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# Oaxaca

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During his conquest of Mexico, Hernán Cortés declared himself the Marqués del Valle of Oaxaca, claiming province over the state's rich mineral deposits. Today, Oaxaca has become a top tourist destination thanks to its miles of sandy beaches and fascinating archeological sites. While there are officially 16 indigenous groups in Oaxaca, every group actually has hundreds of subgroups, each distinguished by unique linguistic and social traditions. Oaxaca, like the nearby states of Guerrero and Chiapas, contains a startlingly diverse range of indigenous cultures with roots that reach back many centuries.

## History

### Early History

Between approximately 1500 and 500 B.C., the Zapotecan city of San José Mogote in what is now the state of Oaxaca was the largest and most important settlement in the region. Historians estimate that during the pre-colonial period, Oaxaca was home to 16 separate cultures, each with its own language, customs and traditions. However the Zapotecas and Mixtecas constituted the largest and most sophisticated societies with villages and farmlands located throughout the region.

**Did you know?** The Zapoteca were skilled in astronomy and excavation, and leveled the top of a local mountain around 450 B.C. and created the ceremonial center now called Monte Albán. One of the most densely populated cities in Mesoamerica, Monte Albán is estimated to have had 18,000 Zapotecan residents at its peak.

San José Mogote, considered the oldest agricultural city in the Oaxaca Valley, was probably the first area settlement to use pottery. Historians also credit Zapotecas with constructing Mexico's oldest-known defensive barrier and ceremonial buildings around 1300 B.C. The culture also predates any other in the state in the use of adobe (850 B.C.), hieroglyphics (600 B.C.) and architectural terracing and irrigation (500 B.C.).

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Before migrating to Oaxaca, the Mixtecas lived in the southern portions of what are now the neighboring states of [Guerrero](#) and [Puebla](#). By the end of the 7th century, Mixtecas established themselves in the western and central parts of Oaxaca, building cities such as Apoala and Tilantongo. During the 13th century, the Mixtecas continued to move south and east, invading the Central Valley and conquering the Zapotecas.

By the 15th century, the [Aztecs](#) had arrived in Oaxaca and quickly conquered the local inhabitants, establishing an outpost on the Cerro del Fortín. Consequently, trade with Tenochtitlán and other cities to the north increased, but the basic fabric of living was unchanged by the Aztec presence.

### **Middle History**

In 1519, conquistador Hernán Cortés set out to conquer central [Mexico](#) on behalf of Spain. Two years later, through mass killings and strategic alliances, he succeeded in overthrowing the Aztec Empire. Cortés promptly sent Pedro de Alvarado and Gonzalo de Sandoval to the Pacific and into the Sierra Madre region in search of gold. On November 25, 1521, Francisco de Orozco took possession of the Central Valley in the name of Cortés. The arrival of de Orozco prompted the construction of housing for Spanish newcomers under the administration of Cortés' brother-in-law, Juan Xuárez. On July 6, 1529, Charles V, Emperor of Spain, awarded Cortés the title Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca and presented him with lavish gifts, including a large tract of land in the area.

In Oaxaca, the comparatively few natives who survived the invasion returned to their remote villages and continued to cultivate the land and labor in the mines. Some found work on haciendas, large estates granted to Spanish nobles who were settling in the region.

During the 300-year colonial period, a rigid class hierarchy ensured that the best government posts were filled by Criollos (Spaniards and their descendants). Only near the end of the colonial period were Mestizos (citizens with both European and indigenous ancestry) allowed to hold public office. Under Spanish rule, the region's social practices, politics and religion were Europeanized. Schools and churches were erected for the Indians, Mestizos and Criollos alike. However, with all the power and wealth concentrated in the hands of the Spanish landowners and clergy, most Oaxacans remained impoverished.

When the movement to free Mexico from Spanish rule began, Oaxaca was at the forefront. Bishop Antonio Barbosa Jordan encouraged Oaxacans to take up arms against the Spanish crown. In 1811, Valerio Trujano initiated guerilla action against Spanish forces and won several important victories. Besieged at Huajuapán, Trujano held out for 111 days until he received reinforcements sent by the revolutionary leader José María [Morelos](#). With the help of the extra troops, Trujano won the battle of Huajuapán, giving the revolutionaries control of Oaxaca.

### **Recent History**

Two Oaxacans played an integral role in Mexican history during the late 19th century. Benito Juárez became Mexico's first Indian president in 1858 and served several terms, one of which was interrupted by the French occupation from 1863 to 1867 after he refused to continue paying long-standing debts owed to France. The second major Oaxacan figure of the 19th century was Porfirio Díaz, who contended for the presidency several times before assuming power in 1877. He ruled initially from 1877 to 1880 and again from 1884 to 1911.

