

History

Mexico's story is always extraordinary, at times barely credible. From the awesome ancient cities to the gorgeous colonial palaces, the superb museums and the deep-rooted traditions and beliefs of the Mexicans themselves – be they the mixed-ancestry mestizos or the millions of direct indigenous descendants of the ancient civilizations – Mexico's ever-present past will never fail to enrich your journey.

FIRST AMERICANS

It's accepted that, barring a few Vikings in the north and some possible direct trans-Pacific contact with Southeast Asia, the pre-Hispanic inhabitants of the Americas arrived from Siberia. They came in several migrations between perhaps 60,000 BC and 8000 BC, during the last Ice Age, crossing land now submerged beneath the Bering Strait. The earliest human traces in Mexico date from about 20,000 BC. These 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.

Archaeologists have traced the slow beginnings of agriculture in the Tehuacán valley in Puebla state, where, soon after 6500 BC, people were planting seeds of chili and a kind of squash. Between 5000 BC and 3500 BC they started to plant mutant forms of a tiny wild maize and to grind the maize into meal. After 3500 BC, beans and a much better variety of maize enabled the Tehuacán valley people to live semipermanently in villages. Pottery appeared around 2500 BC, and some of the oldest finds in Mexico are from sites near Acapulco.

PRECLASSIC PERIOD (1500 BC–AD 250)

Olmecs

Perhaps the oldest Mesoamerican culture of dramatic scale belongs to the Olmecs, who lived near the Gulf Coast in the humid lowlands of southern Veracruz and neighboring Tabasco from 1200 BC to around 600 BC. Their civilization is famed for the awesome 'Olmec heads,' stone sculptures up to 3m high with grim, pug-nosed faces combining the features of human babies and jaguars, a mixture referred to as the 'were-jaguar,' and wearing curious helmets.

The two great Olmec centers, San Lorenzo in Veracruz and La Venta in Tabasco, were violently destroyed by marauding invaders from Oaxaca. But Olmec art and religion, and quite possibly Olmec social organization, strongly influenced later Mexican civilizations.

Pacific Mexico

Western Mexico, and the southern states of Michoacán and Guerrero, are very much shrouded in mystery. Until the 1940s the area was all but ignored by archaeologists, probably because it lacked the grand architecture, writing systems and dramatic religious deities that attracted

In addition to general information, www.mexonline.com hosts a good index of Mexican history links.

Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs by Michael D Coe gives a concise, learned and well-illustrated picture of ancient Mexico's great cultures.

TIMELINE	20,000 BC or earlier	1200 –600 BC
	First humans in Mexico	Olmec civilization

researchers to the rest of Mesoamerica. Archaeological sites went unexcavated and unprotected for decades, and most were looted down the years by nonarchaeologists who sold their findings – primarily ceramics – to collectors. When study of the region's ancient past began in earnest, archaeologists faced the challenges of drawing conclusions from sites that no longer existed as left by their original inhabitants.

From Sinaloa south to the state of Guerrero, people lived in small, independent villages and chiefdoms, most, it is believed, with a distinct culture and language. Except for Guerrero, western Preclassic Mexico remained relatively isolated from the rest of Mesoamerica. The areas of present-day Nayarit, Jalisco and Colima – collectively referred to as West Mexico – have a quite distinct history. Archaeologists and art historians treat West Mexico as a unified region, which is defined by its tradition of shaft or chamber tombs, underground burial chambers at the base of shafts 2m to 16m deep. The oldest of these have been dated as far back as 1900 BC, but the most significant were probably built between 1500 BC and 800 BC. Much of what is known of the cultures of West Mexico is based on the excavation of these tombs and analysis of the clay sculptures and vessels found within, some of which can be viewed at the Museo Regional de Nayarit (p135) in Tepic.

EARLY MONTE ALBÁN

By 300 BC settled village life, based on agriculture and hunting, had developed throughout the southern half of Mexico. Monte Albán, the hilltop center of the Zapotecs of Oaxaca, was growing into a town of perhaps 10,000. Many carvings here have hieroglyphs or dates in a dot-and-bar system, which quite possibly means that the elite of Monte Albán invented writing and the written calendar in Mexico.

CLASSIC PERIOD (AD 250–900)

Teotihuacán

The first great civilization in central Mexico emerged in a valley about 50km northeast of the center of modern Mexico City. Teotihuacán grew into a city of an estimated 125,000 people during its apogee between AD 250 and AD 600, and it controlled what was probably the biggest pre-Hispanic Mexican empire. Teotihuacán had writing and books, the dot-and-bar number system and the 260-day sacred year. The building of a magnificent planned city began around 300 BC and took some 600 years to complete.

Classic Maya

By the close of the Preclassic period, in AD 250, the Maya people of the Yucatán Peninsula and the Petén forest of Guatemala were already building stepped temple pyramids. During the Classic period, these regions produced pre-Hispanic America's most brilliant civilization, with the great cities of Tikal, in Guatemala's Petén, the most splendid of all.

Pacific Mexico

The shaft-tomb tradition that so defined Nayarit, Jalisco and Colima began to die out in the early Classic period. Objects from Teotihuacán

The highly interactive website www.ancientmexico.com offers a terrific breadth of material on the art, culture and history of ancient Mesoamerica.

In 1524 Spanish conquistador Francisco Cortés de Buenaventura, a nephew of Hernán Cortés, arrived on the Jalisco–Nayarit coast. He was met by an army of 20,000 native warriors armed with bows festooned with colorful cloth banners. The bay where this occurred was thereafter known as the Bay of Flags (Bahía de Banderas).

AD 250–900

Classic Maya civilization flourishes

Around 1325

Tenochtitlán, site of present-day Mexico City, founded by the Aztecs

For a wealth of information about the Aztecs, including a Nahuatl dictionary and lessons in the language, see www.mexica.net. The site also contains miscellaneous information about Mexico's indigenous peoples and history.

Azteca by Gary Jennings is a sweeping historical novel about the Spanish conquest of Mexico, written from a native's point of view.

have been found in Nayarit, Jalisco, Colima and Michoacán, which suggests that Teotihuacán was probably absorbing the West Mexican cultures into its sphere. Teotihuacán was probably interested in the area for the region's precious stones and minerals.

The collapse of Teotihuacán in the 7th century was felt all throughout western Mexico and Guerrero – as it was throughout Mesoamerica – but the scattered, independent chiefdoms that characterized the coastal states continued well into the Postclassic period. The fertile coastal ecology provided plentifully for the people who hunted and farmed the coastal plains and upland valleys, and fished the coastal waters.

POSTCLASSIC PERIOD (AD 900–1521)

Aztecs

The Aztecs were the monumental Postclassic civilization. The location of their ancestral homeland is unknown, with some placing it on the island of Mexcaltitán in northern Nayarit. The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, was eventually founded on a lake-island in the Valle de México (site of present-day Mexico City) in the first half of the 14th century. In the mid-15th century the Aztecs formed the Triple Alliance with two other valley states and brought most of central Mexico from the Gulf Coast to the Pacific under its control. The total population of the empire's 38 provinces may have been about five million. The empire's main concern was exacting resources absent from the heartland. Jade, turquoise, cotton, paper, tobacco, rubber, lowland fruits and vegetables, 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.

Tarascos

The only empire to exist in western Mexico was the Tarascos, and being fierce warriors, they were the only group to successfully resist Aztec invasions. After the Aztecs, they were the largest and most powerful empire in Mesoamerica. Called the Purépecha until the Spanish labeled them Tarascos, they ruled present-day Michoacán and parts of Jalisco, Guanajuato and Guerrero from the 12th century until the arrival of the Spanish in 1521.

Oaxaca & Guerrero

After about AD 1200 the remaining Zapotec settlements of Oaxaca, such as Mitla and Yagul, were increasingly dominated by the Mixtecs, famed metalsmiths and potters from the uplands around the Oaxaca–Puebla border. Mixtec and Zapotec cultures became entangled before much of their territory fell to the Aztecs in the 15th and 16th centuries. Around the same time, the Aztecs were establishing small strategic presences along the Guerrero coast. The Yopes, who lived around the Bahía de Acapulco, were one of the few groups who successfully resisted the expansionist Aztecs.

ENTER THE SPANISH

Almost 3000 years of civilization was shattered in just two short years, following the landing by Hernán Cortés near modern-day Veracruz on

1512

Spanish 'discover' the Bay of Acapulco; people had already been living in the area for some 2000 years

1519–21

Hernán Cortés lands near Veracruz, later captures Aztec god-king Moctezuma II and takes over Tenochtitlán

April 21, 1519. Primary sources suggest that the Aztecs were initially accommodating because, according to their calendar, the year 1519 promised the god Quetzalcóatl's return from the east. The Spaniards were well received at Gulf Coast communities that resented Aztec dominion. Cortés thus gained his first indigenous allies. After much vacillation, the Aztec god-king Moctezuma II invited Cortés to meet him, and the Spaniards were lodged in the palace of Axayácatl, Moctezuma's father. After six months in Tenochtitlán, and apparently fearing an attack, the Spaniards struck first and killed about 200 Aztec nobles trapped in a square during a festival.

Cortés and his force returned to the Aztec capital only to come under fierce attack. Trapped in Axayácatl's palace, Cortés persuaded Moctezuma to try to pacify his people. According to one version of events, the king went up to the roof to address the crowds but was wounded by missiles and died soon afterward; other versions have it that the Spaniards killed him.

Following this, full-scale war broke out. After only a few major battles, 900 Spaniards and some 100,000 native allies waged a successful attack on Tenochtitlán in May 1521. By August 13, 1521, Aztec resistance had ended. The position of the conquered peoples deteriorated rapidly, not only because of harsh treatment at the hands of the colonists but also because of introduced diseases. The indigenous population fell from an estimated 25 million at the time of conquest to one million by 1605.

From the 16th to 19th centuries, a sort of apartheid system existed in Mexico. Spanish-born colonists were a minuscule part of the population but were considered nobility in New Spain (as Mexico was then called), however humble their status in their home country. By the 18th century, criollos (people born of Spanish parents in New Spain) had acquired fortunes in mining, commerce, ranching and agriculture, and were seeking

William Henry Prescott's mammoth *History of the Conquest of Mexico* remains a classic, although it was published in 1843 by an author who never visited Mexico.

In 1564, Spanish ships launched from the Jalisco town of Barra de Navidad delivered the Philippines to King Philip of Spain.

INTIMATIONS OF DISASTER

In the Mesoamerican belief system, the world is poised for destruction at the end of each calendar cycle of 52 years, a passage known as 'the tying of years.' As it happened, the Spaniards arrived as one of these cycles was coming to a close. Aztec survivors of the siege on Tenochtitlán told Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590) of eight ominous signs that were visited on the city just prior to the arrival of the conquistadores:

- A comet appeared in the daytime sky
- A 'pillar of fire' – perhaps the same comet – appeared in the nighttime sky
- The temple of Huitzilopochtli was razed by fire
- Lightning struck the Tzonmolco temple
- The city was flooded
- Creatures with many heads but only one body walked the streets
- A weeping woman was heard singing a song of lament for the Aztecs
- A fantastic bird was caught, and when Moctezuma looked into its eyes, he saw a vision of strange men landing on the coast

1524

Battle at Bahía de Banderas

1529

Spanish establish the city of Oaxaca

political power commensurate with their wealth. Below the criollos were the mestizos, of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry, and at the bottom of the pile were the remaining indigenous people and African slaves, who had been imported by the Spaniards as early as the 1520s. (Over nearly three centuries, the slave trade brought about 200,000 Africans to the colony.) The catalyst for rebellion came in 1808 when Napoleon Bonaparte occupied most of Spain – direct Spanish control over New Spain suddenly ceased and rivalry between Spanish-born colonists and *criollos* intensified. On September 16, 1810, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a criollo parish priest, issued his call to rebellion, the Grito de Dolores. In 1821 Spain agreed to Mexican independence.

MEXICAN REPUBLIC

Twenty-two years of chronic instability followed independence, during which the presidency changed hands 36 times. In 1845, the US congress voted to annex Texas, leading to the Mexican-American War (1846–48), in which US troops captured Mexico City. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), Mexico ceded Texas, California, Utah, Colorado and most of New Mexico and Arizona to the USA. The Maya rose up against their overlords in the late 1840s and almost succeeded in driving them off the Yucatán Peninsula. By 1862, Mexico was heavily in debt to Britain, France and Spain, who sent a joint force to Mexico to collect their debts. France decided to go one step further and colonize Mexico, sparking yet another war. In 1864, France invited the Austrian archduke, Maximilian of Habsburg, to become emperor of Mexico. His reign was bloodily ended by forces loyal to the country's former president, Benito Juárez, a Zapotec from Oaxaca.

With the slogan 'order and progress,' dictator Porfirio Díaz (ruled 1878–1911) avoided war and piloted Mexico into the industrial age. Political opposition, free elections and a free press were banned, and control was maintained by a ruthless army. Land and wealth became concentrated in the hands of a small minority.

Very early in the 20th century a liberal opposition formed, but it was forced into exile in the USA. In 1906 the most important group of exiles issued a new liberal plan for Mexico from St Louis, Missouri. Their actions precipitated strikes throughout Mexico – some violently suppressed – that led, in late 1910, to the Mexican Revolution.

FROM REVOLUTION TO REFORM

The Mexican Revolution was a 10-year period of shifting allegiances between a spectrum of leaders, in which successive attempts to create stable governments were undermined by new skirmishes. The basic ideological rift was between liberal reformers and more radical leaders, such as Emiliano Zapata, who were fighting for the transfer of hacienda land to the peasants. The 10 years of violent civil war cost an estimated 1.5 to two million lives – roughly one in eight Mexicans.

After the revolution, former revolutionary leader Alvaro Obregón became president (1920–24) and steered the country toward national reconstruction. More than 1000 rural schools were built and some land was redistributed from big landowners to the peasants.

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.

