**MEXICO**
History and Culture

**M**exico's historical attractions - from the ancient ruins of the Olmecs, Maya, and Aztec, to the train routes used by the brash and legendary Pancho Villa - rank second only to the beaches of Cancun - and Alcapulco as the prime reason people come. The reason for this is simple: the tale of Mexico's past, accompanied by an overwhelming amount of physical remains, is as romantic, blood-curling, dramatic, and complex as it gets.

Somewhere around 1000 BC, the first of Mexico's ancient civilizations, the Olmecs, established themselves in what are now the states of Veracruz and Tabasco. They worshipped a jaguar God, built cities, constructed massive stone head carvings, and spread throughout central and southern Mexico until their civilization mysteriously vanished around 400 BC. Though the Olmecs left behind relatively few artifacts, their influence on later cultures was profound. In their wake came the Teotihuacan, the Zapotecs and Mixtecs of Monte Alban, the Maya of Yucatan, the Toltecs, Aztecs, and dozens of smaller, citied groups. To balance the spiritual and earthly realms and appease their pantheons of gods, many of these civilizations practiced human sacrifice, a fact that often overshadows their great achievements in the realms of mathematics, astronomy, architecture, textile weaving, art, and pottery. The Maya, for example, were so advanced in mathematics and astronomy that their calendar was the world's most accurate until this century. They could also predict solar and lunar eclipses.

None of Mexico's pre-Columbian civilizations is more storied, however, than the Aztecs. Though it is arguable that other civilizations in Mexico achieved greater artistic and scientific feats, none advanced as quickly or ruled as much   territory. Prior to the 15th century, the Aztecs were a marginal tribe living on the edge of Lake Texcoco, the site of present day Mexico City.  By 1473, after subjugating neighboring tribes, they ruled the largest empire Mexico had ever seen. Their capital of Tenochtitlan, set in the lake, was a picturesque city of pyramids, mile-long floating roads, aquaducts, animated marketplaces, and one hundred thousand residents. Leading a highly codified government was an all-powerful emperor who exacted taxes from the conquered and distributed land to his people, especially the warriors. When the Spanish adventurer Hernan Cortez arrived in 1519, the rich city was a vision perfectly meshed to his thirst for conquest.

The Conquest of New Spain, a great and tragic history, begins in April of 1519  when a Cortes lands in Veracruz, about 200 miles from the Aztec capital.  Cortes  had a singular mission: defeat the Aztecs and take their gold. To do so, he had  less than 400 soldiers, 16 horses, 14 pieces of artillery, 11 ships, plenty of guns and ammunition, and cajones. His first act upon landing was to burn all but one of his ships - he wanted no turning back. That he was able to defeat an empire with just a few hundred men seems nothing short of miraculous, but some of el conquistador's success, however, can be attributed to plain and simple luck.

According to an Aztec myth, the white-faced Quetzacuatl - their most important god - had long ago fled to the east, but would one day return. When the Aztec ruler, Moctezuma II, beheld Cortes and his light-skinned men upon their arrival  in Tenochtitlan, he believed them to be emissaries of the great Quetzacuatl himself. The opportunistic Cortes, coached by Malinche - a Spanish-speaking Indian who had become his lover back at the coast - did not attempt to correct him. Cortes returned the emperor's hospitality by taking him hostage. A  compliant Moctezuma ordered his people to stand down, and by the time the Aztecs  began to resist Cortes had already brought in reinforcements from the coast. The Aztecs disowned their cooperative, captive emperor, who died a prisoner in his own palace. When the Aztecs finally laid siege to the palace, Cortes and his men  snuck away in the middle of the night and ran for the coast. On the way, over half his force was killed by the pursuing army, but the survivors returned with thousands of Indian allies to conquer the city a year later.

Mexico, with its fertile plains and great mineral wealth, was the crown jewel of Spain's colonies. It was heavily taxed, ruled directly from Spain, and permitted no autonomy. The Spanish monarchs distributed land to settlers in the form of encomiendas (the predecessor to the hacienda), which were worked by Indian slaves that the settler's were charged to protect and convert to Christianity. A caste system developed: there were Espanoles (Spaniards born in Spain), criollos (Mexican-born, but with Spanish blood), mestizos (Spanish and Indian), and finally the indigenes, the Indians. Because of their forced dependence on the hacienda owners, and no resistance to European ailments, the Indians were riddled with debt and disease long after Spain abolished slavery in 1548.

If the seeds of Mexican independence had not already been planted in the soil,  then they were planted when Napoleon conquered Spain in 1808 When the French conqueror placed his brother on the Spanish throne, Mexico's elite began to talk of self-rule. The man who turned talk into action was a Catholic priest named Father Miguel de Hidalgo y Costilla, who led an armed rebellion in 1810. Though  he was eventually captured and executed, Hidalgo's leadership began a war of independence that culminated on September 27, 1821, when the rebel leader Vicente Guerrero and the royalist Agustin de Iturbide signed the Treaty of  Cordoba. Unfortunately, with independence Mexico's troubles were just beginning.

