

Country Guide for

MEXICO



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1 CONTACT ADDRESSES

Location: Central America

Secretaria de Turismo (SECTUR)

Presidente Mazaryck 172, Colonia Polanco, 11570 México DF, Mexico

Tel: (5) 254 8920 (marketing). Fax: (5) 254 0942 (marketing).

Web site: <http://www.mexico-travel.com>

Fondo Nacional de Fomento al Turismo (FONATUR)

22nd Floor, Insurgentes Sur 800, Colonia del Valle, 03100 México DF, Mexico

Tel: (5) 687 2697 or (250) 01 23 01 53 (travel hotline). Fax: (5) 687 5052. Web site:

<http://www.fonatur.gob.mx>

Consejo de Promocion Turistica de Mexico

Mariano Escobedo 550, 8th Floor, 11580 México DF, Mexico

Tel: (5) 255 5026 or 255 0830. Fax: (5) 203 1087.

E-mail: cptmex@infosel.net.mx

Mexican Embassy

42 Hertford Street, London W1J 7JR

Tel: (020) 7499 8586. Fax: (020) 7495 4035.

E-mail: mexuk@easynet.co.uk

Web site: <http://www.demon.co.uk/mexuk>

Mexican Consulate

8 Halkin Street, London SW1X 7DW

Tel: (020) 7235 6393 or (0900) 160 0125 (recorded visa information; calls cost 60p per minute).

Fax: (020) 7235 5480. E-mail: consullondon@easynet.co.uk

Web site: <http://www.mexicanconsulate.org.uk>

Opening hours: 0930-1300 Monday to Friday.

Mexican Tourism Promotion Board

Wakefield House, 41 Trinity Square, London EC3N 4DT

Tel: (020) 7488 9392. Fax: (020) 7265 0704.

E-mail: info@mexicotravel.co.uk

Web site: <http://www.mexicotravel.co.uk>

Trade Commission of the Mexican Embassy (BANCOMEXT)

3 St James' Square, London SW1Y 4JU

Tel: (020) 7839 6586. Fax: (020) 7839 4425.

E-mail: bancomextuk@bancomext.co.uk

Web site: <http://www.bancomext.com>

British Embassy

Río Lerma 71, Colonia Cuauhtémoc, 06500 México DF, Mexico

Tel: (5) 207 2089. Fax: (5) 207 7672.

E-mail: infogen@mail.internet.com.mx (general information) or
consular.section@mail.fco.gov.uk (consular section).

Web site: <http://www.embajadabritanica.com.mx>

Consulates in: Mexico City, Acapulco, Cancún, Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, Mérida, Monterrey, Tampico, Tijuana and Veracruz.

Mexican Embassy

1911 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington DC, 20006

Tel: (202) 728 1600. Fax: (202) 728 1718.

E-mail: info@embassyofmexico.org

Web site: <http://www.embassyofmexico.org>

Mexican Consulate

2827 16th Street, NW, Washington DC 20009

Tel: (202) 736 1000. Fax: (202) 797 8458. Web site: <http://www.embassyofmexico.org>

Mexican Government Tourism Office

21 East 63rd Street, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10022

Tel: (212) 821 0314 or (1 800) 446 3942 (toll free; USA and Canada). Fax: (212) 812 0367. E-mail: newyork@visitmexico.com

E-mail: newyork@visitmexico.com

Web site: <http://www.visitmexico.com>

Offices also in: Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles and Coral Gables.

Embassy of the United States of America

Paseo de la Reforma 305, Colonia Cuauhtémoc, 06500 México DF, Mexico

Tel: (5) 209 9100. Fax: (5) 208 4178. E-mail: embeuamx@pd.state.gov (general information).

Web site: <http://www.usembassy-mexico.gov>

Consulates General in: Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara and Tijuana. Consulates in: Hermosillo, Matamoros, Mérida, Monterrey and Nuevo Larido.

Mexican Embassy

Suite 1500, 45 O'Connor Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 1A4

Tel: (613) 233 8988 or 233 9272 or 233 9917. Fax: (613) 235 9123.

E-mail: info@embamexcan.com

Web site: <http://www.embamexcan.com>

Consulates in: Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver.

Honorary consulates in: Québec City, Dartmouth, Regina, St.John's and Winnipeg.

Mexican Government Tourism Office

2 Bloor Street West, Suite 1801, Toronto, Ontario M4W 3E2

Tel: (416) 925 0704 or (1 800) 44 63 94 26 (toll free; USA and Canada). Fax: (416) 925 6061.

Offices also in: Montréal and Vancouver.

Canadian Embassy

Street address: Calle Schiller 529, Colonia Rincon del Bosque, 11580 México DF, Mexico

Postal address: Apartado Postal 105-05, 11580 México DF, Mexico

Tel: (5) 724 7900. Fax: (5) 724 7980 (administration) or 724 7943 (consular). E-mail:

consular@canada.org.mx

Web site: <http://www.canada.org.mx>

Consulates in: Acapulco, Cancún, Guadalajara, Mazatlán, Monterrey, Oaxaca, Puerto Vallarta, San José and Tijuana.

Country dialling code: 52.

2 GENERAL

Area: 1,953,162 sq km (761,603 sq miles).

Population: 95,831,000 (1998).

Population Density: 49.1 per sq km.

Capital: Mexico City. Population: 18,000,000 (1998).

Geography: Mexico is at the southern extremity of North America and is bounded to the north by the USA, northwest by the Gulf of California, west by the Pacific, south by Guatemala and Belize, and east by the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. Mexico's geographical features range from swamp to desert, and from tropical lowland jungle to high alpine vegetation. Over half the country has an altitude above 1000m (3300ft). The central land mass is a plateau flanked by ranges of mountains to the east and west that lie roughly parallel to the coast. The northern area of this plateau is arid and thinly populated, and occupies 40% of the total area of Mexico. The southern area is crossed by a range of volcanic mountains running from Cape Corrientes in the west through the Valley of Mexico to Veracruz in the east, and includes the magnificent volcanoes of Orizaba, Popocatepetl, Ixtaccíhuatl, Nevado de Toluca, Matlalcueyetl and Cofre de Perote. This is the heart of Mexico and where almost half of the population lives. To the south, the land falls away to the sparsely populated Isthmus of Tehuantepec whose slopes and flatlands support both commercial and subsistence agriculture. In the east the Gulf Coast and the Yucatán peninsula are flat and receive over 75% of Mexico's rain. The most productive agricultural region in Mexico is the northwest, while the Gulf Coast produces most of Mexico's oil and sulphur. Along the northwest coast, opposite the peninsula of Baja California, and to the southeast along the coast of Bahía de Campeche and the Yucatán peninsula, the lowlands are swampy with coastal lagoons.

Government: Republic since 1917. Gained independence from Spain in 1821. Head of State and Government: President Vicente Fox since 2000.

Language: Spanish is the official language. English is widely spoken.

Religion: 90% Roman Catholic.

Time: Mexico spans three different time zones:

South, Central and Eastern Mexico: GMT - 6 (Central Standard Time). (GMT - 5 from first Sunday in April to Saturday before last Sunday in October.)

Nayarit, Sonora, Sinaloa and Baja California Sur: GMT - 7 (Mountain Time). (GMT - 6 from first Sunday in April to Saturday before last Sunday in October.)

Baja California Norte (Pacific Time): GMT - 8 (GMT - 7 from first Sunday in April to Saturday before last Sunday in October).

Electricity: 110 volts AC, 60Hz. US 2-pin (flat) plugs are usual.

Communications:

Telephone: IDD is available. Country code: 52. Outgoing international code: 00. Long-distance calls are very expensive.

Mobile telephone: AMPS network is operated by IUSACELL. No GSM network exists at present. Handsets can be hired.

Fax: Major hotels have facilities.

Internet/E-mail: ISPs include Infosel (web site: <http://www.infosel.net.mx>), DSICom Internet (web site: <http://www.dsi.com.mx>) and Internet Mexico (web site: <http://www.internet.com.mx>). Cybercafés exist in all regions, particularly the main tourist areas.

Telegram: Services are operated by Telegrafos Nacionales and international telegrams should be handed in to their offices. The main office is situated in Balderas y Colón, México 1DF.

Post: Airmail to Europe takes about six days. Surface mail is slow. Within the capital there is an immediate delivery (Entrega Inmediata) service, which usually takes two or three days.

Press: The major daily newspapers published in Spanish are Excélsior, El Universal, La Prensa and El Día. The English-language papers available are New York Times, The News, Mexico City Times, and USA Today.

BBC World Service and Voice of America frequencies: From time to time these change.

BBC:

MHz 15.22 9.590 6.195 5.975

Voice of America:

MHz 15.80 11.70 9.775 6.130

3 PASSPORT

	<i>Passport Required?</i>	<i>Visa Required?</i>	<i>Return Ticket Required?</i>
British	Yes	1/3	Yes
Australian	Yes	2/3	Yes
Canadian	Yes	2/3	Yes
USA	1	2/3	Yes
OtherEU	Yes	1/3	Yes
Japanese	Yes	2/3	Yes

Note: No brief account of the complex Mexican Passport/Visa regulations is likely to be fully successful. Visitors are advised to use the following for general guidance, but to check on the requirements that specifically apply to them with the appropriate Consulate (or Consular section at Embassy) before travelling. Non-compliance with visa regulations will result in fines and transportation (at the carrier's expense) to the visitor's country of origin.

PASSPORTS: Passport valid for at least 1 year after date of entry is required by all except the following:

- (a) 1. nationals of the USA holding a certified copy of a birth certificate and photo identification (eg driver's licence or student ID).

TOURIST CARDS: Available only to people entering Mexico on holiday, for reasons of health, or to engage in scientific, artistic or sporting activities which are neither remunerative nor lucrative. Valid for the holder only. Other persons (including minors) travelling on the same passport must have their own card. The card is a single-entry document and is issued free of charge. The Consular office retains the right to request further evidence of the applicant's intention to visit Mexico as a tourist whenever such intention has not been established to the Consul's satisfaction. The same right applies with regard to evidence of the applicant's financial means to sustain him/herself while in Mexico.

Note: (a) Visitors eligible for Tourist Cards (see below) can be issued with Tourist Cards by any Mexican Consulate, on board the plane or at the point of entry in Mexico. (b) Tourist Cards must be kept by the visitor during the entire length of stay as they will have to be presented and stamped on leaving.

Nationals of the following countries are eligible for a Tourist card: (a) 1. EU countries for stays of up to 180 days (except nationals of Austria, France, Greece and Luxembourg who can stay for up to 90 days);
(b) 2. Australia, Canada, Japan and the USA for stays of up to 180 days;
(c) Andorra, Argentina, Bermuda, Chile, Costa Rica, Hungary, Iceland, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Norway, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, Switzerland and Uruguay for stays of up to 180 days;
(d) Czech Republic, Israel, Monaco and Poland for up to 90 days;
(e) Korea (Rep. of) for up to 60 days;
(f) Brazil and Venezuela for up to 30 days.

For requirements and regulations relevant to other nationalities, contact the Mexican Embassy.

Application to: Consulate (or Consular section at Embassy); see address section.

Application requirements: Tourist Cards: (a) Passport with a minimum of 6 months' validity. (b) If applying by post, a covering letter giving dates of entry and departure. Postal applications must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for recorded or registered delivery. (c) Return or onward ticket. (d) Proof of sufficient funds if staying for up to 6 months.

Note: In some cases a personal application may be required.

Cost: Tourist Cards are issued free of charge.

VISAS: Required by all except holders of a Tourist Card or visa-replacing document. Nationals of the following countries require a special authorisation from the Ministry of the Interior in Mexico: Afghanistan, Albania, Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, China (PR), Croatia, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, India, Jordan, Korea (DPR), Lebanon, Libya, Macedonia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Syria, Taiwan, Turkey and Vietnam. Authorisation takes approximately 3 to 4 weeks.

Application requirements: Tourist Visa: (a) Passport with minimum of 6 months' validity. (b) Application form. (c) 1 passport-size photo. (d) Original return ticket. (e) Fee (payable in cash only). (f) Proof of sufficient funds (US\$50 per day) to cover length of stay. (g) Postal applications must be accompanied by a covering letter specifying the purpose of the trip and the dates of entry and departure. Applications should be made in a stamped, self-addressed envelope with recorded or registered delivery.

