

Topic page:

Brazil

Port. *Brasil*, officially Federative Republic of Brazil, republic (2005 est. pop. 186,113,000), 3,286,470 sq mi (8,511,965 sq km), E South America. By far the largest of the Latin American countries, Brazil occupies nearly half the continent of South America, stretching from the Guiana Highlands in the north, where it borders Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana, to the plains of Uruguay, Paraguay, and Argentina in the south. In the west it spreads to the equatorial rain forest, bordering on Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia; in the east it juts far out into the Atlantic toward Africa. [Brasília](#) is the capital; the largest cities are [São Paulo](#) and [Rio de Janeiro](#).

Land

Brazil's vast territory covers a great variety of land and climate, for although Brazil is mainly in the tropics (it is crossed by the equator in the north and by the Tropic of Capricorn in the south), the southern part of the great central upland is cool and yields the produce of temperate lands. Most of Brazil's large cities are on the Atlantic coast or the banks of the great rivers.

The rain forests of the [Amazon](#) River basin occupy all the north and north central portions of Brazil. With the opening of the interior in the 1970s and 80s, these rain forests were heavily cut and burned for industrial purposes, farming, and grazing land. Beginning in the late 1980s, popular international movements, along with changes in government policy, began to reduce the rate of deforestation, but by the mid-1990s extensive burning was again occurring. New policies appeared to slow deforestation in the early 21st cent., but it reemerged as a significant problem in late 2007.

The Amazon region includes the states of [Amazonas](#), [Pará](#), [Acre](#), [Amapá](#), [Roraima](#), and [Rondônia](#); its chief city is [Manaus](#). Although it is not as developed as other parts of Brazil, the Amazon region produces timber, rubber, and other forest products such as Brazil nuts and pharmaceutical plants. Gold mining, ecotourism, and fishing are also important. At the mouth of the Amazon is the city of [Belém](#), chief port of N Brazil.

Southeast of the Amazon mouth is the great seaward outthrust of Brazil, the region known as the Northeast. The states of [Maranhão](#) and [Piauí](#) form a transitional zone noted for its many babassu and carnauba palms. The Northeast proper—including the states of [Ceará](#), [Rio Grande do Norte](#), [Paraíba](#), [Pernambuco](#), [Alagoas](#), [Sergipe](#), and the northern part of [Bahia](#)—was the center of the great sugar culture that for centuries dominated Brazil. The Northeast has also contributed much to the literature and culture of Brazil. In these states the general pattern is a narrow coastal plain (formerly supporting the sugarcane plantations and now given over to diversified subtropical crops) and a semiarid interior, or *sertão*, subject to recurrent droughts. This region has been the object of vigorous reclamation efforts by the government.

The "bulge" of Brazil reaches its turning point at the Cape of São Roque. To the northeast lie the islands of [Fernando de Noronha](#), and to the south is the port of [Natal](#). South of the "corner" of Brazil, the characteristic pattern of S Brazilian geography becomes notable: the narrow and interrupted coastal lowlands are bordered on the west by an escarpment, which in some places reaches the sea. Above the escarpment is the great Brazilian plateau, which tapers off in the southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul, where it is succeeded by the plains of the Río de la Plata country. The escarpment itself appears from the sea as a mountain range, generally called the Serra do Mar [coast range], and the plateau is interrupted by mountainous regions, such as that in Bahia, which separates E Bahia from the valley of the São Francisco River.

The chief cities of the Northeast are the ports of [Recife](#) in Pernambuco and [Salvador](#) in Bahia. There are a number of excellent harbors farther south: [Vitória](#) in Espírito Santo; Rio de Janeiro, the former capital, one of the most beautiful and most capacious harbors in the world; [Santos](#), the port of São Paulo and the one of the greatest coffee ports in the world; and [Pôrto Alegre](#) in Rio Grande do Sul.

