

Brazil Country & Culture

Introduction

Brazil is the largest country in South America, and it borders all but two other countries on the continent. It has a tropical climate and a wealth of geographic, biological, and cultural diversity. Brazil is the only Portuguese-speaking country in the Americas, and with a population of more than 200 million people, it is the largest Portuguese-speaking country in the world.

Population: 202,656,788

Language: Portuguese

Capital: Brasilia

Currency: Real

History

Prior to European colonization, Brazil was home to many indigenous people from an estimated 2,000 distinct tribes. Today, millions of Brazilians claim some indigenous ancestry, although many of these traditions and languages have been lost. Modern civilization has been in contact with nearly all isolated indigenous communities in Brazil except for a few in the most geographically remote areas of the country.

Brazil became a colony in 1500, when Pedro Álvares Cabral from Portugal claimed the land. It quickly grew, becoming the wealthiest and largest Portuguese colony. In the early 1800s, France invaded Portugal. Because of this, Portugal's capital and royal court moved to Brazil from 1807 to 1821. The Portuguese royal court returned to Europe after France's invasion, but at that time Brazil decided to declare independence and became a separate kingdom. Following decades of dictatorships and attempted republics, Brazil's current constitution as a federal republic of 26 states was created in 1988.

Brazil is known for growing the most coffee of any country—it produces about a third of the world's coffee, even though coffee is not a native species in Brazil. It was brought by Portuguese colonists, who established large coffee plantations during colonization.

European colonists also brought sugarcane, which continues to be a major industry and export for Brazil. Sugarcane can be used for many things: sugar, molasses, and ethanol, an alcohol that can be used as fuel in vehicles. Brazil and the United States together account for 85 percent of the world's production of ethanol in 2017.

Sugar, coffee plantations, and many other early industries in Brazil heavily relied on slave labor. Over 4 million Africans were brought to Brazil beginning in the 1600s until slavery was abolished in 1888. Displaced Africans brought a variety of religious and cultural traditions from their home tribes, and these influences can be seen and heard throughout Brazilian culture today.



Flag of Brazil.



Map of Brazil.



The Amazon Rainforest. Photo by Neil Palmer (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Geography and Climate

Like the United States, which is only slightly larger than Brazil in total land mass, Brazil is home to many landscapes—coastlines, mountains, rainforests, and highland plains. The equator runs through the northern part of the country, so most of Brazil has a tropical climate with warm temperatures that remain constant throughout the year. In the mountainous areas and farther south in the country, the climate is cooler, with four distinct seasons and temperatures that reach freezing during the winter.

Several major rivers run through Brazil, but the biggest and most significant is the Amazon River. Though the Amazon is the second longest river in the world, it has more water flowing through it than any other river. It is also home to many unique species of fish, birds, insects, and animals. For example, the boto is a river dolphin unique to the Amazon that can reach up to seven feet in length, and the anaconda is a non-venomous water snake that is the largest species of snake in the world.

The Amazon Rainforest spreads across northwestern Brazil. An estimated one in ten of the world's animal species live in this tropical jungle, more than any other rainforest in the world. Human activity over the last ten years—such as clearing forest for farmland—has resulted in the area's worst droughts in a century, which could have devastating consequences for the Amazon wildlife.



Amazon river dolphin. Photo by Jorge Andrade (CC BY 2.0).

People and Culture

Brazil is known worldwide for *Carnival*, a festival that occurs just before the season of Lent in Roman Catholicism, the religion practiced most widely in Brazil. Though the practice has evolved over time, the observance of Lent once meant that people would not eat meat for 40 days prior to Easter. In preparation for this long period of fasting, the day before the beginning of Lent became a day of celebration and food. Today, Carnival lasts two weeks and includes parades, music, and dancing. It is celebrated throughout Brazil and draws millions of visitors from around the world.

Samba is the traditional dance and music of Carnival parades in Rio de Janeiro, the city with the largest and most famous celebration of Carnival. Samba is an important part of Brazilian cultural identity, and it is taught in special schools throughout the year, where students learn a style specific to their neighborhood or region and then participate in samba competitions during the annual celebration.



A samba school parade and competition at the 2017 Carnival celebration. Photo by juniorpetjua.

Food

Brazilian cuisine is influenced by the country's many native and immigrant ethnicities. The staple diet eaten throughout Brazil consists of beans and rice, and the hearty national dish is called *feijoada*, a Portuguese dish that has been adapted in Brazil. The ingredients vary by region, but it is traditionally a stew of black beans, beef, and sausage served with rice. A popular Brazilian sweet is *brigadeiro*, a chocolate candy often served at birthday parties.

Resources

[National Geographic Kids: Brazil](#)

[Encyclopedia Britannica: Brazil](#)



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