could a 2700-year-long tradition of ancient civilization, involving the Olmecs, the Maya and the Aztecs – all intellectually sophisticated and aesthetically gifted, yet at times astoundingly bloodthirsty – crumble in two short years at the hands of a few hundred adventurers from Spain? How could Mexico's 11-year War for Independence from Spain lead to three decades of dictatorship by Porfirio Díaz? How could the people's Revolution that ended that dictatorship yield 80 years of one-party rule? And how was it that, after so many years of turbulent upheavals, one-party rule just laid down and died in Mexico's first-ever peaceful regime change in 2000?

Travel in Mexico is a fascinating encounter with this unique story and the modern country that it has produced. From the awesome ancient cities to the gorgeous colonial palaces, through the superb museums and the deep-rooted traditions and beliefs of the Mexicans themselves, Mexico's ever-present past will never fail to enrich your journey.

Historian Alan Knight has written one of the most recent comprehensive histories of Mexico, in three volumes: *Mexico – From the Beginning to the Spanish Conquest; Mexico – The Colonial Era;* and *Mexico – The Nineteenth & Twentieth Centuries*.

THE ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

From nomadic hunter-gatherer beginnings, early Mexicans first developed agriculture, then villages, then cities with advanced civilizations, then great empires. The political map shifted constantly as one city or state sought domination over another, and a sequence of powerful states rose and fell through invasion, internal dissension or environmental disasters. But the diverse cultures of ancient Mexico had much in common, as religion, forms of social organization and economic basics were transmitted from lords to masters and from one generation to the next. Human sacrifice, to appease ferocious gods, was practiced by many societies; observation of the heavens was developed to predict the future and determine propitious times for important events like harvests; society was heavily stratified and dominated by priestly ruling classes; women were restricted to domestic and child-bearing roles; versions of a ritual ball game (p73) were played almost everywhere on specially built courts.

Most Mexicans today are, at least in part, descended from the country's original inhabitants, and varied aspects of modern Mexico – from spirituality and artistry to the country's continued domination by elites – owe a great deal to the pre-Hispanic heritage.

For concise but pretty complete accounts of the ancient cultures of Mexico and Guatemala, read *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* and *The Maya,* both by Michael D Coe.

TIMELINE

7000–3000 BC

Agriculture develops in the Tehuacán valley. First, chili seeds and squashes are planted; later, corn and beans are cultivated, enabling people to live semi-permanently in villages.

1200–900 BC

The first great Olmec center, San Lorenzo, flourishes. Objects found there from Guatemala and the Mexican highlands indicate that San Lorenzo was involved in trade over a large region.

800–400 BC

The second great Olmec center, at La Venta in Tabasco, flourishes before being violently destroyed. Jade, a favorite pre-Hispanic ornamental material, makes its appearance in a tomb here.

There are many ways of analyzing the pre-Hispanic eras, but one common (if oversimplified) framework divides into three main periods: Preclassic, before AD 250; Classic, AD 250–900; and Postclassic, AD 900–1521. The Classic period saw the flourishing of some of the most advanced cultures, including the Maya and the empire of Teotihuacán.

BEGINNINGS

Hundreds of museums around Mexico display marvelous artifacts from the country's ancient cultures. The best single place to get an overview of everything is Mexico City's Museo Nacional de Antropología. You can make a preliminary visit there at www.mna.inah.gob.mx.

It's accepted that, barring a few Vikings in the north and some possible direct transpacific contact with Southeast Asia, the pre-Hispanic inhabitants of the Americas arrived from Siberia. They came in several migrations during the last ice age, between perhaps 60,000 and 8000 BC, crossing land now submerged beneath the Bering Strait. The first Mexicans hunted big animal herds in the grasslands of the highland valleys. When temperatures rose at the end of the Ice Age, the valleys became drier, ceasing to support such animal life and forcing the people to derive more food from plants. In central Mexico's Tehuacán Valley (p240), archaeologists have traced the slow beginnings of agriculture between 7000 and 3000 BC, leading to a sufficiently dependable supply of food for people to be able to settle in fixed villages. Pottery appeared by 2000 BC.

THE OLMECS

Mexico's 'mother culture' was the mysterious Olmec civilization, which appeared near the Gulf coast in the humid lowlands of southern Veracruz and neighboring Tabasco. The name Olmec – 'People from the Region of Rubber' – was coined by archaeologists in the 1920s. The evidence of the masterly stone sculptures they left behind indicates that Olmec civilization was well organized and able to support talented artisans, but lived in thrall to fearsome deities. Its best-known artifacts are the awesome 'Olmec heads,' stone sculptures up to 3m high with grim, pug-nosed faces and wearing curious helmets.

Xalapa's Museo de Antropología and Villahermosa's Parque-Museo La Venta have top-class collections of Olmec heads and other Olmec artifacts.

Ten Olmec heads were found at the first great Olmec center, San Lorenzo (p709), and at least seven at the second great site, La Venta (p799). The Olmecs were obviously capable of a high degree of social organization, as the stone from which the heads and many other stone monuments were carved was probably dragged, rolled or rafted to San Lorenzo and La Venta from hills 60km to 100km away. They were also involved in trade over large regions. Olmec sites found in central and western Mexico, far from the Gulf coast, may well have been trading posts or garrisons to ensure the supply of jade, obsidian and other luxuries for the Olmec elite.

In the end, both San Lorenzo and La Venta were destroyed violently, but Olmec art, religion and society had a profound influence on later Mexican civilizations. Olmec gods, such as the feathered serpent and their fire and corn deities, persisted right through the pre-Hispanic era.

AD 0–150

A huge planned city is laid out in a grid arrangement at Teotihuacán in central Mexico, and the 70m-high Pirámide del Sol (Pyramid of the Sun) is constructed there.

250–600

Teotihuacán grows into a city of an estimated 125,000 people, the Pirámide de la Luna (Pyramid of the Moon) is built, and Teotihuacán comes to control the biggest of Mexico's pre-Hispanic empires.

250–900

The brilliant Classic Maya civilization flowers in southeast Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and parts of Honduras and El Salvador.

TEOTIHUACÁN

The first great civilization in central Mexico arose in a valley about 50km northeast of the middle of modern Mexico City. The grid plan of the magnificent city of Teotihuacán (p209) was laid out in the 1st century AD. It was a basis for the famous Pyramids of the Sun and Moon as well as avenues, palaces and temples that were added during the next 600 years. At its peak, the city had a population of about 125,000, and it was the center of probably the biggest pre-Hispanic Mexican empire. Developed after around AD 400, this domain extended all the way south to parts of modern Honduras and El Salvador. It was an empire seemingly geared toward tribute-gathering rather than full-scale occupation, and it helped to spread Teotihuacán's advanced civilization – including writing and books, a numbering system based on bar-and-dot numerals and a calendar system that included the 260-day 'sacred year' composed of 13 periods of 20 days – far from its original heartland.

Within Teotihuacán's cultural sphere was Cholula (p227), with a pyramid even bigger than the Pyramid of the Sun. Teotihuacán may also have had hegemony over the Zapotecs of Oaxaca, whose capital, Monte Albán (p737), grew into a magnificent city in its own right between AD 300 and 600.

Like all other ancient Mexican civilizations and empires, Teotihuacán's time in the sun had to end. Probably already weakened by the rise of rival powers in central Mexico, Teotihuacán was burned, plundered and abandoned in the 8th century. But its legacy for Mexico's later cultures was huge. Many of Teotihuacán's gods, such as the feathered serpent Quetzalcóatl (an all-important symbol of fertility and life, itself inherited from the Olmecs) and Tláloc (the rain and water deity) were still being worshipped by the Aztecs a millennium later. Aztec royalty made pilgrimages to the great pyramids and believed Teotihuacán was the place where the gods had sacrificed themselves to set the sun in motion and inaugurate the world that the Aztecs inhabited. Today, New Age devotees converge on Teotihuacán to imbibe mystical energies at the vernal equinox.

Teotihuacán – The City of the Gods (http://archaeology.la.asu.edu/TEO) is a welcome website on this grand city.

Teotihuacán's Pirámide del Sol (Pyramid of the Sun) is the third-biggest pyramid in the world. The biggest is Egypt's Pyramid of Cheops, and the second biggest is Mexico's little-known Pirámide Tepanapa, or the Great Pyramid of Cholula.

THE CLASSIC MAYA

The Classic Maya, in many experts' view the most brilliant civilization of pre-Hispanic America, flowered in three areas:

- North – Mexico's low-lying Yucatán Peninsula
- Central – the Petén forest of present-day northern Guatemala, and the adjacent lowlands in Chiapas and Tabasco in Mexico (to the west) and Belize (to the east)
- South – the highlands Guatemala and a small section of Honduras.

It was in the northern and central areas that the Maya blossomed most brilliantly, attaining heights of artistic and architectural expression, and of

600–900

El Tajín, the major center of the Classic Veracruz civilization, a group of small states with a shared culture near the Gulf coast, is at its peak.

695

The great Maya city of Tikal (in modern-day Guatemala) conquers Maya rival Calakmul (in Mexico), but is unable to exert unified control over Calakmul's former Maya subjects.

700–900

Maya civilization in the central Maya heartland – Chiapas, El Petén, Belize – collapses, probably because of prolonged severe droughts.

learning in fields like astronomy, mathematics and astrology, which were not to be surpassed by any other pre-Hispanic civilization.

The Classic Maya were divided among many independent city-states – often at war with each other – but in the first part of the Classic period most of these appear to have been grouped into two loose military alliances, centered on Tikal (Guatemala) and Calakmul (p955) in the south of the Yucatán Peninsula.

Chronicle of the Maya Kings & Queens (2000) by Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube tells in superbly illustrated detail the histories of 11 of the most important Maya city-states and their rulers.

Maya Cities

A typical Maya city functioned as the religious, political and market hub for surrounding farming hamlets. Its ceremonial center focused on plazas surrounded by tall temple pyramids (usually the tombs of deified rulers) and lower buildings – so-called palaces, with warrens of small rooms. Steles (tall standing stones) and altars were carved with dates, histories and elaborate human and divine figures. Stone causeways called *sacbeob,* probably for ceremonial use, led out from the plazas.

Within Mexico there were four main zones of Classic Maya concentration: one in lowland Chiapas and three on the Yucatán Peninsula.

Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World by Lynn V Foster is a readable introduction to all the important aspects of the Maya, incorporating recent discoveries.

The chief Chiapas sites are Yaxchilán (p845), Bonampak (p842), Toniná (p828) and Palenque (p833). For many people the most beautiful of all Maya sites, Palenque rose to prominence under the 7th-century ruler Pakal, whose treasure-loaded tomb deep inside the fine Templo de las Inscripciones was discovered in 1952.

In the southern Yucatán, the Río Bec and Chenes zones, noted for the lavish monster and serpent carvings on their buildings, are in wild areas where archaeological investigations are relatively unadvanced. The sites here, which include Calakmul, Becán (p956), Xpuhil (p957) and Río Bec itself (boxed text, p958), draw relatively few visitors.

The third concentration of Classic Maya culture on the Yucatán Peninsula was the Puuc zone, the most important city of which was Uxmal (p925), south of Mérida. Puuc ornamentation, which reached its peak on the Governor's Palace at Uxmal, featured intricate stone mosaics, often incorporating faces of the hook-nosed rain god, Chac. The amazing Codz Poop (Palace of Masks) at Kabah (p930) is covered with nearly 300 Chac faces. Chichén Itzá (p937), east of Mérida, is another Puuc site, though it owes more to the later Toltec era.

Joyce Kelly's *Archaeological Guide to Central & Southern Mexico* gives visitors practical and background information on 70 sites.

Calendar & Religion

The Maya developed a complex writing system – partly pictorial, partly phonetic – with 300 to 500 symbols. The deciphering of this system in the 1980s enabled huge advances in the understanding of this culture. The Maya also refined a calendar used by other pre-Hispanic peoples into a tool for the exact recording and forecasting of earthly and heavenly events. Every

900–1150

The Toltec empire, based at Tula, dominates central Mexico with a militaristic culture based on warrior orders dedicated to different animal gods: the coyote, jaguar and eagle knights.

c 1000

The city of Chichén Itzá, on the Yucatán Peninsula, is taken over by a Toltec-type culture and is developed into one of Mexico's most magnificent ancient cities, in a fusion of Toltec and Maya styles.

1325

The Aztecs settle at Tenochtitlán, on the site of present-day Mexico City. Within a century they become the most powerful tribe in the Valle de México, going on to rule an empire extending over nearly all of central Mexico.

major work of Maya architecture had a celestial plan. Temples were aligned so as to enhance observation of the sun, moon and certain stars or planets, especially Venus, helping the Maya predict eclipses of the sun and the movements of the moon and Venus. They measured time in various interlocking cycles, ranging from 13-day 'weeks' to the 1,872,000-day 'Great Cycle'. They believed the current world to be just one of a succession of worlds destined to end in cataclysm and be succeeded by another. This cyclical nature of things enabled the future to be predicted by looking at the past.

Religion permeated every facet of Maya life. The Maya believed in predestination and followed a complex astrology. To win the gods' favors they carried out elaborate rituals involving dances, feasts, sacrifices, consumption of the alcoholic drink *balche,* and bloodletting from ears, tongues or penises. The Classic Maya seem to have practiced human sacrifice on a small scale, the later Postclassic Maya on a larger scale. Beheading was probably the most common method. At Chichén Itzá, victims were thrown into a deep cenote (well) to bring rain.

The Maya inhabited a universe with a center and four directions, each with a color: east was red; north, white; west, black; south, yellow; the center, green. The heavens had 13 layers, and Xibalbá, the underworld to which the dead descended, had nine. The earth was the back of a giant reptile floating on a pond. (It's not *too* hard to imagine yourself as a flea on this creature's back as you look across a lowland Maya landscape!)

Important Maya gods included: Itzamná, the fire deity and creator; Chac, the rain god; Yum Kaax, the corn and vegetation god; and Ah Puch, the death god. The feathered serpent, known to the Maya as Kukulcán, was introduced from central Mexico in the Postclassic period. Also worshiped were dead ancestors, particularly rulers, who were believed to be descended from the gods.

Maya people – direct descendants of the ancient Maya – still inhabit the Yucatán Peninsula, Chiapas, Guatemala and Belize today. The more traditional of them, mostly in the highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala, still wear clothes with pre-Hispanic designs and practice animistic rites alongside Christianity.

The first Maya Great Cycle (period of 1,872,000 days) ends on December 23, 2012 (or December 25, depending whose calculation you trust). The ends of time cycles are highly significant – even cataclysmic – moments in Maya cosmology. Stay tuned around Christmas 2012.

Mesoweb (www.mesoweb.com), Maya Exploration Center (www.mayaexploration.org) and goMaya (www.gomaya.com) are all fabulous resources on the Maya, past and present.

THE TOLTECS

After the fall of Teotihuacán, control over central Mexico was disputed between a number of cities. One of the most important was Xochicalco (p258), a hilltop site near Cuernavaca, with Maya influences and impressive evidence of a feathered-serpent cult. But it was the Toltec empire, based at Tula (p207), 65km north of Mexico City, that came to exert most influence over the course of Mexican history. The name Toltec (Artificers) was coined by the Aztecs, who looked back to them with awe and considered them as royal ancestors.

Mundo Maya Online (www.mayadiscovery.com) features articles on Maya cosmology, navigation and agriculture, among other aspects of this incredible ancient civilization.

1487

Twenty thousand human captives are sacrificed for the dedication of Tenochtitlan's Great Temple.

1492

Christopher Columbus, searching for a new trade route from Spain to the Orient, comes across the Bahamas, Cuba and Hispaniola. In the following years further Spanish expeditions explore the Caribbean and found settlements there.

1517–18

The Spanish send expeditions from Cuba to explore the large land mass to the west. Expeditions led by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba and Juan de Grijalva are driven back from Mexico's Gulf Coast by hostile locals.

WHY DID THE MAYA COLLAPSE?

In the second half of the 8th century, trade between the Maya city-states started to shrink and conflict began to grow. By the early 10th century, the several million inhabitants of the flourishing central Maya heartland in Chiapas, El Petén and Belize had virtually disappeared, and the Classic era was at an end – a cataclysm known as the Classic Maya Collapse.

Expert and amateur Mayanists have expended much effort trying to explain this mysterious occurrence. Overpopulation and consequent ecological and political crises rank high among the theories. The Maya heartland underwent a big population explosion between AD 600 and 800. This seems to have led to greater competition and conflict for resources between the city-states. At the same time, deforestation followed by a sequence of erosion, higher temperatures and scarce water may have been disastrous for a people who depended on water stored in pools and reservoirs for their survival.

In 2003 scientists analyzing seabed sediments off Venezuela came up with new data that made the jigsaw a lot more complete. The sediments were composed of light and dark layers, each about 1mm thick, the dark layers containing titanium which was washed into the sea during rainy seasons. Unusually thin dark layers therefore indicated unusually dry rainy seasons. The investigators worked out that the weather in the region in the 9th and 10th centuries was unusually dry, and that there had been three or four particularly intense droughts, each lasting several years, during the period that saw the collapse of Classic Maya civilization. It was this exceptional dryness that probably drove the Maya out of their heartland.

The people of these areas did not just vanish in a puff of dust – many of them probably migrated to the northern Maya area (the Yucatán Peninsula) or the highlands of Chiapas, where their descendants live on today. The jungle grew back up around the ancient lowland cities, and only today is it being cut down again.

It's hard to disentangle myth from history in the Toltec story, but a widely accepted version is that the Toltecs were one of many semicivilized tribes from the north who moved into central Mexico after the fall of Teotihuacán. Tula became their capital, probably in the 10th century, and grew into a city of about 35,000. Tula's ceremonial center is dedicated to the feathered serpent god Quetzalcóatl, but annals relate that Quetzalcóatl was displaced by Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror), a newcomer god of warriors and sorcery who demanded a regular diet of the hearts of sacrificed warriors. A king identified with Quetzalcóatl, Topiltzin, fled to the Gulf coast and set sail eastward on a raft of snakes, promising one day to return – a legend that was to have extremely fateful consequences centuries later when the Spanish arrived.

Tula seems to have become the capital of a militaristic kingdom that dominated central Mexico. Mass human sacrifice may have started here. Toltec influence spread to the Gulf coast and as far north as Paquimé (p363), and is even suspected in temple mounds and artifacts found in Tennessee and Illinois. But it was in the Yucatán Peninsula that they left their most cel-

1519–20

A new Spanish expedition, under Hernán Cortés, gets a friendlier reception and makes its way to the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán. Initially well-received, the Spaniards are attacked and driven out on the 'Noche Triste' (Sad Night), June 30, 1520.

1521

The Spanish, with 100,000 native Mexican allies, take three months to finally capture Tenochtitlán, razing it building by building. They then rename it 'México' and rebuild it as capital of Nueva España (New Spain).

1524

Virtually all the Aztec empire, plus other Mexican regions such as Colima, the Huasteca and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, have been brought under Spanish control.

ebrated imprint. Maya scripts relate that around the end of the 10th century much of the northern Yucatán Peninsula was conquered by one Kukulcán, who bears many similarities to Tula's banished Quetzalcóatl. The Yucatán site of Chichén Itzá (p937) contains many Tula-like features, including gruesome Chac-Mools (reclining stone figures holding dishes for sacrificial human hearts). Tiers of grinning skulls engraved on a massive stone platform suggest sacrifice on a massive scale. And there's a resemblance that can hardly be coincidental between Tula's Pyramid B and Chichén Itzá's Temple of the Warriors. Many writers therefore believe that Toltec exiles invaded the Yucatán and created a new, even grander version of Tula at Chichén Itzá.

Tula itself was abandoned around the start of the 13th century, seemingly destroyed by one of the hordes of barbarian raiders from the north known as Chichimecs. But later Mexican peoples revered the Toltec era as a golden age.

The website of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies (www.famsi.org) contains numerous resources for broadening your understanding of early Mexican history.

THE AZTECS

The Aztecs' legends related that they were the chosen people of their tribal god, the hummingbird deity Huizilopochtli. Originally nomads from somewhere to the west or north, they were led by their priests to the Valle de México, where they settled on islands in the valley's lakes. By the 15th century the Aztecs (also known as the Mexica) had fought their way up to become the most powerful group in the valley, with their capital at Tenochtitlán (on the site of present-day downtown Mexico City). Legend tells that the site was chosen because there the Aztecs witnessed an eagle standing on a cactus and devouring a snake, a sign that they should stop wandering and build a city. The eagle-snake-cactus emblem sits in the middle of the Mexican flag.

The Aztecs formed the Triple Alliance with two other valley states, Texcoco and Tlacopan, to wage war against Tlaxcala and Huejotzingo, east of the valley. The prisoners they took formed the diet of sacrificed warriors that voracious Huizilopochtli demanded to keep the sun rising every day.

The Triple Alliance brought most of central Mexico – from the Gulf coast to the Pacific, though not Tlaxcala – under its control. This was an empire of 38 provinces and about five million people, ruled by fear and geared to exacting tribute of resources absent from the heartland. Jade, turquoise, cotton, paper, tobacco, rubber, cacao and precious feathers were needed for the glorification of the Aztec elite, and to support the many nonproductive servants of its war-oriented state.

For a wealth of information about the Aztecs and their modern descendants, and other indigenous Mexicans, see the US-based Azteca Web Page (www.mexica.net). The website includes a Náhuatl dictionary and lessons in the language.

Economy & Society

Tenochtitlán and the adjoining Aztec city of Tlatelolco (p161) grew to house more than 200,000 inhabitants. The Valle de México as a whole had more than a million people. They were supported by a variety of intensive farming

1534–92

The Spanish find huge lodes of silver at Pachuca, Zacatecas, Guanajuato and San Luis Potosí, north of Mexico City.

1540s

The Yucatán Peninsula is brought under Spanish control by three related conquistadors all named Francisco de Montejo. Nueva España's northern border runs roughly from modern Tampico to Guadalajara; beyond it dwell fierce semi-nomads.

1605

Mexico's indigenous population has declined from an estimated 25 million at the time of the Spanish conquest to little over a million, mainly because of new diseases.

methods that used only stone and wooden tools, and involved irrigation, terracing and swamp reclamation.

The basic unit of Aztec society was the *calpulli,* consisting of a few dozen to a few hundred extended families, who owned land communally. The king held absolute power but delegated important roles, such as priestly duties or tax collecting, to members of the *pilli* (nobility). Military leaders were usually *tecuhtli,* elite professional soldiers. Another special group was the *pochteca,* militarized merchants who helped extend the empire, brought goods to the capital and organized the large markets that were held daily in big towns. At the bottom of society were pawns (paupers who could sell themselves for a specified period), serfs and slaves.

Richard F Townsend's *The Aztecs* is the best introduction to this enigmatic empire.

Culture & Religion

Tenochtitlán–Tlatelolco had hundreds of temple complexes. The greatest of these, Templo Mayor (p143), set on and around modern Mexico City's Zócalo, was, to the Aztecs, the center of the universe. Its main temple was dedicated to Huizilopochtli and the rain god, Tláloc.

Much of Aztec culture was drawn from earlier Mexican civilizations. They had writings, bark-paper books and the Calendar Round (the dating system used by the Maya, Olmecs and Zapotecs). They observed the heavens for astrological purposes. Celibate priests performed cycles of great ceremonies, typically including sacrifices and masked dances or processions enacting myths.

The Aztecs believed they lived in the 'fifth world,' whose four predecessors had each been destroyed by the death of the sun and of humanity. Aztec human sacrifices were designed to keep the sun alive. Like the Maya, the Aztecs saw the world as having four directions, 13 heavens and nine hells. Those who died by drowning, leprosy, lightning, gout, dropsy or lung disease went to the paradisiacal gardens of Tláloc, the god who had killed them. Warriors who were sacrificed or died in battle, merchants killed while traveling far away, and women who died giving birth to their first child all went to heaven as companions of the sun. Everyone else traveled for four years under the northern deserts in the abode of the death god Mictlantecuhtli, before reaching the ninth hell, where they vanished altogether.

You can pay a virtual visit to the Aztecs' main temple at www.conaculta.gob.mx/templomayor

OTHER POSTCLASSIC CIVILIZATIONS

On the eve of the Spanish conquest, most Mexican civilizations shared deep similarities. Each was politically centralized and divided into classes, with many people occupied in specialist tasks, including professional priests. Agriculture was productive, despite the lack of draft animals, metal tools and the wheel. Corn tortillas, *pozol* (corn gruel) and beans were staple foods, and many other crops, such as squash, to-

1767

Jesuits are expelled from all Spanish dominions, fomenting discontent among the criollos in Mexico.

September, 1810

Priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla launches Mexico's War of Independence with his Grito de Dolores (Cry of Dolores), a call to rebellion in the town of Dolores. A mob massacres *peninsulares* in Guanajuato.

Oct–Nov, 1810

The rebels capture Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí and Morelia, and defeat loyalist forces at Las Cruces outside Mexico City, but do not attack the capital. They occupy Guadalajara, but are then pushed northward.

matoes, chilies, avocados, peanuts, papayas and pineapples, were grown in various regions. Luxuries for the elite included turkey, domesticated hairless dog, game and chocolate drinks. War between different cities and empires was widespread, and often connected with the need for prisoners to sacrifice to a variety of gods.

Apart from the Toltecs and Aztecs, several important regional cultures arose in the Postclassic period:

Yucatán Peninsula The city of Mayapán (p932) dominated most of the Yucatán after the Toltec phase at Chichén Itzá ended around 1200. Mayapán's hold dissolved from about 1440, and the Yucatán became a quarreling ground for numerous city-states, with a culture much decayed from Classic Maya glories.

Oaxaca After 1200 the Zapotec settlements, such as Mitla (p743) and Yagul (p742), were increasingly dominated by the Mixtecs, who were metalsmiths and potters from the uplands around the Oaxaca–Puebla border. Much of Oaxaca fell to the Aztecs in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Michoacán The Tarascos, skilled artisans and jewelers, ruled Michoacán with their capital at Tzintzuntzan (p574), about 200km west of Mexico City. They were one group which managed to avoid conquest by the Aztecs.

Mexico Online (www.mexonline.com) has good history links, among much other information.

THE SPANISH ARRIVE

Ancient Mexican civilization, nearly 3000 years old, was shattered in two short years by a tiny group of invaders who destroyed the Aztec empire, brought in a new religion and reduced the native people to second-class citizens and slaves. Rarely in world history has a thriving society undergone such a total transformation so fast. Why the Spanish embarked on this conquest, how they were able to subdue Mexico so easily, and why their arrival had such a devastating effect, are questions whose answers lie partly in the characters of the two societies involved, but also in some pure happenstance and luck. The characters of the leading protagonists – the ruthless, Machiavellian genius of the ambitious Spanish leader, Hernán Cortés, and the superstitious hesitancy of the Aztec emperor, Moctezuma II Xocoyotzin – were of supreme importance to the outcome.

So alien to each other were the newcomers and the indigenous Mexicans that each doubted whether the other was human (Pope Paul III declared indigenous Mexicans to be human in 1537). Yet from their traumatic encounter arose modern Mexico. Most Mexicans are *mestizo*, of mixed indigenous and European blood, and thus descendants of both cultures. But while Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor, is now an official Mexican hero, Cortés, the leader of the Spanish conquerors, is today considered a villain and his indigenous allies as traitors.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo gives a detailed first-hand account of the conquest of Mexico in *History of the Conquest of New Spain*, while *The Broken Spears: Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, edited by Miguel Leon-Portilla, is a rare piece of history from the losers' point of view.

