



## **INTERACT MEXICO TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE**

### **PRACTICALITIES**

#### **Documentation**

Air visitors to Mexico must present a valid passport before entering the country. Visitors to Mexico must be in possession of a passport valid for at least 6 months after the date of arrival and a return ticket with sufficient funds to cover their stay.

#### **Electricity**

Mexico provides electricity on the same cycle as the United States, 110V, with standard two and three prong sockets.

#### **Time Difference**

Mexico is on Central Standard Time, and some states observe daylight-saving time, but on different dates as the United States.

#### **Currency**

The official currency of Mexico is the Mexican Peso. Some establishments, in particular in the coast, may accept U.S. dollars, but everyone should plan on using Pesos as soon as you exit the airport.



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**Credit, Debit, Prepaid Bank Cards**—Many hotels, stores, and restaurants accept payment with credit or debit card; rarely are prepaid bank cards accepted. Be sure to let your card carrier know before your departure that you will be travelling to Mexico and ask them for any service or exchange rate fees. In addition to these fees, it is common and legal for individual establishments to charge their own credit card use fees for purchases.

Cards should always be in the name of the participant themselves. Debit cards work well for cash withdrawals, but typically must be run as credit for any purchases.

### **WiFi & phone use**

The easiest and quickest way to prepare for phone use while in Mexico is by contacting your provider to review the packages they offer for international travel. Many companies have plans that begin at \$10 USD per travel day. WiFi will be available in some establishments, hotels, and families, but cannot be guaranteed, and the signal can vary greatly. Purchasing an international SIM card is also an option, but will likely be difficult to purchase after arrival.



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### **THE PEOPLE**

**General Attitudes:** The Mexicans' concept of time is less precise than in the United States, although this is changing. Generally, Mexicans feel that individuals are more important than schedules. If a visitor or business associate stops unexpectedly, most Mexicans will stop to talk, regardless of how long it takes. Business contacts are often made during the 2 or 3 hour lunch break. These are social meetings, for the most part, with business being conducted in the last few minutes. Mexicans are very hospitable and will usually serve some refreshment to visitors in their homes. Gift giving is important and serenading is still popular, especially on special occasions such as birthdays, Mother's Day, etc. The Mexican people are generally very patriotic and proud of their country. Young men must serve a one-year term in the military, with one day a week in class.

**Population:** The population of Mexico is over 108 million, the eleventh largest population in the world. Mexico City, the capital of Mexico, has a population of nearly 28 million people and is one of the most populated cities in the world.

When Cortes arrived in Mexico, his soldiers united with the Indian women. The offspring of these and other European marriages were called *mestizos*, which means "mixed". Later, when Spanish women were brought to Mexico, the offspring of the Spaniards born in Mexico were called *criollos* which throughout the colonial period was the term for a white person of Spanish ancestry born in the Americas. European born Spaniards were called *peninsulares* (because they were from the Iberian Peninsula). A *Nahuatl* word that came to be applied to Spaniards in Mexico is *gachupin*, meaning "big boot" but used descriptively, generally for a tradesman. After the conquest, Cortes brought Black Africans to Mexico to work. The offspring of the Black African and Indigenous were called *zambos*, many being located in coastal areas. Continued intermarriage among *mestizos*, *criollos*, *zambos*, and Indigenous has caused a variety of skin colors in Mexico.



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**Language:** The official language is Spanish. Other major languages used are English, Nahuatl (Aztec), Maya, Otomi, Zapotec, Mixtec, Arabic, Chinese, and Yiddish. Over 150 other Indian languages are still used in various parts of Mexico.

**Religion:** Most Mexicans (89%) profess Catholicism. The Catholic church is very much a part of the culture, attitudes, and history of all Mexicans. There is also a small minority of the other Christian sects, and Mexicans have freedom of worship.



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### **LIFESTYLE**

**The Family:** Mexicans tend to have large families (an average of 4.4 people per immediate family), and family unity is very important. Family responsibility often supersedes all other responsibilities. The relatively low divorce rate is in part due to the anti-divorce stand of the Catholic Church and the traditional supportive role of father is the undisputed family leader, but the mother is in charge of running the household. A household may sometimes include other relatives besides the immediate family. There are also common-law marriages.

**Dating:** Traditionally, a chaperone always accompanied young couples, but this practice has now significantly diminished. Today, instead of calling on a girl at her home, the boy often meets the girl at a prearranged place. In many urban areas, dating is very similar to dating in the U.S. Parental approval of the boyfriend, however, is still important. In most areas, a single girl should not go out alone after dark; such action is considered a mark of poor character. It is common for Mexican males to make *piropos*, or personal, flattering comments to females. Mexican females, however, do not react to *piropos*.

**Social and Economic Levels:** There is a large disparity between the upper class and the lower classes in Mexico. Approximately 40% (26% in U.S.) of the nation's income goes to the richest 10% of the people, and 10% of the people live in absolute poverty. The average income in Mexico provides for few luxuries. Few homes in the smaller cities have telephones, but almost every home throughout the country has a radio and many have television sets.



