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HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

Girl celebrating the  
Day of the Dead



# The Culture of Mexico

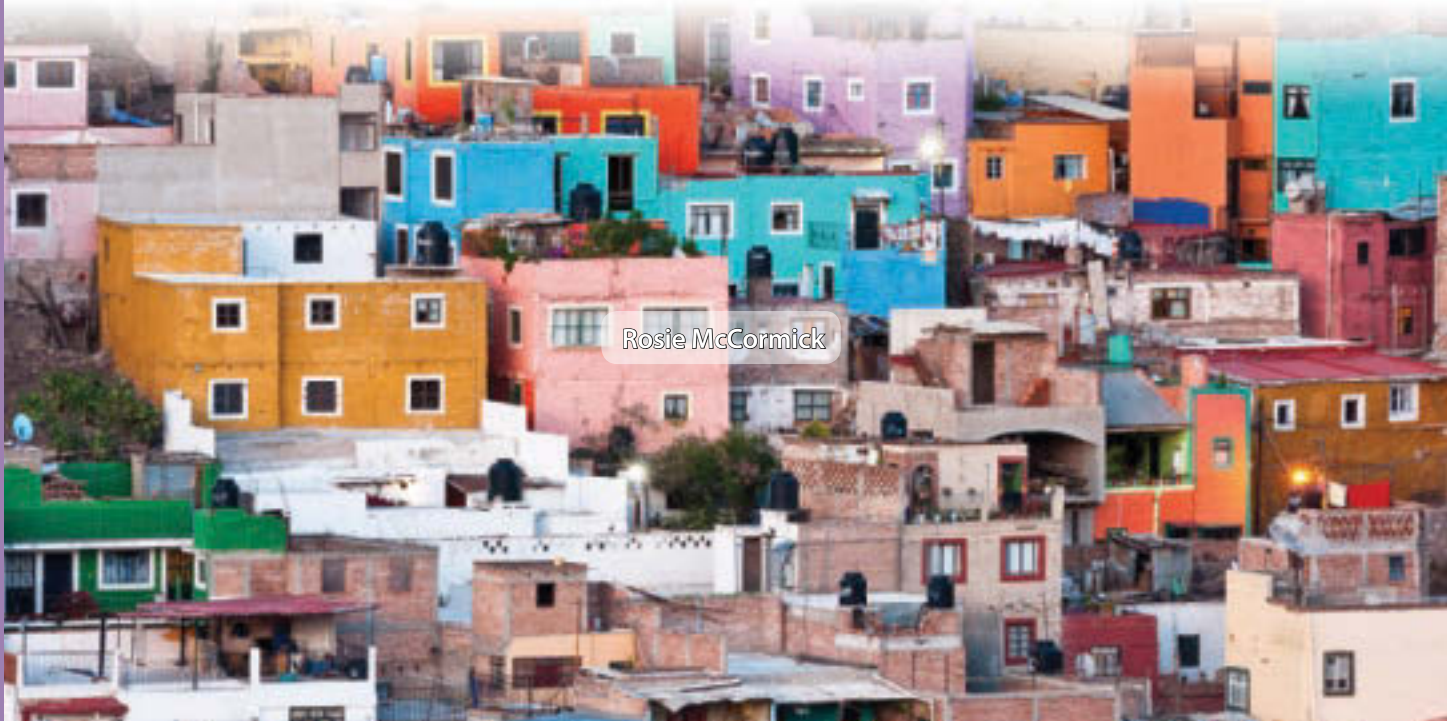
Maya city of Chichén Itzá



Señor Coyote and the rabbit



City of Guanajuato



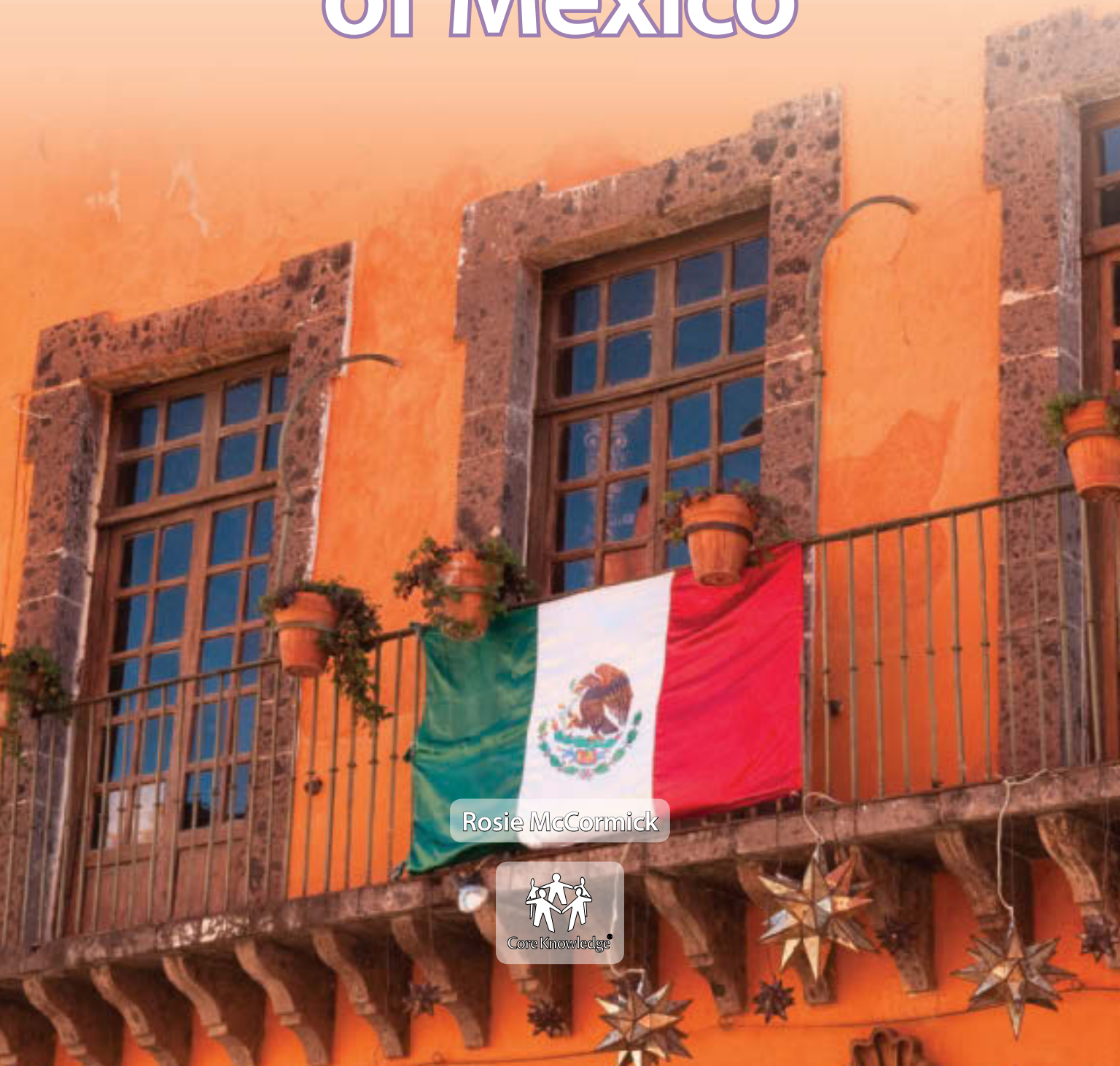
Rosie McCormick