Business Visitors Card: (a)-(b) and, (c) 2 passport-size photos. (d) Letter from applicant's employer accepting financial responsibility to cover the applicant's stay, which also states the nature of business to be undertaken and the name and address of the business contact(s) in Mexico. For visits of more than 30 days, a multiple-entry card is needed, as well as a letter from

the local Chamber of Commerce (or Department of Trade and Industry) confirming the sponsoring company is a member of either body. (e) Fee (payable in cash, postal order or company cheque). (f) Postal applications must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope with recorded delivery.

Note: 3. If intending to undertake business or work of a technical or scientific nature, normal visa regulations do not apply, and it is necessary to obtain a Visitors Card. It is vital to contact the local Mexican consular representative well in advance of the intended date of departure in order to secure the necessary authorisation (see address section). Non-British Nationals seeking to visit Mexico on business are advised to check with the Consulate regarding visa requirements and fees.

Application to: Consulate (or Consular section at Embassy); see address section.

Cost: Tourist: £23.70. Business Visitor's Card: £63.20 (non-lucrative) or £102.80 (lucrative). Visa prices fluctuate according to the exchange rate.

Working days required: 2 (in person); 1 week (by post). Applications should not be made more than 3 months before date of departure.

Temporary residence: Application should be made to the Mexican Home Office with proof of sufficient funds (US\$50 per day) to cover length of stay without working. Contact the Consulate (or Consular section at the Embassy) for further details.

4 MONEY

Currency: New Peso (peso) = 100 centavos. Notes are in denominations of peso500, 200, 100, 50, 20 and 10. Coins are in denominations of peso20, 10, 5, 2 and 1, and 50, 20, 10 and 5 centavos.

Note: The New Peso was introduced on January 1, 1993 and is equivalent to 1,000 former pesos.

Currency exchange: Currency may only be exchanged at authorised banks. The exchange rate of the Mexican peso against Sterling and other hard currencies has, in recent years, been subject to considerable fluctuation.

Credit cards: American Express, Diners Club, Visa and MasterCard are widely accepted. Check with your credit card company for details of merchant acceptability and other services which may be available. There is a government tax of 6% on such transactions.

Travellers cheques: Travellers cheques or letters of credit in US Dollars issued by well-known banks or travel organisations are readily negotiable in banks and hotels. Sterling travellers cheques are not readily negotiable except at head offices of banks in the capital, and may be subject to a considerable discount. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travellers are advised to take travellers cheques in US Dollars.

Currency restrictions: Local currency may be imported up to the equivalent of US\$10,000, larger amounts to be declared; the import of foreign currency is unlimited, provided declared. Foreign currency may be exported up to the amount imported and declared; local currency may be exported up to the equivalent of US\$10,000. The export of gold coins is prohibited.

Banking hours: 0900-1330 Monday to Friday; some banks are open Saturday afternoon.

5 DUTY FREE

The following goods may be imported into Mexico by persons over 18 years of age without incurring customs duty:

400 cigarettes or 50 cigars or 250g of pipe tobacco; 3 litres of wine or spirits; a reasonable amount of perfume or eau de toilette; total of 2 photo, movie or video cameras for non-residents and up to 12 unexposed rolls of film or video cassettes for each camera; goods up to the value of US\$300 or equivalent.

Prohibited items: Any uncanned food, pork or pork products, plants, fruits, vegetables and their products. Canned food is permitted, provided it is not pork or pork products. Firearms and ammunition need an import permit. Archaeological relics may not be exported.

6 PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Jan 1 2001 New Year's Day. Feb 5 Constitution Day. Mar 21 Birthday of Benito Juárez. Apr 13-16 Easter. May 1 Labour Day. May 5 Anniversary of Battle of Puebla. Sep 16 Independence Day. Nov 1 All Saints' Day. Nov 2 All Souls' Day - Day of the Dead. Nov 20 Anniversary of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Dec 12 Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Dec 25 Christmas. Jan 1 2002 New Year's Day. Feb 5 Constitution Day. Mar 21 Birthday of Benito Juárez. Mar 28-Apr 1 Easter. May 1 Labour Day. May 5 Anniversary of Battle of Puebla. Sep 16 Independence Day. Nov 1 All Saints' Day. Nov 2 All Souls' Day - Day of the Dead. Nov 20 Anniversary of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Dec 12 Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Dec 25 Christmas.

Note: (a) In addition there are many local holidays. For details, contact the Mexican Tourist Office. (b) Holidays falling at the weekend are not celebrated on the previous or following weekday.

7 HEALTH

	<i>Special Precautions</i>	<i>Certificate Required</i>
Yellow Fever	No	1
Cholera	2	-
Typhoid and Polio	Yes	-
Malaria	3	-
Food and Drink	4	-

1: A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from travellers over six months of age arriving from infected areas.

2: Following WHO guidelines issued in 1973, a cholera vaccination certificate is no longer a condition of entry to Mexico. However, cholera is a serious risk in this country and precautions are essential. Up-to-date advice should be sought before deciding whether these precautions should include vaccination, as medical opinion is divided over its effectiveness.

3: Malaria risk, almost exclusively in the benign vivax form, exists in rural areas of the following states (in decreasing order of importance): Chiapas, Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Michoacán, Nayarit, Guerrero, Tabasco, Quintano Roo, Chihuahua, Campeche and Hidalgo. Recommended prophylaxis is chloroquine.

4: Water supplied in bottles and from taps marked 'drinking/sterilised water' in hotels can be drunk without precautions. All other water should be regarded as being potentially contaminated. Water used for drinking, brushing teeth or making ice should have first been boiled or otherwise sterilised. Milk in major cities, hotels and resorts is pasteurised. Otherwise, milk is unpasteurised and should first be boiled. Powdered or tinned milk is available and is advised, but make sure that it is reconstituted with pure water. Avoid dairy products which are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Only eat well-cooked meat and fish, preferably served hot. Pork, salad and mayonnaise may carry increased risk. Vegetables should be cooked and fruit peeled. Rabies is present. For those at high risk, vaccination before arrival should be considered. If you are bitten, seek medical advice without delay. Visceral and mucutaneous leishmaniasis occur. Dysenteries and diarrhoeal diseases are present. Hepatitis A occurs and hepatitis E has been reported.

Health care: Health insurance is recommended. Medical facilities are very good and there are both private and state-organised hospitals, doctors, clinics and chemists. Medicines are often available without prescriptions and pharmacists are permitted to diagnose and treat minor ailments. Owing to the high altitude of Mexico City, visitors may take some time to acclimatise to the atmosphere, particularly since its geographical location results in an accumulation of smog. The levels of pollution in Mexico City are extremely high and are considered a health threat, so precautions should be taken.

Travel - International

AIR: Mexico's national airlines are Aeroméxico (AM) and Mexicana (MX). British Airways operates three direct flights each week from Heathrow to Mexico City and two direct flights per week to Cancún.

Approximate flight times: From Mexico City to London is 10 hours 20 minutes; to Los Angeles is 4 hours 20 minutes; to New York is 6 hours; to Singapore is 22 hours 45 minutes and to Sydney is 19 hours.

International airports: Mexico City (MEX) (Benito Juárez) is 13km (8 miles) south of the city. Buses run to and from the city at regular intervals (journey time - 35 minutes). Underground trains and taxis are also available. Airport facilities include duty-free shops (0600-2400), restaurants (0700-2400), bank/bureau de change, 24-hour bar, 24-hour snack bar, chemist (0500-2200), 24-hour shops, tourist information (0900-2000), 24-hour left luggage, post office (0800-1900), first aid (with vaccinations for cholera and yellow fever available) and car hire (Avis, Hertz, Budget and Dollar).

Guadalajara (GDL) (Miguel Hidalgo) is 20km (12 miles) southeast of the city (travel time - 35 minutes). Airport facilities include restaurant, bar, snack bar, bank, post office and shops.

Acapulco (ACA) (General Juan N Alvarez) is 26km (16 miles) southeast of the city (travel time - 35 minutes). Coaches and taxi services run to the city. Airport facilities include restaurant, bank, post office and car hire.

Monterrey (MTY) (General Mariano Escobedo) is 24km (15 miles) northeast of the city (travel time - 45 minutes). Coach and taxi services run to the city. Airport facilities include restaurant, bar, bank, post office, shops and car hire.

Departure tax: Approximately US\$18; children under two years and transit passengers are exempt. The tax is sometimes included in the price of the ticket.

SEA/RIVER: The major cruise ports in Mexico are Cozumel, Acapulco, Tampico, Zihuatanejo/Ixtapa, Manzanillo, Puerto Vallarta and Mazatlán. Regular passenger ships run from the USA and South America. Principal shipping lines are P&O and Fred Olsen Lines. There are also riverboat services from Flores and Tikal (Guatemala) to Palenque, Chiapas in Mexico. Enquire locally for details.

RAIL: Railway connections with Mexico can be made from any city in the USA or Canada. All trains are provided with pullman sleepers, restaurant cars, lounge observation and club cars. Most trains are air-conditioned.

ROAD: Main points of entry from the USA are Mexicali from San Diego; Nogales from Phoenix/Tucson; El Paso/Ciudad Juárez from Tucson and Albuquerque; Eagle Pass/Piedras Negras from Del Río, San Angelo and El Paso; Laredo/Nuevo Laredo from Houston, San Antonio and Del Río; and Brownsville/Matamoros from Houston and Galveston. From Guatemala there are two main roads into Mexico. The Pan American Highway crosses into Mexico from Guatemala and continues through Central America and South America. There is also a road border crossing point from Belize near Chetmul and Corozal.

Travel - Internal

AIR: There is an excellent network of daily scheduled services between principal commercial centres operated by Aeroméxico, Mexicana and Aero California. Many of the smaller airports also have capacity for large planes and some international flights. Flights between Mexico City and Guadalajara take about 55 minutes and those between Mexico City and Monterrey about 75 minutes.

Departure tax: Approximately peso90.

SEA: Steamer ferries operate regularly between Mazatlán and La Paz (Baja California) daily; between Guaymas and Santa Rosalia, across the Gulf of California; between La Paz and Topolobampo three or four times weekly; and from Puerto Vallarta to Cabo San Lucas twice-weekly. Some west coast cruises include Pacific ports such as Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco. There are also regular ferries from the mainland to the Caribbean Islands of Isla Mujeres and Cozumel.

RAIL: Mexico has a good railway network and trains link all the main towns in the country. A spectacular route is the Copper Canyon Railway that runs between Chihuahua and Los Mochis. However, most people travel by bus since it is considerably faster and provides a more extensive service. Children under five travel free, provided they are accompanied by a parent. Children aged 5-11 pay half-fare.

ROAD: Traffic drives on the right. Mexico's road network extends to almost 252,000km (157,500 miles), of which somewhat less than half is paved. A toll is charged for use of the expressways, which are managed by Caminos y Puentes Federales de Ingresos y Servicios Conexos. Rest areas at toll sites also provide ambulance and breakdown services. An organisation known as 'Angeles Verdes' (Green Angels) provides breakdown assistance to tourists on the highways free of charge.

except for petrol, oil and spare parts. Car use in Mexico City is restricted to cut down on pollution. The last digit of the car number plate determines when that car cannot be driven. Bus: Mexico is linked by an excellent and very economical bus system. There are first-class and deluxe coaches as well as ordinary buses. Central bus terminals in major cities provide service and information on fares and schedules. Car hire: Self-drive cars are available at airports, city centres and resorts. Documentation: An International Driving Permit or a full British Driving Licence is required for locally registered vehicles. Minimum driving age is 18. Payment is by credit card. Full car insurance is recommended.

URBAN: There is an excellent and cheap metro system in Mexico City with frequent trains and flat fares. However, it is often crowded and some familiarity with the city is necessary to use it successfully. The metro opens at 0500 Monday to Saturday and 0700 Sunday and closes at about midnight. There is also a small tramway network, and extensive bus and trolleybus services. The latter system has recently been modernised, and also has a flat fare. There is a state-run bus and trolleybus service in Guadalajara, with trolleybuses running in tunnels, and also extensive private bus services. Taxi: Four different types of taxi operate in Mexico City. Yellow and white taxis (usually Volkswagens) are metered, as are orange taxis (Sitio), which are available at taxi-stands. These charge slightly more, and it is advisable to agree the fare before starting the journey. Turismo taxis with English-speaking drivers are available outside main hotels. They are not metered and fares should be agreed before starting journey as rates can be excessive. Peseros (green and white) are share-taxis travelling on fixed routes, for which fares are charged according to the distance travelled. Tipping is not compulsory for any of the taxi services.