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### **THE NATION**

**Land and Climate:** Mexico is the fifteenth largest country in the world and is the third largest in Latin America. It is about one-fifth the size of the U.S. The land of Mexico encompasses desert, tropical, alpine, and temperate regions. The central plateau is bordered by 2 mountain ranges, the Sierra Madre Oriental on the east and The Sierra Madre Occidental on the west. This situation permits cold air fronts to cause great drops in temperature and increased rainfall during the winter season. Visitors usually need a sweater in the evening in Mexico City, which rests at an altitude of over 7,000 feet.

**Economy:** Due largely to the petroleum industry, the economic situation in Mexico has improved a great deal over the last 50 years. Mexico is predominantly an agricultural nation, but at the same time its cities are rapidly growing. Approximately 33% of the people are employed in agriculture. Chief crops include corn, cotton, wheat, coffee (fourth largest producer in the world), and sugarcane. Mining and petroleum production are its most important industries. These industries are now highly developed. Mexico is the world's second largest producer of silver. Oil has become increasingly important to the economy. Other important industries are food, beverage, tourism, chemicals, and metals. The principal exports are cotton, cattle, coffee, shrimp, petroleum, sugar, sulfur, lead, copper and zinc.

**Education:** Education is compulsory and free through age 15. Trade and vocational schools are popular. The National University of Mexico is prestigious, and only one-third of the applicants are able to pass the rigorous entrance exams. More and more Mexicans now have university degrees. The literacy rate is approximately 91%.

**Transportation:** Only 5% of the people own cars although cars are more common in urban areas. Most people use public transportation. Buses are plentiful and relatively inexpensive, and Mexico City also has a fine subway system. Taxis are plentiful and summoned by telephone. When using non-metered taxis, one should agree on a price with the driver before starting out.



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### **NATIONAL HOLIDAYS & FIESTAS**

Mexico loves a good party. A party is a *fiesta* and there are more reasons for them in Mexico than in any other country in the world! If you are falling asleep some night and suddenly it sounds as though World War III is starting outside your window, don't worry - it is simply another happy, noisy, fireworks-crazy fiesta.

Here are the days when everyone celebrates and where the celebrations are the merriest.

**January 1: New Year's Day**, fireworks start well before midnight for those who can't wait.

**January 6: Three Kings Day**, when the Wise Men bring presents to Mexican children.

**March 21:** Benito Juarez birthday, 1806, honoring Mexico's great patriot and president with ceremonies and speeches by school children in the squares.

**Holy Week:** *Semana Santa*, the week before Easter, traditional vacation when all resorts are full and religious observances on Good Friday are most unusual in Taxco, Guanajuato, San Miguel de Allende, Tzintzuntzan and the Mexico City suburb of Ixtapalapa.

**May 1:** Labor Day, the date first chosen by U.S. labor organizations, copied throughout the world, then abandoned by the U.S.; parades of union members.

**May 5:** Anniversary of the Battle of Puebla in which Mexican troops defeated the French at Puebla May 5, 1862, usually called by its Mexican name, *Cinco de Mayo*; big celebration in Puebla.

**September 15-16:** Independence Day celebrations, commemorating the start of the 1810 War of Independence from Spain; fireworks and re-enactment of Father Hidalgo's *Grito* or cry for freedom; biggest celebrations: Mexico City's Zocalo, when the President of Mexico gives the Grito; Dolores Hidalgo, where it happened; San Miguel de Allende.



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**November 1-2:** Day of the Dead, Dia de los Muertos, separately, All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day when spirits of deceased persons visit the living, either at home or in cemeteries. Favorite meals are prepared and graves are decorated with flowers and candles.

**November 20:** Revolution Day, observing the Mexican Revolution of 1910 with parades of athletes.

**December 12:** Virgin of Guadalupe Day, venerating the patron saint of Mexico: special religious services especially at the Basilicas of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

**December 16-24:** *Posadas*, Mexican Christmas party season in which guests re-enact Mary and Joseph's search for an inn, or posada, for the birth of Jesus, and end with a festive party.

**December 25:** Christmas.

**December 31:** New Year's Eve.





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### **A THUMBNAIL SKETCH OF MEXICO HISTORY**

No one really knows where the people came from who first brought their civilization to Mexico. One theory is that nomadic tribes came from Asia by way of Alaska thousands of years ago and slowly worked their way south to settle in Mexico. Some of the tribes built cities, and their remains are still dotted all over the country, many of them virtually unexplored to this day.

Perhaps the most remarkable of these tribes were the Maya. About the time of Christ, the Maya occupied Guatemala, where they build great cities and developed an advanced civilization. Some years later they migrated to Yucatan, where the ruins of their cities are some of the most exciting in the world. These ingenious people discovered lunar months, the length of the year, developed a calendar, chronology and writing. Their period of influence lasted almost seven hundred years, and why they abandoned their cities is still a mystery to scholars.

One of the earliest settlers here was the Toltecs, an aggressive, warlike people from the north. They settled around the valley of Mexico and evidently were driven south by other tribes, filtering down to Yucatan. They left behind remarkable ruins of temples and palaces. It is not rare to see in Mexico a Toltec temple built over and around a Mayan one - an example being Chichen Itza in Yucatan.

Other tribes included the Olmecs, possibly the earliest group the Zapotecs, builders of Monte Alban outside of Oaxaca, and the Mixtecs whose capital was Mitla, famous for its palaces.



