

Central Gulf Coast



Set in the crook of Mexico's curve, the central Gulf coast is easily overlooked by tourists searching for the best sun-lounger and piña colada. Yet opportunities await the adventurer in this wallflower, where the locals aren't talking economy when they say 'We are very rich.' They are referring instead to their landscapes: deserted coastline lapped at by tranquil water, forests Swiss-cheesed with caves, and rivers and waterfalls propelled by towering volcanoes. They are talking about their jostling, honking cities – like Xalapa, with its anthropology museum and its urbane sensibilities, or Veracruz, where the atmosphere, thick with humidity and with marimba, mariachi and *danzón*, enchants you like undulating Latin dance. Their wealth is their architecture: evocative colonial edifices, niched pyramids and even surrealist stairways spiraling skyward. The opulence of this region is its diversity: gorgeous skin shades from Europe, Africa and indigenous communities have melded together in the wake of Cortés' conquest and destruction.

However, it's the people themselves, both generous and quick to laugh, who prove most precious. Don't be surprised to see strangers greet each other, or to be offered a ride on the back of a moped. Though you might summit Mexico's highest peak here, your most vivid memories could be of a grandmother in a market who lets you try her *mole* from a 100-year-old family recipe, or of stumbling into a village fiesta during traditionally costumed dances.

Whatever your endeavor, you'll find that the richness of this coast is to be encountered, not just served to you over ice with an umbrella...though you'll savor it all the same.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Time-travel through Mexican civilizations at the **Museo de Antropología** (p609) in Xalapa
- Climb around gigantic surrealist structures and dip in the exquisite swimming holes of **Las Pozas** (p597) in Xilitla
- Walk the coastal boulevard early in the morning and dance salsa deep into the night in **Veracruz** (p615)
- Gape at the extensive ruins of **El Tajín** (p603)
- Explore the rainforests, volcanoes, waterfalls and deserted coastline of **Reserva de la Biosfera Los Tuxtlas** (p637)



■ BIGGEST CITY: VERACRUZ
(POPULATION 440,000)

■ HIGHEST PEAK: PICO DE ORIZABA
(5611M)

History

The Olmecs, Mesoamerica's earliest known civilization, built their first great center around 1200 BC at San Lorenzo in southern Veracruz state. In 900 BC the city was violently destroyed, but Olmec culture lingered for several centuries at Tres Zapotes. During the Classic period (AD 250–900) the Gulf coast developed another distinctive culture, known as the Classic Veracruz civilization. Its most important center was El Tajín, which was at its peak between AD 600 and 900. Classic Veracruz appears to have been particularly obsessed with the ritual ball game (p35), and its hallmark is a style of abstract carving featuring pairs of curved and interwoven parallel lines. In the post-Classic period the Totonacs established themselves in the region south of Tuxpan. North of Tuxpan, the Huastec civilization flourished from 800 to 1200. During this time, the warlike Toltecs also moved into the Gulf coast area. In the mid-15th century, the Aztecs overtook most of the Totonac and Huastec areas, exacting tributes of goods and sacrificial victims and subduing revolts.

When Cortés arrived in April 1519, he made Zempoala's Totonacs his first allies against the Aztecs by vowing to protect them against reprisals. Cortés set up his first settlement, Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz (Rich Town of the True Cross), and by 1523 all the Gulf coast was in Spanish hands. Forced slavery, newly introduced diseases and the ravages of war severely reduced indigenous populations.

Veracruz harbor became an essential trade and communications link with Spain and was vital for anyone trying to rule Mexico, but the climate, tropical diseases and pirate threats inhibited the growth of Spanish settlements.

Under dictator Porfirio Díaz, Mexico's first railway linked Veracruz to Mexico City in 1872, stimulating industrial development. In 1901 oil was discovered in the Tampico area, and by the 1920s the region was producing a quarter of the world's oil. In the 1980s the Gulf coast still held well over half of Mexico's reserves and refining capacity. Today, the region is not as large a player as it used to be, but is still a significant contributor to Mexico's oil economy.

Climate

The central Gulf coast region is generally warm and humid. It's hotter along the coast and wetter in the foothills – the hot-

test and wettest regions of all being in the southeast. Two-thirds or more of the rain falls between June and September. Veracruz receives about 1650mm of rain annually. From April to October it has temperatures well over 30°C, falling into the teens at night only from December to February. Tuxpan and Tampico, on the north coast, are a bit drier. In the mountainous region inland it can range from 4°C to 15°C in winter.

Parks & Reserves

The Parque Nacional Pico de Orizaba (p629) protects Mexico's tallest mountain, Pico de Orizaba (5611m), a dormant volcano 25km northwest of Orizaba. Just north of here the Parque Nacional Cofre de Perote (p614) encompasses another volcano, Cofre de Perote (4282m). In the south, the Reserva de la Biosfera Los Tuxtlas (p637) is 1551 sq km of protected land that encompasses volcanoes and 11 ecosystems.

Dangers & Annoyances

Crime isn't a huge problem in this region, but travelers should remain wary of petty theft in cheap hotel rooms and pickpocketing in crowded market areas. Big cities, like Veracruz, are where you should be most on your toes. More ominous is the hurricane potential. Check out the **US National Hurricane Center website** (www.nhc.noaa.gov) for the latest. Mosquitoes in coastal regions carry dengue fever, especially in central and southeastern Veracruz.

Getting There & Around

Veracruz city has a modern international airport, with national flights to Mexico City, Monterrey, Reynosa and Villahermosa, Tampico and Poza Rica. From Houston, Texas, Continental has direct flights to Tampico and Veracruz.

Frequent 1st-class buses go just about everywhere within the region and link the main cities with Monterrey, Mexico City, Puebla and Oaxaca. The main company serving this area is ADO, which has a super-deluxe fleet (UNO) and a deluxe fleet (ADO GL), as well as normal 1st-class buses. Greyhound runs buses between the US and Mexico through its Mexican affiliates. Routes include Brownsville, Texas, to Tampico.

The highways of the central Gulf coast region are generally in great shape. But don't