JOURNEY TIMES: The following chart gives approximate journey times (in hours and minutes) from Mexico City to other major cities/towns in Mexico.

	Air	Road	Rail
Acapulco	0.35	3.30	-
Cancún	2.15	3.00	-
Oaxaca	0.15	6.00	12.00
Chihuahua	2.15	3.40	4.00
Puerto Vallarta	1.55	1.40	-
Guadalajara	0.55	7.00	12.00
Tijuana	2.45	3.60	-

8 ACCOMMODATION

HOTELS: The enormous growth of tourism in Mexico is reflected in the wide range of hotels from the modern, elegant and expensive to the clean and modest. There are a variety of chain hotels throughout Mexico as well as 'dude' ranches, thermal spas and resorts that feature specific facilities. Reservations should be confirmed by hotels in writing at the time of booking as hotel tariffs are liable to alteration at any time; it is especially important to make reservations when travelling in the high season. There is a wide range of prices with plenty of choice throughout the country; every hotel is required to display officially approved rate schedules, but the visitor should note that most rates do not include meals. There are also a number of more modest guest-houses (casas de huéspedes). Information can be obtained from the Mexican Hotel and Motel Association, CP 11590, Thiers 83, Colonia Anzures, México DF (tel: (5) 571 3262; fax: (5) 203 0466 or 203 7246). Grading: Mexico operates a 5-star grading system similar to that in Europe, with an additional Gran Turismo category. All hotels are covered. The criteria for inclusion in each of the six grades are as follows:

Gran Turismo: 108 criteria including central air-conditioning, satellite dish and minimum floor area of 32 sq metres (105 sq ft). Shopping area and additional quality services are also required.

5-star: 96-101 criteria including room service 16 hours a day and minimum floor area of 28 sq metres (92 sq ft). Restaurant, cafeteria, nightclub, commercial areas, good hygiene and security are also required.

4-star: 71-76 criteria including adequate furniture and minimum floor area of 25 sq metres (82 sq ft). Some commercial areas and a good standard of maintenance are also required.

3-star: 47-52 criteria including adequate furniture and minimum floor area of 21.5 sq metres (71 sq ft). Restaurant, cafeteria, ceiling fan and some complimentary service are required.

2-star: 33-37 criteria including adequate furniture and minimum floor area of 19 sq metres (62 sq ft). Standards for hygiene and security should be met. First-aid facilities are required.

1-star: 24-27 criteria including adequate furniture and minimum floor area of 15 sq metres (49 sq ft). Standards for guests' comfort should be met.

CAMPING/CARAVANNING: The national parks in Mexico are officially the only areas where no permits or fees are required for camping and hiking. Camping is allowed anywhere within the park areas. Most camping, however, is outside national parks, the most popular regions being the west coast and Baja California. The western Pacific coast has excellent caravan 'hookups' while Baja California is far more informal and isolated. The number of caravan parks along Mexico's major motorways is growing, and there is no difficulty in locating places to park.

Mexico City

Mexico, rich in reminders of ancient civilisations, is also a modern developing nation. Temples and cathedrals contrast with futuristic buildings, motorways and fully-equipped beach resorts. Elsewhere, elements of the ancient and colonial cultures persist in aspects of rural life. Fêtes and festivals are celebrated with enthusiasm, and the markets in towns and villages are lively and colourful.

The capital of Mexico stands at an altitude of 2240m (7350ft) beneath two snow-capped volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccíhuatl. It is a huge rambling city with a distinctly colonial feel. Many of the buildings are in the exuberant Latin American Baroque style. Despite its pollution and sprawling size, Mexico City - or 'El DF', standing for Distrito Federal (Federal District) - is a very attractive city made up of 16 delegaciones (districts) and about 400 colonias (neighbourhoods) with many green spaces and quiet back streets. Exclusive residential areas, such as Polanco and La Condesa, have their own village-like centres. The street names in each district have been given particular themes such as philosophers, European cities, rivers or writers, which lend a certain charm and atmosphere to each area, as well as helping the visitor navigate around the city. In the centre of the Centro Historico (Historic Centre) is the Plaza de la Constitución, more commonly referred to as the Zócalo - the Aztec word for 'plinth' or 'pedestal' - all that was actually completed of a monument to independence planned by General Santa Ana. Construction of the square began in 1573 and was finished in the 19th century. Vast in scale, it is surpassed in size only by Red Square in Moscow. Each evening the enormous Mexican flag that flies in the middle of the square is taken down and folded with great ceremony by the Mexican army. Current improvements planned for the square include the addition of a tree-lined promenade, fountains, new paving made from Oaxaca marble, as well as new lighting to enhance architectural features of the cathedral and National Palace. The Cathedral Metropolitana, on the north side of the square, was begun in 1563 and exhibits a plethora of architectural styles

(mainly Gothic, Baroque and Neo-Classical). The highlight of the ornate gilded interior is the Capilla de Los Reyes (Kings' Chapel) and its altar. Just east of the cathedral is the excavated site of the Aztec Templo Mayor (Great Temple), part of the sacred complex of Tenochtitlán, which was demolished by the Spaniards in the 1520s. Remains of the temple layout can be viewed from raised walkways. The adjoining museum displays artefacts excavated from the site in the 1970s, including the first artefact to be discovered - a huge votive disk to the goddess of the moon, Coyolxauhqui. On the east side of the zócalo, the National Palace, built in 1692 on the ruins of the Palace of Montezuma, is now the office of the President of the Republic. Diego Rivera's depiction of Mexican history is illustrated in a dramatic mural that adorns the stairwell leading up to the middle storey of the main courtyard. Other outstanding examples of Rivera's work - and that of Siqueiros, Orozco and Tamayo - can be found in the Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts) near Alameda Central (Central Park). This beautiful arts centre and concert hall, sculptured out of white Carrara marble, was built between 1900-34 in Neo-Classical, Art-Nouveau and Art-Deco styles. The Ballet Folklórico perform here every Wednesday and Sunday with a blend of ancient Mayan and Aztec ritual, dramatised episodes from Mexican history, as well as current songs and dances from all over Latin America. Another, hugely popular and sentimental, form of Mexican music can be heard through a late afternoon and evening visit to the Plaza Garibaldi, where 'mariachis' from all over Mexico, usually dressed in ornate clothes and giant sombreros, play for the public.

With so many sites of architectural, religious and cultural merit, it is not surprising that the capital has museums with world-class collections. In particular, the Museo Nacional de Antropología, in Chapultepec Park ('Grasshopper Hill' in the Nahuatl language), holds an enormous and absolutely fascinating collection of Pre-Hispanic artefacts within 12 halls on the first floor, including the 24-ton Aztec Sun Stone - the Calendar Stone. Ethnological exhibits on the second floor illustrate life today in Mexico's indigenous communities. The museum is currently undergoing a major refurbishment programme that will see the addition of 2000 newly discovered artefacts. This is due for completion in December 2000. Also worth visiting in the park is the Museo Nacional de Historia, situated in the former castle of the viceroys. Other museums that contain outstanding **collections include:** the Museo del Carmen (colonial religious paintings and sculpture housed in a sixteenth-century former Carmelite monastery); Museo Franz Mayer (16th to 19th century European, Asian and Mexican fine and applied arts, displayed in a restored 16th-century hospital); Museo de Arte Moderno (a collection of some of the major works from twentieth-century Mexican and Latin American artists); Museo Frida Kahlo (examples of the artist's work, her own art collection and belongings displayed in her former home and studio); and Museo Anahuacalli (an extraordinary volcanic stone-clad house, designed by Diego Rivera to house his extensive collection of pre-Hispanic artefacts).

Just to the north of the centre are two places which offer a good insight into Mexican history and architecture, as well as its cultural and religious life today. Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco **celebrates the three major cultures that have shaped Mexico:** there are Aztec ruins, the 17th-century colonial church of San Diego, built in the Baroque style, and several late 20th-century buildings. The Basilica of Nuestra Señora De Guadalupe, a shrine built around Tepeyac hill, and the spot where the Virgin is said to have appeared to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531, is a major pilgrimage site. Each year, on 12 December, millions of devout pilgrims from all over Mexico, many shuffling forward on their knees, congregate at the Basilica to worship their patron saint. Built in 1976, it has a capacity of 10,000 inside plus another 25,000 outside when the 70 surrounding portals are opened.

Two of Mexico City's prettiest colonial villages on the southern fringes - Coyoacán and San Angel - are best visited at the weekend, when the attractive squares and cobble-lined streets are alive with students, artists, craftspeople, musicians and other Mexicans out strolling with their families. The Bazar Sábado (Saturday Market) in San Angel's Plaza San Jacinto is one of the best places to buy good-quality hand crafts and artworks.

The oldest university in the Americas, and one of the largest in the world, the Ciudad Universitaria (University City), located in Pedregal Square, is a remarkable architectural complex

dating back to the 1950s. Among its landmarks buildings is the Library - a tower encased in an astonishing natural stone, glass and tile mural, which was designed by Juan O'Gorman to illustrate key chapters in Mexico's history.

Some 20km (14 miles) south of the zócalo are the floating gardens and tree-lined canals of Xochimilco. Engineered by the Aztecs, the gardens are now a weekend haunt of the city's inhabitants who hire brightly painted trajineras (gondolas), often accompanied by 'mariachis', to cruise the canals.

Excursions from Mexico City

Teotihuacán: Teotihuacán, the 'City of the Gods', 48km (30 miles) northeast of Mexico City, was built about 2000 years ago. It was the largest pre-Hispanic city in Mexico and, at the height of its power, controlled most of Mexico. Visitors to the site can see the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon, the Citadel with the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (the plumed serpent) and the Palace of Quetzalpapálotl (the plumed butterfly), all found in a mile-long stretch called the Calle de los Muertos (Avenue of the Dead).

Tula: Tula, 95km (59 miles) north of Mexico City, is the former capital of the Toltec empire. Architectural highlights include the four basalt Atlantes. These five-metre tall figures originally supported the roof of the sanctuary on top of the Templo de Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (Temple of the Morning Star), and depict Quetzalcoatl as the morning star, dressed as a heavily armed Toltec warrior.

Tepozotlán: Tepozotlán, 43km (27 miles) from the capital, is notable for its Churrigueresque Church of San Francisco Javier, the façade of which is decorated with more than 300 sculptures of angels, saints, plants and people. On a hill nearby, there is an Aztec shrine dedicated to the god of feasting and drinking where annually, on 8 September, a fete is held which features Aztec dancing and the performance of an Aztec play. In the town itself, in the third week of December, a different kind of performance takes place. The experiences of Mexican pilgrims en route to Bethlehem are enacted in pastorellas.

The village of Acolman, 39km (24 miles) north of the capital on the road to Teotihuacán, is centred around the beautiful 16-century monastery of San Agustin Acolman. The building is now a museum containing religious paintings and artefacts.

Nestling in the foothills of the Sierra Madre is Puebla - originally named Puebla de los Angeles (City of the Angels) in 1531. Capital of the state of the same name, it can be reached by a 96km (60-mile) drive southwest from Mexico City. It is famous for its colonial architecture with glazed tiles (known as Talavera after a town in Spain), which cover most of the church domes and house walls, and for the skilled craftsmen who produce them. Tiles and other ceramics can be purchased in El Parián market and in the street leading to Plazuela de los Sapos. The Convention Centre, a modern building of striking elegance and clean lines, reflects its artistic heritage in its choice of tiles and use of natural materials found within the state. The centre has eight reception halls which can be increased to 11 through moveable partition walls. The auditorium has seating for 264 people. This juxtaposition of ancient and modern is made explicit with a walkway that literally bridges the convention centre and the Barrio del Artista (Artists' Quarter).