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# The Culture of Mexico



Rosie McCormick



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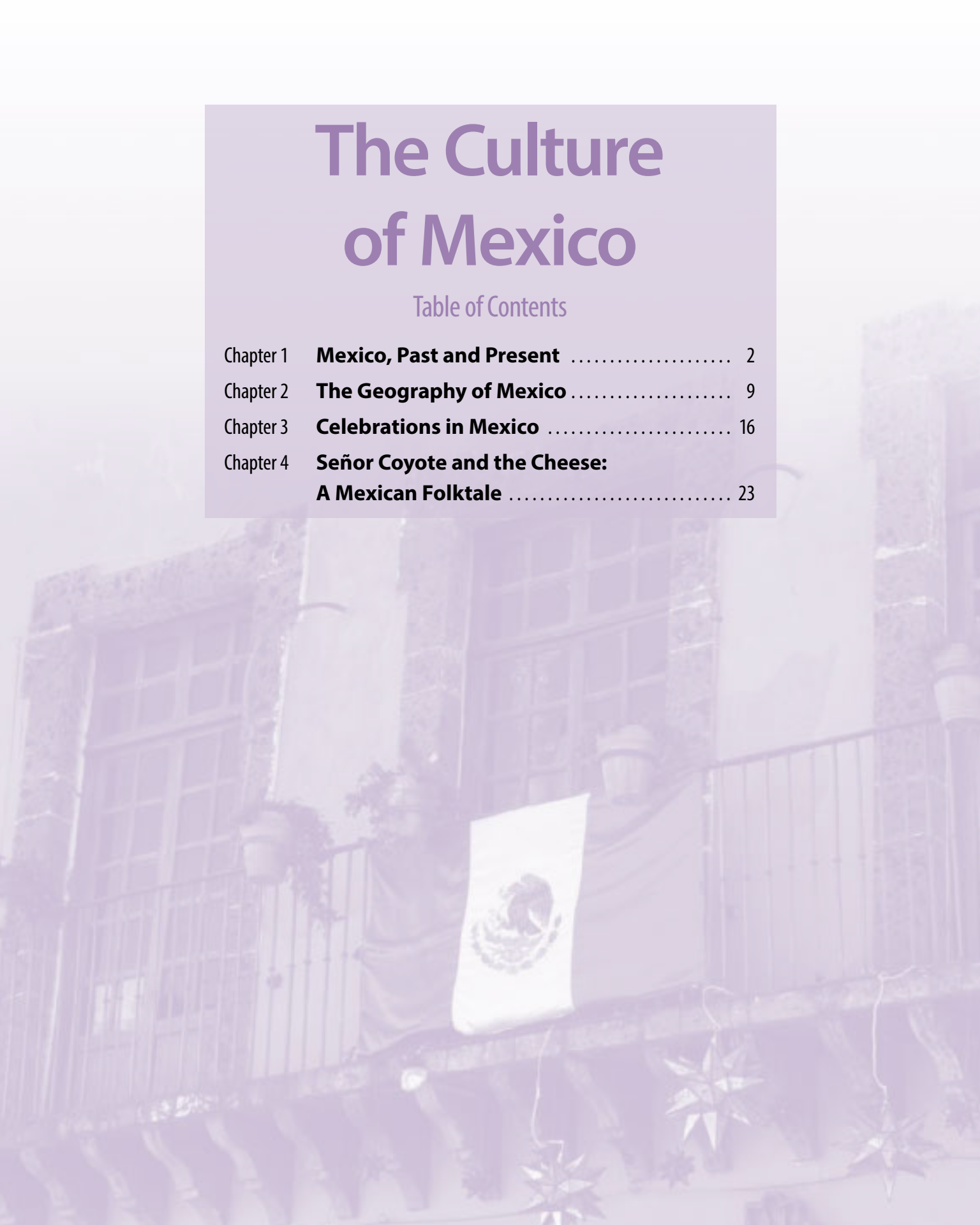
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# The Culture of Mexico

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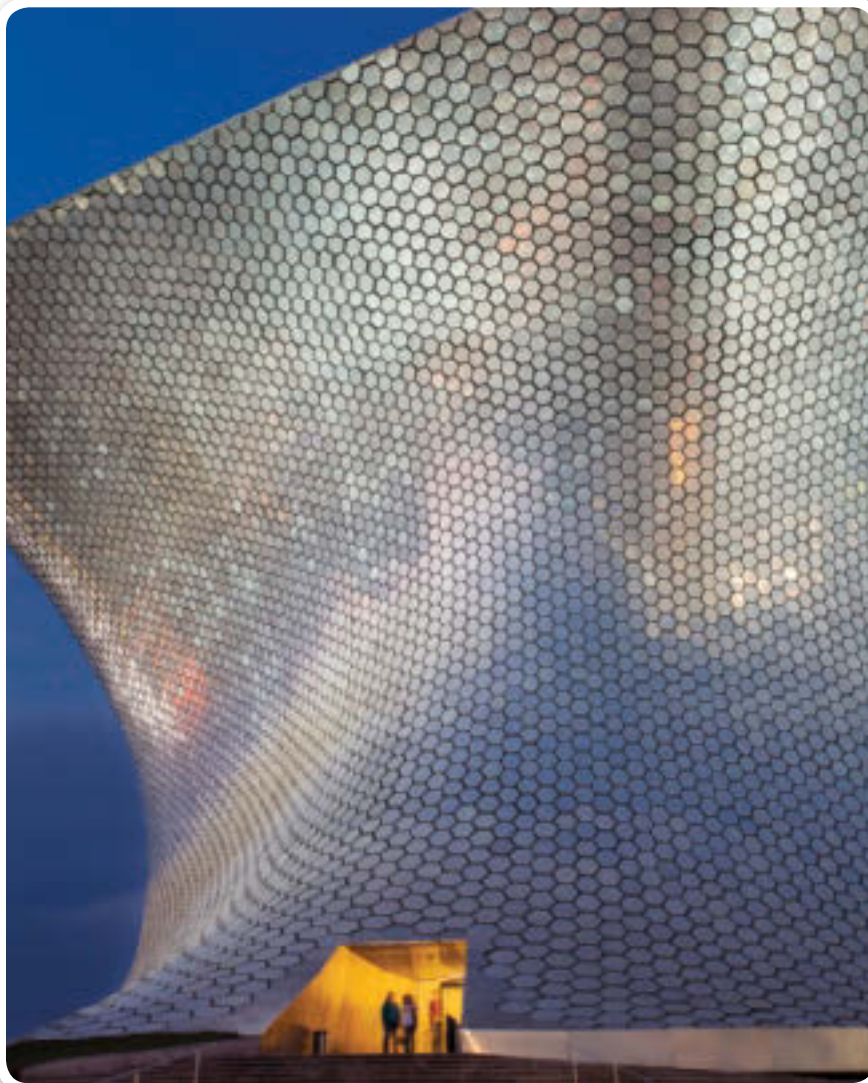
# Mexico, Past and Present

Imagine you are walking through modern-day Mexico City, one of the biggest cities in the world. Suddenly, you come upon the ruins of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán. What you have discovered is that hundreds of years ago, the Aztec built cities with palaces and temples. Mexico City is built on the ruins of the Aztec city, Tenochtitlán.