1811

Rebel numbers shrink and their leaders, including Hidalgo, are captured and executed in Chihuahua. José María Morelos y Pavón, another priest and a former student of Hidalgo, assumes the rebel leadership.

1813

Morelos' forces blockade Mexico City for several months. He holds a congress at Chilpancingo that adopts principles for the independence movement, including universal male suffrage, popular sovereignty and the abolition of slavery.

1815

Morelos is captured and executed. His forces then split into several guerrilla bands, the most successful of which is led by Vicente Guerrero in the state of Oaxaca.

THE SPANISH BACKGROUND

In 1492, with the capture of the city of Granada, Spain's Christian armies finally completed the 700-year Reconquista (Reconquest), in which they had gradually recovered territories on the Spanish mainland from Islamic rule. Under its Catholic monarchs, Fernando and Isabel, Spain was an aggressively expanding state to which it came naturally to seek new avenues of commerce and conquest. With their odd mix of brutality, bravery, gold lust and piety, the Spanish *conquistadores* of the Americas were the natural successors to the crusading knights of the Reconquista.

Pay a virtual visit to Monterrey's excellent Museum of Mexican History at www.museohistoriamexicana.org.mx.

The notion that the world was round was already widespread in Europe, and Spain's Atlantic location placed it perfectly to lead the search for new westward trade routes to the spice-rich Orient. Its explorers, soldiers and colonists landed first in the Caribbean, establishing bases on the islands of Hispaniola and Cuba where they quickly put the local populations to work mining gold and raising crops and livestock. Realizing that they had not reached the East Indies, the Spanish began seeking a passage through the land mass to their west, and soon became distracted by tales of gold, silver and a rich empire there.

After the first Spanish expeditions sent west from Cuba had been driven back from Mexico's Gulf coast, Spain's governor on the island, Diego Velázquez, asked Hernán Cortés, a colonist there, 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, sensing a once-in-history opportunity, ignored him and set sail on February 15, 1519, with 11 ships, 550 men and 16 horses. This tension between Cortés' individual ambition and the authorities' efforts to bring him to heel persisted until his death in Spain in 1547.

THE CONQUEST

Neil Young's 1975 album *Zuma* featured a track called 'Cortez the Killer,' inspired by the Mexican exploits of the conquistador.

The Cortés expedition landed first at Cozumel island, then sailed around the coast to Tabasco, defeating inhospitable locals in the Battle of Centla in modern-day Frontera (p801), where the enemy fled in terror from Spanish horsemen, thinking horse and rider to be a single fearsome beast. Afterwards Cortés delivered the first of many lectures to Mexicans on the importance of Christianity and King Carlos I of Spain – a constant theme of the conquest – and the locals gave him 20 maidens, among them Doña Marina (La Malinche), who became his indispensable interpreter, aide and lover.

The Spaniards were greatly assisted by the hostility felt toward the Aztecs by other Mexican peoples. Resentful Aztec subject towns on the Gulf coast, such as Zempoala (p676), welcomed them. And as they moved inland toward Tenochtitlán, they made allies of the Aztecs' long-time enemies, the Tlaxcalans.

1821

Royalist general Agustín de Iturbide defects and, with Guerrero, establishes guarantees for an independent Mexico: religious dominance by the Catholic Church, a constitutional monarchy and equal rights for criollos and *peninsulares*.

1821–22

The Plan de Iguala wins over all influential sections of society, and the incoming Spanish viceroy agrees to Mexican independence. Iturbide, who has command of the army, takes the new Mexican throne as Emperor Agustín I.

1824

A new constitution establishes a federal Mexican republic of 19 states and four territories. Guadalupe Victoria, a former independence fighter, becomes its first president.

Aztec legends and superstitions and the indecisive character of Emperor Moctezuma also worked to the Spaniards' advantage. As soon as the Spanish ships arrived along the coast, news of 'towers floating on water,' bearing fair-skinned beings, was carried to Moctezuma. According to the Aztec calendar, 1519 would see the legendary Toltec god-king Quetzalcóatl return from the east. Was Cortés actually Quetzalcóatl? Moctezuma could only play a waiting game to find out. Omens proliferated: 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.

The Spaniards, with 6000 indigenous allies, were invited to enter Tenochtitlán, a city bigger than any in Spain, on November 8, 1519. Moctezuma was carried out to meet Cortés on a litter with a canopy of feathers and gold borne by some of his nobles, and the Spaniards were lodged, as befitted gods, in the palace of Moctezuma's father, Axayácatl.

At 17 years of age, Moctezuma's heir, Tecuichpo, bore Cortés' illegitimate daughter, Doña Leonor Cortés y Moctezuma.

Though entertained in luxury, the Spaniards were trapped. Unsure of Moctezuma's intentions, they took him hostage. Believing Cortés a god, Moctezuma told his people he went willingly, but tensions rose in the city, aggravated by the Spaniards' destruction of Aztec idols. Eventually, after some six or seven months and apparently fearing an attack, some of the Spaniards killed about 200 Aztec nobles in an intended pre-emptive strike. Cortés persuaded Moctezuma to try to pacify his people. According to one version of events, the emperor tried to address the crowds from the roof of Axayácatl's palace, but was killed by missiles; other versions say the Spaniards killed him.

The Spaniards fled, losing several hundred of their own and thousands of indigenous allies, on what's known as the Noche Triste (Sad Night). The survivors retreated to Tlaxcala, where they built boats in sections, then carried them across the mountains for a waterborne assault on Tenochtitlán. When the 900 Spaniards re-entered the Valle de México in May, 1521, they were accompanied by some 100,000 native allies. For the first time, the odds were in their favor. The defenders resisted fiercely, but after three months the city had been razed to the ground and the new emperor, Cuauhtémoc, was captured.

The most readable and useful tellings of the whole story include *The Course of Mexican History* by Michael C Meyer and William L Sherman, Lynn V Foster's *A Brief History of Mexico,* Kenneth Pearce's *Traveller's History of Mexico* and Brian R Hamnett's *A Concise History of Mexico.*

MEXICO AS A COLONY

Spain's policy toward conquered Mexico, as for all its conquests in the Americas, can be summed up in one word: exploitation. The Spanish crown saw the New World as a silver cow to be milked to finance its endless wars in Europe, a life of luxury for its nobility and a deluge of churches, palaces and monasteries that were erected around Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries. The crown was entitled to a fifth (the *quinto real,* or royal fifth) of all bullion

1836

US settlers in the Mexican territory of Texas, initially welcomed by the authorities, grow restless and declare Texas independent. President Santa Anna's army wipes out the defenders of the Alamo mission, but is routed on the San Jacinto River.

1838–42

Santa Anna's left leg is amputated at Veracruz during the 'Pastry War' with France. Four years later, he has it disinterred and paraded triumphantly through Mexico City.

1845–48

US Congress votes to annex Texas, sparking the Mexican–American War (1846–48), in which US troops capture Mexico City. Mexico cedes Texas, California, Utah, Colorado and most of New Mexico and Arizona to the US.

SOME WE LOVE, SOME WE LOVE TO HATE

Mexicans have strong opinions about some of their historical characters. Some are held up as shining examples for every Mexican to be proud of, with statues in every city and streets named for them all over the country. Others, just as influential, are considered objects of shame and ridicule.

Mexico's Top Six Heroes

- **Cuauhtémoc** – Aztec leader who resisted the Spanish invaders
- **Benito Juárez** – reforming, liberal, indigenous president who fought off French occupiers
- **Miguel Hidalgo** – the priest who launched the War for Independence
- **José María Morelos** – the priest who took up the sword of the independence movement after Hidalgo's death
- **Pancho Villa** – larger-than-life revolutionary
- **Emiliano Zapata** – Land and Liberty!

Mexico's Top Six Villains

- **Hernán Cortés** – the original evil Spanish conqueror
- **Carlos Salinas de Gortari** – president from 1988 to 1994, blamed for peso crisis, drugs trade, corruption, Nafta, you name it…
- **Santa Anna** – he won at the Alamo, but lost Texas, California, Arizona, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico
- **Porfirio Díaz** – 19th-century dictator
- **Nuño de Guzmán** – conquistador of legendary cruelty
- **La Malinche** – Doña Marina, Hernán Cortés' indigenous translator and lover

sent back from the New World. Individual conquistadors and colonists saw the American empire as a chance to get rich, and by the 18th century some of them had amassed huge fortunes in Mexico from mining, commerce or agriculture, and possessed enormous estates (haciendas).

The populations of the conquered peoples of Nueva España (New Spain), as the Spanish named their Mexican colony, declined disastrously, mainly from epidemics of new diseases introduced by the invaders. The indigenous peoples' only real allies were some of the monks who started arriving in 1523. The monks' missionary work helped extend Spanish control over Mexico – by 1560 they had converted millions of people and built more than 100 monasteries – but many of them were compassionate and brave men, who protected local people from the colonists' worst

1847–48

The Maya people of the Yucatán Peninsula rise up against their criollo overlords in the 'War of the Castes' and narrowly fail to drive them off the peninsula.

1858–61

Liberal government laws requiring the church to sell much of its property precipitate the War of the Reform: Mexico's liberals (with their 'capital' at Veracruz) defeat the conservatives (based in Mexico City).

1861–63

Benito Juárez becomes Mexico's first indigenous president, but Mexico suffers the French Intervention: France invades Mexico, taking Mexico City in 1863 despite a defeat at Puebla on May 5, 1862.

excesses. Indigenous slavery was abolished in the 1550s, but partly replaced by black slavery.

Cortés granted his soldiers *encomiendas,* which were rights to the labor or tribute of groups of indigenous people. Spain began to exert control by setting up Nueva España's first *audiencia,* a high court with government functions, in 1527. Later, authority was vested in viceroys, the Spanish crown's personal representatives in Mexico.

Northern Mexico remained beyond Spanish control until big finds of silver at Zacatecas, Guanajuato and elsewhere spurred Spanish attempts to subdue it. The northern borders were slowly extended by missionaries and a few settlers, and by the early 19th century Nueva España included (albeit loosely) most of the modern US states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Utah and Colorado.

Mexico Connect (www.mexicoconnect.com) has plenty of informative but not-too-heavy stuff on Mexican history.

As the decades passed, many Spaniards put down roots in Mexico, and those born and bred in the colony began to develop their own identity and a growing alienation from the mother country. When Mexico came to its next big turning point – the throwing off of the colonial yoke – it was these criollos, people born of Spanish parents in Nueva España, who engineered the separation.

A person's place in colonial Mexican society was determined by skin color, parentage and birthplace. At the top of the tree, however humble their origins in Spain, were Spanish-born colonists. Known as *peninsulares,* they were a minuscule part of the population, but were considered nobility in Nueva España.

Next on the ladder were the criollos, some of whom were enormously rich. Not surprisingly, criollos sought political power commensurate with their wealth and grew to resent Spanish authority over the colony.

Anna Lanyon's *The New World of Martín Cortés* tells the fascinating and poignant story of the first *mestizo,* the son of Hernán Cortés and La Malinche.

Below the criollos were the *mestizos* (people of mixed ancestry), and at the bottom of the pile were the indigenous people and African slaves. Though the poor were paid for their labor by the 18th century, they were paid very little. Many were *peones* (bonded laborers tied by debt to their employers) and indigenous people still had to pay tribute to the crown.

Social stratification follows similar patterns in Mexico today with, broadly speaking, the 'pure-blood' descendants of Spaniards at the top of the tree, the *mestizos* in the middle, and the indigenous people at the bottom.

Criollo discontent with Spanish rule really began to stir following the expulsion of the Jesuits (many of whom were criollos) from the Spanish empire in 1767. When the crown confiscated church assets in 1804, the church had to call in many debts, which hit criollos hard. The catalyst for rebellion came in 1808 when Napoleon Bonaparte occupied Spain, and direct Spanish control over Nueva España evaporated. Rivalry between *peninsulares* and criollos intensified.

1864–67

Napoleon III sends Maximilian of Hapsburg over as emperor in 1864, but starts to withdraw his troops in 1866. Maximilian is executed by Juárez's forces in 1867.

1876–1911

The Porfiriato: Mexico is ruled by conservative Porfirio Díaz, who brings stability and some economic progress but curbs civil liberties and democratic rights, and concentrates wealth in the hands of a small minority.

1910–11

Mexico rises in revolution against the Díaz regime on November 20, 1910. When revolutionaries under Pancho Villa take Ciudad Juárez in May, 1911, Díaz resigns. Reformist Francisco Madero is elected president in November, 1911.

THE YOUNG REPUBLIC

The city of Querétaro (p643), north of Mexico City, became a hotbed of intrigue among disaffected criollos plotting rebellion against Spanish rule. The rebellion was finally launched in 1810 by Padre Miguel Hidalgo (see boxed text, p629) in his parish of Dolores on September 16 – a date that is still celebrated as a Mexican national holiday. The path to independence was a hard one, involving almost 11 years of fighting between rebels and loyalist forces, and the deaths of Hidalgo and several other rebel leaders. But eventually rebel general Agustín de Iturbide sat down with incoming Spanish viceroy Juan O'Donojú in Córdoba (see Ex-Hotel Zevallos, p694) in 1821 and agreed the terms for Mexico's independence.

As a warning to other rebels, Miguel Hidalgo's head was put on public display for 10 years in Guanajuato. His skull is now inside Mexico City's Monumento a la Independencia.

The country's first nine decades as a free nation started with a period of chronic political instability and wound up with a period of stability so repressive that it triggered a social revolution. A consistent theme throughout was the opposition between liberals, who favored a measure of social reform, and conservatives, who didn't. Of the era's three major figures, one, Benito Juárez, was a liberal. The other two, Antonio López de Santa Anna and Porfirio Díaz, started out as liberals but ended up as conservatives – a fairly common transition for those who acquire power and one that Mexico's entire governing party, the PRI, underwent in the 20th century.

Between 1821 and the mid-1860s, the young Mexican nation was invaded by three different countries, lost large chunks of its territory to the US and underwent nearly 50 changes of head of state. No one did much to stir the economy, and corruption became entrenched. The dominant figures were almost all men of Spanish origin, and another consistent theme was the repeated intervention in politics by ambitious soldiers. The paragon of these military opportunists was Santa Anna, who first hit the limelight by deposing independent Mexico's first head of state, Emperor Agustín I, in 1823. He defeated a small Spanish invasion force at Tampico in 1829 and two years later overthrew the conservative president Anastasio Bustamante. Santa Anna himself was elected president in 1833, the first of his 11 terms in 22 years, during which the presidency changed hands 36 times.

Visit Morelia, the home town of independence fighter, José Morelos, to see a host of sites associated with him.

But Santa Anna is most remembered for helping to lose large chunks of Mexican territory to the US. After his 1836 defeat in Texas and his disastrous territorial losses in the Mexican–American War in 1848 (the US has had the upper hand in American–Mexican relations ever since), a Santa Anna government sold Mexico's last remaining areas of New Mexico and Arizona to the US for US$10 million in the Gadsden Purchase of 1853. This precipitated the Revolution of Ayutla that ousted him for good in 1855.

1913–14

Madero is deposed and executed by conservative rebel Victoriano Huerta. Northern revolutionary leaders unite against Huerta. His troops terrorize the countryside, but he is forced to resign in July 1914.

1917

Reformists emerge victorious over radicals in the revolutionary conflict and a new reformist constitution, still largely in force today, is enacted at Querétaro.

1920–24

President Álvaro Obregón turns to national reconstruction after the devastation of the Revolution. More than a thousand rural schools are built, and some land is redistributed from big landowners to peasants.

Amazingly, it was an indigenous Zapotec from Oaxaca who played the lead role in Mexican affairs for almost two tumultuous decades thereafter. Lawyer Benito Juárez was a key member of the new liberal government in 1855, which ushered in the era known as the Reform, in which it set about dismantling the conservative state that had developed in Mexico. Juárez became president in 1861. Come the French Intervention almost immediately afterwards, his government was forced into exile, eventually to regain control in 1866. Juárez immediately set an agenda of economic and educational reform. Schooling was made mandatory, a railway was built between Mexico City and Veracruz, and a rural police force, the *rurales,* was organized to secure the transportation of cargo through Mexico. Juárez is one of the few Mexican historical figures with a completely unsullied reputation, and his sage maxim, *'El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz'* (Respect for the rights of others is peace), is widely quoted.

Juárez was succeeded at Mexico's helm by Porfirio Díaz, who ruled as president for 31 of the 35 years from 1876 to 1911, a period known as the Porfiriato. Díaz brought Mexico into the industrial age, stringing telephone, telegraph and railway lines and launching public works projects throughout the country. He kept Mexico free of the civil wars that had plagued it for more than 60 years – but at a cost. Political opposition, free elections and a free press were banned. Peasants were cheated out of their land by new laws, workers suffered appalling conditions and the country was kept quiet by a ruthless army and the now-feared *rurales*. Land and wealth became concentrated in the hands of a small minority. All this led, in 1910, to the Mexican Revolution.

The Caste War of Yucatán, by Nelson Reed, is a page-turning account of the modern Maya's insurrection against the criollo elite and establishment of an independent state.

THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

The revolution was no clear-cut struggle between good and evil, left and right or any other pair of simple opposites. It was a 10-year period of shifting allegiances between forces and leaders of all political stripes. The conservatives were pushed aside fairly early on, but the reformers and revolutionaries who had lined up against them could never agree among themselves. Successive attempts to create stable governments were wrecked by new outbreaks of devastating fighting. The overall outcome was that one in eight Mexicans lost their lives and the country swapped the right-wing dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz for a radical government that later lost its revolutionary verve but kept a grip on power right through the 20th century.

Francisco Madero, a wealthy liberal from Coahuila, would probably have won the presidential election in 1910 if Porfirio Díaz hadn't jailed him. On his release, Madero called successfully for the nation to revolt,

The best movie of the Mexican Revolution is Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!* (1952), starring Marlon Brando. John Steinbeck's script is historically sound for the first phase of the revolution, up to the meeting between Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata in Mexico City. Beyond that point it flounders until Zapata is assassinated.

1924–36

President Plutarco Elías Calles closes monasteries and church schools and prohibits religious processions, precipitating the Cristero Rebellion (until 1929). Calles founds the Partido Nacional Revolucionario, a precursor to today's PRI, in 1929.

1934–40

President Lázaro Cárdenas redistributes almost 200,000 sq km of land, establishes the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (Confederation of Mexican Workers), and reorganizes the PNR as the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana.

1938

President Cárdenas boldly expropriates foreign oil-company operations in Mexico, forming Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex, the Mexican Petroleum Company). After the oil expropriation, foreign investors avoid Mexico, slowing the economy.

which spread quickly across the country. Díaz resigned in May, 1911, and Madero was elected president six months later. But Madero could not contain the diverse factions that were now fighting for power throughout the country. The basic divide was between liberal reformers like Madero and more radical leaders such as Emiliano Zapata (see boxed text, p249), who was fighting for the transfer of hacienda land to the peasants, with the cry *'¡Tierra y libertad!'* (Land and freedom!). Madero sent federal troops to disband Zapata's forces, and the Zapatista movement was born.

Get the *Economist*'s country profile on Mexico at www.economist.com/countries/Mexico.

When Madero's government was brought down in 1913, it was by one of his own top generals, Victoriano Huerta, who defected to conservative rebels. Madero was executed and Huerta became president – which succeeded only in (temporarily) uniting the revolutionary forces in opposition to him. Three main leaders in the north banded together under the Plan de Guadalupe: Venustiano Carranza, a Madero supporter, in Coahuila; Francisco 'Pancho' Villa (see boxed text, p376) in Chihuahua; and Álvaro Obregón in Sonora. Zapata also fought against Huerta.

But fighting then broke out again between the victorious factions, with Carranza and Obregón (the 'Constitutionalists,' with their capital at Veracruz) pitted against the radical Zapata and the populist Villa. The latter pair, despite a famous meeting in Mexico City in 1915, never formed a serious alliance, and it was Carranza who emerged the victor. The Zapatistas continued to demand reforms in the state of Morelos, south of Mexico City, but Carranza had Zapata assassinated in 1919. The following year Carranza himself was in turn assassinated on the orders of his former ally Obregón. Pancho Villa was killed in 1923.

In the 1920s, outstanding Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera were commissioned to decorate important public buildings with large, vivid murals on social and historical themes. Many of these can be seen in Mexico City.

The 10 years of violent fighting and upheaval had cost up to two million lives and shattered the economy.

MEXICO AS A ONE-PARTY DEMOCRACY

From 1920 to 2000, Mexico was ruled by the reformists who emerged victorious from the Revolution and their successors in the political party they set up, which since the 1940s has borne the self-contradictory name Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI as it's universally known. Starting out with some genuinely radical social policies, these governments became steadily more conservative, more corrupt, more repressive and more self-interested as the 20th century wore on. Mexico rode many economic ups and downs, and ended the century with a bigger middle class but still a great wealth disparity between the prosperous few and many poor. Rampant population growth became a critical problem in the mid-20th century but by the end of the century growth rates had slowed sharply.

1940s & '50s

The Mexican economy expands, helped by industry and exports growth during WWII, major infrastructure projects and the development of tourism. The population almost doubles in two decades, and millions migrate to urban areas.

1958–64

Popular President Adolfo López Mateos nationalizes foreign utility concessions, implements new social welfare and rural education programs, and redistributes 120,000 sq km of land to small farmers.

1964–70

President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz resists democratizing the PRI. Demonstrations against one-party rule reach a crescendo just before the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. An estimated 400 protestors are massacred at Tlatelolco, Mexico City.

One of Mexico's longest-standing and most bitterly resented inequities – land ownership – was addressed by the redistribution of more than 400,000 sq km from large estates to peasants and small farmers between the 1920s and '60s. This included most of the country's arable land, and nearly half the population received land, mainly in the form of *ejidos* (communal landholdings). However, by the end of the century, small-scale agriculture came under severe pressure from the effects of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta), which permitted cheaper imports from the US and Canada with which traditional Mexican growers found it hard to compete.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, Mexico developed a worrying dependence on its huge oil reserves in the Gulf of Mexico. The 1970s and '80s saw the country veer from oil-engendered boom to oil-engendered slump as world oil prices swung rapidly up then just as suddenly down. Today, Mexico has managed to significantly reduce its reliance on oil for both government tax revenue and exports by developing other industries.

A contingent of 250,000 Mexican and Mexican-American men fought in WWII. One thousand were killed in action, 1500 received purple hearts and 17 received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The huge government-owned oil company, Pemex, was just one face of a massive state-controlled economic behemoth that developed as the PRI sought control over all important facets of Mexican life. The PRI was born as an institution for bringing together the most important influence sectors in Mexican society and politics – labor, the military, farmers and political groupings. It became effectively a monolithic state party that, while governing in the name, and ostensibly the interests, of the people, inevitably bred corruption, inefficiency and violent intolerance of political opposition.

The PRI's antipathy to civil liberties first attracted opposition in the 1960s, especially in the 1968 student-led protests in Mexico City, which resulted in the Tlatelolco Massacre, where an estimated 400 protesters were shot dead (see boxed text p123). Though it has never been revealed who was really responsible, Tlatelolco discredited the PRI forever in the minds of many Mexicans. The party came to depend increasingly on strong-arm tactics and fraud to win elections, especially as rival parties, such as the business-oriented Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and the left-of-center Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD; Party of the Democratic Revolution), gained growing support in the following decades.

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, one of the major Mexican projects of the 1950s, has the world's largest mosaic mural. Created by Juan O'Gorman, the 4000-sq-meter mural on the library depicts scenes of Mexican history.

Mexicans' cynicism about their leaders reached a crescendo with the 1988–94 presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who won the presidential election only after a mysterious computer failure had halted vote-tallying at a crucial stage. During Salinas' term, drug trafficking grew into a huge business in Mexico (many believe he and other PRI high-ups were themselves deeply involved in it), and mysterious assassinations proliferated. Salinas did take steps to liberalize the monolithic state-dominated economy. The apex of his program, Nafta, undoubtedly helped to boost exports and industry, but it was unpopular with farmers and small businesses threatened by inexpensive imports from the US. Shortly before Salinas left office he

1970s

Mexico enjoys an economic boom thanks to a jump in world oil prices. On the strength of the country's vast oil reserves, international institutions begin lending Mexico billions of dollars.

1980s

Oil prices plunge and Mexico suffers its worst recession in decades. Amid economic helplessness and rampant corruption, dissent and protests increase, even inside the PRI.

1985

On September 19 a massive earthquake, with a magnitude of 8.1 on the Richter scale, strikes Mexico City. At least 10,000 people are killed.

MEXICO'S DEADLY DRUG GANGS

Mexico has long been a marijuana and heroin producer, but it was a 1980s US crackdown on drug shipments from Colombia through the Caribbean that gave a huge leg-up to Mexican drug gangs, as drugs being transported from South America to the US went through Mexico instead.

Three main Mexican cartels emerged, each controlling different sectors of the Mexico–US border: the Pacific (or Tijuana) cartel, the (Ciudad) Juárez cartel and the Matamoros-based Gulf cartel. In recent years a fourth mob, the Sinaloa cartel, has muscled in on the scene. These cartels buy up politicians, antidrug officials and whole police forces. Many Mexicans believe organized crime in the early 1990s was actually controlled by the PRI.

By 1997 most illegal drugs entering the US were going through Mexico. In 2007, more than 90% of cocaine reaching the US went through Mexico, and Mexican labs were stepping up methamphetamine production to make up for a crackdown in the US.

Presidents Zedillo (1994–2000), Fox (2000–06) and Calderón (since 2006) all brought the armed forces into the fight against the drug mobs. Calderón deployed 25,000 federal troops to cities and states where the drug gangs are most powerful. But despite some high-profile arrests, business goes on for the gangs, as does their killing of police, soldiers, judges and journalists – and of each other in their vicious turf wars. An estimated 1500 people died in drug gang–related violence in 2005, 2100 people in 2006, and 2500 in 2007. Border cities such as Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo have usually seen the worst of this, but since 2006 places such as Monterrey, Michoacán and Acapulco have suffered shootouts and killings. The mobs are just too powerful and dangerous to be easily defeated.

A decline in tourism to Mexico's northern border areas in 2007 was blamed on fear of drug violence. In reality travelers need not be unduly concerned, as they are not targets of this violence and it normally takes place well away from touristed areas.

spent nearly all of Mexico's foreign-exchange reserves in a futile attempt to support the peso, engendering a slump that he left his successor, Ernesto Zedillo, to deal with.

It was also left to Zedillo to respond to the now almost irresistible clamor for democratic change in Mexico. He established a new, independently supervised electoral system that saw growing numbers of non-PRI mayors and state governors elected during his term, and opened the way for the country's first-ever peaceful change of regime at the end of his term in 2000.

A major problem for Mexico in the middle of the 20th century was that of population growth. Mexico's population grew from 20 million in 1940 to 35 million in 1960 and to 67 million in 1980 – more than trebling in 40 years. Many people migrated from the villages to urban areas in search of work, often living in desperate conditions in shanty towns around the edges of cities. Mexico City's population multiplied 10-fold between the 1940s and 1980s. However, publicity campaigns, education

1988–94

The PRI's Carlos Salinas de Gortari narrowly defeats left-of-center Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in a disputed presidential election, and reforms Mexico's state-dominated economy into one of private enterprise and free trade.

1994

Nafta takes effect. The left-wing Zapatista uprising in Chiapas state begins. Luis Donaldo Colosio, Salinas' chosen successor as PRI presidential candidate, is assassinated. Days after Salinas leaves office, Mexico's currency, the peso, collapses.

