The United Mexican States is the world's largest Spanish-speaking country. It is largely mountainous. The Sierra Madre Occidental begins in the NW state of Chihuahua, and runs parallel to Mexico's W coast and the Sierra Madre Oriental. Monterrey lies in the foothills of the latter.

Between the two ranges lies the Mexican Plateau. The southern part of the plateau contains a series of extinct volcanoes, rising to the 5,700m [18,701ft] Orizaba. The southern highlands of the Sierra Madre del Sur include the archaeological sites in Oaxaca. Mexico contains two large peninsulas: the Baja California in the NW; and the Yucatán peninsula in the SE.

Climate

Mexico's climate is hugely varied according to altitude. Most rain occurs between June and September. More than 70% of Mexico experiences desert or semi-desert conditions.

History

One of the earliest Native American civilizations was that of the Olmec (800-400 BC). The Maya flourished between ad 300 and 900. The Toltec Empire ruled between 900 and c.1200. But it was the Aztec who dominated the central plateau from their capital at Tenochtitlán (modern-day Mexico City). Many splendid pyramids and temples remain from these civilizations.

Fernández de Córdoba was the first European to explore Mexico in 1517. In 1519-21 Spanish conquistadors, led by Hernán Cortés, captured the capital and the Aztec emperor Montezuma. In 1535, the territory became the Viceroyalty of New Spain. Christianity was introduced. Spanish colonial rule was harsh, divisive, and unpopular. Hidalgo y Costillo's revolt (1810) failed to win the support of creoles. In 1821 Mexico gained independence from Spain and General Augustín de Iturbide became Emperor. In 1823 republicans seized power. In 1832 Santa Anna became president. War with Texas escalated into the Mexican War (1846-48) with the United States. Under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848), Mexico lost 50% of its territory. A revolution led to the overthrow of Santa Anna in 1855, and civil war broke out. Liberal forces, led by Benito Juárez, triumphed in the War of Reform (1858-61) but conservatives, with support from France, installed Maximilian of Austria as Emperor in 1864. In 1867, republican rule was restored and Juárez became president. In 1876 an armed revolt gave Porfirio Díaz the presidency. Díaz's dictatorship lasted until 1910. Following an armed insurrection, Francisco Madero became president in 1911. A weak leader, Madero was toppled by General Huerta in 1913. Huerta's dictatorship prolonged the Mexican Revolution (1910-40) and led to US intervention. The US-backed forces of Carranza battled with the peasant armies of Villa and Zapata. After World War 2 Mexico's economy developed as relations with the US improved greatly, although economic migration became a problem.

Politics

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) ruled Mexico continuously from 1929 to 2000. In 1994 the
Zapatista National Liberation Army (ZNLA) staged an armed revolt in the southern state of Chiapas, calling for land reforms and recognition of Native American rights. Vicente Fox became the first non-PRI leader of Mexico in 2000. In 2001, after a nationwide march by the Zapatistas, the Mexican parliament passed a new rights' bill for indigenous peoples. 2006 elections, marred by fraud allegations, made the conservative Felipe Calderón president by an 0.5% margin. His socialist opponent Lopez Obrador contested the results, leading to months of disorder.

Economy

The World Bank classifies Mexico as an 'upper-middle-income' developing country. Agriculture is important. Oil and oil products are the chief exports, while manufacturing is the most valuable activity. Many factories near the northern border, known as maquiladoras, assemble goods such as car parts and electrical products for US companies.

<table>
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<th>area</th>
<th>1,958,201sq km [756,061sq mi]</th>
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