1821

Mexico gains independence from Spain

1861

Benito Juárez becomes the first indigenous Mexican president

Obregón's successor, Plutarco Elías Calles, built more schools and distributed more land. He also closed monasteries, convents and church schools, and prohibited religious processions. These measures precipitated the bloody Cristero Rebellion by Catholics, which lasted until 1929.

At the end of President Calles' term, in 1928, Obregón was elected president again but was assassinated by a Cristero. Calles reorganized his supporters to found the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR; National Revolutionary Party), precursor of today's PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional).

Lázaro Cárdenas, former governor of Michoacán, won the presidency in 1934 with the PNR's support and stepped up the reform program. Cárdenas redistributed almost 200,000 sq km of land, mostly through the establishment of *ejidos* (peasant landholding cooperatives). The land was nearly double the amount distributed since 1920 and nearly one-third of the population received holdings.

MODERN MEXICO

The Mexican economy expanded in the two decades after WWII. By 1952 the country's population had doubled from what it was two decades earlier. Civil unrest appeared again in 1968, in the months preceding the Olympic Games in Mexico City. More than 500,000 people rallied in Mexico City's *zócalo* (main plaza) on August 27 to express their outrage with the conservative Díaz Ordaz (1964–70) administration. On October 2, with the Olympics only a few days away, a rally was organized in Tlatelolco plaza in Mexico City. The government sent in heavily armed troops and police who opened fire on the crowd, killing several hundred people.

The oil boom of the late 1970s increased Mexico's oil revenues and financed industrial and agricultural investments, but the oil glut in the early 1980s deflated petroleum prices and led to Mexico's worst recession in several decades. The population continued to escalate at Malthusian rates through the 1980s, while the economy made only weak progress. In 1985 an earthquake shook Mexico City and killed at least 10,000 people, causing more than US\$4 billion in damage. In a climate of economic helplessness and rampant corruption, dissent grew on both the left and the right, and even within the PRI.

Today, Mexico has more than 100 million citizens, with more than 20% residing in Mexico City.

THE LESS THE MERRIER?

Overpopulation still looms as perhaps Mexico's greatest problem. The population in 1944 was 22 million, and by 1998 it had reached 97 million. The situation seemed hopeless in 1968 when the Vatican banned all methods of contraception. In 1970 more than 600,000 Mexican women underwent illegal operations, and 32,000 died. Government-sponsored clinics were established to offer birth-control literature, and by 1992 more than 6000 family-planning centers were established.

Mexifam is the largest nongovernment family-planning service, concentrating on the poorest areas of the country. By April 2000 it became evident that Mexifam and the government programs were working. Population growth had been reduced from 3.4% in 1970 to 1.7% in 2000 – from seven children per woman to 2.28. (Mexifam does not advocate abortion but does provide information on the morning-after pill to prevent pregnancy.)

1910–20

Almost two million people die and the economy is shattered in the Mexican Revolution

1930s

Tourists start arriving in Mazatlán and Acapulco for world-renowned sportfishing and 'exotic' beaches

Salinas, Nafta & the EZLN

The Harvard-educated Carlos Salinas de Gortari took the presidency in 1988 and set about transforming Mexico's state-dominated economy into one of private enterprise and free trade. The apex of his program was Nafta, the North American Free Trade Agreement, which came into effect on January 1, 1994. The same day a group of 2000 or so indigenous-peasant rebels calling themselves Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN; Zapatista National Liberation Army) shocked Mexico by taking over San Cristóbal de Las Casas and three other towns in the country's southernmost state, Chiapas.

After the EZLN uprising, Salinas pushed through electoral reforms against ballot-stuffing and double voting, and the 1994 presidential election was regarded as the cleanest to date. But it was hardly spotless. In March 1994 Luis Donaldo Colosio, Salinas' chosen successor as PRI presidential candidate, was assassinated in Tijuana. Colosio's replacement as PRI candidate, 43-year-old Ernesto Zedillo, won the election with 50% of the vote.

Zedillo

Within days of President Zedillo taking office in late 1994, Mexico's currency, the peso, suddenly collapsed, bringing on a rapid and deep economic recession that hit everyone hard, and the poor hardest. It led to, among other things, a big increase in crime, intensified discontent with the PRI, and large-scale Mexican emigration to the USA. Zedillo's policies pulled Mexico gradually out of recession and by the end of his term in 2000, Mexicans' purchasing power was again approaching what it had been in 1994.

Zedillo was an uncharismatic figure, but he was perceived as more honest than his predecessors. He set his sights on democratic reform and set up a new, independent electoral apparatus that, in 1997, achieved Mexico's freest and fairest elections since 1911.

In Chiapas, Zedillo at first negotiated with the EZLN, but then in February 1995 he sent in the army to 'arrest' Subcomandante Marcos and other leaders. The rebels escaped deeper into the jungle. On-and-off negotiations eventually brought an agreement on indigenous rights in 1996, but Zedillo balked at turning the agreement into law.

The Fox Presidency

The independent electoral system set in place by Zedillo ensured that his party, the PRI, lost its 70-year grip on power in the 2000 presidential election. The winner was Vicente Fox of the right-of-center Partido Acción Nacional (PAN; National Action Party), a former state governor of Guanajuato and former chief of Coca-Cola's operations in Mexico (where more Coke per person is drunk than in any other country in the world). A 2m (6ft 6in) tall rancher with a penchant for jeans and cowboy boots, Fox 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.

Though Fox remained personally popular and was perceived as honest and well intentioned, in the end his presidency disappointed many – largely because his party did not have a majority in Mexico's national

Michael Meyer & William L Sherman's *The Course of Mexican History* is one of the best general accounts of Mexican history and society.

1960s

Sleepy fishing village Puerto Vallarta emerges to become a glamorous, world-famous resort

1994

North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) comes into effect

Congress and therefore could not effect many changes. Things got worse when the PAN lost more seats to the PRI in mid-term congressional elections in 2003. Fox was thus unable to enact the reforms that he believed key to stirring Mexico's slumbering economy, such as raising taxes or introducing private investment into the energy sector. His government consequently lacked money to improve education, social welfare or roads. By the end of Fox's term of office in 2006, Mexicans' overall standard of living was only a little higher than when he took power. Peasants and small farmers felt the pinch of Nafta, as subsidized corn (maize) from the USA was sold more cheaply in Mexico than was Mexican corn.

Mexicans did enjoy a certain social liberation after the PRI's grip was prized loose. Government became more transparent, honest and accountable, and Mexicans have become more confident about expressing their opinions and asserting their rights, aware that their rulers are now subject to more or less fair elections. As the time to elect Fox's successor approached, the PAN and the PRI colluded in an attempt to derail the election favorite, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática), over a legal technicality, but backed off after an enormous Mexico City demonstration in López Obrador's favor. At least it seemed that Fox's successor would be elected, as he was in 2000, by a free and fair popular vote – something few Mexicans would have believed likely 12 years before.

'Government became more transparent, honest and accountable'

2000

Vicente Fox elected president, bringing to an end 70 years of power by the PRI

2003

Relations with the US are jeopardized when Mexico refuses to support the US-led war in Iraq

The Culture

Carolina A Miranda

REGIONAL IDENTITY

It was *The Night of the Iguana* that put the Mexican Pacific coast on the world itinerary. John Huston's 1964 film adaptation of the Tennessee Williams play starred Richard Burton as a minister-cum-tour-guide leading a gaggle of American biddies down Mexico way. The local cultures were barely represented in the film, but it nonetheless managed to capture a moment when the coastline consisted of little more than a sparse string of fishing villages.

That has changed. Indigenous hamlets have ceded way to gleaming resorts and retirement communities. The hodge-podge of cultural groups that line this 2000km stretch of coast – from the Huichol in the north to the Zapotecs in the south (see p36) – mix tentatively with other segments of Mexico and the world. The northern end has a decidedly cowboy feel. Hard-working ranchers live a life centered around agriculture and livestock, entertaining themselves with rodeos and bullfights. The people of the south, more indigenous in spirit, stoically pass age-old artistic traditions from one generation to the next. In between lie pockets of settlers from all over: entrepreneurial Mexico City hoteliers who make a buck off booming Pacific tourism, former agricultural workers taken in by the growing regional service economy, and water-logged expats in search of the next good wave.

This is just another layer on the many that already existed. The coast has never had one identity, but it has always been united in its aim, which is to show tourists a good time. This is where Mexico rolls out the welcome mat to the world, where resort towns and fishing villages receive travelers with A-list hospitality and down-home taco stands. It is where the national appreciation of revelry and music are brought to hectic climax in tequila-soaked carnivals. It's the spot where Mexico comes together to have a little fun.

LIFESTYLE

The tourism industry on the coast continues to attract new generations of workers from the countryside and this has put some of the country's richest people next to its poorest. The affluent inhabit lavish summer homes, gated and guarded for security, while working-class city dwellers live in multigenerational units in neighborhoods that offer few parks or open spaces. The poorest are left in hastily constructed shantytowns. In the countryside, there is a more spacious environment, with families occupying traditional houses made of wood or adobe and living on the land they cultivate.

Tourism has brought both benefit and harm. The industry keeps thousands employed along the Pacific coastline. It has brought with it a greater awareness of the need to protect vintage architecture, indigenous tradition and the natural environment. But it has also fed the drug trade and prostitution. Despite these challenges, family ties remain strong and there have been many social improvements. Gender roles, for example, continue to relax among the middle class and jobs are more accessible to women in general. A Mexican woman today will have an average of 2.28 children; in the early '70s, that average was seven. As in many Latin American countries, the overall divorce rate remains low (0.62 per 1000 people) – especially when compared with the US or the UK, which both

Though considered inherently Mexican, the origin of the piñata is highly debated. Some attribute it to the Spanish, others to the Italians or Chinese.

The Huichol of Jalisco and Nayarit speak a language that bears a very close resemblance to Nahuatl, the language of the ancient Aztecs.

have a rate of 4.19 per 1000 people. For gays and lesbians, the big resort towns – particularly Puerto Vallarta (see p92 and p85) – offer a well-developed and welcoming scene.

POPULATION

About three-quarters of Mexico's 106 million people currently live in cities. This represents a major shift for a country with a largely rural history. In the early part of the 20th century, only one-tenth of the population lived in cities. Much of this growth is due to a high level of internal migration: one in five Mexicans now lives in a city other than the one they were born in. As a result, heavily agricultural (and poor) states such as Oaxaca, on the southern coast, have seen thousands of young people depart to big cities in search of greater economic opportunities. Guadalajara is the largest city in Mexico's west and the second largest in the country, with a population of about five million. New housing is continually built by migrants on rural lands surrounding city centers, while local governments invest their pesos in industrial development. This rapid growth has left a strained urban infrastructure often devoid of necessary public services. But relief seems to be ahead. Though the country's population doubled between 1970 and 2000, the birth rate has slowed from 3% in the 1980s to 1.2% in 2005. On the coast, fertility rates remain low on the northern end, but swell towards the southern coast.

SPORTS

The favorite sport is *fútbol* (football, aka soccer), which is less a sport than a religion. Mexico has an 18-team national division, with three of these teams based in Guadalajara: the Atlas, Tecos and Chivas. The latter team has the biggest following and, at press time, had a new, 45,000-seat stadium under construction. There are many small local leagues, so you can catch a match year-round.

Second on the list is bullfighting. A popular adage maintains that Mexicans are punctual for only two things: funerals and bullfights. *Corridas de toro* are a Sunday afternoon tradition during the October to March bullfighting season. Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco are good spots to catch a *corrida*. *Charreadas* (rodeos) are also popular, particularly on the northern coast, and take place from February to November.

Baseball is another popular sport. There is a northwest Mexican league, **Liga Mexicana del Pacífico** (www.ligadelpacifico.com.mx in Spanish) and its website has information on games and locations. Increasing in visibility is the *juego de pelota* (ball game), a contemporary variant of an ancient sport. See below.

Get a comprehensive calendar (in English!) of cultural events around Mexico on the handy website www.therealmexico.com.

Keep up with Guadalajara's favorite soccer team, the Chivas, at www.chivas.narany.com/index.php (in Spanish).

THE OLD BALL GAME

It is the world's oldest team sport and was played consistently by various cultures in pre-Hispanic times. *Juego de pelota* took place on a flat court with sloping walls where players scrambled to keep a heavy rubber ball in the air by kicking it around with their hips, thighs, knees or elbows. It was volleyball meets soccer meets human sacrifice. (Some historians claim that players may have been killed after matches as an offering.) The game survives to this day – sans sacrifice, of course. In Michoacán, it's called *juego de pelota purépecha*, in the Mazatlán area it's known as *hulama* and in Oaxaca it is *pelota mixteca*. As a visitor, it's easiest to see a game in Oaxaca City during Guelagueta festivities every July when the city hosts a *pelota* competition.

MULTICULTURALISM

The most significant ethnic division in Mexico is between assimilated *mestizos* (mixed-race Mexicans) and more insular full-blooded Indians who speak native languages. Mestizos make up the vast majority of the population – between 80% and 90% by some counts. Along the western coast, indigenous peoples are largely represented in one of the following ethnic groups: Zapotecs and Mixtecs in Oaxaca, Guerrero and Puebla; Purépecha in Michoacán; and the Huichol in Jalisco and Nayarit. As is happening all over the continent, the younger generations are abandoning traditional lifestyles to go work in cities, largely in service jobs. As a result, some languages and traditions are disappearing. The tourism industry, however, has had the unexpected effect of preserving some aspects of these cultures. In Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca, for example, travel to the region supports a local textile industry that is keeping traditional weaving techniques alive.

Migration to the United States is likewise a significant issue. Almost 11 million Mexican citizens live there (with more in Canada) – where wages are, on average, six times higher. This emigration has had the consequence of turning some rural communities into virtual ghost towns. In Michoacán, for example, more than two million migrants have departed, leaving the state with a population of just over four million. The government is trying to discourage these mass migrations by supporting development and job-creation programs locally. It's a small step in the right direction. But as long as the income disparity between these neighboring countries continues to be wide, immigrants will head north.