In the east and southeast is the heavily populated region of Brazil—the states that in the 19th and 20th cent. received the bulk of European immigrants and took hegemony away from the old Northeast. The state of [Rio de Janeiro](#), with the great steel center of [Volta Redonda](#), is heavily industrialized. Neighboring [São Paulo](#) state has even more industry, as well as extensive agriculture. The city of São Paulo, on the plateau, has continued the vigorous and aggressive development that marked the region in the 17th and 18th cent., when the *paulistas* went out in the famed *bandeiras* (raids), searching for

slaves and gold and opening the rugged interior. They were largely responsible for the development of the gold and diamond mines of [Minas Gerais](#) state, the second most populous state in Brazil, and for the building of its old mining center of Vila Rica ([Ouro Prêto](#)), succeeded by [Belo Horizonte](#) as capital. Minas has some of the finest iron reserves in the world, as well as other mineral wealth, and has become industrialized.

Settlement also spread from São Paulo southward, particularly in the 19th and early 20th cent. when coffee from São Paulo's *terra roxa* [purple soil] had become the basis of Brazilian wealth, and coffee growing spread to [Paraná](#). That state, in the west, runs out to the "corner" where Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay meet at the natural marvel of the Iguazu Falls on the Paraná River. The huge Itaipú dam, built from the early 1970s through the mid-1990s by Paraguay and Brazil, provides power for most of southern Brazil. The more southern states of [Santa Catarina](#) and [Rio Grande do Sul](#), developed to a large extent by German and Slavic immigrants, are primarily cattle-raising areas with increasing industrial importance. Frontier development is continuing in central Brazil. The state of [Mato Grosso](#) is still largely devoted to stock raising. The transcontinental railroad from Bolivia spans the southern part of the state. The federal district of Brasília was carved out of the neighboring plateau state of [Goiás](#), to the east, and the national capital was transferred to the planned city of Brasília in 1960.

People

Brazil has the largest population in South America and is the fifth most populous country in the world. The people are diverse in origin, and Brazil often boasts that the new "race" of Brazilians is a successful amalgam of African, European, and indigenous strains, a claim that is truer in the social than the political or economic realm. More than half the population is of European descent, while another 40% are of mixed African and European ancestry. Portuguese is the official language and nearly universal; English is widely taught as a second language. Most of the estimated 150,000 indigenous peoples (chiefly of Tupí or [Guaraní](#) linguistic stock) are found in the rain forests of the Amazon River basin; 12% of Brazil's land has been set aside as indigenous areas. About 75% of the population is at least nominally Roman Catholic; there is a growing Protestant minority.

Economy

Brazil has one of the world's largest economies, with well-developed agricultural, mining, manufacturing, and service sectors. Vast disparities remain, however, in the country's distribution of land and wealth. Roughly one fifth of the workforce is involved in agriculture. The major commercial crops are coffee (Brazil is the world's largest producer and exporter), citrus fruit (especially juice oranges, of which Brazil also is the world's largest producer), soybeans, wheat, rice, corn, sugarcane, cocoa, cotton, tobacco, and bananas. Cattle, pigs, and sheep are the most numerous livestock, and Brazil is a major beef and poultry exporter. Timber is also important, although much is illegally harvested.

Brazil has vast mineral wealth, including iron ore (it is the world's largest producer), tin, quartz, chrome ore, manganese, industrial diamonds, gem stones, gold, nickel, bauxite, uranium, and platinum. Recently discovered offshore petroleum and natural gas deposits could also make the nation a significant oil and gas producer. There is extensive food processing, and the leading manufacturing industries produce textiles, shoes, chemicals, steel, aircraft, motor vehicles and parts, and machinery. Most of Brazil's electricity comes from water power, and it possesses extensive untapped hydroelectric potential, particularly in the Amazon basin.

In addition to coffee, Brazil's exports include transportation equipment, iron ore, soybeans, footwear, motor vehicles, concentrated orange juice, beef, and tropical hardwoods. Machinery, electrical and transportation equipment, chemical products, oil, and electronics are major imports. Most trade is with the United States, Argentina, China, and Germany. Brazil is a member of [Mercosur](#).

