

Mexico




Also known as: *Estados Unidos Mexicanos, México, United Mexican States*

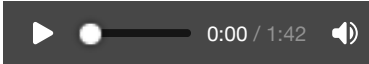
Written by [Angel Palerm](#), [Henry Bamford Parkes](#), [Ernst C. Griffin](#) | [See All](#)

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flag of Mexico



National anthem of Mexico

President: [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#)

[Mexico City](#)

(2023 est.)
130,980,000

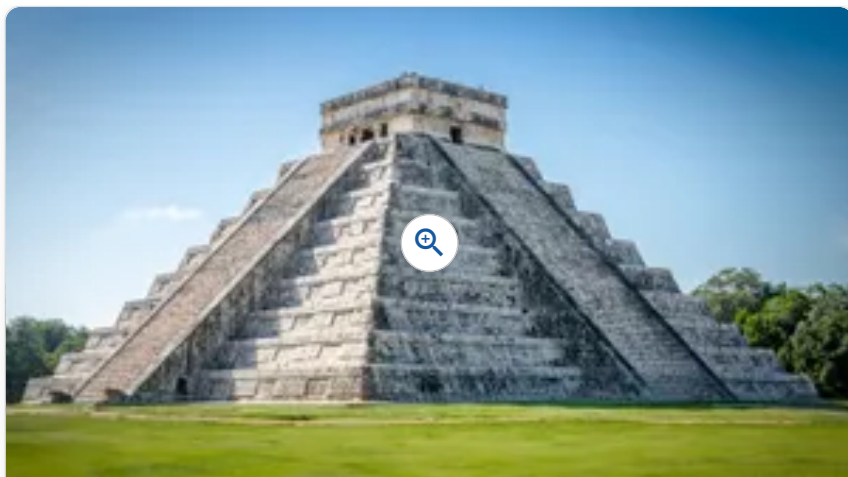
1 USD equals 17.171 Mexican peso

federal republic with two legislative houses (Senate [128]; Chaml...[\(Show more\)](#))

Republican presidential candidate Ron DeSantis is promising to end birthright citizenship, finish building the U.S.-Mexico border wall and send U.S. forces into Mexico to combat drug cartels

A Kentucky woman is accused of fatally shooting her West Texas Uber driver after mistakenly believing she was being kidnapped and taken to Mexico

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Mexico, country of southern [North America](#) and the third largest country in [Latin America](#), after [Brazil](#) and [Argentina](#). Mexican society is characterized by extremes of wealth and poverty, with a limited middle class wedged between an elite cadre of landowners and investors on the one hand and masses of rural and urban poor on the other. But in spite of the challenges it faces as a [developing country](#), Mexico is one of the chief economic and political forces in Latin America. It has a [dynamic](#) industrial base, vast mineral resources, a wide-ranging [service sector](#), and the world's largest population of Spanish speakers—about two and a half times that of [Spain](#) or [Colombia](#). As its official name suggests, the Estados Unidos Mexicanos (United Mexican States) incorporates 31 socially and physically [diverse](#) states and the [Federal District](#).



More than half of the Mexican people live in the centre of the country, whereas vast areas of the arid north and the tropical south are sparsely settled. Migrants from impoverished rural areas have poured into Mexico's cities, and nearly four-fifths of Mexicans now live in urban areas. [Mexico City](#), the capital, is one of the most populous cities and metropolitan areas in the world. Mexico has experienced a series of economic booms leading to periods of impressive social gains, followed by busts, with significant declines in [living standards](#) for the middle and lower classes. The country remains economically fragile despite the forging of stronger ties with the [United States](#) and [Canada](#) through the [North American Free Trade Agreement](#) (NAFTA).

