

# Physical Geography

## What You Will Learn...

### Main Ideas

1. Mexico's physical features include plateaus, mountains, and coastal lowlands.
2. Mexico's climate and vegetation include deserts, tropical forests, and cool highlands.
3. Key natural resources in Mexico include oil, silver, gold, and scenic landscapes.

### The Big Idea

Mexico is a large country with different natural environments in its northern, central, and southern regions.

### Key Terms and Places

Río Bravo (Rio Grande), p. 142  
peninsula, p. 142

Baja California, p. 142

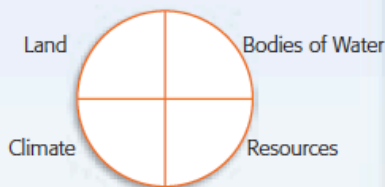
Gulf of Mexico, p. 142

Yucatán Peninsula, p. 142

Sierra Madre, p. 143

### TAKING NOTES

As you read, use a graphic organizer like the one below to take notes on Mexico's physical geography.



## If YOU lived there...

You live on Mexico's Pacific coast. Sunny weather and good beaches bring tourists year-round. Now you are on your way to visit a cousin in Puebla, in the highlands. To get there, you will have to take a bus along the winding roads of the steep Sierra Madre Occidental. This rugged mountain range runs along the coast. You have never been to the interior of Mexico before.

## What landscapes will you see on your trip?

**BUILDING BACKGROUND** Mexico is part of Latin America, a region in the Western Hemisphere where Spanish and Portuguese culture shaped life. Mexico is also part of North America, along with the United States and Canada. Unlike its northern neighbors, Mexico's landscape consists mainly of highlands and coastal plains.

## Physical Features

Mexico, our neighbor to the south, shares a long border with the United States. Forming part of this border is one of Mexico's few major rivers, the **Río Bravo**. In the United States this river is called the Rio Grande. At other places along the U.S.–Mexico border it is impossible to tell where one country ends and the other country begins.

## Bodies of Water

As you can see on the map, except for its border with the United States, Mexico is mostly surrounded by water. Mexico's border in the west is the Pacific Ocean. Stretching south into the Pacific Ocean from northern Mexico is a narrow **peninsula**, or piece of land surrounded on three sides by water, called **Baja California**. To the east, Mexico's border is the **Gulf of Mexico**. The Gulf of Mexico is separated from the Caribbean Sea by a part of Mexico called the **Yucatán** (yoo-kah-TAHN) **Peninsula**.

## Mexico: Physical

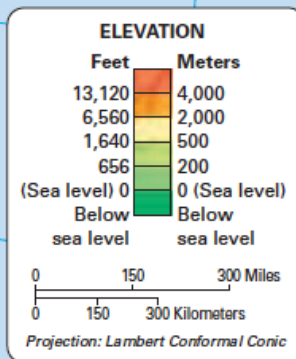


Geography Skills

**Regions** The rugged Mexican Plateau covers much of Mexico.

- Name** What feature extends into the Gulf of Mexico?
- Analyze** Where in Mexico would it be easiest to cross from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico?

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## Plateaus and Mountains

Much of the interior landscape of Mexico consists of a high, mostly rugged region called the Mexican Plateau. The plateau's lowest point is more than a half mile above sea level. Its highest point is close to two miles above sea level. The entire plateau spreads between two mountain ranges that rise still higher. One range, the Sierra Madre Oriental, lies in the east. The other, the Sierra Madre Occidental, lies in the west. Together, these two mountain ranges and another shorter one in southern Mexico make up the **Sierra Madre** (SYER-rah MAH-dray), or "mother range."



- 1** Plateaus and mountains cover much of Mexico. Here, the volcano Popocatepetl rises above a mountain valley. Many people live and farm in the mountain valleys.

Between the two ranges in the south lies the Valley of Mexico. Mexico City, the country's capital, is located there. The mountains south of Mexico City include towering, snowcapped volcanoes. Volcanic eruptions, as well as earthquakes, are a threat there. The volcano Popocatepetl (poh-puh-cah-TE-pet-uhl) near Mexico City has been active as recently as 2000.

### FOCUS ON READING

What do you think the text will discuss next?

