

ArtesAméricas: Guide to Countries and Cultures

MEXICO

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Life in Mexico

Although Mexicans share a common history, life in modern Mexico encompasses a broad range of lifestyles, based on differences in ethnicity, class, sex and sexual orientation, level of education, and geographic region, among other factors. Regional differences in food, music, local art, landscapes, and even language influence the lives of Mexicans, making personal experiences unique and diverse. Being Mexican does not have the same meaning for all those who live in the nation's borders, but there are certain experiences shared by the general population.

During the period preceding the revolution, education had been the charge of the Catholic Church, but was secularized in the 1917 constitution. Though often not enforced, it is legally mandatory for children to attend school through the sixth grade. Schools tend to be more accessible in urban areas and literacy rates are usually higher in cities. The average number of school years completed is 7.6 years, and 9.7 percent of all people older than 15 are illiterate. States that have a higher rural population, like Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guerrero, have higher rates of illiteracy. However, many people do complete secondary education and go on to earn a college degree. Admission to public universities is open to those who pass an entrance exam and fees for attending public universities are controlled.

The family is perhaps the most important social institution in Mexico. Families in earlier times were traditionally large, incorporating not only the nuclear family unit of mother, father, and children, but extended family members as well. It is common for children to live with their parents until they marry and they sometimes continue to reside in the family's home even after marriage. Mothers traditionally stayed at home to care for the children and sometimes took in work at home, but in the last few decades, it has become much more common for women to work outside of the household. Since access to financial credit and to health insurance is limited, family members often rely on one another for support in times of need.

Mexicans enjoy a variety of leisure activities, including sports and outdoor activities, music and dancing, visiting museums, theatre and cinema, and just strolling around the lively plazas that are found in most towns. Soccer is the national sport and a source of great pride for many Mexicans. Other popular sports include baseball, basketball, bullfighting, rodeo, mountain climbing, water sports, and the ever-popular *lucha libre*, the wrestling matches between masked characters that are aired on television. Music is a big part of life in Mexico; from *mariachi* to punk rock, people listen to and play several different kinds of music. Young people often frequent *discotecas* to visit with friends and to dance into the early morning hours.

Food in Mexico, the consumption and preparation of which is often rooted in historical and geographic traditions, is a source of regional identity. While the basic staples of beans, chile peppers, and corn tortillas are eaten everywhere in Mexico, each region has its own local culinary flair. Mexicans traditionally shop in open-air markets

where one can find a wide array of fresh produce, spices, meats, and prepared goods. Street vendors are common in Mexico and sell a variety of prepared food items ranging from diced fruits and ice creams to gorditas and tacos.

Another source of culinary variety are the many types of beverages served in Mexico. *Aguas frescas*, or “fresh waters,” are popular and include flavors such as watermelon, hibiscus, pineapple, lemonade, tamarind, and *horchata*, made from rice water. Several flavored carbonated drinks are produced in Mexico and are sold in old-fashioned glass bottles. Beer is served in many different ways, sometimes with lime and salt or over ice or with Worcestershire sauce; Corona, Negra Modelo, Pacifico, Bohemia, and Tecate are a few of the brands produced in Mexico. *Pulque* is a creamy, frothy alcoholic drink of indigenous origins that is made by fermenting the sap of the maguey plant. Another alcoholic beverage, produced principally in the state of Jalisco, is *tequila*, made by distilling the juices extracted from the core of the blue agave plant.

Foods and beverages play a large role in the celebration of the many religious, historical, and social festivals that occur in Mexico. Weddings, birthdays, and holidays are usually festive events shared by extended families, by communities, and by the nation. In addition to birthdays, most people celebrate a Saint’s day, the day dedicated to the Catholic saint for whom the person was named. Now more commonly celebrated in the U.S. than in Mexico itself, *Cinco de Mayo* (May 5) commemorates the victory won over the French in the 1862 Battle of Puebla. Mother’s Day (May 10) is a national holiday. Independence Day (September 16) is a grand event during which the President reenacts the *Grito de Dolores*, Mexico’s cry for independence. The *Día de la Raza* (October 12) celebrates the culmination of the *mestizo* race, while November 20 commemorates the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution. Christmas is an important holiday, but unlike in the U.S., it is celebrated more widely on Christmas Eve—*la Noche Buena*—rather than on Christmas morning.

