

### Destination: Christmas in Mexico

#### Traveling How-To's & Tips

- This is a copy of the complete trip for the facilitator to use. Hand out [large print copies](#) for residents to follow along.
- Check out the links in the article for additional information to bring to the activity.
- Print a copy of the [pictures](#) or [display them on the television](#).
- Print copies of the [Hola, Mexico Quiz without answers](#) for participants and a copy of the [quiz with answers](#) for the facilitator.
- Post a [special sign](#) announcing the trip.
- For refreshments, check out the Food & Cooking section for a recipe for [Arroz con Leche](#).
- Click [here](#) for the video option of the Travelogue.
- Click [here](#) for the slideshow option of the Travelogue.
- Check the EZ Does It section for the [Travel Brief](#) designed for a simpler activity.



---

### Destination: Christmas in Mexico

#### Introduction

Mexico is a unique destination for Christmas, with monthlong celebrations filled with traditions like processions, dancing, fireworks, and festive feasts. When you add to that beautiful weather, gorgeous landscapes, and delicious food, you're in for a truly special experience.

#### History Buffs

Mexico, located in North America, lies south of the United States, bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea to the east. To the south, it shares borders with the Central American countries of Guatemala and Belize.

Mexico's history is rich and diverse, rooted in both Spanish and Indigenous cultures. During the 16th-century colonial period, Catholicism was introduced by Spanish priests, bringing Christian holidays, including Christmas, to the country.

The early Mayan and Aztec civilizations were followed by three centuries of Spanish colonial rule. After gaining independence in 1821, a republic was formed, but peace was short-lived. The new republic faced political



instability, territorial loss, and foreign invasions. Notable events included the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) and the French occupation (1861–1867).

The 20th century saw the Mexican Revolution, a series of regional conflicts lasting from 1910 to 1920, which led to significant land and social reforms. The following decades saw industrialization, modernization, and economic challenges. Today, Mexico operates as a federal republic with a presidential system and democratic governance.

### Here are some quick facts about Mexico:

- Mexico's official name is the United Mexican States. The currency is the Mexican peso.
- The Mexican Revolution is considered "the defining event of modern Mexican history."
- Mexican society is marked by significant income disparity, with a sharp divide between the wealthy elite and the rural and urban poor.
- Family plays a central role in Mexican society, acting as the core support group, along with providing a sense of identity and community. Multiple generations often live together in the same household.
- The first university in North America, the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, was founded in 1551.
- Mexico's landscape is diverse, ranging from tall mountains and deep canyons to dense rainforests and vast deserts.
- Mexico is one of the top-five most biodiverse countries in the world, home to over 200,000 species and about 12 percent of the world's biological diversity.
- Maize (corn), first domesticated in Mexico, was a critical development for agriculture and civilization.
- Mexico is home to some of the world's most impressive ancient ruins, including the Mayan pyramid of Chichen Itza and the pre-Aztec city of Teotihuacán.
- Some regions of Mexico are under travel advisories due to risks related to terrorism, crime, drug trafficking, and kidnapping.



### Mexican Symbols

**Bird:** Golden eagle. A symbol of strength, freedom, and Mexican heritage, the golden eagle is featured on the coat of arms, perched on a cactus with a snake in its beak.

**Flower:** Dahlia. Native to Mexico, the dahlia was cultivated by the Aztecs. Its hollow stems were used for water transport, and its tubers for food and medicine. It was named Mexico's national flower in 1963.

**Animal:** Jaguar. The jaguar was revered by the Maya and Aztecs as a guardian spirit and symbol of power and protection. Today, Mexico plays a crucial role in its conservation, with many habitats designated as protected areas.

**Food:** Taco. Originating as a simple meal wrapped in a corn tortilla, the taco has evolved over time. Spanish conquerors introduced new fillings like beef, pork, and cheese. Each region of Mexico has its own variations. Tacos are more than a meal—they're a social experience that brings people together.

**Flag:** Mexico's current flag, officially adopted on September 16, 1968, consists of three vertical stripes of green, white, and red, with the national coat of arms in the center of the white stripe.



### Discussion Starters

- Have you ever visited Mexico? If not, would you like to?
- Have you ever spent the Christmas holiday in another country? If so, where was it, and how was it?
- Would you feel comfortable traveling to a place where there was a travel advisory for potential risk?

## The Maya and the Aztecs

Mexico's ancient history is fascinating, especially when it comes to the Maya and Aztecs. Both civilizations were prominent in Mesoamerica, the region extending from southern North America to the Pacific coast of Central America. Despite their differences, both were advanced societies whose achievements in areas like astronomy, engineering, architecture, and mathematics continue to astound today.

### The Maya

The Classic Period of Mayan civilization flourished from approximately AD 250 to 900. It was made up of independent city-states, which were often at war with each other. As the Maya began to decline, the Aztec civilization rose to prominence. The Maya are known for the following:

- Developing a written language in the form of hieroglyphs and inventing the mathematical concept of zero
- Creating an advanced calendar system based on the movements of the sun, moon, and stars that was both complex and highly accurate
- Building impressive structures, including temples, palaces, and observatories, using only the tools available at the time, based on a clear understanding of astronomy and carefully aligned with celestial bodies and events
- Excelling in arts and crafts and producing finely carved stone monuments and majestic painted murals that depicted their rulers and cultural practices



## The Aztecs

The Aztec empire, with its centralized government and powerful military, dominated from the 14th to 16th centuries. Their rule ended in 1521, when they were conquered by Spanish conquistadors led by Hernán Cortés. The Aztecs are known for the following:

- Creating a powerful empire governed by an emperor, with a system of laws, courts, a strong military, and a tribute system that required conquered territories to provide labor, goods, and services
- Mastering engineering and urban planning, as demonstrated by their capital city of Tenochtitlan, which was built on a swampy lake and features canals, causeways, and artificial islands (chinampas), showcasing their sophisticated reasoning and innovation
- Developing a complex writing system, which allowed for basic phonetic expression of a wide range of words and concepts
- Valuing education, with mandatory education for most children, though nobility attended one type of school while commoners attended another, but included lessons on astronomy, governance, and military tactics from an early age
- Establishing a philosophy and ethical system that promoted virtues such as justice, prudence, moderation, and courage, and advocated for finding a “middle path” in a world they referred to as “slippery earth”



## Discussion Starters

- Are you fascinated by the history of ancient civilizations? Have you ever studied the Maya and Aztecs?
- Do you find it interesting that some ancient civilizations, such as the Maya and Aztecs, were so far advanced compared to what was common for the times?
- The Aztecs believed in the importance of education and supported teaching children. Do you agree with its importance? What more could we be doing?

## Trivial Pursuits

Let's get to know a little about our neighbor south of the border.