In 1988, UNESCO declared Puebla part of the 'Cultural Heritage of Mankind'. Highlights include the Cathedral (one of the oldest in Mexico), which has 14 chapels and is built of blue-grey stone. Its towers, at 69m (226ft), are the highest in Mexico. The building thus dominates the arcade-lined zócalo with its beautiful gardens and Fuente de San Miguel (Saint Michael Fountain), the patron saint of the city. On the opposite of the cathedral is the Palacio Municipal, which was remodelled in accordance with the Neo-Classical architectural guidelines issued under the Porfirian dictatorship. The Church of Santo Domingo is famous for its Capillo del Rosario (Rosary Chapel), a breathtaking masterpiece in goldleaf that was consecrated in 1690. Puebla's colonial heritage is also expressed in the architectural riches of its former monasteries and casonas

(mansions), with their alfeñique ('wedding cake') ornamentation, wrought iron balconies and mosaics. Two of the best examples of colonial mansions are the Casa de los Muñecos (Dolls' House), the tiles on the façade depicting the Labours of Hercules (the building is now the University Museum), and the Casa del Alfeñique (Sugar Paste House), which displays craftware and regional costumes. The city has several fine museums but those with the most enlightening **collections include:** Museo Bello (Pueblan Talavera and colonial religious artefacts); Museo Ampara (a superb pre-Hispanic collection of artefacts); and the Ex-Convento de Santa Rosa & Museo de Artesanías (Pueblan State handicrafts, and - the highlight - the old convent kitchen with every square inch covered with beautiful tiles). Now an hotel, the Ex-Convento de la Concepción, is a startling reminder of the wealth of the church during the colonial period, with its beautifully preserved cloisters and wall paintings. From Puebla it is possible to see the volcanoes of Popocatepetl, Iztaccíhuatl, Malinche and Citlaltépetl. Cholula, 10km (6 miles) west from Puebla, is a pre-Hispanic ceremonial centre that once contained about 400 shrines and temples, most of which were destroyed by Cortés's army and replaced with colonial churches - the Spanish claimed to have constructed 365 here. The Pyramid of Tepanapa has the largest base of any pyramid in the world and is the most striking feature of the archaeological site; on the summit stands the Sanctuary of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios. The plaza in the town centre has three fine churches, the most unusual being the Capilla Real (Royal Chapel), which, with its 49 domes, has the appearance of a mosque. Two additional places worth visiting are the churches of Santa Maria and San Francisco at Tonantzintla and Acatepec respectively. The painted stucco flowers, birds, saints and devils that cover every surface of the dome of the church at Tonantzintla demonstrate incredible artistry. The town is also noted for its fiestas which include traditional dances and processions on 15 August. The Church of San Francisco Acatepec, a few kilometres away, is notable for its exterior, clad in beautiful green, yellow and blue tiles from Puebla set in an ornate Chirriqueresque façade.

Cuernavaca: Cuernavaca, 85km (53 miles) from the capital, is built around two large squares. On one stands the Palacio de Cortés (built in 1538), now a museum containing frescoes by Diego Rivera. The Cathedral dates from the 16th century. The town also contains the 18th-century Borda Gardens and the Indian market which sells huaraches (sandals) and leather goods. Articles made of straw are sold too. Xochicalco, 40km (25 miles) south of Cuernavaca, is one of the country's most interesting ceremonial centres, especially noted for its Building of the Plumed Serpent.

Tepoztlán: Tepoztlán (Place of Copper) is an attractive, relaxed town in a spectacular natural setting. Spread out across the valley floor, it is surrounded by steep, jagged cliffs that glow pink in the afternoon sun. It is also the legendary birthplace of Quetzalcóatl, the Aztec serpent god. Set on a cliff, 400m (1312ft) above the town, is a pyramid dedicated to Tepoztécatl, god of the harvest, fertility and pulque. The hour-long climb to the summit is a strenuous one, but well worth it for the extensive views that are afforded over the town, valley and surrounding hills. Dominating the town centre is the fortress-like Dominican church and monastery. From the market side, the entrance to the churchyard has an arch which is decorated with a golden mural depicting local gods and history, and crafted entirely from seeds, stones and other natural products.

Taxco: Taxco, 160km (100 miles) from Mexico City, has been classed as a national monument. The town's fortune was made from the silver mines. The selling of silverware and jewellery is a thriving local trade. As well as numerous interesting, narrow and winding cobbled streets, the Church of Santa Prisca and San Sebastián is a jewel of Chirriqueresque architecture, with a reredos decorated with gold leaf and a wealth of statues and ornaments. Residences of the colonial period include the Casa Humboldt, Casa de Borda and Casa de Figueroa. A cable-car runs from Los Arcos, at the northern end of the town, to the summit of Monte Taxco. The view over

the valley and surrounding mountains from the top are spectacular. The Cacahuamilpa Caves are to the north of Taxco.

Toluca: Toluca, 66km (41 miles) from the capital, lies in a valley dominated by the snow-capped Nevado de Toluca, an extinct volcano (its two craters are known as the Sun and the Moon). As well as a fine market, the town has several interesting museums in its Cultural Centre, dedicated to archaeology, folk and modern art. Nearby are the Indian villages of Tenancingo, Metepec and Chiconcuac. About 8km (5 miles) north of Toluca is Calixtlahuaca, an Aztec site of archaeological interest where a circular pyramid is dedicated to the god of wind.

Ixtapan de la Sal: Ixtapan de la Sal, 80km (50 miles) from Toluca, is a spa town with excellent hot springs and spa facilities. Valle de Bravo, 70km (44 miles) southwest of Toluca, is a resort town at an elevation of 1869m (6135ft) set amid pines on a large lake.

Central Mexico and Colonial Cities

The central highlands, benefiting from a milder climate, constitute the most populous region of Mexico. Many of the colonial cities include a unique blend of indigenous and Spanish culture; these historic centres have remained virtually intact since the time of the conquest. The conquistadores built very Spanish-looking villages near the silver mines. Today, the main attractions of this region are the architecture, the views, and some very good local cooking. One of the most popular circuits is the one following the so-called Independence Route, starting from Mexico City, going north, towards Querétaro, San Miguel Allende, Guanajuato, Morelia, Patzcuaro and Guadalajara. Another circuit starts in Guadalajara, again going north, to Aguascalientes, Zacatecas and San Luis Potosi.

Guadalajara: Guadalajara, capital of Jalisco, still has a Spanish colonial atmosphere, despite being the agricultural, commercial and industrial centre of the western highlands. The Cathedral has 11 altars, 30 columns and a big art collection. There are also a lot of parks: the Parque Agua Azul ('Blue Water') is noteworthy for its forest-like atmosphere; the Parque de las Armas is where the boys and girls of the town court each other. Around the Cathedral there are two parks, the Parque de los Laureles and the Parque de la Revolución. The Plaza de Rotonda contains columns and statues in honour of Jalisco's past heroes; the Plaza Libertad has a market with a wide range of locally produced goods. During the annual October Festival, horsemanship and bullfighting can be seen at the charreada (rodeo). The famous 'Mexican Hat Dance' originated in this area, locally it is called Jarabe Tapatio.

Guanajuato: Guanajuato is steeped in history, legend and folklore. It is situated on Mexico's famous Independence Route, a road 1400km (875 miles) in length, along which can be traced Mexico's historic struggle for independence. Designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, the town preserves a colonial charm in places such as Hidalgo Street, an underground street, the Governor's Palace, the Juarez Theatre, the University, the Basilica of Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato and the Valenciana Church. The parish Church of Dolores Hidalgo is of great significance, being the place where, in 1810, Father Miguel Hidalgo raised the 'Grito de Dolores', the cry of rebellion against the Spanish when, with 80,000 armed supporters, he commenced the independence struggle. The town also features several museums, including the Diego Rivera Museum (birthplace of the internationally renowned muralist) and the somewhat bizarre Mummy Museum.

A short distance away from Guanajuato is San Miguel de Allende, which features thermal waters and spas, art and language schools and the laid back way of life typical of these small colonial cities. The town, founded by a Franciscan friar in 1542, is now classed as a national monument. It is a place of narrow, cobbled streets and squares lined with trees. The houses and patios have elegant colonial architecture and the town is a fitting location for the Allende Institute, a school of

fine arts named after a hero of the revolution whose name was also added to the name of the town. In 1880 the Indian master mason, Ceferino Gutierrez, applied the tools of his trade to the architecture of the Parroquia de San Miguel. Its Franciscan starkness was transformed into Gothic. The Casa de los Perros (House of Dogs) has sculptured dogs on its balcony. The annual Posadas at Christmas-time is one of the fiestas for which the town is noted.

The State's airport, Guanajuato International Airport (BJX), is equidistant from Leon and Guanajuato, and has rapidly become one of Mexico's fastest growing airports, servicing not only the State but also the surrounding states of Michoacan, Queretaro, San Luis Potosi, Aguascalientes and Zacatecas. There are daily flights to Guadalajara, Mexico City and Monterrey via AeroMexico, Aeromar, Mexicana, and the airport also offers the following international flights:

Continental - 2 daily flights from Houston, USA.

American Airlines - 2 daily flights from Dallas, USA.

Mexican - 1 daily flight from Los Angeles, USA.

Mexican - 1 daily flight from Chicago, USA.

The aristocrat among the colonial cities is Morelia, a city halfway between the capital and Guadalajara. Apart from a few modern buildings, the city retains an atmosphere of old Spain. The Plaza de los Martires forms the centre of the city, flanked on one side by the Cathedral, bearing an unusual pink stone façade, with its 61m-high (200ft) tower. Other sights include the College of San Nicolas (founded 1540), the Church of Santa Rosa and the impressive Aqueduct built in 1790 to carry water into the city. Between November and February, visitors should go to the Monarch Butterfly Refuge near Angangueo, Morelia. Each year these butterflies migrate from Canada and the USA to a mountain bordering the state of Michoacan in Mexico.

Patzcuaro: Patzcuaro, situated in the Tarascan Indian country, is best known for butterfly net fishing for whitefish. Every Friday morning the plaza is covered with numerous market stalls, offering ceramics, woodcarvings, copper and woven goods, laquerware and even furniture for sale. The Day of the Dead on November 2 is celebrated in Janitzio as nowhere else in Mexico.

Colima: Colima, the capital of the state of the same name, is located near Mexico's mid-Pacific coast. Founded in the 11th century, when it was known by the Aztec word 'Cajitlán', the city was captured in 1523 by Spanish conquistadors loyal to Cortés. One of its principal sights is the Cathedral whose twin towers were constructed out of volcanic stone quarried from the local Volcán de Colima National Park, one of whose peaks, the Volcán del Fuego de Colima, last erupted in 1991. Colima also hosts a festival, the 'Virgin of the Health' in late January and early February, where amateur toreadors can attempt to overpower a local bull in the 'Torre de Once' competition.

The region is noted too for its striking juxtaposition of ancient sites with colonial mission towns. Ranas is an important example of an ancient ceremonial centre which scholars have attributed to the Teotihuacán-Toltec period. Located on a hill top, Toluquilla has remains of military fortifications which show the influences of the Huasteca culture. The second architectural tradition, that of strikingly beautiful Mexican Baroque churches, dates back to the life and work of the Franciscan friar, Fray Junipero Serra, who founded five missions in the 18th century at Jalpan, Conzá, Tancoyol, Landa and Tilaco.

Querétaro: Querétaro is where the Emperor Maximilian was captured, tried and executed and where the present Mexican constitution was drawn up in 1917. A former San Franciscan monastery is now a local museum, whilst the San Agustin monastery has become the Federal Palace. The mansion of the Marquis Villa del Aguila, who ordered the building of the town's aqueduct, is in the Plaza de la Independencia. The town has excellent hotels and restaurants.

Aguascalientes: Aguascalientes has belonged to the Kingdom of Nueva Galicia since 1535. It was a stopping place for travellers on the silver route during the 18th century. Many of the Baroque buildings from this period still remain; the most interesting are the temples of

Guadalupe, Encino, San Marcos, San Diego and San José de la Merced; also worth visiting are the government and municipal palaces, the House of Culture and Excedra, and the Ionian column marking the centre of Mexico.