For almost a century, the new country would be wracked by marked by almost incessant fighting. One of the first Mexican presidents, the former rebel general Santa Ana, is sourly credited with losing half his country to the United  States after a two-year war that ended in 1848. Santa Ana was eventually exiled and succeeded by Ignacio Comonfort, who abdicated the presidency in favor of one  of Mexico's best-loved leaders, a mestizo from the state of Oaxaca ("Wah-ha-ka") named Benito Juarez.. Juarez liberalized the constitution and instituted  land-reform, infuriating the wealthy conservative class and setting off a bloody conflict known as the War of Reform, which lasted from 1858 to 1861. Juarez's  forces were victorious, but by the time the war was over Mexico's coffers were dry and it was defaulting on its foreign debt payments. France, a major lender, and saw this as a perfect excuse to invade. Napoleon III sent in the archduke of Austria, Maximilian, who quickly took most of the country. After a dogged resistance, Juarez finally retook Mexico City in 1867 and Maximilian was  executed. To the archduke's credit, much of his defeat was caused by his own conscience and love for Mexico: during his rule, he passionately instituted a series of progressive reforms that enraged the conservatives and caused Napoleon to abandon him.

In 1871, a mestizo named Porfirio Diaz ran against Juarez for president and was defeated. A sore loser, he decided to overthrow the government and succeeded five years later. His iron-fisted rule, which lasted almost 40 years, became  known as the Porfiriato. During his reign, Diaz sold off much of Mexico's industries to foreigners and routinely suppressed his opponents with brutal force. He was ultimately challenged by hacienda owner Francisco I. Madero in his  famous book The Presidential Succession of 1910. Diaz ordered Madero arrested, but the latter fled to the US and returned to win the presidency in 1910, backed by the legendary Emiliano Zapata, who was leading a revolt against Diaz in the South. But Madero's presidency was short lived; Madero's own military commander, Victoriano Huerta, assassinated him with the help of the US embassador, and in the tremendously bloody war that ensued, Huerta's forces were pitted against a formidable alliance led by men whose names are now legend: Venustiano Carranza, General Alvaro Obregon, Emiliano Zapata, and the infamous Pancho Villa in the north. The Mexican Revolution, among the bloodiest internal conflicts in world history, was on.

Once Huerta was defeated, Carranza assumed the presidency, but this was only the beginning. Villa and Zapata, refusing to recognize him, drove he and Obregon from the capital. While the armies of the north and south held wild fiestas in the capital, Carranza and Obregon retreated to Veracruz, where they quickly reassembled and then retook the capital when Villa and Zapata failed to organize  a government. Obregon later annihilated Villa's cavalry in Celaya, and Villa would never again be so powerful. Carranza held power until the next elections, when it became clear that the popular Obregon would defeat him. Falling into the now well-worn trap of wanting to hold power for too long, Carranza tried to stage a coup, but Obregon escaped and his forces returned to chase and kill Carranza as he fled along the old escape route to Veracruz.  Meanwhile, in a last-ditch attempt to pull the United States into a conflict against Carranza, Villa invaded several US border towns and killed some inhabitants. After an unsuccessful pursuit by US forces, Villa finally hung up his pistoles and became a farmer in Parral. He was assassinated in 1923 when his car was ambushed. His brother in the south, Zapata, was also killed in 1919 after he was lured into a trap by a government soldier. When it was all over, the only man left alive, Obregon, was president.

Mexico's post-revolution history is marked by the tenacity of a single political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institutional, or PRI. The party was founded by Plutarco Elias Calles, who took over as president when Obregon was assassinated (quite possibly by a Calles plot) in 1928. But the party's most loved president was General Lazaro Cardenas in 1934. Cardenas instituted widespread land reform, strengthened unions, and nationalized the petroleum industry. PRI candidates, who are hand-picked by the president, have held power since - but not always peacefully. Election fraud has been endemic (although recent elections indicate this is changing). In 1968, the government violently suppressed a student protest in Mexico city, killing hundreds. The last 30 years have seen a heavily fluctuating economy, an influx of refugees from Central America, and inveterate government corruption (much of it linked to the illicit drug-trade). Though the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has provided economic hope to some, it has also helped spur Indian guerillas in Chiapas to rebel against what they see as an uncaring government. Many Mexicans put their hope in 1994 PRI candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, only to have them dashed when he was assassinated the same year in Tijuana. The current political atmosphere in Mexico is, however, optimistic. Indications are that the PRI is willing share power with the opposition. In 1997, for the first time in history, Mexico City elected a mayor who was not a PRI candidate. Traditionally, the mayoral seat of Mexico City is the second most powerful office in the nation, and the citizens of the Districto Federal could not have elected a more ironic man: he is Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, the son of the PRI's beloved Lazaro Cardenas. He ran against his father's party, and won.

**Mexican Immigrant Labor History**

The Mexican migratory worker in southwest America is regarded as a necessary part of the bustling harvest season. The need of U.S. employers to import foreign manual labor was heightened first by the expansion of cattle ranches in the Southwest, and by the increase of fruit production in California in 1850 and 1880.

