



# Understand Mexico

## **MEXICO TODAY ..... 796**

The drug war has made appalling headlines but the economy is bouncing back.

## **HISTORY ..... 798**

A truly epic story – the Maya, the Aztecs, the Spanish conquistadors, plus rebellions, revolution and democracy.

## **THE MEXICAN WAY OF LIFE ..... 813**

A window on what makes Mexicans tick, from the Virgin of Guadalupe to *lucha libre*.

## **THE ARTS ..... 817**

Mexico bubbles with creativity, with famous names such as Frida Kahlo, Carlos Fuentes and Gael García Bernal, as well as its myriad artisans.

## **ARCHITECTURE ..... 827**

A treat for the eyes, from ancient pyramids and colonial patios to bold statements of the 21st century.

## **THE MEXICAN KITCHEN ..... 829**

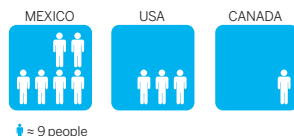
An inside track on Mexico's delectable flavors: know your *sopes* from your *sopas*, and the best way to drink mezcal. Written by expert author Mauricio Velázquez de León.

## **LANDSCAPES & WILDLIFE ..... 839**

Jungles, volcanoes and deserts; whale sharks, howler monkeys and scarlet macaws – Mexico is one of the world's most biologically diverse countries.



## population per sq km



# Mexico Today

## The Drug War

There's no denying that most of the Mexico news reaching the outside world for the last few years has been bad. Terrible, in fact. Some 50,000 people had been killed by the end of 2011, after President Felipe Calderón declared war on the country's gruesomely vicious drug gangs in late 2006. The Mexican government deployed 50,000 troops as well as naval forces and several police forces against the drug mobs. It's assumed that most of the killers and killed were mobsters themselves, in battles over the multi-billion-dollar trafficking routes for Colombian cocaine and Mexican marijuana and methamphetamines into the US. The 'good' news in 2011 was that the number of killings, while still on the rise, was rising less rapidly. Pessimists argued that any possible respite in the mayhem was simply because the most powerful cartels had effectively wiped out their weaker rivals. Indeed, by 2012 there seemed to be only two major players left – the Sinaloa cartel in the northwest of Mexico and Los Zetas on the eastern side of the country.

The drug-gang violence scared away some tourists and other foreigners from Mexico. Naturally, it had ordinary Mexicans worried too – not just about being caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, but also about the penetration of organized crime in society generally. Minor gangs, squeezed out of the drug trade, were reportedly turning to protection rackets.

But the picture is far from uniform across the country. The great majority of drug-related violence happens in a few specific areas – principally along Mexico's northern border, with the city of Ciudad Juárez notoriously worst hit, and in the states of Sinaloa and Guerrero. Many other areas, including the Yucatán Peninsula (Mexico's major tourist destination), have suffered minimal drug-related violence, and if one takes

- » Population: 112 million
- » Annual population growth: 1.2%
- » Area: 1.9 million sq km
- » GDP per capita: US\$9200
- » US share of Mexican exports: 78%
- » Remittances to Mexico by Mexicans living in the US: US\$21 billion (2010)
- » Adult literacy: 93%
- » Number of recognized national languages: 69

## Mexico Reading

**God's Middle Finger** Richard Grant investigates the narco-riddled Sierra Madre Occidental (called *Bandit Roads* in the UK).

**Pedro Páramo** The ultimate Mexican novel, by Juan Rulfo.

**Oh Mexico!** Lucy Neville's memoir of a young Australian living in Mexico City.

**The Last Narco** The hunt for Mexico's most wanted drug baron, by Malcolm Beith.

**In the Sierra Madre** Jeff Biggers lives with the Tarahumara (Rarámuri).

**All the Pretty Horses** Cormac McCarthy's tense tale of three latter-day cowboys riding south.

## Music Albums

**Pecados y milagros** (Sins & Miracles) Best-yet from folk-jazz singer Lila Downs.

**Avalancha de éxitos** (Avalanche of Hits) Café Tacuba's rock/folk/hip-hop classic.