



Floating Paradise The first Europeans who came to America expected to find simple people living in mud huts. Imagine how surprised they must have been when they came upon the great city of Tenochtitlán, with its towering pyramids and its population of more than 100,000.

Tenochtitlán was unlike anything the Europeans had ever seen. The city was built on an island in the middle of a lake. Three wide **causeways** connected the city to the mainland, and a network of canals connected the various parts of the city. The Aztecs traveled around their capital in canoes.

City Tour

Imagine that you have hopped into a canoe to tour Tenochtitlán as it was in the early 1500s. First, you see the so-called “floating gardens” that ring the city. These gardens are not really floating; they just look like they’re floating because they are surrounded on all sides by water. The Aztecs turned parts of Lake Texcoco into raised garden beds. They did this by digging up mud from the bottom of the lake and piling it up in

shallow areas until the mud pile rose up above the waterline. Then they shaped the piles into long, narrow gardens. Because the gardens were surrounded by water, they stayed moist. The Aztecs also kept the soil fertile by scooping new mud onto the gardens every year. The rich soil was perfect for growing corn, squash, and beans.

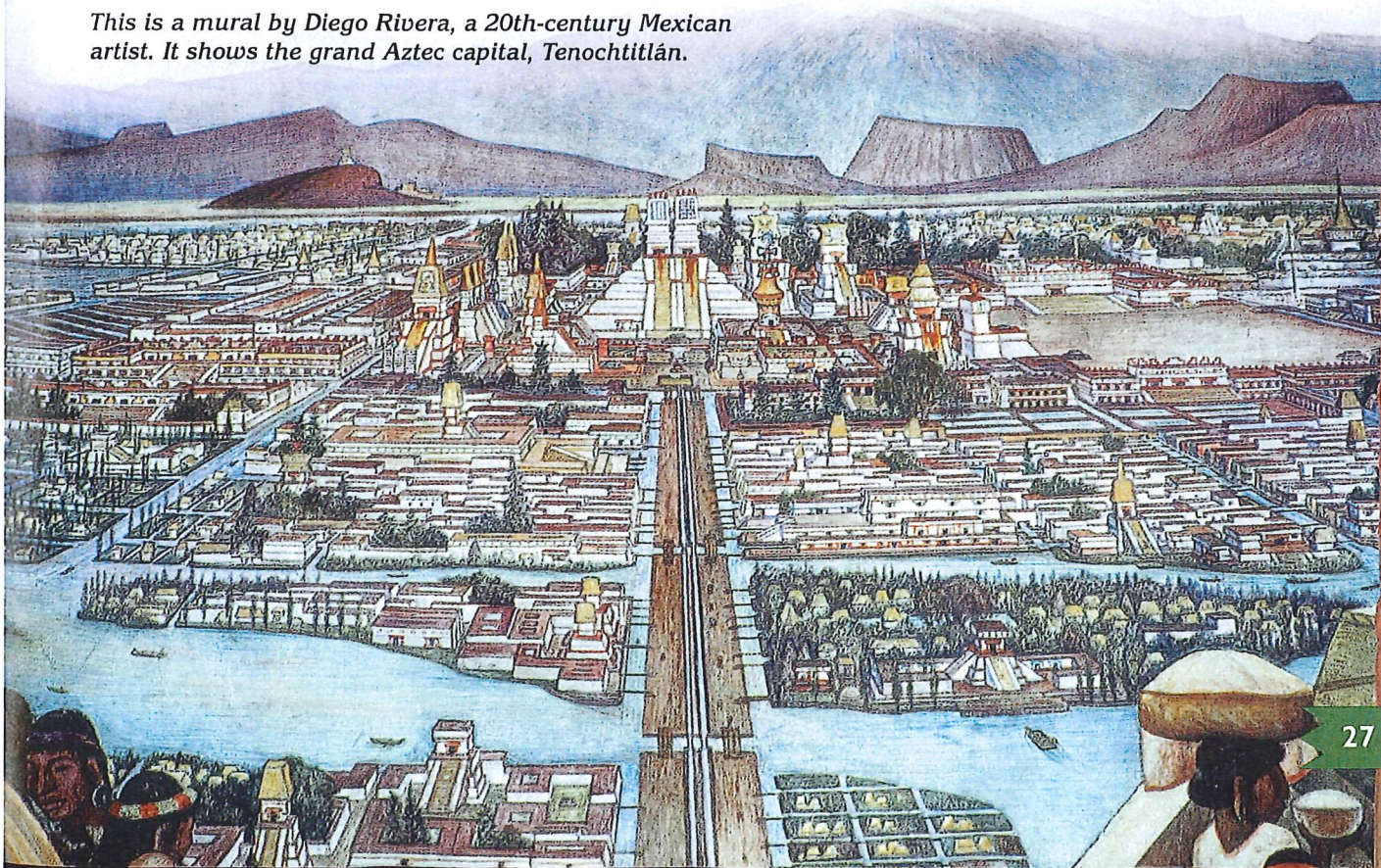
vocabulary

causeway a raised road built over water to connect islands to a mainland

Aztec Home Life

As you glide toward the center of Tenochtitlán, you see Aztec men dressed in loin cloths and cloaks and women in long skirts, blouses, and ponchos. You also see hundreds of

This is a mural by Diego Rivera, a 20th-century Mexican artist. It shows the grand Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán.



one-room houses with thatched roofs and mud walls. Inside one, you meet two girls who are learning weaving from their mother. In another, a mother is punishing an unruly son. She throws a handful of chile peppers on the fire and holds the child near the smoking chiles. The chile smoke stings his eyes and makes him cry. This is his punishment for being disobedient.

