Did you know there are ancient pyramids and volcanoes in Mexico? How about that Mexico gave the world chocolate? Or that the sport of rodeo is based on Mexico’s national sport, the *charreada*? Did you know there are more different species of reptiles and lizards in Mexico than anywhere in the world? Or that every year giant gray whales swim thousands of miles from Alaska to mate in the warm waters off the western coast of Mexico? Here are some other things to know about this fascinating country.

**History**

Home to some of the world’s most highly developed early civilizations, Mexico’s known history began over 10,000 years ago when indigenous people populated the country. The Olmec were Mexico’s first complex organized society, appearing around 1200 BC in the southeastern region of the country. They were followed by the Maya, Toltec and Aztec cultures. In the early 1500s, the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortes conquered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan and Mexico became a Spanish colony for 300 years. In 1821, Father Miguel Hidalgo wrote the “Grito de Dolores,” Mexico’s declaration of independence which ignited a decade long war with Spain resulting in Mexico’s establishment as an independent nation in 1821. Today, Mexico is a federal republic of 31 states, governed by a Constitution with free and open elections and separate legislative, executive and judicial branches of government.

**The Mexican Flag**

The three colors of Mexico’s flag hold deep significance for the country and its citizens: green represents hope and victory, white stands for the purity of Mexican ideals, and red brings to mind the blood shed by the nation’s heroes. The flag’s dramatic emblem is based on the legend of the Aztec Indians’ journey to find the place where they could establish their empire. The god Huitzilopochtli advised them that a sign—an eagle devouring a serpent atop a “Nopal” or cactus—would appear to them at the exact spot where they should build their city. On a small island in the middle of a lake, the Aztecs came upon the scene exactly as Huitzilopochtli had described it. They immediately settled there and founded the city of Tenochtitlán which is now Mexico City, the country’s capital. Over 25 million people live in Mexico City, making it one of the largest cities in the world. Because it is built over a lake, it is actually sinking at a rate of 6 to 8 inches per year!

**Geography**

Mexico is located in an area known as the Pacific “Ring of Fire.” This region, one of Earth’s most dynamic, is characterized by active volcanoes and frequent seismic activity. The highest point in the country, Citlaltépetl (also called Orizaba), and the active volcano Popocatépetl are among the many volcanic peaks in Mexico. Mountain ranges called the Sierra Madres cross the country in all directions. The center of Mexico is a large plateau that escalates into high
mountains and deep canyons. The northern part of the country is a vast desert region while dense tropical forests make up the south and east. Because much of Mexico is covered by mountains, it is a rich source for minerals like copper and silver. In fact, Mexico is the world’s leading producer of silver.

**People**

Over 11,000,000 people live in Mexico, making it the largest Spanish speaking country in the world. Over 90% of the population is Roman Catholic which means it has the world’s second largest Catholic population behind only Brazil. Most Mexicans are *mestizos* meaning a mixture of Spanish and Indian heritage. Sports are important parts of Mexican identity and culture, with baseball and soccer being the most popular team sports. Bullfighting is also quite popular with most major cities housing at least one bullfighting arena. The Plaza Mexico in Mexico City is the world’s largest bullfighting arena.

**Son Jarocho and El Fandango**

*Son jarocho* (son ha-ROH-cho) is one of many types of traditional Mexican music. It is specific to the Sotovento region, which is made up of Southern Veracruz state, a region in the east-central part of Mexico, plus small parts of Oaxaca and Tabasco. Son jarocho incorporates music, dance and poetry. The main instrument used is called a *jarana jarocha*, a guitar-like string instrument with eight strings. Other instruments include the tambourine, the *leona* (like a bass guitar), the harp, and the *marimbol*, or thumb piano.

El Fandango is a ritual celebration where communities get together to play son jarocho and to dance on a platform called the *tarima*. The dance that accompanies the music at the fandango is called *zapateado*. The dancers provide the percussion for the music using their feet. These celebrations mark special events such as the birth of a child, a girl's passage to adulthood, and later on, her marriage. Fandango also accompanies burials, worshipping rituals for saints, or the birthday of Virgin Mary.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The CIA World Factbook entry for Mexico

Mexico on History.com
[http://www.history.com/topics/mexico](http://www.history.com/topics/mexico)

U.S. State Department Notes on Mexico
[http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35749.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35749.htm)

National Geographic Kids: Mexico Facts, Information, Photos, and Video
[http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/Places/Find/Mexico](http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/Places/Find/Mexico)

Wikipedia entry for Mexico

About Mexico - Pyramids of Mexico
[http://www.aboutmexico.net/mexico/pyramids.asp](http://www.aboutmexico.net/mexico/pyramids.asp)

Learn more about Arts Midwest World Fest online at [http://www.artsmidwestworldfest.org](http://www.artsmidwestworldfest.org)