**Unit 6 LESSON 1: MEXICO**

**THE PEOPLE**

*The people of Mexico trace their roots to three cultures—Spanish,Native American, and mestizo. Over the years, this mix of people has created a unique culture full of beauty, style, and excitement.*

Today, Mexico is the world’s largest Spanish-speaking country. In area, it is the third largest country in Latin America, after Brazil and Argentina. Although Spanish is the national language, the Aztec language of Nahuatl is spoken by many Mexicans. More than 50 other Indian languages are also spoken.

**A Blend of People**

About a quarter of Mexico’s people are mostly or completely Native American. About two-thirds of Mexicans are mestizos, with mixed Spanish and Native American ancestry.

**City Life**

Numerous cities and towns in Mexico began as Indian communities. Rural traditions remain strong in Mexico, but about 75 percent of Mexicans now live in cities. The largest city by far is Mexico City, the country’s capital. With about 19 million people in and around the city, Mexico City is one of the world’s largest and most crowded urban areas.

Mexican cities are very much like European cities. Many of them are organized around large **plaza**s, or public squares. City plazas serve as centers of public life. The main government buildings and the largest church are usually located alongside each city’s plaza.

**GOVERNMENT AND CULTURE**

Mexico’s official name is the United Mexican States. Like the United States, it is a representative democracy. It also has a constitution that guarantees basic human rights, including freedom, equality, health care, and education.

Mexico is also a federal republic. It has 31 states and one federal district, where Mexico City, the capital of the country, is located. Power is divided between national and state governments.

A president leads the national government. He or she can serve only one six-year term, and shares power with the legislative and judicial branches.

**Political Parties**

From 1920 on, one political party—the Institutional Revolutionary Party—ruled Mexico for more than 70 years. Then, in the 1990s, economic troubles and the people’s lack of political power led to calls for change.

In 2000 Mexican voters elected a president from a different political party—the National Action Party. In the next presidential election, National Action Party candidate, Felipe Calderón won after a close vote. In 2012, IRP Enrique Peña Nieto won election as Mexico’s president.

**Cultural Life**

The mix of European and Native American groups has given Mexico a rich, lively culture. Folk arts, such as wood carving and straw weaving, are deeply rooted in Native American traditions. Favorite sports, such as bullfighting and soccer, were brought from Europe. Carved and painted religious statues display the mixing of the two cultures.

Throughout the year, Mexicans enjoy celebrations called fiestas. These special days include parades, fireworks, music, and dancing. Food is an important part of Mexican celebrations. Mexican foods, such as tacos and enchiladas, are now as popular in the United States as they are in Mexico.

**Artists and Writers**

Mexican artists and writers have created many national treasures. In the early 1900s, Mexican painters, such as Diego Rivera, produced beautiful murals. Rivera’s wife, Frida Kahlo, became well-known for her paintings that expressed her inner feelings. Modern writers such as Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz have written poems and stories that describe the values of Mexico’s people.

