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## Chapter 1

# Welcome to Mexico



**WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU WILL FIND** the largest pyramid on Earth? If you said “Egypt,” guess again. The largest pyramid on Earth is actually in Mexico. It’s called the Great Pyramid of Cholula. (*See page 20.*)

That’s just one of the many surprising and fascinating things about Mexico. There are many others. For example, did you know that the American cowboy originally came from Mexico?

So, come along on an exciting adventure to Mexico, where you will discover fun facts about the country, the people, the customs, and the wildlife -- from mariachi bands to floating gardens, from Mayan pyramids to the Mexican Hat Dance, and much more! They are all part of what makes Mexico a fun and fascinating country.

# Where in the World Is Mexico?



**MEXICO IS ONE OF 23 COUNTRIES** in North America. Those 23 countries include the United States and Canada, seven Central American countries, and 13 Caribbean island countries.

Mexico shares a border with only three other countries. It is bordered by the United States to the north and by Belize and Guatemala to the south.

To the west of Mexico is the Pacific Ocean. To the east are the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea.

A stretch of land juts into the Gulf of Mexico from the country's southeastern tip. This land is called the Yucatán **Peninsula**. It was once the home of the Maya civilization. (See page 14.)

## Did You Know?

The border between Mexico and the U.S. is the second longest border in the world. It's about 2,000 miles (3,155 km) long. Do you know which two countries share the world's longest border? **Canada – United States: 5,525 miles (8,893 km)**

# A Brief History of Mexico

The Olmecs form Mexico's first-known society along the Gulf Coast.

**1200 B.C.**

**500 B.C.**

Mayan civilization forms on the Yucatan Peninsula.

The Aztecs build a great civilization.

**1427**

**1519 - 1521**

Hernán Cortés conquers the Aztec Empire.

Mexico declares its independence from Spain.

**1810**

**1836**

Texas declares its independence from Mexico.