The state capital of San Luis Potosí, 351km (218 miles) northeast of Guadalajara, is the centre of a rich mining and agricultural area. Featured throughout the city are colourful, glazed tiles found on churches, plazas and streets. Good examples are the Church of San Francisco with its blue-and-white tiled dome and a suspended glass boat in the transept, and Carmen, at the Plaza Morelos, with a tiled dome and intricate façade, as well as the Church of San Miguelito in the old part of the city. Other sites include the Palacio de Gobierno (1770), housing paintings of former governors, and the colonial treasury, the Antigua Caja Real (1767).

Zacatecas: Zacatecas was founded by the Spanish in 1546; at that time the nearby silver mines were among the richest in the country. Much of the revenue was sent to Spain, but enough remained to finance the fine cathedrals and palaces. The Convent of Guadalupe houses one of the largest art collections of the Americas and is also an important place for pilgrimages.

Northern Mexico

The north is mostly desert: a vast, high, windswept plateau flanked by the Occidental and Oriental chains of the Sierra Madre. Most of the population is gathered in several large cities and on the coasts; parts of the plateau are used for agriculture, but much of the north bears little trace of human habitation.

Chihuahua: Chihuahua, capital of the state of the same name (Mexico's largest), is an important industrial and commercial centre. There are many edifices dating from the colonial era, including the 18th-century Cathedral, the Government Palace, the City Hall and Quinta Luz, which is the Villa Museum (containing Pancho Villa memorabilia). There is a monument to the División del Norte de Doroteo Arango (Pancho Villa in the unfamiliar guise of his real name). Entertainments include bullfights, dog- and horseraces, nightclubs and restaurants.

In the state of Chihuahua, Ciudad Juárez has a commercial and cultural centre with modern buildings based on traditional styles of architecture. The handicrafts section includes sarapes (blankets) and glassware. There are bullfights, and horse- and greyhound-racing, along with a good nightlife. Restaurants serve international and Mexican food.

The remarkable Copper Canyon Railway passes through Chihuahua on its way from Ojinaga on the Rio Grande to the Gulf of California. It is an engineering miracle in itself and also provides a good way of seeing the canyons, mesas and bare peaks of the Sierra Madre Occidental. The view at the Barranca del Cobre, where the Urique River has cut a 1840m-deep (6136ft) chasm through the mountains, rivals the Grand Canyon. The journey lasts about 13 hours.

Monterrey: Monterrey is Mexico's industrial powerhouse, standing beneath the highest peaks of the Sierra Madre Oriental in a setting of great natural beauty. The remnants of Monterrey's more tranquil past (the Cathedral, the Palacio del Gobierno, the Obispado) compete with its present-day preoccupations.

Tijuana: Tijuana claims to be 'the world's most visited city', receiving more than 20 million visitors every year, many of them day-trippers from California. With San Diego just a few miles away across the border, it is the land gateway to and from the USA, thriving on the sale of souvenirs.

Baja California: Baja California is a peninsula 1100km (700 miles) long that extends south from Tijuana into the Pacific Ocean. It comprises two states, Baja California Norte and Baja California Sur. The enclosed Gulf is rich in marine life and offers excellent opportunities for experienced divers and anglers (although the currents are treacherous). Baja's Pacific lagoons are an

important breeding ground for whales, particularly the gray whale, which is often referred to as the 'Mexican Gray' whale. The estuary of the Colorado River lies at the top of the Gulf; only a trickle of fresh water now reaches the sea, most having been diverted for agriculture far upstream. The interior is mountainous desert, for the most part waterless and inhabited by only the hardiest plants and animals.

Cabo San Lucas: Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo are the main tourist destinations, offering miles of excellent beaches. At Cabo San Lucas on the tip of the peninsula, 260km (162 miles) from La Paz, seals may often be seen.

Mexicali: Mexicali is the capital of Baja California Norte. It provides a base for those who wish to explore the surrounding mountains and countryside of Rumorosa.

La Paz: La Paz, the capital of Baja California Sur, is in a bay on the Gulf of California. Watersports and deep-sea angling are well catered for. The beaches of Las Hamacas, Palmeira, El Coromuel and Puerto Balandra provide excellent bases for swimmers and skindivers; the waters are calm and clear. Fish and seafood figure prominently on local menus.

Southern Mexico

Oaxaca: Oaxaca, known as the 'Jade City' due to the green tinge in the stone used in the construction of many of its buildings, is a culturally diverse city. It is also the capital of a state whose pre-Hispanic, colonial and indigenous roots are vividly expressed through its architecture, craft traditions, Zapotec and Mixtec archaeological sites, gastronomy and festivals - the Noche de Rábanos (Night of the Radishes) and the Guelagueta in particular reflect age-old traditions. Within its 95,364 sq km (59,258 miles) live sixteen ethnic groups, each with its own dialect or language, making the state one of the most linguistically and culturally varied of any in Mexico. In 1987, UNESCO declared both Oaxaca city and the Zapotec site of Monte Alban, 9km (5.5 miles) away, to be a 'Cultural Heritage of Humanity'. Traditional arts and crafts - hand-woven and hand-embroidered clothing, alebrijes (painted wooden figures and fantastical creatures), rugs, gold jewellery and distinctive, shiny black pottery - reflect the vibrancy and skill of modern artists who have built on and refined older artistic traditions. Works by Oaxacan artists, particularly those of Rufino Tamayo, Francisco Toledo and Rodolfo Morales, are recognised internationally, and several galleries within the town specialise in modern art; it is also possible to visit artists in their homes to purchase paintings. Many of the villages surrounding Oaxaca have weekly markets where food and craft products can be bought, of which the following are the most notable: Tlaxiaco (blankets); Tlacolula (rugs and ceramics); Miahuatlán (mescal, leather goods and bread); Santa Ana del Valle (a general market), Etlá (flowers, cheese and meat); Ejutla (embroidered clothes, mescal); Ocotlán (pottery, flowers and textiles); Oaxaca (crafts of all descriptions). Villages where the actual manufacture of local crafts can be seen include the barro negro brillante (black, shiny pottery) of San Bartolo Coyotepec and the beautiful woven rugs stained with natural dyes at Teotitlán del Valle.

Oaxaca's relaxed atmosphere belies its sizeable student and language-school population, both of which have added vibrancy to the town's nightlife. In the bandstand of the central zócalo, the former state marimba band gives free concerts most nights of the week, while local musicians play at the tables of the cafés and restaurants under the arcades that edge the square. Dominating the north-west corner of the square is the Cathedral. Construction commenced in the 16th century but, due to earthquake damage, it was only completed two centuries later. Its Baroque facade is decorated with some fine bas-reliefs. The Neo-Classical Palacio de Gobierno, on the south side, contains murals by Arturo García Bustos that show key moments from Oaxacan history and legend. The pedestrianised Calle Alcalá leads to the monumental former monastery and church complex of Santo Domingo. The inside of the church is decorated with a profusion of colourful Baroque ornaments, statues and altars. Of particular interest are the family

tree of St Domingo de Guzmán, the founder of the order, sculpted as a vine with leaves and tendrils; Old and New Testament scenes on the barrel roof; the main altar; and the adjoining Capilla del Rosario (Rosary Chapel). Attached to the church is the former monastery, now the Museo Regional de Oaxaca. Among the highlights of the collection are the Zapotec and Mixtec artefacts fashioned from gold, jade, silver, turquoise and quartz that were excavated from Tomb 7 at Monte Alban. Outside, the former monastery gardens are being re-landscaped and planted with Oaxacan flora, including some dramatic cacti. Also well worth a visit are the Rufino Tamayo and Contemporary Art museums.

Two churches central to the religious life of the area are the Basilica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad with its statue of the Virgin of la Soledad, patron saint of the town, to whom many miracles are ascribed, and San Juan de Dios, the oldest church in Oaxaca. Outside the town, other major Dominican sites of worship are to be found at Tlacoahuaya, Yanhuítlán, Teposcolula, Tlaxiaco, Coixtlahuaca and Cuilapan.

Monte Albán: Monte Albán, 14km (9 miles) from Oaxaca, was a sacred city in prehistoric times and the religious centre of the Zapotec culture, which flourished 2000 years ago. The remarkable Central Plaza, the Ball Court and many of the tombs are open to the public. It is an amazing complex situated on a levelled mountain top. Aldous Huxley wrote that '...even today this high place of the Zapotecs remains extraordinarily impressive...Monte Albán is the work of men who knew their architectural business consummately well'. The best time to appreciate the spectacular beauty of the buildings in the changing light is either early in the morning or at sunset.

Mitla: Mitla, 45km (28 miles) from Oaxaca, features numerous Mixtec remains, including the Hall of Columns and the Column of Life which visitors are invited to grasp if they wish to determine how long they will live. Also in the village is the Frisel Museum. Other key archaeological sites are to be found at Yagul, Lambityeco and Dainzú.

The State of Oaxaca also contains areas of outstanding natural beauty: the 2000-year-old tree at Santa Maria del Tule; the Herve el Agua ('frozen waterfalls) near San Lorenzo Albarradas; and the lagoons at Chacahua and Manialtepec. Along the Pacific Coast, the resorts of Hualteco, Puerto Angel and Puerto Escondido also have dramatic natural settings, as well as excellent facilities (see the Beach Resorts section for more information). Tuxtla Gutierrez is the state capital of Chiapas and the home of Mexico's famed marimba music. Set in a thriving coffee-growing region, it is a good base from which to explore the nearby villages where life has changed little since pre-Hispanic times. A short drive away is the impressive Sumidero Canyon. Mountain peaks surround the 1829m (6000ft) drop along the 42km (26-mile) rift and are an impressive sight.

San Cristobal de las Casas: San Cristobal de las Casas was founded in 1528 by Diego de Mazariegos as the colonial capital of the region. At an altitude of 2195m (7200ft), the 2-hour drive from Tuxtla Gutierrez involves a rapid temperature change. It is a cool, white-washed town with an almost alpine atmosphere. During the year, several festivals are held here, making it an important gathering spot for the local craftsmen. In the near vicinity are a number of indigenous villages populated by Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Chamula people. These can be visited, but the visitor should respect local traditions and sensitivities, especially when taking photographs. San Cristobal is also known as a centre for writers, musicians and poets.

The capital of Yucatán State is Mérida, the 'White City', founded in 1542 on the site of an ancient Mayan town. It has an air of elegant, faded grandeur, a legacy of its once worldwide importance as a centre of henequén (sisal used in the manufacture of rope) production. It is still reckoned to be one of the best places in Latin America to buy fine quality cotton hammocks. There is much to keep the tourist here, including a fine cathedral, the Casa de Montejo, and a museum of archaeology, but above all it is a good base for excursions.

Southern Mexico

Oaxaca: Oaxaca , known as the 'Jade City' due to the green tinge in the stone used in the construction of many of its buildings, is a culturally diverse city. It is also the capital of a state whose pre-Hispanic, colonial and indigenous roots are vividly expressed through its architecture, craft traditions, Zapotec and Mixtec archaeological sites, gastronomy and festivals - the Noche de Rábanos (Night of the Radishes) and the Guelaguetza in particular reflect age-old traditions. Within its 95,364 sq km (59,258 miles) live sixteen ethnic groups, each with its own dialect or language, making the state one of the most linguistically and culturally varied of any in Mexico. In 1987, UNESCO declared both Oaxaca city and the Zapotec site of Monte Alban, 9km (5.5 miles) away, to be a 'Cultural Heritage of Humanity'. Traditional arts and crafts - hand-woven and hand-embroidered clothing,alebrijes (painted wooden figures and fantastical creatures), rugs, gold jewellery and distinctive, shiny black pottery - reflect the vibrancy and skill of modern artists who have built on and refined older artistic traditions. Works by Oaxacan artists, particularly those of Rufino Tamayo, Francisco Toledo and Rodolfo Morales, are recognised internationally, and several galleries within the town specialise in modern art; it is also possible to visit artists in their homes to purchase paintings. Many of the villages surrounding Oaxaca have weekly markets where food and craft products can be bought, of which the following are the most notable: Tlaxiaco (blankets); Tlacolula (rugs and ceramics); Miahuatlán (mescal, leather goods and bread); Santa Ana del Valle (a general market), Etna (flowers, cheese and meat); Ejutla (embroidered clothes, mescal); Ocotlán (pottery, flowers and textiles); Oaxaca (crafts of all descriptions). Villages where the actual manufacture of local crafts can be seen include the barro negro brillante (black, shiny pottery) of San Bartolo Coyotepec and the beautiful woven rugs stained with natural dyes at Teotitlán del Valle.