1994–2000

Under President Ernesto Zedillo, Mexico slowly emerges from a deep recession triggered by the peso collapse. Crime and emigration to the US increase. Zedillo sets up a more independent and transparent electoral system.

and family planning clinics all helped to slow things down. In 1970, the average Mexican woman gave birth seven times in her lifetime. Today the figure is just 2.4 – and the overall population growth rate has sunk from 3.4% a year to 1.15%. A major safety valve is emigration to the US, something very large numbers of Mexicans, especially men from rural areas, do for at least part of their lives. By some estimates, 15 million Mexicans are now (legally or illegally) in the US, where average wages are six times higher than in Mexico.

MEXICO UNDER THE PAN

The independently run electoral system installed by President Zedillo in the 1990s duly unseated his own party, the PRI, when Vicente Fox of the right-of-center PAN, a son of Basque and German-American immigrants and former chief of Coca-Cola's operations in Mexico, won the 2000 presidential election.

Fox's election itself, after 80 years of one-party rule, was really the biggest news about his six-year term. A charismatic, 6ft 5in (nearly 2m) rancher, he entered office with the goodwill of a wide range of Mexicans, who hoped a change of ruling party would bring real change in the country. In the end, his presidency was considered a disappointment by most. He had no magic solutions to the same economic and social problems that previous governments had struggled with. Without the full support of Mexico's Congress, where the PAN did not enjoy a majority, Fox was unable to push through the reforms that he believed were key to stirring Mexico's slumbering economy. His government consequently lacked money to improve education, social welfare or roads. At least government had become more transparent, honest and accountable, and Mexicans less cynical about their political system.

You'll certainly get a feel for the scary brutality and corruption of the cross-border narco world from Steven Soderbergh's 2000 movie *Traffic*.

Fox was succeeded in late 2006 by another PAN president, the less charismatic but potentially more effective Vicente Calderón. Again, it was the manner of his election that signified most. His victory over the PRD candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was by the narrowest of margins. López Obrador, who had led all the way in the opinion polls, cried 'fraud' and his supporters staged several weeks of large protests in Mexico City. But the protestors could find no convincing evidence of foul play by the PAN. The fact that the electoral apparatus had come unscathed through a second election and survived a severe cross-examination was at least as significant for Mexico's future as the name or party of the winning candidate. It had taken a decade of independence war for Mexico to throw off Spanish rule, and a decade of revolution to throw off the post-colonial elite that entrenched itself after independence. The elite party that entrenched itself after the Revolution had, in the end, given way with barely a shot fired.

See the Mexican presidency's angle on things at www.presidencia.gob.mx.

2000

The PRI finally loses power as Vicente Fox of the right-of-center PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) wins the presidential election – the first ever peaceful change of regime in Mexican history.

2000–06

The Fox presidency sees reasonable economic progress but fails to enact reforms to really spark growth, rein in the violent drug mobs, or to reach an accord with the Zapatistas. Society becomes more open and a little less corrupt.

2006

The PAN's Felipe Calderón narrowly defeats Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-of-center PRD in the presidential election. López Obrador supporters stage massive protests alleging electoral fraud.

The Culture

LIFE, DEATH & THE FAMILY

The last thing you can do with Mexicans is encapsulate them in simple formulae. They adore fun, music and a fiesta, yet in many ways are deeply serious. They work hard but relax and enjoy life to the full in their time off. They're hospitable and warm to guests, yet are most truly themselves only within their family group. They will laugh at death, but have a profound vein of spirituality. You may read about anti-gringo sentiment in the media, but Mexicans will treat you, as a visitor to their country, with refreshing warmth and courtesy.

Nobel Prize–winning Mexican writer Octavio Paz argues in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* that Mexicans' love of noise, music and crowds is just a temporary escape from personal isolation and gloom. Make your own judgment!

Mexico is the home of machismo, that exaggeration of masculinity whose manifestations range from a certain way of trimming a moustache to aggressive driving, heavy drinking or the carrying of weapons. The other side of the machismo coin is the exaggeratedly feminine female. But gender equalization has come a long way: today you'll find most Mexicans, especially among the increasingly educated and worldly younger generations, ready to relate simply as one person to another.

Mexico's 'patron saint' – not actually a saint but a manifestation of the Virgin Mary – is the dark-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe, who made her appearance before an Aztec potter in 1531 on a hill near Mexico City. Universally revered, she's both the archetypal mother and the pre-eminent focus of Mexicans' inborn spirituality, which has its roots both in Spanish Catholicism and in the complex belief systems of Mexico's pre-Hispanic civilizations. Elements of ancient religions survive alongside Catholicism among the country's many indigenous peoples, and most Mexicans still inhabit a world in which omens, portents, coincidences and curious resemblances take on great importance. The ancient belief in the cyclical, repetitive nature of time persists too, somewhere in most Mexicans' subconscious.

A UN development program study in 2004 reported that while the wealthiest zones of Mexico City and Monterrey could be compared to rich European cities, other parts of the capital and rural areas in the south of Mexico were more like parts of Africa.

On a more mundane level, you'll find most Mexicans are chiefly concerned with earning a crust for themselves and their strongly knit families – and also with enjoying the leisurely side of life, whether partying at clubs, bars or fiestas, or relaxing over a long, extended-family Sunday lunch at a country or beachside restaurant.

On a political level, the country has become fairer and more pluralistic, but most Mexicans still have little faith that it will ever be governed well. They mock their country's failings, but at the same time are a proud people: proud of their families, their villages and towns, proud of Mexico. So close to the US, where millions of them spend years of their lives, many Mexicans take on board a certain amount of US culture and consciousness, but they also strongly value the positives they see in Mexican life – a more human pace, a strong sense of community and family, their own very distinctive cuisine, their unique *mestizo* (mixed indigenous and Spanish) heritage and their thriving, multifaceted national culture.

Mexico City's Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) was one of only three Latin American universities included in Britain's *Times Higher Education* 2007 list of Top 200 World Universities. UNAM was placed 192nd, lower than two Brazilian universities.

LIFESTYLE

Around three-quarters of Mexicans now live in cities and towns, and the proportion grows as rural folk are sucked into cities in search of work. Most urban dwellers inhabit crowded, multigenerational family homes on tightly packed streets in crowded neighborhoods, with few parks or open spaces. Fly into Mexico City and you'll get a bird's-eye view of just how little space is not occupied by housing or roads. Around the edges of the city, new streets climb the steep slopes of extinct volcanoes, while the poorest arrivals inhabit

MANNERS FOR MEXICO

Locals in much of Mexico are accustomed to foreign visitors and tolerant of their strange ways. But dressing conservatively is still recommended in small towns, churches and in places off the beaten track.

Mexicans love to hear that you're enjoying their country, and will appreciate it if you start any conversation with a few words of Spanish. As a rule, Mexicans are slow to criticize or argue, expressing disagreement more by nuance than by blunt contradiction. An invitation to a Mexican home is an honor for an outsider; as a guest you will be treated hospitably and will enter a part of the real Mexico to which few outsiders are admitted. Take a small gift if you can.

Some indigenous people adopt a somewhat cold attitude toward visitors: they have come to mistrust outsiders after five centuries of rough treatment. They don't like being gawked at by tourists and can be very sensitive about cameras. If in any doubt about whether it's OK to take a photo, ask first.

shacks on the city's fringes made from a few concrete blocks, wooden boards or sheets of tin. Many of these people barely scrape a living as street hawkers, buskers or home workers in the 'informal economy,' rarely earning more than M$50 a day.

More affluent city neighborhoods often have blocks of relatively spacious apartments. In the wealthiest quarters, imposing detached houses with well-tended gardens and satellite dishes sit behind high walls with strong security gates. Domestic staff can be seen walking dogs or babies.

Some 35 million adult Mexicans have not completed the basic nine years of primary and secondary schooling.

Out in the villages and small towns, people work the land and often live in yards with a few separate small buildings for members of an extended family – buildings of adobe, wood or concrete, often with earth floors, and with roofs sometimes of tile but more commonly of cheaper tin. Inside these homes are few possessions – beds, a cooking area, a table with a few chairs and a few aging photos of departed relatives. Villages may or may not be reached by paved roads, but are nearly always accessible by decrepit buses, pickups or some other public transport, as few of their inhabitants own cars.

While rich kids go clubbing in flashy cars and attend private universities (or go to school in the US), poor villagers may dance only at local fiestas and often leave school before they reach 15. Millions of kids from poorer families are likely to complete the basic nine-year education only because of government cash handouts that are conditional upon school attendance. Mexican state schooling remains old-fashioned, emphasizing rote learning more than creativity and original thought. In comparisons of educational levels, Mexico does poorly against other major Latin American countries.

When sick, many Mexicans prefer to visit a traditional *curandero* – a kind of cross between a naturopath and a witch doctor – rather than resort to a modern *médico*.

Mexicans' family and hometown ties remain strong. Even if they are not actually living together, large family groups take holidays or spend Sunday lunches together, while Mexicans in the US send money back to their families or to fund schools or clinics in their hometowns.

Mexico is more broad-minded about sexuality than you might expect. Gays and lesbians rarely attract open discrimination or violence, and there are large, growing and confident gay communities in Mexico City (which recently legalized gay unions), Guadalajara, Monterrey and Puerto Vallarta.

Tradition remains powerful. Holidays for saints' days, patriotic anniversaries and festivals such as Semana Santa (Holy Week), Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead, November 2), the Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe (Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, December 12) and Christmas are essential to the rhythm of Mexican life, ensuring that people get a break from work every few weeks and bringing them together for the same processions and rituals year after year.

GIVING SOMETHING BACK

Travelers who find themselves visiting some of the more impoverished places in Mexico often wish they could do something to help. Spending money there is, of course, one way to contribute. Stop for something to eat or drink; see what the shops and markets are selling; stay the night if there is suitable accommodation. Buying crafts and commodities direct from villages or from the artisans themselves ensures that your cash goes to those who deserve it most. In some areas there are local community organizations working in tourism – ecotourism initiatives, crafts cooperatives, guide associations and the like. Using their services, you'll be helping to develop a potentially long-term source of income that could save local people from having to migrate to cities for work.

If you would really like to get involved, you can do some volunteer work – see p980 for some pointers.

ECONOMY

Since the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) came into force in 1994, trade with the US has replaced oil as the most important element in Mexico's economy. Nafta has steadily eliminated restrictions on commerce and investment between the US, Mexico and Canada, with the result that Mexican trade with the US has more than doubled. The US now receives 85% of Mexican exports and supplies more than half of Mexican imports.

Nafta is unpopular in rural areas and among Mexico's poor in general, especially in the southern half of the country, for its effect on Mexican small-scale agriculture, which struggles to compete with subsidized imports from the US and Canada. There is now no tariff on imports of corn (maize) to Mexico from the US, where corn growers are heavily subsidized by the government.

Since 1994 economic growth in most of northern Mexico has been running at more than 4% a year; in most of the center and south of Mexico it has been under 2%.

The 20th century saw Mexico transform from a backward agricultural economy to one of Latin America's most industrialized nations. Motor vehicles, processed food, steel, chemicals, paper and textiles joined more traditional industries such as sugar, coffee and mining. Most of Mexico's exports today are manufactured goods, and over half of these come from the *maquiladoras* (factories, usually foreign-owned) that import materials and parts for processing or assembly by inexpensive Mexican labor, then export the products, usually to the US.

Since most *maquiladoras,* and most industry in general, are concentrated in the north of the country and Mexico City, Nafta had the effect of widening the wealth gap between Mexico's north and its mainly agricultural and underdeveloped south. Draw a line across the middle of Mexico from about Tampico to Colima and you divide very neatly – with the exceptions of the Yucatán Peninsula and Mexico City – those states whose production is near or above the national average from those that are well below it.

Service industries contribute about 70% of Mexico's Gross Domestic Product and employ about 30% of the workforce. Tourism is one of the most important service industries. Some 20 million foreign visitors a year – more than half of them cross-border day-trippers – bring in more than US$12 billion of foreign exchange, and the domestic tourism business is three times as big. Agriculture employs nearly a quarter of Mexico's workers but produces only 4% of the national product.

Under the 2000–06 presidency of Vicente Fox, Mexico had achieved a degree of economic stability rare in its turbulent past, which had suffered periodic debt crises and bursts of rapid inflation. By 2006 job creation was almost keeping pace with the growth in the workforce engendered by the rising population. Fox's successor, Felipe Calderón, also from the business-

friendly National Action Party (PAN) nevertheless faced numerous stiff challenges if he was to keep the momentum going and really unlock Mexico's economic potential.

The country's nationalized oil industry, provider of 40% of federal government revenue, faced falling production and falling reserves, having failed to invest enough in new exploration and refineries.

Mexico is still the world's sixth biggest oil producer, but now imports 40% of its gasoline from the USA.

Around half of Mexicans still work in the 'informal economy' (street vendors, home workers, traffic signal fire-eaters, criminals – anybody whose work is not officially registered). Few of these people scrape together much more than M$50 a day. They don't pay taxes and they don't contribute to the country's social security system, which provides health care and pensions. The Mexican government's non–oil tax revenue is equivalent to only 11% of GDP, well below levels in the developed world and even below the average for Latin America.

Early tax and pensions reforms by the Calderón government were aimed at boosting the government's income in order to reduce oil dependency and strengthen social security programs. Greater spending on infrastructure projects and more competition are two of Calderón's main priorities. As well as oil, the telecommunications, electricity, cement and beer industries are all dominated by a very small number of companies, state-owned or private, with prices for these products generally higher than they could be. Mexico also faces serious competition from the rapidly growing economies of India and especially China, with much lower wage levels than Mexico's, meaning that their products are often cheaper and that they can more easily attract foreign investment.

Anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla argues in *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization* that Mexico's urban and rural poor, *mestizo* and indigenous, constitute a uniquely Mesoamerican civilization quite distinct from Mexico's European- and American-influenced middle class.

POPULATION

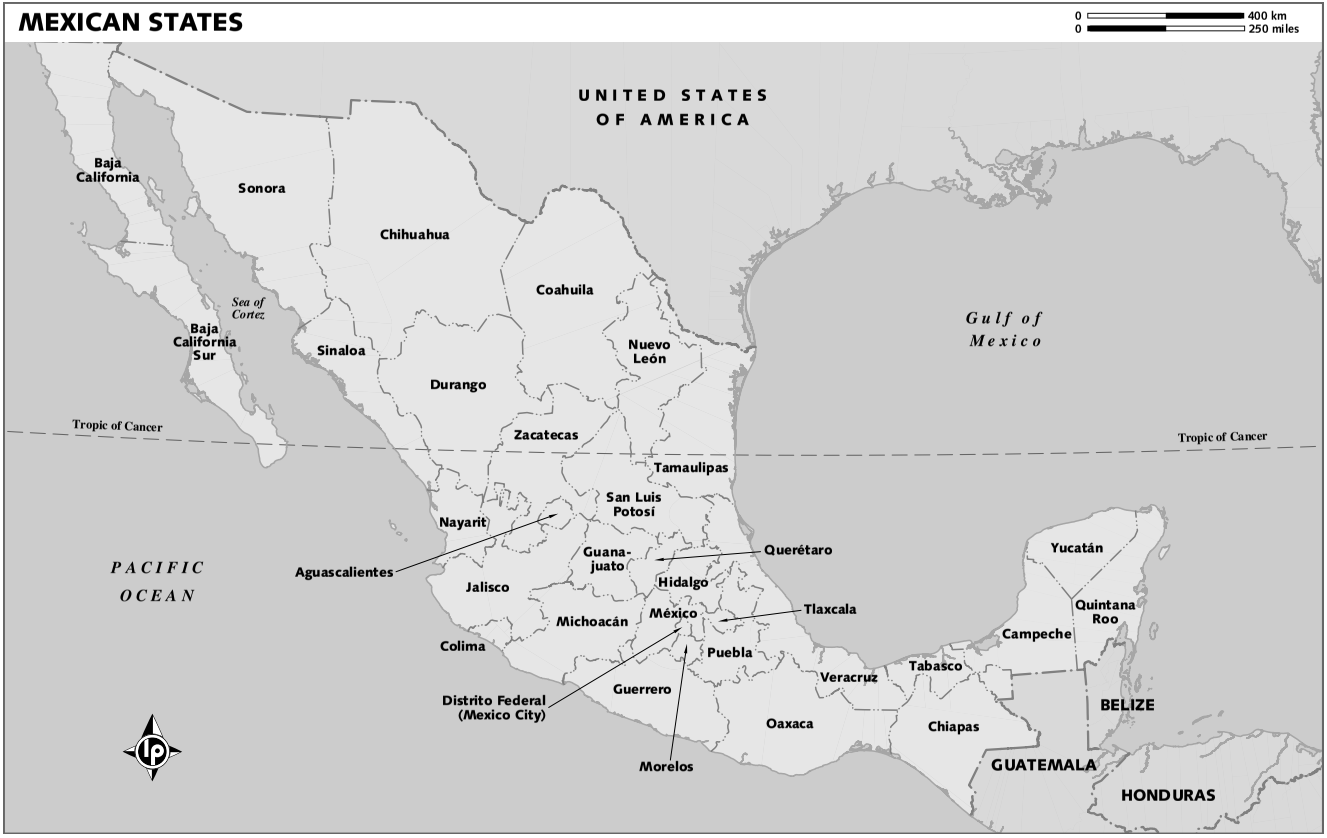
In 2008 Mexico's population was estimated at 107 million. About 75% of these people live in towns or cities, and a third are aged under 15. The biggest cities are Mexico City (with around 23 million people), Guadalajara (with a conurbation estimated at four million) and Monterrey (conurbation estimated at 3.6 million). Tijuana, Puebla, Ciudad Juárez, León and the Torreón, and San Luis Potosí conurbations all have populations above one million. The most populous state is the state of México, which includes the rapidly growing outer areas of Mexico City, though not the Distrito Federal (the city core), and has more than 15 million people.

MULTICULTURALISM

Mexicans are a far from uniform people, and their ethnic diversity is one of the most fascinating aspects of traveling around the country. The major distinction is between *mestizos* and *indígenas*. *Mestizos* are people of mixed ancestry – usually a compound of Spanish and indigenous, although African slaves and other Europeans are significant elements. *Indígenas* (indigenous people; less respectfully called *índios,* meaning 'Indians') are descendants of Mexico's pre-Hispanic inhabitants – the Maya, the Zapotecs, the Nahua, the Mixtecs and other peoples here before the Spanish arrived – who have retained a distinct ethnic identity. *Mestizos* make up the great majority of the population and, together with the few people of supposedly pure Spanish ancestry, they hold most positions of power and influence in Mexican society.

Mary Jane Gagnier's *Oaxaca Celebration* is beautifully photographed and written portrait of life in a Mexican village, Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, by a long-time resident.

Other groups in Mexico – chiefly the result of immigration in the 20th century and mostly resident in the bigger cities – include small numbers of South Americans, Jews, Germans, Italians, Chinese, Lebanese, Koreans and Cubans, and uncounted numbers of (often illegal) migrant workers from Central America. There are also numerous US and Canadian expatriates,


MEXICAN STATES
0 400 km
0 250 miles
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
Baja California
Sonora
Chihuahua
Coahuila
Sea of Cortez
Baja California Sur
Sinaloa
Durango
Nuevo León
Gulf of Mexico
Tropic of Cancer
Tropic of Cancer
Zacatecas
Tamaulipas
San Luis Potosí
Nayarit
Aguascalientes
Guana-juato
Querétaro
Yucatán
PACIFIC OCEAN
Jalisco
Hidalgo
Quintana Roo
Michoacán
México
Tlaxcala
Campeche
Colima
Puebla
Tabasco
Veracruz
Guerrero
Distrito Federal (Mexico City)
BELIZE
Oaxaca
Chiapas
Morelos
GUATEMALA
HONDURAS

especially near the Lago de Chapala (south of Guadalajara) and at San Miguel de Allende.

Indigenous Peoples

Researchers have listed at least 139 vanished indigenous languages (and therefore 139 vanished indigenous cultures). The 60 or so that remain have survived primarily because of their rural isolation. Each group has its own language and traditions and, often, its own unique costumes, though the distinct identity of smaller and less resilient groups continues to be nibbled away by the forces of homogenization. Indigenous people generally remain second-class citizens, often restricted to the worst land or forced to migrate to city slums or the US in search of work. Their main wealth is traditional and spiritual, and their way of life is imbued with communal customs, beliefs and rituals bound up with nature.

In the 1990s, the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas spearheaded a campaign for indigenous rights. The San Andrés Accords of 1996, agreed between Zapatista and government negotiators, promised a degree of autonomy to Mexico's indigenous peoples, but were never made law.

At least the cause of indigenous languages took a step forward with the passing of a Law of Linguistic Rights in 2002. This recognizes indigenous tongues as 'national' languages and aims to develop Mexico's linguistic plurality through teaching. But while 1.2 million primary school kids now receive bilingual teaching (in 54 different languages), truly bilingual teachers are in short supply.

In the most recent national census (in 2000), just 7% of Mexicans listed themselves as speakers of indigenous languages, but people of predominantly indigenous ancestry may actually total two or three times that figure. The biggest indigenous group is the Nahua, descendants of the ancient Aztecs. More than two million Nahua are spread around central Mexico. Southeastern Mexico has a particularly high indigenous population. The approximately 1.5 million Yucatec Maya on the Yucatán Peninsula are direct descendants of the ancient Maya, and the Tzotziles and Tzeltales of Chiapas (400,000 to 500,000 of each) are probably descendants of Maya who migrated there at the time of the Classic Maya downfall.

Also directly descended from well-known pre-Hispanic peoples are the estimated 800,000 Zapotecs, mainly in Oaxaca; the 700,000-plus Mixtecs, mainly in Oaxaca, Guerrero and Puebla; the 400,000 Totonacs in Veracruz and Puebla; and the 200,000 Purépecha in Michoacán (descendants of the pre-Hispanic Tarascos). There are 50 or so other indigenous peoples, some now comprising only a few hundred people.

The word 'gringo' isn't exactly a compliment, nor is it necessarily an insult: the term is often simply a neutral synonym for 'American'.

RELIGION

Roman Catholicism

Nearly 90% of Mexicans profess Roman Catholicism, making this the world's second-biggest Catholic country, after Brazil. Almost half of Mexican Catholics attend church weekly, and few of them do not have at least some underlying religious sentiment. Most Mexican fiestas are built around local saints' days, usually involving processions with sacred images as well as other celebrations, and pilgrimages to important shrines such as those at Chalma (p272), Plateros (p593), Zapopan (p528), San Juan de los Lagos (p543) and Real de Catorce (p608) are a big feature of the Mexican calendar. Prayers to the Virgin, Christ and saints offer many Mexicans at least hope for escape from all manner of problems.

The church's most binding symbol is Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, the dark-skinned manifestation of the Virgin Mary who appeared to an Aztec

The successful 2002 Mexican film *El Crimen del Padre Amaro* (The Crime of Father Amaro), starring Gael García Bernal, paints an ugly picture of church corruption in a small Mexican town.

potter, Juan Diego, near Mexico City in 1531. A crucial link between Catholic and indigenous spirituality, the Virgin of Guadalupe is now the whole country's religious patron, her blue-cloaked image is ubiquitous and her name is invoked in religious ceremonies, political speeches and literature. December 12, the Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, sees large-scale celebrations and pilgrimages all over the country, biggest of all in Mexico City (p166) and Monterrey (p404).

For more on Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, check out www.interlupe.com.mx.

The Mexican Catholic Church is one of Latin America's more conservative. Only in the south of the country have its leaders become involved in current political issues such as human rights and poverty, most notably Samuel Ruiz, long-time bishop of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, who retired in 1999.

Indigenous Religion

The missionaries of the 16th and 17th centuries won the indigenous people over to Catholicism by grafting it onto pre-Hispanic religions. Old gods were renamed as Christian saints, and old festivals continued to be celebrated much as they had been in pre-Hispanic times, but on the nearest saint's day. Acceptance of the new religion was greatly helped by the 1531 appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Indigenous Christianity is still fused with ancient beliefs today. In some remote regions Christianity is only a veneer at most. Jalisco's Huichol people (see boxed text, p613) have two Christs, but neither is a major deity. More important is Nakawé, the fertility goddess. The hallucinogen peyote is a crucial source of wisdom in the Huichol world. Elsewhere, among peoples such as the Rarámuri of the Barranca del Cobre (Copper Canyon) and many Tzotzil people in highland Chiapas, intoxication is an almost sacred element at festival times. In a visit to the church at the Tzotzil village of San Juan Chamula (p825), you may see chanting *curanderos* (healers) carrying out shamanic rites.

The secrets of physical and spiritual health of a Nahua *curandera* are revealed in *Woman Who Glows in the Dark* by Elena Ávila.

The Totonac people's famous flying *voladores* performance (see p673) is very likely a version of an ancient fertility ritual.

In the traditional indigenous world almost everything has a spiritual dimension – trees, rivers, plants, wind, rain, sun, animals and hills have their own gods or spirits. Witchcraft, magic and traditional medicine survive. Illness may be seen as a 'loss of soul' resulting from the sufferer's wrongdoing or from the malign influence of someone with magical powers. A soul can be 'regained' if the appropriate ritual is performed by a *brujo* (witch doctor) or *curandero*.

Other Christian Faiths

Around 7% of Mexicans practice other varieties of Christianity. Some are members of the Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian or Anglican churches set up by US missionaries in the 19th century. Others have been converted since the 1970s by a wave of American Pentecostal, Evangelical, Mormon, Seventh-Day Adventist and Jehovah's Witness missionaries. These churches have gained millions of converts, particularly among the rural and indigenous poor of southeast Mexico, some of whom have come to view Catholicism as just another part of a political apparatus that has subjugated them for centuries. This has led to some strife with Catholics.

LaNeta (www.laneta.apc.org), the internet portal for Mexican civil society, has links to many Mexican women's organizations.

WOMEN IN MEXICO

Machismo is no longer the norm among the more educated younger generation. Education and jobs are more accessible for young women, with enrolment rates at all levels of education similar to those for men, and women holding 42% of the country's professional and technical jobs and 29% of

COMMUNING WITH DEPARTED SOULS

Mexico's most characteristic and perhaps oddest fiesta, Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead), has its origins in the belief of the pre-Hispanic Tarasco people of Michoacán that the dead could return to their homes on one day each year.

The underlying philosophy is that death does not represent the end of a life but the continuation of life in a parallel world. The day when the dead could return was a month after the autumn equinox. The occasion required preparations to help the spirits find their way home and make them welcome. An arch made of bright yellow marigold flowers was put up in each home, as a symbolic doorway from the underworld. *Tamales,* fruits, corn and salt were placed in front of the arch on an altar, along with containers of water (because spirits always arrived thirsty after their journey). Traditionally, the spirits of departed children visited on the first night and dead adults came on the following night, when they joined their living relatives to eat, drink, talk and sing.

Come the Spanish conquest, the Catholic celebrations of All Saints' Day (November 1) and All Souls' Day (November 2) were easily superimposed on the old 'day of the dead' traditions, which shared much of the same symbolism – flowers, candles and offerings of food and drink. All Souls' Day is the Catholic day of prayers for those in purgatory; All Saints' Day was understood as a visit by the spirits of children who immediately became *angelitos* (little angels) when they died. The growing *mestizo* community evolved a new tradition of visiting graveyards and decorating graves of family members.

Día de Muertos persisted in the guise of Catholic celebration throughout the colonial period, when the idea of death as a great leveler and release from earthly suffering must have provided comfort for the overwhelmingly poor populace. After Mexican independence, poets used the occasion to publish verses ridiculing members of the social elite by portraying them as dead, with all their wealth and pretensions rendered futile. The great Mexican engraver José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913) expressed similar sentiments in his famous *calaveras* – skeletal figures of Death cheerfully engaging in everyday life, working, dancing, courting, drinking and riding horses into battle. One of his most enduring characters is La Calavera Catrina, a female skeleton in an elaborate low-cut dress and flamboyant flower-covered hat, suggestively revealing a bony leg and an ample bust that is all ribs and no cleavage.