Later, you see a beautiful church built by the Spanish who came to Mexico from Europe in the 1500s. You stop to gaze at the church.



But that's not all you see. As day turns to night, you come across modern buildings made of steel and glass. This is the Mexico City of today. It is a city that honors its past and its future.

The Aztec culture, the Spanish culture, and the culture of Mexico today are all around you. As you move through the crowded streets, you hear Spanish being spoken. You also hear Nahuatl, a language spoken by the Aztec. You smell foods such as beans and chilies, which are eaten by people today, just as they were by the Aztec of long ago. It has been a great day of exploration. Now it is time to get some sleep!

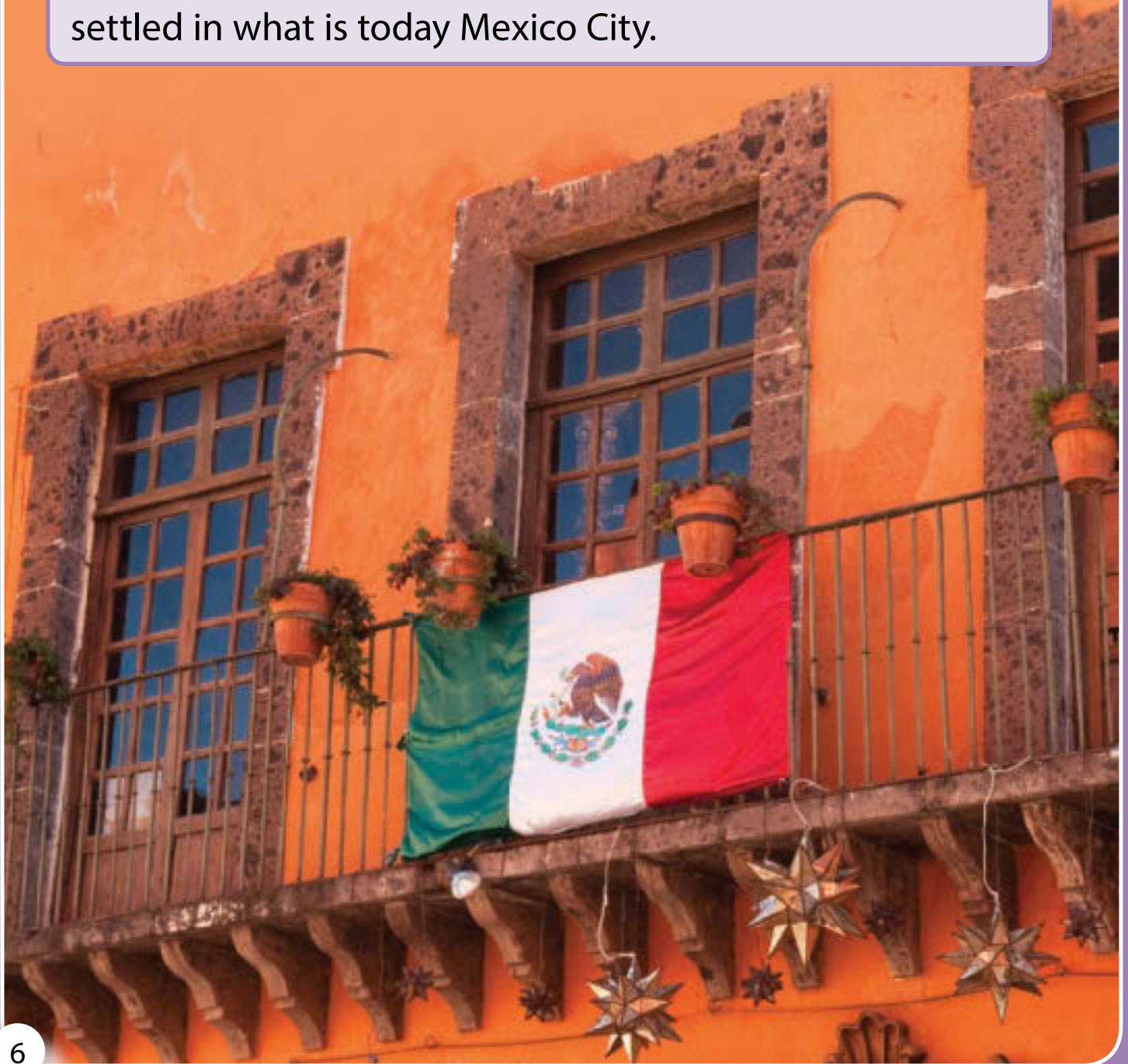




The next day you are up bright and early. Every morning in the Zócalo, the main square in Mexico City, a band plays music, and soldiers raise the Mexican flag. The flag has three wide stripes—one green, one white, and one red.



