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For Migrants, New Land of Opportunity Is Mexico

By DAMIEN CAVE

MEXICO CITY — Mexico, whose economic woes have pushed millions of people north, is increasingly becoming an immigrant destination. The country's documented foreign-born population nearly doubled between 2000 and 2010, and officials now say the pace is accelerating as broad changes in the global economy create new dynamics of migration.

Rising wages in China and higher transportation costs have made Mexican manufacturing highly competitive again, with some projections suggesting it is already cheaper than China for many industries serving the American market. Europe is sputtering, pushing workers away. And while Mexico's economy is far from trouble free, its growth easily outpaced the giants of the hemisphere — the United States, Canada and Brazil — in 2011 and 2012, according to International Monetary Fund data, making the country more attractive to fortune seekers worldwide.

The new arrivals range in class from executives to laborers; Mexican officials said Friday that residency requests had grown by 10 percent since November, when a new law meant to streamline the process took effect. And they are coming from nearly everywhere.

Guillaume Pace saw his native France wilting economically, so with his new degree in finance, he moved to Mexico City.

Lee Hwan-hee made the same move from South Korea for an internship, while Spanish filmmakers, Japanese automotive executives and entrepreneurs from the United States and Latin America arrive practically daily — pursuing dreams, living well and frequently succeeding.

“There is this energy here, this feeling that anything can happen,” said Lesley Téllez, a Californian whose three-year-old business running culinary tours served hundreds of clients here last year. “It's hard to find that in the U.S.”

The shift with Mexico's northern neighbor is especially stark. Americans now make up more than three-quarters of Mexico's roughly one million documented foreigners, up from around two-thirds in 2000, leading to a historic milestone: more Americans have been added to the population of Mexico over the past few years than Mexicans have been added to the population of the United States, according to government data in both nations.

Mexican migration to the United States has reached an equilibrium, with about as many Mexicans moving north from 2005 to 2010 as those returning south. The number of Americans legally living and working in Mexico grew to more

than 70,000 in 2012 from 60,000 in 2009, a number that does not include many students and retirees, those on tourist visas or the roughly 350,000 American children who have arrived since 2005 with their Mexican parents.

“Mexico is changing; all the numbers point in that direction,” said Ernesto Rodríguez Chávez, the former director of migration policy at Mexico’s Interior Ministry. He added: “There’s been an opening to the world in every way — culturally, socially and economically.”

But the effect of that opening varies widely. Many economists, demographers and Mexican officials see the growing foreign presence as an indicator that global trends have been breaking Mexico’s way — or as President Enrique Peña Nieto often puts it, “the stars are aligning” — but there are plenty of obstacles threatening to scuttle Mexico’s moment.

Inequality remains a huge problem, and in many Mexican states education is still a mess and criminals rule. Many local companies that could be benefiting from Mexico’s rise also remain isolated from the export economy and its benefits, with credit hard to come by and little confidence that the country’s window of opportunity will stay open for long. Indeed, over the past year, as projections for growth have been trimmed by Mexico’s central bank, it has become increasingly clear to officials and experts that the country cannot expect its new competitiveness to single-handedly move it forward.

“The fact that there is a Mexican moment does not mean by itself it’s going to change our future,” said Ildefonso Guajardo Villarreal, Mexico’s economy minister. “We have to take advantage of the Mexican moment to do what is required of us.” The challenge, he said, is making sure that the growing interest in his country benefits all Mexicans, not just newcomers, investors and a privileged few.

Mexico has failed to live up to its economic potential before. “They really blew a moment in 1994 when their currency was at rock bottom and they’d just signed Nafta,” said Kevin P. Gallagher, a professor of international relations at Boston University, adding that those conditions created a big opportunity for Mexican exports.

But now, he and others contend, Mexico has another shot. If the country of 112 million people can harness the energy of foreigners and newly educated Mexicans, become partners with the slew of American firms seeking alternatives to China, and get them to do more than just hire cheap labor, economists and officials say Mexico could finally become a more equal partner for the United States and the first-world country its presidents have promised for decades.

“This is their second chance,” Professor Gallagher said. “And this time, they really have to capitalize on it.”

Protection to Openness

For most the 20th century, Mexico kept the world at arm’s length. [The 1917 Constitution](#) guaranteed Mexicans would be given priority over foreigners for various jobs, and until the 1980s the country favored policies that protected domestic industry from imports.

