



# PROGRAM COUNTRY: MEXICO



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Mexico, millennial country of deeply-rooted national with unequalled color, folklore light and flavor varieties. From the pacific ocean to the Caribbean sea, from deserts to tropical forests, this country offers the visitor a surprising world. Ex-

quisite traditional dishes, ancestral archeological monuments, preserved colonial architecture and beaches with crystalline turquoise water are symbols of a nation who knows to appreciate and preserve the beauty of its land.

## COUNTRY INFORMATION

Mexico is bordered by the United States on the north, the pacific ocean on the west, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea on the east, and Guatemala and Belize on the south. It is characterized by an extraordinary diversity in topography and climate, and is crossed by two major mountain chains, the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental. The high central plateau between these two mountains ranges historically funneled most of the human population toward the center of this region. Mexico features volcanic peaks, snowcapped mountains, tropical rains forests, and internationally famous beaches.

Mexico City is an enormous metropolitan area and dominates the rest of the country's culture, economy and politics. Nearly one fifth of the nation's population lives in the immediate vicinity of the capital. Mexico City is also a central hub for Mexico's transportation network including railroads, highways and airlines.

Mexico and the United States share a border that is 3,100 km long, much of which is formed by the Rio Grande, a major river known as the Rio Bravo in Mexico. This international border is the longest in the world between an economically developing country and one with a highly developed, industrialized economy.

The people of Mexico reflect the country's rich history. The Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire in the early 16th century soon led to widespread intermarriage and racial mixing between Spaniards and native Americans. As late as the early 19th century, native Americans accounted for nearly two-thirds of the population in the region. During that century, however, the racial composition of the country began to change from one that featured distinct European (Spanish) and indigenous populations, to one made up

largely of Mestizos – people of mixed Spanish and native American descent. By the end of the 19th century, mestizos, who were discriminated against during three centuries of Spanish colonization, had become the largest population group in Mexico. Mestizos now account for about 60% of Mexicans.

During the colonial era, many native Americans and mestizos adopted the Spanish language and were converted to Roman Catholicism, the religion of the Spanish colonizers. This has provided the country with a greater religious and cultural homogeneity than might have been present otherwise. The vast majority of Mexicans, about 90%, are Catholic and speak Spanish. Nearly 8% of Mexicans continue to speak one of many native American languages, the most common of which is Nahuatl.

Mexico has a rich heritage in art and architecture and is recognized internationally for the contributions of its 20th century mural artists, who created murals that reflected not only Mexico's history, but also its current social issues. Mexico's blend of indigenous and European influences has affected many of its traditions and much of its culture. This ethnic heritage has contributed to the development of notable musical styles, folk art, and cuisine, all of which are also now found throughout the United States.

Mexican cuisine is known for its intense and varied flavors, colorful decoration, and variety of spices. Most of today's Mexican food is based on pre-hispanic traditions, including the Aztecs and Maya, combined with culinary trends introduced by Spanish colonists. The conquistadores eventually combined their imported diet of rice, beef, pork, chicken, wine, garlic and onions with the native pre-Columbian food, including maize, tomato, vanilla, avocado, papaya, pineapple, chili pepper, beans, squash, limes (limón in Mexican Spanish), sweet potato, peanuts and turkey. The most internationally recognized dishes include chocolate, tacos, quesadillas, enchiladas, burritos, tamales and mole among others.

## SCHOOL LIFE

The school year in Mexico starts in August and finishes in June. There are short holiday periods in the fall, at Christmas, and at Easter. At the end of the school year, there is a summer break of six weeks. Summer vacation dates vary from state to state.



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School generally starts around eight o'clock in the morning. Mostly classes end between one and two o'clock in the afternoon. On some days there might be afternoon classes as well. It really depends on the school. There is no school on the weekends.

School in Mexico is taken seriously, meaning that students are expected to arrive on time and to attend all classes every day unless they are sick. In this case, the host parents have to write a letter explaining the absence. Students have to be prepared for each class and do all the homework assignments. They need to be attentive and need to participate in class. Teachers and students will surely understand that the first months will be very difficult for the exchange students due to the foreign language. As long as the students show that they put in the effort and are very motivated, they will be met with sympathy and understanding.

It is natural that it will be hard to understand a lot of the class discussions in the beginning. But it is important not to become frustrated and worried! If the students make all the necessary efforts, they will realize how quickly they will progress.

It is up to the school to determine in which grade the student will be placed. In case the student will be in a class with younger classmates, it is important to see it as an opportunity to understand the class material better and to follow the classes given in simpler Spanish. There are no school uniforms and no dress code in Mexican high schools. Students generally wear casual clothes to school.

The student should ask the teachers and classmates about extracurricular activities offered in school. Sports, art and other clubs offer a wonderful opportunity to be around young Mexicans in a relaxed atmosphere. It is a great chance to make friends! It takes time and energy to establish friendships. The student will have to overcome shyness, approach people, smile and signal interest in getting to know them. The communication and contact between boys and girls are relaxed and natural. A boy and a girl can be best friends, just like two girls or two boys. When teenagers fall in love, they generally do not hide this from friends, teachers or parents. Public display of affection such as hugging and kissing is common.

## HOST FAMILY LIFE

Most Mexican families own their own home and usually both parents support the family. There are still families where the mother stays at home to take care of the household and the children full-time. The families usually consist of four or five members.

In Mexico the people are very close and family orientated. Mexican families are very loving and warm and they care for each other. They will make sure the student feels welcome and they will make him/her a part of the family. Respect towards each other, especially towards parents and elderly, is very important. The student must not forget this part of the Mexican culture and respect the host parents, their house and their rules. The Mexican host family is hospitable and interested in learning more about the student's country.

Teenagers are attached to their families and follow the rules that are set in their house. The opinion of the parents in Mexican culture is very important. Another of the important things in a Mexican family is religion. In Mexico most families are Catholic and have much respect for religion and also towards others. The Mexicans do not force others to practice their religion, but want, respect for what they believe in. Young people are not very keen on going to church or practicing the religion, but they are very respectful. Young people who do want to practice religion, generally attend church groups.

Mexican families usually eat three times a day. Breakfast in the morning between 7 and 9 am, lunch between 1 and 3 pm and dinner in the evening between 8 and 10 pm. Dinner is the time when the families get together and talk about the day's activities.

When Mexican families have vacation they often travel. The student is of course invited to join them since they gladly show their country, but at his/her own expense.

## PROGRAM EXTRAS

There are trips organized for the students during the school breaks. Usually in November-December there is a trip to the beautiful Mexican beaches and in January there is a trip called "the Route of the Gods". This trip includes the pyramids of Teotihuacan, city of Oaxaca, Montealbán, Mitla, Tule's Tree, Chiapas, Sumidero's canyon, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Palenque, Blue water cascades, Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Cancún, Islas Mujeres, Tulum, Tuxtla's region and the ecological reservation of Nanciyaga.

It is very important to us that the students can enjoy the Mexican beauty. The students will receive more details regarding this trip after arrival in Mexico.