The most famous Zapotec in Mexican history is the venerated Benito Juárez (1806–72) from Oaxaca, who was the only full-blooded Indian to become president of Mexico.

RELIGION

Despite a rocky history in Mexico, the Catholic church (and to a larger degree, the Virgin of Guadalupe) remains the focal point of religious life for almost nine out of 10 people. But the church's grip is loosening. In 1970 more than 96% of the country identified as Roman Catholic; by the '90s that figure had slipped to 89%. Part of this is due to a growing evangelical movement comprised of, among other groups, Protestants, Seventh-Day Adventists and Mormons.

Catholicism nonetheless remains a deep-seated national force. Members of the clergy were present during the early days of the Spanish conquest. By the mid-19th century the Church owned more than a quarter of all land in Mexico and controlled most schools, hospitals and charitable institutions. This led the federal government to pass a series of measures intended to clamp down on ecclesiastic power. The constitution of 1917 forbade the Church from owning property, running schools or newspapers and banned clergy from voting. After a series of anticlerical purges in the late 1930s, anti-Church sentiment eased, and in 1950 the constitutional provisions ceased to be enforced. In the early '90s, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari removed them from the constitution entirely.

Jesús Malverde, an early-20th-century bandit from Sinaloa, is now venerated as the patron saint of drug traffickers. He has a shrine and chapel in his honor in downtown Culiacán.

Indigenous Religion

The early missionaries won over indigenous people by grafting Catholic beliefs onto pre-Hispanic ones. Today, indigenous Christianity remains a fusion of traditional Indian and Christian belief. The Huichol of Jalisco, for example, have two Christs, neither of which is as important as Nakawé, the fertility goddess. A crucial source of wisdom comes from the use of the hallucinogenic drug peyote. In Oaxaca a number of carnival celebrations are as much indigenous in content as Catholic: the Guelaguetza festival has its roots in Zapotec maize-god rituals. Customs such

as witchcraft and magic still flourish. When illness strikes, indigenous communities will often seek guidance from the local *brujo* (witch doctor) or *curandero* (curer).

ARTS

Literature

A dive into Mexican literature can easily begin with Nobel Prize-winning poet and cultural critic Octavio Paz (1914–98). His most prominent work, *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude; 1950), is a book-length essay examining the roots of Mexican identity and culture. His poetry is also renowned. The bilingual *Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957–1987* is a good start for the foreign reader. It contains his best-known verses, such as *Piedra del sol* (Sunstone).

The country is home to no small number of accomplished novelists. Foremost among them is Juan Rulfo (1918–86), who was born near Guadalajara and whose plots often unfold in the coastal state of Jalisco. His most legendary work is *Pedro Páramo*, which takes place in the turbulent period preceding the Mexican Revolution (p30). This complex yet slim novel is often cited as the precursor to magic realism.

Also significant is novelist and political commentator Carlos Fuentes (b 1928). His novel *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (The Death of Artemio Cruz; 1962) is a metaphor on the birth of postrevolutionary Mexico. Other prominent works include *Terra nostra*, *Cambio de piel* (A Change of Skin) and *Gringo Viejo* (The Old Gringo), the latter of which is an intriguing tale about an American who joins the army of Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa (c 1877–1923). Other admired works that fictionalize the Mexican Revolution are *Los de abajo* (The Underdogs) by Mariano Azuela (1873–1952) and *Como agua para chocolate* (Like Water for Chocolate) by Laura Esquivel (b 1950).

Mexico has also generated some of the continent's most lauded female writers, beginning with 17th-century Hieronymite nun and poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. She produced a staggering number of plays, essays and poems, all in a baroque style. Among her most renowned works are 'Redondillas' (Quatrains) and *Primer sueño* (First Dream) – both poems. English-speakers interested in her work can pick up *A Sor Juana Anthology* by Alan S Trueblood. More contemporary feminist authors include Rosario Castellanos (1925–74), whose best-known novel *Oficio de tinieblas* (The Book of Lamentations) is the tale of an Indian rebellion; and Elena Poniatowska (b 1932), whose work *Tinisima* reimagines the life of photographer Tina Modotti (p39). Also worth a read is short-story writer Elena Garro (1920–98), author of the novellas *Primer amor* and *Busca mi esquila*, available in the English volume *First Love & Look for My Obituary*.

A new generation of writers is focused on some of the immediate issues facing Mexican society: drug trafficking, corruption and the omnipresent neighbor to the north. Élmér Mendoza (b 1949), Raúl Manriquez (b 1962), Rafa Saavedra (b 1967) and Juan José Rodríguez (b 1970) have all produced works in this vein. Unfortunately, they have yet to be translated.

NON-MEXICAN AUTHORS

Mexico has long been a muse for the voluminous travel lit produced by foreigners. Popular contemporary accounts include Tony Cohan's *On Mexican Time* and Mary Morris's *Nothing to Declare*. Of special interest to coastal travelers is *Western Mexico: A Traveller's Treasury* by Tony Burton, which contains detailed information about the region's history,

Luis Humberto Crothswaite (b 1962) is one of the few contemporary novelists available in translation. His humorous novella *La luna siempre será un amor difícil* (The Moon Will Forever Be a Distant Love) can be found on book websites such as Amazon.com.

Loads of information on Mexican museums, pre-Hispanic art and historical monuments can be found online in English and Spanish at www.mexicodesconocido.com.mx.

The origins of the Day of the Dead celebrations go back 3000 years to Mesoamerican birth and death rituals; the dead are now honored annually on November 1–2.

art and archeology. Truly worthwhile is *In Search of Captain Zero*, the engaging surf memoir by Allan Weisbacker, much of which unfolds on the Pacific coast.

Vintage accounts from the early 20th century include *Mornings in Mexico* by novelist DH Lawrence and John Steinbeck's *A Log from the Sea of Cortez*. The latter title received a tribute from contemporary American writer Andromeda Romano-Lax in 2002. She retraces the famous author's voyage in *Searching for Steinbeck's Sea of Cortez*. Also of interest are *Survivor in Mexico* by early British feminist Rebecca West and the novel *Under the Volcano* by Malcolm Lowry. A truly classic travelogue on the country is Graham Greene's *The Lawless Roads*, which covers the bitter period following the clerical purges of the '30s and served as the basis for his seminal novel *The Power and the Glory*.

Cinema & TV

From the 1930s to the late 1950s, Mexico's film industry was famously prolific, churning out 80 features a year full of dance, drama and mustachioed matinee idols in large sombreros. Since then, however, weak government funding has left the industry starved. The national film commission, Conafilm, operates on a paltry budget of a few hundred thousand dollars a year (and even that was threatened during the latest austerity measures in 2005). Filmmakers have few financial incentives – other than a 10% income-tax deduction – to create anything.

Why wade through all that baroque poetry when you can just watch the movie? *Yo la peor de todas* (I the Worst of All) is a gripping biopic on the life of 17th-century nun-poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

Despite these obstacles, Mexican cinema has managed to launch a number of award-winning films onto the global screen. The best of these is Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (And Your Mother Too; 2001), which portrays a youthful road trip that is as comic and erotic as it is tragic. The film was controversial in Mexico, not only for its sexual content, but for the honest way in which it depicted the country's poverty. (Keep your eyes peeled because the Pacific coast has a starring role.) Other popular international releases have included the light romantic comedy *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* (Sex, Shame and Tears; 1989), the Oscar-nominated dramas *Amores perros* (Love's a Bitch; 2000) and *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (The Crime of Father Amaro; 2002), and the crime caper *Nicotina* (Nicotine; 2003) – all of which are worth a watch.

The better-established TV industry balances the grit of Mexico's cinema with an endless supply of melodramatic *telenovelas* (soap operas), which are a global export. One of the more curious anecdotes in the medium's history relates to Veronica Castro. A major TV star in the 1970s, her career was faltering by the early '90s until one of her old soaps, *Los ricos también lloran* (The Rich Also Cry; 1979), was aired in Russia in 1992. The passion for the show there was tremendous. During a visit to Moscow, she was mobbed by fans, including then president Boris Yeltsin, who threw a dinner in her honor at the Kremlin.

Fine & Traditional Arts

Mexico offers an artistic feast that dates back more than two millennia. Viewers can gorge themselves on dramatic pre-Hispanic sculpture, colonial-era paintings and even cutting-edge contemporary installations.

Pre-Hispanic works are well represented throughout the country, though the best pieces are generally kept in Mexico City museums. On the Pacific coast it was the ancient Zapotec (AD 300–700) and Mixtec (AD 1200–1600) cultures that predominated artistically. Fine examples of their work are on display in Oaxaca City at the Museo Rufino Tamayo (p229) and the Museo de las Culturas (p229). Intricate funerary ceramic sculpture, created between

200 BC and AD 800 by the shaft-tomb cultures (p26) of Nayarit, Jalisco and Colima, can be found in Guadalajara at the Museo de Arqueología.

During the colonial period and after independence, Mexican art consisted largely of European-style portraiture and religious painting. The Oaxacan-born Miguel Cabrera (1695–1768) was particularly notable. He created a famous portrait of poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (p37), which now resides at the Museo Nacional de Historia in Mexico City.

Out of the ashes of the revolution came the muralists. The celebrated Diego Rivera (1885–1957), David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974) and José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949) were the movement's figureheads. Orozco was born in the state of Jalisco and lived for a while in Guadalajara, where his house is now open to visitors.

Other leading modern painters included Frida Kahlo (1907–54), the surrealist self-portraitist married to Diego Rivera, and Rufino Tamayo (1899–1991), who was born in Oaxaca and is known for his abstract spin on Mixtec and Zapotec art. Visitors can view the objects of Tamayo's inspiration in Oaxaca City, where a pristine collection of his pre-Hispanic figurines lies in the museum that bears his name (p229). In a class by herself is photographer Tina Modotti (1896–1942). Though born in Italy, she settled in Mexico in the early 1920s and became an accomplished photographer. A political activist and contemporary of the muralists (she appears in several of Rivera's works), Modotti reached international acclaim for her stark portraits.

A trip along the coast will reveal plenty of contemporary indigenous fine and folk art. In Nayarit and Jalisco, you'll find colorful beaded sculptures and yarn paintings by the Huichol. But it's Oaxaca City that is richest in artistic treasures: dexterously woven textiles, polished black ceramics, elaborate *alebrijes* (wood figurines), metal sculpture and contemporary fine art. The city's streets are lined with galleries catering to every taste.

Architecture

The architecture of the coastline is, to some degree, unremarkable. The bigger cities – Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco – didn't see real development until the late '60s and construction consisted largely of bland, modernist resorts. Any trip slightly inland, however, will turn up plenty of architectural treasures. The pre-Hispanic city of Monte Albán in Oaxaca is a glimmering example of ancient Zapotec architecture. The countryside in this region is also dotted with 16th- and 17th-century Spanish churches built in the Gothic and baroque styles. Many of these have indigenous decorative elements: wall frescoes and colorful floor tiles. The *Basilica de la Soledad* (p229) in Oaxaca City is a great example of an immaculate baroque building. In Guadalajara, you can knock out a few architectural styles with a single visit to the cathedral. The design techniques here consist of everything from the Churrigueresque and the baroque to the neoclassical. It's odd but educational.

Many of the older cities, such as Mazatlán, Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta and Oaxaca City, still retain examples of Spanish colonial architecture in their older corners. Take a peek inside these adobe buildings whenever you can. They rarely look like much from the outside, but are often set around inviting, plant-filled courtyards that bring the structures to life.

Music

For many travelers, Mexican music consists of little beyond the blaring trumpets of a few tired mariachis. This is a shame. As with the country's art and literature, there is a vast terrain to be explored.

Get an up-to-date list of the plentiful art galleries and community museums in Oaxaca City at www.oaxaca.oaxaca.com/galleries.htm. All listings are in English.

For the seminal view on Frida Kahlo's life and work, read Hayden Herrera's artfully written *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*.

Guadalajara is home to Mexico's most prestigious mariachi festival, held every year in September. Check out www.mariachi-jalisco.com.mx (in Spanish) for information on dates and performances.

In San Blas listen to Maná's *Sueños Líquidos* album. The melancholy song 'El muelle de San Blas' makes frequent reference to the town's dock.

Let's start with rock. Mexico is one of the most important hubs for Latin American rock, known universally as *rock en español*. Beginning in the '80s, bands such as El Tri, Los Caifanes and Maná (the latter hailing from Guadalajara) helped make this musical form an inherently Mexican product. One of the most consistently innovative rock bands is Café Tacuba. Their box set, *Lo esencial de Café Tacuba* (2001), is a good place for an audio tour of the band's eclectic musical history.

More recent acts include the rock-rappers Molotov from Mexico City. The group has gained international acclaim with raunchy lyrics and subversive political statements. (Their drummer is, of all things, the Mexico-raised son of a US drug agent.) Seminal albums include *¿Dónde jugarán las niñas?* and *Dance and Dense Denso*. Other acts include the jazzier Plastilina Mosh, whose 1998 album *Aquamosh* was a smash hit, and Tijuana crooner Julieta Venegas, whose tender vocals provide plenty of easy listening. Her album *Sí* (2003) is worthwhile. For fans of electronica, the DJs of the Nortec Collective from Tijuana will keep you grooving with a clever synthesis of dance and traditional *norteño* (below) beats. Their album *Tijuana Sessions Vol 1* is a must-have in this genre.

MEXICAN REGIONAL MUSIC

Mexican music has its roots in *son* (sound), folk music that dates back to the early part of the 20th century and grew from a fusion of Spanish, African and indigenous sounds. These musical styles have splintered into distinct regional types.