Among indigenous communities, most notably the Purépecha of Michoacán (descendants of the pre-Hispanic Tarascos), Muertos is still very much a religious and spiritual event. For them, the observance is more appropriately called Noche de Muertos (Night of the Dead), because families actually spend whole nights at the graveyard – the night of October 31/November 1 with the sprits of dead children, the following night with the spirits of dead adults.

For Mexico's *mestizo* majority, Muertos is more of a popular folk festival and family occasion. People may visit a graveyard to clean and decorate family graves, but they do not usually maintain an all-night vigil. And though they may pray for the souls of the departed and build altars in their homes to welcome them back, the Catholic belief is that those souls are in heaven or in purgatory, not actually back on a visit to Earth. Sugar skulls, chocolate coffins and toy skeletons are sold in markets everywhere as gifts for children as well as graveyard decorations; they derive as much from Posada's work as from the ancient death cults.

legislative, senior official and management posts. But women's wages overall still average less than half of men's. Among the poor majority, women still tend to play out traditional domestic and mothering roles – something that goes back in part to pre-Hispanic cultures and has also been fostered by the Catholic faith – though they often also have part-time jobs or sell produce at market.

Women's organizations in Mexico are growing in size and number, but campaigns against violence and for better health care and wages have had few successes – although when abortion on demand in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy was legalized in Mexico City in 2007, it was seen as a landmark for women's rights in Latin America. Some radical groups such as the Zapatistas

Hollywood turned its attention to the Ciudad Juárez feminicides with *Bordertown*, filmed in 2005, in which Jennifer Lopez plays a US reporter sent to investigate the killings.

actively promote gender equality and women's empowerment, but they are in a minority, as are women in leadership positions in society. In politics, the most high-profile women are Patricia Espinosa (foreign minister and one of only three women in President Calderón's cabinet as of 2008) and Beatriz Paredes, leader of the opposition PRI party.

Violence against women, especially among the poor and the socially dislocated, remains a national problem. It may be most widespread, though less reported, in impoverished rural areas. Women are often fearful of reporting violence, and in rape cases the victim bears the burden of proof. One hopeful sign is that women's confidence about reporting domestic violence may be on the increase. The southern state of Chiapas, one of Mexico's poorest areas, registered a huge increase in domestic violence denouncements, from 4000 in 2006 to 16,000 in 2007.

Women have had the vote since 1947 and currently hold 21% of seats in the national Congress.

SPORTS

Football (Soccer)

No sport ignites Mexicans' passions as much as *fútbol*. Games in the 18-team national Primera División (First Division) are watched by large crowds and followed by millions on TV. Mexico City's Estadio Azteca (Aztec Stadium) hosted the 1970 and 1986 World Cup finals. Attending a game is fun, and rivalry between opposing fans is generally good-humored. Tickets are sold at the entrance for anything from M$50 to M$250, depending on the seat.

The Spanish-language Femexfut (www.femexfut.org.mx) and FutMex (www.futmex.com) give Mexican soccer scores, standings, upcoming games, news and links to club websites.

The two most popular teams in the country are América, of Mexico City, known as the Águilas (Eagles), and Guadalajara (Chivas – the Goats). They have large followings wherever they play, and matches between the two, known as 'Los Clásicos,' are the biggest games of the year. Other leading clubs are: Cruz Azul (known as La Máquina – the Machine) and UNAM (Universidad Autónoma de Mexico, known as Pumas), both from Mexico City; Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara (Los Tecos) and Atlas, both from Guadalajara; Monterrey and Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (Los Tigres – the Tigers), both from Monterrey; Toluca, Pachuca, Necaxa (of Aguascalientes), Atlante (of Cancún) and Santos of Torreón. It was at Pachuca that soccer was introduced to Mexico by miners from Cornwall, England, in the 19th century.

Crowds at Primera División games normally range from a few thousand to 70,000. Games are spaced over the weekend from Friday to Sunday, with details printed in the newspapers. The Primera División's season is divided into the Torneo de Apertura (Opening Tournament, August to December) and the Torneo de Clausura (Closing Tournament, January to June), each ending in eight-team play-offs (La Liguilla) and eventually a two-leg final to decide the champion.

Something very similar to the Pelota Purépecha is depicted on the murals of the Palaciop de Tepantitla at Teotihuacán (p211).

Mexico's national team, known as El Tri (short for Tricolor, the name for the national flag), reached the last 16 of the World Cup in 1994, 1998 and 2002 – though it will take Mexicans a long time to get over the disappointment of being eliminated by the US in Korea in 2002!

Women's soccer is a growing sport; there's even a national league, the Super Liga Femenil, though as yet the national women's team has done worse than the men's.

Bullfighting

Bullfighting is another Mexican passion, though less widespread than soccer. Fights take place chiefly in the larger cities, usually on Sunday afternoons and often during local festivals.

GREAT BALLS OF FIRE!

Probably all ancient Mexican cultures played some version of the Mesoamerican ritual ball game, the world's first-ever team sport. More than 500 ball courts have survived at archaeological sites around Mexico and Central America. The game varied with time and place, but seems always to have involved two teams, with the object being to keep a rubber ball off the ground by flicking it with various parts of the body. The game had (at least sometimes) deep religious significance, serving as an oracle with the result indicating which of two courses of action should be taken. Games could be followed by the sacrifice of one or more of the players.

The ancient ball game survives in Mexico today, somewhat modified (and without human sacrifice), in at least three areas and several different forms. All are team sports of around five a side, generally played on narrow courts from about 50m to 200m long on open ground or occasionally in village streets. The Pelota Mixteca (Mixtec Ball Game) is played regularly in numerous towns and villages in Oaxaca state, including Ejutla, Nochixtlán and Bajos de Chila near Puerto Escondido. Participants hit the ball back and forth on a long, narrow court, using thick, heavy gloves and with a scoring system not unlike tennis. Oaxacan migrants have exported the game to other parts of Mexico and even to California.

In Sinaloa the game is known as *ulama* and has some resemblance to volleyball, with a highly complicated scoring system. There are two main variants, both requiring high skill: in *ulama de cadera,* played only in Mazatlán and Escuinapa, players hit the ball with their hips, which are protected with leather and deerskin belts and wrappings. In *ulama de antebrazo,* played in Culiacán, Angostura and a few other towns, the ball is hit with the forearm.

The Pelota Purépecha (Purépecha Ball Game) is played in the state of Michoacán, including in Uruapan, Paracho, Angahuan and villages around the Lago de Pátzcuaro. This game, played by women as well as men, resembles field hockey. The amazing Pelota Purépecha Encendida (Burning Purépecha Ball Game) version is played with a burning rubber-and-cloth ball, making it resemble the sun or a comet.

The website of the **Federación Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes Autóctonos y Tradicionales** (www.codeme.org.mx/autoctonoytradicional) tells in Spanish where all these games are played, with some pictures and even their official rules.

To many gringo eyes, the *corrida de toros* (literally, running of the bulls) hardly seems to be sport. To Mexicans it's as much a ritualistic dance as a fight, and it's said that Mexicans arrive on time for only two events – funerals and bullfights.

Usually six bulls are fought in an afternoon, and each is fought in three *suertes* (acts) or *tercios* (thirds). In the first, the cape-waving *toreros* spend a few minutes tiring the bull by luring him around the ring, then two *picadores,* on heavily padded horses, jab long *picas* (lances) into the bull's shoulders to weaken him. Next is the *suerte de banderillas,* when the *toreros* stab three pairs of elongated darts into the bull's shoulders. Finally comes the *suerte de muleta,* in which the matador has exactly 16 minutes to kill the bull. After some fancy cape work to tire the animal, the matador takes sword in hand to deliver the fatal *estocada* (lunge). This must be done into the neck from a position directly in front of the animal.

For details of upcoming fights, biographies of matadors and plenty more on bullfighting, visit Portal Taurino (www.portaltaurino.com), in Spanish and (sort of) English.

In northern Mexico the bullfighting season generally runs from March or April to August or September. In Mexico City's Monumental Plaza México, one of the world's biggest bullrings, and other rings in central and southern Mexico, the main season is from October or November to March. The veteran Eloy Cavasos, from Monterrey, is often acclaimed as Mexico's top matador. Eulalio 'Zotoluco' López is another major established name. Ignacio Garibay and José Luis Angelino are younger stars in their twenties and early thirties. Bullfights featuring star matadors from Spain have extra spice.

Baseball

Professional *béisbol* has a strong following. The winner of the October-to-January Liga Mexicana del Pacífico, with teams from northwest Mexico, represents Mexico in the February Serie del Caribe (the biggest event in Latin American baseball) against the champions of Venezuela, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Traditionally the two strongest clubs are the Tomateros of Culiacán and the Naranjeros of Hermosillo. Younger American players on the way up often play in the Pacific league. The Liga Mexicana de Béisbol, with 16 teams spread down the center and east of the country from Monclova to Cancún, plays from March to September.

The Mesoamerican Ballgame (www.ballgame.org) is an interesting educational website about the indigenous ball game, with video of a contest in action.

Other Sports

Charreadas (rodeos) are held, mainly in the northern half of Mexico, during fiestas and at regular venues often called *lienzos charros*.

The highly popular *lucha libre* (wrestling) is more showbiz than sport. Participants in this pantomime-like activity give themselves names like Shocker, Tarzan Boy, Virus and Heavy Metal, then clown around in Day-Glo tights and lurid masks. For the audience it provides a welcome change from real life because the good guys win. Most bouts pit *técnicos* (craftsmen) against *rudos* (rule-breakers). The *rudos,* who generally wear black, usually get the upper hand early on, only to be pounded by the *técnicos* in a stunning reversal of fortune.

Mexico has produced many world champions in boxing. The legendary Julio César Chávez won five world titles at three different weights, and achieved an amazing 90 consecutive wins after turning pro in 1980. Chávez was a classic Mexican boxer – tactically astute but also able to take punishment and hand out even more.

Decharros (www.decharros.com) has a calendar of events and much more on *charreadas,* all in Spanish.

Mexico also has a popular professional men's basketball league, the Liga Nacional de Baloncesto Profesional, with teams mainly from the north and center of the country. In 2008–09, teams from Monterrey, Tijuana and Gómez Palacio played in the American Basketball Association.

Golfer Lorena Ochoa, from Guadalajara, is enjoying a fantastically successful career in women's golf, and gained the world number one ranking of the Ladies Professional Golf Association in 2007 – a year in which she won more than US$4 million in prize money.

MEDIA

Mexican network TV is still dominated by the Televisa group, the biggest TV company in the Spanish-speaking world, which runs four national networks and has many local affiliates, and is strongly linked with the PRI, the political party that ran Mexico as a virtual one-party state for 70 years until 2000. Since the PRI's grip was loosened, the rival Azteca group (two networks) has started to undermine Televisa's dominance. Network programming continues to comprise mainly soap operas *(telenovelas),* ads, game shows, comedy, soccer and a bit of reality TV. However, many hotel rooms now have multichannel cable or satellite systems giving access to international TV. Many home viewers have cable systems too, but still switch to Televisa for news and *telenovelas*. Two good noncommercial Mexican channels, with plenty of arts and documentaries, are Once TV (11 TV), run by Mexico City's Instituto Politécnico Nacional, and Canal 22, run by Conaculta, the National Culture and Arts Council.

For the online editions of about 300 Mexican newspapers and magazines, and links to hundreds of Mexican radio and TV stations and other media sites, visit www.zonalatina.com.

Mexico has around 1400 regional and local radio stations offering a good quota of local news and perky talk, as well as music.

Print media reflect Mexico's political and regional variety, with a spectrum of national and local daily newspapers, and some serious magazine

journalism. But the most popular press still lives on a diet of crime and road accidents, with gory photos of the victims. In many cases journalists are constrained by their publishers' commercial requirements, and they can be subject to political pressures and the threat of violence if they make unwelcome revelations. The international watchdog group Reporters Without Borders has declared Mexico to be Latin America's most dangerous country for journalists, with at least 20 journalists murdered between 2005 and 2007. Intimidation by drug gangs is largely to blame, and some local media have stopped covering the gangs' activities.

New media such as online news sites and blogs are less easily influenced or intimidated. You'll find good links to Mexico news providers, including new media, on the **Latin America Network Information Center** (LANIC; http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/mexico/) and on **Planeta** (www.planeta.com).

The Narco News Bulletin (www.narconews.com) provides an alternative left-wing perspective on the drug trade and Mexican human rights issues.

The Arts

Wherever you go in Mexico you'll be amazed by the marvelous creativity on display. Colorful art and beautiful crafts are everywhere; Aztec dancers vibrate in the very heart of Mexico City; musicians strike up on the streets and in the bars and buses; and so many of the country's buildings are works of fine art in themselves. This is a country that has given the world some of its finest painting, music, movies and writing. As you see for yourself how the arts form an essential part of everyday life in this country, you'll start to understand why.

Mexico Connect (www.mexconnect.com) and Mexico Online (www.mexonline.com) feature a wealth of articles and links on Mexican arts.

PAINTING & SCULPTURE

Since pre-Hispanic times, Mexicans have had a love of color and form, and an exciting talent for painting and sculpture. The wealth of modern and historic art in mural form and in the country's many galleries are highlights of the country. Contemporary artists, galleries and patrons have made Mexico City one of the hotspots of today's international art scene.

PRE-HISPANIC

Mexico's first civilization, the Olmecs of the Gulf coast, produced remarkable stone sculptures depicting deities, animals and wonderfully lifelike human forms. Most awesome are the huge Olmec heads, which combine the features of human babies and jaguars.

The Classic Maya of southeast Mexico, at their cultural height from about AD 250 to 800, were perhaps ancient Mexico's most artistically gifted people. They left countless beautiful stone sculptures, complicated in design but possessing great delicacy of touch. Subjects are typically rulers, deities and ceremonies. The art of the later Aztecs reflects their harsh worldview, with many carvings of skulls and complicated symbolic representations of gods.

COLONIAL PERIOD

Mexican art during Spanish rule was heavily Spanish-influenced and chiefly religious in subject, though portraiture grew in popularity under wealthy patrons. The influence of indigenous artisans is seen in the elaborate altar-pieces and sculpted walls and ceilings, overflowing with tiny detail, in churches and monasteries, as well as in fine frescoes. Miguel Cabrera (1695–1768), from Oaxaca, was arguably the most talented painter of the era. His scenes and figures have a sureness of touch lacking in the more labored efforts of others. Cabrera's work can be seen in churches and museums all over Mexico.

MEXICO'S TOP THREE ANCIENT MURAL SITES

- Teotihuacán's **Palacio de Tepantitla** (p211)
- **Cacaxtla** (p236)
- **Bonampak** (p842)

INDEPENDENT MEXICO

The landscapes of José María Velasco (1840–1912) capture the magical qualities of the countryside around Mexico City and areas farther afield, such as Oaxaca.

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 canvases. The engravings and cartoons of José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913), with their characteristic *calavera* (skull) motif, satirized the injustices of the Porfiriato period, launching a long tradition of political and social subversiveness in Mexican art. Gerardo Murillo (1875–1964), also known as Dr Atl, displayed some scandalously orgiastic paintings at a 1910 show marking the centenary of the independence movement.

You can see good collections of José María Velasco's art at Mexico City's Museo Nacional de Arte (p146) and Toluca's Velasco museum (p268).

THE MURALISTS

In the 1920s, immediately following the Mexican Revolution, education minister José Vasconcelos commissioned leading young artists to paint series of public murals to spread a sense of Mexican history and culture and the need for social and technological change. The trio of great muralists – all great painters in smaller scales too – were Diego Rivera (1886–1957), José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974).

Rivera's work carried a clear left-wing message, emphasizing past oppression of indigenous people and peasants. His art pulled the country's indigenous and Spanish roots together in colorful, crowded tableaus depicting historical people and events, or symbolic scenes of Mexican life, with a simple moral message. Rivera's works are found in many locations in and around Mexico City.

For the best view of José Guadalupe Posada's creations, head to the Museo José Guadalupe Posada (p598) in his home town of Aguascalientes.

Siqueiros, who fought on the Constitutionalist side in the Revolution (while Rivera was in Europe), remained a political activist afterward. His murals lack Rivera's 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 (p147), Castillo de Chapultepec (p153) and Ciudad Universitaria (p157), all in Mexico City.

Orozco, from Jalisco, focused more on the universal human condition than on historical specifics. He conveyed emotion, character and atmosphere. By the 1930s Orozco had grown disillusioned with the Revolution. His work was at its peak in Guadalajara between 1936 and 1939, particularly in the 50-odd frescoes in the Instituto Cultural de Cabañas (p526).

The best books on Diego Rivera include his autobiography *My Art, My Life,* and Patrick Marnham's biography, *Dreaming with His Eyes Open*.

Chief among their successors, Rufino Tamayo (1899–1991) from Oaxaca (also represented in Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes) was absorbed by abstract and mythological scenes and effects of color. Many of his works 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 multicolored mosaic interpretation of Mexican culture on the Biblioteca Central at Mexico City's Ciudad Universitaria (p157) is his best-known work.

OTHER 20TH-CENTURY ARTISTS

Frida Kahlo (1907–54), physically crippled by a road accident and mentally tormented in her tempestuous marriage to Diego Rivera, painted anguished self-portraits and grotesque, surreal images that expressed her left-wing views and externalized her inner tumult. Kahlo's work suddenly seemed to strike an international chord in the 1980s, becoming as renowned as Rivera's almost overnight. Thanks to the 2002 Hollywood biopic *Frida,* she's now better

known worldwide than any other Mexican artist. Her Mexico City home (Museo Frida Kahlo, p158) is a don't-miss for any art lover.

After WWII, the young Mexican artists of La Ruptura (the Rupture) reacted against the muralist movement, which they saw as too didactic and too obsessed with *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness). They explored their urban selves and opened Mexico up to world trends such as abstract expressionism and pop art. The leader of La Ruptura was José Luis Cuevas (b 1934), some of whose work you can see at the Mexico City art museum he founded (p144).

Mexican Muralists by Desmond Rochfort covers the whole muralist movement.

Other fine artists to look for include Juan Soriano (1920–2006), with his iconoclastic, often fantasy-inclined paintings and sculptures; María Izquierdo (1902–55) whose paintings have a dreamlike quality for which many later artists strove; and Oaxacans Francisco Toledo (b 1940) and Rodolfo Morales (1925–2001), who informed their contemporary vision with an exploration of pre-Hispanic roots.

Among the most internationally renowned Mexican artists who emerged in the later 20th century is sculptor Sebastián (b 1947) from Chihuahua, famed for his large, mathematics-inspired sculptures that adorn cities around the world.

CONTEMPORARY ART

The unease and irony of postmodernism found fertile ground among Mexico's ever-questioning intelligentsia from the late 1980s onward. Contemporary art displays a vast diversity of attempts to interpret the urban and global uncertainties of the 21st century. Frida Kahlo, with her unsettling, disturbing images from which many postmodernists drew inspiration, stands as a kind of mother figure amid the maelstrom.

Frida fans should read Hayden Herrera's *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* and Malka Drucker's *Frida Kahlo*.

Mexico is experiencing a bout of art fever as, thanks to the activities of dynamic independent galleries and patrons, and the globalization of the world's art scenes, the works of Mexican artists are reaching galleries the world over, and art from around the globe is being seen in Mexico. Installations are in vogue, and new cultural centers and art spaces, both publicly and privately run, are springing up all over the country. Even some of the more sedate art museums are staging more temporary exhibits, often showcasing video and other non-mainstream art.

The abstract painting of Francisco Castro Leñero (b 1954) is an extension of La Ruptura; his works have been likened to musical compositions. In general, though, the pendulum has swung away from abstraction to hyper-representation, photo-realism and innovative forms like installations and video. Rocío Maldonado (b 1951), Rafael Cauduro (b 1950) and Roberto Cortázar (b 1962) all paint classically depicted figures against amorphous, bleak backgrounds. Check out Cauduro's hyper-realist murals on state-sponsored crime in Mexico City's Supreme Court building (p145).

Mexico City's new Museo de Arte Popular (p149) showcases the country's folk arts. You can pay a virtual visit at www.map.org.mx.

The leading lights of Mexico City's contemporary scene, such as Miguel Calderón (b 1971) and Gabriel Orozco (b 1962), spread their talents across many media from sculpture, photography and painting to video and installations, always setting out to challenge preconceptions in one way or another. Another major protagonist of the scene is not an artist but a patron: Eugenio López, heir to the Grupo Jumex fruit-juice empire, has the biggest collection of contemporary Mexican art and, with galleries in Mexico City and Los Angeles, is a major force in its globalization.

Fashionable Mexico City suburbs such as Roma and Polanco are full of contemporary galleries, and the youthful cutting edge of the art scene has recolonized streets such as San Jerónimo in the oldest part of the city, the Centro Histórico, with alternative galleries and cafés. Many other cities such as Monterrey (with its Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, p398), Oaxaca,

Tijuana, Hermosillo, Mazatlán, Chihuahua, Cuernavaca, Guadalajara and Morelia all have thriving art scenes. Top international artists are themselves attracted to Mexico: Britain's Damien Hirst, for example, lives part of his life at Troncones on the Pacific coast.

A good way to hook into the art scene is to check some contemporary art sites on the internet (see boxed text, below) then visit some of the galleries and shows. *La Jornada* newspaper has a very good cultural section with daily listings of exhibitions and culture of all kinds.

ARCHITECTURE

Mexico's beautiful and awe-inspiring architectural heritage is one of its top attractions.

PRE-HISPANIC

The ancient civilizations produced some of the most spectacular, eye-pleasing architecture ever built. You can still see fairly intact pre-Hispanic cities at Teotihuacán (p209), Monte Albán (p737), Chichén Itzá (p937) and Uxmal (p925). Their spectacular ceremonial centers were designed to awe, with great stone pyramids, palaces and ball courts. Pyramids usually functioned as the bases for small shrines on their summits. Mexico's three biggest pyramids are the Pirámide del Sol (p211) and Pirámide de la Luna (p211), both at Teotihuacán, and the Pirámide Tepanapa (p228) at Cholula, near Puebla.

The Art of Mesoamerica by Mary Ellen Miller is an excellent survey of pre-Hispanic art and architecture.

There were many differences in architectural styles between the pre-Hispanic civilizations: while Teotihuacán, Monte Albán and Aztec buildings were relatively simple in design, intended to impress with their grand scale, Maya architecture paid more attention to aesthetics, with intricately patterned facades, delicate 'combs' (grid-like arrangements of stone with multiple gaps) on temple roofs, and sinuous carvings. Buildings at such Maya sites as Uxmal, Chichén Itzá and Palenque (p833) are among the most beautiful human creations in the Americas. Maya buildings are characterized by the corbeled vault, their version of the arch: two stone walls leaning toward one another, nearly meeting at the top and surmounted by a capstone.

COLONIAL PERIOD

Many of the fine mansions, churches, monasteries and plazas that today contribute so much to Mexico's beauty were created during the 300 years of Spanish rule. Most were in Spanish styles, but with unique local variations.

Gothic and renaissance styles dominated building in Mexico in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Gothic is typified by soaring buttresses,

TOP WEBSITES FOR CONTEMPORARY & MODERN MEXICAN ART

Arte de Oaxaca (www.artedeoaxaca.com) Window on the Oaxacan scene.
Arte México (www.arte-mexico.com) Extensive guide to art in Mexico City.
Artes Visuales (www.artesvisuales.com.mx) Covers Mexico City galleries and museums.
Galería Nina Menocal (www.ninamenocal.com) Mexico City gallery highlighting emerging Latin American artists.
Galería OMR (www.galeriaomr.com) Leading Mexico City gallery with a strong international presence.
Kurimanzutto (www.kurimanzutto.com) Trendy Mexico City gallery with a specialty in installations.
Museo Andrés Blaisten (www.museoblaisten.com) Comprehensive online gallery of 19th- and 20th-century Mexican art.

pointed arches, clusters of round columns and ribbed ceiling vaults. The renaissance saw a return to the disciplined ancient Greek and Roman ideals of harmony and proportion, dominated by shapes like the square and the circle. In Mexico, renaissance architecture usually took the form of plateresque (from *platero,* meaning 'silversmith,' because its decoration resembled ornamented silverwork). Plateresque commonly appears on the facades of buildings, particularly church doorways, which have round arches bordered by classical columns and stone sculpture. A later, more austere renaissance style was called Herreresque, after the Spanish architect Juan de Herrera. Mérida's Catedral de San Ildefenso (p915) and Casa de Montejo (p917) are outstanding renaissance buildings. The cathedrals of Mexico City (p142) and Puebla (p218) mingle renaissance and baroque styles.

Bacaanda (www.bacaanda.org.mx) is a group of pioneering creative folk promoting creativity in many media from visual and plastic arts to design, writing and multimedia.

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 *retablos* (altarpieces – see p90). The finest baroque architecture in Mexico includes the marvelous facade of Zacatecas' cathedral (p586). Mexican baroque reached its final form, Churrigueresque, between 1730 and 1780. This was characterized by spectacularly out-of-control ornamentation – check out the Sagrario Metropolitano (p143) in Mexico City, the Ocotlán sanctuary (p234) at Tlaxcala and Santa Prisca church (p259) in Taxco.

Indigenous artisans added profuse sculpture in stone and colored stucco to many baroque buildings, such as the Capilla del Rosario in Puebla's Templo de Santo Domingo (p220) and the nearby village church of Tonantzintla (p230).

Neoclassical style, dominant in Mexico from about 1780 to 1830, was another return to sober Greek and Roman ideals. An outstanding example is Guanajuato's Alhóndiga de Granaditas (p616).

19TH TO 21ST CENTURIES

Independent Mexico in the 19th and early 20th centuries saw revivals of Gothic and colonial styles and imitations of contemporary French or Italian styles. Mexico City's semi–art nouveau Palacio de Bellas Artes (p147) is one of the finest buildings from this era.

After the Revolution, art deco made an appearance, but more important was the attempt to return to pre-Hispanic roots in the search for a national identity. This trend was known as Toltecism, and many public buildings exhibit the heaviness of Aztec or Toltec monuments. Toltecism culminated in the 1950s with the UNAM campus (p157) in Mexico City, where many buildings are covered with colorful murals.

Pay a virtual visit to Monterrey's excellent Museo de Arte Contemporáneo at www.marco.org.mx.

Modern architects have provided some cities with some eye-catching and adventurous buildings as well as a large quota of dull concrete blocks. Modernist Pedro Ramírez Vásquez (b 1919) designed three vast public buildings in Mexico City: the 1960s Estadio Azteca (p187) and Museo Nacional de Antropología (p153) and the 1970s Basílica de Guadalupe (p162). His work more or less ignores Mexican traditions. The biggest name in contemporary architecture is Ricardo Legorreta (b 1931), who has designed a slew of large buildings in bold concrete shapes and 'colonial' orangey-brown hues. Legorreta is responsible for Mexico City's Centro Nacional de las Artes (p184), Monterrey's Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (p398) and the towers of Mexico City's Plaza Juárez (p148).

MUSIC

Music is everywhere in Mexico. It comes booming out of sound systems in markets, shopping streets and passing automobiles, and live musicians may start up at any time, on plazas, in buses or on the Mexico City metro. These performers are playing for a living and range from marimba (wooden xylophone) teams and mariachi bands (trumpeters, violinists, guitarists and a singer, all dressed in smart Wild West–style costumes) to ragged lone buskers with out-of-tune guitars. Mariachi music, perhaps the most 'typical' Mexican music, originated in the Guadalajara area (see p538) but is played nationwide. Marimbas are particularly popular in the southeast and on the Gulf coast.