## Coastal Lowlands

From the highlands in central Mexico, the land slopes down to the coasts. Beautiful, sunny beaches stretch all along Mexico's eastern and western coasts. The plain that runs along the west coast is fairly wide in the north. It becomes narrower in the south. On the east side of the country, the Gulf coastal plain is wide and flat. The soils and climate there are good for farming.

The Yucatán Peninsula in the southeast is also mostly flat. Limestone rock underlies much of the area. Erosion there has created caves and sinkholes, steep-sided depressions that form when the roof of a cave collapses. Many of these sinkholes are filled with water.

**READING CHECK** Summarizing What are Mexico's major physical features?

## Climate and Vegetation

From snowcapped mountain peaks to warm, sunny beaches, Mexico has many different climates. You can see Mexico's climate regions on the map below. This great variety of climates results in several different types of vegetation.

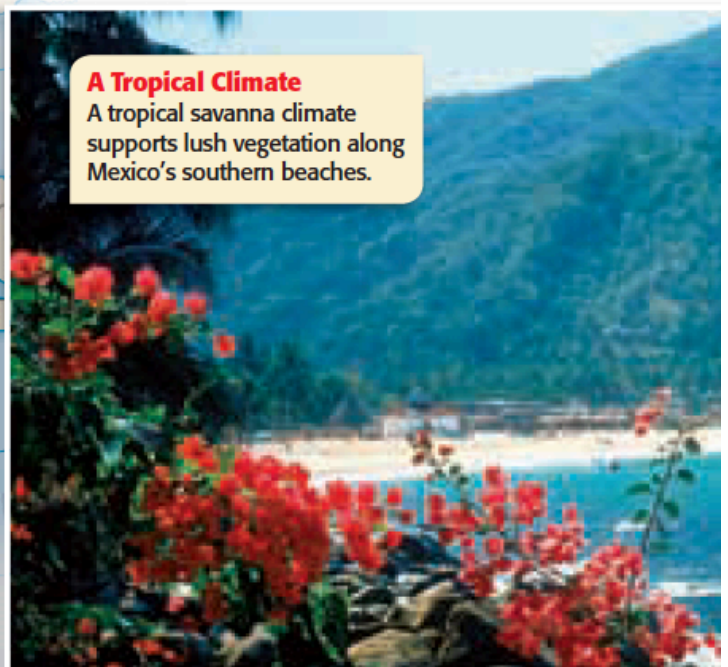
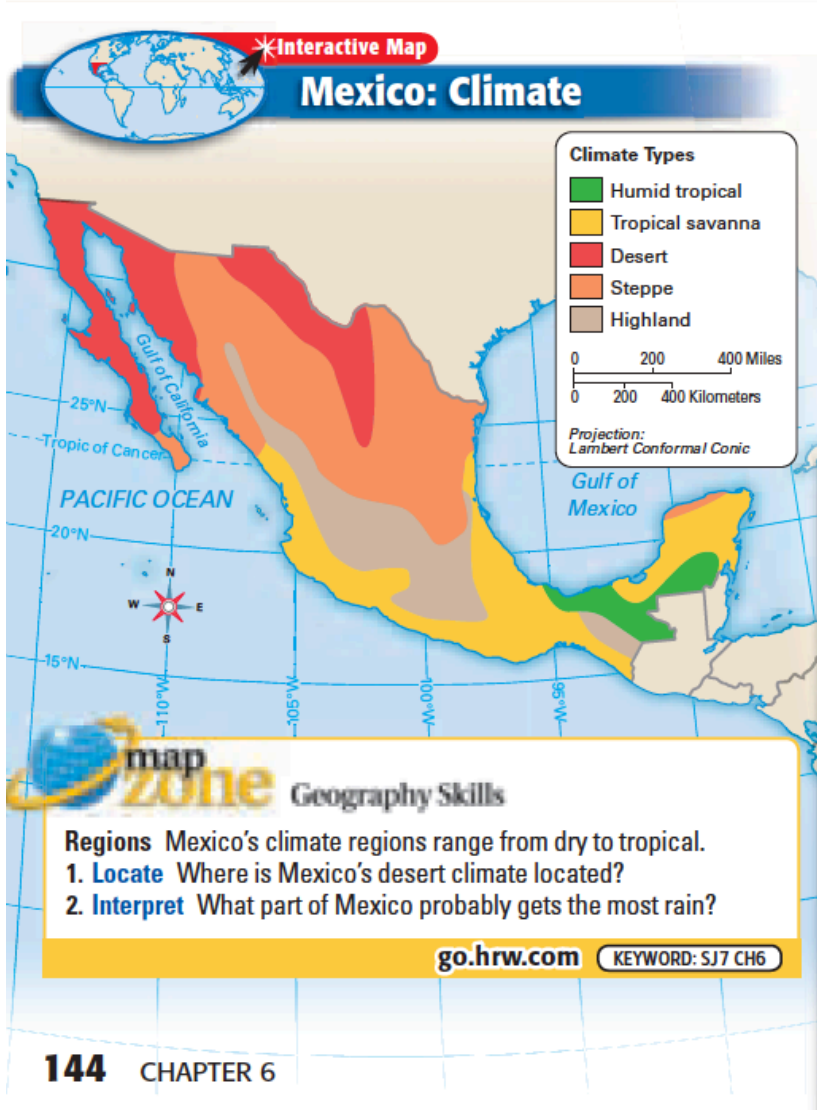
In some areas, changes in elevation cause climates to vary widely within a short distance. For example, the areas of high elevation on the Mexican Plateau can have surprisingly cool temperatures. At times, freezing temperatures reach as far south as Mexico City—even though it is located in the tropics. Mexico's mountain valleys generally have mild climates, and many people have settled there.