The Mexican Revolution begins and ends with a new Constitution

**1910 - 1917**

## Chapter 2

# Early Civilizations: The Olmecs

*The Olmec stone head is a symbol of the Olmec civilization.*

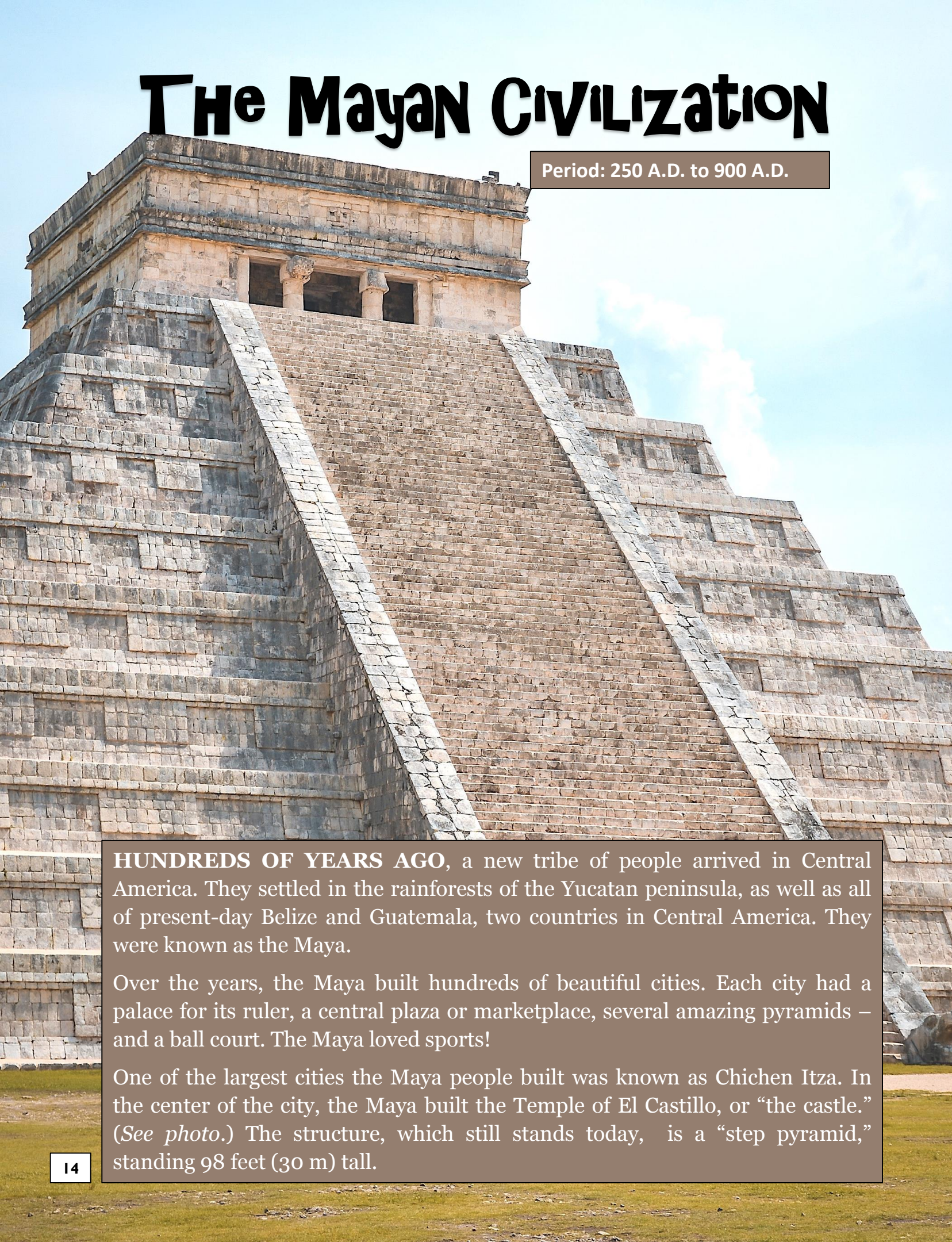
Period: 1200 BC to 400 BC

**IN 1521, MEXICO WAS CONQUERED** by Spain. But for hundreds of years before that, the land known today as Mexico was the land of many advanced and amazing civilizations.

Three of the most advanced civilizations that developed before the arrival of Europeans were the Olmecs, the Maya, and the Aztecs.

# The Mayan Civilization

Period: 250 A.D. to 900 A.D.



**HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO**, a new tribe of people arrived in Central America. They settled in the rainforests of the Yucatan peninsula, as well as all of present-day Belize and Guatemala, two countries in Central America. They were known as the Maya.

Over the years, the Maya built hundreds of beautiful cities. Each city had a palace for its ruler, a central plaza or marketplace, several amazing pyramids – and a ball court. The Maya loved sports!

One of the largest cities the Maya people built was known as Chichen Itza. In the center of the city, the Maya built the Temple of El Castillo, or “the castle.” (*See photo.*) The structure, which still stands today, is a “step pyramid,” standing 98 feet (30 m) tall.

# The Aztec Civilization

Period: 1300 to 1521



An artist's  
drawing of an  
Aztec Warrior.

**ABOUT 700 YEARS AGO**, a group of people moved into the Valley of Mexico. There, they came across a lake with an island in the center. They decided to settle on the island. They named their settlement Tenochtitlán.

Over the next two hundred years, they built an awesome civilization and one of the biggest cities in the world at the time. They created a powerful and important empire.

The people who built this great empire called themselves Mexica. (*Say: me-shee-ka.*) European explorers gave them the name Aztec.

# Whale Watching in the Baja Peninsula



**ARE YOU READY** for a whale of an adventure? Then try whale watching on the coast of Baja, Mexico.

Every fall, hundreds of gray whales set off on a 6,000-mile (9,656-km) trip. Their journey takes them from their summer home in Alaskan waters to the warm waters along the coast of Baja, Mexico.



