The Aztecs, Part 2
By Jane Runyon

The life of an Aztec could be quite interesting. The people lived on islands located in a swamp. Because land was so limited, they created their own growing spaces by creating floating islands. The islands would be planted with seeds and then pushed out into the water to grow. When the crop needed tending, the island was pulled back to shore. Most of the people of Tenochtitlan lived inside the city. By the 1520's, only about one of every five citizens made their living by growing food. Many of the rest of the people were warriors, craftsmen, or traders.

Warriors were important to the Aztec civilization. They believed in war. They attacked and conquered other tribes all over Mexico. They would rather capture their enemies in battle than kill them. They preferred to take their captives back to the capital and make a few into slaves. Those who weren't slaves were killed in human sacrifices to their gods. This treatment made enemies of many of the tribes in the area. These tribes backed Cortez in his plan to destroy the Aztec nation. When the Aztecs conquered an area far from the main city, they didn't take over its government. They left the original leaders in charge. They did, however, demand that the captured people pay tribute to the Aztecs from one to four times a year. This tribute could be paid in the form of food, cloth, jewels, and even firewood. The Aztecs could get the luxury items they desired in this way. They demanded colorful feathers, decorated costumes, and beads from the conquered towns.

Transportation in the Aztec nation was usually by foot. The Aztecs created an intricate system of roads from place to place. These roads were not large enough for animals or wagons. Messages were sent regularly to distant towns by couriers who ran along the paths. Every six to nine miles, a rest station was built. Here the traveler could eat or sleep. After the Spanish conquered the Aztecs, the roads were no longer maintained. They disappeared from the land.

Education was important to the Aztec people. Children were taught at home until they reached the age of 15. They learned sayings that taught them about the Aztec ways. When the children turned 15, they were ready for school. Both boys and girls were required to attend classes. The course of study was different for each, however. Boys were expected to go into one of two schools. The first school prepared the boys for a life in the military. The second school taught writing, astronomy, and religion. Girls were taught how to take care of a home. They learned about crafts, religion, and how to tend to children.

The Aztec people ate a lot of beans, squash, and maize or corn. They grew small shrimp in the waters of the swamp. They grew chiles and tomatoes which they added to spice up their dishes. Much of their protein came from eating crickets, worms, ants, and the larvae of insects. They grew a plant called maguey. From the maguey they were able to get sugar, fibers for cloth and rope, and a liquid used to make a beverage similar to beer. Cocoa beans were often used as a form of money. They also made a bitter chocolate drink from them. They kept beehives to produce honey.

It is estimated that over 15 million people lived in or near Tenochtitlan before the Spanish arrived. Unfortunately for the Aztecs, the Spanish brought with them a weapon more deadly than guns. The Spanish introduced smallpox to the natives. These natives had never been exposed to a disease like this and had no immunity against it. During the siege of the Spanish in 1520 and 1521, an epidemic of smallpox hit the capital city. It has been estimated that up to half of the citizens died from smallpox during this time. This disease has often been given as a major reason for the conquest of the Spanish over the Aztec people. By 1581, it is estimated that only 2 million Aztecs had survived.

It was mentioned earlier that cocoa beans were sometimes used as money. The Aztecs didn't have an established monetary system. They used the barter system. Two or more people who wanted a product would work out a deal among themselves. You might have corn. A neighbor might have beans. You would work out a trade that was fair to both of you. You might even trade for work. Cocoa beans were often used in this way.

You didn't have much time to live the life of an Aztec. If you lived to the age of thirty-seven, you were considered to be an elder. The life expectancy of an Aztec was pretty short.
It has been hard to learn as much about the Aztec people as some scientists would like. One of the early Aztec rulers ordered that all books be destroyed and replaced with his ideas of what the history had been. When the Spanish conquered Tenochtitlan, they destroyed most of the books that existed at that time. What is known of Aztec life has been passed on from one generation to the next. The capital of Mexico, Mexico City, is now built on the site where Tenochtitlan once stood.

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Questions

1. Tenochtitlan was the Aztec capital city.
   A. False
   B. True

2. At what age did Aztec children begin school?
   A. 2
   B. 5
   C. 15
   D. 6

3. How did people get from place to place in the Aztec Empire?
   A. Cart
   B. Horse
   C. Wagon
   D. Walking

4. How is bartering done?

5. How did the Aztecs treat their enemies during war?

6. What was maguey NOT used for?
   A. Sugar
   B. Rope
   C. Fiber for cloth
   D. Animal food

7. What caused the death of millions of Aztecs?
   A. War
   B. Starvation
   C. Guns
   D. Small pox

8. From what did the Aztecs get protein?
   A. A mine
   B. Milk
   C. Beef
   D. Insects and worms

Describe what you think life would be like as an Aztec.
Do you think everyone should go to school? Who do you think should be educated? Who would you not educate?