Oaxaca's relaxed atmosphere belies its sizeable student and language-school population, both of which have added vibrancy to the town's nightlife. In the bandstand of the central zócalo, the former state marimba band gives free concerts most nights of the week, while local musicians play at the tables of the cafés and restaurants under the arcades that edge the square. Dominating the north-west corner of the square is the Cathedral. Construction commenced in the 16th century but, due to earthquake damage, it was only completed two centuries later. Its Baroque facade is decorated with some fine bas-reliefs. The Neo-Classical Palacio de Gobierno, on the south side, contains murals by Arturo García Bustos that show key moments from Oaxacan history and legend. The pedestrianised Calle Alcalá leads to the monumental former monastery and church complex of Santo Domingo. The inside of the church is decorated with a profusion of colourful Baroque ornaments, statues and altars. Of particular interest are the family tree of St Domingo de Guzmán, the founder of the order, sculpted as a vine with leaves and tendrils; Old and New Testament scenes on the barrel roof; the main altar; and the adjoining Capilla del Rosario (Rosary Chapel). Attached to the church is the former monastery, now the Museo Regional de Oaxaca. Among the highlights of the collection are the Zapotec and Mixtec artefacts fashioned from gold, jade, silver, turquoise and quartz that were excavated from Tomb 7 at Monte Alban. Outside, the former monastery gardens are being re-landscaped and planted with Oaxacan flora, including some dramatic cacti. Also well worth a visit are the Rufino Tamayo and Contemporary Art museums.

Two churches central to the religious life of the area are the Basilica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad with its statue of the Virgin of la Soledad, patron saint of the town, to whom many miracles are ascribed, and San Juan de Dios, the oldest church in Oaxaca. Outside the town, other major Dominican sites of worship are to be found at Tlacoahuaya, Yanhuitlán, Teposcolula, Tlaxiaco, Coixtlahuaca and Cuilapan.

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Mayan World

More than 3000 years ago, there emerged a highly sophisticated civilisation, the Mayas, in the diverse landscape of what is now Guatemala, Belize, western Honduras and part of El Salvador, as well as the Mexican states of Yucatán, Quintana Roo, Campeche, Chiapas and Tabasco.

The variety of landscape is matched by the abundance of flora and fauna, unrivalled anywhere else in the continent. Birdlife, especially, seems to abound, including toucans, parrots and macaws, hummingbirds and others. The lowland rainforest of Chiapas, Campeche and Quintana Roo is home to such exotic wildlife as ocelots, margays, whitetail deer, anteaters, peccaries, tapirs, howler and spider monkeys and jaguars, the largest wildcats in the Americas. The upland cloud-forests are home to the multicoloured guacamayas as well as the resplendent and elusive quetzal, an emerald-coloured bird with trailing feathers once considered sacred by the ancient Mayas. The coast also supports a wealth of birdlife, as well as alligators and manatee, a rare aquatic animal distantly related to the elephant, which can be found in the coastal lagoons. The Wildlife Reserve of Contoy Island is the resting and nesting place for hundreds of migrant and resident birds. Even the underwater world can offer a richness of species such as marlin, snapper, grouper, bonito, wahoo, shrimp, lobster, octopus and sailfish, and the beaches are important nesting places for sea turtles during the summer months.

At the height of their development (AD250-900), the Mayans built extraordinary temples and ceremonial centres, many of which are now engulfed by the rainforest. Among the most

important archaeological sites to be found in this region are Palenque and Bonampak (Chiapas); La Venta and Comacalco (Tabasco); Edzna, Chicanna and Becan (Campeche); Chichén-Itzá and Uxmal (Yucatán) and Tulum and Coba (Quintana Roo).

Nestled in the foothills at the edge of the Chiapas rainforest lies Palenque. This small but important Mayan site is one of the most aesthetically appealing sites of the Mayan world, with its exquisite stucco façades. The Temple of Inscriptions (above the crypt of a Maya king), the Multileveled Palace and the Temple of the Count are other highlights. It is easily reached in a couple of hours drive from Villahermosa or San Cristobal de las Casas.

The site of Bonampak, 150km (90 miles) southeast of Palenque, is famous for the finest Mayan murals ever to be discovered. Housed in the Temple of Frescoes, the multicoloured murals depict scenes of Mayan warfare, sacrifice and celebration.

The museum park of Parque-Museo La Venta not only boasts one of the few extensive collections of Olmec artefacts, but it is also the only archaeological site ever to be completely transplanted. The original Olmec city of La Venta (1500BC) was situated on the island of Tonalá and featured, among other exceptional sculptures, the colossal human heads that now characterise the Olmec civilisation. Originally evacuated in 1925, it was moved to Villahermosa in the 1970s because of the fear that nearby oil drilling would damage the site. The museum park contains 30 Olmec sculptures set in a botanical garden.

About 67km (42 miles) from Villahermosa is Comacalco. This archaeological site of the Maya civilisation dates back to the late Classic period (AD500-900). Some of the structures resemble those at Palenque though they are still unique in the region. All the buildings here are made from bricks rather than the stone used elsewhere. In fact, Comacalco means 'in the house of bricks'. Sights include the Great Acropolis with its detailed stucco masks and the small museum.

Edzna: Edzna, 65km (40 miles) southeast of Campeche, dates back to 300BC. Besides the Chenes-style architecture, visitors can also see an extensive network of canals, reservoirs and waterholes. Attractions include the Great Acropolis, the Small Acropolis, the Platform of the Knives, the Ball Court, the Temple of Stone Masks and the Nohochna.

The famous archaeological and UNESCO World Heritage site of Chichén-Itzá, 120km (75 miles) east of Mérida, contains the Pyramid of Kukulcan (El Castillo), where one can find the 'Red tiger with jade eyes'. During the spring and autumn equinoxes (March 21-22 and September 21-22), huge crowds gather to see a unique spectacle, when shadows create the illusion of a serpent descending the northern staircase. Of interest are also the snaking columns of the Temple of the Warriors, a ball court in perfect condition, El Caracol (the observatory), the Caves of Balankanche and the Sacred Cenote (where bejewelled young girls were thrown into the well as sacrifices to the rain god Chac).

The elaborate stucco work and detailed façades of Uxmal, 80km (50 miles) south of Mérida, have led to a comparison of the city with Rome. Among the fine stonework are the entwined serpents in the Nun's Quadrangle, the House of Pigeons and the Ball Court. Other attractions include the Pyramid of the Magician and the Governor's Palace.

The walled fortress of Tulum, 131km (78 miles) south of Cancún, has been described as one of the most dramatic sites of the pre-Hispanic world. Perched atop rugged cliffs on the coast, this last outpost of the Maya civilisation commands a breathtaking view of the Caribbean. Settlement here dates from AD900-1500 and sights include the Temple of the Descending God, El Castillo and the Temple of the Frescoes.

Coba: Coba, 38km (24 miles) north of Tulum, is possibly the largest archaeological site on the Yucatán peninsula. This town, set amongst dense jungle and marshlands and including four lakes, dates from the classical period and is believed to have been occupied during the time of the conquest. The most significant groupings of sites are the Coba Group, Las Pinturas, the Macanxoc Group, the Crossroad Pyramid and the Chumuc Mul Group. It also houses the tallest structure in Yucatán, the Nohoch Mul Pyramid.

Beach Resorts

PACIFIC COAST: PACIFIC COAST: Acapulco, situated on Acapulco Bay, is probably the most famous beach resort in Mexico. The town stretches for over 16km (10 miles) round the bay. It has many beaches as well as numerous top-class hotels. The malecón (seaside promenade) runs along the beaches. There is a square in the centre of the old town to the west of the Bay. This lively and fashionable resort offers skindiving, angling, parachute sailing, water-skiing, golf, tennis, riding and the unique spectacle of the Quebrada divers. The waters of the Bay are famous for their calmness and safety, though the beach of La Condesa has rougher waters and good surf for those who want it. The two beaches nearest the centre of the town are Playa Caleta and Playa Caletilla; the sun on these is considered to be at its best in the morning. The late afternoon sun is thought to be best on Playa Hornos, which is further around the bay to the east. Scuba-diving lessons can be arranged on request. Nearby is Roqueta Island, visited regularly by glass-bottomed boats from which the underwater image of the Virgin of Guadalupe can be seen. The island itself is popular for family trips.

Fort San Diego, in the middle of the town, is where the last battle of the Mexican War of Independence was fought. Admission is free but it is closed on Thursday.

Behind the town of Acapulco rise the Sierra Madre Mountains, a favourite location for photographers who relish the greenery, the rocky cliffs and the breathtaking views over the bay. 16km (10 miles) away is Pie de la Cuesta which has a lagoon and several large beaches. The surf is rough.

Ixtapa: Ixtapa, to the north of Acapulco, is a new resort complex with moorings for yachts and a golf course.

Manzanillo: Manzanillo, a major seaport, has recently become an important resort. The emphasis is on watersports, but the spacious beaches afford good swimming. Fishing is of a world-class standard.

Mazatlán: Mazatlán, famed as an angling centre, also has numerous beaches and facilities for surfing, skindiving, tennis, golf, riding and shooting. The name of the town means 'Place of the Stag' in the Nahuatl language, an indication of the town's longstanding association with sporting activities. The malecón, which runs along the beachfront, is disguised by a variety of names, being named Avenida Camaron in the north and then proceeding through a number of name changes till it becomes Olas Atlas in the south. In the evening, strollers promenade along this beachfront among the arañas (covered carts), 4-wheeled carriages and 3-wheeled taxis. The Mirador is a tower on the malecón from which divers give a spectacular display twice a day. 'El Faro' on the promontory of Cerro del Creston is one of the highest lighthouses in the world. There are direct flights from Los Angeles as well as from numerous Mexican cities, and a ferry crosses regularly from La Paz in Baja California. The island of Mexcaltitan nearby is said to be the original home of the Aztecs.

Puerto Vallarta: Puerto Vallarta is the largest town in the immense Bahía de Banderas resort area (1 hour 10 minutes by air from Mexico City). It is situated on the Bahía de Banderas Bay, which is the largest natural bay in Mexico. There are a hundred miles of coastline with many sandy beaches and facilities for parasailing, shooting, scuba diving, sailboarding, fishing, golf and tennis. Boat trips provide opportunities to explore the coast. For the visitor who would relish the experience of journeying in a dugout canoe there is the chance to visit Yelapa, a Polynesian-style village which cannot be visited in any other way. The mountains behind the bay may be explored on horseback. Charreadas, uniquely Mexican rodeos, are held at certain times of the year. Amongst the smaller resorts are San Blas, Barra de Navidad and Zihuatanejo. Further down the coast, in Oaxaca state, are the well-known resorts of Puerto Escondido and Puerto Angel. Puerto Escondido (Hidden Port), once an isolated fishing village, has now

developed into a well-equipped resort, though it has still retained some of its original character. The string of beaches stretching from the main bay are frequented by bathers, surfers and fishermen. On the hills behind are cheap restaurants and hotels. Puerto Angel, to the west, also a fishing port, is relatively low-key and sleepy. Charming secluded beaches are its main attraction, plus authentic eating places and cheap accommodation. Nearby is the famous beach of Zipolite, a 2-km stretch of palm-fringed, white sand, which, although renowned amongst surfers, has treacherous undercurrents; local people rarely swim here.

One of Mexico's newest resort areas is at Hualtulco, a group of nine interlocking bays set against rainforest-covered mountains. Until the mid-1980s, this area was a sleepy fishing village with no water or electricity. However, a carefully planned expansion programme has brought luxury hotels and other amenities to the area, while strict regulations conserve its natural beauty. The beaches include Playa La Entrega (good for snorkelling with beautiful, calm water) and Bahía Tangolunda (where there is an 18-hole golf course). Watersports and other activities are easily arranged.

CARIBBEAN COAST: Cozumel, Cancún: CARIBBEAN COAST: Cozumel, Cancún and Isla Mujeres are island resorts off the Yucatán Peninsula. Only recently developed for tourism, they offer sun, sand and sea in a wild and beautiful tropical setting. The seafood is particularly good. Giant turtles come ashore to breed on Isla Mujeres.

