

Brazil: Country and 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

Capital: Brasilia

Language: Portuguese

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 American Indian ancestry, although many indigenous traditions and languages have been lost. However, in some of the more geographically isolated areas of Brazil, there are communities who never made contact with Europeans or people of European descent. It is estimated that there are more isolated communities like this in Brazil than in any other country in the world.

Brazil became a colony in 1500, when an explorer claimed the land for Portugal after reaching South America. It became the wealthiest and largest Portuguese colony, and after France invaded Portugal in the early 1800s, Portugal's capital and royal court moved to Brazil from 1807 to 1821. Shortly after the Portuguese royal court returned to Europe, Brazil declared independence and became a separate kingdom in 1822 until a military coup overthrew the monarchy in 1889. 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. However, coffee is not a native species in Brazil. It was brought by Portuguese colonists, who established large coffee plantations.

European colonists also brought sugarcane, which continues to be a major industry and export for Brazil. Though sugar is the most obvious use of sugarcane, it is also used to produce ethanol, which is an alcohol that can be used as fuel in vehicles. Since 1976, all fuel in Brazil is at least partly ethanol.

Sugar and coffee plantations as well as other early industries in Brazil relied on slave labor. Many slaves were brought from Africa beginning in the 1600s until slavery was abolished in 1888. The slaves also brought a variety of African religious and cultural traditions, and these influences can be seen throughout Brazilian culture today.



Flag of Brazil



Coffee beans. Photo by McKay Savage (CC BY 2.0)



Brazil: Country and Culture

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. Because the Amazon regularly floods, it is surrounded by a basin of very fertile land. The Amazon is also home to an incredible number of 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.



Morning in the Amazon. Photo by Mark Goble (CC BY 2.0)

The Amazon Rainforest spreads across northwestern Brazil. An estimated one in ten of the world's 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.

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 Carnival.



Dancers from a samba school during a Carnival parade. Photo by Mark Scott Johnson (CC BY 2.0)

Food

Brazilian cuisine is influenced by the country's many native ethnic and immigrant groups. 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 sweet that in Brazil is *brigadeiro*, a chocolate candy often served at birthday parties.

Resources

National Geographic Kids: Brazil
<http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/countries/brazil.html>

Encyclopedia Britannica: Brazil
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/78101/Brazil>

Learn more at www.artsmidwestworldfest.org