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### **THE AZTECS & MAYA**

Then came the Aztecs from the northwest. They were a dominating, fearless people who had little trouble conquering less warlike tribes. Around 1300 A.D., they founded Tenochtitlan. The story goes that they were instructed by their gods to build a capital city where they found an eagle perched on a cactus devouring a snake. This they did, building their city on two islands in the middle of a lake called Texcoco. The Aztec civilization was well advanced by the time Columbus arrived in the new world. Tenochtitlan was a splendid city; its emperor Montezuma ruled an empire larger than any monarch before him. At its height, nearly a million people lived in the capital and practically the whole of South Mexico was under the Aztec empire with trade routes extending to Yucatan and Guatemala.

In 1517, a Spaniard, Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba, discovered Yucatan. Two years later, in 1519, an expedition set out from Cuba to conquer the land, which had been named New Spain. The leader of the expedition was a man named Hernan Cortes, a swordsman, horseman, explorer, statesman, orator and historian, a Christian from Catholic Spain. He had with him around 500 soldiers, eleven ships, some horses, cannons and a great deal of determination. Landing on a barren beach, he christened it Villa Rica de La Vera Cruz, or Veracruz. From there he proceeded to the Aztec capital, making allies of the Indians he fought and conquered en route.



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### **THE COLONIAL PERIOD**

Two years later, Cortes was master of Mexico. Moctezuma had been killed by his own people. The city known as Tenochtitlan was completely destroyed by the Spaniards and on its ruins was built Mexico City patterned after the cities of Spain. Cortes' accomplishment is unequalled in the history of the world. With a handful of soldiers he conquered a great empire.

For the next three hundred years Spain governed New Spain with a succession of some sixty viceroys, the last of whom fled in 1821 when Mexico finally realized its independence. During the Colonial Period, as it is called, there was much bitterness. The Spaniards exploited Mexico, discovered a fabulous wealth of silver and gold in the mountains, and made vast fortunes. Most of the money went to Spain, but the part that remained built great churches, beautiful colonial cities and palaces. Mexico City came to be known as a city of palaces. Sad to say, the conquered Indian fared less well and lived in virtual slavery. The *Mestizos*, descendants of Spanish fathers and Mexican mothers, and *Creoles*, Spaniards born in the new land, were the people without rights.

Revolutionary ideas began to spread until, finally, the ideas burst into action. A Mexican priest from Guanajuato, Miguel Hidalgo, was the first leader of the movement to overthrow Spanish rule. On September 15, 1810, he issued his famous call for insurrection, *El Grito de Dolores*, which became a rallying cry. Hidalgo was caught and executed, and another priest, Jose Maria Morelos, assumed leadership, gaining some victories before he, too, was killed. Six years later, in 1821, General Iturbide arrived in Mexico City heading an army of patriots and had himself crowned emperor, adopting the title of Agustin I. His empire, however, lasted but a few months and in December 1822, General Santa Anna proclaimed the Mexican Republic. The emperor was captured and shot. A constitution was adopted and the United States and England officially recognized the Republic of Mexico in 1825.



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### **THE REPUBLIC**

For almost the next hundred years, Mexico lived in turmoil - both internal and external. In 1836, Texas rebelled, objecting to increasing control from Mexico City. Texas declared its independence and in 1846 joined the United States. Mexico objected and the United States invaded Mexico. The war ended with a siege of Mexico City and the fortress of Chapultepec. As a consequence, Mexico lost vast amounts of land in Arizona, California and New Mexico.

After the war, internal discontent continued. In 1858, Benito Juarez, a full-blooded Zapotecan Indian, became Mexico's president. His liberal reform program, however, made enemies. The conservatives of the country who were against the government turned to France for help. Napoleon III sent the brother of Austrian Emperor Franz Josef to be Emperor of Mexico. For three years, Maximilian attempted to rule Mexico and establish a stable government, in the process lending a colorful period to Mexican history. He turned the fortress of Chapultepec into a beautiful palace and built the handsome boulevard of Paseo de la Reforma. France soon lost control of Mexico, however. Maximilian was executed, and Juarez returned as president until his death. He is considered by many as Mexico's greatest leader.



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### **THE REVOLUTION**

After the death of Juarez, President Porfirio Diaz was the controlling power in Mexico for nearly thirty years, but the power he brought to bear was that of a dictatorship. Although Diaz did a great deal to stabilize and develop Mexico, the poor masses lived virtually as slaves. In 1910, the country exploded. Francisco Madero, objecting to Diaz' long term in office, led a revolution which ended with the resignation and exile of Diaz. The revolution was followed by a period of ferment, the murder of Madero and the emergence of such colorful figures as Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, Victoriano Huerta, Venustiano Carranza and Alvaro Obregon.

Finally, late in the 1920s, reconstruction began. Mexico obtained a new constitution and a solid government, which affected land reform, labor and education reform. The government began a new era in 1934. The Party of Revolutionary Institutions of PRI, as it is called today, was born. After a half-century, the PRI is still the predominant political party and has successfully ruled the country, dedicating itself to progress and stability.

Along with governmental stability has come an increasing national unity, reflected in modern schools and hospitals, the expansion of industry, vast programs for public works and increasing Mexican pride in the country's history and future.