Before Mexican workers supported American agriculture, it was the Chinese who filled the labor hole. Nearly 200,000 Chinese were legally contracted to cultivate California fields, until the Chinese Exclusion Act. Then it was the Japanese who replaced the Chinese as field hands.

Between 1850 and 1880, 55,000 Mexican workers immigrated to the United States to become field hands in regions that had, until very recently, belonged to Mexico. The institution of Mexican workers in the United States was well established at this time in commercial agriculture, the mining industry, light industry and the railroad. The working conditions and salaries of the Mexicans were poor.

The presence of Mexican workers in the American labor scene started with the construction of the railroad between Mexico and the U.S. That presence grew between 1880 and 1890. As much as 60 percent of the railway working crews were Mexican. Rodolfo Tuiran, in his paper "Past and Present of the Mexican Immigration to the United States", reports that the initial flood of migrant workers to the United States were mainly skilled miners, work hands from cattle ranches in Mexico, indentured servants fleeing Mexican farms, small independent producers who were forced north by natural disasters or Indian raids and workers affected by the War of Secession.

In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, the Mexican government was unable to improve the lives of its citizens. By the late 1930s, the crop fields in Mexico were harvesting smaller and smaller bounties, and employment became scarce. The Mexican peasant needed to look elsewhere for survival. World War I also stoked the fire of Mexican immigration, since Mexican workers performed well in the industry and service fields, working in trades such as machinists, mechanics, painters and plumbers. These years were ripe with employment opportunities for Mexicans because much of the U.S. labor force was overseas fighting the war. Agencies in Mexico recruited for the railway and agriculture industries in the United States.

[](http://www.pbs.org/kpbs/theborder/images/1942bracero_recruitment.jpg%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)Mexican workers’ complaints about the abuse of their labor rights eventually led the Mexican government to action. Led by Venustiano Carranza in 1920, the Mexican government composed a model contract that guaranteed Mexican workers certain rights named in the Mexican Political Constitution. The contract demanded that U.S. ranchers allow workers to bring their families along during the period of the contract. No worker was allowed to leave for the United States without a contract, signed by an immigration official, which stated the rate of pay, work schedule, place of employment and other similar conditions. Thus, this became the first de facto Bracero Program between the two countries.

In 1924, the U.S. Border Patrol was created, an event which would have a significant impact on the lives of Mexican workers. Though the public did not immediately view Mexicans as "illegal aliens," the law now stated that undocumented workers were fugitives. With the advent of the Border Patrol, the definition "illegal alien" is born, and many Mexican citizens north of the border are subject to much suspicion.

[](http://www.pbs.org/kpbs/theborder/images/1942shorthandled_hoe_is_now_illegal.jpg%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)The Mexican work force was critical in developing the economy and prosperity of the United States. The Mexican workers in numerous accounts were regarded as strong and efficient. As well, they were willing to work for low wages, in working conditions that were questionably humane. Another measure of control was imposed on the Mexican immigrant workers during the depression: visas were denied to all Mexicans who failed to prove they had secure employment in the United States. The Mexicans who were deported under this act were warned that if they came back to the United States, they would be considered outlaws.

It seemed whenever the United States found a reason to close the door on Mexican immigration, a historic event would force them to reopen that door. Such was the case when the United States entered World War II. In 1942, the United States was heading to war with the fascist powers of Europe. Labor was siphoned from all areas of United States industry and poured into those which supported the war efforts. Also in that year, the United States signed the Bracero Treaty which reopened the floodgates for legal immigration of Mexican laborers. Between the period of 1942 and 1964, millions of Mexicans were imported into the U.S. as "braceros" under the Bracero Program to work temporarily on contract to United States growers and ranchers.

Under the Bracero Program, more than 4 million Mexican farm workers came to work the fields of the United States. Impoverished Mexicans fled their rural communities and traveled north to work as braceros. It was mainly by the Mexican hand that America became the most lush agricultural center in the world.

The braceros were principally experienced farm workers who hailed from regions such as Coahuila, "la Comarca Lagunera," and other crucial agricultural regions in Mexico. They left their own lands and families chasing a rumor of economic boom in the United States.

Large groups of bracero applicants came via train to the northern border. Their arrival altered the social and economic environments of many border towns. Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas, became a hotbed of recruitment and a main gathering point for the agricultural labor force.

The Bracero Program contracts were controlled by independent farmer associations and the "Farm Bureau," and were written in English, and many braceros would sign them without understanding the rights they were giving away nor the terms of the employment.

The braceros were allowed to return to their native lands only in case of emergency, and required written permission from their employer. When the contracts expired, the braceros were mandated to hand over their permits and return to Mexico. The braceros in the United States were busy thinning sugar beets, picking cucumbers and tomatoes and weeding and picking cotton.

At the end of World War II, Mexican workers were ousted from their jobs by workers coming out of wartime industries and by returning servicemen. By 1947, the Emergency Farm Labor Service was working on decreasing the amount of Mexican labor imported. By the 1960s, an overflow of "illegal" agricultural workers along with the invention of the mechanical cotton harvester, diminished the practicality and appeal of the bracero program. These events, added to the gross humanitarian violations of bracero employers, brought the program to an end in 1964.