

MEXICO



REGIONAL INFORMATION



General Info

Mexico – Ancient and thrilling

Mexico is a country with a huge variety – from ancient temples to modern metropolises, from indigenous tribes to Spanish colonialism, from its famous Tequila and Burritos to less known specialities. Mexico is a country with a passion!

People



Religion & Culture

Roman Catholic mostly – but held in check

While about 89% of Mexicans are Roman Catholic, religion plays a limited role in public life thanks mainly to Benito Juarez, an indigenous former president. Until recently the number of priests allowed was limited, priests were not allowed to vote and churches had no right to own property (and this is still limited today). Mexico is also home to about 6m Protestants and small communities that practice Judaism, Islam and Buddhism.

Population

Mexico has 3rd largest Spanish speaking population

The largest Spanish-speaking population in the world, and the 2nd largest in Latin America (after Brazil), Mexico's population of 112m is the 11th largest in the world. The population is broadly divided into *mestizos* or Amerindian-Spanish (60%), Amerindian (30%), whites (9%). About 53% of Mexico's indigenous people live in Oaxaca state. Literacy is about 86% and life expectancy about 76 years.

Language

Spanish is first among many but not official

Spanish is the primary language of Mexico though about 5% of the population, mostly from indigenous tribes, do not speak it. The government however recognises 63 indigenous languages as official languages (and strangely Spanish is not an official language) but while 10% of the population is of Native American origin only 5.4% of the population (or 6m people) speak an indigenous language. However these 6 million make Mexico the country with the 2nd largest indigenous language-speaking population in the Americas after Peru.



Food

Tacos, burritos and much more

Mexican food is world-famous. Based around corn (from which are made various forms of hard or soft wraps, e.g. burritos, tacos, enchiladas) and beans often with squash, peppers, garlic, onions, meat and of course chilli. Other common spices in Mexican food include cumin, oregano, coriander, cinnamon, and cocoa. Rice is another popular staple and guacamole of course originates in Mexico too. Beer and spirits made from agave such as tequila or mescal are popular tipples. Regional specialities include some strange options with dishes containing grasshoppers, iguana, rattlesnakes, spider monkeys and, of course, ant eggs!

Environment



Geography

Roughly the size of France, Spain and Portugal combined

Mexico covers over 1.96 m sq kms, making it almost four times the size of Spain. With more than 9,000k of coastline, climates from tropical to desert and peaks of up to 5,700m Mexico is a vast and varied country. Oaxaca province in the South of Mexico is slightly larger than Hungary and home to numerous eco-systems from mangrove swamps to pine and oak forests – making it a place of great natural resources and huge biodiversity.

Flora & Fauna

Bursting with biodiversity

Mexico ranks fifth in the world in terms of the number of species of animals largely due the variety of its terrains and therefore climates – from deserts in the north to jungles in the south. Animals include coyotes, bears, spider and howler monkeys, mountain lions, jaguars and deer as well as over 750 species of bird. The southerly states in particular (especially Oaxaca) are home to huge biodiversity hosting many endemic and unique species of plants, ferns, palms and grasses.

Climate

Tropical to temperate

In general the climate of Mexico is tropical to temperate - varying according to altitude, winds and the Pacific Ocean currents. Low-lying areas of the south enjoy a hot, humid tropical climate, while weather in the higher altitudes is temperate. Coastal areas receive rainfall, but most of the country is dry most of the time.

History & Economy



History

Olmecs, Zapotecs, Mayas and Aztecs

The first evidence of human life in Mexico dates from more than 20,000 years ago when hunter-gatherers crossed from Asia via the Bering Strait. The early civilisations in Mexico were among the most advanced in the world of the time and the country was home to the Olmecs, Zapotecs, Mayas, Taztecas and Aztecs amongst others. Hernan Cortés and the Spanish arrived in the 1500s and razed much of the culture, dominating the land until independence in the early 1900s. Since independence internal strife and a lack of political leadership has meant the country has not yet reached its full potential.

Economy

A mixed economy with many trade agreements

The Mexican economy is based on a mixture of industrial goods such as motor vehicles, raw materials such as iron and petroleum and consumer goods such as food, tobacco and clothing. Tourism is also an important source of foreign currency. Since joining NAFTA in 1994, trade with the US and Canada has tripled and 90% of Mexico's trade now falls under one of its trade agreements that cover 50 countries. The government's main economic priorities are creating jobs and reducing poverty as despite rising levels of affluence, Mexico's inequality levels remain stubbornly high.