- According to legend, the Aztecs were guided by the god Huitzilopochtli in their search for a place to build their city. They were instructed to look for the sign of an eagle perched on a cactus, holding a snake in its beak. This sign led them to the location where they founded the ancient city of Tenochtitlán, now known as Mexico City. The eagle represents victory, strength, and the sun, while the snake represents darkness, evil, and the challenges Mexico has faced. The cactus, or *nopal*, represents Mexico's geography and Indigenous heritage.





- Color television was developed in Mexico. In the 1940s, engineer Guillermo González Camarena invented the Trichromatic Sequential Field System,” also known as a system for color television. The first color broadcast was aired in Mexico on Channel 5, during the children’s show *Paraíso Infantil (Children’s Paradise)*.
- Mexico’s earliest known civilization, the Olmec, are credited with being the first to turn the cacao plant into chocolate as a drink. Later modified by the Maya and Aztecs, chocolate was revered as a sacred crop. When it reached Europe, it was modified into the version we know and love today.
- Mexicans drink more Coca-Cola than any other people in the world.
- Mexico is home to the largest Spanish-speaking population in the world.
- Mexico has the second-largest coral reef system in the world, after the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia.
- Monarch butterflies, during their annual migration from Canada, spend from November to March in Mexico, forming colonies of about 20 million. These large butterflies, with distinctive orange and black wings, are facing endangerment due to climate change, use of pesticides, and habitat loss.
- The Xoloitzcuintli (*show-low-eats-QUEENT-lee*), or Xolo for short, is Mexico’s national dog. One of the oldest dog breeds in the Americas, it has a history dating back thousands of years. The breed held deep cultural and spiritual significance to both the Aztec and Mayan civilizations and continues to do so today. They come in both hairless and coated varieties and are known for their loyalty, intelligence, and calm temperament.
- Mexico City, the country’s capital and largest city, is built on a lake bed and is gradually sinking. As a result, many buildings appear slanted or crooked.
- Raise your hand if you are familiar with the [Mexican hat dance](#). This national dance of Mexico is one many of us remember from our childhood. Originating as a courtship dance during the 19th century, it symbolizes a woman initially rejecting, and then accepting, a man’s advances. During the ritual, the male dancer typically places his sombrero on the ground, and the female dances around it.
- The comet believed to have caused the mass extinction of the dinosaurs—and approximately 75 percent of all plant and animal species on Earth—made impact at the Yucatán Peninsula in southeastern Mexico. This event created the Chicxulub crater, much of which is now buried under the ocean.
- One of the world’s best spots for whale watching is in Baja California, a state located in northwestern Mexico. Each winter, hundreds of gray whales migrate to its warm, sheltered bays to breed and give birth.



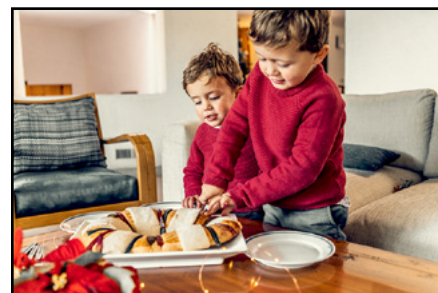
## Discussion Starters

- Can you remember your first television? Can you remember your first color TV? How important has television been in your life?
- Are butterflies frequent visitors to your home? Do you plant things to attract them? Do you feel there are fewer butterflies today than when you were young?
- Have you ever seen a whale in the wild? What was that experience like?

## Christmas in Mexico

Christmas, known as *Navidad* in Mexico, is not only an important religious holiday but also a celebration with deep cultural significance. Not just a one-day event, festivities begin on December 12 and continue until January 6. During this time, family members often travel long distances to reunite, and communities come together in celebration. The poinsettia plant, which is native to Mexico, is a popular decoration during the Christmas season because of its red and green colors. Here are some of the highlights of a Mexican Christmas:

- **December 12:** Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a celebration honoring the patron saint of Mexico
- **December 16–24:** Las Posadas, a nine-night series of processions reenacting Mary and Joseph's search for lodging, during which communities come together to celebrate with carol singing, piñatas, and delicious foods and beverages
- **December 24:** Noche Buena (Christmas Eve), a night of lavish family dinners, midnight Mass, exchanging gifts, and festivities; meals typically include traditional dishes such as tamales, *bacalao* (dried and salted codfish), and *ponche* (spiced fruit punch)
- **December 25:** Christmas Day, a day for family gatherings, relaxation, and enjoying leftovers from the previous night's feast
- **January 6:** Día de Los Reyes (Three Kings Day), the day children traditionally receive their gifts left by the Three Wise Men, and often including Rosca de Reyes, a sweet bread with candied fruit, as a special treat
- **February 2:** Día de la Candelaria (Candlemas Day), the traditional end of the Christmas season celebrated with tamales and blessings



[Feliz Navidad](#), everyone. We wish you a Merry Christmas.

## Discussion Starters

- If you celebrate Christmas, what are the important dates in your celebration? Is it just Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, or do you extend the holiday?

- What are some of your Christmas holiday traditions?
- Over the years, is there a Christmas celebration that stands out in your mind as most memorable?

## What to See and Do

Of the many amazing places to see in Mexico, there are some you'll especially want to visit during the Christmas holiday, including the following.

[San Miguel de Allende](#) is a vibrant city located in the far eastern part of Guanajuato that is known for its colonial architecture, thriving arts scene, and rich cultural heritage. A popular tourist destination, it is often described as one of the best small cities in the world.



After an influenza pandemic in the early 20th century, San Miguel de Allende nearly became a ghost town. Fortunately, its Baroque and Neoclassical buildings attracted foreign artists, who moved to the town and helped establish cultural institutions like the Instituto Allende and Escuela de Bellas Artes. The town's reputation grew, drawing artists and aspiring students, including U.S. soldiers who studied on the GI Bill following World War II.

During Christmas, the town transforms into a magical place, featuring unique decorations created by local artists, a large, beautifully decorated tree in the main plaza, spectacular light displays, and a festive atmosphere with parades, caroling, parties, and holiday shopping. The delightful weather, inviting restaurants, and welcoming people make it a place many expats, especially from the United States and Canada, call home year-round.

[Tlalpujahua](#) (*ta-L AHL-poo-HAH-wah*) is a quaint mountain community in the state of Michoacán in central Mexico. Known as "Town of the Eternal Christmas," it is famous for its handblown and painted glass Christmas ornaments, which are sold worldwide. It's a must-see stop on our Mexican Christmas tour.



The story behind these ornaments is interesting. In the 1950s, Joaquín Muñoz Orta and his family left Tlalpujahua to immigrate to Chicago. There, Joaquín worked in a factory making Christmas tree ornaments. A quick learner, Joaquín realized he could start his own business in Mexico, and so he moved to Mexico City and set up a workshop. It prospered, and in the 1960s, he moved his enterprise to his hometown of Tlalpujahua. Today, his company employs many workers and produces millions of handblown glass Christmas tree ornaments each year. Additionally, more than 200 small workshops in the town create a wide array of handcrafted ornaments.