Government

Brazil is governed under the 1988 constitution as amended. The president, who is elected by popular vote for a four-year term (and may serve two terms), is both head of state and head of government. There is a bicameral legislature consisting of an upper Federal Senate and a lower Chamber of Deputies. The 81 senators are elected for eight years and the 513 deputies are elected for four years. The president may unilaterally intervene in state affairs. Administratively, the country is divided into 26 states and one federal district (Brasília); each state has its own governor and legislature. The main political parties are the Brazilian Democratic Movement party, the Liberal Front party (now known as the Democrats party), the Democratic Labor party, the Brazilian Social Democracy party, and the Workers party.

History

Early History

There is evidence suggesting possible human habitation in Brazil more than 30,000 years ago, and scholars have found artifacts, including cave paintings, that all agree date back at least 11,000 years. By the time Europeans arrived there was

a relatively small indigenous population, but the archaeological record indicates that densely populated settlements had previously existed in some areas; smallpox and other European diseases are believed to have decimated these settlements prior to extensive European exploration. The indigenous peoples that survived can be classified into two main groups, a partially sedentary population that spoke the Tupian language and had similar cultural patterns, and those that moved from place to place in the vast land. It is estimated that approximately a million indigenous people were scattered throughout the territory.

Whether or not Brazil was known to Portuguese navigators in the 15th cent. is still an unsolved problem, but the coast was visited by the Spanish mariner Vicente Yáñez Pinzón (see under [Pinzón, Martín Alonso](#)) before the Portuguese under Pedro Alvares [Cabral](#) in 1500 claimed the land, which came within the Portuguese sphere as defined in the Treaty of [Tordesillas](#) (1494). Little was done to support the claim, but the name Brazil is thought to derive from the Portuguese word for the red color of brazilwood [*brasa*=glowing coal], which the early visitors gathered. The indigenous people taught the explorers about the cultivation of corn, the construction of hammocks, and the use of dugout canoes. The first permanent settlement was not made until 1532, and that was at [São Vicente](#) in São Paulo. Development of the Northeast was begun about the same time under [Martim Afonso de Sousa](#) as first royal governor. Salvador was founded in 1539, and 12 captaincies were established, stretching inland from the Brazilian coast.

Portuguese claims, somewhat lackadaisically administered, did not go unchallenged. French Huguenots established themselves (1555) on an island in Rio de Janeiro harbor and were routed in 1567 by a force under Mem de [Sá](#), who then founded the city of Rio de Janeiro. The Dutch made their first attack on Salvador (Bahia) in 1624, and in 1633 the vigorous Dutch West India Company was able to capture and hold not only Salvador and Recife but the whole of the Northeast; the region was ably ruled by [John Maurice of Nassau](#). No aid was forthcoming from Portugal, which had been united with Spain in 1580 and did not regain its independence until 1640. It was a naval expedition from Rio itself that drove out the Dutch in 1654. The success of the colonists helped to build their self-confidence.

Farther south, the *bandeirantes* from São Paulo had been trekking westward since the beginning of the 17th cent., thrusting far into Spanish territory and extending the western boundaries of Brazil, which were not delimited until the negotiations of the Brazilian diplomat [Rio Branco](#) in the late 19th and early 20th cent. The Portuguese also had ambitions to control the Banda Oriental (present Uruguay) and in the 18th cent. came into conflict with the Spanish there; the matter was not completely settled even by the independence of Uruguay in 1828.

The sugar culture came to full flower in the Northeast, where the plantations were furnishing most of the sugar demanded by Europe. Unsuccessful at exploiting the natives for the backbreaking labor of the cane fields and sugar refineries, European colonists imported Africans in large numbers as slaves. Dependence on a one-crop economy was lessened by the development of the mines in the interior, particularly those of Minas Gerais, where gold was discovered late in the 17th cent. Mining towns sprang up, and Ouro Preto became in the 18th cent. a major intellectual and artistic center, boasting such artists as the sculptor [Aleijadinho](#). The center of development began to swing south, and Rio de Janeiro, increasingly important as an export center, supplanted Salvador as the capital of Brazil in 1763.