In the dusty north, along the border, it is *norteño* that flourishes, a boot-stomping brand of polka-infused country music accompanied by boisterous accordions and *bajo sextos*, the Mexican 12-string guitar. Its roots lie in the traditional ballads – *corridos* – of the revolution. Long considered fuddy-duddy music for old-timers, the style received a boost in the 1980s when bands began singing *narcocorridos*, ballads about the

THE MARIACHI TRADITION

Nothing defines Mexican music better than mariachis: the groups of nattily clad itinerant musicians who wander from town to town (or restaurant to restaurant) in search of the next paid gig. Though there is some disagreement about the origins of the word, historians do agree that 'mariachi' came into existence sometime in the middle of the 19th century in the state of Jalisco, just south of Guadalajara. Mariachi bands largely comprised wandering laborers for whom music was a secondary pursuit. By default, mariachis were, for decades, the keepers of Mexican musical folklore: harvesting and archiving local sounds and lyrics as they moved around in search of agricultural work. During the revolution, in the early 20th century, they carried news, along with arsenals of new songs about battle-hardened heroes and the loves they had lost.

In addition to a singer, a traditional mariachi group consists of a couple of violins, a Spanish guitar, a *vihuela* (a small, high-pitched five-string guitar) and a *guitarrón* (an acoustic bass instrument that is held like a guitar). Modern mariachi bands typically include a trumpet or two as well. Perhaps the most legendary group in the country is the Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán. Founded in 1898 in the state of Jalisco by Gaspar Vargas, the group quickly achieved regional fame. They became a national sensation in the 1930s when the then president Lázaro Cárdenas hired them as the official mariachis of the Mexico City police. (Their website proclaims: 'The Mariachi Vargas was something of an oddity in the early 1930s... They showed up on time for performances and they were sober.') The group has been performing since its founding and is now in its fifth incarnation. In the process, they have inspired hundreds, if not thousands of other musicians. For information on tour dates in Mexico and abroad, log on to the Mariachi Vargas website, www.mariachivargas.com.mx.

drug trade. Their popularity is attributed to Chalino Sánchez, a raspy-voiced singer from Sinaloa who took on the drug establishment, crooning about dope deals gone bad and corrupt police officials. In 1992, at the age of 32, Sánchez was found with two bullets in his head on the side of a Sinaloa road. His death (still unresolved by the police) made him a legend and ensured that *narcocorridos* would become a permanent part of the musical pantheon. Some of the biggest, long-running *norteño* bands today include Los Tigres del Norte, Los Rieleros del Norte and Los Tucanes de Tijuana.

Banda also hails from the traditional *corrido*, but substitutes the string section with lots of brass. The sound is all oompah. One of the genre's most renowned groups is Banda El Recodo, whose members come from the port of Mazatlán. The band has been around, in one guise or another, since 1938. The music, to be honest, is an acquired taste, but El Recodo has nonetheless toured internationally – even in Japan. Other genres, such as *grupera*, combine *norteño* with Colombian *cumbia*, a tropical style of folk music from that country's Caribbean coast. Grupo Límite from Monterrey is one of the best-known bands in this arena.

Ranchera is a classical style of Mexican country music cultivated in the hills of Guadalajara. The most legendary of the country's *ranchera* singers is Vicente Fernández, who is known as 'El rey' (the King) and has taken to the stage in silver-studded regalia for more than three decades. His baritone-voiced son Alejandro is equally talented (in addition to being quite easy on the eyes). Anyone interested in reveling in the sweet agony of an achingly sung *ranchera* should listen to Alejandro's album *Que Seas Muy Feliz* (May You Be Very Happy; 1995). Pick up some tequila, drown your sorrows and let him sing your pain.

Dance

Mexico is home to hundreds of regional dances, most of which reveal a significant amount of pre-Hispanic influence. One of the most spectacular of these is the Danza de las plumas (Feather Dance), which tells the story of the Spanish conquest from a Zapotec Indian point of view. A good time to see it is during Guelaguetza (p230) in Oaxaca. In Michoacán, the Danza de los viejitos (Dance of the Little Old Men) originated as a mockery of the Spanish, whom the local Tarasco Indians thought aged very fast. The dance is generally performed around Christmas time.

If you're in the mood for vintage *rancheras*, pick up *20 Éxitos* by Lola Beltrán (1931–96). She was known as 'Lola La Grande' for singing her ballads with so much drama and emotion.

Learn about regional dancing from all over the country at www.ballet.udg.mx, the website for the Ballet Folclórico de la Universidad de Guadalajara. Its site (in Spanish) offers historical information on the roots of indigenous dance.

Environment

With biodiversity greater than any other region of Mexico, Mexico's Pacific coast provides considerable pleasure to lovers of nature. Sensualists will find a nirvana for the senses, while paradise-seekers will have plenty of territory to explore, from palm-shaded tropical shorelines and deciduous tropical-forested headlands all the way up to the cloud forests that crown the highest reaches of the Sierra Madre.

Environmental scientists, however, have reason to worry. As in other ecologically precious territories around the globe, the human impact on the environment has been enormous, and the coast has a litany of problems that threaten not only the fauna and flora but people, too.

The US Sierra Club's prestigious Chico Mendes Prize, for bravery and leadership in environmental protection, was awarded in 2005 to Felipe Arreaga and two other leaders of a peasant organization battling indiscriminate logging in the state of Guerrero. Arreaga was unable to collect the award because he was in jail on what he said was a trumped-up murder charge.

Defending the Land of the Jaguar by Lane Simonian is the absorbing story of Mexico's long, if weak, tradition of conservation.

THE LAND

It's nearly 2000km by road from Mazatlán, the northernmost destination in this book, to the southeastern resort of Bahías de Huatulco in Oaxaca. Mazatlán sits about midway down a dry coastal plain that stretches south from Mexicali, on the US border, almost to Tepic, in Nayarit state. Inland from the flats stands the rugged, volcanically formed Sierra Madre Occidental, which is crossed by only two main transport routes – the Barranca del Cobre (Copper Canyon) railway, from Chihuahua to Los Mochis, and the dramatic Hwy 40 from Durango to Mazatlán.

South of Cabo Corrientes (the lip of land protruding into the Pacific near Puerto Vallarta), the Pacific lowlands narrow to just a thin strip and the mountains rise dramatically from the sea. The Sierra Madre Occidental widens near Nayarit and finishes in Jalisco, where it meets the Cordillera Neovolcánica, a volcanic range running east–west across the middle of Mexico. Known in English as the Trans-Mexican Volcanic Belt, the Cordillera Neovolcánica includes the active volcanoes Popocatepetl (5452m) and Volcán de Fuego de Colima (3960m), as well as Pico de Orizaba (5610m), the nation's highest peak.

The main mountain range in southern Mexico is the Sierra Madre del Sur, which stretches across the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca and separates the Oaxacan coast from its capital city. As the crow flies, it's only about 160km from Puerto Ángel, the southernmost town in Oaxaca, north to Oaxaca city; but crossing the crinkled back of the Sierra takes about six hours by car.

WILDLIFE

Animals

LAND LIFE

Raccoons, armadillos, skunks, rabbits and snakes are common. One critter you'll encounter is the gecko, a harmless, tiny green lizard that loves to crawl across walls and squawk at night. Michoacán and Guerrero are home to more species of scorpions and spiders than anywhere in Mexico.

Both black and green iguanas are common along the entire coast. Both are prized for their meat and have been overhunted, especially in Guerrero and Oaxaca. Boa constrictors are sometimes spotted in lagoons.

Rarer animals – which you'll be lucky to see – include spider monkeys and the beautiful, endangered jaguar, which once inhabited much of the coast.

SEA TURTLES

The Pacific coast is among the world's chief sea-turtle breeding grounds. Of the world's eight sea-turtle species, seven are found in Mexican waters, and six of those in the Pacific. Their nesting sites are scattered along the entire coast. For information about where you have the best chances of encountering sea turtles, see p52.

Female turtles usually lay their eggs on the beaches where they were born, some swimming huge distances to do so. They come ashore at night, scoop a trough in the sand and lay 50 to 200 eggs in it. Then they cover the eggs and go back to the sea. Six to 10 weeks later, the baby turtles hatch, dig their way out and crawl to the sea at night. Only two or three of every 100 make it to adulthood. Turtle nesting seasons vary, but July to September are peak months in many places.

Playa Escobilla, just east of Puerto Escondido, is one of the world's main nesting grounds for the small olive ridley turtle, the only sea-turtle species that is not endangered. Between May and January, about 700,000 olive ridleys come ashore here in about a dozen waves – known as *arribadas* – each lasting two or three nights, often during the waning of the moon. Playa Escobilla's turtles are guarded by armed soldiers, and there is no tourist access to the beach.

The rare leatherback is the largest sea turtle – it grows up to 3m long and can weigh one ton and live 80 years. One leatherback nesting beach is Oaxaca state's Playa Mermejita, between Punta Cometa and Playa Ventanilla, near Mazunte. Another is Barra de la Cruz, east of Bahías de Huatulco.

The green turtle is a vegetarian that grazes on marine grasses. Most adults are about 1m long. For millennia, the green turtle's meat and eggs have provided protein to humans in the tropics. European exploration of the globe marked the beginning of the turtle's decline. In the 1960s, the Empacadora Baja California in Ensenada, Baja California, was canning as many as 100 tonnes of turtle soup a season.

The loggerhead turtle, weighing up to 100kg, is famous for the vast distances it crosses between its feeding grounds and nesting sites. Loggerheads born in Japan and even, it's thought, Australia, cross the Pacific to feed off Baja California. Females later return to their birthplaces – a year-long journey – to lay their eggs.

The hawksbill turtle nests along both of Mexico's coasts and can live 50 years. The coast's sixth species, the black turtle, sticks to the Pacific.

The smallest and most endangered sea turtle, the Kemp's ridley (parrot turtle), lives only in the Gulf of Mexico.

MARINE LIFE

Dolphins can be seen off the coast, as can gray, humpback and blue whales, especially from November to March, when a whale-watching trip is recommended (see p52). Early in the year, even while lying on the beach you'll probably spot whales. Sting rays and the larger Pacific manta rays can often be seen when they burst from the water with wild abandon. Tide pools harbor sea anemones, urchins, octopi, starfish, sea slugs and an array of crabs. Spend any time *under* water and you'll probably see such beauties as the Cortez angelfish, seahorses, moray eels, rays, puffers and even whale sharks. Jellyfish are abundant at the beginning of the rainy season. See p48 for information on the larger Pacific fish.

Coastal lagoons, especially in the south, once harbored thousands of crocodiles. They've now been hunted almost to extinction.

To see how one organization is helping to ensure the survival of sea turtles, visit the website of the Grupo Ecológico de la Costa Verde (www.project-tortuga.org). See also www.turtles.org for fascinating facts about turtles.

The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (www.wdcs.org) is the global voice for the protection of whales, dolphins and their environment. Its website includes information about how to get involved in global efforts to protect marine mammals.

PROTECTING MEXICO'S TURTLES

Despite international conservation efforts, turtle flesh and eggs continue to be eaten, and some people still believe the eggs to be aphrodisiacs. Turtle skin and shell are used to make clothing and adornments. The world's fishing boats kill many turtles by trapping and drowning them in nets. In Mexico, hunting and killing sea turtles was officially banned in 1990, but the illicit killing and egg-raiding still goes on – a clutch of eggs can be sold for more than a typical worker makes in a week.

You can visit turtle hatcheries in Cuyutlán (p170), Colima and Mazunte, Oaxaca (p263). If you want to get involved in conservation efforts, volunteer opportunities exist at the Grupo Ecológico de la Costa Verde (p142).

To help the turtles that use Mexican beaches – and most people who have seen these graceful creatures swimming at sea will want to do that – follow these rules if you find yourself at a nesting beach:

- Try to avoid nesting beaches altogether between sunset and sunrise.
- Don't approach turtles emerging from the sea, or disturb nesting turtles or hatchlings with noise or lights (lights on or even near the beach can cause hatchlings to lose their sense of direction on their journey to the water).
- Keep vehicles – even bicycles – off nesting beaches.
- Don't build sand castles or stick umbrellas into the sand.
- Never handle baby turtles or carry them to the sea – their arduous scramble is vital to their development.
- Boycott shops or stalls selling products made from sea turtles or any other endangered species.

New legislation in Mexico bans the import and export of marine mammals for commercial purposes. The new decree should end Mexico's involvement in the international trade in dolphins, which are highly sought after for 'swim with dolphins' tourist attractions.

Saving the Gray Whale: People, Politics, and Conservation in Baja California by Serge Dedina offers a hopeful prescription for the future of conservation in Mexico.

BIRDLIFE

The lagoons and wetlands of Pacific Mexico host hundreds of species of native and migratory birds, and any break-of-dawn boat trip will send bird lovers squawking. Birds from as far north as Alaska migrate here each winter – the best season for racking up your species-spotted list. You may see parrots and parakeets, loons, grebes, frigate birds, herons, hawks, falcons, sandpipers, plovers, ibis, swifts and boobies (to name only a handful).

In Oaxaca, it's not uncommon to spot ospreys soaring above the ocean cliffs. Of course, the bird you'll see most, wherever you are, is the *zopilote* (vulture). For the best birding locations, see p52.

Plants

The Sierra Madre Occidental, the Cordillera Neovolcánica and the Sierra Madre del Sur still have some big stretches of pine forest and, at lower elevations, oak forest.

Tropical forest covers much of the lowest western slopes of the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Cordillera Neovolcánica, and can also be found in the Oaxaca. These forests lose their leaves during the dry winter but are lush and verdant in the summer rainy season. Pink trumpet, cardinal sage, spider lily, *mala ratón* (literally 'rat killer') and *matapalo* (strangler fig) bloom in these forests during the rainy season. Much of this plant community, however, has disappeared as the land has been taken over by ranches and cropland.

Along the dry Pacific coastal plain, from the southern end of the Desierto Sonorense to Guerrero state, the predominant vegetation is thorny bushes and small trees, including morning glory and acacias, and savanna.

The coastal lagoons that dot the Pacific coast are home to dense mangrove forests that have thick leathery leaves and small seasonal flowers.

PARKS & RESERVES

With all the spectacular beaches and accessible lagoons, you don't have to search for a park to experience the natural elements. Fortunately, federal, state and local governments have created a handful of protected areas to preserve some of the coast's fragile ecosystems. Some are easily accessible with private transport while others require the use of local guides (who will also greatly increase your chances of spotting any wildlife).