An important part of the town's history is that of the Our Lady of Carmen Church, built in the Baroque architectural style in the mid-1700s during the prosperous mining boom. In 1937, a mudslide buried much of the town, including the church, claiming many lives and creating extensive damage. The church's tower, the only structure surviving the mudslide, remains today as an archaeological site and symbol of both loss and hope.



While visiting Tlalpujahua, be sure to see the nearby butterfly sanctuary, where from November to March, you can witness millions of monarch butterflies clustered in trees and flying around—a truly spectacular sight.

Located in southern Mexico, [the Oaxaca Valley](#) is believed to have been inhabited since 11,000 BC. Its 16th-century architecture and pre-Hispanic ruins, including the well-preserved temples and stone structures of Monte Albán, are remarkable to see. Oaxaca is also known for its artisanal culture, with generations of families dedicating themselves to the creation of crafts such as handwoven wool rugs, embroidered clothing, jewelry, baskets, pottery, and ceramics. The region is also the birthplace of corn, squash, and Mezcal, a popular spirit made from agave.



Oaxaca's contribution to the Christmas tour is the unique [Noche de Rábanos](#) (Night of the Radishes), held on December 23. Farmers grow large radishes throughout the year to be carved into holiday masterpieces. This event's origins date back to the colonial period, when the Spanish first introduced radishes. The town, known for its wood-carving tradition, extended its skills to the carving of radishes to attract the attention of customers at the Christmas market. In 1897, a formal competition was initiated, and the government allocated land for growing radishes for the event. Today, the popular event attracts more than 100 contestants and thousands of visitors.



Additionally, floats featuring Nativity scenes, giant puppets, fireworks, music, and delicious food are part of a Christmas Eve parade that culminates in a holiday celebration in the main square.

Known for its sunny weather and warm temperatures, [Los Cabos](#) is a wonderful destination to spend Christmas. Its shining lights, beautiful decorations, lively music, cultural holiday traditions, and the warm hospitality of the locals are a welcome respite from winter weather. Artisan markets and boutiques are great places to find special gifts. Take in the sounds of the city as you listen to "Christmas in Cabo," and sing along with the [lyrics](#).

[Puerto Vallarta](#) is a fantastic destination to visit year-round and is especially festive during the Christmas holiday season. Sand and surf are joined by Nativity scenes, holiday decorations, and traditional celebrations, including parades, music, and dance. On Christmas Eve, gifts are usually exchanged at midnight.

From December 1 to December 12, the Virgin of Guadalupe is honored, with the people of Puerto Vallarta making a pilgrimage to the Parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe, bearing gifts and accompanied by music.

### Discussion Starters

- Of the places discussed to visit, which would you most want to see, and why?
- What are some of your favorite Christmas tree ornaments? Are there some that have been passed down from generation to generation in your family?
- Do you live where December is cold and snowy, or do you live where it is warm and sunny? Would it feel strange to you to celebrate Christmas in a warm climate?



## What to Eat

Given how delicious the Mexican cuisine is, the better question would be what *not* to eat. Add to that the special foods enjoyed during the Christmas holiday, and you've got some treats in store. Here are some of the highlights.

[Rosca de Reyes](#) – This sweet bread, also known as the Wreath of Kings, has a small figurine of the baby Jesus hidden inside. Traditionally served during the celebration of Epiphany on Día de Los Reyes (Three Kings Day), it honors the three kings bearing gifts for the baby Jesus. The person who finds the figurine inside is expected to host Día de la Candelaria on February 2 and prepare the tamales for family and friends.



[Arroz con Leche](#) – Made from long grain rice, sugar, milk, and cinnamon sticks, this simple, comforting dessert originated in Spain during the Middle Ages and was brought to the Americas by Spanish colonists. It is often served during Christmas and family gatherings and is part of the cultural identity.

[Buñuelos](#) – These crispy, thin fried dough discs are served with syrup or sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. They are considered an essential holiday dessert and are often served with Mexican hot chocolate or *champurrado*, a thick chocolate drink.

[Tamales](#) – A cornerstone of Mexican cuisine, tamales are a centerpiece of the traditional Christmas meal. With hundreds of unique regional recipes across Mexico, they date to the pre-Columbian Aztecs and Maya peoples and were originally created as portable food for warriors. Made with *masa* (corn dough), tamales are filled with a wide variety of ingredients, such as pork, beef, chicken, chili sauce, cheese, beans, vegetables, and even fish.



[Pozole](#) – This flavorful soup or stew is made with tender pork or chicken, hominy, and a rich, savory broth. Often enjoyed during holidays and celebrations, it is a beloved Mexican comfort food.

[Romeritos](#) – This traditional herb dish is made of edible wild green sprigs, potatoes, sometimes shrimp, and a sauce similar to mole. It is often served during Christmastime as part of the holiday feast.

[Mole](#) – This iconic, rich sauce requires labor-intensive preparation and takes days to make. It includes more than 20 ingredients, such as chilies, nuts, seeds, spices, fruits, and sometimes chocolate. At Pujol, one of Mexico's premier restaurants, *mole madre* ("mother mole") is a living sauce that is aged over time, with new mole being added to the base to create increasingly complex flavors. For Christmas, mole is commonly served over turkey or chicken and as a filling for tamales.

[Pavo](#) – What's not to love about this dish of roasted turkey, typically stuffed with cornbread or vegetables and served with a rich mole sauce? The dish is a classic centerpiece for Christmas meals.

[Rompoppe](#) – This creamy Mexican eggnog originated in the 18th century, created by Mexican nuns. Similar to American eggnog, it is made with milk and egg yolks and flavored with cinnamon, vanilla, and cloves. Alcoholic spirits such as brandy or rum are sometimes added.

Ponche Navideño – A warm, spiced fruit punch made with prunes, apples, sugarcane, and sometimes a splash of rum or tequila, ponche Navideño is a traditional holiday drink that adds warmth and flavor to Christmas.

Tequila and Mezcal – Both distilled spirits are made from the agave plant in Mexico. Tequila is exclusively made from the blue Weber agave plant, while mezcal is produced using 30 different agave species from across the country. Both spirits are popular worldwide, with the United States being the largest market for agave-based drinks.

### Discussion Starters

- Are you a fan of Mexican cuisine? If so, what are your favorite dishes?
- Would you enjoy tamales as a part of your Christmas dinner?
- Have you ever tasted mole? If so, what did you think of it?

### Hola, Mexico Quiz

1. What is the meaning of the Spanish word *hola*?
  - A. Help
  - B. Hello
  - C. What's up?

**Answer:** B. Hello. *Hola* is the most common greeting for “hello.” For a more formal greeting, depending on the time of day, you can say *buenos días* (“good morning”), *buenas tardes* (“good afternoon”), or *buenas noches* (“good evening/night”).