These performers are among the most visible actors in a huge and vibrant popular music scene that encompasses great stylistic and regional variety. Its outpourings can be heard live at fiestas, nightspots and concerts, or bought from music shops.

ROCK & HIP-HOP

So close to the big US Spanish-speaking market, Mexico can claim to be the most important hub of *rock en español*. Talented Mexico City bands such as Café Tacuba and Maldita Vecindad emerged in the early 1990s and took Mexican rock to new heights and new audiences (well beyond Mexico), mixing a huge range of influences – from rock, hip-hop and ska to traditional Mexican *son* (folk music), bolero or mariachi. Café Tacuba's exciting ability to handle so many styles yet retain their own strong musical identity keeps them at the forefront of Mexican rock today. The albums *Re* (1994), *Avalancha de Éxitos* (1996), *Tiempo Transcurrido* (2001) and *Sino* (2007) are all full of great songs.

Find out what's coming up at Guanajuato's Cervantino festival, Mexico's foremost arts extravaganza, at www.festivalcervantino.gob.mx.

The city of Monterrey took the helm in the late 1990s and early 2000s, producing twosome Plastilina Mosh (a kind of Mexican Beastie Boys), hip-hoppers Control Machete, controversial rap-metal band Molotov (who have upset just about everyone with their expletive-laced lyrics), the Britpop-like Zurdok and ragamuffin band El Gran Silencio, most of whom are still active and popular today. Monterrey is also home to Mexico's best-known indie band, Niña, who meld punk, metal, folk and glam influences, and the city continues to throw up creative combinations, although a lot of the most creative and experimental rock is now coming from the indie bands of Guadalajara, with a heavy punk and electronic influence. Look out for bands No+Mas, Buró and Pito Pérez.

Foreign rock acts were not allowed to play in Mexico until the late 1980s.

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 under the earlier name Caifanes.

The Mexican band most famous outside its home country is probably Guadalajara's Maná, an unashamedly commercial band with British and Caribbean influences, reminiscent of the Police. And not to be forgotten are El Tri, the grandfathers of Mexican rock, who are still pumping out energetic rock 'n roll after four decades.

POP

Skinny Paulina Rubio is Mexico's answer to Shakira. She has also starred in several Mexican films and TV series. The new generation of Mexicans topping the charts throughout the Hispanic world is headed up by singer Belinda and boy-girl group RBD, all of whom started out as TV soap stars. Balladeer Luis Miguel (born in Veracruz in 1970), meanwhile, is Mexico's Julio Iglesias

and incredibly popular, as is Juan Gabriel, who has sold millions of his own albums and written dozens of hit songs for other singers.

ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Mexico has a big *punchis-punchis* (as Mexicans accurately call it) scene. Almost every weekend there's a big event in or around one of the big cities, where you can enjoy sessions by the country's top DJs and international guests. Top Mexican DJs include Vazik (psychedelic/progressive), Shove (trance) and Forza (trance).

Though they went separate ways (at least temporarily) in 2008, the Tijuana-based Nortec Collective, centered on DJ Bostich and chemical engineer Pepe Mogt, spent several years melding traditional Mexican music with electronica into a unique, fun genre known as Nortec. Look for *The Nortec Sampler* (2000), *Tijuana Sessions Vol 1* (2001) or *Tijuana Sessions Vol 3* (2005). (There's no Volume 2.)

Kinetik.tv (www.kinetik.tv) has details of upcoming raves and parties.

Kinky, from Monterrey, is a group that successfully fuses Latin rock with electronics and gives great live shows. Their most recent album is *Reina* (2006).

REGIONAL & FOLK MUSIC

The deepest-rooted Mexican folk music is *son* (literally, 'sound'), a broad term covering a range of country styles that grew out of the fusion of indigenous, Spanish and African musical cultures. *Son* is essentially guitars plus harp or violin, often played for a foot-stamping dance audience with witty, frequently improvised lyrics.

The most celebrated brands of Mexican *son* come from four areas. From the Huasteca area, inland from Tampico, *son huasteco* features a solo violinist and two guitarists singing falsetto between soaring violin passages. Keep an eye open for *son* festivals or performances by top group Camperos de Valles. In Jalisco, the *sones jaliscenses* originally formed the repertoire of many mariachi bands. The baking-hot Río Balsas basin, southwest of Mexico City, produced perhaps the greatest *son* musician of recent decades, violinist Juan Reynoso. Around Veracruz, the exciting local *son jarocho* is particularly African-influenced; its principal instruments are harp, guitars and the *jarana,* a small guitar-shaped instrument. Harpist La Negra Graciana is one of the greats; Grupo Mono Blanco lead a revival of the genre with contemporary lyrics. The universally known *La Bamba* is a *son jarocho*!

Mexico City's annual contemporary art fair, MACO (www.femaco.com), pulls in cognoscenti from the world over.

Modern Mexican regional music is rooted in a strong rhythm from several guitars, with voice, accordion, violin or brass providing the melody. *Ranchera* is Mexico's urban 'country music.' This is mostly melodramatic stuff with a nostalgia for rural roots – vocalist-and-combo music, maybe with a mariachi backing. The hugely popular Vicente Fernández, Ana Bárbara, Juan Gabriel and Alejandro Fernández (Vicente's son) are among the leading *ranchera* artists now that past generations of beloved stars like Lola Beltrán, Lucha Reyes, Chavela Vargas and Pedro Infante have died or retired.

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

in California. They play to huge audiences on both sides of the frontier. *Norteño* groups *(conjuntos)* go for 10-gallon hats, with backing centered on the accordion and the *bajo sexto* (a 12-string guitar), along with bass and drums. Los Tigres del Norte added saxophone and absorbed popular *cumbia* rhythms from Colombia. Other leading *norteño* exponents include groups Los Tucanes de Tijuana and Los Huracanes del Norte, and accordionists Ramón Ayala and Flaco Jiménez.

Banda is Mexican big-band music, with large brass sections replacing *norteño's* guitars and accordion. Popular since the 1970s in the hands of Sinaloa's Banda el Recodo, it exploded in popularity nationwide and among US Hispanics in the 1990s.

An exciting talent is Oaxaca-born Lila Downs, who has an American father and Mexican Mixtec mother. Lila has emerged as a passionate and original reinterpreter of Mexican folk songs, often with a jazz influence. Her major albums include *La Sandunga* (1997), *Border* (2001) and *La Cantina* (2006). She sang several songs on the soundtrack of the 2002 movie *Frida.*

Fearful of *narco-corridos'* tendency to glorify the activities of drug runners, several Mexican state governments have encouraged radio stations to ban them.

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 (see p87). Some *banda* and *norteño* groups throw in a lot of *cumbia. Cumbia sonidera* is *cumbia* as played by some DJs in central Mexico and the US, with their own mixes, speeds, intros and outros.

TROVA

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

Many *trova* singers are strongly inspired by Cuban political musician Silvio Rodríguez. 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 widely over Mexican song forms and are all well worth hearing.

CINEMA

A clutch of fine, gritty movies by young directors has thrust modern Mexican cinema into the limelight, garnering commercial success as well as critical acclaim after decades in the doldrums. These films confronted the ugly and the absurd in Mexican life as well as the beautiful, comical and sad. Alfonso Arau's *Como Agua para Chocolate* (Like Water for Chocolate; 1992) and Guillermo del Toro's 1993 horror movie *Cronos* set the ball rolling, then in 1999 Mexicans flocked to see Antonio Serrano's *Sexo, Pudor y Lágrimas* (Sex, Shame and Tears), a comic but sad tale of young couples' relationships.

But the first to really catch the world's eye was the 2000 film *Amores Perros* (Love's a Bitch), directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu and starring Gael García Bernal. Set in contemporary Mexico City, with three plots connected by one traffic accident, it's a raw, honest movie with its quota of graphic blood, violence and sex.

Arguably the most famous of all Mexican film actors was Zorba the Greek – Anthony Quinn (1915-2001), born Antonio Quiñones in Chihuahua. His family moved to the US when he was four months old.

MEXICO GOES TO HOLLYWOOD – OR NOT?

It might seem at first glance that the brightest talents of new Mexican cinema are turning their backs on their home country for the glamour and big dollars of Hollywood. In reality, these top directors and actors retain strong Mexican links not only in their themes and settings but also in their production companies. While Alejandro González Iñárritu followed his Mexican-made *Amores Perros* with two Hollywood productions in *21 Grams* and *Babel,* he kept in touch with Mexico by setting one of the plots of *Babel* astride the US–Mexico border and casting Gael García Bernal in it. Screenwriter for all three of these successful movies was Mexican Guillermo Arriaga, although unfortunately the pair reportedly fell out after *Babel*.

Alfonso Cuarón had already made Hollywood movies (including *A Little Princess* and *Great Expectations*) before coming home to Mexico for *Y Tu Mamá También,* then returning to Hollywood for *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Children of Men*. Cuarón looks set to return to Mexico in every way with the eagerly awaited *Mexico 68,* a film about the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, due out in 2009.

Guillermo del Toro made his 1993 success, *Cronos,* in Mexico, but moved to California in 1998 after his father was kidnapped in Mexico. He set up his own production company, the Tequila Gang, to make films such as *the Devil's Backbone* (2001) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), both set in Spain, but looks likely to turn to Hollywood backing if, as is mooted, he directs *The Hobbit*.

Actor Gael García Bernal starred in three of the biggest Mexican-made successes – *Amores Perros, Y Tu Mamá También* and *El Crimen del Padre Amaro* – and starred in the Mexican leg of González Iñárritu's *Babel*. García Bernal at least kept a Latin American focus in his biggest non-Mexican role, playing Che Guevara in *The Motorcycle Diaries,* directed by Brazil's Walter Salles for the British production company FilmFour. He is set to star in a film of the greatest Mexican novel, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo,* with top Spanish director Mateo Gil.

Y Tu Mamá También (And Your Mother Too), Alfonso Cuarón's 2002 'growing up' road movie of two teenagers (Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna) from privileged Mexico City circles, was at the time the biggest grossing Mexican film ever, netting more than US$25 million.

Another 2002 success, *El Crimen del Padre Amaro* (The Crime of Father Amaro), directed by Carlos Carrera and again starring Gael García Bernal, painted an ugly picture of corruption in the Catholic church in a small Mexican town.

After *Amores Perros,* Alejandro González Iñárritu moved to Hollywood to direct two more great movies with interconnected multiple plots. *21 Grams* (2003), with Sean Penn, Benicio del Toro and Naomi Watts, had nothing to do with Mexico, but the global *Babel* (2006), with Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett and (yet again) Gael García Bernal, weaves a sad US–Mexico cross-border tale in with its other Moroccan and Japanese threads. *Babel* received seven Oscar nominations.

Alfonso Cuarón stepped from *Y Tu Mamá También* to *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), then directed *Children of Men* (2006), a grim but highly acclaimed science fiction tale set in a future England featuring Clive Owen, Julianne Moore and Michael Caine, which received three Oscar nominations. Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* was one of the most internationally successful films of 2006, winning three Academy Awards with a dual plot in which a young girl lives out fairy-tale adventures in a fantasy world, against a background of the harsh realities of post–Civil War 1940s Spain.

Mexican-made films also continued to flourish. Carlos Reygadas' *Batalla en el Cielo* (Battle in Heaven; 2005) was a graphic tale of kidnapping, prostitution and brutal Mexico City realities, but the country's big hit of that year was Fernando Kalife's *7 Días* (7 Days), the story of a lowly music promoter's miraculous coup of getting U2 to play in his home town,

Monterrey. The big success of 2007 was *El Violín* (The Violin), directed by Francisco Vargas, with a great performance by Ángel Tavira in a story set amid the country's rural guerrilla struggles of the 1970s.

The historical golden age of Mexican movie-making was WWII, when the country was turning out up to 200 films a year, typically epic, melodramatic productions. Hollywood reasserted itself after the, war and Mexican filmmakers have struggled for funds ever since. But Mexico has the world's seventh-biggest cinema audience, and locally made films attract around 10% of that group. Mexico still has a high-class movie-making infrastructure, with plenty of technical expertise and up-to-the-minute equipment. The country now produces more than 50 films a year, a big increase on a decade ago. Several cities hold annual film festivals, including Morelia (p560), Mexico City (p183) and Monterrey (p404).

Despite faint critical praise, *Frida,* Julie Taymor's 2002 factually informative movie biography, shouldn't be missed for its strong Mexican period atmosphere and a fine performance by Salma Hayek as Ms Kahlo.

LITERATURE

Mexicans such as Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo and Octavio Paz produced some of the great Spanish-language writing of the 20th century, and the contemporary literary scene is throwing up some bold talents.

Internationally, the prolific novelist and commentator Carlos Fuentes (b 1928) is probably Mexico's best-known writer. His first and one of his best novels, *Where the Air is Clear* (1958), traces the lives of various Mexico City dwellers through Mexico's post-revolutionary decades in a critique of the Revolution's failure. *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962) takes another critical look at the post-revolutionary era through the eyes of a dying, corrupted press baron and landowner. Fuentes' *Aura* (1962) is a magical book with one of the most stunning endings of any novel. *La Silla del Águila* (The Eagle Throne; 2003) again deals with political corruption and cynicism. It's set in 2020 when an all-powerful US has cut Mexico's access to telecommunications and computers, Condoleezza Rice is US president, and a vicious struggle is being played out for the lifetime presidency of Mexico.

In Mexico, Juan Rulfo (1918–86) is widely regarded as the supreme novelist. His *Pedro Páramo* (1955), about a young man's search for his lost father among ghostlike villages in western Mexico, is a scary, desolate work with confusing shifts of time – a kind of Mexican *Wuthering Heights* with a spooky, magical-realist twist. Some regard it as the ultimate expression of Latin American existence, and Rulfo certainly never felt the need to write anything else afterward.

Octavio Paz (1914–98), poet, essayist and winner of the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature, wrote a probing, intellectually acrobatic analysis of Mexico's myths and the Mexican character in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

THREE FILMS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW WERE SHOT IN MEXICO

Titanic Twentieth Century Fox built an entire 184,000 sq meter studio near Playas de Rosarito, Baja California, for the 1997 multi-Oscar epic. The facility has since been used for *Pearl Harbor, Jackass* and *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World.*

Romeo & Juliet Baz Luhrmann transplanted his 1996 version of Shakespeare's Italian tragedy, with Leonardo di Caprio and Claire Danes, to a fictional Florida city called Verona Beach – really a combination of Mexico City and Veracruz.

Missing Costa-Gavras' chilling 1982 political thriller about the coup that overthrew Salvador Allende in Chile used Mexico City as a substitute for Santiago. Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek starred.

(1950). Decide for yourself whether you agree with his pessimistic assessments of his fellow Mexicans. Paz's *Sor Juana* (1982) reconstructed the life of Mexico's earliest literary giant, Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, a 17th-century courtesan-turned-nun (and proto-feminist) whose love poems, plays, romances and essays were aeons ahead of their time.

The 1960s-born novelists who form the *movimiento crack* have nothing to do with drugs – they take their name from the sound of a limb falling off a tree, an image that represents these writers' desire to break with Mexico's literary past. Their work tends to adopt global themes and international settings. Best known is Jorge Volpi, whose *In Search of Klingsor* (1999) has been an international best-seller. With an exciting plot around post-WWII efforts to unmask the scientist in charge of Nazi Germany's atomic weapons program, it also weaves in a good deal of scientific theory to make sure your brain cells don't rest. Ignacio Padilla also took Nazism as a theme in his sophisticated *Shadow Without a Name* (2000).

The relationship between Diego and Frida and the cultural upheaval they lived through are explored in the well-illustrated *Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera* by Isabel Alcantara and Sandra Egnolff.

Northern Mexican writers, mostly born in the 1960s and focusing on themes like violence, corruption, drug trafficking, the border and conflicts of identity, have produced some of the most immediate and gritty new Mexican writing. Juan José Rodríguez (*Mi Nombre es Casablanca,* 2003), Raúl Manríquez (*La Vida a Tientas,* 2003) and Élmer Mendoza (*Un Asesino Solitario,* 1999) tell of explosive violence provoked by drug conflicts.

The Mexican Revolution yielded a school of novels: the classic is *The Underdogs,* the story of a peasant who becomes a general, by Mariano Azuela (1873–1952). Modern writers have also been inspired by the Revolution and its aftermath: Laura Esquivel (b 1950) made her name with *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989), a rural love story interwoven with both fantasy and cooking recipes set during the Revolution, while *Tear This Heart Out* (1985), by Ángeles Mastretta (b 1949), is amusingly written as the memoir of the wife of a ruthless political boss. Two more fine books by Mastretta are *Lovesick* (1996), about a woman torn between two very different lovers, and *Women with Big Eyes* (2004), a set of tales of women who played important roles in her own life.

Rosario Castellanos (1925–74), from Chiapas, an early champion of women's and indigenous rights, wrote of the injustices that provoked the 1994 Zapatista rebellion decades before it happened. *The Book of Lamentations* (1962) draws on earlier historical events for its story of an indigenous uprising in the 1930s.

In poetry, the great figures are Octavio Paz and a reclusive figure from Chiapas, Jaime Sabines (1925–99), who both treated themes of love and death with stark, vivid imagery.

DANCE

INDIGENOUS DANCE

Traditional indigenous dances are among the most colorful ingredients of many Mexican fiestas. There are hundreds of them, some popular in several parts of the country, others danced only in a single town or village. Many bear traces of pre-Hispanic ritual, having evolved from old fertility rites and other ancient practices. Other dances tell stories of Spanish or colonial origin – Oaxaca's Danza de las Plumas (Feather Dance) represents the Spanish conquest of Mexico, while the fairly widespread Moros y Cristianos re-enacts the victory of Christians over Muslims in 15th-century Spain.

MEXICO IN OTHERS' WORDS

Mexico has inspired much fine writing from non-Mexicans. Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* dramatizes the state–church conflict that followed the Mexican Revolution. *Under the Volcano* (1938) by Malcolm Lowry follows a dipsomaniac British diplomat in Mexico who drinks himself to death on the Day of the Dead.

B Traven is best known as the author of the 1935 adventure story of gold and greed in northwest Mexico, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. But he wrote many other novels set in the country, chiefly the six of the Jungle series – among them *The Rebellion of the Hanged, General from the Jungle* and *Trozas* – focusing on pre-revolutionary oppression in Chiapas. The identity of Traven himself is one of literature's great mysteries. Was he really a Bavarian anarchist called Ret Marut, or a Norwegian American living reclusively in Acapulco called Traven Torsvan? Quite likely he was both.

The beat generation spent plenty of time in Mexico, too: William Burroughs' early novel *Queer* chronicles the guilt, lust and drug excesses of an American in Mexico City in the 1940s. The city was also the scene of parts of Burroughs' *Junky* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and *Tristessa,* and was where Kerouac wrote his long work of jazz poetry *Mexico City Blues,* as well as two other novels.

Recent decades have brought some fine new English-language novels set in Mexico. Cormac McCarthy's marvelous *All the Pretty Horses* is the laconic, tense, poetic tale of three young latter-day cowboys riding south of the border. *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain* completed McCarthy's Border Trilogy. James Maw's *Year of the Jaguar* (1996) catches the feel of Mexican travel superbly, taking its youthful English protagonist from the US border to Chiapas in an exciting search for a father he has never met. Australian Meaghan Delahunt's *In the Casa Azul* (2002) revolves around a Mexico City fling between Frida Kahlo and Russian Leon Trotsky, against the canvas of Trotsky's mortal struggle with his Soviet rival Stalin.

For nonfiction travel writing set in Mexico, see p34.

Nearly all traditional dances require special colorful costumes, sometimes including masks. The Danza de las Plumas and the Danza de los Quetzales (Quetzal Dance), from Puebla state, both feature enormous feathered headdresses or shields.

Today some of these dances are performed outside their sacred context, as simple spectacles. The Ballet Folklórico (p184) in Mexico City brings together traditional dances from all over the country in a spectacular stage show. Other folkloric dance performances can be seen in several cities and at festivals such as the Oaxaca's July Guelaguetza (p727).

LATIN DANCE

Caribbean and South American dances are highly popular in Mexico. This is tropical ballroom dancing to percussion-heavy, infectiously rhythmic music. The capital city has numerous clubs and large dance halls devoted to this scene (see p185), often hosting bands from the Caribbean or South America. One of the more formal, old-fashioned varieties of Latin dance is the elegant *danzón,* originally from Cuba and associated mostly with the port city of Veracruz. *Cumbia,* from Colombia but now with its adopted home in Mexico City, is livelier, more flirtatious and less structured. It rests on thumping bass lines with brass, guitars, mandolins and sometimes marimbas.

Salsa developed in New York when jazz met *son,* and cha-cha and rumba came from Cuba and Puerto Rico. Musically it boils down to brass (with trumpet solos), piano, percussion, singer and chorus – the dance is a hot one with a lot of exciting turns. Merengue, mainly from the Dominican Republic, is a *cumbia*–salsa blend with a hopping step; the rhythm catches

the shoulders, the arms go up and down. The music is strong on maracas, and the musicians go for puffed-up sleeves.

FOLK ART

Popularte (www.uv.mx/popularte) provides an online introduction to Mexican *artesanías,* albeit with slightly confusing navigation.

Mexicans' skill with their hands and their love of color, beauty, fun and tradition are expressed everywhere in their myriad appealing *artesanías* (handicrafts). The 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, and many modern craft techniques, designs and materials are easily traced to pre-Hispanic origins. Selling folk art to tourists and collectors has been an ever-growing business for Mexican artisans since before WWII.

TEXTILES

If you get out to some of Mexico's indigenous villages you'll be stunned by the variety of intensely colorful, intricately decorated everyday attire, differing from area to area and often village to village. Traditional costume – more widely worn by women than men – serves as a mark of the community to which a person belongs. Some garments are woven or embroidered with webs of animal, human, plant and mythical shapes that can take months to complete.

Diamond shapes on some *huipiles* from San Andrés Larrainzar, in Chiapas, represent the universe of the villagers' Maya ancestors, who believed that the earth was a cube and the sky had four corners.

Four main types of women's garments have been in use since long before the Spanish conquest. A long, sleeveless tunic *(huipil)* is found mainly in the southern half of the country. The *enredo* is a wraparound skirt, almost invisible if worn beneath a long *huipil*. The *enredo* is held in place by a *faja* (waist sash). The *quechquémitl* is a shoulder cape with an opening for the head, found mainly in the center and north of Mexico.

Spanish missionaries introduced blouses, which are now often embroidered with just as much care and detail as the more traditional garments. Also dating from Spanish times is the *rebozo,* a long shawl that may cover the shoulders or head or be used for carrying. The male equivalent of the *rebozo* is the sarape, a blanket with an opening for the head.

The basic materials of indigenous weaving are cotton and wool, though synthetic fibers are now common too. Dye, too, is often synthetic today, but natural dyes are still in use or are being revived – deep blues from the indigo plant; reds and browns from various woods; reds, pinks and purples from the cochineal insect (chiefly used in Oaxaca state).

The Crafts of Mexico is a gorgeously illustrated coffee-table volume by Margarita de Orellana and Albertio Ruy Sánchez, editors of the superb magazine *Artes de México,* focusing on ceramics and textiles.

The basic indigenous weavers' tool – used only by women – is the *telar de cintura* (back-strap loom) on which the warp (long) threads are stretched between two horizontal bars, one of which is fixed to a post or tree, while the other is attached to a strap that goes around the weaver's lower back; the weft (cross) threads are then woven in. A variety of sophisticated techniques is used to weave amazing patterns into the cloth. *Huipiles* in the southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas are among Mexico's most intricate and eye-catching garments.

One textile art that's practised by men is weaving on a treadle loom, which is operated by foot pedals. The treadle loom can weave wider cloth than the back-strap loom and tends to be used for blankets, rugs, *rebozos,* sarapes and skirt material. It allows for great intricacy in design. Mexico's most famous rug-weaving village is Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca.

The 'yarn paintings' of the Huichol people – created by pressing strands of wool or acrylic yarn onto a wax-covered board – depict scenes resem-

bling visions experienced under the influence of the drug peyote, which is central to Huichol culture.

CERAMICS

Because of its durability, pottery tells us much of what we know about Mexico's ancient cultures. Today the country still has many small-scale potters' workshops turning out everything from plain cooking pots to elaborate decorative pieces that are true works of art.

One highly attractive variety of Mexican pottery is Talavera, made chiefly in Puebla and Dolores Hidalgo and characterized by bright colors (blue and yellow are prominent) and floral designs. The Guadalajara suburbs of Tonalá and Tlaquepaque are the country's most renowned pottery centers, producing a wide variety of ceramics. In northern Mexico the villagers of Mata Ortiz make a range of beautiful earthenware, drawing on the techniques and designs of pre-Hispanic Paquimé, similar to some of the native American pottery of the US southwest. Another distinctive Mexican ceramic form is the *árbol de la vida* (tree of life). These large, elaborate, candelabra-like objects are molded by hand and decorated with numerous tiny figures of people, animals, plants and so on. The Garden of Eden is one common subject. Some of the best are made in the towns of Acatlán de Osorio and Izúcar de Matamoros, in Puebla state, and Metepec, in the state of México. Metepec is also the source of colorful clay suns.

The areas producing the most exciting *artesanías* are mostly those with prominent indigenous populations, in states such as Chiapas, Guerrero, México, Michoacán, Oaxaca, Puebla and Sonora.

MASKS

For millennia Mexicans have worn masks for magical purposes in dances, ceremonies and shamanistic rites: the wearer temporarily becomes the creature, person or deity represented by the mask. Today, these dances often have a curious mixture of pre-Hispanic and Christian or Spanish themes. A huge range of masks exists, and you can admire their artistry at museums in cities such as San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Morelia and Colima, and at shops and markets around the country. The southern state of Guerrero has probably the broadest range of fine masks.

Wood is the basic material of most masks, but papier-mâché, clay, wax and leather are also used. Mask-makers often paint or embellish their masks with real teeth, hair, feathers or other adornments. 'Tigers,' often looking more like jaguars, are common, as are other animals and birds, and also Christ, devils and Europeans with comically pale, wide-eyed, mustachioed features.

Today, masks are also made for hanging on walls.

Chronicle Books publishes beautiful photo essays on Mexican style and crafts, including *Mexicolor* by Melba Levick, Tony Cohan and Masako Takahashi (on Mexican design) and *In a Mexican Garden* by Melba Levick and Gina Hyams.

LACQUERWARE & WOODWORK

Gourds, the hard shells of certain squash-type fruits, have been used in Mexico since antiquity as bowls, cups and small storage vessels. Today they also serve as children's rattles, maracas and even hats. The most eye-catching decoration technique is lacquering, in which the gourd is coated with layers of paste or paint, each left to harden before the next is applied. The final layer is painted with the artisan's chosen design, then coated with oil varnish. All this makes the gourd nonporous and, to some extent, heat resistant.

Most lacquerware you'll see in Mexico today is pine or a sweetly scented wood from remote Olinalá in Guerrero. Olinalá boxes, trays, chests and furniture are lacquered by the *rayado* method, in which designs are created by scraping off part of the top coat of paint to expose a different-colored layer below.

Among Mexico's finest wooden crafts are the polished ironwood carvings of the Seri people of Sonora, who work the hard wood into dramatic human, animal and sea-creature shapes (see boxed text, p329). Also attractive are

the brightly painted copal dragons and other imaginary beasts, known as *alebrijes,* produced by villagers around Oaxaca city.