# VOLADORES

LONG BEFORE THE BARNUM AND BAILEY CIRCUS, (and before Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico), there was a group of daredevils known as “voladores” or “flyers.”

Five voladores would climb to the top of a 98 ft. (30 m) tall pole. Four of them would then throw themselves toward the ground, tied only by their feet. The fifth performer danced at the top of the pole while playing the flute and drum.

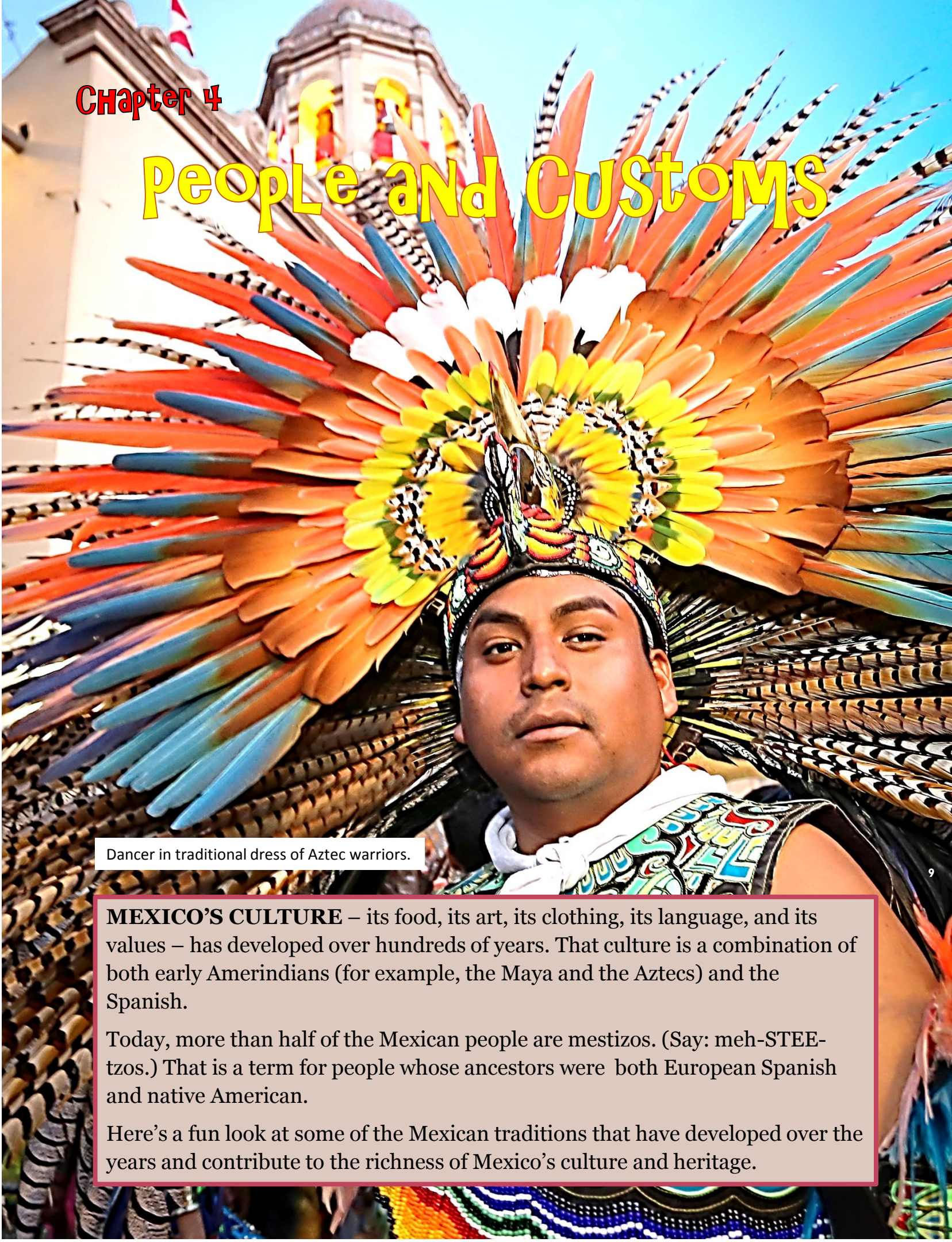
This **ritual** was reportedly performed as a way to ask the gods to end a severe drought.