## **THE AZTECS & URBAN PLANNING & TEMPLES**

The city of Tenochtitlan was built on islands in the middle of Lake *Texcoco* in the Valley of Mexico. Lake *Texcoco* was salty, but aqueducts carried fresh water from other lakes in the area into the city. Streets made of hard earth ran between the adobe brick houses of the city dwellers. The houses were painted white with trimmings of bright colors much like the houses in Mexican villages today. Many canals also flowed through the city. These canals were used for transportation and also connected Tenochtitlan with the mainland to the north, west and south.

Tenochtitlan had several great marketplaces. Merchants sold a wide variety of items: fruits, vegetables and meats, cloth, ready-to-wear clothing, reed sleeping mats and baskets, tools, ornaments of brilliant feathers and jewelry of jade, shell and turquoise. People gathered on the last day of each week at the huge market in Tenochtitlan.

Articles were exchanged by barter, or customers could pay with cacao beans that could be used for making a delicious chocolate drink. The busy markets were filled with merchants and craftsmen showing their wares and housewives looking for bargains.

All the main canals and roadways led to the ceremonial plaza in the center of town. The ceremonial plaza was made up of large, flat-topped pyramids crowned with temples and surrounded by a great walled enclosure. Each temple was dedicated to a main Aztec god. The ceremonial plaza also contained governmental buildings, markets and the stone palaces of the emperor and nobles. A huge rack containing thousands of skulls of sacrificed victims also stood in the area. The pattern of villages forming a dense population around a temple-pyramid center was very common to the ancient Indian civilizations of Mexico.



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### **THE AZTECS**

#### **RELIGION**

Religion dominated every aspect of Aztec life. Church and state were so closely joined that civil laws had behind them the force of religious belief. Prisoners captured in war were sacrificed to the Aztec gods. All the gods required special ceremonies, prayers and sacrifices at certain times of the year and on special occasions. The Aztecs believed that the victims would be welcomed as honored guests by the gods to whom they were sacrificed.

The importance of the sacrifices and the enormous size of the sacred pyramids show the power the priests held over the people. There were more than 5,000 priests in the city of Tenochtitlan alone when the Spaniards came to Mexico.

Less powerful clans were those made up of farmers, hunters, soldiers, merchants, artists, spies, etc. Even though these people had little voice in the government, they could achieve a higher position in society through their own efforts. This was done by doing their best work, no matter what job they had to do.

#### **SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT**

Aztec life was very structured and organized. The society was based on family groups called clans. Clans, not individuals, owned the land. Some clans were more powerful than others. The more powerful clans were made up of nobles, warriors, merchants and priests. A total of 20 clans made up the Aztec tribe. Each clan had an elected leader. The leaders of the 20 clans formed a special group called a council. Only four of the 20 leaders voted on who would become emperor. The name of the emperor who ruled from 1502 to 1520 was Moctezuma.

#### **FAMILY LIFE**

Many of the Aztecs probably lived much like Indians in the more remote villages of Mexico today. A family lived in a simple house made of adobe or poles tied together and covered with a thatched roof. When the tribe was not at war, the husband worked in the fields with his older sons. The wife managed the household and trained her daughters in the arts of cooking and sewing.



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### **CRAFTS - CLOTHING**

The people made their clothing from woven cotton or fiber from the leaves of the century plant. Men wore a breechcloth, a cape and sandals. The women dressed in skirts and sleeveless blouses. Colorful designs on the clothes told the wearer's position in Aztec society. Village chiefs wore a white mantle (cape), and ambassadors carried a fan. Priests usually dressed in black.

### **TRADE AND TRANSPORTATION**

Because the people had no wheeled vehicles or beasts of burden, they carried most goods on their backs. Canoes were used for water transportation.

Trade was very important. Aztec traders were respected persons who also acted as spies and emissaries. The supplies that came into Tenochtitlan from distant parts of the empire were obtained by trade and by tribute (tax). As the empire expanded, conquered tribes had to pay annual tributes of goods - including rubber, feathers and cacao from the lowland regions of Mexico, and gold and precious stones from the south. This brought enormous wealth into the Aztec capital.

### **MEDICINE**

The medicine practiced by the Aztec was a mixture of magic, religion and the use of special herbs and plants. Cure doctors appeared in cases of serious illness. Cure doctors were persons who had knowledge of treating diseases with herbs and plants. Some of the common ailments that were treated by herbs were: colds, malaria, severe stomachaches caused by intestinal parasites, and skin diseases.





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### **EDUCATION AND WRITING**

The priests controlled education. Special schools trained outstanding boys and girls for official religious duties. Schools for the other children were called "Houses of Youth". They offered courses in history, Aztec traditions, crafts and religious observances.

The Aztecs developed a type of rebus writing using pictures and symbols. They kept records of their important events in books made of paper from ficus bark. The people rolled these books into scrolls or folded them like maps. Most of their books were concerned with history, observations of the stars and planets, poetry and legends. Only a few of their books have survived.

### **FESTIVALS AND MUSIC**

The Aztec year was divided into 18 months. Each month, containing 20 days, was filled with ceremonies, festivals and parades. Many of the ceremonies were performed to honor the gods of rain, sun and the growing and harvesting of crops.

Dancers and musicians also performed at many of the ceremonies. The instruments used were drums of all sizes, conch shells, flutes and reed instruments. The music was very rhythmic, rather than melodic, and produced a hypnotic effect. The purpose of the dance was to obtain aid from the gods.