Ripples from intellectual stirrings in Europe that preceded the French Revolution and the successful American Revolution brought on an abortive plot for independence among a small group of intellectuals in Minas; the plot was discovered and the leader, [Tiradentes](#), was put to death. When Napoleon's forces invaded Portugal, the king of Portugal, [John VI](#), fled (1807) to Brazil, and on his arrival (1808) in Rio de Janeiro that city became the capital of the Portuguese Empire. The ports of the colony were freed of mercantilist restrictions, and Brazil became a kingdom, of equal status with Portugal. In 1821 the king returned to Portugal, leaving his son behind as regent of Brazil. New policies by Portugal toward Brazil, tightening colonial restrictions, stirred up wide unrest.

Independence and the Birth of Modern Brazil

The young prince eventually acceded to popular sentiment, and advised by the Brazilian José [Bonifácio](#), on Sept. 7, 1822, on the banks of the Ipiranga River, allegedly uttered the fateful cry of independence. He became [Pedro I](#), emperor of Brazil. Pedro's rule, however, gradually kindled increasing discontent in Brazil, and in 1831 he had to abdicate in favor of his son, [Pedro II](#).

The reign of this popular emperor saw the foundation of modern Brazil. Ambitions directed toward the south were responsible for involving the country in the war (1851-52) against the Argentine dictator, Juan Manuel de Rosas, and again in the War of the Triple Alliance (1865-70) against Paraguay. Brazil drew little benefit from either; far more important were the rise of postwar discontent in the military and beginnings of the large-scale European immigration that was to make SE Brazil the economic heart of the nation. Railroads and roads were constructed, and today the region has an excellent transportation system.

The plantation culture of the Northeast was already crumbling by the 1870s, and the growth of the movement to abolish slavery, spurred by such men as Antônio de Castro Alves and Joaquim [Nabuco](#), threatened it even more. The slave trade

had been abolished in 1850, and a law for gradual emancipation was passed in 1871. In 1888 while Pedro II was in Europe and his daughter **Isabel** was governing Brazil, slavery was completely abolished. The planters thereupon withdrew their support of the empire, enabling republican forces, aided by a military at odds with the emperor, to triumph.

In 1889 the republic was established by a bloodless revolution, with Marshal Manuel Deodoro da **Fonseca** as its first president. The rivalry of the states and the power of the army in government, especially under Fonseca's unpopular Jacobinist successor, Marshal Floriano **Peixoto**, caused the political situation to remain uneasy. The expanding market for Brazilian coffee and more particularly the wild-rubber boom brought considerable wealth as the 19th cent. ended.

Brazil in the Twentieth Century

The creation of rubber plantations in Southeast Asia brought the wild-rubber boom to a halt and hurt the economy of the Amazon region after 1912. Brazil sided with the Allies in World War I, declaring war in Oct., 1917, and shared in the peace settlement, but later (1926) it withdrew from the League of Nations. Measures to reverse the country's growing economic dependence on coffee were taken by Getúlio **Vargas**, who came into power through a coup in 1930. By changing the constitution and establishing a type of corporative state he centralized government (the *Estado Novo*—new state) and began the forced development of basic industries and diversification of agriculture. His mild dictatorial rule, although it aroused opposition, reflected a new consciousness of nationality, which was expressed in the paintings of Cândido **Portinari** and the music of Heitor **Villa-Lobos**.

World War II brought a new boom (chiefly in rubber and minerals) to Brazil, which joined the Allies in 1942, after coming close to backing Germany, and began taking a larger part in inter-American affairs. In 1945 the army forced Vargas to resign, and Gen. Eurico Gaspar Dutra was elected president. Brazil's economic growth was plagued by inflation, and this issue enabled Vargas to be elected in 1950. His second administration was marred by economic problems and political infighting, and in 1954 he committed suicide. Juscelino **Kubitschek** was elected president in 1955. Under Kubitschek the building of Brasília and an ambitious program of highway and dam construction were undertaken. The inflation problem persisted.