The valleys along Mexico's southern coastal areas also have pleasant climates. Warm temperatures and a summer rainy season support the forests that cover about 25 percent of Mexico's land area. Tropical rain forests provide a home for jaguars, monkeys, anteaters, and other animals.

While most of southern Mexico is warm and humid, the climate in the northern part of the Yucatán Peninsula is hot and dry. The main vegetation there is scrub forest.

### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

vary to be different



### A Tropical Climate

A tropical savanna climate supports lush vegetation along Mexico's southern beaches.

Like the Yucatán Peninsula in the south, most of northern Mexico is dry. The deserts in Baja California and the northern part of the plateau get little rainfall. Desert plants and dry grasslands are common in the north. Cougars, coyotes, and deer live in some areas of the desert.

**READING CHECK Analyzing** Why does Mexico City sometimes experience freezing temperatures even though it is in the tropics?

## Natural Resources

Mexico is rich in natural resources. One of its most important resources is petroleum, or oil. Oil reserves are found mainly under the southern and Gulf coastal plains as well as offshore in the Gulf of Mexico. Mexico sells much of its oil to the United States.

Before oil was discovered in Mexico, minerals were the country's most valuable resource. Some gold and silver mines that were begun many centuries ago are still in operation. In addition, new mines have been developed in Mexico's mountains. Today Mexico's mines produce more silver than any other country in the world. Mexican mines also yield large amounts of copper, gold, lead, and zinc.



Another important resource is water. The refreshing water surrounding Mexico draws many tourists to the country's scenic beaches. Unfortunately, water is limited in many parts of Mexico. Water scarcity is a serious issue.

**READING CHECK Finding Main Ideas** What is one of Mexico's most important resources?

**SUMMARY AND PREVIEW** The natural environments of Mexico range from arid plateaus in the north to humid, forested mountains in the south. Next, you will study the history and culture of Mexico.

## Section 1 Assessment

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**Online Quiz**  
KEYWORD: SJ7 HP6

### Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and Places

- a. Describe** What is the interior of Mexico like?

**b. Analyze** Do you think the **Yucatán Peninsula** is a good place for farming? Explain your answer.
- a. Recall** What is the climate like in the northern part of the Yucatán Peninsula?

**b. Explain** Why can climates sometimes vary widely within a short distance?

**c. Elaborate** How do you think climate and vegetation affect where people live in Mexico?
- a. Identify** Where are Mexico's oil reserves located?

**b. Make Inferences** What problems might water scarcity cause for Mexican citizens?

**c. Elaborate** How are Mexico's location, climate, and physical features also natural resources?

### Critical Thinking

- Categorizing** Draw a chart like the one here. Using your notes, list the geographical features found in northern Mexico and southern Mexico.

	Geography
Northern Mexico	
Southern Mexico	

### FOCUS ON WRITING

- Telling What Mexico Looks Like** What features of Mexico's physical geography will you include in your "I Am" poem? Write notes about the physical features, climate and vegetation, and natural resources of Mexico.