### **TLACHTLI – JUEGO DE PELOTA**

One of the most popular games played from Arizona to Honduras was *tlachtli* or basketball. No one can say precisely where or when it began. However, the Olmecs who lived in the hotlands of the Gulf Coast, where rubber grew, were playing the game as early as 500 B.C. A ball court was found in their temple complex at La Venta.

The game was played in an L-shaped court. There were walls of tiered seats on either side. In the middle of this was the "basket". The "basket" was a stone or wooden ring that was set, not horizontally as in basketball but vertically. The object was to put the rubber ball through the ring. The ball was hard, not inflated. The players were allowed to strike it only with their legs, hips or elbows. They were padded like goalies in ice hockey.



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### **ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY & THE MAYA**

The Maya have inhabited the Yucatan Peninsula for approximately five thousand years. The Maya Formative or Preclassic period began around 2500 B.C. During the following two thousand years village farming became established, intensive settlement took place, and advanced cultural traits developed. The Mayans became the most highly evolved and most gifted scientific and artistic peoples in MesoAmerica. An important center in the northern lowlands during the Preclassic period was Dzibilchaltun, which was occupied as early as 800 B.C. Dzibilchaltun, located about 8 miles north of Merida, was one of the largest and probably one of the oldest cities on the northern half of the Peninsula.

About A.D. 250 a general blending of cultural elements began to form a higher civilization that was marked by a distinctive art style, the corbeled vault or false arch, mathematical concepts including the zero, an accurate calendar system, and general refinements in astronomy and computation. During this, the Classical period (A.D. 250 to 900), a spectacular growth of monumental architecture took place; examples of which include Uxmal, Izamal, Labna, Sayil, Kabah, and Palenque. Uxmal, certainly one of the great centers, is not only the most compact and uniform Mayan city, but also one of the most attractive. During the Postclassic period (A.D. 900 to 1500) the southern lowland urban centers were abandoned, while the northern cultural region greatly increased in importance. Chichen Itza, which was occupied in the Late Classic period, rose to greatness in Postclassic times as did the port city of Tulum. The city of Coba, which flourished in the Late Classic period, was probably occupied during all three phases of Mayan civilization. Political disorganization, warfare between city-states coupled with or promoted by overpopulation, the vagaries of nature, which included famines and hurricanes, and a smallpox epidemic in 1514, resulted in a general decay of the Mayan culture. This eased the way for Spanish conquest.



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### **ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES**

During the early years of the Spanish conquest, the Peninsula was a source of honey, salt, and laborers. Later tallow, hides, and sugar cane became the mainstays of economy. After the bloody Castes War (1847-1848), henequen became the prominent commercial plantation crop of not only the Yucatan, but also Mexico. The production of this hard fiber, the market for which was stimulated first by ship ropes and later harvest twine, made the Yucatan the richest state in Mexico during the period 1880 to 1914. As a consequence, the influx of labor resulted in the Yucatan having one of the most dense populations in rural Mexico. The decline of sailing vessels, the formation of inefficient land holdings, competition from East Africa, the development of synthetic fibers, and the lack of other resources has resulted in the economic decline of northern portion of the Peninsula.

Shifting slash and burn agriculture continued to typify traditional land use. As a result of a large initial population, a continuing high birth rate, greater longevity, and little out-migration the population of the Peninsula is doubling about every 25 years. Recently, the tourist boom on the Caribbean coast of Quintana Roo with its jobs in construction, service and food related industries has helped alleviate some of the region's economic problems.

Today the major land uses are henequen growing around Merida, cattle ranching centered on Tizimin, and the extraction of forest products, especially mahogany and tropical cedar, in the south of the Peninsula. The grazing potential of the southern and eastern portions of Peninsula is being developed, as can be seen along the highway between Chetumal and Villahermosa. Commercial fishing is centered on Progreso.

The surge of tourism and accompanying activity has been dramatic.



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### **THE YUCATAN PENINSULA**

Isolation, both physically and culturally, characterizes the Yucatan region of Mexico. Great distances, seas, and dense vegetation separate the Peninsula from the heart of Mexico. This has resulted in historical, political, and economic isolation of the region. Isolation has also promoted intense regional pride among the Yucatecos. Few people realize that Miami, Florida and New Orleans, Louisiana are closer to Cancun than Mexico City.

The Peninsula is composed of an extensive limestone plain approximately 225 miles across, spanning about 5 degrees of latitude. Cancun and Merida are 21 degrees north of the equator. The states of Yucatan, Quintana Roo, and Campeche occupy most of the Peninsula. These, the outer provinces of Mexico, were only recently connected to the central plateau. Prior to 1948, when the first railroad entered this region, Yucatan could only be reached effectively by sea or air. A paved road, which traversed the north side of the isthmus, was opened in 1961. Even this route involves several time consuming ferry crossings. More recently an inland highway, paralleling the railroad, was completed.



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### **THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

The Yucatan Peninsula was formed some 50 million years ago, and is geologically related to the main part of the Florida peninsula, Cuba, and the Bahamas. The vast plain of the Yucatan is composed of limestone, which is formed from the remains of shelled marine organisms, such as mollusks and corals. When the animals died, their shells were deposited on the shallow ocean floor, and after compacting became limestone. Uplift of the earth's crust raised these thick-bedded deposits above sea level forming the Yucatan Platform. Subsequent solution and re-crystallization of the limestone have destroyed the fossils in most of the older surface rocks.