Mexico's urban growing pains are in sharp counterpoint to the traditional lifestyles that prevail in more-isolated rural areas. In states such as [Oaxaca](#) or [Chiapas](#), small communal villages remain where [indigenous](#) peasants live much as their ancestors did. The cultural remnants of great [pre-Columbian civilizations](#), such as [Teotihuacán](#) or the [Mayan](#) pyramids at [Chichén Itzá](#) and Tulum, provide a contrast to colonial towns such as [Taxco](#)

or [Querétaro](#). In turn, these towns appear as historical relics when compared with the modern metropolis of Mexico City. Yet even the bustling capital city, which has been continually built and rebuilt on the rubble of past civilizations, reveals Mexico's wide range of social, economic, and cultural struggles. As the renowned Mexican poet and [intellectual Octavio Paz](#) observed,

Past epochs never vanish completely, and blood still drips from all their wounds, even the most ancient. Sometimes the most remote or hostile beliefs and feelings are found together in one city or one soul, or are superimposed like [pre-Columbian] pyramids that almost always conceal others.

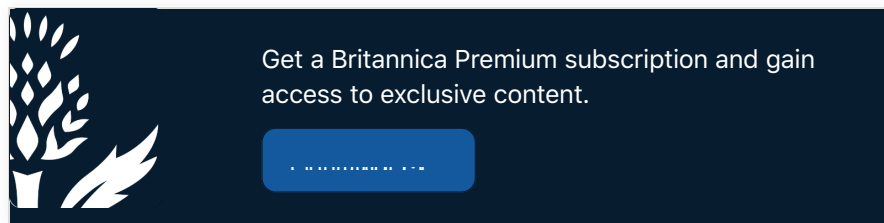
It is this tremendous cultural and economic [diversity](#), distributed over an enormously complex and varied physical [environment](#), that gives Mexico its unique character.



Land



Sharing a common border throughout its northern extent with the United States, Mexico is bounded to the west and south by the [Pacific Ocean](#), to the east by the [Gulf of Mexico](#) and the [Caribbean Sea](#), and to the southeast by [Guatemala](#) and [Belize](#). Mexico also administers such islands and archipelagoes as the Tres Mariás in the Pacific and [Cozumel](#) and Mujeres off the coast of the [Yucatán Peninsula](#). Including these insular territories, the roughly triangular country covers an area about three times the size of [Texas](#). While it is more than 1,850 miles (3,000 km) across from northwest to southeast, its width varies from less than 135 miles (217 km) at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to more than 1,200 miles (1,900 km) in the north.



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Mexico is located in one of the Earth's most [dynamic](#) tectonic areas. It is a part of the circum-Pacific "[Ring of Fire](#)"—a region of active volcanism and frequent seismic activity. Among its towering volcanic peaks are [Citlaltépetl](#) (also called Orizaba), which forms the highest point in the country at 18,406 feet (5,610 metres), and the active volcano [Popocatepetl](#), which rises to 17,930 feet (5,465 metres) to the southeast of Mexico City. These and other Mexican volcanoes are young in geologic terms, from the Paleogene and Neogene periods (about 65 to 2.6 million years ago), and are examples of the volcanic forces that built much of the central and southern parts of the country. Mexico is situated on the western, or leading, edge of the huge North American Plate, whose interaction with the Pacific, Cocos, and Caribbean plates has given rise to numerous and severe earthquakes as well as the earth-building processes that produce southern Mexico's rugged landscape. It is in this

dynamic and often unstable physical environment that the Mexican people have built their country.

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Mexico can be divided into nine major physiographic regions:

[Baja California](#), the Pacific Coastal Lowlands, the Mexican [Plateau](#), the Sierra Madre Oriental, the Sierra Madre Occidental, the Cordillera Neo-Volcánica, the Gulf Coastal Plain, the Southern Highlands, and the Yucatán Peninsula.

The [Baja California](#) peninsula in northwestern Mexico is an isolated strip of extremely arid land extending between the Pacific Ocean and the [Gulf of California](#) (Sea of Cortez).