The largest national park in this book is the Parque Nacional Volcán Nevado de Colima (21,930 hectares; p169), where you'll find two volcanoes: the extinct Volcán Nevado de Colima and the active Volcán de Fuego. The smallest national park is the 192-hectare Isla Isabel (p132), a volcanically formed island north of San Blas, Nayarit. Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua (p243), in Oaxaca, protects 14,000 hectares, which incorporate two mammoth lagoons, mangroves, fishing communities and more than 13km of coastline. Created in 1998, the 119-sq-km Parque Nacional de Huatulco (p266) encompasses nine pristine bays, tropical deciduous forest, sea and shoreline.

The ancient Zapotec city of Monte Albán (p240) in Oaxaca is a protected archeological zone of 2078 hectares.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Mexico's environmental crises, including those of the coast, are typical of a poor country with an exploding population struggling to develop. From early in the 20th century, urban industrial growth, intensive chemical-based agriculture, and the destruction of forests for logging and to allow grazing and development were seen as paths to prosperity, and little attention was paid to their environmental effects. A growth in environmental awareness since the 1970s has managed to achieve only very limited changes.

Forest Depletion

Deforestation has increased considerably on the coast since the passage of Nafta in 1994, which gave international corporations access to vast *ejido* (communal) landholdings. For example, in the Sierra de Petatlán and Coyuca de Catalán regions of Guerrero's Costa Grande, 40% of its forests have been logged in less than a decade. The vast stands of white and sugar pine logged in the region (mostly by subsidiaries of Idaho-based Boise Cascade) were sold primarily in the USA. Deforestation has caused massive erosion and contributed to increased flooding, local climate changes, and oversilting of rivers.

Wetland Depletion

Mexico's rich coastal lagoons and wetlands have experienced considerable harm in recent years from shrimp farming. Shrimp farms contribute to the destruction of mangroves, permanent flooding of lagoons, the privatization of communal fishing waters, and the introduction of massive amounts of fertilizers and chemicals. The industry is booming in Sinaloa, Nayarit and Oaxaca, and receives heavy investment from the Mexican government and the World Bank. The biggest market for Mexican-farmed shrimp is the USA.

Cattle grazing also has a devastating impact on wetlands where they are drained to create pastureland. Laguna Manialtepec (p253) in Oaxaca was being reduced at an alarming rate until considerable protests from local fishing communities put a stop to it in the late 1990s.

Dedicated birders should seek out the Spanish-language *Aves de México* by Roger Tory Peterson and Edward L. Chalif. An alternative is *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico & Northern Central America* by Steve NG Howell and Sophie Webb.

The website for Eco Travels in Latin America (www.planeta.com) brims with information and links about Mexican flora and fauna.

Erosion & Water Contamination

Erosion is mainly the result of deforestation followed by cattle grazing or intensive agriculture on unsuitable terrain. In the Mixteca area of Oaxaca, around 80% of the arable land is gone.

Some rural areas and watercourses have been contaminated by excessive use of chemical pesticides and defoliants. Sewage, and industrial and agricultural wastes contaminate most Mexican rivers.

Tourism

In some places in Mexico it's hoped that ecologically sensitive tourism will benefit the environment by providing a less harmful source of income for local people. An example is Mazunte (p263), Oaxaca, a village that lived by slaughtering sea turtles until the practice was banned in 1990. Villagers then turned to slash-and-burn farming, threatening forest survival, before a low-key and successful tourism program was launched.

In other cases, despite official lip service paid to conservation, large-scale tourism developments have destroyed fragile ecosystems. Acapulco grew at such a rate and pumped so much sewage into the Bay of Acapulco in the 1970s and 1980s that drastic measures had to be taken to reverse damage to the bay. In the case of now-developing Bahías de Huatulco, the federal government has taken steps to prevent water pollution by resorts, limited construction heights on hotels and even created a national park to preserve fragile ecosystems. But local communities have been displaced, and inland lagoons critical to the local ecosystem have been mysteriously drawn out of park boundaries (where golf courses may be drawn in).

To see what a couple of big international conservation groups are up to in Mexico, see Conservation International (www.conservation.org) and Greenpeace (www.greenpeace.org.mx in Spanish).

Environmental Movement

Environmental consciousness first grew in the 1970s, initially among the middle class in Mexico City, where nobody could ignore the air pollution. Today nongovernmental action is carried out by a growing number of groups around the country, mainly small organizations working on local issues.

Between 1999 and 2001, Guerrero's Costa Grande made continuous headlines and attracted international criticism after the military arrested and imprisoned antilogging activists Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera. Montiel and Cabrera started a community environmental group in 1997, which fought heavy logging of the Costa Grande. Montiel and Cabrera were imprisoned for 16 months after reportedly being tortured into confessing to trumped-up drug and weapons charges. After intense international pressure, President Fox finally ordered their release; it came a month after their original defense lawyer was assassinated in Mexico City.

Joel Simon's *Endangered Mexico: An Environment on the Edge* examines Mexico's varied environmental crises with the benefit of excellent first-hand journalistic research.

Environmental campaigning today is carried out mainly by small organizations working on local issues, though some successful campaigns in recent years have rested on 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. Another was the annulment in 2001 of a large hotel project at the Caribbean turtle-nesting beach of Xcacel. Ideas for hydroelectric dams on the Río Usumacinta, along Mexico's border with Guatemala, attract broad opposition whenever they resurface, owing to their consequences for the huge watershed of what is Mexico's biggest river and for the area's many Mayan archaeological sites.

Puerto Vallarta & Pacific Mexico Outdoors

Mexico's Pacific coast is an orgy of outdoor fun. Sportfishing, diving, snorkeling, sailing, jet-skiing, water-skiing, parasailing and swimming have lured sunseekers to this spectacular shoreline for decades. But in recent years people have started to realize there's even *more* to do: kayaking, surfing, hiking, mountain biking, river rafting and wildlife viewing are becoming increasingly popular. To help plan your travels, we've compiled a brief introduction to where and how you can get active on the coast. None of these activities should distract you, however, from putting in some serious hours under the sun, flat on your back, down on the beach.

Refer to this book's destination sections for details on equipment rentals, and availability and advisability of guides.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Though it's tough to compete with the azure waters and coral reefs of the Caribbean, there are some outstanding dive sites unique to the Pacific coast – and plenty of dazzling snorkeling spots. Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta, Barra de Navidad, Manzanillo, Zihuatanejo, Playa Manzanillo (Troncones), Faro de Bucerías, Puerto Escondido, Puerto Ángel and Bahías de Huatulco all have highly praised dive sites nearby, not to mention some first-rate outfitters who will tank you up and take you out. Operators generally charge around US\$50 for a guided one-tank dive, approximately US\$80 for a two-tank dive and around US\$60 for a night dive.

Most dive shops offer guided snorkeling excursions, or rent snorkel equipment so you can go it alone. On beaches with good snorkeling nearby, restaurants and booths usually rent equipment, though you should check gear carefully for quality and comfort before heading out for the day. There are plenty of places to snorkel without a guide, but with a guide, you're usually taken by boat to better, hard-to-reach spots.

Many diving outfitters are affiliates of the international organizations PADI (www.padi.com) or NAUI (www.nauui.org) and post their certifications in plain view. Both organizations' websites allow you to search for their affiliated dive shops in Mexico.

Each year swimmers are killed by undertow, cross-currents, whirlpools and other ocean hazards. Whenever possible seek local advice before entering the water, and keep in mind that swimming conditions can change rapidly.

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR DIVING

Before embarking on a scuba-diving trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure you have a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Obtain a current diving certification card from a recognized scuba-diving instructional agency, either at home or from one of many in Mexico.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Make sure that you are comfortable diving and dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, hire a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how local, trained divers deal with these considerations.

The Divers Alert Network (DAN; www.diversalertnetwork.org) has a comprehensive divers' health section on its website that is well worth a peek before your plunge.

The Mexican Pipeline in Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca, is one of North America's most famous waves. More a proving ground than a surf spot, it provides enthralling but dangerous surf, and is definitely not for beginners.

SURFING

Describing all the epic surf spots on Mexico's Pacific coast would be as arduous as paddling out against a double-overhead set at Playa Zicatela – well, almost. From the 'world's longest wave' near San Blas to the screaming barrels of Puerto Escondido's 'Mexican Pipeline,' the Pacific coast is bombarded with surf. Sayulita, Barra de Navidad, Manzanillo, Playa Boca de Pascuales, Playa La Tícla, Barra de Nexpa, Playa Azul, Playa Troncones, La Saladita, Ixtapa, Playa Revolcadero, Chacahua, Barra de la Cruz – the list goes on and on.

Most beach breaks receive some sort of surf all year, but wave season is really May to October/November. Spring and fall can see excellent conditions with fewer people, while the biggest months are June, July and August, when waves can get *huge* and the sets roll like clockwork.

Shipping a surfboard to Mexico is not a problem, but most airlines charge at least US\$50, and some will hit you for another US\$50 on your way home – even if they told you they wouldn't; be ready.

A good board bag is advisable, but a better one doesn't necessarily guarantee fewer mishaps on the aircraft. We've talked to people who've shipped their boards in what amounted to socks and escaped ding-free, while others have blown half their vacation funds on a super-bag only to open it to the tune of a broken skeg. They're usually fine, however. You'll rarely, if ever, need a wetsuit, but a rash guard is highly recommended for protection against the sun. Bring plenty of warm-water wax, as it's tough to find south of the border. Soft racks (or some sort of packable tie-downs) are easy to carry and indispensable if you plan to do any driving or want to secure your board to a taxi. Unless you plan to surf one spot only, renting a car, or driving your own, makes everything much easier.

FISHING

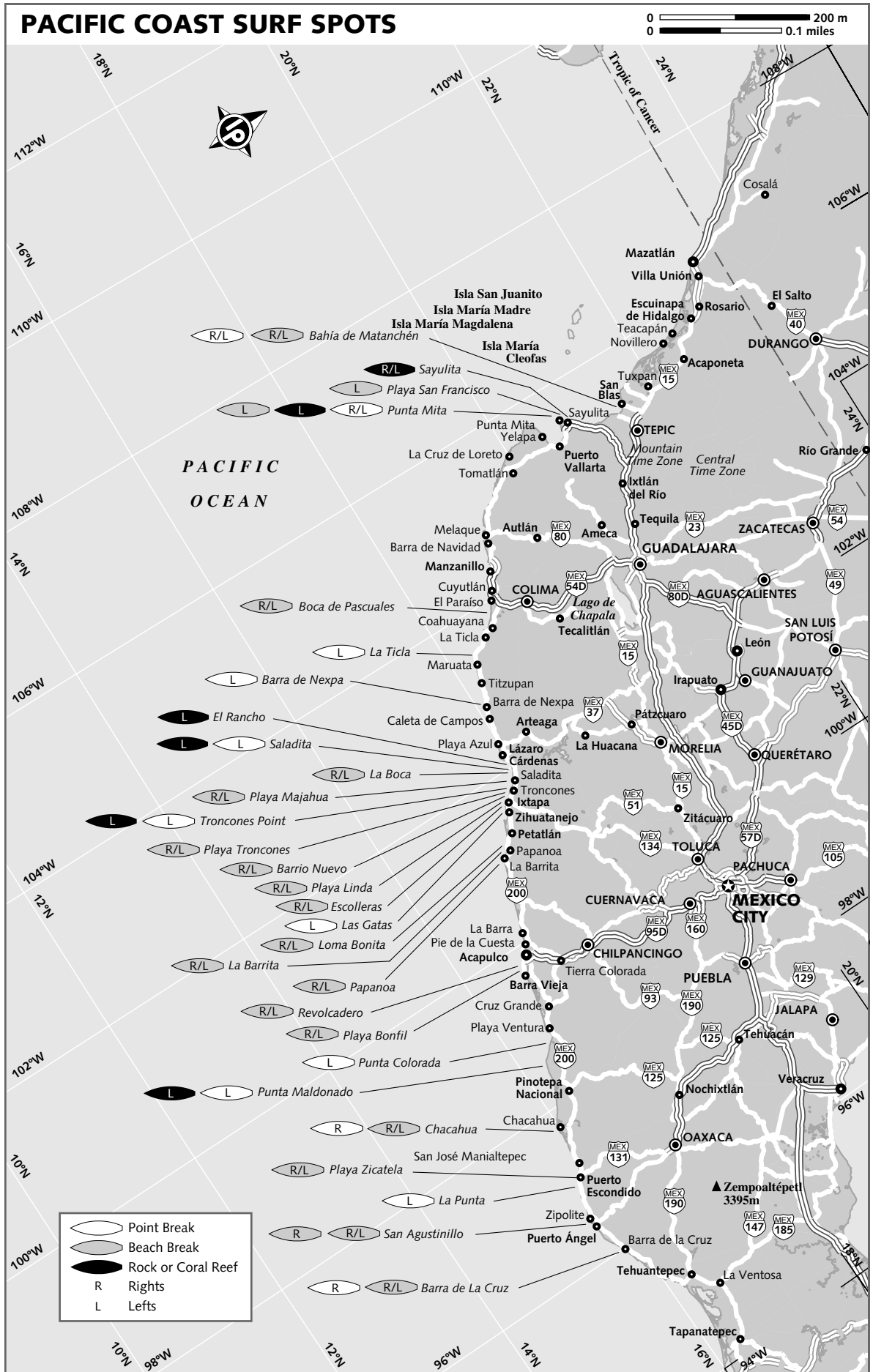
Mexico's Pacific coast has world-famous billfishing (marlin, swordfish, sailfish) and outstanding light-tackle fishing year-round. Many deep-sea charters now practice catch-and-release for billfish, a practice we highly recommend because these majestic lords of the deep are being disastrously overfished.