Because limestone is easily dissolved by water, rainwater quickly percolates through the surface layers forming underground channels and sinkholes on the surface. As a result, the Peninsula is almost devoid of surface water such as lakes and streams. Geomorphologists call this relatively flat landscape dotted with solution sinkholes a Karst surface.

More recently, the clear seawater and extremely white sandy beaches have made the east coast of the Peninsula one of the world's most important tourist destinations. The beach sand, which is said to be the whitest in the world, is the result of the weathering of homogenous bedrock material that forms the Peninsula. As a result of very porous subsurface material, rainwater's making their way to the coast through underground channels are relieved of their silt and organic materials by a natural filtration system. Consequently, the Caribbean coastal waters are extremely clear, relatively free of silt and organic materials. The warm temperature of the water promotes the growth of tropical coral reefs and underwater gardens.

The northern portion of the peninsula is dominated by a tropical wet and dry climate. Only at the northwestern tip, near Progreso, do semiarid conditions prevail. The lack of significant topographic features results in fairly uniform temperatures being recorded across the Peninsula. Interior locations experience a wider range of temperatures than those on the coast. Along the coastal areas land and sea breezes provide welcome relief from the warm summer sun. Although in the tropical latitudes, the generally low elevations found on the Peninsula result in relatively modest precipitation. Traditionally the low winter rainfall, welcomed by tourists, has created the greatest problems for agriculture.



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### **HISTORY OF MEXICAN CUISINE**

Mexico has a distinctive cuisine, which reflects the country's history and influences of the ancient Prehispanic, Spanish, French and North Americans.

Many people are pleasantly surprised to find Mexican cuisine is the subtle blending of the best of the Indian, Spanish, French and North Americans.

The Aztecs were ancient Mexicans who lived in the vicinity of Mexico City. Their basic diet consisted of corn, beans, chilies, tomatoes, cocoa, fish, honey, fruits, and wild game.

In 1520, Cortes invaded Mexico and brought the Spanish language, architecture, Christian religion and European culture. As Spanish families settled in Mexico, they brought their favorite foods - rice, olive oil, wine, pork, lard and oven-baked bread (bolillos).

Two of the Spaniards' famous dishes which have developed into national Mexican favorites are paella, a combination of rice, fish, seafood, chicken and peas cooked in chicken broth, and arroz con pollo, rice with chicken cooked in chicken broth.

The Spaniards also introduced the oven. To this day, no fiesta is complete without oven-baked bread.

In 1854, Maximilian, archduke of Austria, was appointed emperor of Mexico by Napoleon III. Maximilian and his wife, Princess Carlotta of Belgium, brought their court to Mexico. The court cooks introduced French, Italian and Austrian dishes and customs to the Mexicans. Many of these dishes are now part of the Mexican menu.



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### **FAVORITE MEXICAN FOODS**

Mexicans today enjoy eating - and their favorite foods are those typical dishes made with masa – corn kernels soaked in limewater and then ground with a stone mortar and pestle into a paste. Masa is the basic ingredient for the Mexican breadstuffs: tortillas, tamales, tacos, enchiladas and tostadas. A brief description of each follows:

**Tortilla:** the bread of Mexico, made of masa baked on a griddle in a thin, flat cake. The tortilla is used in a variety of ways.

**Taco:** the Mexican sandwich. A tortilla is rolled or folded and stuffed with beef, chicken, or pork and fried.

**Enchilada:** a tortilla filled with shredded cheese, beef, chicken, port, or beans, rolled or stacked and served with a tomato or chili sauce.

**Tamale:** masa filled with savory beef, chicken, or pork, then steamed in corn husks.

**Tostada:** an open-face sandwich. A tortilla which has been fried until crisp is topped with refried beans, meats and cheeses. Also, when tortillas are cut into quarters and fried until they are crisp, they are called totopos and are used as snacks and for dips.

It is hard to imagine Mexican cooking without beans. No meal is complete without them. Indian beans were unknown in Europe and the Spaniards introduced this New World food to the Old World.

Because of their high protein content, beans are a valuable addition to the Mexican diet. All types are used - including pinto and pink beans, chickpeas and red kidney beans.

The favorite way to serve beans is as frijoles refritos (refried beans). The boiled bean is drained, mashed and fried in lard and served plain or with cheese and chilies.



## **INTERACT MEXICO TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE**

### **FAVORITE MEXICAN FOODS cont.**

The fertile soil and mild climate of Mexico are conducive to the raising of a great variety of vegetables and fruits which add flavor and interest to Mexican meals. Moreover, many plants native to Mexico, such as tomatoes and chocolate, have been contributed to other countries and are now international favorites.

The favorite spices and flavorings of Mexico are chilies. Chilies vary in color - red, green, yellow, and brown: flavors range from mild to piquant and range in size from an inch to a foot. They are available fresh, canned or dried.

Chili powder is a blend of dried, ground chili pepper pods. Its flavor and pungency depend on the type of chili pepper used.

Salsa is a chili sauce made of tomatoes, onions and chili peppers. It too, varies in flavor and pungency.

