

REGION OAXACA



Pic. 1: Oaxaca state map

Pic. 2: Location in Mexico

FACTS

<b>Surface:</b>	95.400km <sup>2</sup>
<b>Inhabitants:</b>	3,6 milion
<b>Average Income:</b>	
<b>Life Expectancy:</b>	62
<b>Language:</b>	Spanish, various regional indigenous languages
<b>Religion:</b>	Catholicism, various other beliefs

INTRODUCTION

The state of Oaxaca has a population of about 3.4 million, the majority of which of indigenous origin. Located in the southern part of Mexico, Oaxaca borders in the north to Veracruz, in the east to Chiapas, in the west to Guerrero, and in the south to the Pacific Ocean. The great valleys of the state are located between the *Sierra Madre del Sur* and the *Sierra Madre de Oaxaca*. The capital of the state is Oaxaca City. As the fifth largest state of Mexico, Oaxaca is characterized by extreme geographic fragmentation. With extensive mountain ranges throughout the state, Oaxaca has an average altitude of 1.500m above sea level, even though only about 9% of this is arable land. With such a large area and rough terrain, Oaxaca is divided into 571 municipios. Despite the fact that the state belongs economically to the poorest of the nation, Oaxaca is rich for its cultural diversity, mix of prehispanic treasures and colonial patrimony. Its

mountainous topography is one of the reasons for the cultural diversity. Because individual towns and tribal groups lived in isolation from each other for long periods of time, about sixteen ethnolinguistic groups were able to maintain their individual languages, and a good part of their customs and ancestral traditions intact to the present day. Therefore, Oaxaca is the most ethnically complex of Mexico's states. Almost half of the population of Oaxaca still speaks an indigenous dialect. The dominant indigenous groups are the Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Mazatecs, Chinantecs and Mixes.



Pic. 3 Cathedral in Oaxaca City



Pic. 4 Colonial Architecture in Oaxaca

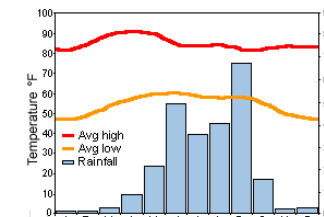
HISTORY

The pre-hispanic cultures of the *Valles Centrales* in Oaxaca reached their heights with the city of *Monte Albán*. The city of *Monte Albán* was the centre of the Zapotec culture, which extended its control over most of Oaxaca by conquest between 300 and 700AD. *Monte Albán* declined suddenly and by 750 it was deserted as many other Zapotec sites in the *Valles*. From about 1200 the Zapotecs came under growing dominance by the Mixtecs from Oaxaca's northwest uplands. Mixtec and Zapotec cultures became entangled before the Aztecs conquered them in the 15th and early 16th century. In colonial times, the indigenous population dropped dramatically. The population of the Mixteca region, for example, fell from 700.000 to about 25.000 in 1700. Although indeginous rebellions continued into the 21th century, the indigenous people rarely formed a serious threat to the ruling powers. The great reforming leader in Oaxaca of the mid-19th-century was Benito Juárez who served two terms as state governor before being elected Mexico's president in 1861. The presidency of Porfirio Diaz between 1877 to 1910 brought the country into the industrial age, but fostered corruption, repression and, eventually the Mexican revolution. In *Valle*

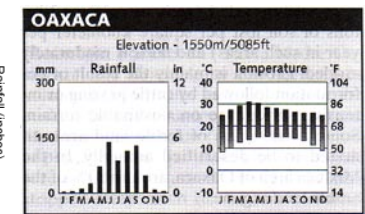
*Nacional* in northern Oaxaca the situation for the indigenous people was especially bad. Tobacco planters set up virtual slave plantations, most of whose 15.000 workers had to be replaced annually after dying from disease, beating or starvation. Indigenous lands were commandeered by foreign and mestizo coffee planters. After the revolution about 300 peasant land-holding cooperatives were set up, but landownership remains a source of constant conflict in rural Oaxaca. Today Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico. With little industry many of the residents leave their home to work in the cities or the USA. The situation is made worse in some areas by deforestation and erosion. Tourism thrives in Oaxaca city and nearby villages, and in a few places along the coast. Underdevelopment though prevails in most of the backcountry.