Unevenly divided between the states of Baja California and [Baja California Sur](#), the peninsula is nearly 800 miles (1,300 km) long but seldom more than 100 miles (160 km) wide. The central core of the peninsula is a granitic fault block with peaks of more than 9,000 feet (2,700 metres) above [sea level](#) in the [Sierra San Pedro Mártir](#) and Sierra de [Juárez](#). The gently sloping western side of these mountain ranges is in contrast to the steep eastern escarpment, which makes access from the Gulf of California extremely difficult. The [Sonoran Desert](#) extends onto the peninsula along the northern end of the gulf.

The Pacific Coastal Lowlands begin near [Mexicali](#) and the Colorado River delta in the north and terminate near [Tepic](#), some 900 miles (1,450 km) to the south. For most of that distance, they face the Gulf of California while [traversing](#) the states of [Sonora](#), [Sinaloa](#), and [Nayarit](#). Bounded on the east by the steep-sided Sierra Madre Occidental, the lowlands are a series of coastal terraces, mesas, and small basins interspersed with riverine deltas and restricted coastal strips. Although the

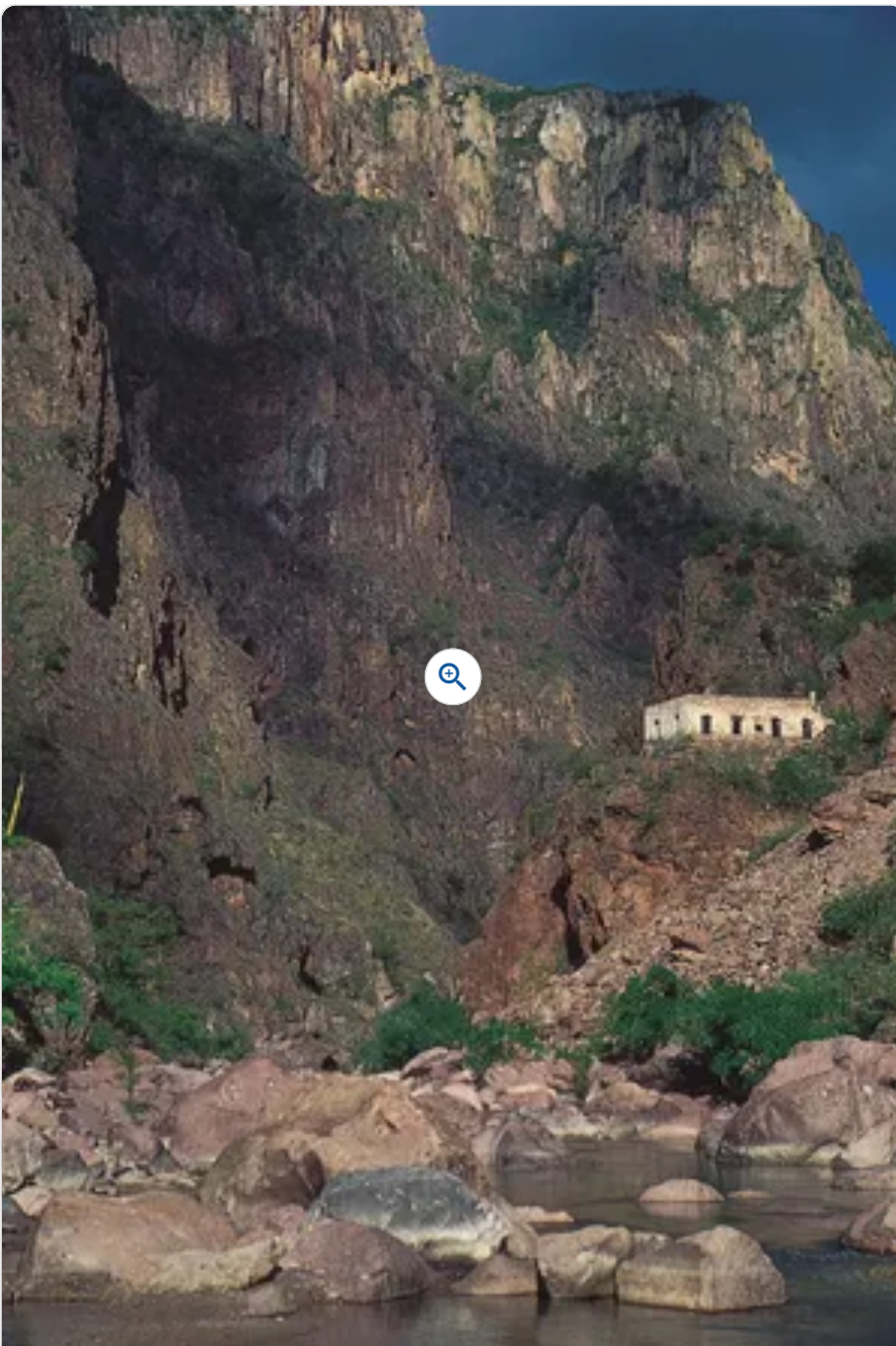
vast Sonoran Desert dominates their northern section, parts of the lowlands have been irrigated and transformed into highly productive farmland.