As you walk across the square, you notice that on the white stripe in the flag, there is an image of an eagle sitting on a cactus plant, eating a snake. This image tells the story of how the Aztec came upon an eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus, eating a snake. For them this was a sign that they had found the place where they should live. The Aztec settled in what is today Mexico City.





In Mexico, you meet people who have two Spanish last names. Just as in Spain, many children are given their father's family name and their mother's family name. The father's family name comes before the mother's family name. For example, a boy might be called Carlos Miranda Lopez. Miranda is his father's family name, and Lopez is his mother's family name.



You also discover that children in Mexico learn many of the same subjects in school as you do. They learn math, science, history, geography, art, technology, and physical education. But instead of English, they learn Spanish. Many children also speak native languages that have existed in Mexico for hundreds of years! You have learned a lot about Mexico during your visit.





# The Geography of Mexico

The United States, Canada, Mexico, and the countries of Central America are on the continent of North America. Canada is to the north of the United States, and Mexico is to the south.

On Mexico's western coast are the Gulf of California and the Pacific Ocean. These two bodies of water are separated by a long strip of land, the Mexican state of Baja California. To the east are the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea.



Part of the border between Mexico and the United States is a river that has two names. Mexicans call the river Río Bravo, and people in the United States call it Rio Grande. Both names mean that it is a large and mighty river. In fact, it is the longest river in Mexico and the fifth longest in all of North America.