Today, this breath-taking ritual is still performed at cultural festivals throughout Mexico.

*A family of acrobats known as “los voladores” perform a dance ritual that is hundreds of years old.*

## Chapter 4

# People and Customs

A man in traditional Aztec warrior attire, featuring a large, colorful feathered headdress with orange, yellow, and blue feathers. He is wearing a patterned tunic and a white shawl. The background shows a building with a dome and a flag.

Dancer in traditional dress of Aztec warriors.

**MEXICO'S CULTURE** – its food, its art, its clothing, its language, and its values – has developed over hundreds of years. That culture is a combination of both early Amerindians (for example, the Maya and the Aztecs) and the Spanish.

Today, more than half of the Mexican people are mestizos. (Say: meh-STEE-tzos.) That is a term for people whose ancestors were both European Spanish and native American.

Here's a fun look at some of the Mexican traditions that have developed over the years and contribute to the richness of Mexico's culture and heritage.

# Mexican Holidays

## Day of the Dead



### Mexican Holidays

**What:** The Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos)

**When:** November 1 and 2

**Why:** To honor and remember family members and friends who have died.

**THE MEXICAN PEOPLE LOVE FIESTAS** (or festivals). They celebrate Independence Day on September 16. It marks the country's independence from Spain. They celebrate Cinco de Mayo. That is a national holiday on May 5 to honor the Mexican victory for the French army in 1862. They even have a day to celebrate children. Children's Day (Día del Niño) is celebrated each year on April 30.

A man and a woman in traditional Mexican dance attire are smiling at each other. The man is wearing a large, wide-brimmed sombrero with a black band decorated with gold and white patterns. He is also wearing a white shirt, a black vest with white embroidery, and a large gold bow tie. The woman is wearing a white blouse with colorful floral embroidery, a green and red striped skirt, and a large red and green bow in her hair. She is also wearing large gold earrings and a necklace. The background shows a clear blue sky and a red-tiled roof.

# Mexican Hat Dance

**THERE IS A TRADITIONAL DANCE IN MEXICO** that everybody loves! It's called the Mexican Hat Dance (or in Spanish, Jarabe Tapatío).

The Mexican Hat Dance got its start nearly 300 years ago, and is popular today around the world. It is considered Mexico's "National Dance."

During the dance, the man places his sombrero on the ground. The woman dances around it. Finally, she picks up the hat and holds it up. Both dancers hide their faces behind the hat for a kiss.

The Mexican Hat Dance is well-known for elaborate and colorful dance clothes. The woman wears a wide colorful skirt and blouse. The man wears a decorated cowboy suit, called a charro.

Here's the cool thing: You don't have to be an expert to do this dance.

# The Mariachi's Charro Outfit

Mariachi musicians are known for their elaborate costumes, called “charro” outfits. A “charro” is a type of Mexican horseman.