When & Where to Fish

You can catch fish in these waters year-round, but what, how many, where and when depend on such variables as water temperature, currents, bait supply and fish migrations. In general, the biggest catches occur from April to July and October to December. Keep in mind that summer and late fall is also prime tropical storm and hurricane season.

Mazatlán (p116), 'the billfish capital of the world,' is famous for marlin, while Puerto Vallarta (p72) is known for sailfish; both offer big catches of yellowfin tuna, *dorado* (dolphinfish or mahimahi), red snapper and black sea bass. In Zihuatanejo (p190) sailfish, marlin, dorado, roosterfish and wahoo are caught most of the year, and the biggest tuna catches are in spring. In Bahías de Huatulco swordfish, sailfish and dorado are caught year-round, while marlin are caught mostly from October to May; roosterfish season is April to August.

Plenty of other light-tackle fish are caught year-round along the entire coast, including yellowtail, grouper, Spanish mackerel, sea bass, halibut and wahoo.



Charters

Fishing charters are available in all major resort towns, and you'll find reputable local companies listed throughout this book. Always ask what's included in the rates. Fishing licenses, tackle, crew and ice are standard, but sometimes charters also include bait, cleaning and freezing, meals, drinks and tax. Live bait – usually available dockside for a few dollars – should be checked for absolute freshness. Tips for the crew are at your discretion, but US\$15 to US\$20 (per angler) for a successful eight hours is considered adequate. Bring along a hat, sunscreen, polarized sunglasses and Dramamine (or equivalent) whether or not you suffer from seasickness. Make sure the toilet situation is up to your standards of privacy.

Prices depend on boat type, size and season. The most comfortable is the cruiser, usually 8.6m to 14m (26ft to 42ft) in length and equipped with everything from fighting chairs (to reel in the big fish) to fish-finders and a full head (toilet). Prices range from US\$250 to US\$450 per boat for an eight-hour day.

The cheapest boats are *pangas*, the vessel of choice of Mexican commercial fishermen, as they put you right up close with the sea. About 6m to 8m (18ft to 24ft) long, these sturdy skiffs hold three to four people and cost between US\$150 and US\$200. Super-*pangas* are larger, accommodate four to six fishers comfortably and often feature toilets and a canvas top for shade. Rates start around US\$300 per day per boat.

Foreigners are barred from harvesting abalone, clams, coral, lobster, sea fans, sea shells, shrimp and turtles. Moreover, buying these items directly from fishermen is against the law.

HERE, FISHY FISHY FISH...

Who's gonna believe you if you can't even tell 'em what kind of fish you caught? This little angler's glossary should help. It will also help you communicate with Mexican guides and captains, who can usually tell you what you're most likely to catch. Keep in mind that some terms are regional. Sea bass, for instance might be called '*robalo*,' '*cabrilla*' or '*corvina*,' depending on whom you talk to.

barracuda	<i>picuda</i>
black marlin	<i>marlín negro</i>
blue marlin	<i>marlín azul</i>
bonito	<i>bonito</i>
dolphin fish (mahimahi)	<i>dorado</i>
grouper	<i>garropa, mero</i>
halibut	<i>lenguado</i>
mullet	<i>lisa</i>
red snapper	<i>huachinango, pargo</i>
roosterfish	<i>pez gallo</i>
sailfish	<i>pez vela</i>
sea bass	<i>robalo, cabrilla, corvina</i>
shark	<i>tiburón</i>
Spanish mackerel	<i>sierra</i>
striped marlin	<i>marlín rayado</i>
swordfish	<i>pez espada</i>
tuna	<i>atún</i>
wahoo	<i>peto, guahu</i>
yellowtail	<i>jurel</i>
yellowfin tuna	<i>atún de aleta</i>

The phrase that may serve you best, however, is '*se me fue*' – 'it got away.' Then throw your hands up and say '*lo juro!*' ('I swear it!').

Depending on the season and the whims of the captain you may be able to negotiate better rates.

Licenses & Bag Limits

Anyone aboard a private vessel carrying fishing gear, both on the ocean and in estuaries, must have a Mexican fishing license whether they're fishing or not. Licenses are almost always included on charters, but you'll need your own if you choose to hire a local fisherman to take you out. In Mexico, licenses are issued by the Oficina de Pesca, which has offices in most towns. Licenses can also be obtained in the USA from the **Mexican Fisheries Department** (☎ 619-233-4324; fax 233-0344; Ste 101, 2550 Fifth Ave, San Diego, CA 92103). The cost of the license at the time of research was US\$23/US\$33/US\$43 per week/month/year. Write, call or fax to request an application form.

The daily bag limit is 10 fish per person with no more than five of any one species. Billfish (such as marlin, sailfish and swordfish) are restricted to one per day per boat, while for dorado, tarpon, roosterfish and halibut it's two.

Surf Fishing

Surf fishing is a fun – though not always easy – way to put food in your stomach, *especially* when you're camping. No license is required when fishing from land, as many Mexicans still make their livelihood this way. You don't have to bring a pole – just find a local tackle shop (they're in any sizable fishing town, and some are listed in this book) and purchase a hand reel (a small piece of wood wrapped with fishing line) or *rollo de nylon* (spool of nylon) and some hooks, lures and weights. Some tackle shops sell live bait and *carnada* (raw bait), and it's often sold near the town pier. Shrimp and other raw baits are sold cheaply in the central markets.

Surf fishing is widely enjoyed on rocky shorelines throughout the region. With your hand reel in one hand let out some line, grab it with the other hand, swing it around your head (this takes practice) and let it go. Even if you fail horribly, it's a good way to meet local fishers who might give you a few tips.

KAYAKING, CANOEING & RAFTING

The coastal lagoons and sheltered bays of the Pacific coast are magnificent for kayaks and canoes. If you have your own boat, you'll be in heaven. If you don't, don't worry – many places rent kayaks and provide guides and transportation to boot. Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chachahua, Laguna de Manialtepec, Barra de la Cruz (near Bahías de Huatulco), La Manzanilla and Barra de Navidad are all places with brackish, bird-filled, mangrove-fringed lagoons just waiting to be paddled. Outfitters in San Blas (p131) and La Manzanilla (p153) take folks on some excellent kayaking trips. You can also rent kayaks and/or canoes and paddle off on your own at these and other places, including Bucerías, La Cruz de Huanacastle (both near Puerto Vallarta), Puerto Escondido and Pie de la Cuesta, near Acapulco.

White-water rafting is practiced from June to November on the Copalita and Zimatán Rivers near Bahías de Huatulco (p269); several outfitters there offer excursions.

WILDLIFE- & BIRD-WATCHING

Teeming with birdlife, lined with mangroves and sometimes even crawling with crocodiles, the coastal lagoons of Pacific Mexico are wonderful spots to see wildlife. Many of them are flanked by a small village or two

The multipurpose site Mexico Online (www.mexonline.com/tours.htm) maintains an ecotourism directory.

A Gringo's Guide to Mexican Whitewater by Tom Robey details 56 kayak, canoe and raft runs on 37 different rivers.

Avidly read by birders, Fat Birder (www.fatbirder.com) covers bird-watching worldwide and provides general information about the pursuit in Mexico.

Mexico has more species of birds than the USA and Canada combined.

and have docks where you can hire a local fisher to buzz you around in the cool of the morning. They'll point out birds and iguanas, crocs and turtles, maybe even a boa or two, and they'll let you fish, or stop at an island beach for a swim and a snack. See p42 for additional information on the creatures that inhabit the coast.

Sea Turtle-Watching

Seven of the world's eight sea turtle species are found in Mexican waters, and four of those make it to the Pacific shores of mainland Mexico (the others are found around Baja California and the Gulf of Mexico). Getting a glimpse of these majestic creatures is truly a highlight. There are numerous places to spy on sea turtles, but you have to know where and when to go looking. In order to protect the turtles, some beaches (most notably Playa Ventanilla) are guarded during nesting season and are off-limits to tourists. But chances of seeing the turtles at other beaches are still quite high. See the boxed text, p44, for tips on how to avoid disrupting nesting turtles if you happen to find yourself on a nesting beach.

Whale-Watching

Between November and March, humpback whales migrate to Pacific Mexico to mate and calve. Puerto Vallarta's Bahía de Banderas (p74) is one of their most popular stomping grounds, and a whale-watching trip from one of the city's many operators can bring you almost within kissing distance. Other great places for whale-watching (all of which have outfits offering seasonal trips out to sea) include Chacala, Rincón de Guayabitos and Bucerías, all near Puerto Vallarta. Even from the shore, it's not uncommon to see breaching whales along the entire coast during the first few months of the year.

Bird-Watching

Bird-watchers flock here year-round for the great variety of birds on offer. Even if you're not a bird-watcher, this is the perfect place to experience the rush that makes birders so fanatical. A morning float around one of

TOP TURTLE-WATCHING AREAS

The following coastal areas are where you're most likely to encounter sea turtles:

- **Playa San Francisco** (p143) The southern coast of Nayarit is home to Grupo Ecológico de la Costa Verde, which offers volunteer opportunities and releases more than 25,000 hatchlings each year to the sea.
- **Cuyutlán** (p170) Just south of Manzanillo, the Centro Tortuguero operates a thriving turtle-release program and a visitors' center with baby turtles on display.
- **Playa Maruata** (p174) Black turtles come ashore nightly from June to December to lay their eggs at this back-to-basics beach.
- **Puerto Escondido** (p247) Turtle-spotting tours on Bahía Principal often encounter the elusive loggerhead turtle.
- **San Agustín** (p262) Once the site of large-scale turtle slaughter, today this village is known for its turtle-viewing boat trips.
- **Mazunte** (p263) Home to the Centro Mexicano de la Tortuga, a turtle aquarium and research center with specimens of all seven of Mexico's marine turtle species.
- **Bahías de Huatulco** (p269) This area's terrific dive sites feature frequent close encounters with sea turtles.

the coast's many lagoons, with abundant birdlife, is an unforgettable experience. And if you do it in winter, not only will you see the native waterfowl, you'll see the North American and Alaskan species that migrate here as well. See p44 for some of the birds you might see.

The swamp forests and lagoons around San Blas are ideal for bird-watching, and there's a bird sanctuary in the nearby San Cristóbal estuary. The island of Isla Isabel, four hours from San Blas by boat, is a bird-watcher's dream. Laguna de Manialtepec in Oaxaca is another wetland bird habitat that will truly send you over the edge. There are estuary wetlands flapping with birds near La Cruz de Loreto (in Jalisco, south of Puerto Vallarta), Playa La Ticola (Michoacán) and Barra de Potosí (Guerrero). In Oaxaca, the pair of giant lagoons in Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua, and the tiny lagoon of Barra de la Cruz near Bahías de Huatulco, are two other places offering plenty of chances to sneak up on birds. Inland, near Tepic (Nayarit), Laguna Santa María del Oro, an idyllic lake at 750m elevation in a 100m-deep volcanic crater, is home to some 250 species of bird, and its mountainous surroundings make a wonderful contrast to coastal ecology.

Most outfitters who offer bird-watching tours don't provide binoculars, so pack your own if this activity is on your agenda.

HIKING

Mexico's beaches make outstanding places along which to hike. The 13km beach in Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua (Oaxaca); Playa Larga (near Zihuatanejo); and the endless, empty beaches of Michoacán are great for stretching the legs. Many villages on the coast have back roads or nearby trails you can explore by foot.

Some great hikes can be had inland too (if you can drag yourself away from the beach). Near Tepic, Laguna Santa María del Oro (p137) and the terrain around the extinct Volcán Ceboruco, both offer superb settings for various levels of hiking. Parque Nacional Volcán Nevado de Colima (p169), in Colima, has more good hiking. The Valles Centrales of Oaxaca are popular for guided hikes between mountain villages; they're offered by several operators based in Oaxaca city.

MOUNTAIN BIKING

Shops rent mountain bikes up and down the coast, but you're usually left to your own intuition about where to explore. Troncones, Zihuatanejo, Manzanillo, Playa Azul, San Blas, Sayulita, La Crucecita (Bahías de Huatulco) and many other coastal towns have bike rentals and are small enough places that you can navigate through town and into open terrain without the fear of being run down. You can often ride from one fishing village to another, stopping in each for a beer or a bite to eat (Troncones to La Saladita comes to mind here). Oaxaca (p230) and Puerto Vallarta (p75) have become very popular for mountain biking, and several operators listed in these chapters will take you for some beautiful rides along old mountain roads to visit tiny villages.

On the Internet, **Planeta** (www.planeta.com) has a 'Mexico Biking Guide.' See Puerto Vallarta (p75) and Oaxaca (p230) for outfitters offering some great cycling trips.

HORSEBACK RIDING

It's hard to beat a trot down the beach on a trusty Mexican horse. Horses are rented on countless beaches along the coast. Puerto Vallarta, Troncones, Zihuatanejo, Pie de la Cuesta and Bahías de Huatulco are just a

A Hiker's Guide to Mexico's Natural History by Jim Conrad and *Backpacking in Mexico* by Tim Burford are both must-reads for intrepid explorers planning a bipedal tour south of the border.

Spanish-language site *Ciclismo de Montaña en México* (Mountain Biking in Mexico; www.mountainbike.org.mx) is a great resource for bilingual pedalheads.

Earthfoot (www.earthfoot.org/mx_pc.htm) presents small-scale, locally produced, low-impact ecotours worldwide and maintains a page dedicated to specialist guides in Pacific Mexico.

few of the places where you can mount up for about US\$15 to US\$30 per person for a two- to three-hour guided ride. Some places will allow you to take horses on your own if you leave a small deposit and an ID. Mexican horses tend to be a bit smaller, more worn out and less inclined to run than their North American and European counterparts, but they can still be fun. Keep in mind that if a guide accompanies you, the money he or she makes is often primarily what riders tip them; around US\$5 per person is usually sufficient.

GOLF & TENNIS

Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta, Ixtapa, Acapulco and Bahías de Huatulco all have world-class golf courses where you can swing the old irons to some spectacular views. But you'll pay a pretty price to do it: green fees run anywhere from US\$60 to US\$200. Carts and caddies – which are often required – can cost an additional US\$30 to US\$50, depending on the course.