When the [Mexican Revolution](#) began in 1910, Oaxaca, like many southern states, rallied around the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata who proclaimed that the land belonged to the workers. This rhetoric resonated with Oaxacans, since many of them were being exploited by the large landowners.

After Díaz was removed from power, dissension among the revolutionary leaders continued to divide the people of Mexico. Venustiano Carranza, who opposed some of Zapata's populist positions, seized control of the federal government and eventually triumphed over the armed forces of Zapata and [Pancho Villa](#). With Carranza in power, the relationship between Oaxaca and the federal government deteriorated. Oaxacans disliked the new president so much that Carranza's brother was assassinated in Oaxaca. The period from 1916 to 1920 was filled with constant struggle for control of the new government; in the end, federal troops won out.

## Oaxaca Today

Tourism is the principal industry in Oaxaca. With more than 500 kilometers (310 miles) of Pacific Coast beaches, archeological ruins, colonial architecture, mountains, valleys and a mild climate, Oaxaca attracts visitors from around the world.

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Puebla



Mexican  
Revolution



Hitler's Teeth  
Reveal Nazi  
Dictator's Cause  
of Death

A poor and underdeveloped state, Oaxaca relies mainly on the commercial value of its forestry products, fruit and vegetable crops and handicrafts created by indigenous artisans to support its economy. Past mismanagement has squandered some resources, and poor transportation systems have hindered the movement of produce and raw materials. In some cases, disagreements among indigenous cultures have prevented the development of the region's resources.

In recent years, Oaxaca has experienced considerable political and social upheaval. Governor Ulises Ruiz, accused of fraud in the 2004 elections, was subjected to protests and guerilla-style attacks during the summer of 2006, and federal forces were sent to quell the protests. Tension still exists today among several segments of society, notably the teacher's union, which has allied itself with the agricultural union in an effort to remove Ruiz from power.

## Facts & Figures

- **Capital:** Oaxaca de Juarez
- **Major Cities (population):** Oaxaca de Juarez (266,033) San Juan Bautista Tuxtepec (144,555) Juchitlan de Zaragoza (85,869) Salina Cruz (76,219) Santa Cruz Xoxocotlan (65,873)
- **Size/Area:** 36,275 square miles
- **Population:** 3,506,821 (2005 census)
- **Year of statehood:** 1824

# Fun Facts

- Oaxaca's coat of arms features a red background that commemorates the many battles that have been fought in the state. The top of the design is adorned with an eagle holding a snake atop a cactus, Mexico's national symbol. Seven silver stars represent the state's seven geographical regions: Istmo (isthmus), Costa (coast), Papaloapan (river basin), Sierra (mountains), Mixteca (Mixtec territory), Valles Centrales (central valleys) and Cañada (woodlands). The emblem's central oval is bordered by the phrase "Respect for the rights of others will bring peace." At the bottom of the oval, two hands are breaking a chain, symbolizing Oaxaca's struggle against colonial domination. On the left is an indigenous symbol for Huaxycac, the first Oaxacan region settled by the Spanish conquistadors. To the right are the Mitla Palace and a Dominican cross, representing Oaxaca's indigenous history and its ties to Catholicism.
- The diversity of Oaxacan cuisine is suggested by its nickname, *Land of the Seven Moles*. Each of the state's seven regions produces a unique variation of the spicy mole sauce.
- Prominent natives of Oaxaca include Benito Juárez, Porfirio Díaz, José Vasconcelos (a writer who greatly influenced the Mexican Revolution), famed painters Rufino Tamayo and Francisco Toledo and baseball hero Vinicio (Vinny) Castilla.
- An unusual Oaxaca delicacy is chapulines, a dish consisting primarily of barbecued grasshoppers.
- Puerto Escondido on the Pacific Coast, which surfers call the Mexican Pipeline, is known for its large, consistent waves.
- The city of Oaxaca celebrates the festival of Guelaguetza on the last two Mondays of July. Guelaguetza honors the diverse cultures that contribute to Oaxaca, giving communities from around the state the opportunity to share their music, traditional costumes, dances and food. The main event takes place in the city's open-air amphitheater located on Cerro del Fortín, a nearby historic hill.
- One of Oaxaca's best-known products is mezcal, an alcoholic beverage similar to tequila but distilled from varieties of cactus other than the blue agave, which is used for tequila. The plant must be six to eight years old before it can be harvested. Most bottles of mezcal include a worm, a practice that originated in the 1940s when Jacobo Lozano Páez accidentally discovered that a worm enhances the flavor of mezcal.

# Landmarks

## Architecture

The Iglesia de Santo Domingo, a Dominican church founded in 1575, is located just north of Oaxaca City's main square. The interior walls and ceiling of the Baroque church are adorned with gilded ornamentation and colorful frescoes.