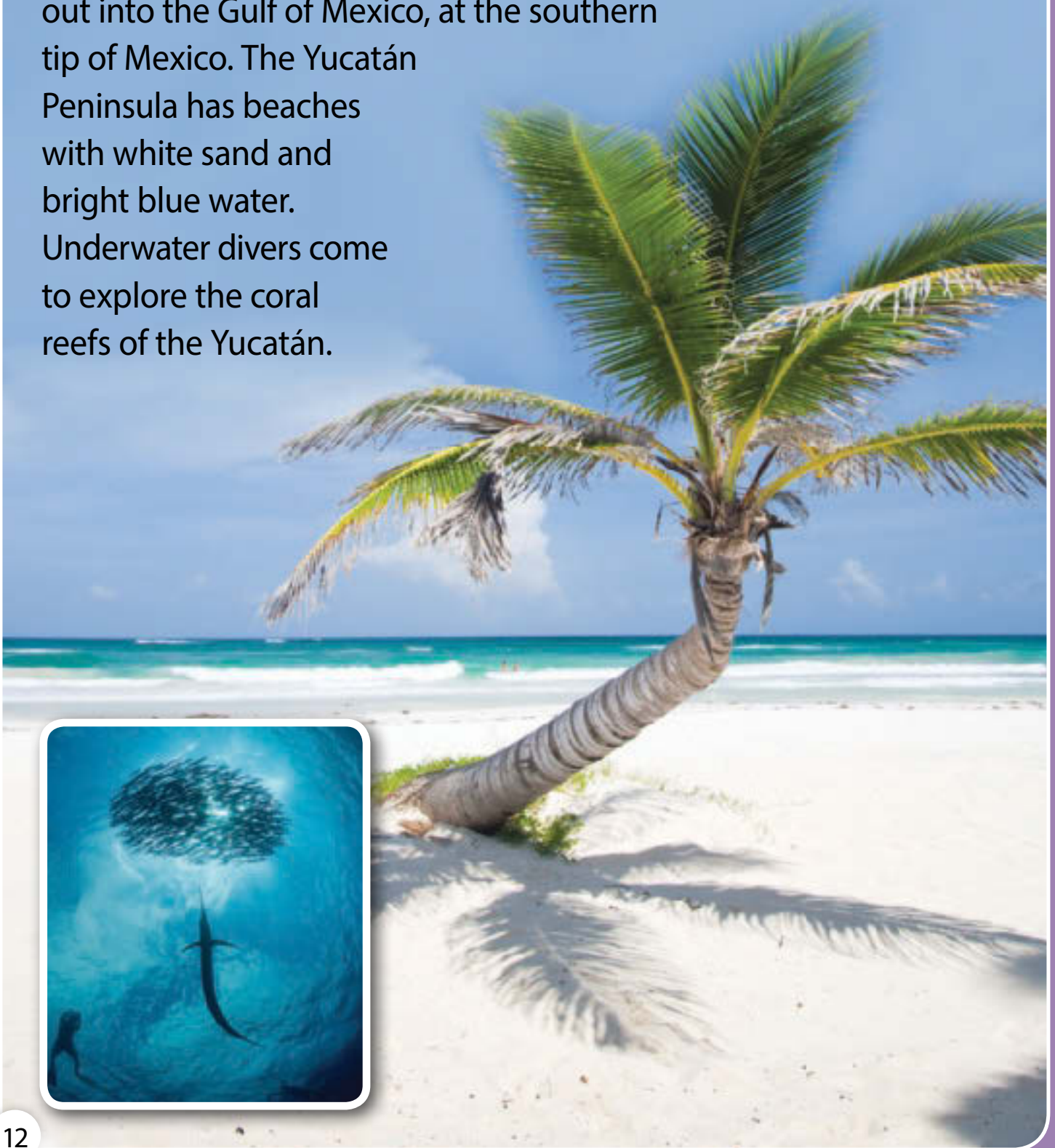




For at least a thousand years, people have lived in the area surrounding the Rio Grande. They have used water from the river to help them farm on the dry land. Today, two dams on the river bring water to the farmland. This water helps farmers grow their crops.