JEWELRY & METALWORK

Some ancient Mexicans were expert metalsmiths and jewelers, but the Spanish banned indigenous people from working gold and silver for a time during the colonial period. Indigenous artisanship was revived in the 20th century, most famously in Taxco, by the American William Spratling, who initiated a silver-craft industry that now supplies more than 300 shops in the town. Silver is much more widely available than gold in Mexico, and is fashioned in all manner of styles and designs, with artistry ranging from the dully imitative to the superb.

Chloe Sayer's fascinating *Arts and Crafts of Mexico* traces the evolution of crafts from pre-Hispanic times to the present, with many fine photos.

Precious stones are less common than precious metals. True jade, beloved of ancient Mexicans, is now a rarity – most 'jade' jewelry is actually jadeite, serpentine or calcite.

Oaxaca city is the center of a thriving craft in tinplate, stamped into low relief and painted in hundreds of colorful designs.

RETABLOS

An engaging Mexican custom is to adorn the sanctuaries of saints or holy images with *retablos* (also called *exvotos*), small paintings giving thanks to a saint for answered prayers. Typically done on small sheets of tin, but sometimes on glass, wood or cardboard, they depict these miracles in touchingly literal images painted by their beneficiaries. They may show a cyclist's hair's-breadth escape from a hurtling bus, or an immigrant worker's safe return home from the US, beside a representation of the saint and a brief message along the lines of 'Thanks to San Miguel for taking care of me – José Suárez, June 6, 2006.' The Basílica de Guadalupe (p162) in Mexico City, the Santuario de Plateros (p593) near Fresnillo in Zacatecas, and the church at Real de Catorce (p609) in San Luis Potosí state all have fascinating collections of *retablos*.

See a great collection of modern *retablos* and *exvotos* in *Contemporary Mexican Votive Painting* by Alfredo Vilchis Roque.

Food & Drink

Mauricio Velázquez de León

In Mexico we love food, especially our own. When visiting the country you will soon get a sense of how important food is in our lives. Ask a group of Mexicans where to find, say, the best *carnitas* (braised pork) in Mexico City or the best *mole* in Oaxaca and you are up for a passionate, lengthy and well-informed debate that will fill a notebook with names of places that you *must* go to and specialties that you *must* try. Interestingly, if you ask who is the best cook they know, they all will be in agreement: *mi madre* (my mother). Another point most Mexicans agree with is that Mexican cuisine has little to do with what is served as Mexican fare in restaurants outside the country. For many visitors their first experience with real Mexican food will be a surprise. There will be no big hats and piñatas hanging from the ceiling, no flavored margaritas, oversized burritos, or cheese nachos on the menu. The food will be fresh, simple and, frequently, locally grown – and, most likely, somebody's mom will be running the kitchen.

During your visit you'll find that the ingredients and methods are far-reaching and varied, and closely connected with the history of each of the country's regions and the character of its peoples. Take a look at the history of the Mayas and you'll see that corn plays a main role. Should you read about the gargantuan markets in Aztec cities you will share the amazement of the Spanish conquistadores. In Diego Rivera's murals you will discover the vast range of Mexican produce. Not surprisingly, one of Mexico's best-known contemporary films, *Like Water for Chocolate*, is based on the power of food. So, if you want to know Mexico and its people, to understand its history and its regions, you ought to try the food.

When the Spanish arrived in Mexico in 1519 they found that the Aztec, Maya, Mixtec and other Mesoamerican civilizations had built a horticultural system that produced different strains of beans, squashes, chilies, sweet potatoes, tomatoes and the small-husked green tomatoes known as tomatillos. Avocados, papayas and pineapples were plentiful, and so was an incredible variety of fish. Turkey, duck, quail and venison were slowly simmered in sauces using seeds, nuts and chilies. Moreover, the conquistadores found that a wild maize had been domesticated into corn, creating the building blocks of an entire civilization's cuisine that lives to this day. The Spaniards, in turn, brought spices like cinnamon, black pepper and clove, old-world staples like wheat, rice, onions and grapes, and introduced hogs, cattle and chickens to the new continent. For the next 500 years, the Mexican cuisine evolved into what we know today. Dishes such as *pipián,* a sauce thickened with pumpkin seeds, chilies and tomatoes, stayed the same, while others, such as *Huachinango a la veracruzana,* a dish of red snapper cooked in a sauce with tomatoes, jalapeño chilies, cinnamon, capers, olives and white

Mauricio was born in Mexico City, where he was given boiled chicken feet and toasted corn tortillas to sooth his teething pains. Mauricio has worked for a variety of newspapers and magazines, and his food writing has been widely published. He currently works in New York City as an editor, writer and father of twin toddlers, whose teething pains were soothed with toasted corn tortillas.

THE LADIES BEHIND THE COMAL (GRIDDLE)

The Mexican kitchen is very much a matriarchal place where woman have run the show for centuries. Currently, the most visible women cooks are cookbook author and owner of Izote restaurant (p177) Patricia Quintana, chef and owner of El Bajío restaurant (p177) Carmen 'Titita' Ramirez, author and restaurateur Alicia Gironella and British-born bestselling author Diana Kennedy, but it is in the hands and memories of ordinary Mexican women that the food of this country is practiced and preserved every day.

wine, became classic Mexican dishes by blending indigenous and Spanish ingredients and techniques.

By 1864, Mexico's culinary map was again redefined, this time by the invasion of French troops. The French army's goal was to collect part of the debt Mexico owed in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, and Napoleon III sent Maximilian of Hapsburg to rule as emperor. Maximilian and his wife, Carlota, brought to Mexico many customs of French society – architecture, fashion and food – and while privileged Mexicans quickly embraced this chic cultural influx, the majority of the population received the invaders violently. Within four years they had killed Maximilian, forced Carlota back to Europe (where she went insane) and regained control of the country. But what Mexican patriots revolted against, Mexican cooks embraced – when the French left, their cooking techniques stayed. Today it is natural to see a cook in a Mexican kitchen preparing a number of dishes using a *baño maría* (bain-marie) or filling puff pastry shells to make savory *bolovanes* (vol-au-vent). The famous Mexican *tortas* are made with a type of bread that in Mexico City we call *bolillo* and in Guadalajara it is called *birote,* but any foodie outside Mexico will call French Roll.

In Teotihuacán (present-day Mexico City) chocolate was considered the 'drink of the gods,' and it was called *tlaquetzalli* or 'precious thing' in the Náhuatl language. Chocolate was so valued by the Aztecs that the cacao bean, from which chocolate is derived, was also used as a form of currency.

STAPLES & SPECIALTIES

The staples of Mexican food are corn, an array of dry and fresh chilies and beans. Corn's main manifestation is in the tortilla but, according to historian Eusebio Dávalos Hurtado there are more than 700 dishes that use corn as a base in Mexico.

Contrary to popular belief, not all food in Mexico is spicy, at least not for the regular palate. Chilies are used as flavoring ingredients and to provide intensity in sauces, *moles* and *pipiáns,* and many appreciate their depth over their piquancy. But beware. Many dishes indeed have a kick, reaching daredevil levels in some cases. The *habanero* chili in the Yucatan is the most spicy pepper in the world, and the *chile de árbol* used in the famous *tortas ahogadas* (drowned *tortas*) in Guadalajara can be terribly fierce. A good rule of thumb is that when chilies are cooked and incorporated into the dishes as sauces they tend to be on the mild side, but when they are prepared for salsas or relishes, intended for use as condiments over tacos and other foods, they can be really hot.

The 20th-anniversary edition of *Authentic Mexican* by chef Rick Bayless is a comprehensive and entertaining resource for Mexican cooking aficionados.

There are other Mexican food staples that give this food its classic flavoring. Among them are spices like cinnamon, clove and cumin, and herbs such as thyme, oregano and, most importantly, cilantro and *epazote. Epazote* may be the unsung hero of Mexican cooking. This pungent-smelling herb (called pigweed or Jerusalem oak in the US) is used for flavoring beans, soups, stews and certain *moles*. You may never see it in your dish, as it is removed when the cooking is finished.

Specialties vary dramatically from region to region, but there is no doubt that *mole* (see the boxed text, p94) and *antojitos* are in the center of what represents Mexican cooking. The problem with the word *antojitos* is that it can encompass everything, as the word *antojo* translates as 'a whim, a sudden craving.' Hence an *antojito* is a little whim but, as any Mexican will quickly point out, it is not just a snack. In my view, *antojitos* are more like the Spanish tapas. You can have an entire meal of *antojitos,* or have a couple as appetizers, or yes, eat one as a *tentempíe* (quick bite), before hopping in the subway or while standing outside a bar. The American award-wining chef and author Rick Bayless has a great way to define *antojitos* by grouping them according to the one component present in all: corn masa (dough). Using this criterion we can say that there are eight types of *antojitos*: tacos, quesadillas, enchiladas, tostadas, *sopes*, *gorditas*, *chilaquiles* and *tamales*.

Tacos The quintessential culinary fare in Mexico can be made of any cooked meat, fish or vegetable wrapped in a tortilla, with a dash of salsa and garnished with onion and cilantro. Soft corn tortillas are used to wrap grilled meats in *tacos al carbón,* an array of stews in *tacos de guisado* or with griddle-cooked meats and vegetables in *tacos a la plancha*. When tacos are filled with chicken, barbacoa, potatoes or cheese and lightly fried they are called *tacos dorados*. If you are in northern Mexico, chances are you will find tacos with flour tortilla (*tortilla de harina*) and the fillings will be more meat-based than vegetarian.

Quesadillas Fold a tortilla with cheese, heat it on a griddle and you have a quesadilla. (*Queso* means cheese, hence the name.) But real quesadillas are much more than that. In restaurants and street stalls quesadillas are stuffed pockets made with raw corn masa that is lightly fried or griddled until crisp. They can be stuffed with *chorizo* and cheese, squash blossoms, mushrooms with garlic, *chicharrón,* beans, stewed chicken or meat.

Enchiladas In Spanish *enchilar* means to put chili over something; therefore enchiladas are a group of three or four lightly fried tortillas filled with chicken, cheese or eggs and covered with a cooked salsa, such as tomatillo (*enchiladas verdes*), tomato (*enchiladas rojas*) or enchiladas with *mole*. Enchiladas are usually a main dish, and can also be baked, like the famous *enchiladas suizas* (Swiss-style enchiladas).

Tostadas Tortillas that have been baked or fried until they get crisp and and are then cooled. The idea is that in this state they can hold a variety of toppings. *Tostadas de pollo* are a beautiful layering of beans, chicken, cream, shredded lettuce, onion, avocado and *queso fresco* (a fresh cheese).

Sopes Small masa shells, 2 or 3 inches in diameter, that are shaped by hand and cooked on a griddle with a thin layer of beans, salsa and cheese. *Chorizo* is also a common topping for *sopes*.

Gorditas Round masa cakes that are baked until they puff. Sometimes *gorditas* are filled with a thin layer of fried black or pinto beans, or even fava beans. In some regions, *gorditas* have an oval shape and are known as *tlacoyos*.

Chilaquiles Started as a way to utilize leftover tortillas and typically served as breakfast. Corn tortillas are cut in triangles and fried until crispy. At this point they are indeed tortilla chips, or *totopos,* as they are known in Mexico. When cooked in a tomatillo (*chilaquiles verdes*) or tomato salsa (*chilaquiles rojos*) they become soft and are then topped with shredded cheese, sliced onions and sour cream. If you want a hearty breakfast, order them topped with shredded chicken (*chilaquiles con pollo*) or topped with two fried eggs (*chilaquiles con huevo*).

Tamales Made with masa mixed with lard, stuffed with stewed meat, fish or vegetables, wrapped and steamed. The word comes from the Náhuatl word *tamalli* and refers to anything wrapped up. Every region in the country has its own special *tamal*, the most famous being the Oaxacan-style tamales with *mole* and wrapped in banana leaves, the Mexico City *tamales* with chicken and green tomatillo sauce wrapped in corn husks, and the Yucatecan style, made with chicken marinated in *achiote* (annatto paste) and wrapped in banana leaves.

MARKETS

Markets are perfect places to experiment the Mexican way of life and munch on some really good *antojitos*. You can find a *mercado* in any city, but the food offerings will vary from region to region. Markets tend to have a specific section for prepared foods where you can sit around a small counter or at large communal tables. In the gargantuan Mercado de la Merced in Mexico City (p189; covering 113 acres, it's the largest market in Latin America) the best *antojito* may be the *huarache,* a foot-long tortilla shaped like the shoe for which it is named, grilled and topped with salsa, onions, cheese and a choice of *chorizo*, steak, squash blossoms and more. The *huarache* competitor can be found in the markets of Oaxaca City where large flat tortillas called *tlayudas* are spread with refried beans and topped with Oaxacan string cheese, salsa and pork strips. In the street that separates the Mercado Juárez and Mercado 20 de Noviembre in Oaxaca you may want to try the *chapulines,* or grasshoppers, fried with garlic, two types of chili and lime. The Mercado San Juan de Dios (p540) in Guadalajara covers 500,000 sq ft and has three levels, more than 70 entrances, and one of the most diverse food sections of any Mexican

Josefina Velázquez de León is considered the mother of Mexican cuisine. Born in Aguascalientes in 1899, Doña Josefina ran a successful culinary school in Mexico City and wrote more than 140 cookbooks. Her most ambitious project was her landmark book *Platillos Regionales de la Republica Mexicana* (Regional Dishes of the Mexican Republic), which is widely considered to be the first book to collect Mexico's enormously regional cuisine in a single volume. You can check Josefina's work at www.josefina-food.com and http://josefina-food.blogspot.com/.

MULLI (MOLE)

Zarela Martinez, the Mexican chef, author and owner of the eponymous restaurant in New York once told me that in *mole* the sauce is the dish. What she meant was that when we eat *mole* we eat it because we want the sauce. The meat – whether it be chicken, turkey or pork – plays a secondary role. The word *mole* comes from the Náhuatl word *molli* or *mulli*. A complex sauce made with nuts, chilies and spices, *mole* defines Mexican cuisine. Although *mole* is often called chocolate sauce, this is not accurate as only a very small percentage of *moles* include this ingredient. The confusion is somewhat understandable since the recipe for *mole poblano, mole* from the state of Puebla, the most widely known *mole* in the country (and around the world), includes a small amount of chocolate. But most Mexicans would agree that when it comes to *mole*, Oaxaca is the place to go. It's known as the 'Land of Seven *Moles*': they include *mole negro* (black *mole*), which uses a chili called *chilhuacate negro; almendrado* (thickened with almonds and *chile ancho,* dried peppers); *mancha manteles* (tablecloth-stainer) with *chile ancho,* pineapples and bananas; and *mole verde* (green *mole*), a delicacy thickened with corn masa and made with white beans, tomatillos, *epazote* and *hoja santa,* an indigenous herb from Mexico that adds a beautiful anise flavor to it.

Eating good *mole* is a fantastic experience. The nuts, seeds and dry chilies used in *moles* are toasted and ground to release their aroma. Fresh chilies, tomatoes, tomatillos and garlic are also slow-roasted, giving the sauce a great smoky flavor. Fresh herbs are quickly fried and mixed with the rest of the ingredients, which have been pureed. Then the *mole* is left to simmer until it thickens. This long process gives *moles* a great depth and many layers of flavor. *Moles* can be spicy or sweet, or they can be spicy and sweet at the same time.

market. Stands selling an array of tacos and *tortas* abound, but there are also many stalls selling Chinese food and incredible and delicious seafood. Nothing shouts out to you in this *mercado* as loud as the *birria* stands serving the goat stew that is quintessential Guadalajara. Try a taco, or two!

DRINKS

Tequila

In Mexico we love tequila. We drink it on large and small national holidays, at funerals and anniversaries, at casual lunches and at dinner with friends. Legally, tequila is our champagne. All tequila has to come from the state of Jalisco and is protected with a DO (Designation of Origin) by the Consejo Regulador del Tequila (Tequila Regulate Council). This organization ensures that all tequila sold throughout the world comes from this state in central south Mexico. This arid area with highland soil creates the perfect conditions for the blue agave, the plant from which tequila is distilled, to grow. No tequila made in China (or elsewhere), *por favor*. We drink it because we are proud of its Mexican provenance, and because we really like its taste.

Taste is a key word when it comes to tequila. Visitors interested in discovering its real taste should stay away from the image of big testosterone-driven machos gulping shot after shot of tequila and throw away its reputation as an quick intoxicator. Tequila has become more and more sophisticated and today is considered a refined drink that rivals an imported single-malt whiskey or a quality cognac, and not only in price but also in its smooth, warm taste. Today's finest tequilas are meant to be enjoyed in a small glass, with pleasure, in tiny sips.

The process of making tequila starts by removing the *piña* (heart) of the blue agave plant. This *piña* is then steamed for up to 36 hours, a process that softens the fibers and releases the *aguamiel,* or honey water. This liquid is funneled into large tanks where it is fermented. Fermentation determines whether the final product will be 100% agave or *mixto* (mixed). The highest-

quality tequila is made from fermenting and then distilling only *aguamiel* mixed with some water. In tequilas *mixtos* the *aguamiel* is mixed with other sugars, usually cane sugar with water. When tequila is 100% agave it will say so on the label. If it doesn't say 100% it is a *mixto*.

The next step in the tequila-making process is to distill the *aguamiel* and store it in barrels for aging. The aging is important, especially for today's fancier tequilas, because it determines the color, taste, quality and price. Silver or *blanco* (white) is clear and is aged for no more than 60 days. Tequila *blanco* is used primarily for mixing and blends particularly well into fruit-based drinks. Tequila *reposado* (rested) is aged from two to nine months. It has a smooth taste and light gold color. Tequila *añejo* (old) is aged in wooden barrels for a minimum of 12 months. The best quality *añejos* are aged up to four years. Tequila *añejo* has a velvety flavor and a deep dark color. These three kinds of tequila are equally popular in Mexico, and it is entirely a matter of personal taste that determines which one to drink.

Although it is commonly referred as a cactus, the agave is classified in its own family, *agavaceae,* which consists of more than 120 species. In Mexico the agave plant is known as *maguey*.

Drinking tequila straight from a small glass is still the most traditional way, and although the old technique of using lime and salt is still popular there are other options. In many places tequila is served alongside a small glass of *sangrita*. *Sangrita* (not to be confused with Spanish sangria, made with wine) is a bright-red chaser made with tomato juice, orange or grapefruit juice, a dash or Worchester and Tabasco, a bit of grenadine or sugar, and salt. *Sangrita* has a sharp tart flavor that blends well with the smokiness of tequila. If you want to go one step further order a *bandera* (flag), and you will be served one small glass with lime, one with tequila, and another one with *sangrita*. The presentation resembles the colors of the Mexican flag (green, white and red) and the experience of drinking one sip of each at a time is like no other. The practice of serving chilled tequila is becoming more and more popular in Mexico. Bars and restaurants keep bottles in the freezer and serve it directly to your glass on the table. Straight cold tequila is creamy and smooth, and it is a great refreshment when eating outdoors in warm weather.

The margarita, of course, has done more for the popularity of tequila than any other cocktail, and you will find this sweet-and-sour beverage in every tourist place in the country. But the margaritas are far from being the only tequila cocktail in Mexico. A *paloma* (dove) mixes tequila, lime juice, and grapefruit soda, while a Bloody María uses tequila to create a version of a spicy Bloody Mary. In trendy bars you will find an array of martinis using tequila in lieu of vodka or gin.

Mezcal

Mezcal is tequila's brother. Like tequila, it is distilled from the agave plant, but *mezcal* doesn't have to come from blue agave, or from the tequila-producing areas of Jalisco. In other words, all tequila is *mezcal*, but not all *mezcal* is tequila. Since *mezcal* can be made with any type of agave plant, it can also be produced throughout the country, where sometimes it is known by other names, such as *bacanora* in Sonora State or *sotol* in Chihuahua. But unlike tequila, the *piña* from the agave is roasted (not steamed) in fire pits, giving it a great smoky flavor.

American-born Cristina Potters is a writer and blogger living in Morelia, Michoacán. Her blog (www.mexicocooks.typepad.com) is the most compelling and well-informed blog about Mexican food and culture to be found on the web. Cristina writes weekly about food and drink, art, culture and travel.

In Oaxaca, the '*Mezcal* Capital of the World,' the spirit is traditionally served in small earthenware cups with lime wedges and *sal de gusano,* an orange-colored salt that has been spiced with smoked agave worms. These are the same legendary worms that you find in some bottles of *mezcal*, and they are actually the larvae of moths that live on the plant. There are many legends about why the worm is added to the bottle, but all of them are too vague to single one out. What is irrefutable is the fact that consuming the worm is completely harmless. Another fact is that high-end *mezcals* don't include a worm in their bottles.

Pulque

If tequila and *mezcal* are brothers, then pulque would be the father of Mexican spirits. Two thousand years ago the Aztecs started to extract the juice of the agave plant to produce a milky, slightly alcoholic drink that they called *octli poliqhui*. *Octli* had religious significance, and consumption was limited to specific holidays and rituals when large tubs were set up in public squares. When the Spanish arrived in Mexico they started to call the drink pulque. Early attempts to distill pulque were unsuccessful, and the resulting spirit was harsh and unpleasant. It was soon discovered, however, that cooking the agave produced a sweet sap. After fermentation and distillation this juice became what we know today as *mezcal*.

English sailors coined the term 'cocktail' upon discovering that their drinks in the Yucatán port of Campeche were stirred with the thin, dried roots of a plant called *cola de gallo*, which translates as 'cock's tail'.

Although pulque has lower alcohol content than tequila or *mezcal* it is much harder on the palate. Because it is not distilled, it retains an earthy, vegetal taste and has a thick, foamy consistency that some people find unpleasant. In some places it is mixed with fruit juices such as mango or strawberry to make it more palatable. When pulque is mixed with juices it is called *curado*.

Pulque flavor changes dramatically over short periods, and therefore is a not easy to store and preserve. Some attempts at preserving and canning pulque have been developed with very little success. This is why pulque is usually sold today as it has been for hundreds of years: directly in bulk from the *tinacal* (a large vat) or in bars called *pulquerías*.

Beer

For many visitors, 'Una cerveza por favor' is among the first the phrases they learn in Spanish. For some, it is their most commonly used phrase while in Mexico. This makes sense. Mexican cerveza is big, and although you don't need to travel to the country to try it (Mexican beers are among the best-selling brands all over the world), drinking beer here makes a big difference because Mexican beer is a great match with, well, Mexican food! Most Mexican brands are light and quench beautifully the spiciness of a plate of enchiladas. They are also great companion for the thousands of *fútbol* (soccer) matches that we follow in this country with religious zeal.

Cantina El Nivel holds Mexico City liquor license number 1, dating back to 1855. It has remained an unofficial requirement for Mexico's president-elect to get drunk there prior to taking office.

Two major breweries dominate the Mexican market. Grupo Modelo, based in Mexico City and Guadalajara, makes twelve brands, among them Corona, Victoria, Modelo Especial, Pacifico, Montejo and Negra Modelo. Although Corona is the fifth best-selling beer in the world, beer aficionados regard Negra Modelo, a darker beer, as the brewery's jewel. In the north of the country, in the industrial city of Monterrey, Cervecería Cuauhtémoc Moctezuma produces Sol, Carta Blanca, Dos Equis, Superior, Tecate and Bohemia, among others. With its gold foil wrapping, Bohemia is marketed as the premium Mexican beer. It competes head-to-head with Negra Modelo and is also popular among experts. But the array of Mexican beer allows for drinking them in many different environments. A day on the beach calls for a Corona, a Superior or a Pacifico. Victoria and Montejo are good matches for seafood, and meat goes really well with Modelo Especial and Carta Blanca. A night in a bar feels very Dos Equis to me, and a Bohemia or Negra Modelo would pair perfectly with a very good, decadent dinner.

The practice of a beer served with a wedge of lime in its mouth is not as common in Mexico as it is in foreign bars, and you will find that establishments that serve lime with your beer would most likely do it on a small plate. There are many legends around the origin of the practice. Some say that it began as a way of keeping the flies away from the bottles, others maintain that it appeared as a way to clean the rustiness on the mouth of the bottle caused by the old metal caps. In any case some lighter Mexican brands can

benefit from the addition of a squeeze of lime, but most Mexican beers don't need anything.

Wine

Now may be the right time to expand your Spanish vocabulary to include 'Una copa de vino por favor.' Although the wine industry is still much smaller than that of tequila or beer, Mexican wines are leaping forward at a great rate.

Mexico became the first wine-producing region in the Americas after the Spaniards brought the first grapes in 1524. But by the mid-1600s Spain started controlling wine production in order to protect its home industry, and in 1699 winemaking was forbidden in Mexico. An exception was made for the Catholic Church, which continued using wine for the communion, and was allowed to make homegrown wine for it. Mexican wineries began using their grapes for brandy. Since the 1990s, challenged in part by the success of Californian, Chilean and Argentinean wines, Mexican producers began yielding good wines in nine regions, from Queretaro to Sonora, with the best coming from the north of Baja California. The two larger wineries in Mexico, Pedro Domeq and LA Cetto, offer solid table wines and some premium labels like Chateu Domecq and Limited Reserve Nebbiolo. Many 'boutique wineries' with names like Monte Xanic, Casa de Piedra and Casa Valmar are also producing great wine in smaller quantities.

Be aware that wine consumption in Mexico is still pretty much restricted to upper-class establishments, especially outside the larger cities and wine-producing regions. Because most waiters are not much help in recommending wines, the best way to discover new Mexican wines is by conducting your own tasting. Ask for a small taste before ordering a glass or committing to the full bottle. Most establishments will try to help you decide.

Nonalcoholic Drinks

The great variety of fruits, plants and herbs that grow in this country are a perfect fit for the kind of nonalcoholic drinks Mexicans love. All over the country you will find classic *juguerías,* street stalls or small establishments selling all kinds of fresh-squeezed orange, tangerine, strawberry, papaya or carrot juices. These places also sell *licuados,* a Mexican version of a milk-shake that normally includes banana, milk, honey and fruit. Many of these places serve incredibly creative combinations, such as *nopal* (cactus leaves), pineapple, lemon and orange, or vanilla, banana and avocado.

In *taquerías* and *fondas* you will find *aguas frescas,* or fresh waters. Some of them resemble iced teas. In *agua de tamarindo* the tamarind pods are boiled and then mixed with sugar before being chilled, while *agua de jamaica* is made with dried hibiscus leaves. Others like *horchata* are made with melon seeds and/or rice. *Agua de chia* (a plant from the salvia family) is typical during holy week celebrations in Chiapas, and in the Yucatan Peninsula the

MY COLD BEER

In Mexico we frequently call our beer *chela,* and by all accounts this moniker is the origin of the famous *micheladas* (*mi chela helada,* meaning 'my cold beer'). *Micheladas* are prepared chilled beers, and they range from really simple drinks to complex cocktails. The basic *michelada* will be a mix of the juice of one or two Key limes on a previously chilled mug, a few ice cubes, a dash of salt and a Mexican cold beer. In many places they are served with a few drops of hot sauce, Worcestershire sauce and Maggi seasoning. Don't be surprised if you see *micheladas* with Clamato or tomato juice, or even with a couple of ounces of tequila or rum in addition to the beer: *micheladas* are a blank canvas.

leaves from the native shrub *chaya* (also known as tree spinach) are mixed with lime, honey and pineapple to create *agua de chaya*.

