

Brazil

Britannica Elementary Article

Introduction



Flag of Brazil



The largest country in South America, Brazil takes up about half of the continent. It is one of the world's largest and most economically important countries. It is also filled with some of the greatest natural treasures on Earth. In particular, the Amazon River basin, including the Amazon rainforest, is one of the richest areas in the world in terms of plant and animal life. The Iguazú Falls in the south constitute one of the country's most famous natural wonders. Brazil is the only Portuguese-speaking nation in South America. While language distinguishes it from its neighbours, however, the country has much in common historically and culturally with the rest of the region. The capital is Brasília.



The instrumental version of the national anthem of Brazil.

Geography

Brazil covers most of eastern South America and shares borders with every nation on the continent except two - Ecuador and Chile. It is bounded in the east by the Atlantic Ocean. To the south is Uruguay; to the south-west are Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia; to the west, Peru; to the north-west, Colombia; and to the north are Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname and the territory of French Guiana. The country covers an area of 8,547,404 square kilometres (3,300,171 square miles).



The Pantanal region of Brazil is the world's largest wetland.

In such a large country there are many different geographical regions. The two that dominate the landscape are the Amazon River basin in the north and the Brazilian Highlands, or Plateau, in the centre, east and south. The north-eastern coast is flat and dry; the central part of the Brazilian Highlands is mostly grassland; and the south-eastern coast includes narrow plains and scenic mountains. In the central-western part of Brazil is a vast wetland called the Pantanal.



The São Francisco

The Amazon, with its many large tributaries, is the world's largest river system. Other major rivers in Brazil include the Paraguay, the Paraná, the Tocantins, the Araguaia and the São Francisco.

Brazil is the world's largest tropical country. In the rainforest,

River in Brazil features dramatic waterfalls.

temperatures average 27° C (80° F) all year round and rainfall is heavy. South of the Amazon lowland the climate becomes more varied. Along the coast temperatures can reach as low as 14° C (57° F), and during winter there are sometimes freezing

temperatures in the southern hills.

Plants and Animals

The Amazon rainforest has the most varied plant life on Earth, with about 50,000 different species. Individual plants of each species are widely scattered throughout the forest. This helps them survive blight, disease and pests.

The animal life along the Amazon is equally diverse. Because of the tall trees, very little sunlight reaches the ground. Most animals therefore live in the trees, at different heights up to the treetops at about 45 metres (150 feet), where food and sunlight are plentiful. Animals living in the tree canopy include tree frogs and salamanders, monkeys, swarms of insects and hundreds of types of birds. Parrots, macaws and hummingbirds are common. Brazil has tens of thousands of butterflies - more than any other place in the world.

Larger animals in the rainforest include jaguars, tapirs, pumas and sloths. Along the riverbanks can be found the world's largest rodent, the capybara, as well as alligators, boa constrictors and turtles. The river itself contains a wide variety of fish, including electric eels, catfish and the famous piranha. Manatees and freshwater dolphins are also common.

Outside the Amazon basin, in the Pantanal wetland, are great numbers of birds, reptiles, insects and larger animals such as anteaters and armadillos. In the south-eastern part of the country, where many of Brazil's largest cities are located, most of the original forests have been destroyed to make way for the cities. Because of this, few wild animals remain in south-eastern Brazil.

In the drier north-eastern region of Brazil, the plant cover is low and spread out. It is known as *caatinga*, from an Indian term meaning 'white forest'. Thicker woodlands known as *agreste* grow in moister areas, mainly between the *caatinga* and the coast. Covered in thorns, these woods may in places reach heights of up to 10 metres (30 feet), with interlocking branches that make them hard to get through.

People and Culture



Dancers perform at a parade during the annual festival known as Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Brazil's population is a mix of several different ethnic groups. These include descendants of the original Indians, the Portuguese who colonised the region beginning in the 1500s, and the Africans whom the Portuguese brought as slaves to work their plantations and mines. Starting in the mid-1800s, thousands of European settlers from Italy, Germany and parts of eastern Europe began to move to the country. Later, in the early 1900s, large groups of Japanese also moved to Brazil. From the earliest days of Brazil's colonial history, these groups have intermarried, so that today most Brazilians have a variety of ancestors.

The Portuguese language, enriched by Indian and African influences, is the official language of Brazil. Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion, though a number of Indian and African beliefs are also still practised.