These same resorts all have numerous tennis clubs, many of which are found in the luxury hotels. Nonhotel guests are almost always welcome to use the courts for about US\$20 per hour and can rent racquets on the spot.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Water-skiing, parasailing and banana-boat riding are widespread resort activities, especially in Acapulco, Puerto Vallarta, Zihuatanejo, Mazatlán and Bahías de Huatulco. Many of the larger resort hotels – if they're located on a bay – rent sailboats and catamarans, too. Laguna de Coyuca (p201), at Pie de la Cuesta, is famous for water-skiing and has several operators that will zip you around the lagoon. Always cast an eye over the equipment before taking off.

Adrenaline junkies can bungee jump from a platform over sea cliffs near Puerto Vallarta (p75) or from a crane top in the middle of the hotel district in Acapulco – great for those margarita hangovers!

The two-stroke engines found on jet skis discharge as much as one third of their fuel and oil unburned into the sea and can also prove detrimental to wildlife.

Food & Drink

James Peyton

When the Spanish arrived in Mexico, they found a cuisine based on corn, beans, squash, chili and, along the coasts, seafood. To this they contributed beef, pork, lamb, chicken, wheat, dairy products and spices like cumin and cinnamon. While these foods combined in ways that created common threads, each area developed its own regional interpretations. To this day, the states along Mexico's Pacific coast – Sinaloa, Nayarit, Colima, Jalisco, Guerrero and Oaxaca – maintain their distinctive culinary traditions and, in each of them, talented chefs continue the process. What you find will probably bear only a passing resemblance to the items served in most Mexican restaurants outside Mexico. You will discover that Mexican cooking is far more varied and interesting than you imagined, and if you are truly interested in food, it will be one of the highlights of your trip.

STAPLES & SPECIALTIES

Seafood

For those who do not live near the coast, your visit will be an opportunity to sample seafood (*mariscos*) that is truly fresh. You will find fish cooked either whole (*entero*) or filleted (*filete* or *fileteado*). One of the most common ways of preparing both fish and shrimp is *al mojo de ajo* (with garlic sauce). The seafood is sautéed or grilled, then served with a sauce of garlic that is simmered in olive oil until meltingly tender. A particularly unique and delicious dish – a specialty of Sinaloa, Nayarit and Jalisco – is *pescado zarandeado*. Originally prepared on a wooden grill over coals, it consists of an entire specially filleted fish. The fillets are very thin and marinated with a unique combination of spices and herbs, often including garlic, mild chilies and *achiote* (the powdered seeds of the annato tree), and grilled. Another favorite way of using seafood is as a filling for tacos. A popular version of seafood tacos in the state of Guerrero is called *pescadillos*, and is made with fish, tomato, and olives, flavored with bay leaf and cinnamon. Dried seafood, often shark, is made into a hash called *machaca* that is popular at breakfast. All along the coast you will find seafood served *al diablo*. While there are infinite variations, most versions consist of seafood served with a sauce of tomato and various chilies.

In terms of preparation fish can be sautéed (*empanizada* or *a la plancha*), grilled (*al carbón* or *a la parrilla*), steamed (*al vapor*), smoked (*ahumado*), or deep fried (*frito*). You will also find seafood or poultry dishes prepared *en escabeche* (simmered in a broth with mild, fruity vinegar; onions; squash; other vegetables and exotic spices; and served at room temperature).

Mexico's Pacific coast has some of the most delicious seafood soups anywhere. They are usually made with a tomato-infused broth and can include everything from fish and squash to a medley of four or five kinds of seafood and several vegetables. Hominy may be added, creating a dish called *pozole*, and sometimes the fish and other seafood is ground and rolled into 'meatballs' called *albondigas*.

Seafood cocktails, most often of shrimp, but also made with crab, scallops, octopus, squid, oysters and scallops, are a special treat. They are often referred to as *campechanas*, named for the port city, Campeche, where they originated. A close cousin to the cocktails is *seviche*, where raw fish is marinated in lime juice; the acid in the lime 'cooks' the fish, which is then combined with spices, chilies, onions, tomatoes, cilantro and sometimes pineapple or orange juice. For these dishes, some caution is advised.

Diana Kennedy is the acknowledged doyenne of Mexican food. Her latest book, *From My Mexican Kitchen: Techniques and Ingredients* (2003), captures the essence of Mexico's complex food and makes it available to cooks outside the country.

For a comprehensive overview of both Mexico and its foods, visit www.mexconnect.com. Some portions of the site are free, but most require a yearly subscription of US\$30.

TACO STANDS EVERYWHERE!

Looking for a cheap, quick meal on the run? Look no further than one of Mexico's ubiquitous taco stands, a godsend tailor-made for the busy budget traveler.

Amble on up to the counter and your choices are clear: *tripa* (intestine), *uba* (udder), *cabeza* (head meat) or *lengua* (tongue). Of course, the much more palatable and commonplace meat choices are *carne asada/res/bistek birria* (varieties of grilled beef) or *chorizo*. Often there will only be a few items on the menu, as different taco stands specialize in different things.

Tacos can vary in size, but are usually about three or four bites and cost around US\$0.50 to US\$0.75 each. Say 'con todo' if you want extras such as beans, onion and cilantro. The tacos will be prepared to order and put on plastic plates covered in clean plastic bags (making cleanup easy but creating unfortunate trash). The best stands are bigger and offer grilled onions, complimentary salsas and radish or cucumber slices. Unless the stand has plastic chairs or is near public seating, you'll probably have to stand to munch the tacos. Pay for your meal after you eat.

And what about sanitary conditions? Well, have a peek at the stand itself: does it look clean? Is it busy? Is the food piping hot or has it been hanging loose awhile? Use your instincts – there are no guarantees, but adventurous travel is all about tasting the local fare, don't you think?

While the lime juice makes the fish opaque and firms it up, no heat is applied, so the juice does not cook the fish to the extent that all bacteria is destroyed. Therefore it should be especially fresh – sushi quality.

Meat, Poultry & More

Those who prefer meat will find a mouthwatering selection. There are many restaurants specializing in *comida nortea* (northern-style cooking) that feature char-broiled meats in various combinations – think fajitas (which are often referred to as *arrecharas*). And nearly every menu will have a selection of steaks and chops, some with beef imported from the USA, which is usually more tender, but less flavorful than the local, grass-fed offerings. Steak *tampiqueña* (Tampico-style), which includes a thin tenderloin steak served with an enchilada, quesadillas and similar *antojitos* (appetizers), as well as rice and beans, is available in myriad combinations. For poultry fans, Sinaloa has a special dish called *pollo sinaloense*, where chicken is marinated in a perfectly balanced combination of chilies, juices and spices, and broiled over coals.

Coastal areas in Jalisco and Guerrero (especially on Thursdays) serve the *pozoles* for which those states are famous. These hominy soups are usually made with pork, but on the coast often with seafood. They are traditionally accompanied by small bowls of lime wedges, chilies, cilantro and oregano so that diners can spice up their offerings. In Guerrero you may find a breakfast dish, called *baila con tu mujer* (dance with your woman), of eggs scrambled with tomato, onion, green chilies and bits of corn tortillas. In the market of Zihuatanejo they serve special breakfast *tortas* (sandwiches) made with roast pork, pineapple, raisins, almonds, plantains, onion and potatoes.

Oaxaca is known as the 'Land of Seven Moles,' and many of these rich, complex stews of chilies, fruits, nuts and exotic spices are found on the coast. Particular favorites include *mole negro* (black mole), *colaradito* (red) and *verde* (green), named for the color of the final dish. Oaxaca also produces special tamales that are wrapped in banana leaves and filled with either *mole negro* or seafood. There, you will also find a pre-Hispanic drink called *champurrado* (hot chocolate with ground, dried corn) that is rich and delicious. The culinarily adventurous may want to try iguana, which is usually stewed, is generally tender and tastes like a combination of chicken and pork.

According to Mexican food authority Amando Farga, seviche was first called *cebiche* by Captain Vasco Núñez de Balboa after being given some by fishermen following his discovery of the Pacific Ocean in 1513. Farga speculates that the name comes from the Spanish verb *cebar*, one of whose meanings is 'to penetrate or saturate.'

The owners of www.mexgrocer.com have in-depth experience with Mexican food products and offer a large selection at reasonable prices.

Dessert

For dessert, coastal cooks take full advantage of local tropical fruits, such as *guayaba* (guava), mango, papaya and coconut. They are served fresh, in puddings, custards, various confections and ice cream. Sinaloa specializes in *pastel tres leches* (a three-milk cake made with fresh or canned evaporated cream, sweetened condensed milk and evaporated milk), which is a favorite throughout Mexico and increasingly in the USA. You may also find *tacuarines*, which are doughnut-like pastries. Acapulco cooks make special use of coconut, ginger and pineapple. They appear in both desserts and special confections called *cocadas* and *alfajores*. Jalisco is famous for a flan-like custard dessert called *jericalla*.

DRINKS

Alcoholic

You will find tequila, Mexico's national drink, everywhere, and bartenders prepare margaritas of every hue and flavor. If you wish to go native, try your tequila either neat with a bite of lime and a lick of salt, or with *sangrita* (a chaser of orange juice, grenadine, chili and sometimes tomato juice). Mamá Lucia's (p104) in Mismaloya is a great place to sample some of the country's top tequilas. Oaxaca is famous for mezcal (p237), a drink similar to tequila, but made with a different agave that is usually smoked before being distilled. Rum drinkers will find interesting light and dark varieties that are often served in a cocktail called Cuba libre (with Coca Cola and lime juice). Visitors will also find good selections of both imported and Mexican wines (whites, reds and rosés), the latter of which have improved greatly in recent years.

Nonalcoholic

Mexico has a long tradition of nonalcoholic drinks. The most popular are *tamarindo*, made with tamarind pods; *Jamaica*, made with dried hibiscus leaves; *horchata*, a combination of melon and its seeds and/or rice; and lime-ade. These delicious, fruity drinks are sold from large, keg-shaped, glass containers, often garnished with mint leaves. Be careful, however, in regard to sanitation.

You will also discover a variety of delicious and healthful smoothies and milkshakes called *licuados*, made with milk, fruits, yogurt and honey. Orange juice, nearly always freshly squeezed, is available everywhere, as

In addition to many other items, such as corn and turkey, two of the world's most beloved edibles, chocolate and vanilla, originally came from Mexico.

Noted chef and restaurateur Rick Bayless has a website (www.fronterakitchens.com) that is partially promotional but has a very good selection of recipes and other information on Mexican food.

WE DARE YOU

A current culinary renaissance in Mexico features pre-Hispanic foods that are often accompanied by copious amounts of tequila's fiery cousin, mezcal. One of the most popular foods is *chapulines* (chop-ooo-lean-ace), which are grasshoppers (purged of digestive matter and dried, you will be happy to hear). They come in large and small sizes, with the latter often being smoked, and are served in many ways, ranging from a taco filling to being sautéed in butter and flamed in brandy. The small, smoked variety are quite tasty and less likely to leave bits of carapace and feelers protruding from your teeth!

Jumiles are beetles, actually a type of stink bug, esteemed in central Mexico when in season in late fall and early winter. They are usually either ground with chilies, tomatoes and tomatillos to make a sauce or used as a taco filling, either toasted or live. In discussing the latter, Diana Kennedy says in *My Mexico*, 'the more fleet-footed ones have to be swept back into the mouth and firmly crunched to prevent them from escaping.' The flavor is unforgettable.

Other favorites include stewed iguana, which tastes like a cross between chicken and pork, as do armadillos, whose copious, small bones are their most irritating quality.

Jim Peyton's www.lomexicano.com is updated quarterly and offers regional Mexican recipes, food-related travel articles and a large glossary of Mexican food terms.

are juices of other fruits and vegetables. Many of these items are found in street *puestos*, or 'stalls,' and in larger, barlike establishments.

Some of the best coffee in the world is grown in Mexico, and Mexicans have a unique way of making it called *café de olla*. This 'coffee from the pot' is brewed in a special clay vessel with a raw sugar called *piloncillo* and cinnamon. *Café con leche* (coffee with milk) is also very popular. For ordinary coffee, with cream on the side, simply ask for *café con crema*. Waiters will often pour both coffee and cream at the table according to your instructions. Bottled water (*agua purificada*) and mineral water (*agua mineral*) are available everywhere.

CELEBRATIONS

Feast days in Mexico are taken seriously, but resort areas are more casual in their observations. For the most part, they do not allow their traditions to interfere with the enjoyment of their visitors. However, be aware that on Christmas, New Year, Holy Week, and during the Day of the Dead, celebrated during the first two days of November, nontouristy establishments may be closed. During these times special items are often available, including *pan de muertos* (bread of the dead), made with yeast, flour, eggs, butter, nutmeg and aniseed and topped off with sprinkled or glazed sugar. Vegetarian specialties (opposite) are popular during Holy Week, and at Christmas and New Year *bacalao* (dried cod) is often served in a mild chili sauce.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Where you eat will depend on your mood and budget, and the number of choices will delight you. *Palapas* are casual, thatched-roof structures found on nearly every popular beach. You will discover delicious traditional seafood cocktails and entrées at moderate to low prices.

In urban areas you will find *puestos*, street stalls that usually specialize in a single item – tacos, burritos etc. Many serve dishes passed down through generations. As always, take precautions when eating at such informal places (see above). Slightly more formal are *loncherias*, *comedores* and *taquerías*, small sit-down eateries often found in private homes in villages and at markets in towns and cities. A step up are *cafés* that serve Mexican specialties, including corn- and tortilla-based *antojitos* such as tacos and enchiladas and simple but delicious meat and seafood entrées, usually accompanied by homemade soups, steaming rice pilafs, beans and fresh vegetables.