The avocado is the favorite Mexican fruit-vegetable. It is eaten plain, in salads, in soup, and the most famous delicacy guacamole - mashed, seasoned avocado served as a dip or salad.

Vegetables are generally cooked in combination with other foods, since the Mexican is not fond of plain boiled vegetables. The popular vegetables are tomatoes, squash - particularly zucchini - pumpkin, sweet potatoes and rice.

Semi-tropical fruits grown in Mexico are pineapple, mangos, papayas, melons, coconuts, bananas, pomegranates and citrus fruits. Fruit is served fresh cooked, dried or candied and is used primarily in salads, desserts and meat dishes.

Cinnamon, vanilla and cumin (flavor like caraway seed) are used for flavoring.

Coffee and chocolate are favorite beverages. The most popular is chocolate sweetened with sugar and cinnamon and beaten to a froth.





## **INTERACT MEXICO TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE**

### **MEAL TIMES AND MENUS**

Income, education and ethnic background influence the food habits of Mexicans. Because of the many population groups, foods, methods of preparation and meal times vary from region to region.

A general trend today, however, is toward purchasing of items previously made at home. For example, few Mexican women still make their own tortillas. Most buy tortillas in modern, sanitary bakeries.

Traditionally, well-to-do Mexican families have eaten four meals a day, beginning with desayuno: fruit, tortillas, sweet rolls, coffee or chocolate.

Comida, the main meal served between one and four, consists of as many as five courses. First course is a wet soup, second, a dry soup, which is actually a starchy dish of rice, noodles or macaroni cooked in stock until the broth has been absorbed.

Dry soups are one of the main starches in a meal. The most popular soup is Mexican rice.

Wet soups are similar to American soups - the ingredients consist of rich broth, vegetables, pasta, meat and seafood.

The main course might include a stew made from meat, fish or chicken with vegetables, a rice dish, refried beans, tortillas, lettuce and tomato salad, dessert and a beverage. The comida is followed by the famous siesta (nap) in tropical areas.

Merienda (teatime) is at six. Chocolate is served with pan dulce (sweet rolls).

Cena (supper) is served late, usually between eight and nine, and consists of a soup and dessert.

Sweets have long been enjoyed in Mexico. The early Indians kept bees for their honey and Cortes introduced sugar cane to Mexico.



## **YUCATAN REGIONAL FOODS**

The regional dishes of Yucatan are of great variety and few use hot chilies. The hot sauces are usually served separately. Sni-pek, in Maya, means 'the nose of a dog' as it makes one's nose run. This looks like a harmless salad but can be very hot. It is excellent on bread while waiting for the entree to arrive. Chicken and turkey are the favorites with pork running a close third.

- **RELLENO NEGRO**

Turkey with a thick black paste and sauce and hard boiled eggs. A typical fiesta dish. Very peppery.

- **RELLENO BLANCO**

Turkey in a delicate white sauce also has hard-boiled eggs. Not spicy.

- **POLLO PIBIL**

Chicken spread with red paste (achiote, grown locally) covered with a sauce of onions and tomatoes, wrapped in a banana leaf and traditionally cooked underground.

- **COCHINITA PIBIL**

Pork spread with red paste (achiote, grown locally) covered with a sauce of onions and tomatoes, wrapped in a banana leaf and traditionally cooked underground.

- **ESCABECHE ORIENTAL**

Chicken or turkey, prepared in an onion and herb broth. Originated in East Yucatan, Valladolid.

- **BISTEC CAZUELA** Stewed beef cut in slices with vegetables.

- **PUCHERO** Beef or chicken stew with vegetables.

- **MONDONGO ANDALUCIA** A favorite Spanish dish of stewed tripe and spiced sausage.



## **INTERACT MEXICO TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE**

### **YUCATAN REGIONAL FOODS cont.**

- **FABADA** Spanish pork stew with white beans.
- **SALPICON DE VENADO**  
Venison shredded and served cold mixed with chopped radish and cilantro, with bitter orange juice.
- **HUEVOS MOTULEÑOS**  
Two fried eggs on top of fried tortillas with refried beans between; topped with a tomato and onion sauce, chipped ham and probably golden-fried bananas.
- **QUESO RELLENO, CALABAZA RELLENA**  
The first is a round of Dutch cheese hollowed out and stuffed with minced beef, onions, tomatoes, raisins, olives and hard-boiled egg. The second is a small summer squash with the same filling.
- **FRIJOL CON PUERCO** Yucatan pork and beans with chopped radish and cilantro.
- **SOPA DE LIMA** A chicken soup with slices of lime.
- **REFRIED BEANS** A rather solid dish of bean puree.
- **FRIJOL DE OLLA** Beans in a hot liquid bean soup.
- **PAPADZULES**  
Tortillas filled with a mixture of tomatoes, onions and hard-boiled eggs, herbs and a special sauce.
- **HORCHATA** A white drink flavored with almonds, rice and cinnamon.



## **INTERACT MEXICO TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE**

### **SHOPPING**

You'll have a unique experience in learning about and experiencing Mexican markets. The "mercados" are incredibly colorful and filled with smiling Mexicans and their wares.

To get the most out of the mercado you must experience bargaining, Mexico's national pastime. Bargaining is great fun and you'll have an opportunity to interact and make many new friends!