More than three-quarters of Brazil's people live in cities and towns, and 20 of those cities have more than one million inhabitants each. These include São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro – two of the world's largest cities. Some of the other major cities are Salvador, Belo Horizonte, Fortaleza, Brasília, Recife and Pôrto Alegre. Most of the rural population is concentrated along the east coast or in the southern highlands, though more and more rural families have moved inland, to the Amazon basin and elsewhere, to clear forests to make room for farms and mines.

Economy

Brazil's economy is mixed, with agriculture, manufacturing and services all being very important. The service sector of the economy, including schools, government offices, banks, hospitals, restaurants and the military, became especially important beginning in the 1900s.

Agriculture

Approximately a quarter of the Brazilian labour force is employed in farming. Only about six per cent of Brazil's land is farmed, and most of that land is in the south-eastern and southern regions. However, the Amazon basin is under a growing threat by farmers, miners and other settlers.

Brazil grows more oranges and coffee than any other country. It is also one of the world's top producers of cassava, sugar cane, bananas, soya beans, cacao, tomatoes and corn. In the Western Hemisphere it is the leading producer of rice and pulses (beans, peas and lentils). It also has great numbers of cattle and pigs. The country exports a variety of oils, waxes, fibres and nuts, such as the cashew and Brazil nut.

Industry

Manufacturing accounts for almost one-third of Brazil's economy. The country produces steel, cars, textiles and clothing, foods, electrical equipment and chemicals. Begun on a small scale to supply the country's internal needs, many of these industries now export their products throughout the Americas and to other parts of the world. The country mines large reserves of iron, manganese, lead, zinc, aluminium ores, quartz crystal, mica, diamonds, semi-precious stones and gold.

Services

The rapidly expanding service sector is Brazil's largest employer, accounting for more than half of the labour force by the beginning of the 21st century. In addition to government jobs, many workers are employed in the hospitality industries (hotels, restaurants and bars) and in repair shops of various kinds.

History

Early History

Before the Portuguese arrived in what is now Brazil, the region was the home of at least two million Indians. Those who occupied the drier lands lived mostly by hunting and gathering. Other groups lived in the rainforests of the Amazon and along the Atlantic coast. Some of these groups were also hunters and gatherers. Many others lived in large villages (as many as 3,000 people) and were expert farmers and fishermen. They also manufactured hammocks, canoes and balsa rafts, blowguns for hunting and warfare, and pottery.

Brazil Under the Portuguese

On 22 April 1500, the navigator Pedro Álvares Cabral claimed the land for Portugal after landing near what is now Pôrto Seguro, Brazil. Soon after the Portuguese began to settle Brazil in the early 1500s, they began importing Africans to work on the sugar plantations and, later, in the gold and diamond mines and on the coffee plantations. By 1822, when the slave trade was abolished, about four million Africans had been brought to Brazil.

Brazil was long neglected by the Portuguese, whose attention was focused on their wealthier colonies in Asia and Africa. As a result the French established settlements at São Luís and Rio de Janeiro, and in 1624 the Dutch occupied the entire north-eastern coast. By then sugar from that area had become important to the Portuguese economy, and non-Portuguese settlers were forced to leave by 1654.

When the French emperor Napoleon threatened to invade Portugal in 1808 the Portuguese royal family fled to Brazil. They ruled from there and made Brazil equal with Portugal in the new United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves. The king returned to Portugal in 1821 but his son, Dom Pedro, stayed in Brazil. The next year Dom Pedro declared Brazil's independence from Portugal and became emperor of the new nation. In 1889 Brazil became a federal republic.

Recent History

Brazil has been one of Latin America's most stable nations. Only three times since independence has Brazil's democratic system been taken over by the military.

Since 1985, Brazil has been under civilian leadership. In 1988, the country adopted a new constitution that guaranteed basic social and labour rights. Brazil continued to struggle to strengthen its economy, which has suffered from long periods of inflation. It has also tried to resolve its serious social problems, but with mixed results, as its population and diversity continue to grow.

In 2010 Brazil elected its first woman president, Dilma Rousseff. Soon after she took office in January 2011, Rousseff had to address one of Brazil's worst natural disasters in decades. Torrential rain created floods and mudslides that left thousands homeless and killed more than 500 in several mountainside communities just north of Rio de Janeiro. Population (2009 estimate), 191,481,000.

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