2. This music is most identified with Mexico.
  - A. Corrido
  - B. Ranchera
  - C. Mariachi

**Answer:** C. Mariachi. Originating in the Mexican state of Jalisco, mariachi is a folk music tradition known for lively performances and the distinctive attire worn by musicians. The band typically consists of stringed instruments, such as violins and guitars, along with trumpets.

3. The Rosca de Reyes, a sweet, ring-shaped bread with the figurine of a baby hidden inside, is like which New Orleans tradition?
  - A. Funnel cake during Jazz Fest
  - B. Beignets on Fat Tuesday
  - C. King cake during Mardi Gras

**Answer:** C. King cake during Mardi Gras. The king cake eaten during Mardi Gras in New Orleans also has a figurine of a baby hidden inside. Whoever gets the piece of the cake with the baby is said to have good luck and becomes “king” or “queen” for the day. They are also responsible for hosting the next king cake party, which is similar to the responsibilities of the person finding the figurine in the Rosca de Reyes.

4. Which small dog breed originated in Mexico and is named after one of its central northern states?
- A. Xolo
  - B. Chihuahua
  - C. Calupoh

**Answer:** B. Chihuahua. Originating in ancient Mexico, chihuahuas are believed to be descendants of the Techichi dog kept by the Aztec and Toltec civilizations. Rediscovered in the state of Chihuahua in the mid-19th century, they were recognized by the American Kennel Club in 1904. Their small size, appealing appearance, and loyal personalities account for their enduring popularity.

5. This Mexican holiday is celebrated more by Americans than Mexicans.
- A. Cinco de Mayo
  - B. Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)
  - C. Constitution Day

**Answer:** A. Cinco de Mayo. Cinco de Mayo is a minor holiday in Mexico, commemorating victory over Napoleon's forces in the 1862 Battle of Puebla. Americans of both Mexican and non-Mexican descent celebrate this day much more than the people in Mexico do. In the United States, it has become a commercialized "party" holiday, with parades, music, food, and a steady flow of margaritas.

6. The official seal of the city of Los Angeles contains these symbols from two other countries.
- A. The flag of France and the coat of arms of Spain
  - B. The flag of France and the coat of arms of Mexico
  - C. The eagle and snake from the coat of arms of Mexico, and the lion and castle from the coat of arms of Spain

**Answer:** C. The eagle and snake from the coat of arms of Mexico, and the lion and castle from the coat of arms of Spain. Their inclusion represents the city's historical periods of Spanish and Mexican rule, with both being significant phases in the city's history prior to it becoming part of the United States.

7. *Entomophagy* refers to this traditional part of Mexican cuisine.
- A. Eating insects
  - B. Slow cooking underground
  - C. Combining chilis for extra spice

**Answer:** A. Eating insects. Insects are consumed throughout the world, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Known for their nutritional value, environmental sustainability, and economic viability, insects are a good source of protein, healthy fats, and essential vitamins and minerals. Included in the Mexican diet, especially in rural areas, are insects such as *chapulines* (grasshoppers), *chicatana* ants (large flying ants), and *jumiles* (stink bugs). They are often fried and eaten as a snack.

8. Which mountain range runs through Mexico?

- A. Andes
- B. Sierra Madre
- C. The Rockies

**Answer:** B. Sierra Madre. The Sierra Madre (Spanish for “mother range”) has three ranges—Oriental, Occidental, and del Sur. The Sierra Madre Occidental runs parallel to Mexico’s Pacific Ocean coastline for some 780 miles (1,250 kilometers). It is known for its deep canyons, rugged summits, and scenic vistas.

9. How many recognized languages does Mexico have?

- A. 43
- B. 84
- C. 68

**Answer:** C. 68. Of these 68 languages, 63 are Indigenous. Spanish is the most widely spoken language and is the one used for all government purposes.

10. This Mexican holiday is a two-day celebration occurring each November. It is a blend of Aztec rituals and Catholic observances.

- A. Festival of the Marigolds
- B. Day of the Dead
- C. All Saints’ Day

**Answer:** B. Day of the Dead. Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) begins at midnight on November 1 and ends on November 2. It is a joyous occasion in which deceased family members are honored. Home altars are covered in marigolds, whose strong scent and vibrant color are believed to help guide the spirits to their home. Additionally, grave sites are cleaned and decorated, and parades and festivals are held. People paint their faces to look like skulls, with floral motifs and intricate designs of vibrant colors.

Thank you for joining us in our travels to Mexico. We look forward to seeing you next month.

### Additional Activities

- Travel to the [wonders of Mexico](#).
- Enjoy a little [mariachi music](#).
- Learn more about the [Aztecs and Maya](#).



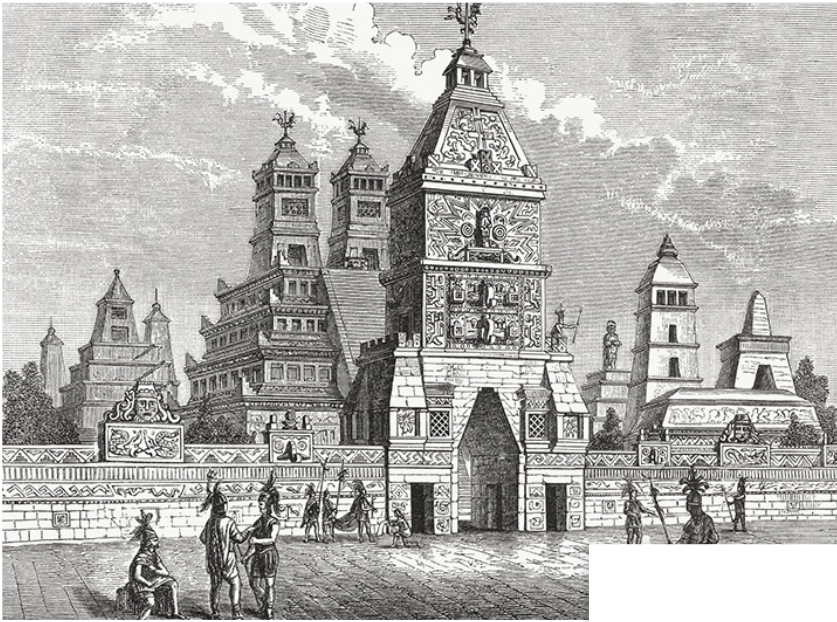
































# Destination: Christmas in Mexico

## Introduction

Mexico is a unique destination for Christmas, with monthlong celebrations filled with traditions like processions, dancing, fireworks, and festive feasts. When you add to that beautiful weather, gorgeous landscapes, and delicious food, you're in for a truly special experience.



## History Buffs

Mexico, located in North America, lies south of the United States, bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea to the east. To the south, it shares borders with the Central American countries of Guatemala and Belize.