The largest and most densely populated region is the inland [Mexican Plateau](#), which is flanked by the Sierra Madre Occidental and Sierra Madre Oriental. The plateau consists of the vast [Mesa del Norte](#) (Northern Plateau) and the smaller but heavily populated [Mesa Central](#) (Mesa de Anáhuac). The Mesa del Norte begins near the U.S. border; covers great stretches of the states of [Chihuahua](#), [Coahuila](#), [Durango](#), [Zacatecas](#), [Jalisco](#), and [Aguascalientes](#); and ends near [San Luis Potosí](#) city. From there the Mesa Central stretches to a point just south of Mexico City. The plateau tilts gently upward from the north toward the south; at its northern end, the Mesa del Norte is about 4,000 feet (1,200 metres) above sea level. Throughout the region, relatively flat intermontane basins and *bolsones* (ephemeral interior drainage basins) are interrupted by mountainous outcrops. In the north the Chihuahuan Desert covers a section of the plateau that is more extensive than the U.S. state of California.



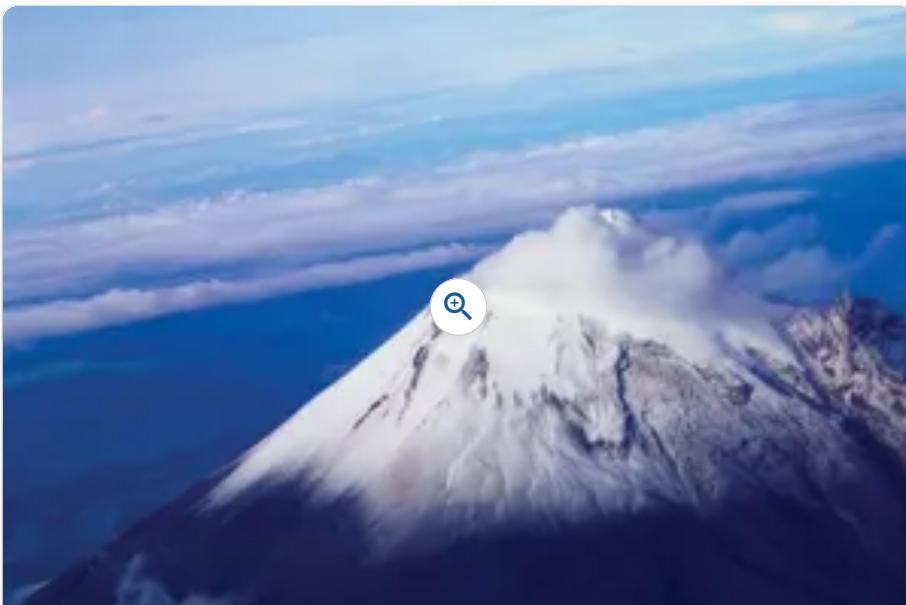
The Mesa Central covers large parts of [Michoacán](#), [Guanajuato](#), [Querétaro](#), [Hidalgo](#), and [México](#) states and the [Federal District](#) (Mexico City). Its southern end rises 7,000–9,000 feet (2,100–2,700 metres) in the vicinity of Mexico City. The Mesa Central, moister and generally flatter than the Mesa del Norte, is divided into a series of fairly level intermontane basins separated by eroded volcanic peaks. The largest valleys rarely exceed 100 square miles (260 square km) in area, and many others are quite small. Among the generally fertile basins is the [Bajío](#) (El Bajío, or the Basin of Guanajuato), the traditional breadbasket of the country, which is located in the northern part of the Mesa Central. Many of the basins were once sites of major lakes that were drained to [facilitate](#) European and mestizo settlement. Around Mexico City the weak, structurally unstable soils that remain have caused the colonial-era Metropolitan Cathedral and other buildings to shift on their foundations and, over many years, to list or sink unevenly into the ground.