CLIMATE

The western two-thirds of the state are rugged and mountainous; the eastern third lies on the hot low-lying *Isthmus of Tehuantepec*. There is a thin plain along the Pacific Coast and a low-lying north-central region bordering Veracruz state. The *Valles Centrales* are warm and dry, with most rainfall between June and September. On the coast and in low-lying areas it is hotter and wetter.



Pic. 5 Oaxaca State Climate



Pic. 6 Oaxaca City Climate

TOPOGRAPHY

The eastern part of the state encloses about half of the *Isthmus of Tehuantepec*, a narrow neck of land that connects central Mexico with the Yucatán Peninsula and Central America. Much of the state is covered by mountainous terrain - including the *Sierra Madre de Oaxaca* and the *Sierra Madre del Sur* ranges- and is characterized by moderate temperatures and a mild climate. The mountains drop down to hot and arid lowlands on the *Isthmus*, and hot and humid lowlands on the northern side of the state, bordering Veracruz. The country's only

tropical national park, *Lagunas de Chacahua*, is located along the Pacific Ocean in the southwestern part of Oaxaca.



Pic. 7 Oaxaca landscape



Pic. 8 Oaxaca pine forest

**VEGETATION**

In this agricultural region you will find a variety of produce such as tropical fruits, cereals, sugar, coffee, cacao and tobacco. The state of Oaxaca has a very varied vegetation due to the different climate and topography conditions of the mountain range. The vegetation formations include tropical evergreen forest, mountain cloud forest, pine forest, and oak forest at an height of 1600 up to 2600 meters.

These forests contain a number of endemic and endangered plant, vegetable and animal species.

The extremely abrupt and rugged topography of the Sierra Madre has allowed the forests and species to remain relatively intact despite human exploitation. But cattle farming, grazing, agriculture and aggressive infrastructure development threaten the habitat, and are responsible for deforestation and land erosion.



Pic. 9 Oaxaca landscape



Pic. 10 Agriculture



Pic. 11 Mezcal plant



Pic. 12 Deforestation

**ETHNICAL GROUPS**

Oaxaca's diverse population is made up of many ethnic groups: the Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Mixes, Chinantecos, Mazatecos, Chatinos, Huaves, Chontales, Zoques, Tacuates, Amuzgos, Triquis, Nahuas, Cuicatecos, Chochos, Ixcatecos, and descendants from African slave populations who live on the coast. The Zapotec (347,000 people) and the Mixtec (241,000 people) are the two largest groups of Indians, all descendants of major Mesoamerican civilizations.



Pic. 13-15 Indigenous traditions

Being one of the three poorest states in Mexico, the approximate 3,000,000 people have a life expectancy of 62 years and the maternal/Infant mortality rate is 79%. The educational system is one of the least developed in Mexico and many children do

not finish primary school as they start working alongside their parents in the fields. The illiteracy rate is over 20%.

Festivals and holidays are important in Oaxaca. A centuries-old fiesta *The Guelaguetza* is held on the last 2 Mondays of July. During this time, communities from throughout the state present their regional costumes, dances, songs and music in an open-air theater built into the side of a hill. The participants often throw gifts to the spectators.

*Dia de la Muertos* is a 2-day religious festival which takes place in the beginning of November. Cemeteries are visited and food is often left at the graves. Candlelight vigils are held and altars in the homes hold flowers, fruits and nuts, a special bread and the favourite food of the ancestors.



Pic. 16 Ethnic groups

**Images:**

Pic.-Nr 7-15 Barabas A.M. Bartolomé M.A. Maldonado B., *Atlas Etnográfica. Los pueblos indígenas de Oaxaca*, 2003, Mexico D.F.

**Literature:**

Barabas A.M. Bartolomé M.A. Maldonado B., *Atlas Etnográfica. Los pueblos indígenas de Oaxaca*, 2003, Mexico D.F.  
Lonely Planet. Mexico, 2002, London  
Guillermo Bofil Batalla, Mexico Profundo. *Reclaiming a Civilization*, 1996, Austin

**Websites:**

[http://www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_/oaxaca/oaxacaindex.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/oaxaca/oaxacaindex.html)  
<http://www.oaxaca.gob.mx>  
<http://en.wikipedia.org>