Mexico's history is rich and diverse, rooted in both Spanish and Indigenous cultures. During the 16th-century colonial period, Catholicism was introduced by Spanish priests, bringing Christian holidays, including Christmas, to the country.



The early Mayan and Aztec civilizations were followed by three centuries of Spanish colonial rule. After gaining independence in 1821, a republic was formed, but peace was short-lived. The new republic faced political instability, territorial loss, and foreign invasions. Notable events included the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) and the French occupation (1861–1867).

The 20th century saw the Mexican Revolution, a series of regional conflicts lasting from 1910 to 1920, which led to significant land and social reforms. The following decades saw industrialization, modernization, and economic challenges. Today, Mexico operates as a federal republic with a presidential system and democratic governance.

## Here are some quick facts about Mexico:

- Mexico's official name is the United Mexican States. The currency is the Mexican peso.
- The Mexican Revolution is considered "the defining event of modern Mexican history."

- Mexican society is marked by significant income disparity, with a sharp divide between the wealthy elite and the rural and urban poor.
- Family plays a central role in Mexican society, acting as the core support group, along with providing a sense of identity and community. Multiple generations often live together in the same household.
- The first university in North America, the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, was founded in 1551.
- Mexico's landscape is diverse, ranging from tall mountains and deep canyons to dense rainforests and vast deserts.
- Mexico is one of the top-five most biodiverse countries in the world, home to over 200,000 species and about 12 percent of the world's biological diversity.
- Maize (corn), first domesticated in Mexico, was a critical development for agriculture and civilization.
- Mexico is home to some of the world's most impressive ancient ruins, including the Mayan pyramid of Chichen Itza and the pre-Aztec city of Teotihuacán.
- Some regions of Mexico are under travel advisories due to risks related to terrorism, crime, drug trafficking, and kidnapping.



## Mexican Symbols

**Bird:** Golden eagle. A symbol of strength, freedom, and Mexican heritage, the golden eagle is featured on the coat of arms, perched on a cactus with a snake in its beak.

**Flower:** Dahlia. Native to Mexico, the dahlia was cultivated by the Aztecs. Its hollow stems were used for water transport, and its tubers for food and medicine. It was named Mexico's national flower in 1963.

**Animal:** Jaguar. The jaguar was revered by the Maya and Aztecs as a guardian spirit and symbol of power and protection. Today, Mexico plays a crucial role in its conservation, with many habitats designated as protected areas.



**Food:** Taco. Originating as a simple meal wrapped in a corn tortilla, the taco has evolved over time. Spanish conquerors introduced new fillings like beef, pork, and cheese. Each region of Mexico has its own variations. Tacos are more than a meal—they're a social experience that brings people together.

**Flag:** Mexico's current flag, officially adopted on September 16, 1968, consists of three vertical stripes of green, white, and red, with the national coat of arms in the center of the white stripe.



## The Maya and the Aztecs

Mexico's ancient history is fascinating, especially when it comes to the Maya and Aztecs. Both civilizations were prominent in Mesoamerica, the region extending from southern North America to the Pacific coast of Central America. Despite their differences, both were advanced societies whose achievements in areas like astronomy, engineering, architecture, and mathematics continue to astound today.

### The Maya

The Classic Period of Mayan civilization flourished from approximately AD 250 to 900. It was made up of independent city-states, which were often at war with each other. As the Maya began to decline, the Aztec civilization rose to prominence. The Maya are known for the following:

- Developing a written language in the form of hieroglyphs and inventing the mathematical concept of zero
- Creating an advanced calendar system based on the movements of the sun, moon, and stars that was both complex and highly accurate
- Building impressive structures, including temples, palaces, and observatories, using only the tools available at the time, based on a clear understanding of astronomy and carefully aligned with celestial bodies and events
- Excelling in arts and crafts and producing finely carved stone monuments and majestic painted murals that depicted their rulers and cultural practices



## The Aztecs

The Aztec empire, with its centralized government and powerful military, dominated from the 14th to 16th centuries. Their rule ended in 1521, when they were conquered by Spanish conquistadors led by Hernán Cortés. The Aztecs are known for the following:

- Creating a powerful empire governed by an emperor, with a system of laws, courts, a strong military, and a tribute system that required conquered territories to provide labor, goods, and services
- Mastering engineering and urban planning, as demonstrated by their capital city of Tenochtitlan, which was built on a swampy lake and features canals, causeways, and artificial islands (chinampas), showcasing their sophisticated reasoning and innovation
- Developing a complex writing system, which allowed for basic phonetic expression of a wide range of words and concepts
- Valuing education, with mandatory education for most children, though nobility attended one type of school while commoners attended another, but included lessons on astronomy, governance, and military tactics from an early age
- Establishing a philosophy and ethical system that promoted virtues such as justice, prudence, moderation, and courage, and advocated for finding a “middle path” in a world they referred to as “slippery earth”



## Trivial Pursuits

Let's get to know a little about our neighbor south of the border.

- According to legend, the Aztecs were guided by the god Huitzilopochtli in their search for a place to build their city. They were instructed to look for the sign of an eagle perched on a cactus, holding a snake in its beak. This sign led them to the location where they founded the ancient city of Tenochtitlán, now known as Mexico City. The eagle represents victory, strength, and the sun, while the snake represents darkness, evil, and the challenges Mexico has faced. The cactus, or *nopal*, represents Mexico's geography and Indigenous heritage.



- Color television was developed in Mexico. In the 1940s, engineer Guillermo González Camarena invented the Trichromatic Sequential Field System,” also known as a system for color television. The first color broadcast was aired in Mexico on Channel 5, during the children’s show *Paraíso Infantil* (*Children’s Paradise*).

- Mexico’s earliest known civilization, the Olmec, are credited with being the first to turn the cacao plant into chocolate as a drink. Later modified by the Maya and Aztecs, chocolate was revered as a sacred crop. When it reached Europe, it was modified into the version we know and love today.



- Mexicans drink more Coca-Cola than any other people in the world.
- Mexico is home to the largest Spanish-speaking population in the world.
- Mexico has the second-largest coral reef system in the world, after the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia.
- Monarch butterflies, during their annual migration from Canada, spend from November to March in Mexico, forming colonies of about 20 million. These large butterflies, with distinctive orange and black wings, are facing endangerment due to climate change, use of pesticides, and habitat loss.

- The Xoloitzcuintli (*show-low-eats-QUEENT-lee*), or Xolo for short, is Mexico’s national dog. One of the oldest dog breeds in the Americas, it has a history dating back thousands of years. The breed held deep cultural and spiritual significance to both the Aztec and Mayan civilizations and continues to do so today. They come in both hairless and coated varieties and are known for their loyalty, intelligence, and calm temperament.



- Mexico City, the country’s capital and largest city, is built on a lake bed and is gradually sinking. As a result, many buildings appear slanted or crooked.



