

DEMOGRAPHIA



MEXICO CITY: LARGEST CITY NOT TO BE

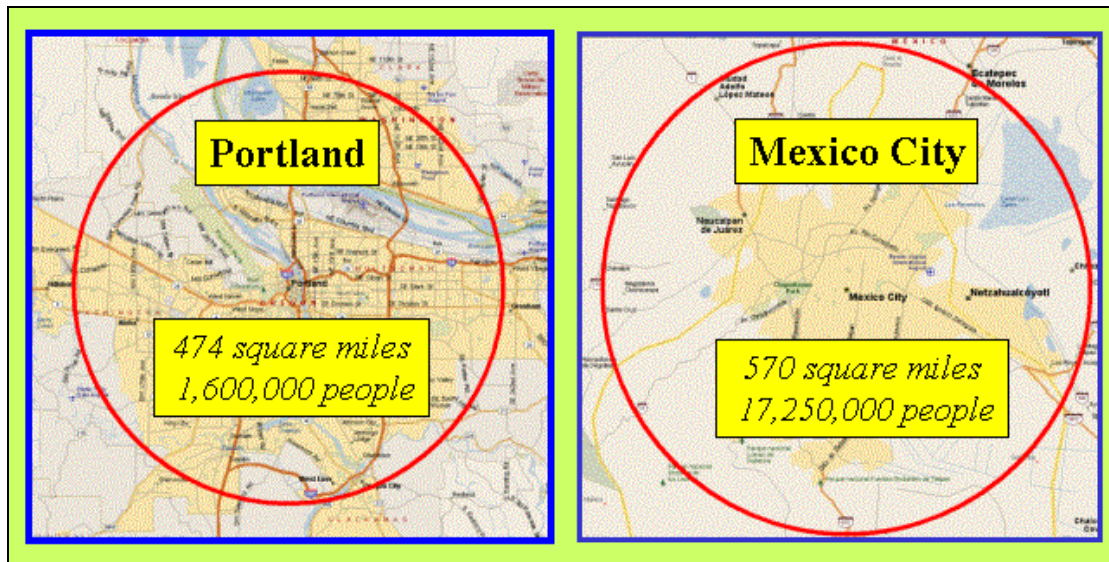
SUMMARY STATISTICS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	19,100,000	New York, Mumbai, Sao Paulo
Urbanized Area* Population	17,40,000	New York, Mumbai, Sao Paulo
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	690	Montreal, Milan, Cincinnati
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	1,790	
Population per Square Mile	25,200	Busan, Montevideo, Singapore
Population per Square Kilometer	9,700	
Capital of Mexico 4 th largest urbanized area in the world Data updated at 12 September 2004		
Urbanized Area Atlas: <i>Guía Roji Ciudad de Mexico</i> , purchase at Sanford's (154 maps)		
*Continuously built up area		

10 October 2003

Note:

*Another "Rental Car Tour" of Mexico City.
"Mexico City: East Side-West Side" is
available at www.rentalcartours.net*

Landing in Mexico City at night is an unforgettable experience. The city, with the brightest of lights, seems to stretch to the horizon, rather like Sao Paulo. People I have talked to think that these two urban areas are among the most sprawling in the world. But looks are deceiving. The built up area of Mexico City covers a bit more land area than Portland. But there are more than 10 times as many people in Mexico City as in Portland. That should bring envy to the urban planners whose strategies intent on driving people out of the housing market in the city by the Willamette.



Portland & Mexico City Urbanized Areas

Both Mexico City and Sao Paulo are among the least sprawling of the world's largest urbanized areas (continuously built-up areas). Among the six urbanized areas of more than 15,000,000, only Mumbai covers less area and has a higher population density. What makes them look so big is that the bright lights of their density make the urban areas look much larger than more sprawling urban areas, where trees and lower densities make the expanse of the urban area much less obvious. This can be seen when one lands in New York or Chicago, where the suburbs are so sparsely populated that they don't look urban at all.

