

# Mexico – people, culture, language

## A guide for businesses



### The country

Covering almost 2 million square kilometres, Mexico is the fifth-largest country in the Americas and the 14<sup>th</sup> largest in the world. It is also the most populous Spanish-speaking country.

Mexico has a free market economy, and is described as an “upper middle-income” country. Despite being the world’s 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy, huge gaps remain between rich and poor, and also geographically: between the richer, industrial north and the poorer, less-developed south; and between urban and rural areas.

Mexico's largest source of foreign income is oil exports. The second-largest is remittances from Mexican citizens working in the USA, who send home a total of US\$20 billion per year.

Nearly 90% of Mexican trade has been put under free trade agreements with over 40 countries, including the European Union, Japan and Israel. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was introduced in 1994 and remains the most influential: around 90% of Mexican exports go to the USA and Canada, and close to 55% of its imports come from these two countries.



Photograph by Cathlyn Melloan/Getty Images

**The “Zócalo” - main square - in the centre of Mexico City. The Metropolitan Cathedral stands near the former site of the city's leading Aztec temple.**

### Did you know...?

- There are more than 5 million cars in Mexico City, making it one of the most polluted cities on earth.
- Alaska was once part of Mexico.
- In Mexico cats only have seven lives, Tuesday (not Friday) the 13<sup>th</sup> is unlucky and “April Fool’s Day” is on December 28<sup>th</sup>.
- Some limited-edition tequilas are sold for as much as \$225,000.
- In Mexico, there is a saying people use after agreeing a time with you: “*Hora Inglesa*”. Literally translated, this means “English Time”. The inference is that the time agreed should be strictly adhered to.

### Fast facts

**Location:** Central America, with land borders with the USA, Guatemala and Belize

**Capital:** Mexico City

**Official Language(s):** Spanish (*de facto*); over 60 indigenous languages have the same validity as Spanish in areas where they are spoken

**Population:** 108 million

**Ethnic Groups:** 60% “mestizo” (Amerindian-Spanish), 30% Amerindian or predominantly Amerindian, 9% white, 1% other

**Religion(s):** 89% nominally Roman Catholic, 6% Protestant, 5% other

**Currency:** Peso

**Dialling Code:** +52

**Time:** -6 hours GMT

### Language

**Talking the talk:** the positive impression you will make by speaking a few basic Spanish phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases – if you want to learn more, why not download our **FREE Talk the Talk™ podcast** with essential words and phrases in Latin American Spanish? Available soon at [www.rlnpodcast.com](http://www.rlnpodcast.com).

English	Spanish	Pronunciation
Hello	Hola	o-la
Good day/good morning	Buenos días	bwe-nos dee-ass
Good afternoon	Buenas tardes	bwe-nas tar-des
Good evening	Buenas noches	bwe-nas no-ches
Goodbye	Adiós	a-dyos
How are you?	Qué tal?	Ke tal?
Fine, and you?	Bien, y usted?	B-yen, ee oos-teth?
Pleased to meet you	Mucho gusto	moo-cho goos-to
Yes	Sí	see
No	No	no
Please	Por favor	por fa-vor
Thank you	Gracias	gra-syas

## Getting a foot in the door

- Business is not usually done with strangers. It is important to find connections on the ground in Mexico, who can introduce you to potential partners.
- You will be judged by the person who introduces you and changing this first impression is very difficult.
- Initial meetings are generally with a senior figure within a company; it is important that your delegation includes someone from a similar level.
- Remember that these first meetings are used to assess your trustworthiness, sincerity, and integrity. This is done through building rapport on a personal level.
- After the initial 'getting-to-know-you' meetings, the senior-level contacts may not attend meetings or be visible anymore. This indicates you are now getting down to business and they are no longer needed to smooth the introduction.



*Teotihuacán, the largest pre-Columbian city in the Americas.*

## Negotiation style

- Always bear in mind a strong relationship is necessary for success in Mexico. Assess whether this has been sufficiently developed before embarking on any negotiation.
- When negotiating maintain eye contact; this demonstrates sincerity and trust.
- Negotiations may take a long time, especially if you do not have senior decision makers in the room. Be patient and try to provide more information to overcome any doubts.
- Being pushy or aggressive in your negotiation style would be counterproductive.
- Once a verbal agreement has been made, ensure the same is captured in writing.

## Business meetings

- In Mexico, time is regarded as flexible. As a result punctuality is not taken as seriously as it is in the UK. Do not be offended or surprised if your contacts in Mexico turn up late, sometimes very late. As the visitor, however, you would always be expected to be on time.
- Meetings should commence with some small talk. This is all part of building the relationship on a personal level rather than just a business one. Wait for your counterpart to change the subject to business.
- Good topics of conversation include your (positive) experiences of Mexico, the weather, food and, of course, football.
- Meetings do not work on regimented agendas. Issues will be tackled in a rather haphazard manner, as and when they arise: so be prepared to think on your feet.
- If making a presentation or pitch, be sure to use a lot of background information, facts and statistics. Try to present information visually rather than verbally.
- Mexicans try to protect feelings and relationships, so it is important to read between the lines. A "no" may be disguised as a "maybe" or a "we'll see." Try to be diplomatic in your communication style.

## Meeting and greeting

- Although Mexicans have three names they will only use two when introducing themselves. So María Vázquez Laredo would be María Vázquez.
- Mexicans respect hierarchy and this is reflected in the use of titles. Examples of titles include *Licenciado*, (a professional, such as a lawyer) *Ingeniero*, (an engineer) and *Arquitecto* (an architect). Business cards will usually carry such information.
- Men always shake hands when they meet and before they depart each other's company. For men meeting women in a business context, a formal handshake is appropriate, also when meeting and before departing.
- Once a relationship warms up an *abrazo* (hug) is shared; wait for your Mexican contact to initiate this.
- Physical contact is the norm in Mexico, so if you are someone reserved in that area, be prepared! It would be perceived as rude or cold to recoil from someone's warm handshake, slap on the back or *abrazo*.



*Mexico has created the world's largest single-nation marine sanctuary, now in nearly 3 million square km of the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean, off the Baja California coast.*

## Further resources

UK Trade & Investment: Support for those wanting to do business in/with Mexico. [www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk](http://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk)  
The British Chamber of Commerce in Mexico - non-profit making trade association helping to develop trade and investment between Mexico and the UK. [www.britchamexico.com](http://www.britchamexico.com)  
MEXOnline - useful information resource and directory for everything Mexico. [www.mexonline.com/business.htm](http://www.mexonline.com/business.htm)  
Latin Trade Online: online version of Latin America's largest and most respected pan-regional business magazine. [www.latintrade.com](http://www.latintrade.com)  
The Economist – an in-depth country briefing covering mainly business and politics. [www.economist.com/countries/Mexico/](http://www.economist.com/countries/Mexico/)

*Please note: While every effort is made to ensure accuracy, the Regional Language Network does not take responsibility for the content of this briefing. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Regional Language Network or of CILT, the National Centre for Languages.*

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