- Raise your hand if you are familiar with the Mexican hat dance. This national dance of Mexico is one many of us remember from our childhood. Originating as a courtship dance during the 19th century, it symbolizes a woman initially rejecting, and then accepting, a man's advances. During the ritual, the male dancer typically places his sombrero on the ground, and the female dances around it.



- The comet believed to have caused the mass extinction of the dinosaurs—and approximately 75 percent of all plant and animal species on Earth—made impact at the Yucatán Peninsula in southeastern Mexico. This event created the Chicxulub crater, much of which is now buried under the ocean.
- One of the world's best spots for whale watching is in Baja California, a state located in northwestern Mexico. Each winter, hundreds of gray whales migrate to its warm, sheltered bays to breed and give birth.

## Christmas in Mexico

Christmas, known as *Navidad* in Mexico, is not only an important religious holiday but also a celebration with deep cultural significance. Not just a one-day event, festivities begin on December 12 and continue until January 6. During this time, family members often travel long distances to reunite, and communities come together in celebration. The poinsettia plant, which is native to Mexico, is a popular decoration during the Christmas season because of its red and green colors. Here are some of the highlights of a Mexican Christmas:

- **December 12:** Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a celebration honoring the patron saint of Mexico
- **December 16–24:** Las Posadas, a nine-night series of processions reenacting Mary and Joseph's search for lodging, during which communities come together to celebrate with carol singing, piñatas, and delicious foods and beverages



- **December 24:** Noche Buena (Christmas Eve), a night of lavish family dinners, midnight Mass, exchanging gifts, and festivities; meals typically include traditional dishes such as tamales, *bacalao* (dried and salted codfish), and *ponche* (spiced fruit punch)
- **December 25:** Christmas Day, a day for family gatherings, relaxation, and enjoying leftovers from the previous night's feast
- **January 6:** Día de Los Reyes (Three Kings Day), the day children traditionally receive their gifts left by the Three Wise Men, and often including Rosca de Reyes, a sweet bread with candied fruit, as a special treat
- **February 2:** Día de la Candelaria (Candlemas Day), the traditional end of the Christmas season celebrated with tamales and blessings



Feliz Navidad, everyone. We wish you a Merry Christmas.

## What to See and Do

Of the many amazing places to see in Mexico, there are some you'll especially want to visit during the Christmas holiday, including the following.

San Miguel de Allende is a vibrant city located in the far eastern part of Guanajuato that is known for its colonial architecture, thriving arts scene, and rich cultural heritage. A popular tourist destination, it is often described as one of the best small cities in the world.



After an influenza pandemic in the early 20th century, San Miguel de Allende nearly became a ghost town. Fortunately, its Baroque and Neoclassical buildings attracted foreign artists, who moved to the town and helped establish cultural institutions like the Instituto Allende and Escuela de Bellas Artes. The town's reputation grew, drawing artists and aspiring students, including U.S. soldiers who studied on the GI Bill following World War II.

During Christmas, the town transforms into a magical place, featuring unique decorations created by local artists, a large, beautifully decorated

tree in the main plaza, spectacular light displays, and a festive atmosphere with parades, caroling, parties, and holiday shopping. The delightful weather, inviting restaurants, and welcoming people make it a place many expats, especially from the United States and Canada, call home year-round.

Tlalpujahua (*ta-L AHL-poo-HAH-wah*) is a quaint mountain community in the state of Michoacán in central Mexico. Known as “Town of the Eternal Christmas,” it is famous for its handblown and painted glass Christmas ornaments, which are sold worldwide. It’s a must-see stop on our Mexican Christmas tour.



The story behind these ornaments is interesting. In the 1950s, Joaquín Muñoz Orta and his family left Tlalpujahua to immigrate to Chicago. There, Joaquín worked in a factory making Christmas tree ornaments. A quick learner, Joaquín realized he could start his own business in Mexico, and so he moved to Mexico City and set up a workshop. It prospered, and in the 1960s, he moved his enterprise to his hometown of Tlalpujahua. Today, his company employs many workers and produces millions of handblown glass Christmas tree ornaments each year. Additionally, more than 200 small workshops in the town create a wide array of handcrafted ornaments.

An important part of the town’s history is that of the Our Lady of Carmen Church, built in the Baroque architectural style in the mid-1700s during the prosperous mining boom. In 1937, a mudslide buried much of the town, including the church, claiming many lives and creating extensive damage. The church’s tower, the only structure surviving the mudslide, remains today as an archaeological site and symbol of both loss and hope.

While visiting Tlalpujahua, be sure to see the nearby butterfly sanctuary, where from November to March, you can witness millions of monarch butterflies clustered in trees and flying around—a truly spectacular sight.



Located in southern Mexico, the Oaxaca Valley is believed to have been inhabited since 11,000 BC. Its 16th-century architecture and pre-Hispanic ruins, including the well-preserved temples and stone structures of Monte Albán, are remarkable to see. Oaxaca is also known for its artisanal culture, with generations of families dedicating themselves to the creation of crafts such as



handwoven wool rugs, embroidered clothing, jewelry, baskets, pottery, and ceramics. The region is also the birthplace of corn, squash, and Mezcal, a popular spirit made from agave.



Oaxaca's contribution to the Christmas tour is the unique Noche de Rábanos (Night of the Radishes), held on December 23. Farmers grow large radishes throughout the year to be carved into holiday masterpieces. This event's origins date back to the colonial period, when the Spanish first introduced radishes. The town, known for its wood-carving tradition, extended its skills to the carving of radishes

to attract the attention of customers at the Christmas market. In 1897, a formal competition was initiated, and the government allocated land for growing radishes for the event. Today, the popular event attracts more than 100 contestants and thousands of visitors.

Additionally, floats featuring Nativity scenes, giant puppets, fireworks, music, and delicious food are part of a Christmas Eve parade that culminates in a holiday celebration in the main square.

Known for its sunny weather and warm temperatures, Los Cabos is a wonderful destination to spend Christmas. Its shining lights, beautiful decorations, lively music, cultural holiday traditions, and the warm hospitality of the locals are a welcome respite from winter weather. Artisan markets and boutiques are great places to find special gifts. Take in the sounds of the city as you listen to "Christmas in Cabo," and sing along with the lyrics.

Puerto Vallarta is a fantastic destination to visit year-round and is especially festive during the Christmas holiday season. Sand and surf are joined by Nativity scenes, holiday decorations, and traditional celebrations, including parades, music, and dance. On Christmas Eve, gifts are usually exchanged at midnight.

From December 1 to December 12, the Virgin of Guadalupe is honored, with the people of Puerto Vallarta making a pilgrimage to the Parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe, bearing gifts and accompanied by music.



## What to Eat

Given how delicious the Mexican cuisine is, the better question would be what *not* to eat. Add to that the special foods enjoyed during the Christmas holiday, and you've got some treats in store. Here are some of the highlights.