CELEBRATIONS

Food and fiestas go hand-to-hand in Mexico. They can be national holidays, religious festivals, local fiestas or personal celebrations, but chances are you will get caught in one of them during your visit. During national holidays food is always present, but toasting with tequila is a prerequisite, especially during Día de la Independencia (September 16), which celebrates independence from Spain. The largest religious festivity is the Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe (December 12), where *tamales*, *mole* and an array of *antojitos* are traditional fare. During Lent, meatless dishes such as *romeritos* (a wild plant that resembles rosemary served with dried shrimp, potatoes and *mole*) show up on most menus. On Día de los Santos Reyes (January 6), the day when the Three Wise Men arrived bearing their treasured gifts for the Baby Jesus, we celebrate by eating *rosca de reyes,* a large oval sweetbread decorated with candied fruit. The *rosca* is served with corn *tamales* and hot chocolate. During Christmas, a traditional Mexican menu includes turkey, *bacalao* (dry codfish cooked with olives, capers, onions and tomatoes) and *romeritos*. Family and personal celebrations such as *bodas* (weddings), *cumpleaños* (birthdays) and La Fiesta de Quince Años (a girl's 15th birthday) are celebrated in a big way in Mexico. Plenty of food and drinks are served, and in some occasions the fiesta goes on for an entire weekend. But there is no celebration in Mexico with more mystique than El Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead), held on the second day of November. Its origins date back to the Aztecs, and it celebrates the passing of relatives and loved ones. By celebrating death we salute life, and we do it the way we celebrate everything else, with food, drinks and music. An altar to death is set up in a house or, as some families prefer, in the graveyard. It is decorated with bright *cempasuchil* (marigold) flowers, plates of *tamales*, sugar-shaped skulls and *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead; a loaf made with egg yolks, *mezcal* and dry fruits), and the favorite foods of the deceased are laid out so that they feel welcome upon their return.

Under the Jaguar Sun by Italian writer Italo Calvino is a compelling account of a husband and wife discovering Mexico and its cuisine. The couple in the story becomes so enamored of the cuisine that their passion is transferred from the bedroom to the dining table.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

It's easy to find a place to eat in Mexico. From an early snack at a small *puesto* (street or market stall) to a lavish late dinner at a fine restaurant, food seems to always be available. One thing you should know, though, is that mealtimes in Mexico are different from what you might be used to. *Desayuno* (breakfast) is usually served in restaurants and *cafeterías* from 8:30am to 11am, and it tends to be on the heavy side. Those who have a light breakfast or skipped it altogether can have an *almuerzo* (a type of brunch) or an *antojito* or other quick bite. *Taquerías* (places specializing in tacos), *tortérias* (small establishments selling *tortas*) and *loncherías* (places that serve light meals) are good options for an *almuerzo*. In Mexico the main meal is the *comida*. It is usually served from 2pm to 4:30pm in homes, restaurants and cafés. Places called *fondas* are small, family-run eateries that serve *comida corrida,* an inexpensive prix-fix menu that includes a soup, rice, a main dish, beverage and dessert. In some small towns people will have a *merienda,* a light snack between the *comida* and *la cena* (supper), but in most large cities people are too busy working or commuting and don't eat again until dinner time. Frequently dinner is not served until 9pm, and it is usually light when eaten at home. In restaurants dinner can be a complete meal that lasts until midnight.

When we go out to a bar, a club or a late movie, we often stop off for a quick taco before returning home. Many famous *taquerías* cater to these hungry insomniacs and don't close until the wee hours. On Fridays and

TIPPING AND TAXES

A mandatory 15% of IVA (or value-added tax) is added to restaurant checks in Mexico, but the *propina* (gratuity) is not. The average tip is 15% to 20%, and although some people argue that the tip should be calculated before IVA, it is just easier to tip the same amount, or a bit more, than the amount marked for the IVA. For instance, in a check that marks IVA 82 pesos, a tip between 80 and 100 pesos would be appropriate.

Saturdays so many customers visit these places that sometimes you have to wait for a table at 3am!

Cantinas are the traditional Mexican watering holes. Until not long ago, women, military personnel and children were not allowed in cantinas, and some cantinas still have a rusted sign stating this rule. Today everybody is allowed, although the more traditional establishments retain a macho edge. Beer, tequila and *cubas* (rum and coke) are served at square tables where patrons play dominos and watch soccer games on large TV screens. Cantinas are famous for serving *botanas* (appetizers) like *quesadillas de papa con guacamole* (potato quesadillas with guacamole) or escargots in *chipotle* sauce.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

In Guadalajara's market there is large sign for an eatery named *Restaurant Vegetariano* (Vegetarian Restaurant) listing some menu items underneath. It has salads, rice, beans, grilled chicken and fish in garlic sauce. This sign shows one of the problems for vegetarians and vegan in Mexico: the concept is not always fully understood. Many Mexicans think of a vegetarian as a person who doesn't eat meat, and by 'meat' they mean red meat. Many more have never heard the word *veganista,* the Spanish term for vegan. The good news is that almost every city, large or small, has real vegetarian restaurants, and their popularity is increasing. Also, many traditional Mexican dishes are vegetarian: *ensalada de nopales* (cactus leaves salad); quesadillas made with mushrooms, cheeses and even flowers like zucchini flowers; *chiles rellenos de queso* (cheese-stuffed poblano chilies); and *arroz a la mexicana* (Mexican-style rice). Be warned, however, that many dishes are prepared using chicken or beef broth, or some kind of animal fat, such as *manteca* (lard). Most waiters will be happy to help you in choosing vegetarian or vegan dishes, but you have to make your requirements clear.

EATING WITH KIDS

In most restaurants in Mexico you will see entire families and their kids eating together, especially at weekends. Waiters are used to accommodating children and will promptly help you with high chairs (*silla para niños* or *silla periquera*), and in some places they will bring crayons or toys to keep them entertained. Across Mexico it is common to see children having dinner in restaurants after 8 or 9pm.

COOKING COURSES

Cooking schools in Mexico can differ greatly depending on their location. A school in Oaxaca would focus on different ingredients and techniques from a school in Monterrey or Sonora.

Mexican-born chef Rose Marie Plaschinski runs **Xilonen** (www.cookinginmexico.com.mx), the school of traditional cuisine, in Guadalajara. Xilonen has full-day and weeklong classes. It also has private lessons for individual and groups, and special classes for culinary professionals.

Cookbook author Susana Trilling operates **Seasons of My Heart** (www.seasonsofmyheart.com) in Rancho Aurora Oaxaca. Susana offers day and long-weekend classes, weeklong courses and culinary tours of the state of Oaxaca and other regions of Mexico.

Closer to Mexico City, in the small village of Tepotztlán, New York native Magda Bogin runs **Cocinar Mexicano** (www.cocinarmexicano.com). The program includes weeklong classes and weekend courses specially designed for travelers.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Knowing at least a few words in Spanish indicates a respect for the locals and their culture, not to mention a willingness to risk embarrassment, and that can make a huge difference.

Useful Phrases

Are you open?
e·*sta* a·*byer*·to — *¿Está abierto?*

When are you open?
kwan·do e·*sta* a·*byer*·to — *¿Cuando está abierto?*

Are you now serving breakfast/lunch/dinner?
a·*o*·ra e·*sta* ser·*vyen*·do de·sa·*yoo*·no/ la ko·*mee*·da/la *se*·na — *¿Ahora, está sirviendo desayuno/ la comida/la cena?*

I'd like to see a menu.
kee·*sye*·ra ver la *kar*·*ta*/el me·*noo* — *Quisiera ver la carta/el menu.*

Do you have a menu in English?
tye·nen oon me·*noo* en een·*gles* — *¿Tienen un menú en inglés?*

Can you recommend something?
pwe·de re·ko·men·*dar* al·*go* — *¿Puede recomendar algo?*

I'm a vegetarian.
soy ve·khe·te·*rya*·no/a — *Soy vegetariano/a.* (m/f)

I can't eat anything with meat or poultry products, including broth.
no *pwe*·do ko·*mer* al·*go* de *kar*·ne o *a*·ves een·kloo·*yen*·do *kal*·do — *No puedo comer algo de carne o aves, incluyendo caldo.*

I'd like mineral water/natural bottled water.
kee·*ye*·ro *a*·gwa mee·ne·*ral/a*·gwa poo·ree·fee·*ka*·da — *Quiero agua mineral/agua purificada.*

Is it (chili) hot?
es pee·*ko*·so — *¿Es picoso?*

The check, please.
la *kwen*·ta por fa·*vor* — *La cuenta, por favor.*

Food Glossary

a la parilla	a la pa·*ree*·ya	grilled
a la plancha	a la *plan*·cha	pan-broiled
adobada	a·do·*ba*·da	marinated with *adobo* (chili sauce)
agua mineral	*a*·gwa mee·ne·*ral*	mineral water or club soda
agua purificado	*a*·gwa poo·ree·fee·*ka*·do	bottled, uncarbonated water
al albañil	al al·ba·*nyeel*	'bricklayer style' – served with a hot chili sauce
al carbón	al kar·*bon*	char-broiled
al mojo de ajo	al *mo*·kho de *a*·kho	with garlic sauce
al pastor	al *pas*·tor	cooked on a pit, shepherd's style
albóndigas	al·*bon*·dee·gas	meatballs
antojitos	an·to·*khee*·tos	'little mexican whims,' and tortilla-based snacks like tacos and *gorditas*
arroz mexicana	a·*ros* me·khee·*ka*·na	pilaf-style rice with a tomato base
ate	*a*·te	jam, preserves
atole	a·*to*·le	gruel made with ground corn

avena	a·*ve*·na	oatmeal
aves	*a*·ves	poultry
azucar	a·soo·*kar*	sugar
barbacoa	bar·ba·*ko*·a	pit-smoked barbecue
biftec	beef·*tek*	steak
bolillo	bo·*lee*·yo	French-style roll
brocheta	bro·*che*·ta	shishkabob
buñuelos	boo·*nywe*·los	tortilla-size fritters with a sweet, anise sauce
burrito	boo·*ree*·to	a filling in a large flour tortilla
cabra	*ka*·bra	goat
cabrito	ka·*bree*·to	kid goat
café con crema/leche	ka·*fe* kon *kre*·ma/*le*·che	coffee with cream/milk
cajeta	ka·*khe*·ta	goat's milk and sugar boiled to a paste
calabacita	ka·la·ba·*see*·ta	squash
calamar	ka·la·*mar*	squid
caldo	*kal*·do	broth or soup
camarones	ka·ma·*ro*·nes	shrimp
cangrejo	kan·*gre*·kho	crab
carne	*kar*·ne	meat
carne de puerco	*kar*·ne de *pwer*·ko	pork
carne de res	*kar*·ne de res	beef
carnero	kar·*ne*·ro	mutton
carnitas	kar·*nee*·tas	pork simmered in lard
cebolla	se·*bo*·ya	onion
cecina	se·*see*·na	thin cut of meat flavored with chili and sautéed or grilled
cerdo	*ser*·do	pork
chalupas	cha·*loo*·pas	open-faced, canoe-shaped cooked corn dough, topped with meat and chilies
chicharrones	chee·cha·*ro*·nes	fried pork skins
chilaquiles	chee·la·*kee*·les	fried tortilla strips cooked with a red or green chili sauce, and sometimes meat and eggs
chile relleno	*chee*·le re·*ye*·no	chili stuffed with meat or cheese, usually fried with egg batter
chiles en nogada	*chee*·les en no·*ga*·da	mild green chilies stuffed with meat and fruit, fried in batter and served with a sauce of cream, ground walnuts and cheese
chorizo	cho·*ree*·so	Mexican-style bulk sausage made with chili and vinegar
chuleta de puerco	choo·*le*·ta de *pwer*·ko	pork chop
churros	choo·*ros*	doughnut-like fritters
cochinita pibil	ko·chee·*nee*·ta pee·*beel*	pork, marinated in chilies, wrapped in banana leaves, and pit-cooked or baked
coco	*ko*·ko	coconut
coctel de frutas	kok·*tel* de *froo*·tas	fruit cocktail
cordero	kor·*de*·ro	lamb
costillas de res	kos·*tee*·yas de res	beef ribs
crema	*kre*·ma	cream
crepas	*kre*·pas	crepes or thin pancakes
elote	e·*lo*·te	fresh corn
empanada	em·pa·*na*·da	pastry turnover filled with meat, cheese or fruits

empanizado	em·pa·nee·*sa*·do	sautéed
enchilada	en·chee·*la*·da	corn tortilla dipped in chili sauce, wrapped around meat or poultry, and garnished with cheese
ensalada	en·sa·*la*·da	salad
filete	fee·*le*·te	filet
filete al la tampiqueña	fee·*le*·te al la tam·pee·*ke*·nya	steak, tampico style, a thin tenderloin, grilled and served with chili strips and onion, a quesadilla and *enchilada*
flor de calabaza	flor de ka·la·*ba*·sa	squash blossom
fresa	*fre*·sa	strawberry
frijoles a la charra	free·*kho*·les a la *cha*·ra	beans cooked with tomatoes, chilies and onions (also called *frijoles rancheros)*
frijoles negros	free·*kho*·les *ne*·gros	black beans
frijoles refritos	free·*kho*·les re·*free*·tos	refried beans
frito	*free*·to	fried
galleta	ga·*ye*·ta	cookie
gelatina	khe·la·*tee*·na	gelatin; also Jello (English jelly)
gorditas	gor·*dee*·tas	small circles of tortilla dough, fried and topped with meat and/or cheese
guacamole	gwa·ka·*mo*·le	mashed avocado, often with lime juice, onion, tomato and chili
helado	e·*la*·do	ice cream
hígado	*ee*·ga·do	liver
horchata	hor·*cha*·ta	a soft drink made with melon
huachinango veracruzana	wa·chee·*nan*·go ve·ra·kroo·*sa*·na	Veracruz-style red snapper with a sauce of tomatoes, olives, vinegar and capers
huevos fritos	*hwe*·vos *free*·tos	fried eggs
huevos motuleños	*hwe*·vos mo·too·*le*·nyos	fried eggs sandwiched between corn tortillas, and topped with peas, tomato, hamand cheese
huevos rancheros	*hwe*·vos ran·*che*·ros	fried eggs served on a corn tortilla, topped with a sauce of tomato, chilies, and onions, and served with refried beans
huevos revueltos	*hwe*·vos re·*vwel*·tos	scrambled eggs
huitlacoche	weet·la·*ko*·che	corn mushrooms – a much-esteemed fungus that grows on corn
jaiba	*khay*·ba	crab
jamón	kha·*mon*	ham
jitomate	khee·to·*ma*·te	red tomato
jugo de manzano	*khoo*·go de man·*sa*·na	apple juice
jugo de naranja	*khoo*·go de na·*ran*·kha	orange juice
jugo de piña	*khoo*·go de *pee*·nya	pineapple juice
langosta	lan·*gos*·ta	lobster
leche	*le*·che	milk
lengua	*len*·gwa	tongue
licuado	lee·*kea*·do	smoothie
limón	lee·*mon*	lime (lemons are rarely found in Mexico)
lomo de cerdo	*lo*·mo de *ser*·do	pork loin
machacado	ma·cha·*ka*·do	pulverized jerky, often scrambled with eggs

mantequilla	man·te·*kee*·ya	butter
mariscos	ma·*rees*·kos	seafood
menudo	me·*noo*·do	stew of tripe
milanesa	mee·la·*ne*·sa	thin slices of beef or pork, breaded and fried
mixiote	mee·*shyo*·te	chili-seasoned lamb steamed in agave membranes or parchment
mole negro	*mo*·le *ne*·gro	chicken or pork prepared in a very dark sauce containing chilies, fruits, nuts, spices and chocolate
mole poblano	*mo*·le po·*bla*·no	chicken or turkey in a sauce of chilies, fruits, nuts, spices and chocolate
mole	*mo*·le	a traditional stew
mollejas	mo·*ye*·khas	sweetbreads (thymus or pancreas)
nieve	*nye*·ve	sorbet
nopalitos	no·pa·*lee*·tos	sautéed or grilled, sliced cactus paddles
ostras/ostiones	*os*·tras/os·*tyo*·nes	oysters
pan	pan	bread
papas fritas	*pa*·pas *free*·tas	French fries
papas	*pa*·pas	potatoes
pastel	pas·*tel*	cake
pato	*pa*·to	duck
pay	*pa*·ee	pie
pechuga	pe·*choo*·ga	breast
picadillo	pee·ka·*dee*·yo	a ground beef filling that often includes fruit and nuts
piña	*pee*·nya	pineapple
pipian verde	pee·*pyan ver*·de	a stew of chicken, with ground squash seeds, chilies and *tomatillos*
platano	*pla*·ta·no	banana
platano macho	*pla*·ta·no *ma*·cho	plantain
pollo	*po*·yo	chicken
postre	*pos*·tre	dessert
pozole	pa·*so*·le	a soup or thin stew of hominy, meat, vegetables and chilies
pulpo	*pool*·po	octopus
quesadilla	ke·sa·*dee*·ya	cheese folded between a tortilla and fried or grilled
queso fundido	*ke*·so foon·*dee*·do	cheese melted, often with *chorizo* or mushrooms, and served as an appetizer with tortillas
rajas	*ra*·khas	strips of mild green chili fried with onions
sábana	*sa*·ba·na	filet mignons pounded paper thin and seared
sopa	*so*·pa	soup, either 'wet' or 'dry' – as in rice and pasta
sopa de ajo	*so*·pa de *a*·kho	garlic soup
sopa de cebolla	*so*·pa de se·*bo*·ya	onion soup
sopa de pollo	*so*·pa de *po*·yo	chicken soup
sope	*so*·pe	a type of *gordita*

taco	*ta*·ko	filling of meat, poultry or vegetables wrapped in a tortilla
té de manzanillo	te de man·sa·*nee*·ya	chamomile tea
té negro	te *ne*·gro	black tea
tinga poblana	*teen*·ga po·*bla*·na	a stew of pork, vegetables and chilies
tocino	to·*see*·no	bacon
tomates verdes	to·*ma*·tes *vair*·des	tomatillos
toronja	to·*ron*·kha	grapefruit
tuna	*too*·na	cactus fruit
venado	ve·*na*·do	venison
verduras	ver·*doo*·ras	vegetables

Want to try all the different kinds of Mexican *tamales?* Good luck. The *Diccionario Enciclopédico de Gastronomía Mexicana* documents 170 different styles prepared throughout the country. It's a similar story with *moles* or any kind of *antojito*. Mexican food is extremely regionalized. What you'll find on your plate is dictated by the national staples (corn, beans and chilies) and the geography, climate and history of the particular region.

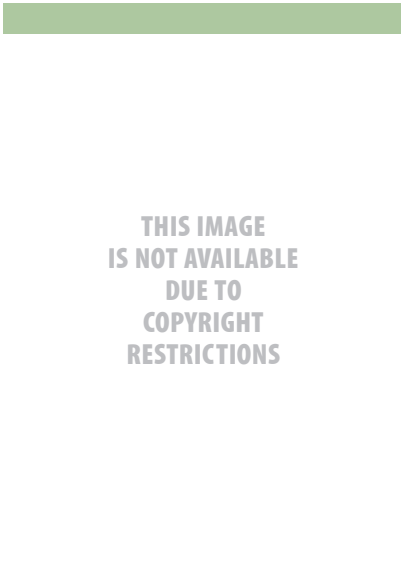
THE NORTHERN STATES: BAJA CALIFORNIA, BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR, SONORA, CHIHUAHUA, DURANGO, COAHUILA, NUEVO LEÓN & TAMAULIPAS

Beef, flour (as opposed to corn) and seafood are the staples of the big northern region. Five of the eight states share a border with territories that once belonged to Mexico and are now part of the US, so it is not surprising that some of the regional specialties are counterparts of what California, Texas and Arizona consider their own regional food, such as burritos, fajitas and nachos. But the northern Mexican region is home to an authentic cuisine that can only be found on this side of the border.

The north is extremely dry, especially in its center, where Mexico's two largest deserts, the Sonora and Chihuahua, define the environment. This is beef territory. Think *mochomos,* for example, a Sonora and Chihuahua specialty of dry beef cooked with onions and garlic and used as a filling for tacos in *tortillas de harina* (flour tortillas).

The mainstay of the rich, industrial state of Nuevo León and its capital, Monterrey, is *cabrito asado* (roasted kid goat), cooked on big metal skewers in an open fire and served in large pieces to order. *Frijoles borrachos* (drunken beans), made with beans, tomato, garlic, cilantro, bacon and beer, is the perfect pal to a good *cabrito*.

Baja California cuisine relies on its surrounding oceans. *Mariscos* (shellfish) and



top five THE NORTHERN STATES

Antojitos
Tacos de pescado in Baja California and *mochomos* in Sonora and Chihuahua.

Dishes
Cabrito asado in Monterrey and *jaiba rellena* in Tamaulipas

Beverages
Baja California wines

Product
Tortillas de harina

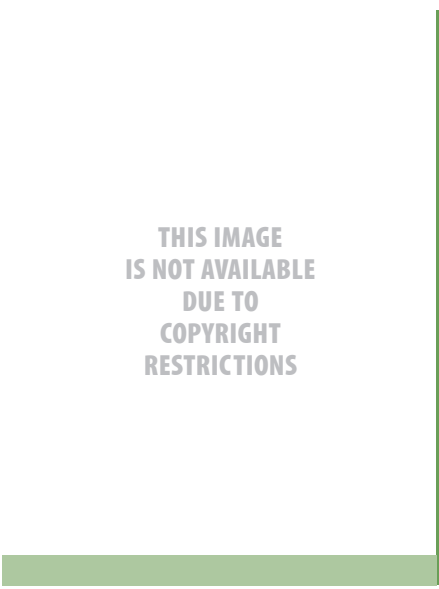
Restaurants
Fonda de la Tía Chona (p383) in Durango

pescado (fish) are prepared *al ajillo* (in garlic and *guajilllo* chili sauce), *a la plancha* (grilled) or *a la diabla* (with garlic, tomato and *cascabel* chili). *Tacos de pescado* (fish tacos), including lobster and black bean tacos, are a favorite and are consumed for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Seafood continues its rule on the long and narrow state of Tamaulipas where *jaibas rellenas* (blue crabs stuffed with crabmeat, tomato, chili, capers, olives and raisins) or *al chilpachole* (crab soup with *epazote* – pigweed – *chile chipotle* and tomatoes) are strong favorites.

CENTRAL PACIFIC COAST: SINALOA, NAYARIT, JALISCO & COLIMA

Wedged between the Sierra Madre Oriental range and the Pacific Ocean are these four states, well known for the resort areas in Puerto Vallarta, Manzanillo and Mazatlán.

With a moderate climate and short but intense rain seasons, Sinaloa, Nayarit and Colima shape an area with a rich agricultural tradition and an even richer coastline. *Tamales de camarón* are a specialty in Sinaloa, and *pescado zarandeado* (fish grilled on the beach inside a *zaranda* or wooden grill) is a classic preparation in Nayarit. Colima also enjoys an array of seafood dishes, but it is the *tatemado de puerco* (a *mole*-type stew of chilies, ginger and spices over a loin of pork) that better represents the state.



top five CENTRAL PACIFIC COAST

Antojitos
Tortas ahogadas in Guadalajara and *tamales de camarón* in Sinaloa

Dishes
Tatemado de puerco in Colima and *birria* in Guadalajara

Beverages
Tequila

Culinary Spots
Mercado Libertad in Guadalajara

Restaurants
Los Xitomates (p463) in Puerto Vallarta

Jalisco is the state responsible for many traditions regarded as Mexican symbols (mariachis, tequila, etc), and it is in its capital, Guadalajara, where food is best represented. *Tapatios,* as people from the city are known, boast an unmatched regional pride when it comes to where to find the best *birria* (goat stew cooked wrapped in agave leaves and spiced with *chile de árbol*) or most authentic *tortas ahogadas* (drowned tortas), a sandwich stuffed with *carnitas* (fried pork) and beans then drowned in a very spicy salsa.

SOUTHERN PACIFIC COAST: OAXACA, GUERRERO & CHIAPAS

This is an area where indigenous cultures and the bounty of ingredients in a sub-tropical climate have produced some of the most interesting culinary traditions in the country.

Oaxaca is known as the 'Land of Seven *Moles*' and also the '*Mezcal* Capital of the World.' The seven *moles* include the world-famous *mole negro* (black *mole*), *almendrado* (thickened with almonds and *chile ancho*) and *mole verde* (green *mole*), made with beans, *tomatillos, epazote* and *hoja santa,* an indigenous herb. An array of *tamales* and soups such as *tamales oaxaqueños* (with *mole negro*) or *caldillo de nopales con camarón* (shrimp and cactus leaf soup) are also popular in the state. Oaxaca is also the place to eat bugs. Fried or roasted *chapulines* (grasshoppers) with lime and salt are commonly served as *botanas* (snacks).

From the tourist resorts of Acapulco and Ixtapa Zihuatanejo to the state's small fishing settlements and mountain towns, Guerrero has a great assortment of seafood dishes. *Ceviches* made with sierra fish, *pescado a la talla* (fish marinated in *chile ancho* and spices and cooked on an open flame) and *camarones Barra Vieja* (shrimp cooked with *chile guajillo* and *chipotle,* spices and fish broth) are served in beach shacks and fancy restaurants. Although the state's average temperature is 32°C (90°F), a hot, hearty bowl of *pozole* is the local favorite, traditionally eaten on Thursdays. The *pozole* in Guerrero is made with *epazote,* ground pumpkinseeds and *tomatillos,* served with an assortment of condiments.

Chiapas' large indigenous population preserves old culinary traditions. Dishes like *armadillo en adobo* (armadillo in a thick chili sauce) or *en escabeche* (pickled), *bazo relleno (*beef stuffed with plantains, potatoes, hard-boiled egg, raisins and olives) and *bosto de sardina* (grilled sardines wrapped in banana leaves) are centuries-old popular foods in the state.

top five SOUTHERN PACIFIC COAST

Antojitos
Chapulines and maguey worms in salsa in Oaxaca

Dishes
Guerrero-style green *pozole* and *mole negro,* one of Oaxaca's seven *moles*

Beverages
Margaritas in Acapulco and *mezcal* in Oaxaca

Culinary Spots
Mercado 20 de Noviembre (p729) in Oaxaca

Restaurants
La Biznaga (p730) in Oaxaca and Casas Viejas (p859) in Chiapas

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THE YUCATÁN PENINSULA: YUCATÁN, CAMPECHE & QUINTANA ROO

The regional staple is the *chile habanero,* the spiciest pepper in the world, but don't let this keep you away from the wonderful cuisine of the Yucatán Peninsula. Cancún, Playa del Carmen and other tourist towns are here, but it is in old cities and towns like Mérida, Valladolid, Motul and Chetumal where you discover the dynamic culinary marriage of Maya and Caribbean traditions. *Recado* is the generic name for local marinades combining dry chilis, spices, herbs and vinegar that are rubbed into meats and poultry. A common one is *recado rojo,* containing the *achiote* (annatto) seeds that infuse an intense red color and flavor to *cochinita pibil* (pork pibil style), the region's most famous dish. *Pib* means a hole in the ground, and cooking *'al pibil'* is a cooking technique that has been used for centuries in this region. Despite the fierce reputation of the *chile habanero,* food in this region is not spicy. The *habanero* is most commonly found in table salsas, so it's up to you how much to add. Try a little on top of papaadzules (tacos stuffed with hard-boiled eggs and pumpkin-see sauce) or *panuchos,* small corn tortillas that puff when heated. Filled with beans and hard-boild egg, they are lightly fried, they are topped with meat or shredded *cochinita pibil* and pickled red onions.

top five THE YUCATÁN PENINSULA

Antojitos
Papadzules and *panuchos*

Dishes
Cochinita pibil and *sopa de lima*

Beverages
Xtabentún, the so-called liqueur of the gods

Produce
Habanero chili

Restaurants
Checándole (p872) in Cancún and Príncipe de Tutul-Xiu in Maní

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MEXICO CITY

When it comes to food, Mexico City has no match. It has always been the recipient of an overwhelming migration of people and their foods. Surfing a chaotic transportation system, the *capitalinos* (as people in the city are called) are always on the move, creating one of the most vibrant street-food cultures on the planet and an endless series of eateries, from humble *loncherías* (lunch stalls) to superb restaurants. It is said that you can eat breakfast, lunch and dinner in a different place here for a year without repeating a venue.