I was to meet my daughter Deanna at about 10:00 p.m. I was flying Mexicana from Cancun and she was on Continental from Denver through Houston. I landed on time, and upon checking the arrivals screen found that her flight was delayed three hours. I had never been to Mexico City before, but Deanna had worked there off and on for a period of a couple of years. Further, she had friends there, Lilia and Araceli, who were going to help us find our way around the city.

Well, with three hours to burn, what better thing to do than to take the rental car and begin the tour on my own. My maps were terrible, since I had not yet purchased the *Guia Roji* atlas. I started out toward Centro, drove down Viaducto and then north on San Antonio Abad to Plaza de la Constitution Zocalo, the historic plaza on which the old Cathedral and the Palacio Nacional are located. This was practice for the run that would be made later in the evening with Deanna to our hotel at the southwest corner of the square. Then I drove toward and then on the peripheral highway (Periferico) to the north, then south behind the international airport. Finally, I drove back to the airport, picked up Deanna, and successfully repeated the route back to the Gran Hotel de la Ciudad de Mexico. It is located across the street to the west of the southwest corner of Zocalo, at the corner of 16 September and 5 February. This Iberian custom of naming streets after dates has never caught on to nearly the same degree in the rest of Western Europe and its former colonies. For all I can tell, there is no Rue de 14 Julio in Paris, no 4th of July Avenue in Washington, no 1st of July Avenue in Ottawa and no 1st of January Avenue in Canberra. Someone should publish a daily calendar with pictures of the various day-named streets to be found around Iberia and its former colonies. I will place a prepublication order.

The Gran Hotel de la Ciudad de Mexico was grand and not. It surely had seen better days. There is an open atrium that predates Atlanta's Hyatt Regency by perhaps 60 years (as is also the case with the Brown Palace in Denver). The elevators are of the old-iron cage variety, and very nice.

At the top of the five story atrium is a beautiful ceiling of stained glass (picture). But the lobby was dimly lit, rather like a pre-communist collapse international airport. The pay phones worked only intermittently and international calls simply could not be made from the rooms. But the rooms were grand, perhaps the largest standard rooms I have ever seen.

The next morning we had a very nice breakfast on the sixth floor plaza, overlooking Zocolo. A military band marched back and forth.

Centro, where our hotel was located, had a drab and run-down look. The streets were dark and dingy. To the west, however, things were much more prosperous. This is where the modern commercial buildings are to be found in the Bellas Artes and Insurgentes districts. The north-south Avenida Insurgentes has many large and modern commercial buildings. This broad avenue stretches toward the University of Mexico, in the southwestern quarter of the city.

Further west from Insurgentes, adjacent to and north of Chapultepec Park, is Zona Rosa with the luxurious hotels and the quality restaurants. We had a nice dinner here, but regrettably I chose the Montezuma's special salad and paid the price for nearly a month. Deanna was wiser.

A bit further to the southwest of Chapultepec are single-family dwellings --- estates --- in which some of the most wealthy live. They live behind walls. This was a surprise, this piece of Johannesburg's north side in Mexico City.

Further to the west, up the hill slope, is Santa Fe, an even newer large commercial area, with a large shopping center and multi-story office buildings. This is an emerging edge city as surely as Tyson's Corner in Washington or Bellevue in Seattle.

At the foot of the hill, however, there is little prosperity. Here is to be found one of Mexico City's many shantytowns (informal settlements). Shantytowns define much of the Mexico City urban area. To the east of the city and the peripheral highway are huge suburbs, such as Nezahualcoytl (itself a suburb with approximately 1,300,000 people), with perhaps the largest expanse of shanty towns in the western hemisphere.

Periferico is a grade separated motorway for part of the way, but deteriorates to little more than a signaled boulevard to the southwest. There is also an inner ring motorway, which combines with the peripheral highway on the west side.

Over the past 35 years, Mexico City has built one of the world's best patronized Metro systems. But the expensive system principally serves only the central city, which is home to only one-half the urban area's population. Since the Metro opened, nearly all growth has been outside Mexico City, much of it in the lower income developments in the state of Mexico, to the east. At the same time, the bus system and its large vehicles is being replaced and supplemented by much smaller vehicles that better serve the increasingly dispersed travel patterns in this large metropolitan area. It's no wonder people buy cars as soon as, or even before they can afford them.