**Rosca de Reyes** – This sweet bread, also known as the Wreath of Kings, has a small figurine of the baby Jesus hidden inside. Traditionally served during the celebration of Epiphany on Día de Los Reyes (Three Kings Day), it honors the three kings bearing gifts for the baby Jesus. The person who finds the figurine inside is expected to host Día de la Candelaria on February 2 and prepare the tamales for family and friends.



**Arroz con Leche** – Made from long grain rice, sugar, milk, and cinnamon sticks, this simple, comforting dessert originated in Spain during the Middle Ages and was brought to the Americas by Spanish colonists. It is often served during Christmas and family gatherings and is part of the cultural identity.

**Buñuelos** – These crispy, thin fried dough discs are served with syrup or sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. They are considered an essential holiday dessert and are often served with Mexican hot chocolate or champurrado, a thick chocolate drink.

**Tamales** – A cornerstone of Mexican cuisine, tamales are a centerpiece of the traditional Christmas meal. With hundreds of unique regional recipes across Mexico, they date to the pre-Columbian Aztecs and Maya peoples and were originally created as portable food for warriors. Made with [masa](#) (corn dough), tamales are filled with a wide variety of ingredients, such as pork, beef, chicken, chili sauce, cheese, beans, vegetables, and even fish.



**Pozole** – This flavorful soup or stew is made with tender pork or chicken, hominy, and a rich, savory broth. Often enjoyed during holidays and celebrations, it is a beloved Mexican comfort food.



**Romeritos** – This traditional herb dish is made of edible wild green sprigs, potatoes, sometimes shrimp, and a sauce similar to mole. It is often served during Christmastime as part of the holiday feast.

**Mole** – This iconic, rich sauce requires labor-intensive preparation and takes days to make. It includes more than 20 ingredients, such as chilies, nuts, seeds, spices, fruits, and sometimes chocolate. At Pujol, one of Mexico's premier restaurants, *mole madre* ("mother mole") is a living sauce that is aged over time, with new mole being added to the base to create increasingly complex flavors. For Christmas, mole is commonly served over turkey or chicken and as a filling for tamales.



**Pavo** – What's not to love about this dish of roasted turkey, typically stuffed with cornbread or vegetables and served with a rich mole sauce? The dish is a classic centerpiece for Christmas meals.

**Rompo** – This creamy Mexican eggnog originated in the 18th century, created by Mexican nuns. Similar to American eggnog, it is made with milk and egg yolks and flavored with cinnamon, vanilla, and cloves. Alcoholic spirits such as brandy or rum are sometimes added.



**Ponche Navideño** – A warm, spiced fruit punch made with prunes, apples, sugarcane, and sometimes a splash of rum or tequila, ponche Navideño is a traditional holiday drink that adds warmth and flavor to Christmas.

**Tequila and Mezcal** – Both distilled spirits are made from the agave plant in Mexico. Tequila is exclusively made from the blue Weber agave plant, while mezcal is produced using 30 different agave species from across the country. Both spirits are popular worldwide, with the United States being the largest market for agave-based drinks.

Thank you for joining us in our travels to Mexico. We look forward to seeing you next month.

---

# Hola, Mexico Quiz

(Questions Only)

How many of these multiple choice questions can you answer?

1. What is the meaning of the Spanish word *hola*?

- A. Help
- B. Hello
- C. What's up?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

2. This music is most identified with Mexico.

- A. Corrido
- B. Ranchera
- C. Mariachi

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

3. The Rosca de Reyes, a sweet, ring-shaped bread with the figurine of a baby hidden inside, is like which New Orleans tradition?

- A. Funnel cake during Jazz Fest
- B. Beignets on Fat Tuesday
- C. King cake during Mardi Gras

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Which small dog breed originated in Mexico and is named after one of its central northern states?

- A. Xolo
- B. Chihuahua
- C. Calupoh

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

5. This Mexican holiday is celebrated more by Americans than Mexicans.

- A. Cinco de Mayo
- B. Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)
- C. Constitution Day

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_



6. The official seal of the city of Los Angeles contains these symbols from two other countries.
- A. The flag of France and the coat of arms of Spain
  - B. The flag of France and the coat of arms of Mexico
  - C. The eagle and snake from the coat of arms of Mexico, and the lion and castle from the coat of arms of Spain

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

7. *Entomophagy* refers to this traditional part of Mexican cuisine.
- A. Eating insects
  - B. Slow cooking underground
  - C. Combining chilis for extra spice

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

8. Which mountain range runs through Mexico?
- A. Andes
  - B. Sierra Madre
  - C. The Rockies

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

9. How many recognized languages does Mexico have?
- A. 43
  - B. 84
  - C. 68

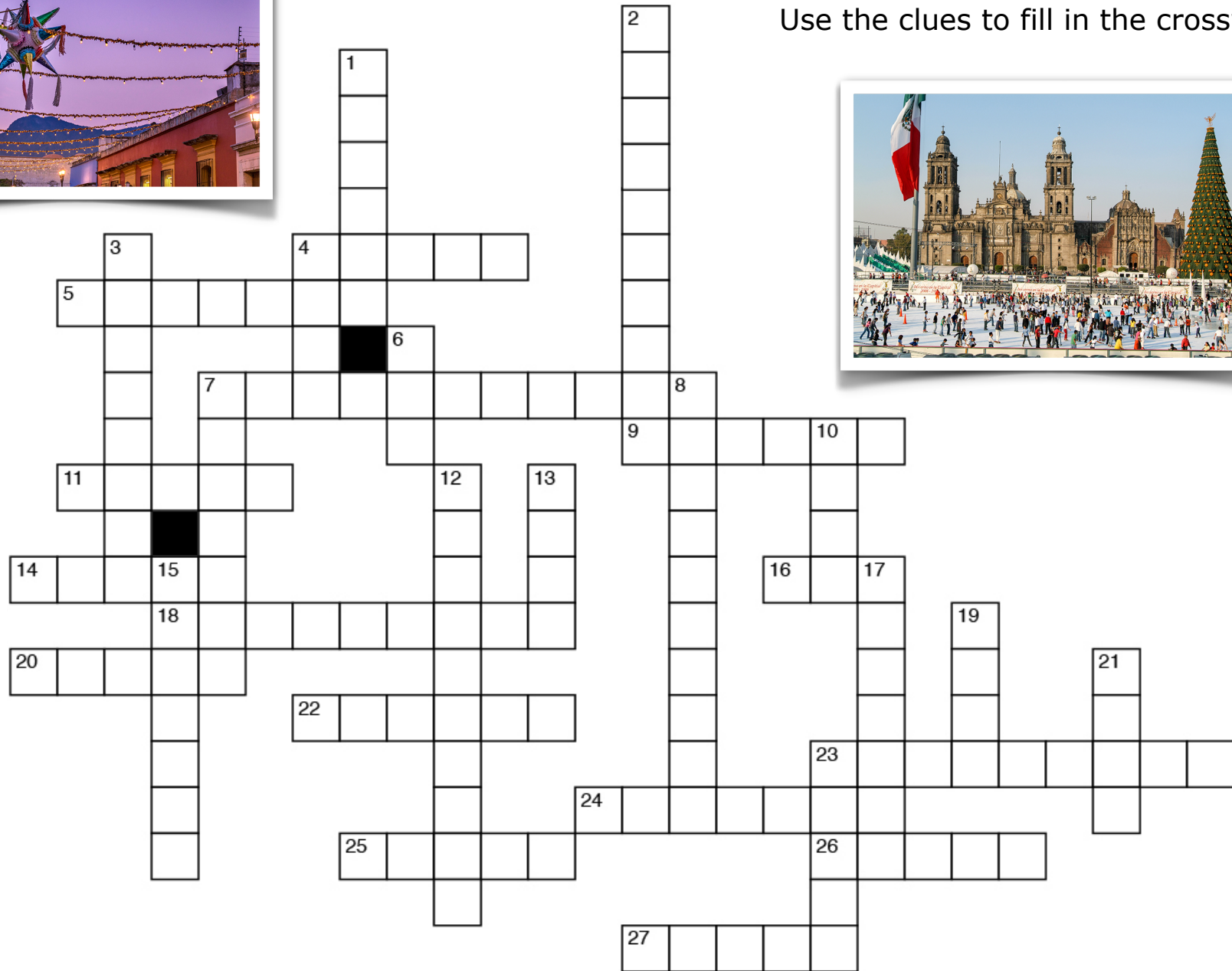
Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