|  |
| --- |
| How has Mexico grown? |
|  |
| **MEXICO’S ECONOMIC REGIONS**  Like much of the Western Hemisphere, Mexico has a free market economy—and it is growing. Mexico has tried to use its resources to improve the lives of its people. Between 1992 and 2004, the percentage of poor people fell from 44 percent to 37 percent. The economic growth of the country has had strong effects on the lives of Mexico’s people.  Mexico’s geography and climate together give the country three unique economic regions. These regions are the North, Central Mexico, and the South.  **The North**  In the North, many companies from the United States and elsewhere have built maquiladoras, or factories, in which workers assemble parts made in other countries. The finished products are then exported to the United States and other countries. This maquila worker is helping to make signal horns for use when boating or camping.  Much of the land in the North is too dry to farm without irrigation. Farmers have built canals to carry water from rivers to their fields. As a result, they are able to grow cotton, grains, fruits, and vegetables for export.  The North also has grasslands for raising cattle. Mexican cowhands called **vaquero**s work on cattle ranches. They use tools and methods they developed during Spanish colonial times. They later passed their skills on to American cowhands.  In addition to farming and ranching, the North has rich deposits of copper, zinc, iron, lead, and silver. Manufacturing is located in cities near or along the Mexico-United States border. These cities include Monterrey, Tijuana, and Ciudad Juárez.  **Central Mexico**  More than half of Mexico’s people live in Central Mexico. Large industrial cities, such as Mexico City and Guadalajara, prosper there. Workers in these cities make cars, clothing, and household items. The coastal area along the Gulf of Mexico is the center of Mexico’s energy industry, because of major offshore oil and gas deposits.  Farms in Central Mexico are productive. Although this area is in the tropics, it has a high elevation. This gives it a climate that is mild and not too hot. The volcanoes that have erupted over the centuries have created fertile soil. These Mexican workers put in long days in the field.  Both coasts in the South have beautiful beaches and a warm climate. Tourists from all over the world flock to such resort cities as Acapulco on the Pacific coast and Cancún on the Caribbean coast. This waiter works in the service industry.  **The South**  Mexico’s South is the poorest region. The mountains towering in the center of this region have poor soil. **Subsistence farm**s, or small plots where farmers grow only enough food to feed their families, are common in this region. In contrast, coastal lowlands have good soil and a lot of rain. Wealthy farmers grow sugarcane or bananas on plantations. Beautiful resort towns make tourism the most important industry in this region. |

**MEXICO’S ECONOMIC REGIONS**

Mexico’s economy relies less on farming and more on manufacturing than it once did. Much of this change has come about because of Mexico’s closer ties with its northern neighbors, the United States and Canada.

**NAFTA**

As you learned in Unit 3, Canada and the United States signed an agreement to make trade easier between them. In 1994 Mexico signed a similar agreement with both countries. This agreement is called the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. Under NAFTA, Mexico, Canada, and the United States trade goods back and forth without putting tariffs on them.

**Growth of Industry**

Thousands of Mexicans now work in maquilado**ra**s**,**ma**k**ing **c**a**r**s, **t**extil**e**s, compu**te**rs, **a**nd other co**n**su**m**er goods. M**a**ny serv**i**ce industries, such as banking and tourism, also add greatly to Mexico’s economy. Economic advances have raised the standard of living, especially in the North. The speed of this growth, however, has also brought concerns about damage to the environment and dangers to workers’ health and safety.

**Challenges**

Pollution has become a major national challenge. The Rio Grande, the river along much of the Mexico-United States border, is heavily polluted. Mexico City is often covered by **smog**, or a thick haze of fog and chemicals.

Like the economy, Mexico’s population has grown rapidly. Because many Mexicans have moved to the cities to find jobs, the cities have grown. Many people have had to take jobs t**h**at don’t pay well. As a result, hundreds of thousands of **pe**ople crowd together in slums.

**Migrant Workers**

Mexicans who cannot find work or who want to earn more money than they do in Mexico sometimes become migrant workers. Migrant workers are people who travel from place to place when extra help is needed to plant or harvest crops. Mexican migrant workers cross the border to work in the United States where the pay is better.

But migrant workers do not always cross the U.S.-Mexico border legally. About a million job-seekers cross the border illegally each year. There are many problems with this kind of immigration. Often workers make the trip through dangerous desert areas. Also, many people in the United States do not want border laws to be broken. Many lawmakers in the United States are working hard to find a solution to the problem of illegal immigration.

**Native American Protests**

Another issue facing Mexico concerns the country’s Native Americans. Most live in rural areas, and many are poor. During the 1990s, Zapatistas, a group of Native Americans in the southern state of Chiapas, rose up against the Mexican government. They demanded that the government make changes to improve their lives. Some conflicts turned violent. By the early 2000s, the struggle between Native American groups and the Mexican government still had not been settled. Today, protests continue, however, these protests are much less violent.