Mexico was never totally closed — midcentury wars in Europe and the Middle East sent ripples of immigrants to Mexico, while Americans and Central Americans have always maintained a presence. But it was not a country that welcomed outsiders; the Constitution even prohibited non-Mexicans from directly owning land within 31 miles of the coast and 62 miles of the nation’s borders.

Attitudes began to soften, however, as Mexico’s relationship with the United States began to change. Many economists and social scientists say that closer ties with Mexico’s beloved and hated neighbor to the north, through immigration and trade, have made many Mexicans feel less insular. Millions of emigrants send money earned abroad to relatives in Mexico, who then rush out to Costco for more affordable food and electronics. Even the national soccer team, after decades of resistance, now includes two Argentine-born midfielders.

“It’s a new era in terms of our perspective,” said Francisco Alba Hernández, a scholar at the Colegio de México’s Center for the Study of Urban and Environmental Demographics. “We are now more certain about the value of sharing certain things.”

Like immigrants the world over, many of Mexico’s newcomers are landing where earlier arrivals can be found. Some of the growth is appearing in border towns where foreign companies and [binational families are common](#). American retirees are showing up in new developments from San Miguel de Allende to other sunny spots around Cancún and Puerto Vallarta. Government figures show that more Canadians are also joining their ranks.

But the most significant changes can be found in central Mexico. More and more American consultants helping businesses move production from China are crisscrossing the region from San Luis Potosí to Guadalajara, where Silicon Valley veterans like Andy Kieffer, the founder of [Agave Lab](#), are developing smartphone applications and financing new start-ups. In Guanajuato, Germans are moving in and car-pooling with Mexicans heading to a new Volkswagen factory that opened a year ago, and sushi can now be found at hotel breakfasts because of all the Japanese executives preparing for a new Honda plant opening nearby.

Here in the capital, too, immigrants are becoming a larger proportion of the population and a growing part of the economy and culture, opening new restaurants, designing new buildings, financing new cultural offerings and filling a number of schools with their children. Economics has been the primary motivator for members of all classes: laborers from Central America; middle-class migrants like Manuel Sánchez, who moved here from Venezuela two years ago and found a job selling hair products within 15 days of his arrival; and the global crème de la crème in finance and technology, like Mr. Pace, 26, whose first job in Mexico was with a major French bank just after graduating from the University of Reims.

Mr. Pace, bearded and as slim as a Gauloise, said he moved to Mexico in 2011 because college graduates in France were struggling to find work. He has stayed here, he said, because the affordable quality of life beats living in Europe — and because Mexico offers more opportunity for entrepreneurship.

Sitting at a Belgian cafe with a laptop this spring, speaking Spanish with a lilt, he said he recently opened a **communications business** that was off to a blazing start. One of his partners was French, the other Mexican, and in their first few months of operation, they got more than 30 clients, including VivaAerobus, a discount airline aimed at Mexico's emerging middle class.

More recently, as Mexico's economy has slowed, Mr. Pace said a few clients had canceled planned promotions, but over all his business has grown this year to include work for international brands like Doritos and the beer Dos Equis.

"We're not going back to France," Mr. Pace said. "The business is doing well and we're very happy in Mexico."

Some Mexicans and foreigners say Europeans are given special treatment because they are perceived to be of a higher class, a legacy of colonialism when lighter skin led to greater privileges. But like many other entrepreneurs from foreign lands, Mr. Pace and his partners are both benefiting from and helping to shape how Mexico works. Mr. Rodríguez, the former Interior Ministry official, Cuban by birth, said that foreigners had helped make Mexico City more socially liberal.

And with so many Mexicans working in the informal economy, foreigners have little trouble starting new ventures. Many immigrants say Mexico is attractive because it feels disorderly, like a work in progress, with the blueprints of success, hierarchy and legality still being drawn. "Not everyone follows the rules here, so if you really want to make something happen you can make it happen," said Ms. Téllez, 34, whose food business served more than 500 visitors last year. "No one is going to fault you for not following all the rules."

Mr. Lee said that compared with South Korea, where career options were limited by test scores and universities attended, Mexico allowed for more rapid advancement. As an intern at the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency here, he said he learned up close how Samsung and other Korean exporters worked. "Here," he said, "the doors are more open for all Koreans." He added that among his friends back home, learning Spanish was now second only to learning English.