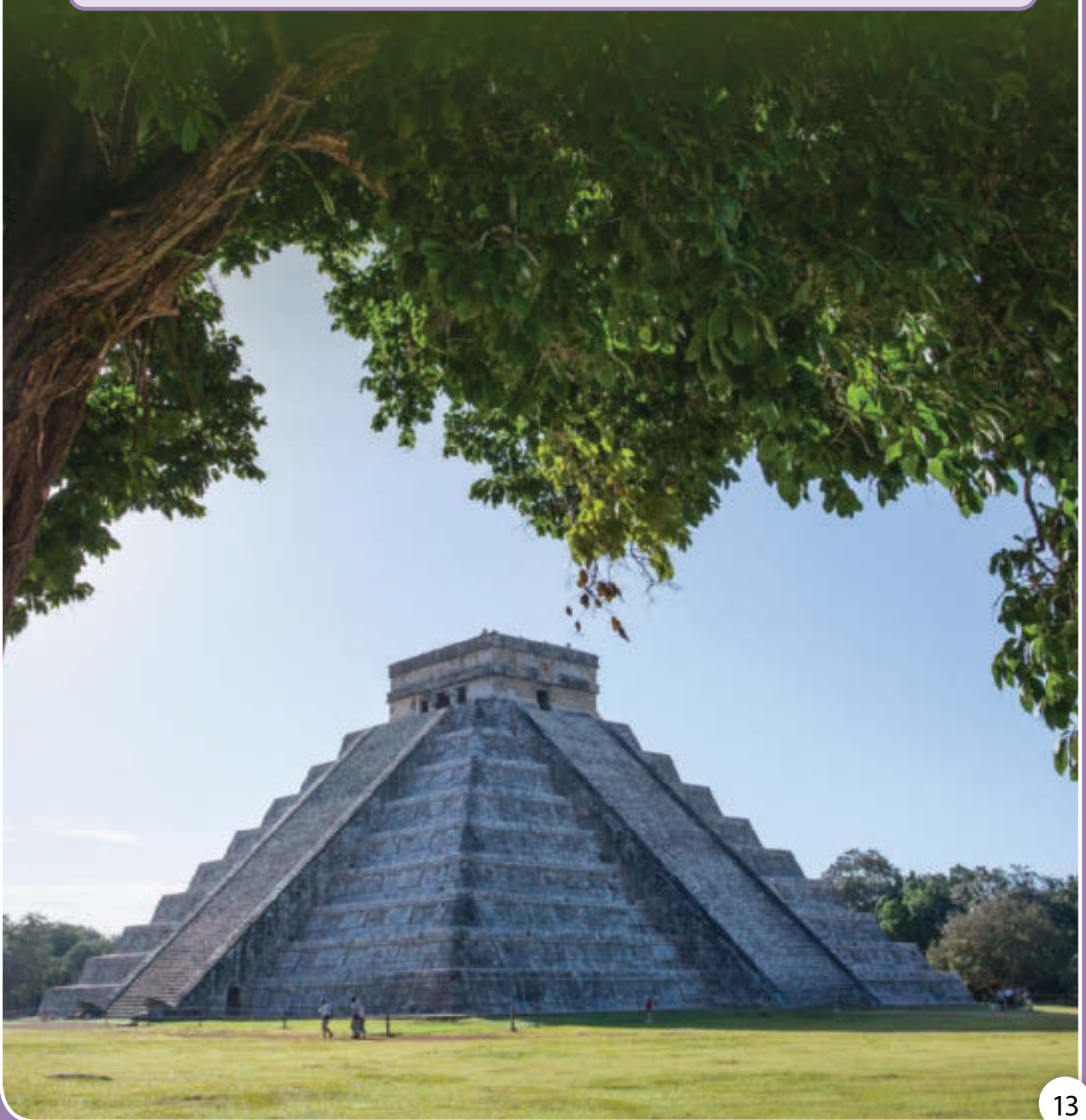


Every year, thousands of people from all over the world visit the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico. A peninsula is a piece of land with water around it on almost all sides. The Yucatán Peninsula sticks out into the Gulf of Mexico, at the southern tip of Mexico. The Yucatán Peninsula has beaches with white sand and bright blue water. Underwater divers come to explore the coral reefs of the Yucatán.





There are tropical rainforests thick with green plants, trees, and animals on the Yucatán Peninsula. Tucked away among the trees there is a once-magnificent Maya city called Chichén Itzá. This old Maya city is a wonderful place to explore!



Much of Mexico is covered by mountains. Some mountains are dangerous because they are volcanoes. Volcanoes sometimes erupt, or explode, and spit out fire and rocks. There are about three thousand volcanoes in Mexico. Mount Popocatépetl is one of the highest volcanoes in Mexico. It is almost eighteen thousand feet tall. The name means “smoking mountain.”