We were fortunate to have Deanna's friends Lilia and Araceli to accompany us for a couple of days and share with us sites and perspectives we would otherwise have missed. We were also privileged to visit Araceli's family briefly, allowing us to see life from the inside, not just from the outside.

One of those places was Teotihuacan, the city of pyramids. There was a time, some centuries ago that what is now Mexico City would have been considered an exurb of Teotihuacan. No more. This monumental Toltec city is now a suburb of Mexico City and can be reached by car and toured in a day with hours to spare (including time to climb both the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon).

Vera Cruz is also worthwhile side-trip. At approximately 250 miles, the trip can be easily made in less than five hours. Most of the route is a high-quality toll motorway. I don't recall the speed limit, but traffic on Mexican motorways is comparatively light and moves at speeds quite appropriate to the condition (and well above the posted limits). Along the way are good views of the two volcanic neighbors of Popocatepetl (17,900 feet, 5,450 meters) and Iztaccihuatl (17,300 feet, 5,350 meters). A little more than halfway to Vera Cruz, to the north of the Motorway is Orizaba, a volcano and Mexico's highest peak and the highest mountain between the Yukon and the Andes (18,400 feet, 5,600 meters). Then there is a winding downhill section, with the city of Orizaba at the bottom. Vera Cruz itself is the old colonial city where the Spanish conquistadors landed.

Along the way is Puebla, itself a metropolitan area of 2,000,000. The city has an attractive colonial core and a large cathedral. The descent from Puebla to Mexico City is a challenging driving experience with sharp motorway curves. It is especially enjoyable at night. At one point Deanna woke apparently thinking the end was soon to come. Then she remembered who she was with and went back to sleep. The drive is reminiscent of Adelaide's entry from Murray Bridge or the Washington Luis descent into Rio de Janeiro. The Anchieta from Santos to Sao Paulo is similar, but goes uphill, instead of down.

Traveling around Mexico, one is sure to see Sanborn's in many locations. Sanborn's is a very nice, moderately priced restaurant that also doubles as a souvenir shop, bookstore and newsstand. Deanna and I had a nice meal in Puebla at Sanborn's.

Twenty years ago Mexico City was going to become the largest urban area in the world. So sure of this were some authors that they declared it so, even though the projections were for a decade or two away. Then the earthquake came (1985), the smog became worse and efforts were undertaken by the federal government to decentralize its operations. In the meantime, Mexico City's growth rate has fallen substantially, similar to the decline that has occurred in Sao Paulo. Now, Mexico City will probably never be the largest urban area in the world. That is good. In a nation enjoying the improved affluence that comes with liberalized trade (the Canada-US-Mexico free trade agreement), a slower growth rate should give the area the opportunity to make progress that would be much more difficult if the pre-1985 rates of growth had continued.

Other things are changing in Mexico. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had held the reigns of power since the 1920s. Since that time it had become far more institutional than revolutionary, as happens when power is maintained by one interest for too long (here it would be appropriate to insert the quote by Lord Acton, so I will --- *power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*). We were in Mexico City a few months before the election in which Vicente Fox was elected president and the PRI was given a chance to de-institutionalize.

All in all, there is much to be optimistic about in Mexico City, but there are millions who have not yet shared in the nation's rising prosperity. So long as its government seeks to expand the pie rather than to divide it up differently (in destructive Peronist style), there will be great hope.

Meanwhile, I may ask the city council to rename the street on which I live after my birthday.



Atrium Ceiling: Gran Hotel



Cathedral on Zocalo



South Side of Zocalo from Hotel Room



Street in Centro



Teotihuacan: Pyramid of the Moon



Teotihuacan: Pyramid of the Moon from the Pyramid of the Sun



Teotihuacan



Deanna, Lilia and Araceli at Teotihuacan



Palacio de Bellas Arts



Eastern Suburbs



The Road to Vera Cruz



Orizaba



Veracruz

By Wendell Cox

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