One of the most unique celebrations, distinctively Mexican in character, is the Day of the Dead, *el Día de los Muertos* (November 2). This day is an opportunity for people to both honor the death and celebrate the life of loved ones who have passed away. There are many ritual traditions associated with the observance of this special holiday that are distinctive in character and indicative of the nature of Mexicans’ relationship with death. Recognized as a day when those who have passed return for a brief moment to the world of the living, family members bring offerings of flowers, candles, decorative or personal articles, and even the deceased’s favorite foods. Breads and candies artfully shaped into skulls, skeletons, or animals are sometimes included in the offering and incense is frequently burned.

The Arts

Since its earliest beginnings, Mexico has been a rich center for the production of the arts. Indigenous tribes created decorative pottery, colorful textiles, intricate sculpture, frescoed murals, metal crafts, and painted parchments, which documented history and territorial boundaries, and made music with native instruments. The high priests frequently wore elaborate costumes and performed ritual dancing. Pre-Columbian architecture was characterized by its use of pyramidal structures, ball courts, palaces, and relief carvings.

The arrival of the Spanish brought European influences to Mexico, but not without the infiltration of indigenous elements into contemporary European styles. Since indigenous laborers were usually the artisans who contributed to the production of religious artifacts and architecture, much of the art that emerged in the colonial period melded local and European traits. The most obvious example of this phenomenon is the Mexican Baroque style that is evident in many colonial era churches. The facades and altars of these churches include nature motifs, such as maize, flowers, moons, and animals, which are not characteristic of their European counterparts.

While indigenous art centered on natural and spiritualistic subjects, colonial Mexican art was dominated by religious themes. Austere portraits were painted of elite leaders while writing was concentrated on political and religious topics. One of the most important and, perhaps, revolutionary literary figures of the colonial era was Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a Catholic nun and court poet. She was a child prodigy who taught herself to read at a very early age. After retiring from her position in the Spanish court, she entered a convent where she continued her studies and wrote on themes such as politics, philosophy, history, science, and education for women. Her controversial position as an educated and vocal female voice on subjects traditionally reserved for men eventually caused her demise. In 1693, Church officials pressured her to abandon her library and to stop writing.

In an effort to distinguish Mexico from its Spanish colonial roots, artists of Independent Mexico began to incorporate more secular subjects into their works. Painters illustrated typical Mexican landscapes and scenes of indigenous communities, while authors wrote of life experiences in the new nation. One of the most famous visual artists to emerge in Independent Mexico was José Guadalupe Posada, whose drawings of skeletal caricatures made poignant social critiques about political and historical topics. His works are still popular today and are often associated with Day of the Dead festivities. In contrast, the reign of Porfirio Díaz emphasized the high culture of Europe and especially that of France. Díaz commissioned the construction of the Palace of Fine Arts as well as other fine buildings inspired by European styles, erected monumental statues, and embellished the Avenida de la Reforma in Mexico City modeling it after the Champs-Élysées.

After the Mexican Revolution, indigenous traditions were revived as artistic themes to create a new nationalism. The histories of pre-Columbian nations were integrated into the collective history of Mexico, as illustrated in many media. During the great muralist movement of the 1920s and '30s, painters such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros adorned the walls of many important public buildings with their incredible works of art. Of these great artists, Rivera particularly concentrated on recreating scenes that incorporated indigenous people into the landscape of Mexico's identity. Another important painter of the era, Frida Kahlo, focused on Mexican archaeology, folk art, and the flora and fauna of Mexico in several famous self-portraits. The late Rufino Tamayo became another important Mexican painter of the modern era, and also combined images of indigenous culture, history, and religion with the modern Mexican reality.

Literature continued to flourish during the twentieth century as writers participated in the construction of the post-Revolutionary, national identity. Among the many influential literary figures of the modern era, Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Juan

Rulfo and Elena Poniatowska have provided commentary on Mexican social issues. Octavio Paz, a poet, essayist, and winner of the Nobel Prize in 1990, wrote his famous *Labyrinth of Solitude* analyzing the many facets of the Mexican character. Carlos Fuentes has written a number of novels and essays on indigenous myths, the Mexican Revolution, modern Mexican culture, and political and social issues.

Artists and writers in Mexico have a rich and varied history from which to draw themes for their work. From the beauty of its landscape to the mysterious myths of its ancient cultures, Mexico is a complex and magnificent place that is stimulating and inviting for those who venture to explore it.

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