Mexico City is the *antojito* capital. They're found almost anywhere: in a basket attached to a bicycle; in plaza *puestos* (street stalls); in market eateries; and in the thousands of *taquerias* and *torterías*. *Huaraches* (foot-long tortillas) are classic fare at Mercado de la Merced and other markets, where squash flowers and *huitlacoche* quesadillas also abound. In plazas,

top five MEXICO CITY

Antojitos
Huaraches, tacos and tortas, *esquites*

Dishes
Ensalada de nopales, carnitas

Beverages
Agua de jamaica or *tamarindo*

Culinary spots
Mercado de la Merced

Restaurants
El Bajío (p177) and Pujol (p177)

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esquites (warm braised corn seasoned with *epazote,* lime juice and powdered chili) are traditional treats.

Cuisine from all of Mexico is represented in the city's eateries and *fondas,* and places focusing on one region or cuisine are plentiful. Vegetarians can enjoy *ensalada de nopales* (cactus leaves salad), and carnitas (braised pork) is a standard. More formal restaurants like Los Danzantes (p178) serve brilliant Oaxacan cuisine. Others, like El Bajío (p177), have terrific multiregional traditional fare. Many restaurants are epicenters of *nueva cocina mexicana,* where chefs bring haute-cuisine techniques and sophistication to traditional Mexican recipes. Patricia Quintana prepares dishes like lobster enchiladas with pumpkinseed sauce in her restaurant, Izote (p177), while chef Enrique Olvera of Pujol (p177) is acclaimed for dishes like *ravioles de aguacate, camarón y mayonesa picante* (avocado ravioli with shrimp and spicy mayonnaise).

GULF COAST: VERACRUZ & TABASCO

La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz (now called Veracruz) was the first town to be founded in the American continent by the Spanish conquistadors, and it became the main point of contact with the Caribbean and Europe. This mélange of cultures explains the area's rich and varied cuisine: *antojitos* like *tostadas de jaiba* (blue crab *tostadas*), *gorditas infladas* (puffed masa cakes) and *tamales de frijol con polvo de aguacate* (bean *tamales* with avocado dust) are definitively pre-Hispanic, while *huachinango a la veracruzana* (red snapper in tomato, olives, capers and onion) has strokes of Mediterranean. Dishes like *mondongo* (tripe soup), *molotes* (battered plantains) and the use of crops like sugarcane and yucca exemplify the influence that the transit of slaves from the Caribbean and Africa has had in the state.

Sugarcane and coffee fields dominate a great deal of the Veracruz landscape. From sugarcane, Veracruz residents make *aguardiente* (literally fiery water), an unrefined alcoholic drink that is definitely not suitable for the faint of heart. Mexico's first coffee beans were cultivated in Acayucan, Veracruz, in 1800. The high terrain, constant clouds and mist found in many areas throughout the state became fertile ground for the high-quality *coffea Arabica* strain. Today, towns like Coatepec, Huatusco and Coscomatepec produce some of the best coffee in the world. A good place to try some is Gran Café de la Parroquia (p691) in Veracruz city, which has been serving *café con leche* and other java treats since 1809.

top five GULF COAST

Antojitos
Tostadas de jaiba and *gorditas infladas*

Dishes
Huachinango a la veracruzana

Beverages
Aguardiente and local coffee

Produce
Cacao and vanilla

Restaurants
La Fonda (p681) in Xalapa and Gran Café de la Parroquia (p691) in Veracruz

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EL BAJÍO: QUERÉTARO, GUANAJUATO, MICHOACÁN, SAN LUIS POTOSÍ, AGUASCALIENTES & ZACATECAS

El Bajío is an area of temperate climate and fertile land where the northern cattle-rich states meet the produce-plentiful states in the south. The Purépecha populated most of today's Michoacán, and their cuisine has a large influence in the area. *Ichúscutas* and *yururichustasas* are regional *gorditas* (masa cakes) and the *uchepos* (sweet corn *tamales*) are among other *purépecha antojitos*. *Churípo,* a stew made with beef, cabbage, potatoes, chickpeas, carrots and *chile guajillo,* is a traditional Michoacán dish. In Uruapan it's *carnitas* with avocado.

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top five EL BAJÍO

Antojitos
Corundas and *uchepos (tamales)* in Michoacán

Dishes
Enchiladas queretanas in Queretaro, *churípo* and *carnitas* in Michoacán

Beverages
Pulque and *atoles*

Produce
Avocado

Restaurants
Los Dorados de Villa (p591) in Zacatvecas

In San Luis Potosí *cabuches* (the edible flowers of the barrel cactus) and *el asado de la boda* (pork cooked with *chile ancho*) compete only with the famous *enchiladas potosinas* as the local favorites. The ancient drink *atole* is popular in the region. It is made by boiling corn with water or milk and is usually sweetened with sugar or *piloncillo* and flavored with local fruits. Not all *atoles* are sweet: the *chileatole* includes chili and in the old days it was given to new mothers right after labor.

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top five
CENTRAL MEXICO

Antojitos
Tacos de cecina de Yecapixtla in Morelos and *gusanos de maguey con salsa borracha* in Tlaxcala

Dishes
Mole poblano and *chiles en nogada* in Puebla

Beverages
Pulque

Produce
Nopales

Restaurants
Fonda Santa Clara in Puebla

CENTRAL MEXICO: PUEBLA, TLAXCALA, HIDALGO & MORELOS

Mole poblano was created by nuns working in one of Puebla's many convents. It is the perfect marriage between indigenous and Spanish ingredients and techniques. A good vegetarian option is nopales (edible cactus leaves). *Chiles en nogada* are another Puebla specialty, and one with patriotic undertones. This delicacy is made with a green pepper stuffed with ground beef and dried fruits, topped with a white *nogada* (walnut cream sauce) and sprinkled with red pomegranate seeds. Green, red and white: the colors of the Mexican flag. The story is that it was first served in 1821 when Agustin de Iturbide, one of the New Republic's leaders, visited Puebla after the signing of Mexican independence from Spain. Puebla city held a lavish banquet, but Iturbide refused to eat, fearing enemies may have poisoned the food. However, when he was presented with a plate of *chiles en nogada* he was so seduced by the dish's beauty that he threw caution to the wind and started munching.

Environment

One of the unfailing thrills of travel in Mexico is the incredible, never-ending spectacle of its environment. From the snow-capped volcanoes and cactus-strewn deserts to the lush tropical forests and the coastal lagoons teeming with aquatic life, there's never a dull moment for the eye. Nature lovers will revel in this country which, thanks to its location straddling temperate and tropical regions, is home to the fourth greatest biological diversity on the planet. With little over 1% of the world's land, Mexico cradles more than 10% of the earth's bird, mammal, reptile, fish and plant species, and many of them exist nowhere else – including more than 150 types of mammal.

THE LAND

Nearly two million sq km in area, with a coast 10,000km long and half its land above the 1000m mark, Mexico has a spectacularly rugged and diverse topography.

High Plains & Sierras

Northern Mexico is dominated by continuations of the mountains and uplands of the western half of the US. A string of broad plateaus down the middle of the country, the Altiplano Central, is fringed by two long mountain chains – Sierra Madre Occidental on the west and Sierra Madre Oriental on the east. Most of the northern altiplano is occupied by the sparsely vegetated Desierto Chihuahuense (Chihuahuan Desert), which extends north into Texas and New Mexico. The southern altiplano is mostly rolling hills and broad valleys, and includes some of best Mexican farming and ranching land.

The two *sierras madre* meet where they run into the Cordillera Neovolcánica. This spectacular volcanic chain, strung east to west across the middle of Mexico, includes the active volcanoes Popocatépetl (5452m) and Volcán de Fuego (3820m), as well as the nation's other highest peaks – Pico de Orizaba (5611m) and Iztaccíhuatl (5220m).

Coastal Plains

Narrow coastal plains lie between the *sierras madre* and the seas. The Gulf coast plain is crossed by many rivers flowing down from the Sierra Madre Oriental. On the west side of Mexico, a relatively dry coastal plain stretches south from the US border almost to Tepic, in Nayarit state. Its northern end is part of a second great desert straddling the Mexico–US border, the Desierto Sonorense (Sonoran Desert).

South of the resort destination of Puerto Vallarta, the Pacific plain narrows. Another mountain chain, the Sierra Madre del Sur, stretches across the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca, ending at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the narrowest part of Mexico at just 220km wide. The north side of the isthmus is a wide, marshy plain, strewn with meandering rivers.

The Far South

East of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state, rises sharply from a fertile Pacific plain, El Soconusco, to highlands almost 3000m high, then falls away to lowland jungles that stretch into northern Guatemala. The jungle melts into a region of tropical savanna on the Yucatán Peninsula, a flat, low limestone platform that separates the Gulf of Mexico from the Caribbean Sea.

Only two transportation routes make it right across the wide, rugged Sierra Madre Occidental: the Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacífico (Chihuahua Pacific Railway) through the Copper Canyon, and the dramatic Hwy 40 from Durango to Mazatlán.

RJ Secor's *Mexico's Volcanoes: A Climbing Guide* is invaluable for those planning to pit themselves against Mexico's central volcanic belt.

Mexico's youngest volcano, Paricutín (2800m), in Michoacán, arose only in 1943.

WILDLIFE

From the whales, sea lions and giant cacti of Baja California to the big cats, howler monkeys, quetzal birds and cloud forests of the southeast, Mexico's fauna and flora are exotic and fascinating. A growing number of ecotourism and active tourism firms are ready to take you out to Mexico's most exciting natural sites.

Animals

In the north, urban growth, ranching and agriculture have pushed the puma (mountain lion), bobcat, bighorn sheep, wolf, deer and coyote into isolated, often mountainous, pockets.

Tropical Mexico – The Ecotravellers' Wildlife Guide by Les Beletsky is a well-illustrated, informative guide to the land, air and sea life of southeastern Mexico.

Baja California is famous for whale-watching in the early months of the year. Gray whales swim 10,000km from the Arctic to breed in its coastal waters (see boxed text, p293). Between Baja and the mainland, the Sea of Cortez (Golfo de California) hosts more than a third of all the world's marine mammals, including sea lions, fur and elephant seals, and four species of whale.

Mexico's coasts, from Baja to Chiapas and from the northeast to the Yucatán Peninsula, are among the world's chief breeding grounds for sea turtles. Seven of the world's eight species are found in Mexican waters, with some female turtles swimming unbelievable distances (right across the Pacific Ocean in the case of some loggerhead turtles) to lay eggs on the beaches where they were born. Killing sea turtles or taking their eggs is illegal in Mexico, and there are more than 100 protected nesting beaches.

Dolphins play along the Pacific and Gulf coasts, while many coastal wetlands, especially in the south of the country, harbor crocodiles. Underwater life is richest of all on the coral reefs off the Yucatán Peninsula's Caribbean coast, where there's world-class diving and snorkeling.

Back on land, the surviving tropical forests of the southeast still harbor five species of large cat (jaguar, puma, ocelot, jaguarundi and margay), plus spider and howler monkeys, tapirs, anteaters and some mean tropical reptiles, including a few boa constrictors. The cats are reduced to isolated pockets mainly in eastern Chiapas, Tabasco and parts of the Yucatán Peninsula.

For the state of the world's sea turtles, check SWOT (www.seaturtlestatus.org).

Coastal Mexico is a fantastic bird habitat, especially its estuaries, lagoons and islands. An estimated three billion migrating birds pass by or over the Yucatán Peninsula each year, and the state of Veracruz is a migration corridor for huge numbers of birds of prey. Even in the drier inland areas, surprising numbers of birds abound. Tropical species such as trogons, hummingbirds, parrots and tanagers start to appear south of Tampico in the east of the country and from around Mazatlán in the west. The southeastern jungles and cloud forests are home to colorful macaws, toucans, guans and quetzals. Yucatán has spectacular flamingo colonies at Celestún and Río Lagartos.

Mexico's most unforgettable insect marvel is Michoacán's Reserva Mariposa Monarca (p563), where the trees and earth turn orange when millions of monarch butterflies arrive every winter.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

The World Conservation Union (www.iucn.org) provides information on threatened species.

The Mexican government has a different classification system for endangered species from the World Conservation Union (WCU), which publishes the widely recognized Red List of endangered and threatened species. Either way, the numbers are large. On one or other or both lists you'll find such wonderful creatures as the jaguar, ocelot, golden anteater, Central American tapir, spider and howler monkeys, sea otter, seven sea turtle species, boa constrictor, resplendent quetzal, keel-billed toucan and northern elephant seal. The Margarita Island kangaroo rat and Oaxacan pocket gopher may be less glamorous, but their disappearance will still forever affect the other

GIVING THE EARTH A VOICE

American Ron Mader founded **Planeta** (www.planeta.com), a 'global journal of practical ecotourism,' back in 1994. The first-ever website dedicated to ecotourism, Planeta has grown into an influential, much-visited resource and debating chamber. Its span is global, but it has always had a strong emphasis on Mexico, where Ron has lived since 1997.

What made you decide to launch a website on ecotourism? Living in Austin, Texas, I had access to innovative and inexpensive technology. I focused on ecotourism as that has always been the focal point of my travels. Could we use the brand-new web to showcase local environmental and cultural conservation? I called the site Planeta as part of a meditation – if the world could speak, would we listen?

How would you characterize responsible tourism? It's treating others the way they wish to be treated. Tourism campaigns have long touted 'destinations' – in fact, we are simply entering a place that is someone else's home. A growing number of travelers want their journeys to be less invasive and more beneficial to the local community. They want to better understand the culture of the places they visit. Travelers and locals are seeking ways of building constituencies with the shared goal of making tourism more responsible.

How much of this is going on in Mexico? Mexico is a leader in the responsible tourism movement, but you have to look beyond the glitzy brochures. Tour companies have built their fame and profitability on the fact that they can create local jobs while educating and entertaining visitors. I am a big fan of the small mom-and-pop operators such as Pedro Martínez (p723) who runs a biking outfit in Oaxaca. What he offers to locals and travelers is mutually beneficial tours that respect people and place.

Is everything peaches and cream or are there setbacks in Mexico? At the national tourism level Mexico still does not share the wisdom of 'small is beautiful.' Preferential investment and promotion favors the large resorts rather than community endeavors. Golf courses in the desert and marinas by the sea are developed with an eye toward the jet-setting crowd. Oddly enough, the greatest threat to Mexico's responsible and sustainable tourism are the bureaucrats who promote Mexico.

What's your number one piece of advice for travelers who care about the Mexican environment? Think smart, travel slow. There's no better way to respect the environment than by making trips longer. Weekend getaways come at a high environmental cost in terms of carbon emissions. Longer trips – one to six months – allow an opportunity to experience Mexico in a deeper, more satisfying manner, particularly if travelers do some research ahead of time, make a few contacts and network in the online forums such as Planeta and **Thorn Tree** (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree). Finally, and key in the 'slow travel' code, is to reflect after the journey on the lessons learned and to share some recommendations and tips with others.

plants and animals around them. Additionally, they're endemic to Mexico. Once gone from here, they're gone from the universe.

By WCU figures for 2007, 141 of Mexico's 2945 animal species are critically endangered, a further 215 are endangered, and another 223 vulnerable. The percentages in these three most serious categories are higher in Mexico than any country on the American mainland except the USA.

Of endangered Mexican endemics, the most iconic is the vaquita – or harbor porpoise – the world's smallest marine mammal, found only in the northern Sea of Cortez and now numbering less than 600.

Birders should carry *Mexican Birds* by Roger Tory Peterson and Edward L Chalif or *Birds of Mexico & Adjacent Areas* by Ernest Preston Edwards.

Plants

Northern Mexico's deserts are the world's most biologically diverse deserts. More than 400 cactus species can be found in the Desierto Chihuahuense. Isolated Baja California has a rather specialized and diverse flora, from the 20m-high cardón, the world's tallest cactus, to the bizarre boojum tree, which looks like an inverted carrot.

Mexico's great mountain chains still have big stretches of pine forest and (at lower elevations) oak forest. Half the world's pine species and 135 types of oak are found here, and the mountain chains host a quarter of the country's plant species. In the southern half of the country, high-altitude pine forests are often covered in clouds, turning them into cloud forests with lush, damp vegetation, an enormous variety of colorful wildflowers, and epiphytes growing on tree branches.

You may well see howler monkeys, or hear their eerie growls, near the Maya ruins at Palenque (p833) and Yaxchilán (p845).

The natural vegetation of the low-lying areas of southeast Mexico is predominantly evergreen tropical forest (rainforest in parts). This forest is dense and diverse, with ferns, epiphytes, palms, tropical hardwoods such as mahogany, and fruit trees such as the mamey and sapodilla. Despite ongoing destruction, the Selva Lacandona (Lacandón Jungle) in Chiapas is the largest remaining tropical-forest area in the country, containing a large number of Chiapas' 10,000 plant species. It's part of the 24,000-sq-km Maya tropical forest stretching into Guatemala, Belize and the southern Yucatán Peninsula. The northern Yucatán is dry forest, with thorny bushes and small trees (including many acacias), resembling the drier parts of the Pacific coastal plain. Mexico has the northern hemisphere's largest tropical dry forests.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

By WCU figures, 40 Mexican plant species are critically endangered, 75 endangered and 146 vulnerable.

The World Wildlife Fund's Wildfinder (www.worldwildlife.org/wildfinder) is a database of over 26,000 animal species, searchable by species or place. For each of 60 Mexican ecoregions it'll give a list of hundreds of species with their names in English and Latin, their threatened status, and often pictures.

PARKS & RESERVES

Mexico has spectacular national parks and other protected areas – about 11% (more than 200,000 sq km) of its territory is under some kind of federal, state or local protection. Governments have never had enough money for effective protection of these areas against unlawful hunting, logging, farming, grazing and species collection, but help from Mexican and international conservation organizations is turning increasing numbers of protected areas from 'paper parks' into real ones.

National Parks

Mexico's 68 *parques nacionales* (national parks) total 15,050 sq km. Many are tiny (smaller than 10 sq km) and around half of them were created in the 1930s, often for their archaeological, historical or recreational value rather than for ecological reasons. Most of the more recently created national parks, such as Baja California's Bahía de Loreto (created in 1996) and Archipiélago Espíritu Santo (2007), or the Yucatán Peninsula's Arrecifes de Xcalak (2000), protect coastal areas, offshore islands or coral reefs. Despite illegal logging, hunting and grazing, national parks have succeeded in protecting big tracts of forest, especially the high, coniferous forests of central Mexico.

Biosphere Reserves

Reservas de la biosfera (biosphere reserves) are based on the recognition that it is impracticable to put a complete stop to economic exploitation of many ecologically important areas. Instead, these reserves encourage sustainable local economic activities within their territory, except in strictly protected core areas *(zonas núcleo)*. Today, Mexico recognizes 37 biosphere reserves, covering 115,813 sq km, most of which are also included in Unesco's world biosphere reserves network. They protect some of Mexico's most beautiful and biologically fascinating areas, and all focus on whole ecosystems with genuine biodiversity. Sustainable, community-based tourism is an important source of support for several of them, and successful visitor programs are in

For information on Unesco biosphere reserves, visit www.unesco.org/mab.

Park/Reserve	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit
Área de Protección de Flora y Fauna Cuatrociénegas (p389)	beautiful desert oasis with hundreds of clear pools and unique turtles and fish	swimming, snorkeling	year-round
Parque Marino Nacional Bahía de Loreto (p300)	islands, shores & waters of the Sea of Cortez	snorkeling, kayaking, diving	year-round
Parque Nacional Cumbres de Monterrey (p411)	mountains outside Mexico's third-biggest city	canyoneering, climbing, hiking, mountain biking, rappelling	Apr-Sep (canyoneering), Oct-Apr (climbing)
Parque Nacional Iztaccíhuatl-Popocatépetl (p231)	live & extinct volcanic giants on rim of Valle de México	hiking, climbing	Nov-Feb
Parque Nacional Pico de Orizaba (p699)	Mexico's highest peak (5611m)	volcano hiking & climbing	Oct-Mar
Parque Nacional Volcán Nevado de Colima (p555)	live & extinct volcanoes; pumas, coyotes, pine forests	volcano hiking	Dec-May
Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul (p955)	rainforest with major Maya ruins	visiting ruins, wildlife spotting	year-round
Reserva de la Biosfera El Cielo (p423)	mountainous transition zone btwn tropical & temperate ecosystems; birds, bats, orchids	hiking, birding, fishing, 4WD trips	year-round
Reserva de la Biosfera El Triunfo (p854)	cloud forests; many rare birds including quetzals	guided hiking, birding, wildlife-spotting	Jan-May
Reserva de la Biosfera El Vizcaíno (p292)	deserts & coastal lagoons where gray whales calve	whale-watching, hikes to ancient rock art	Dec-Apr
Reserva Mariposa Monarca (p563)	forests festooned with millions of monarch butterflies	butterfly observation, hiking	Dec-Feb
Reserva de la Biosfera Montes Azules (p829)	tropical jungle, lakes, rivers	jungle hikes, birding, canoeing, rafting, boat trips, wildlife-watching	year-round
Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún (p934)	estuary with petrified forest & plentiful bird life including flamingos	bird-watching, boat trips	Mar-Sep
Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an (p904)	Caribbean coastal jungle, wetlands & islands with incredibly diverse wildlife	birding, snorkeling & nature tours, mostly by boat	year-round

place in reserves like Calakmul, El Cielo, El Triunfo, El Vizcaíno, Mariposa Monarca and Sian Ka'an.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Mexico faces many serious environmental problems, which it is only just beginning to come to grips with. For most of the 20th century, its governments saw urban industrial growth, chemical-based agriculture, and the destruction of forests for logging and development as the way to prosperity. Today, Mexico is among the world's 15 major producers of carbon dioxide. The Calderón government's national development plan, released in 2007, pledges to reverse deforestation, promote cleaner, more efficient technologies, and develop a plan for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions – the first time a Mexican government has planned concerted action on global warming.

Mexico City

The capital is a high-altitude metropolis that is now spreading over the mountainous rim of the Valle de México and threatening to fuse with the cities of Puebla and Toluca. The ring of mountains traps polluted air in the city, causing health problems for residents. In an effort to limit pollution levels, many vehicles are banned from the roads one day a week (see p200). Mexico City consumes two-thirds of Mexico's electricity and, despite extracting groundwater at a rate that causes the earth to sink all over the city, it still has to pump up about a quarter of its water needs from outside the Valle de México.

Mexico's Comisón Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (www.conanp.gob.mx) lists protected areas (in Spanish) in its 'Lo Que Hacemos' section.

Water

Mexico faces challenges both in getting its water and in getting rid of it. While the south has 70% of the water, the north and center of the country have 75% of the people. Overall, about 11 million Mexicans – 10% of the population – have no domestic water supply, and 15 million live without drainage systems. Surface and underground aquifers in the north and center are under increasing pressure, for both city and industrial use, as well as agricultural use. The north has suffered several droughts in the past two decades, affecting agricultural production. The situation is predicted to get worse with global warming, and not only in the north.

Much of the available water is wasted. Leakages soak up about half the water supply to cities. Half of the 75% of Mexico's water supply that goes to agriculture is not productively utilized.

About four-fifths of waste water goes untreated, which, along with agrochemical run-off and the large amounts of garbage emptied into rivers and lakes, means that three-quarters of Mexico's surface waters suffer some degree of pollution. Much of Mexico City's sewage ends up in the Río Pánuco, which enters the Gulf of Mexico at Tampico. The Río Lerma, which also supplies water to Mexico City, receives sewage and industrial effluent from many other towns on its way into poor Lago de Chapala – Mexico's biggest natural lake.

Forests

Forest conservation is crucial not only to combat global warming but also because forests are often the source of water supplies. Today, only around

HOW TO HELP

Travelers can help protect Mexico's fragile environment by following guidelines such as these:

- Don't buy turtle, iguana, crocodile or black-coral products.
- Don't disturb coral or nesting turtles.
- Don't collect wild cacti, their seeds or wild orchids.
- Support projects that promote sustainable development and value wildlife and natural environments rather than destroying them. Check our GreenDex (p1052) for listings.
- Try to observe wildlife in its natural environment, and hire local guides to take you. This helps provide local communities with a non-harmful source of income, and also attaches value to nature and wildlife.
- Don't hesitate to ask about your ecotourism operator's policy on disturbing wildlife and on observing rules of parks and reserves. Genuine operators can rarely promise sightings of wild animals.
- Keep water use down, especially in areas that have signs requesting you to do so.

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15% of the country (300,000 sq km) is forested, and this is being reduced by around 7000 sq km a year for grazing, logging and farming. The southern states of Chiapas and Tabasco have probably lost more than half their tropical jungles since 1980. Deforestation followed by cattle grazing or intensive agriculture on unsuitable terrain often leads to erosion, with consequent silting of rivers and wetlands and loss of fertile land.

The Calderón government, in office since 2006, has made reforestation a priority and pledged zero tolerance of illegal logging. Official forest protection has often not been enough to stop the loggers, and the logging industry can be extremely ruthless in dealing with its opponents. Activist Aldo Zamora was shot dead in 2007 as he gathered information on illegal logging for Greenpeace in México state – one of a string of such incidents in recent years.

The Nature Conservancy (www.nature.org), Conservation International (www.conservation.org) and World Wildlife Fund (www.panda.org) all provide lots of information on the Mexican environment, including on their programs in the country.

Development & Expansion

Most of Mexico's faster growing cities face difficulties of water supply, sewage treatment, overcrowding and traffic pollution.

Large-scale tourism development brings its own set of problems and is threatening fragile ecosystems, especially in Baja California and on the Caribbean coast. In Baja, the Los Cabos corridor is already a disaster of unplanned urban development, and further large-scale developments, often with US or Canadian investment, are underway or planned at places like Loreto and Todos Santos, and at Puerto Peñasco on the mainland side of the Sea of Cortez. New hotels, golf courses, marinas and villas all threaten to deplete water supplies, increase pollution, destroy wetlands and attract larger permanent populations.

Rampant development along the Caribbean coast has fragmented wildlife habitats and encroached on turtle-nesting beaches. As the Riviera Maya pushes south, conservationists are worried that the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve may be affected by water pollution or altered hydrology.

Certification schemes for sustainable forestry are in operation but as yet have very limited reach, covering only 5000 sq km.

Environmental Movement

Environmental awareness is increasingly strong among individual Mexicans as they cope with daily problems like traffic pollution. There is no large-scale environmental movement but rather a number of smaller organizations working on local issues. Some successful campaigns in recent years have benefited from broader-based support, even from outside Mexico. One was the defeat in 2000 of the plan for a giant saltworks at Laguna San Ignacio in Baja California, a gray-whale breeding ground. Probably the most influential Mexican environmental group is **Pronatura** (www.pronatura.org.mx), which deploys around M$100 million a year chiefly on climate change projects, priority species and the conservation of lands and watersheds.

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