

History

Mexico's story is always extraordinary and at times barely credible. How could a 2700-year-long tradition of ancient civilization, involving the Olmecs, the Maya and the Aztecs – all intellectually sophisticated and aesthetically gifted, yet at times astoundingly bloodthirsty – crumble in two short years at the hands of a few hundred adventurers from Spain? How could Mexico's 11-year War for Independence from Spain lead to three decades of dictatorship by Porfirio Díaz? How could the people's revolution that ended that dictatorship yield 80 years of one-party rule? And how was it that, after so many years of turbulent upheavals, one-party rule just laid down and died in Mexico's first-ever peaceful change of regime in 2000?

From Mexico's awesome ancient cities to its gorgeous colonial palaces, through the superb museums and Mexicans' deep-rooted traditions, the country's ever-present past will never fail to enrich your journey.

THE ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

From nomadic hunter-gatherer beginnings, early Mexicans first developed agriculture, then villages, then cities with advanced civilizations, then great empires. The political map shifted constantly as one city or state sought domination over another, and a sequence of powerful states rose and fell through invasion, internal dissension or environmental disaster. But the diverse cultures of ancient Mexico had much in common, as religion, forms of social organization and economic basics were transmitted from lords to vassals and from one generation to the next. Human sacrifice, to appease ferocious gods, was practiced by many societies; observation of the heavens was developed to predict the future and determine propitious times for important events like harvests; society was heavily stratified and dominated by priestly ruling classes; and women were restricted to domestic and child-bearing roles. Versions of a ritual ball game were played almost everywhere: the game seems always to have involved two teams trying to keep a rubber ball off the ground by flicking it with various parts of the body. The game could serve as an oracle, with the result indicating what course of action should be taken, and games could be followed by the sacrifice of some players.

Most Mexicans today are, at least in part, descended from the country's original inhabitants, and various aspects of modern Mexico – from spirituality and artistry to the country's continued domination by elites – owe a great deal to the pre-Hispanic heritage.

There are many ways of analyzing the pre-Hispanic era, but a common framework divides it into three main periods: pre-Classic, before AD 250; Classic, AD 250–900; and post-Classic, AD 900–1521. The most advanced

Historian Alan Knight has written one of the most recent comprehensive histories of Mexico, in three volumes: *Mexico – From the Beginning to the Spanish Conquest*; *Mexico – The Colonial Era*; and *Mexico – The Nineteenth & Twentieth Centuries*.

The Mesoamerican Ballgame (www.ballgame.org) is an interesting educational website about the indigenous ball game past and present, with video of a modern contest in action.

TIMELINE

7000–3000 BC

Agriculture develops in the Tehuacán valley. First, chili seeds and squashes are planted; later, corn and beans are cultivated, enabling people to live semi-permanently in villages.

1200–400 BC

Mexico's 'mother culture,' the Olmecs, flourishes on the Gulf coast at San Lorenzo and La Venta. Jade, a favorite pre-Hispanic ornamental material, makes its appearance in a tomb at La Venta.

AD 0–150

A huge planned city is laid out in a grid arrangement at Teotihuacán in central Mexico, and the 70m-high Pirámide del Sol (Pyramid of the Sun) is constructed there.

cultures in Mexico emerged chiefly in the center, south and east of the country. Together with Maya lands in what are now Guatemala, Belize and a small part of Honduras, this zone is collectively known to historians and archaeologists as Mesoamerica.

Beginnings

The pre-Hispanic inhabitants of the Americas arrived from Siberia, in several migrations during the last Ice Age, between perhaps 60,000 and 8000 BC, crossing land now submerged beneath the Bering Strait. The first Mexicans hunted big animal herds in the grasslands of the highland valleys. When temperatures rose at the end of the Ice Age, the valleys became drier, ceasing to support such animal life and forcing the people to derive more food from plants. In central Mexico's Tehuacán Valley (p206), archaeologists have traced the slow beginnings of agriculture between 7000 and 3000 BC.

For concise but pretty complete accounts of the ancient cultures of Mexico and Guatemala, read *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* and *The Maya*, both by Michael D Coe.

The Olmecs

Mexico's 'mother culture' was the mysterious Olmec civilization, which appeared near the Gulf coast in the humid lowlands of southern Veracruz and neighboring Tabasco. The name Olmec – 'People from the Region of Rubber' – was coined by archaeologists in the 1920s. The evidence of the masterly stone sculptures they left behind indicates that Olmec civilization was well organized and able to support talented artisans, but lived in thrall to fearsome deities. Its best-known artifacts are the awesome 'Olmec heads,' stone sculptures up to 3m high with grim, pug-nosed faces and wearing curious helmets.

Xalapa's Museo de Antropología (p609) and Villahermosa's Parque-Museo La Venta (p713) have top-class collections of Olmec heads and other Olmec artifacts.

Ten Olmec heads were found at the first great Olmec center, San Lorenzo (p639), and at least seven at the second great site, La Venta (p720). The stone for the heads and other monuments was probably dragged, rolled or rafted at least 60km to San Lorenzo and La Venta. The Olmecs were also involved in trade over long distances: far-flung Olmec sites found in central and western Mexico may have been trading posts or garrisons to ensure the supply of jade, obsidian and other luxuries for the Olmec elite.

Olmec art, religion and society had a profound influence on later Mexican civilizations. Olmec gods, such as the feathered serpent and their fire and corn deities, persisted right through the pre-Hispanic era.

Teotihuacán

The first great civilization in central Mexico arose in a valley about 50km northeast of the middle of modern Mexico City. The grid plan of the magnificent city of Teotihuacán (p177) was laid out in the 1st century AD. It was a basis for the famous Pyramids of the Sun and Moon as well as avenues, palaces and temples that were added during the next 600 years. The city

250–600

Teotihuacán grows into a city of an estimated 125,000 people, the Pirámide de la Luna (Pyramid of the Moon) is built, and Teotihuacán comes to control the biggest of Mexico's pre-Hispanic empires.

250–900

The brilliant Classic Maya civilization flowers in southeast Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and parts of Honduras and El Salvador.

600–900

El Tajín, the major center of the Classic Veracruz civilization, a group of small states with a shared culture near the Gulf coast, is at its peak.