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The largely volcanic [Sierra Madre Occidental](#), which forms the western border of the Mexican Plateau, has an average elevation of 8,000–9,000 feet (2,400–2,700 metres) and extends roughly 700 miles (1,100 km) from north to south. It has been highly incised by westward-flowing streams that have formed a series of gorges, or [barrancas](#), the most spectacular of which is the complex known as Copper Canyon (Barranca del Cobre) in southwestern [Chihuahua](#) state.

The [Sierra Madre Oriental](#), a range of folded mountains formed of shales and limestones, is situated on the eastern side of the Mexican Plateau. Often considered an extension of the [Rocky Mountains](#) (which are cut by the [Rio Grande](#) but continue in [New Mexico](#) and western Texas), it runs roughly 700 miles (1,100 km) from north to south before merging with the Cordillera Neo-Volcánica. Its average elevations are similar to those of the Sierra Madre Occidental, but some peaks rise above 12,000 feet (3,650 metres). The mountains have major deposits of copper, lead, and zinc.



The [Cordillera Neo-Volcánica](#), also called the Neo-Volcanic Axis or Trans-Volcanic Axis, is a geologically active mountain range whose smoldering cinder cones link the Sierra Madre Occidental with the Sierra Madre Oriental at the southern edge of the Mesa Central. As it crosses Mexico from [Cape Corrientes](#) on the west coast to [Xalapa](#) and Veracruz on the eastern coast, it forms a mountainous [backdrop](#) to the states of [Jalisco](#), Michoacán, [Guerrero](#), México, [Morelos](#), and [Puebla](#) as well as the Federal District. This volcanic range includes the

spectacular peaks Citlaltépetl, Popocatepetl, and [Iztaccíhuatl](#) (Ixtacihuatl), among others. One of the world's youngest volcanoes, [Parícutin](#) emerged violently from the fields of Michoacán between 1943 and 1952. The region is rich in silver, lead, zinc, copper, and tin deposits. The hot, dry Balsas Depression, which takes its name from the major river draining the region, is immediately south of the Cordillera Neo-Volcánica. The depression is formed of small, irregular basins interrupted by hilly outcrops, which give the area a distinctive physical landscape.

The [Gulf Coastal Plain](#), which is much wider than its Pacific coast counterpart, extends some 900 miles (1,450 km) along the Gulf of Mexico from [Tamaulipas](#) state (on the Texas border) through [Veracruz](#) and [Tabasco](#) states to the Yucatán Peninsula; it includes the [Tabasco Plain](#) in its southeastern section. The triangular northern portion of the plain, which is characterized by lagoons and low-lying swampy areas, reaches a width of more than 100 miles (160 km) near the U.S. border but tapers toward the south. North of the port of [Tampico](#), an outlier of the Sierra Madre Oriental reaches the sea and interrupts the [continuity](#) of the Gulf Coastal Plain. South from there the plain is narrow and irregular, widening at the northern end of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.