Veracruz: Veracruz is a lively seaport, with excellent seafood cuisine - the visitor will particularly enjoy carnival time in this easy-going city, which is also well known for its lively nightlife. For centuries, Veracruz was Mexico's main seaport, and it has seen invasions by the French and the Spanish, as well as numerous attacks by pirates. Its colourful history is reflected in its architecture, the highlights of which date from the 17th and 18th centuries. The main square or zócalo, said to be the oldest in Mexico, features the Palacio Municipal (containing the tourist office) and the Cathedral. Street cafés, hotels and bars add to the lively atmosphere. Nearby beaches include Mocambo and Boca del Río, 9km (5.6 miles) and 13km (8 miles) to the south respectively. The Isla de Sacrificios, accessible by ferry, also has attractive beaches and is the site of a pre-Hispanic shrine.

Not far from Papantla, in the state of Veracruz, lie the ruins of the Totonac city of El Tajín, one of Mexico's most impressive ancient sites. Most of the buildings to be seen on this extensive site date from AD600-700, while the Totonac civilisation was at its height at around AD600-900. Abandoned around 1200, El Tajín was rediscovered by the Spaniards in 1785. The central edifice is the Píramide de los Nichos, so called because of the 365 square niches on the sides of the building, representing the solar year. Around the pyramid are 11 ball courts whose walls are carved with bas-reliefs depicting human sacrifices, warriors and ball games. Behind this edifice is a network of buildings, El Tajin Chico, which is dominated by the Edificio de las Columnas, featuring massive columns covered in mosaics. An ancient Totonac ritual is performed daily at about noon by the 'voladores' of Papantla. Five men in traditional dress climb to a small platform at the top of a pole where one of them performs a dance in honour of the sun god, accompanying himself on the drum and whistle. Meanwhile, the other four wrap themselves in rope fastened to a suspended frame. At a given signal, they launch themselves gracefully into space, rotating exactly 13 times, arms outstretched to greet the sun while the rope unwinds. The exact significance of this ritual is unknown, though it is thought to relate to a pre-Hispanic calendar.

9 SPORT & ACTIVITIES

Trekking and ecotourism: Trekking and ecotourism: Mexico hosts a wide variety of landscapes and ecosystems within its borders: deserts, swamps, volcanoes and rainforest are all present.

There are 58 national parks and biosphere reserves where the abundant flora and fauna receive special protection. The country boasts approximately 176 kinds of orchids and more species of birds than exist in the USA and Canada combined. Guided 'ecotourist excursions' with multilingual professional guides can be arranged. Transportation is via kayak, mountain bike, jeep or on horseback. If visitors care to venture out alone, updated information on protected camping sites and special permits is provided by tourism offices in each state. Those wishing to observe sea life can go to Guerrero Negro in Baja California, home to one of Mexico's prime whale-watching spots, the Parque Natural de Balena Gris (Gray Whale National Park), where gray whales breed near the shores of Scammon's Lagoon from November through March. The small town of San Ignacio (145 km/90 miles to the southeast) is noted for its nearby San Ignacio Lagoon, where whales are reputed to be so 'friendly' that they swim close enough to be petted. Puerto Lopez Mateos on Magdalena Bay is another good spot for whale watching. Several islands in Baja California host colonies of sea lions and sea birds. In the central plains, there are high peaks to climb, including the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Nevado de Toluca, where it is possible to go scuba diving in the crater. Monarch butterflies are a must-see in the region of Michoan.

Watersports: Watersports: Mexico has nearly 16,000km (10,000 miles) of coastline and a warm climate. While the Caribbean coast features white-sand beaches and gentle seas, the Pacific coast is characterised by rolling surf and darker sand. The gentlest swimming conditions are offered by the waters of the Yucatán coast (Cancún, Riviera Maya and Cozumel) and the Sea of Cortés (Loreto, Guayamas and La Paz). For more information about coastal resorts, see Beach Resorts in the Resorts and Excursions section. Major city hotels and most hotel resorts have swimming pools and some towns have public baths. Almost all Mexican resorts have facilities for the full range of water sports, including jet-skiing, windsurfing and sea kayaking. Surfing can be enjoyed on the pacific breakers and parasailing is another exciting sport. Equipment can be hired at hotels or through watersports centres. Acapulco has particularly good facilities for water-skiing. Visitors can marvel at the skill of the professional divers that swallow-dive from the cliffs at Acapulco. All over Mexico, there are excellent facilities for sailing, with modern marinas sited around the coasts. Most resort hotels will rent small sailing boats to guests. Diving is particularly popular in two areas: the Sea of Cortés and the Yucatan Peninsula's east coast. In these areas, the sea is clear and placid, and facilities are outstanding. The Yucatan peninsula features the second-largest coral reef in the world. Snorkelling enthusiasts may like to head for the Puerto Vallarta area on the Pacific coast, where resorts include Punta Mita, Guayabitos, Mismaloya and Los Arcos. In Zihuatanejo, Playa Las Gatas and Ixtapa Island offer good conditions and in Huatulco, the bays of La Entrega and Tangolunda are very suitable. Mexico's coast offers some of the best deep-sea fishing in the world. Every major port has charter boats and fishing gear for hire and even the smallest fishing village is likely to have at least one fishing boat for hire. Freshwater fishing for black and striped bass is possible mainly around Hermosillo (Sonora) and El Fuerte, Culiacán and Cosalá (Sinaloa).

Golf: Golf: Mexico has around a dozen top-class golf courses and numerous other courses. Many are located in spectacular natural settings, with some specially designed by famous golfers such as Jack Niklaus. In contrast to North American courses, they are usually uncrowded and comparatively reasonably priced.

Special Interest Tours: Special interest tours: There are many opportunities for visitors to attend courses of study in the Spanish language and in Mexican culture. Summer schools and other institutions are located in a variety of places, from major cities to beach resorts. It is usually possible to stay with a Mexican family, in order to make the visit more rewarding and productive. Further information is available from the tourist board (see address section). A detailed directory listing courses and fees (cost: US\$5) can be obtained from the National Registration Center for Study Abroad, PO Box 1393, Milwaukee, WI 53201, USA (tel: (414) 278 0631; fax: (414) 271 8884).

Spa holidays: The Aztecs, Tarascans and other native peoples used to frequent the countless hot springs which abound in the country, especially in the area around Mexico City. Nowadays, there are many resorts with high-class facilities offering a range of treatments. Visitors can choose from spiritual retreat spas, with a New Age bias and a meditation programme, mineral water spas, hot springs and 'upscale spas', which are mini-resorts offering complete packages based on weight reduction, stress management, and body fitness. Further information can be obtained from the Mexico Spa Association, World Trade Center, Montecito No 38, Col. Napoles, Piso 14, Of. 9, Mexico City, Mexico 03810.

Spectator sports: Spectator sports: These include football, baseball, jai alai (a very fast game of Basque pelota played with a small ball and straw rackets) and horseracing.

10 SOCIAL PROFILE

Food & Drink: Self-service (fast food) is available but table-service is usual. Bars have table-and/or counter-service. There are laws relating to minors and licensing on civic holidays. Mexican cuisine is delicious and varied; there are many specialities, such as turkey mole, a sauce containing a score of ingredients including several sorts of chilli, tomatoes, peanuts, chocolate, almonds, onions and garlic. Another sauce, guacamole, incorporates avocado pears, red peppers, onions and tomatoes, and often accompanies turkey or chicken with tortillas (pancakes made with maize). There are also enchiladas, tacos (maize pancakes served with pork, chicken, vegetables or cheese and chilli) and tamales. Every region of Mexico has its own dishes. International cuisine is available at most hotels in the larger cities, and at most restaurants. There is a wide variety of exotic fruits such as papayas, mangoes, guavas, zapotes, pineapples, mameyes and tunas (juicy prickly pears, fruit of the cactus). Drink: Imported spirits are expensive, local spirits probably give better value for money; the best buys are rum and gin. European aperitifs are produced in Mexico and are of excellent quality; and, of course, there is tequila (made from maguey, a variety of cactus). It is traditionally drunk neat with a pinch of salt and a bite of lemon, and makes excellent cocktails. Mexico's coffee liqueur, kahlúa, is world famous. Hidalgo, Domecq and Derrasola are good Mexican white wines, whilst Los Reyes and Calafia are excellent reds. Mexico is a producer of good beer; both the dark beers and the light beers are worth sampling. All the big supermarkets sell spirits, beer and wine.

Nightlife: With a range of settings from panoramic restaurants to intimate bars, Mexico City offers excellent music and assorted cuisine, with some of the best bars and restaurants located in hotels. Nightlife is very vibrant and exciting and features a large variety of top-name entertainers, international shows, jazz groups, rock groups, traditional Mexican music and dancing, Spanish flamenco dancers and gypsy violinists. Worth seeing is the impressive light show, with accompanying sound show at the archaeological site of Teotihuacán. The history and mythology of this ancient civilisation are re-created through a gorgeous display of coloured lights, poetic dialogue and music. The season runs from October to May.

Shopping: Good buys include silverware, ceramics and locally made pottery, woven wool blankets (sarapes), brightly coloured scarves in wool or silk (rebozos), richly embroidered charro hats, straw work, blown glass, embossed leather, hard and semi-precious stones, gold and silver jewellery, finely pleated men's shirts in cotton voile (guayaberas), white dresses embroidered with multi-coloured flowers (huipiles), which are sold in the markets, and hammocks. The best shopping is in Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Taxco, San Miguel de Allende, Acapulco, Guadalajara, Oaxaca, Mérida and Campeche. Shopping hours: 0900-2000 Monday to Saturday (Mexico City); 0900-1400 and 1600-2000 Monday to Friday (rest of the country).

Special Events: Mexicans celebrate more than 120 fêtes and festivals in a year, some of them religious, others secular, national or local. Most provide occasion for music, dancing, processions and fireworks. The following is a selection of the major festivals and other special events celebrated annually in Mexico. For a complete list, contact the Mexican Tourist Office (see address section).

Jan Fiesta de Enero, Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas. Jan 6 Feast of the Epiphany, nationwide. Feb 2 Candlemas, nationwide. Feb Carnival, Mazatlan, Veracruz and other locations. Feb 27 Mardi Gras, nationwide. Mar Spring Equinox, celebrated at the Temple of Kukulcan, Chichén-Itzá. Apr-May San Marcos National Fair, Aguascalientes. May 10 Mothers' Day. May Cancun Jazz Festival. Jun 14 Corpus Christi (special events varying regionally), nationwide. Jul (last two Mondays) Guelaguetza (cultural event dating back to pre-Columbian times), Oaxaca. Aug 14 Eve of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (streets carpeted in designs of flower-petals and coloured sawdust, and a midnight procession), Huamantla (Tlaxcala). Sep Autumn Equinox, celebrated at the Temple of Kukulcan, Chichén-Itzá. Oct October Festivals, Guadalajara; Black Cinema Festival, Acapulco. Nov 1-2 Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), nationwide. Dec Festival of the Radishes (local farmers compete to produce the best or biggest radish, others make radish carvings and exhibit them), Oaxaca; National Silver Fair, Taxco.

Social Conventions: Handshaking is the most common form of greeting. Casual sportswear is acceptable for daytime dress throughout the country. At beach resorts, dress is very informal for men and women and nowhere are men expected to wear ties. In Mexico City, however, dress tends to be smart in elegant restaurants and hotel dining rooms. Smoking is unrestricted except where notified. Mexicans regard relationships and friendships as the most important thing in life next to religion and they are not afraid to show their emotions. A large Mexican family always seems to find room for one more and a visitor who becomes friends with a Mexican will invariably be made part of the family. Visitors should always remember that local customs and traditions are important. Tipping: Service charges are rarely added to hotel, restaurant or bar bills and many of the staff depend on tips for their livelihood. 15% is expected and 20% if the service has been very good. Airport portorage is charged at the equivalent of US\$1 per bag.