## Archaeological Sites

Monte Albán, which was the capital of the ancient Mixtec-Zapotec empire, is the most important archaeological site in the state. The city came to dominate the Oaxacan highlands and engaged in commerce with other major settlements in the area, such as Tenochtitlán.

Mitla (meaning place of the dead) is a town in Oaxaca known for its unique ancient architecture and tile mosaics traceable to Zapotec and Mixtec cultures. Just over 15,000 people still live in Mitla, which is a short distance from Oaxaca City.

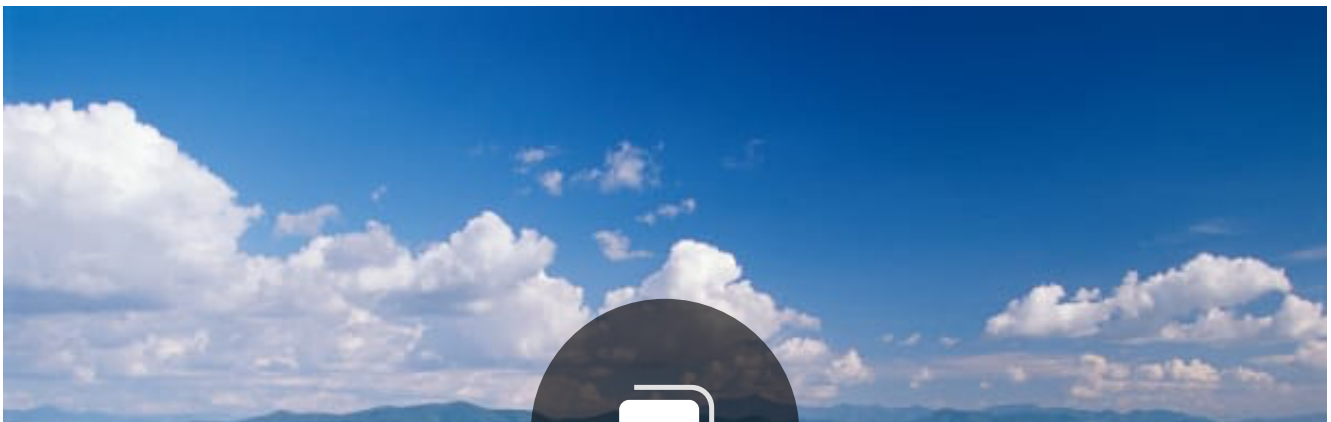
## Beaches

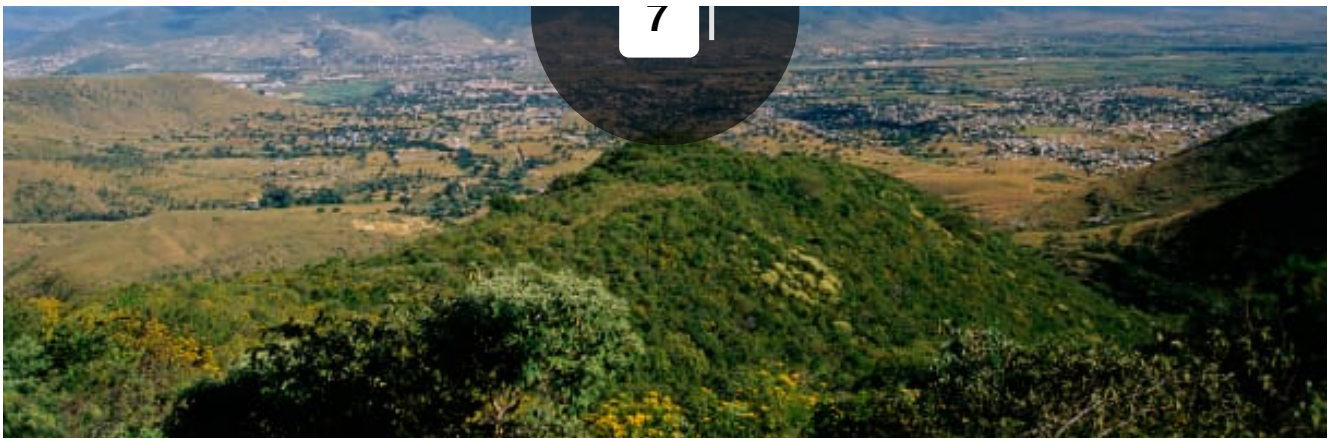
Huatulco Beach (Bahías de Huatulco) features nine bays and more than 30 beaches. A very calm beach removed from the noise and congestion of major cities, Huatulco is a favorite among families with children.

Puerto Escondido has two main beaches, Playa Principal and Zicatela, as well as several smaller ones. Zicatela's strong waves make Puerto Escondido a world-class surfing spot. Often compared to Hawaii's famous surf, the waters of Zicatela have been nicknamed the Mexican Pipeline.

# PHOTO GALLERIES

## Oaxaca





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