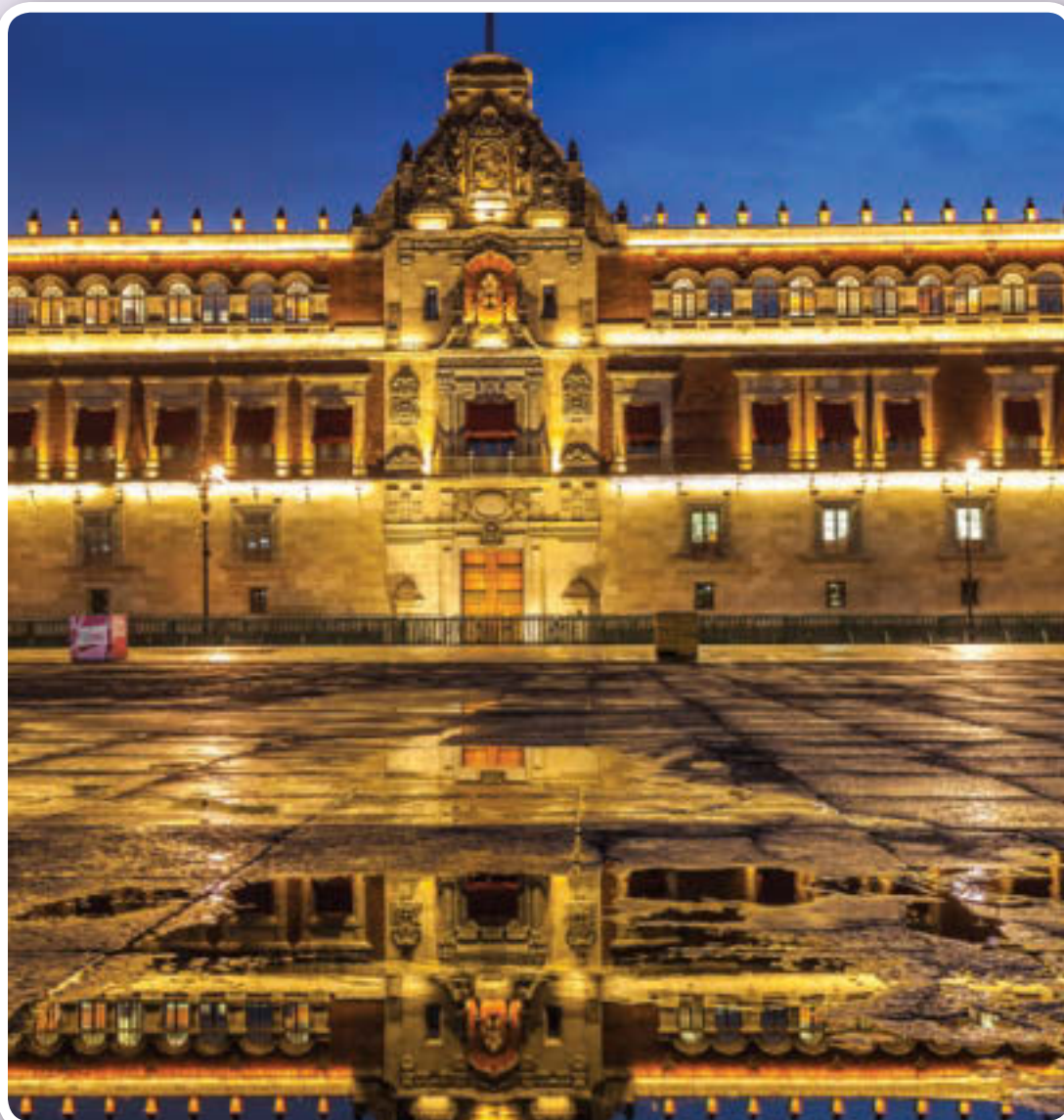


Between the mountain ranges on the east and west coasts of Mexico, there is a large plateau. A plateau is usually a high, flat area of land. This Mexican plateau has hills, mountains, and volcanoes. Mexico City and the colorful city of Guanajuato are located on the plateau. This is also where most of the Mexican people live. The Mexican plateau has Mexico's best farmland.



## Celebrations in Mexico

Every year, on September 16, the president of Mexico stands on the balcony of the National Palace in Mexico City. He shouts, “Viva Mexico! Viva la independencia!” In English this means, “Long live Mexico! Long live independence!” The president does this to remind people of Mexico’s fight for independence from Spain. Mexicans celebrate their independence on this day.





The war for independence lasted eleven years. Finally, in 1821, Mexico won independence from Spain. Now, Independence Day is celebrated with red, white, and green fireworks, as well as parades and the ringing of church bells.



Mexicans celebrate the Day of the Dead on November 1 and 2. On those days, they remember their family members and friends who have died. They dress up in incredible costumes and wear makeup!





On the evening of November 1, families visit the graves of their loved ones. They bring food and candles. They clean the graves and put flowers on them. At six p.m., church bells begin to ring, and they continue to ring every thirty seconds all through the night.



Mexicans eat skull-shaped candy during the two days of remembrance and celebration. They bring the candy to the graves as gifts.





On the fifth of May—el Cinco de Mayo—Mexicans have a big celebration, or fiesta. There are colorful parades and marching bands. Men, women, and children dance in the streets. There are delicious holiday foods. But why is this day special?

After Mexico became independent from Spain, Mexico fought a battle with France, and won!

France was a powerful country. This was a big victory for Mexico!



A popular birthday party game in Mexico includes a piñata and a stick. A piñata is a colorful, fun model made from paper and glue, filled with candy, toys, or other treats. The idea of the game is to take turns trying to hit the piñata with the stick until it breaks open and the treasures inside fall out. This may seem easy, but each person is blindfolded as they try!





Mariachi is a popular style of music in Mexico. Musicians play mostly stringed instruments, such as guitars and violins, but trumpets can be included too. Often, male mariachi musicians wear sombreros and short jackets. For many people, mariachi has a happy, cheerful sound.





## Señor Coyote and the Cheese: A Mexican Folktale

Señor Coyote stared up at the beautiful, bright moon in the sky and yawned. Then he scratched his tummy.

"I'm hungry!" said Coyote to the moon.

It was then that he saw a little white rabbit.



Señor Coyote crept toward the little white rabbit who was sitting on the edge of a small lake.

"Ha! I think you will fill my tummy quite nicely," said Coyote to the rabbit.

"Oh!" said the little white rabbit. "I have something even better. Can you see the delicious, yellow cheese in the lake? It's just waiting for someone to eat it. Sadly, I cannot reach it."



Coyote looked out across the lake. He saw yellow cheese in the water. Coyote licked his lips. He loved cheese.

"But perhaps you can't swim," said the little white rabbit.

"Why, I am an excellent swimmer," said Coyote proudly.

"Then you must swim out and get the cheese," suggested the little white rabbit. "While you are doing that, I will get some tortillas, and when you get back we will have a feast!"





Coyote dipped a paw in the water.

"Wait! How can I be sure you will be here when I get back?" he asked.

"I have been dreaming about tasting that cheese for hours," said the little white rabbit. "I will be right here when you get back!" Coyote nodded and then jumped into the lake.



Coyote kept his eyes on the cheese as he swam through the water. But for some strange reason he could not quite reach it. The cheese was always just ahead of him. Coyote even tried twice to grab the cheese, but he could not. Instead he swallowed lots of water, and eventually grew tired. In the end, he swam back to the shore.

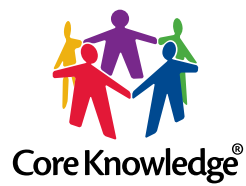




"At least there's the little white rabbit to munch on," thought Coyote as he shook the water from his fur.

But the little white rabbit was nowhere to be found. All that Coyote could see was a beautiful, round, yellow moon in the night sky.





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