11 BUSINESS PROFILE

Economy: The agricultural sector produces various staple crops, including sorghum, wheat, maize, rice, beans and potatoes, largely for domestic consumption; while coffee, sugar cane, fruit and vegetables are grown for export. The contribution made by agriculture (including fishing, which is a major employer in coastal areas) has declined since the 1980s: it now employs about 20% of the workforce and accounts for 5% of GDP. The Government has sought to combat this by scrapping the allegedly inefficient ejido (very roughly - 'collective') system introduced after the revolution of the 1910s. The biggest growth has been in manufacturing, where the most important products are vehicles, food products, iron and steel, chemicals and machinery. An increasing number of these are located in so-called maquiladora plants, under which semi-finished goods or raw materials from the southern USA are shipped across the border into Mexico, completed, and then (for the most part) returned to the USA. The purpose is to take advantage of lower wages and running costs and the absence of major restrictions on the behaviour of corporations (as for instance environmental controls or health and safety regulations). NAFTA (see below) has stimulated growth in this area. Mexico also has a large mining sector, producing a wide range of minerals, including silver, bismuth, arsenic and antimony; there are also smaller deposits of sulphur, lead, zinc and cadmium. However, Mexico's largest single natural resource, and the source of much of its wealth in recent years, is oil. While oil prices were relatively high, Mexico used the revenues to fund rapid industrial growth. Although prices have generally been at lower levels during the 1990s, it remains an important source of

revenue. Oil, gas and oil products account for one-third of total export earnings. In the service sector, tourism is the most important single industry, with most of the business coming from North America. Economic relations with the economic giant to the north have become even more important since November 1993 and the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which created a free market among the USA, Canada and Mexico. Originally an initiative of Mexican President Salinas, NAFTA created a free-trade bloc able to rival the EU in both population and economic output. As well as NAFTA, Mexico is a member of the Inter-American Development Bank, the Association for Latin American Integration (ALADI) and, most recently, the Asian-Pacific Economic Forum (APEC). While much of its recent attention has been concentrated to the north, Mexico has not ignored economic relations with its southern neighbours, having concluded in the early 1990s a number of free trade agreements with Colombia and Venezuela (The Group of Three) and with the Hispanic countries of Central America. The USA dominates Mexico's trade, providing 70% of the country's imports (US\$14.5 billion) and taking slightly under 70% (US\$18 billion) of its exports. Outside the American continent, Japan, Germany and Spain are Mexico's other important trading partners. The UK is the largest foreign investor in Mexico after the USA. Several initiatives have been undertaken to strengthen trade links between Mexico and the EU.

Business: English is widely spoken in business circles although it is preferable for the visitor to be able to speak Spanish. Letters written in Spanish should be replied to in Spanish. Business wear is formal. Mexicans attach much importance to courtesy and the use of titles. Prior appointments are necessary and if in doubt about a correct title it is advisable to use licenciado in place of señor. Best months for business visits are January to June and September to November. Avoid the two weeks before and after Christmas and Easter. Office hours: Vary considerably; usually 0900-1400 and 1500-1800 Monday to Friday.

Commercial Information: The following organisation can offer advice: Confederación de Cámaras Nacionales de Comercio, Servicios y Turismo (CONCANACO), 3rd Floor, Balderas 144, Col. Centro, 06079 México DF (tel: (5) 709 1559; fax: (5) 709 1152).

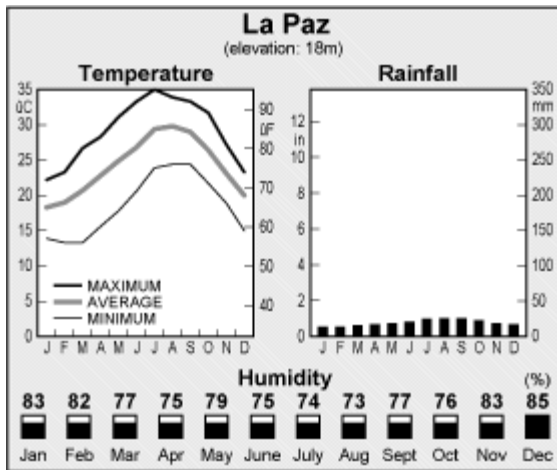
CONFERENCES/CONVENTIONS: The meetings, conventions, exhibitions and incentives planner's kit issued by the Mexican Ministry of Tourism lists over 70 convention venues in Mexico City, Acapulco, Taxco, Morelia, Puerto Vallarta, Ixtapa, Guadalajara, Mazatlán, Cancún and Mérida. Taxco, Acapulco, Morelia and Cancún have dedicated centres, the largest of which, in Acapulco, can seat up to 8000 people.

12 CLIMATE

Climate varies according to altitude. Coastal areas and lowlands (tierra caliente) are hot and steamy with high humidity, while the central plateau is temperate even in winter. The climate of the inland highlands is mostly mild, but sharp changes in temperatures occur between day and night. The cold lands (tierra fría) lie above 2000m (6600ft). Rainfall varies greatly from region to region. Only the Sierra Madre Oriental, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the state of Chiapas in the far south receive any appreciable amount of rain during the year, with the wet season running between June and September. All other areas have rainless seasons, while the northern and central areas of the central plateau are dry and arid. There is some snow in the north in winter. The dry season runs from October to May.

13 HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT

History: Mexico has an ancient and fascinating history. It begins with the Olmec civilisation in around 1500BC, which reached its height about 1200BC. Olmec (meaning 'people from the rubber country') were an advanced culture in religion, architecture and mathematical systems. The earliest known date was recorded by them in 31BC, according to our present calendars. By AD500, two great cities had emerged, Teotihuacan (with a population of approximately 200,000) and Cholula, a religious centre near Puebla which survived until the Spanish Conquest in 1521. The height of Mayan civilisation was reached between AD600-900. The Toltecs, whose capital was Tula, were the predominant civilisation of this time. Known for their fine architecture, elegant speech and intellectual pursuits, they were the ancestors of the famous Aztecs who were thriving at the time Columbus arrived in the New World in 1492. In 1519, a Spaniard named Hernan Cortés arrived from Cuba with a crew of 550 sailors and explorers and settled just north of today's city of Veracruz. By this time the Aztec Empire controlled vast territories from the Yucatán peninsula to the Pacific, with over 370 individual nations under their authority. Ruling from their capital city, Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs demanded heavy tribute from their subjects, which may have caused some to side with Cortés in his attack on the Aztecs. The other factor on Cortés' side was the lucky coincidence that 1519 was the exact year when legend had it that the Aztec god, Quetzalcoatl, had promised his followers he would return - from the east - and so Cortés was mistaken for a god. After two years of fighting and great loss of life on both sides, the Aztecs were defeated under their final ruler, Cuauhtemoc. Under Spanish rule, local culture was suppressed and native traditions were discouraged. Mexico achieved independence after the wars of 1810-21. In 1824 a constitution was adopted and Mexico's first President, Guadalupe Victoria, was inaugurated and both Britain and the USA officially recognised the Republic of Mexico. But stability was short-lived. In 1847, Mexico was forced to cede half of its territory to the USA. In 1861, Benito Juárez, a Zapotec Indian from the state of Oaxaca, was elected President. Faced with overwhelming debts (mainly owed to France, Spain and Britain), Juárez announced a 2-year moratorium on payment of foreign debts. The French Emperor Napoleon III sent an army to Veracruz to enforce his claim to payment. A series of civil wars and conflicts with European governments and the USA punctuated the next 30 years. However, Juárez was elected to a third term and is now considered among Mexico's most popular leaders, having come from a humble background and instituting such welcome changes as a total reform of the education system (making primary school attendance free and obligatory) and completing a railroad from Mexico City to Veracruz. Afterwards, the dictatorship of Porfirio D'az (between 1876 and 1910) brought an autocratic stability to the Republic. Several revolutions and coups followed before the egalitarian 1917 Constitution was introduced which led to the accession of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), which created an effective one-party state within the framework of an elective democracy. The PRI ruled virtually unchallenged until the mid-1970s, by which time opposition parties had managed to build up strong bases of support and occasionally mount one-off electoral challenges, but the reins of



power remained firmly in the hands of the PRI.

From the 1960s onwards, Mexico developed a largely oil-based economy. Under the government of Lopez Portillo, who was elected President in 1976, the country was brought to the verge of bankruptcy by the negotiation of enormous foreign loans, totalling US\$80 billion, borrowed against future oil revenues to finance a massive programme of economic and social development. Corruption and mismanagement, coupled with a collapse in the oil price during that period, precipitated a major political crisis in 1982. This was handled by Lopez Portillo's successor, Miguel de la Madrid, who implemented economic reforms and anti-corruption measures, but achieved only limited success in the face of entrenched vested interests. Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who won the next presidential poll in 1988, had more success. This election was significant for the challenge to the PRI by the Frente Democrático Nacional (FDN) led by a disillusioned ex-PRI apparatchik, Cuauhtémoc Cardenas, but it failed to dent the PRI's continuing electoral appeal. The new government's embarked on a major economic reform programme comprising a package of devaluation, tax reform, privatisation and deregulation. The programme met with widespread opposition, manifested by strikes in the public sector the following year, but it was widely praised in Western capitals and dubbed 'Cactus Thatcherism'. The move towards a liberal trading regime has included Mexico's application to join GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and the instigation by Salinas of a free-trade treaty with the USA and Canada: this eventually led to the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which was ratified by the three countries during 1993. The Salinas government also improved its standing in Washington by cracking down on drug trafficking. Popular as all this was overseas, Mexicans saw little benefit as living standards for most people fell sharply. With political opposition stifled by the PRI stranglehold, discontent took on a new form when, on New Year's Day 1994, an armed insurrection began in the southern state of Chiapas. Land reform was at the heart of the 'Zapatista' programme (named after Mexican revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata). The Mexican Government waged a classic counter-insurgency war, using a mixture of force and incentives on the impoverished peasant population which clearly has considerable sympathy with the guerrillas. With a neat line in propaganda, the Zapatista insurgency did much to undermine the image of the government abroad but after its initial burst, it has since been largely engaged in an inconclusive stand-off with the government. Elections in August 1994 brought Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon to power. Within months, Zedillo faced a major economic crisis as the peso collapsed and output declined by 10% in three months. Although the economy had recovered somewhat when the next electoral contest was held in July 1997, the PRI lost its overall majority for the first time in the Camara, (although it retained control of the Senado). By the time of the latest presidential poll in July 2000, the writing was on the wall for the PRI. The major challenge came, not from Cardenas (standing for a third consecutive time) but from the centre-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) whose candidate, Vicente Fox Quesada, stood under the banner of 'Alliance for Change'. In what was considered to be the fairest poll in recent Mexican history, Fox defeated the PRI candidate, Francisco Labastida, by a seven-point margin. The Alliance for

Change also comfortably won the simultaneous parliamentary election. The rule of the PRI which had overtaken the Soviet Communist Party longevity record for a ruling political party, was finally at an end after 71 years.

Government: Mexico is a federal republic with 31 states and one federal district. The bicameral National Congress is elected by universal adult suffrage. The 64 members of the Senate (two per state plus two for the federal district) serve for a term of six years. The 500-seat Chamber of Deputies consists of members elected for three years, 300 from single-member constituencies with the remaining 200 allocated to minority parties on the basis of proportional representation. The president, who appoints a cabinet, has executive power and serves a term congruent with that of the Senate. Each state has its own governor and elected Chamber of Deputies.

14 OVERVIEW

Country Overview: Mexico is at the southern extremity of North America and is bounded by the USA, the Gulf of California, the Pacific, Guatemala, Belize, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. Mexico's geographical features range from swamp to desert, and from tropical lowland jungle to high alpine vegetation.

Mexico City, rich in reminders of ancient civilisations, is also a modern developing city. In Mexico, temples and cathedrals contrast with futuristic buildings, motorways and fully-equipped beach resorts.

Cholula, 124km (77 miles) from Mexico City, is a pre-Hispanic religious centre containing more than 400 shrines and temples. The Pyramid of Tepanapa is the largest of all Mexican pyramids.

Acapulco, situated on Acapulco Bay, is probably the most famous beach resort in Mexico. The town stretches for over 16km (10 miles) round the bay. It has many beaches as well as numerous top-class hotels.

There are many local specialities, such as turkey mole, a sauce containing several sorts of chilli, tomatoes, peanuts, chocolate, almonds, onions and garlic.

Nightlife is vibrant and exciting, featuring international shows, jazz groups, rock groups, traditional Mexican music and dancing, Spanish flamenco dancers and gypsy violins.