Remember that prices fluctuate in Mexico, just as in our country. Interact recommends that you get an idea of what you'd like to buy, and how much you'd like to spend.

Remember that your goal is to interact with the foreign culture, using the marketplace as a backdrop to your experience - not to see how much money you can spend as a "tourist".

QUALITY is best determined by checking the workmanship of each item. Try not to buy the first thing you see, as you may regret your hasty purchase. Instead: inspect, compare, bargain.

### **TYPICAL CRAFTS**

#### **SILVER**

Silver jewelry can be found in both bargaining markets as well as posh jewelry shops. Examine the weight and clasps of each piece. Sterling jewelry (.925 pure) must be stamped .925. Smaller pieces will have a tag attached, which will be stamped .925. Some pieces also contain a stamped Eagle. CAUTION: German silver is not really silver, commonly known as "alpaca". This may turn your skin green.

#### **LEATHER**

Always try on leather clothing before buying. Better quality is soft. Check for good stitching on all items. Beware of cardboard purses with leather glued on; hand-tooled purses should be of a thicker, more durable leather. Better leather is usually lined with velvet or animal fur.



## **INTERACT MEXICO TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE**

### **CLOTHING**

“Huipiles” are cotton blouses/dresses very popular with the girls. Prices vary with the detail and design as well as with quality of the fabric.

### **DECORATIVE KNIVES**

Many come from Oaxaca and have proverbs stamped on the blade. Most of these “refranes” are quite humorous. Inspect the handles to be certain that they’re solid and check the firmness of attachment to the blade.

**SWITCHBLADES ARE ILLEGAL AND WILL BE CONFISCATED BY CUSTOMS UPON RETURN TO THE UNITED STATES.**

### **ONYX**

Onyx is very brittle. Prices vary with the detail and design. Be sure there are no chipped edges and that it has not been glued together. Natural onyx comes in earthy colors, brightly colored onyx is dyed and has a tendency to fade after several years.

### **Shopping**

#### **COPPER**

Look for hammer marks on hand-worked copper. Items intended for practical food usage should have an inner metal coating of “estaño”.

#### **SOMBREROS**

Decorative sombreros are priced according to the amount of embroidery. Look for loose or frayed edges as well as discoloration before finalizing your purchase.

#### **BLANKETS**

Materials vary tremendously. Natural colors cost more although brightly colored blankets seem to be more popular. Cost is dependent upon the materials. Pure wool will be picky. Avoid buying a blanket if it smells oily.



## **INTERACT MEXICO TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE**

### **GUITARS**

The best are made in Paracho. Compare in several markets as well as shops before making your purchase.

### **BARK PAINTINGS**

Bark paintings are based upon the ancient process of paper making. Examine the bark while holding it up to the light. If you see many holes, look for better quality. These tear easily on the edges, take care.

### **LACQUERWARE**

Most is painted and then lacquered. Smoothness and detail of the design are important.

### **POTTERY**

Check for flaws such as hairline cracks, blotches, and unfinished areas, particularly around the handle. Although handmade pottery isn't meant to be perfect, it shouldn't wobble when it isn't supposed to. Each pottery region reflects its own cultural heritage in its design.

Bargaining is competitive, stimulating, and fun! In your role as a student you'll have an advantage over the "tourist." You will earn the respect of the Mexicans with your respect for custom and your care with money.

Once you've made your purchase, do not: 1. Price that item again in another market or shop, 2. Ask someone else what he or she would have paid. What really matters is, "Are YOU happy with it?" We hope so! Buena suerte.



## **INTERACT MEXICO TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE**

### **CULTURAL COURTESIES**

**Greetings:** The usual greeting is a nod or a handshake, although a full embrace between long-time friends is common. Women often greet each other with a kiss on the cheek. Mexicans typically stand close to each other while talking, sometimes touching their friend's clothing. A polite greeting to policemen or customs officials is expected before asking them questions. Mexicans are generally very friendly and polite, often to the point of personal inconvenience. Care should be taken not to impose on their friendliness.

**Eating:** Both hands should be kept above the table while eating. Guests should not leave directly after a meal. Food purchased at a street stand should be eaten before leaving. When eating spicy-hot food, one should eat bread, rice or beans, rather than water, to relieve the burning sensation. Mexicans, themselves, usually use a pinch of salt. Carbonated drinks also help. Hot, spicy food is called *picante*, not *caliente*, which refers only to temperature.

**Public Meetings:** When speaking in public, guests should avoid political and historical topics, such as the Mexican-American war or illegal immigrants. In conversation, Mexicans are more than happy to talk about their geography, art (especially their murals), archeology, monuments, parks and museums. People generally appreciate a foreigner's effort to speak Spanish. Mexicans refer to Mexico City simply as "Mexico" or "el D.F.."

**Gestures:** "No" can be indicated by moving the hand left to right with the index finger extended, palm outward. The "thumbs up" gesture is also used for approval, as in the U.S. Items, such as keys or pencils, should always be handed to people, not tossed. A common way to beckon people is with a "psst-psst" sound, which is not considered impolite. If someone sneezes, Mexicans say *salud* (good health).

**Shopping:** When something is paid for, the money is placed in the cashier's hand. Purchased items are customarily wrapped or placed in a bag being carried in public. Bargaining is acceptable in small shops and open markets.