

ICH AS THE HUES of a handwoven serape, Mexico is a land of many textures and traditions.

Machete-sharp mountain ridges flank fertile valleys. Lush tropical forests give way to unforgiving deserts. All are bound by more than 6,000 miles of varied coastline.

The contrasts of the land are mirrored in the people, who now number nearly 92 million. While many share an ancestry that includes both indigenous groups and Spanish invaders, many distinct traditions have been passed on through the centuries and live in today's folk art, dances, and celebrations.

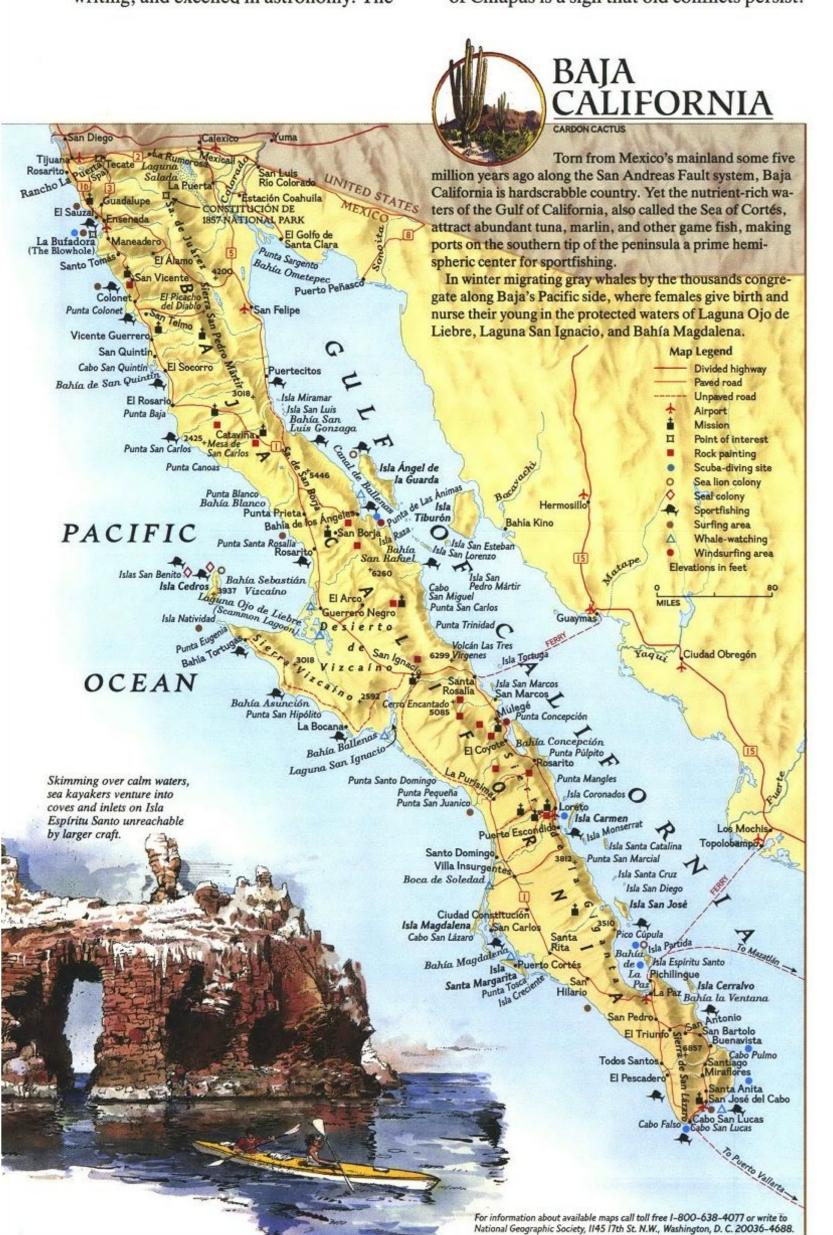
Before Europeans arrived, the Maya, Aztec, and others built enormous masonry structures, perfected complex systems of writing, and excelled in astronomy. The

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Machete-sharp mountain remains of their genius memorialize them from Teotihuacan to Chichén Itzá, and the rhythms of their speech still echo in the languages of their descendants.

Spain invaded Mexico in 1519, destroying the Aztec Empire and subjugating native groups, and ruled until 1821, when revolution brought independence to Mexico. France gained a stronghold in 1864, establishing Maximilian, an Austrian archduke, as emperor. Occupation ended in 1867, after opposition forces pressured France to withdraw. Within weeks President Benito Juárez, a Zapotec, court-martialed Maximilian, who was soon executed.

Mexico has since survived dictatorship and more revolts on its way to becoming a politically stable nation—yet a recent uprising of rebel groups in the southeastern state of Chiapas is a sign that old conflicts persist.





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