Resorts and large cities offer upscale dining with local atmosphere and a mix of international foods and elegant Mexican creations. Many of their chefs practice Mexico's upscale version of fusion cooking called *nueva cocina mexicana* (new Mexican cooking), which combines regional Mexican dishes, ingredients and cooking techniques in new, aesthetically pleasing and delicious ways. Pork *vampiro* (vampire) is one such dish. It draws its inspiration from a popular Mexican drink (a *vampiro*) made with tequila, *sangrita* (a combination of orange juice, grenadine, ancho chiles or chili powder, and lime juice) and sparkling water. These ingredients are then blended and used to braise pork loin. A perfect pairing of flavors results.

To make certain your experience is positive, exercise the same caution you would when selecting any place to eat. Avoid establishments that do not appear to be busy or that seem messy or unclean. Be particularly wary of seafood served from street stalls, as their only refrigeration may be an inadequate amount of ice in a large cooler, and there may be no place for the staff to wash their hands. Remember that if it smells fishy it isn't fresh! Also, avoid mayonnaise-based sauces (which are made with egg yolks) whenever possible.

Restaurateur and chef Zarela Martínez has provided the perfect guide to the regional cooking of Veracruz. Zarela's *Veracruz: Mexico's Simplest Cuisine* (2004) is part travelogue and filled with anecdotes and recipes from places you can actually visit.

FRUIT IN A BAG

You'll see them in many parts of Mexico, in the city or on the beach: small cart vendors selling juicy slices of mango, cucumbers and jicama, or cut squares of watermelon and papaya. Each fruit or vegetable is brightly presented in a clear plastic bag or cup (with a fork or toothpick stuck on the top), tempting you to stop, drop some spare change and take a quick refreshing snack. How can you resist?

You can often also choose a mixed bag of fruit, or ask the vendor to make you a particular combination of fruits (this may up the price by a few cents, though). The price depends on the quantity of fruit in the bag and the popularity of the town with tourists. Expect to pay from US\$0.60 to US\$1.50, with US\$1.25 as the common denominator. For an extra savory kick, have the vendor add some salt, lime juice and chili powder to your bag – this may sound a bit unconventional at first, but one taste of sweet mango with the opposing flavors of salt and chili and you might just get hooked. Plus, not many bugs can survive the double whammy of chili and lime. Hopefully your taste buds and tummy can, though.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Tourist establishments have learned to cater to their patrons, including vegetarians, and visitors will find vegetarian offerings on most menus, certainly by special order. Vegetarian dishes are also on the menus of most restaurants during Lent, though not at other times.

Most waiters in the larger eateries are generally knowledgeable about what they serve and anxious to please. However, they are often not aware of the specific requirements of vegetarians, and especially vegans, and may find the concept difficult to understand – most Mexicans do without meat only because they cannot afford it, and many Mexican vegetarians eat what they do purely because they believe vegetables are healthy, rather than for ethical or philosophical reasons. So you must make your requirements very clear. Your server may believe he is bringing you a vegetarian meal when the items have been flavored with beef or chicken broth, or cooked in lard. Many Mexican soups, for instance, are vegetarian although they are often made with chicken broth or flavored with crushed bouillon. The more upscale the restaurant, the better your chances of being accommodated.

EATING WITH KIDS

Mexicans adore children and Mexico is a child-friendly place. Most waiters will cheerfully do anything within reason to please your child, and virtually all restaurants have high chairs; just ask for a *silla para niños*. Supermarkets carry a full range of American and international brands of baby food. Stock up if you intend to visit small or remote towns.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Coastal eating customs are less formal than in other parts of Mexico. Instead of the afternoon *comida* (meal) served in most of Mexico between 1:30pm and 4pm, lunch is usually available no later than noon, and many restaurants do not open until 6pm for dinner. It is customary for entire families to dine together, either at someone's home or at a restaurant, especially for the Sunday afternoon *comida*. If invited to someone's home for dinner, chocolates or tequila are good choices for a gift. Arriving 10 to 15 minutes late is advisable, as this is what most Mexicans do.

Mexico's attitude toward liquor is usually quite liberal, but be aware that in many communities liquor cannot be sold on election days or when the president is visiting. Also, while alcoholic beverages are usually considered a normal part of life, drinking while driving is a serious no-no!

Besides being great entertainment, both the book and the film of *Like Water for Chocolate* show the importance of food in Mexico, and their use of magic realism showcases the way so many Mexicans view life.

Lots of recipes for Mexican foods can be found at <http://mexicanfood.about.com>.

Jim Peyton's *New Cooking from Old Mexico* (1999) includes a history of Mexican cooking, illustrated with traditional recipes. It also introduces Mexico's unique new contemporary cuisine, *nueva cocina mexicana*, a fusion between Mexico's traditional and regional cuisines with emphasis on elegance and presentation.

Susana Trilling has lived in Oaxaca for over 15 years and operates a fine cooking school by the same name. In *Seasons of My Heart* (1999) she introduces the reader to the fascinating food and customs of this very special area.

In better restaurants, tipping is expected. While 10% is considered on the low side, 15% is the norm, and 20% and is above average. Most restaurants add on Mexico's value-added tax of 15%, which is noted as IVA.

COOKING COURSES & TOURS

In Oaxaca, **Seasons of My Heart** (☎ 518-77-26; www.seasonsofmyheart.com) is operated by well-known cookbook author Susana Trilling. She also conducts culinary tours in Oaxaca and other regions of Mexico. For details of other cooking classes, see p230.

For those with particular interest in cooking and food, cookbook author and Mexico culinary expert Marilyn Tausend (www.marilyntausend.com) conducts terrific, reasonably priced culinary tours of Mexico, most of which include market tours and workshops with noted food experts and chefs.

EAT YOUR WORDS

For non-Spanish speakers, travel and dining in Mexico is no problem as English is understood almost everywhere. However, a few words in Spanish will indicate a respect for them and their culture, not to mention a willingness to risk embarrassment, and that can make a huge difference.

For further tips on pronunciation, see p310.

Useful Phrases

Are you open?

¿Está abierto?

e-sta a-byer-to

When are you open?

¿Cuándo está abierto?

kwan-do e-sta a-byer-to

Are you now serving breakfast/lunch/dinner?

¿Ahora, está sirviendo desayuno/
la comida/la cena?

a-o-ra e-sta ser-vyen-do de-sa-yoo-no/
la ko-mee-da/la se-na

I'd like to see a menu.

Quisiera ver la carta/el menú.

kee-sye-ra ver la kar-ta/el me-noo

Do you have a menu in English?

¿Tienen un menú en inglés?

tye-nen oon me-noo en een-gles

Can you recommend something?

¿Puede recomendar algo?

pwe-de re-ko-men-dar al-go

I'm a vegetarian.

Soy vegetariano/a. (m/f)

soy ve-he-te-rya-no/a

I can't eat anything with meat or poultry products, including broth.

No puedo comer algo de carne o aves,
incluyendo caldo.

no pwe-do ko-mer al-go de kar-ne o a-ves
een-kloo-yen-do kal-do

I'd like mineral water/natural bottled water.

Quiero agua mineral/agua purificada.

kye-ro a-gwa mee-ne-ral/a-gwa poo-ree-fee-ka-da

Is it (chili) hot?

¿Es picoso?

es pee-ko-so

The check, please.

La cuenta, por favor.

la kwen-ta por fa-vor

Food Glossary

MENU DECODER

arroz mexicana
chilaquiles

a-ros me-khee-ka-na
chee-la-kee-les

pilaf-style rice with a tomato base
fried tortilla strips cooked with a red or green
chili sauce, and sometimes meat and eggs
chilies stuffed with meat or cheese, dipped in
egg batter and usually fried
pastry turnover filled with meat, cheese or fruits

chiles rellenos

chee-les re-ye-nos

empanada

em-pa-na-da

<i>enchiladas</i>	en-chee-la-das	corn tortillas dipped in chili sauce, wrapped around meat or poultry and garnished with cheese
<i>ensalada</i>	en-sa-la-da	salad
<i>filete al la tampiqueña</i>	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
<i>huevos fritos</i>	hwe-vos free-tos	fried eggs
<i>huevos rancheros</i>	hwe-vos ran-che-ros	fried eggs served on a corn tortilla, topped with a sauce of tomato, chilies and onions
<i>huevos revueltos</i>	hwe-vos re-vwel-tos	scrambled eggs
<i>nopalitos</i>	no-pa-lee-tos	sautéed or grilled sliced cactus paddles
<i>papas fritas</i>	pa-pas free-tas	french fries
<i>picadillo</i>	pee-ka-dee-yo	a ground-beef filling that often includes fruit and nuts
<i>quesadilla</i>	ke-sa-dee-ya	cheese and other items folded inside a tortilla and fried or grilled

COOKING METHODS

<i>a la parilla</i>	a la pa-ree-ya	grilled
<i>a la plancha</i>	a la plan-cha	pan-broiled
<i>adobada</i>	a-do-ba-da	marinated with <i>adobo</i> , chili sauce
<i>al carbón</i>	al kar-bon	charbroiled
<i>al mojo de ajo</i>	al mo-kho de a-kho	with garlic sauce
<i>alambre</i>	al-am-bre	shish kebab
<i>empanizado</i>	em-pa-nee-sa-do	sautéed
<i>frito</i>	free-to	fried

DAIRY PRODUCTS

<i>crema</i>	kre-ma	cream
<i>leche</i>	le-che	milk
<i>mantequilla</i>	man-te-kee-ya	butter
<i>margarina</i>	mar-ga-ree-na	margarine
<i>queso</i>	ke-so	cheese

SOUPS

<i>caldo</i>	kal-do	broth or soup
<i>pozole</i>	pa-so-le	a hearty soup or thin stew of hominy, meat or seafood, vegetables and chilies
<i>sopa</i>	so-pa	soup, either 'wet' or 'dry,' as in rice and pasta

FISH & SEAFOOD

<i>calamar</i>	ka-la-mar	squid
<i>camarones</i>	ka-ma-ro-nes	shrimp
<i>cangrejo/jaiba</i>	kan-gre-kho/khay-ba	crab
<i>langosta</i>	lan-gos-ta	lobster
<i>mariscos</i>	ma-rees-kos	seafood
<i>ostras/ostiones</i>	os-tras/os-tyo-nes	oysters
<i>pulpo</i>	pool-po	octopus

MEAT & POULTRY

<i>albóndigas</i>	al-bon-dee-gas	meatballs
<i>aves</i>	a-ves	poultry
<i>biftec</i>	beef-tek	steak
<i>brocheta</i>	bro-che-ta	shish kebab

<i>carne</i>	<i>kar-ne</i>	meat
<i>carne de puerco</i>	<i>kar-ne de pwer-ko</i>	pork
<i>carne de res</i>	<i>kar-ne de res</i>	beef
<i>carnitas</i>	<i>kar-nee-tas</i>	pork simmered in lard
<i>cerdo</i>	<i>ser-do</i>	pork
<i>chorizo</i>	<i>cho-ree-so</i>	mexican-style bulk sausage made with chili and vinegar
<i>chuleta</i>	<i>choo-le-ta</i>	chop, as in pork chop
<i>costillas de res</i>	<i>kos-tee-yas de res</i>	beef ribs
<i>jamón</i>	<i>kha-mon</i>	ham
<i>lomo</i>	<i>lo-mo</i>	loin
<i>lomo de cerdo</i>	<i>lo-mo de ser-do</i>	pork loin
<i>pechuga de pollo</i>	<i>pe-chu-ga de po-yo</i>	chicken breast
<i>pollo</i>	<i>po-yo</i>	chicken
<i>tocino</i>	<i>to-see-no</i>	bacon

VEGETABLES, LEGUMES & GRAINS

<i>arroz</i>	<i>a-ros</i>	rice
<i>calabacita</i>	<i>ka-la-ba-see-ta</i>	squash
<i>cebolla</i>	<i>se-bo-ya</i>	onion
<i>papas</i>	<i>pa-pas</i>	potatoes
<i>verduras</i>	<i>ver-doo-ras</i>	vegetables

OTHER FOODS

<i>azúcar</i>	<i>a-soo-kar</i>	sugar
<i>pan integral</i>	<i>pan in-te-gral</i>	wholemeal bread
<i>pan</i>	<i>pan</i>	bread
<i>pimienta</i>	<i>pi-myen-ta</i>	pepper
<i>sal</i>	<i>sal</i>	salt

FRUIT

<i>coco</i>	<i>ko-ko</i>	coconut
<i>coctel de frutas</i>	<i>kok-tel de fru-tas</i>	fruit cocktail
<i>fresa</i>	<i>fre-sa</i>	strawberry
<i>piña</i>	<i>pee-nya</i>	pineapple
<i>plátano</i>	<i>pla-ta-no</i>	banana or plantain

DESSERTS

<i>cajeta</i>	<i>ka-khe-ta</i>	goat's milk and sugar boiled to a paste
<i>helado</i>	<i>e-la-do</i>	ice cream
<i>nieve</i>	<i>nye-ve</i>	sorbet
<i>pastel</i>	<i>pas-tel</i>	cake
<i>postre</i>	<i>pos-tre</i>	dessert

DRINKS

<i>agua mineral</i>	<i>a-gwa mee-ne-ral</i>	mineral water or club soda
<i>agua purificada</i>	<i>a-gwa poo-ree-fee-ka-da</i>	bottled uncarbonated water
<i>café americano</i>	<i>ka-fe a-me-ree-ka-no</i>	black coffee
<i>café con crema/leche</i>	<i>ka-fe kon kre-ma/le-che</i>	coffee with cream/milk
<i>café negro</i>	<i>ka-fe ne-gro</i>	black coffee
<i>jugo de manzana</i>	<i>khoo-go de man-sa-na</i>	apple juice
<i>jugo de naranja</i>	<i>khoo-go de na-ran-kha</i>	orange juice
<i>jugo de piña</i>	<i>khoo-go de pee-nya</i>	pineapple juice
<i>té de manzanillo</i>	<i>te de man-sa-nee-ya</i>	chamomile tea
<i>té negro</i>	<i>te ne-gro</i>	black tea

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'