A few houses away a wedding is taking place. During the ceremony the bride's blouse is tied to the groom's cloak. This tying together is a symbol of the connection between man and wife.

Suburbs and Schools

You also visit an Aztec school, where boys learn military drills and moral instruction. The students practice with miniature weapons. They throw spears and wield special wooden clubs that are studded with sharp pieces of black rock.

A visit to a school for the sons of Aztec nobles turns out to be a hair-raising experience. You quickly realize that the teachers in this school are Aztec priests. Although you've had some scary teachers over the years, you've never had one who painted his face black, refused to wash his hair for religious reasons, and performed human sacrifices on the weekend!

The priests train students to become priests and scribes. Students study Aztec religion and astronomy and learn how to read and write Aztec hieroglyphs. They also learn how to record information in a special kind of book known as a codex. The priest shows students a sample codex. It is a long strip of tree bark that folds up like an accordion. The pages of the codex are covered with pictures and pictograms. The priest explains that these folding codices (KOH duh seez) are used to make lists of rulers, record payments made by conquered people, and keep track of religious holidays.

The Market

The next stop on your tour is the central market. Here, people trade cacao (chocolate) beans and cotton blankets for other items. The sound of thousands of Aztecs trading in the open air creates a ruckus that can be heard a mile away.

In one corner of the market a man is offering to trade rabbits, deer, and small dogs that are bred for food. Across the way a woman displays pottery. You notice all sorts of other merchandise to be traded here, including sandals, feathers, seashells, turkeys, wood, corn, bananas, pineapples, honeycombs, and fabrics.



One section of the market is set aside for slave trading. Here you see slaves with wooden collars around their necks. Noblemen mill around, inspecting the slaves.

The Ceremonial Center

In the heart of the city is the ceremonial center. Here you find the largest temple in the city, the Great Temple. This massive pyramid is almost 100 yards wide at its base and rises almost 90 feet in the air. The top steps are stained with the blood of human sacrifices. Smaller temples surround the Great Temple, each dedicated to a particular god. In the plaza you also catch a glimpse of the gruesome skull rack displaying the severed heads of victims.

Not far from these religious buildings stands the palace of the Aztec emperor. You will have to admire the palace from the outside: Commoners are not allowed to enter. The palace contains hundreds of rooms and is staffed by more than 1,000 servants.

Montezuma II

In the early 1500s the Aztec emperor was Montezuma II (sometimes written Moctezuma). In the court of Montezuma II, no one was permitted to look the emperor in the eye. When

Montezuma entered the room, even the nobles threw themselves face down to the ground. When he left the palace, he was carried in a fancy **litter**. When he wanted to travel on foot, nobles laid mats on the ground so he would not dirty his golden sandals.

During Montezuma's reign a number of unsettling things happened. There was a drought. A comet appeared in the skies.

Lightning struck one of the temples in Tenochtitlán.

All kinds of fantastic rumors

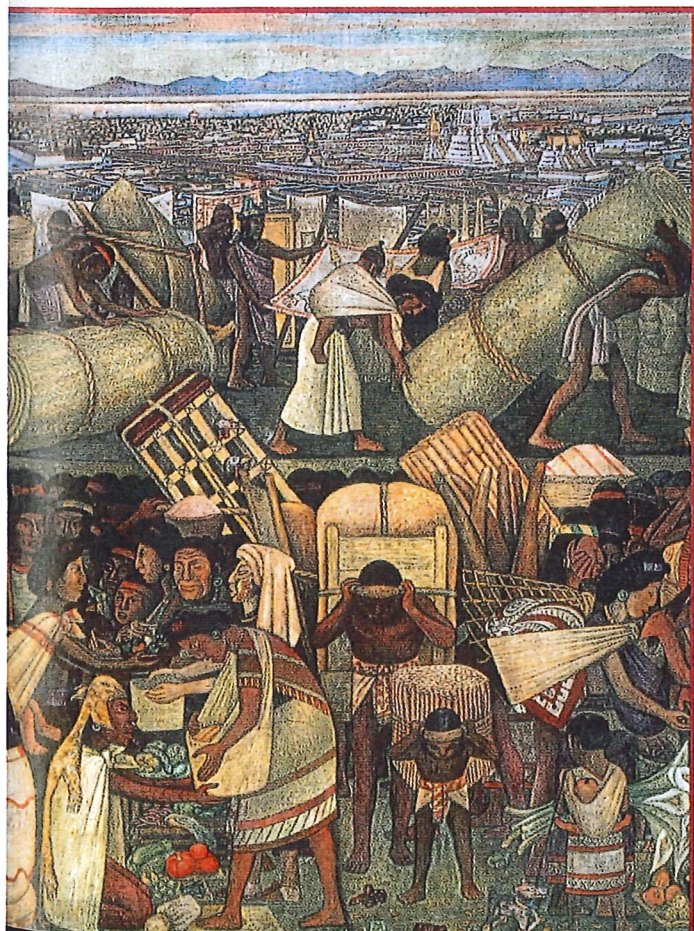
began to circulate. One said that a ghostly woman was walking the streets of the capital at night, wailing, "My children, we must flee far away from this city!"

The Aztecs believed that the world might end at any moment. Montezuma and his priests worried that these strange events might be signs that the gods were angry with the Aztecs. They feared that doomsday might be near.

As it turned out, doomsday was coming, but it was not coming from the sky. It was coming from across the Atlantic Ocean. At that very moment, Spanish soldiers were sailing across the Atlantic in search of riches and glory. In the final lesson of this unit, you will learn what the arrival of these pale-skinned men meant for the mighty Aztec Empire.

vocabulary

litter a chair attached to two beams and carried on the shoulders of several men



Another mural by Diego Rivera shows the lively marketplace at Tenochtitlán where thousands of people gathered to trade.