The [Southern Highlands](#) are a series of highly dissected mountain ranges and plateaus, including the Sierra Madre del Sur, Mesa del Sur, and the [Chiapas Highlands](#), also called the Sierra Madre de Chiapas. On their southwestern side, approximately from [Puerto Vallarta](#) to the [Gulf of Tehuantepec](#), are a series of relatively low ranges known collectively as the [Sierra Madre del Sur](#). The crystalline mountains, which achieve elevations of 7,000–8,000 feet (2,100–2,400 metres), often reach the sea to create a rugged coastal margin, part of which is known as the Mexican Riviera. Several coastal sites, such as Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, [Acapulco](#), and Puerto Escondido, have become [alluring](#) tourist destinations. However, the less-hospitable inland basins provide a difficult environment for traditional peasant farmers. Farther northeast is the Mesa del Sur, with numerous stream-eroded ridges and small isolated valleys some 4,000–5,000 feet (1,200–1,500 metres) above sea level. The picturesque Oaxaca Valley is the largest and most densely settled of these, with a predominantly indigenous population. It is one of the poorest areas of Mexico.

Bisecting the Southern Highlands is the [Isthmus of Tehuantepec](#), a low-lying, narrow constriction of land that reaches an elevation of less than 900 feet (275 metres). Its hilly central area [descends](#) to narrow coastal plains on the south and to the Tabasco Plain on the north.

The [Chiapas Highlands](#) are an extension of the mountain ranges of [Central America](#). Within the highlands the low, crystalline [Sierra de Soconusco](#) range lies along the Pacific coast. To the northwest and paralleling the coast is the Grijalva River valley. A group of highly dissected, folded, and faulted mountains is located between the valley and the Tabasco Plain,

a southeastern extension of the Gulf Coastal Plain. Among the

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Because of its climatic characteristics and arrangement of landforms, [Mexico](#) has few major rivers or natural lakes. The largest are found in the central part of the country. The [Lerma River](#) has its headwaters in the Toluca Basin, west of [Mexico City](#), and flows westward to form [Lake Chapala](#), the country's largest natural lake. The [Santiago River](#) then flows out of the lake to the northwest, crossing the Sierra Madre Occidental on its way to the Pacific. The eastward-flowing waters of the [Pánuco River](#) and its tributaries, the Moctezuma and Santa María rivers, originate in the eastern [Mesa Central](#) and tumble through [gorges](#) in the [Sierra Madre](#) Oriental on their way to the [Gulf of Mexico](#). Lakes Pátzcuaro and [Cuitzeo](#), west of Mexico City, are remnants of vast lakes and marshes that covered much of the southern Mesa Central before European settlement.

There are few permanent streams in the arid [Mesa del Norte](#), and most of these drain into the interior rather than to the ocean. By far the most important river in that part of the country is the Río Bravo del Norte (called the [Rio Grande](#) in the United States), which forms a lengthy part of the international border. The [Conchos River](#), a tributary of the Río Bravo, is important for irrigation agriculture and hydroelectricity.

The [Balsas River](#) and its tributaries drain the Balsas Depression as well as much of the southern portion of the Mesa Central. [Dammed](#) where it crosses the Sierra Madre del Sur, the Balsas is a major source of [hydroelectric power](#). Farther southeast, on the [Guatemala](#) frontier, the [Grijalva-Usumacinta](#) river system drains most of the humid [Chiapas Highlands](#). Together with the

[Papaloapan River](#), which enters the Gulf of Mexico south of [Veracruz](#), the Grijalva and Usumacinta account for about two-fifths of the total volume of Mexico's rivers.

Streams on the west and east coasts are short and steep because the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental originate close to the coastal margins. Along the Pacific Coastal Lowlands the [Yaqui](#), [Fuerte](#), and Culiacán rivers have been dammed and support vast irrigated fields. Aridity in [Baja California](#) and the [porous](#) limestones that underlie the [Yucatán Peninsula](#) cause those regions to be virtually devoid of permanent surface streams.