10. This Mexican holiday is a two-day celebration occurring each November. It is a blend of Aztec rituals and Catholic observances.
- A. Festival of the Marigolds
  - B. Day of the Dead
  - C. All Saints' Day

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

# Feliz Navidad from Mexico

Use the clues to fill in the crossword.





# Feliz Navidad from Mexico

(clues)

## ACROSS

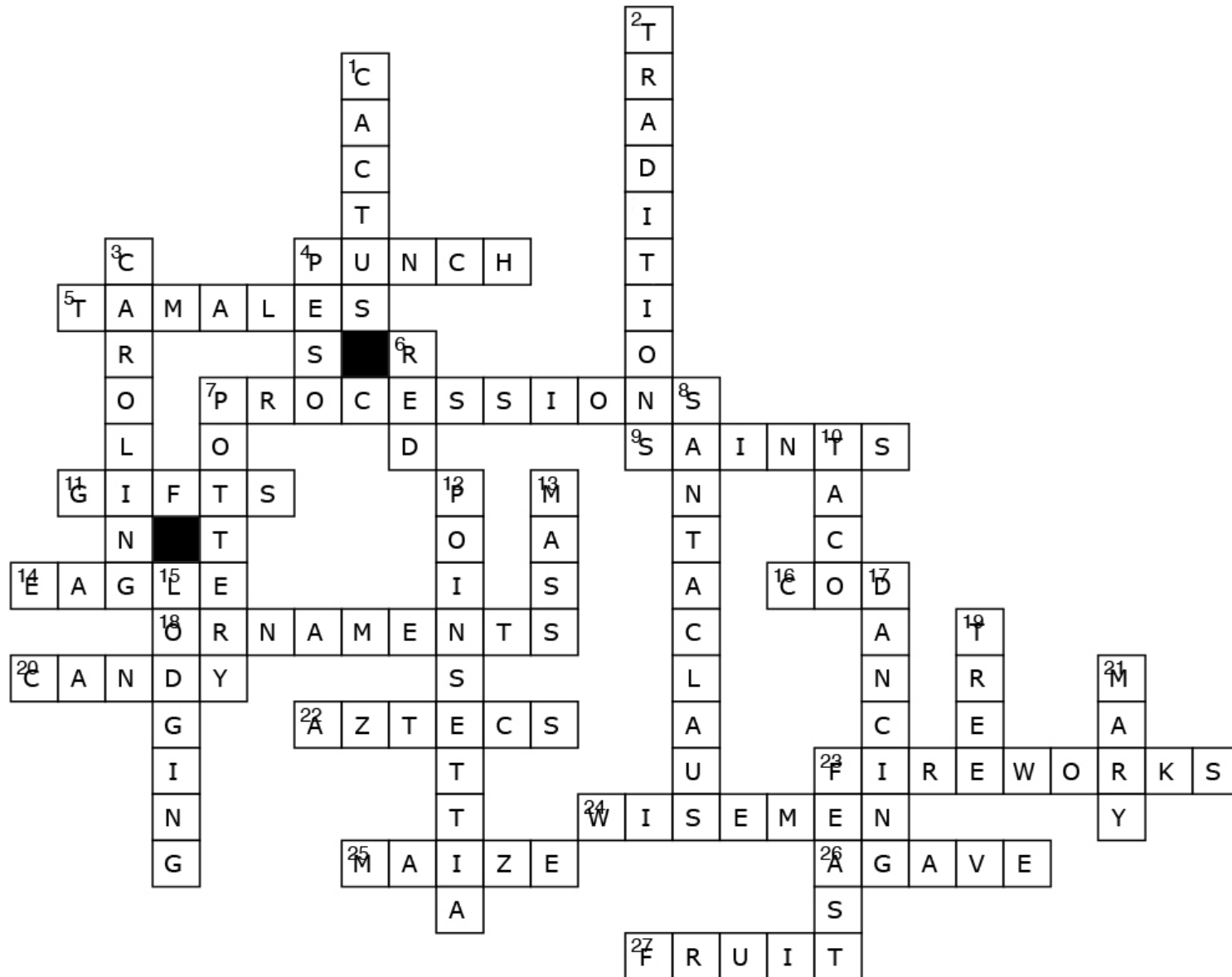
4. Party bowlful
5. Leaf-wrapped dish
7. Formal marches
9. Holy ones
11. Christmas purchases
14. Coat of arms bird; golden \_\_\_\_\_
16. Mild white fish
18. Tree decorations sometimes made of handblown glass
20. What might fill up a piñata
22. Montezuma's people
23. Flashy display
24. Biblical trio
25. Indigenous crop
26. Tequila plant
27. Apples and pears

## DOWN

1. Prickly plant
2. Customs like Los Posadas and Noche Buena
3. The activity of singing Christmas hymns
4. Mexican money
6. Mexican flag colors; green, white, and \_\_\_\_\_
7. Ceramics
8. Kris Kringle
10. Folded food
12. Christmas plant
13. Religious ceremony
15. Place to stay
17. Moving to music
19. Gifts are put under it
21. Mother of Jesus
23. Sumptuous meal

# Feliz Navidad from Mexico

(solution)





JOIN THE FRONT PORCH TRAVELERS

# DESTINATION: CHRISTMAS IN MEXICO



[activityconnection.com](http://activityconnection.com)