**Sombrero**

**Bow Tie**

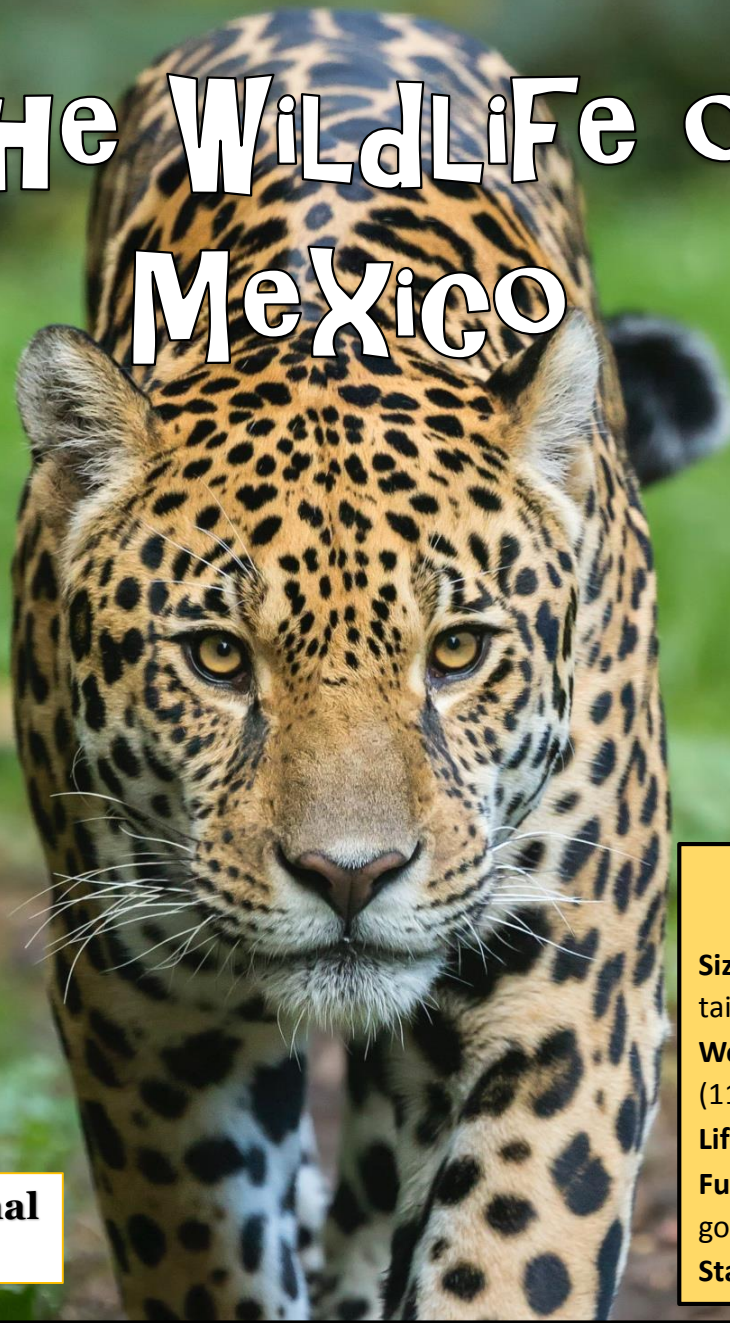
**Ruffled  
Shirt**

**Waist-length  
Jacket**

**Pants (often  
decorated with  
embroidery)**

**Boots**

# The Wildlife of Mexico



**National Mammal  
of Mexico**

## **Jaguar At-a-Glance**

**Size:** Up to 6 feet (1.8 m);  
tail: up to 3 feet (91 cm)

**Weight:** Up to 250 lbs  
(113 kg)

**Lifespan:** 12 to 15 years

**Fun Fact:** Jaguars are very  
good swimmers.

**Status:** Near Threatened

**MEXICO IS ONE OF THE MOST biodiverse** countries in the world. It leads the world in the number of different kinds of reptiles. It ranks second in the number of different mammals. (*See chart, page 37.*)

Many of Mexico's animals are **endemic**. That means they are found in the wild only in Mexico. You can read about two of them on page 35. But there many others.

The beautiful jaguar above is Mexico's national mammal. Check out the country's other national animals on the next pages.

*Most jaguars in Mexico are located in the jungles of Chiapas and the Yucatan Peninsula.*