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Throughout tropical southeastern Mexico, high rates of precipitation produce infertile reddish or yellow lateritic soils high in iron oxides and aluminum hydroxides. The richest soils in the country are the chernozem-like volcanic soils found in the Mesa Central. Deep, easily crumbled, and rich in base minerals, some of those dark soils have been farmed continuously for many centuries. However, overuse has caused serious [sheet erosion](#) and has exposed *tepetate* (a lime hardpan) in many areas. In the arid north, gray-brown desert soils occupy the largest expanses. High in lime and soluble salts, they can be extremely productive when irrigated, but in such cases salinization (salt buildup) can be a serious problem, resulting in barren fields.

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Because of its vast size and topographic [diversity](#), Mexico has a wide array of climatic conditions. More than half of the country lies south of the [Tropic of Cancer](#). In those areas, tropical maritime air masses from the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, are attracted by the relatively low pressures that occur over land. The maritime air masses are the main sources of precipitation, which is heaviest from May through August. Tropical hurricanes, spawned in oceans on both sides of the country, are common in the coastal lowland areas from August through October. Northern Mexico is dominated by the

Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts, and arid and semiarid conditions predominate over much of the Mexican [Plateau](#).

Seasonal temperature variations within the tropics are small, often only about 10 °F (5 °C) between the warmest and coolest months. In those areas winter is defined as the rainy rather than the cold season. Elevation is a major climatic influence in most parts of Mexico, and several vertical climatic zones are recognized. From [sea level](#) to just over 3,000 feet (900 metres) is the *tierra caliente* (“hot land”), with uniformly high temperatures. For example, [Veracruz](#), located on the Gulf of Mexico, has an average daily temperature of approximately 77 °F (25 °C). The *tierra templada* (“temperate land”) extends to about 6,000 feet (1,800 metres) and includes the city of [Xalapa](#), at an elevation of more than 4,600 feet (1,400 metres), where the average daily temperature is 66 °F (19 °C). The *tierra fría* (“cold land”) extends as high as 11,000 feet (3,350 metres) and includes [Pachuca](#), at just under 8,000 feet (2,440 metres), where the average annual temperature is 59 °F (15 °C). Above the *tierra fría* are the *páramos*, or alpine pastures, and the *tierra helada* (“frozen land”), or permanent [snow line](#), which is found at 13,000–14,000 feet (4,000–4,270 metres) in central Mexico.

North of the tropics, temperature ranges increase substantially and are greatest in the north-central portion of the Mesa del Norte, where summer and winter temperatures are extreme. The highest temperatures in the country, [exceeding](#) 110 °F (43 °C), occur in July and August in central Baja California and in the northern [Sonoran](#) and [Chihuahuan deserts](#). Outside the high mountainous areas of northern Mexico and the north central portion of the Mesa del Norte, the lowest temperatures

normally do not descend below 32 °F (0 °C).

Most of Mexico lacks adequate precipitation for at least part of the year. Except for the Sierra Madre Occidental, the Sierra Madre Oriental, and the Gulf [Coastal Plain](#), the area north of the Tropic of Cancer generally receives less than 20 inches (500 mm) of precipitation annually and is classified climatically as either tropical desert or tropical steppe. Nearly all of Baja California, much of [Sonora](#) state, and large parts of [Chihuahua](#) state receive less than 10 inches (250 mm) of rainfall yearly. Much of central and southern Mexico receives less than 40 inches (1,000 mm) of precipitation annually, mostly from May through August, and is classified as having tropical savanna or highland savanna climates. Only the Gulf Coastal Plain and the [adjacent](#) mountains—roughly from [Tampico](#) southward to [Villahermosa](#)—the Chiapas Highlands, and the southern part of the Yucatán Peninsula receive abundant precipitation year-round. A [tropical rainforest](#) climate exists there because of uniformly high temperatures and humid conditions.