The results of that interest are becoming increasingly clear. There were 10 times as many Koreans living in Mexico in 2010 as in 2000. Officials at a newly opened Korean cultural center here say at least 12,000 Koreans now call Mexico home, and young Mexicans in particular are welcoming them with open arms: there are now 70 fan clubs for Korean pop music in Mexico, with at least 60,000 members.

A Creative Magnet

Europe, dying; Mexico, coming to life. The United States, closed and materialistic; Mexico, open and creative. Perceptions are what drive migration worldwide, and in interviews with dozens of new arrivals to Mexico City —

including architects, artists and entrepreneurs — it became clear that the country’s attractiveness extended beyond economics.

Artists like Marc Vigil, a well-known Spanish television director who moved to Mexico City in October, said that compared with Spain, Mexico was teeming with life and an eagerness to experiment. Like India in relation to England, Mexico has an audience that is larger and younger than the population of its former colonial overlord. Mr. Vigil said that allowed for clever programming, adding that he already had several projects in the final stages of negotiation.

“In Spain, everything is a problem,” he said. “Here in Mexico, everything is possible. There is more work and in the attitude here, there is more of a spirit of struggle and creativity.”

Diego Quemada-Díez, another Spanish director who said he was the first person in his family to leave Spain since at least the 1400s, moved to Mexico in 2008 after working as a camera operator in Hollywood. He went to film school at the American Film Institute and completed a [short film](#) that won several awards, but he said he moved to Mexico because the United States had become creatively restrictive. He wanted to make a film without famous actors, about Central American immigrants. In Los Angeles, no producers would bite. Here, the government provided more than \$1 million in financing. The film, *La Jaula de Oro*, had its premiere at Cannes this year, with its young actors winning an award.

“Europe feels spiritually dead and so does the United States,” Mr. Quemada-Díez said. “You end up wanting something else.”

He struggled to make sense of Mexico at first. Many foreigners do, complaining that the country is still a place of paradox, delays and promises never fulfilled for reasons never explained — a cultural clash that affects business of all kinds. “In California, there was one layer of subtext,” Mr. Quemada-Díez said. “Here there are 40 layers.”

Mexico’s immigrant population is still relatively small. Some officials estimate that four million foreigners have lived in Mexico over the past few years, but the 2010 census counted about one million, making around 1 percent of the country foreign-born compared with 13 percent in the United States. Many Mexicans, especially among the poor, see foreigners as novel and unfamiliar invaders.

Race, ethnicity and nationality matter. Most of the immigrants who have the resources or corporate sponsorship to gain legal residency here come from the United States and Europe. The thousands of Central American immigrants coming to Mexico without visas — to work on farms or in cities, or to get to the United States — are often greeted with beatings by the Mexican police or intense pressure to work for drug cartels. Koreans also say they often hear the xenophobic refrain, “Go back to your own country.”

Mr. Sánchez, the hair products salesman from Venezuela, said Mexicans who had not been able to rise above their economic class mostly seemed to resent the mobility of immigrants. In a country still scarred by the Spanish conquistadors, he said many of his Mexican neighbors responded with shock when they discovered that his younger sister was studying medicine at Mexico's national university. Not that the quiet scorn is enough to deter him. "I earn more here in a year than I would in 10 years in my own country," he said. "Mexicans don't realize how great their country is."

Many do, of course, especially those with experience elsewhere. Mexico has allowed dual nationality for more than a decade, and among the growing group of foreigners moving here are also young men and women born in Mexico to foreign parents, or who grew up abroad as the children of Mexicans. A globalized generation, they could live just about anywhere, but they are increasingly choosing Mexico.

Some are passionate idealists, like Luna Mancini, 27, a human rights lawyer working for the Supreme Court who was born in Mexico to Italian parents. After growing up in Barcelona, Spain, she returned to Mexico in 2009 because she felt that more could be done in Latin America, with law and with new tools of communication — digital video, social media — that encouraged grass-roots dialogue. Some, especially Mexican-Americans working in Mexico City's hip culinary scene, have come here to reconnect with their roots. Others simply see Mexico as their best option, as an incubator for personal, professional and artistic growth.

Domingo Delaroiere, an architect whose father is French and mother is Mexican, said Mexico's appeal — especially in the capital — was becoming harder to miss. When he came back here last year for a visit, after two and a half years in Paris, he said he was surprised. "Art, culture, fashion, architecture, design — the city was filling up with new spaces, things that are interesting, daring," he said.

He soon decided it was time to move. Compared with Mexico, he said, "Nothing is happening in Paris."