On Apr. 21, 1960, Brasília became Brazil's official capital, signaling a new commitment to develop the interior of the country. In 1960 Jânio da Silva **Quadros** was elected by the greatest popular margin in Brazilian history, but his autocratic, unpredictable manner aroused great opposition and undermined his attempts at reform. He resigned within seven months. Vice President João **Goulart** was his successor. Goulart's leftist administration was weakened by political strife and seemingly insurmountable economic chaos, and in 1964 he was deposed by a military insurrection. Congress elected Gen. **Castelo Branco** to fill out his term. Goulart's supporters and other leftists were removed from power and influence throughout Brazil and, in 1965, the president's extraordinary powers were extended and all political parties were dissolved.

A new constitution was adopted in 1967, and Marshall **Costa e Silva** succeeded Castelo Branco. In 1968, Costa e Silva recessed Congress and assumed one-man rule. In 1969, Gen. Emílio Garrastazú Médici succeeded Costa e Silva. Terrorism of the right and left became a feature of Brazilian life. The military police responded to guerrilla attacks with widespread torture and the formation of death squads to eradicate dissidents. This violence abated somewhat in the mid-1970s. Gen. Ernesto Geisel succeeded Médici as president in 1974. By this time, Brazil had become the world's largest debtor.

In 1977 Geisel dismissed Congress and instituted a series of constitutional and electoral reforms, and in 1978 he repealed all emergency legislation. His successor, Gen. João Baptista de Oliveira **Figueiredo**, presided over a period (1979-85) of tremendous industrial development and increasing movement toward democracy. Despite these improvements, economic and social problems continued and the military maintained control of the government. Civilian government was restored in 1985 under José Sarney, and illiterate citizens were given the right to vote. Sarney's reforms were initially successful, but increasing inflation brought antigovernment protests.

In 1988 a new constitution came into force, reducing the workweek and providing for freedom of assembly and the right to strike, and in 1990 President Fernando **Collor de Mello** was elected by popular vote. As a result of increasing international pressure, Collor sponsored programs to decrease the rate of deforestation in Amazon rain forests and to protect the autonomy of the indigenous Yanomami. In 1992, amid charges of wide-scale corruption within his government, Collor became the first elected president to be impeached by the Brazilian congress; he resigned as his trial began, to be replaced temporarily by his vice president, Itamar Augusto Franco. In 1994 the supreme court cleared Collor of corruption charges, but he was barred from public office until 2001.

Fernando Henrique **Cardoso** was elected president in Oct., 1994, and took office in Jan., 1995. The Cardoso government reduced state controls on the economy and privatized government-owned businesses in telecommunications, oil, mining, and electricity. With the help of a new stable currency, Cardoso was able to bring inflation under control; he also signed decrees expropriating new lands from private estates for redistribution to the landless poor.

Reelected in 1998, Cardoso was faced with an economic crisis as budget deficits and a decline in foreign exchange reserves led to currency devaluations and increased interest rates. Late in 1998, he appealed to the International Monetary Fund,

which assembled a \$42 billion aid package for the country. Brazil then began implementing a program of stringent economic policies that restored investor confidence by mid-1999 and led to economic growth. In May, 2000, Cardoso signed a fiscal responsibility law that limited spending by the states; the legislation was a result of fiscal crises in several Brazilian states.

A series of corruption scandals that undermined the governing coalition in early 2001 was followed by an energy crisis that led the government to order widespread cuts in electrical consumption from May until Mar., 2002; the crisis resulted from a drought that reduced the water available to produce hydropower and a decade-long increase in the demand for electricity. Popular dissatisfaction with economic austerities helped fuel the election of Lula da Silva, of the opposition Workers' party (PT), to the presidency in 2002. Da Silva's subsequent inauguration also marked the increasing stability of Brazilian democracy; it was the first transfer of power between elected presidents since 1961. The new president did not deviate greatly from his predecessor's economic program, however, which alienated many supporters on the left.

Da Silva's government was hurt by a campaign finance scandal in early 2004 and by an increase in unemployment, and suffered losses in popular and congressional support, although economic growth in 2004 was strong and unemployment subsequently decreased. In June, 2005, the president was further hurt PT officials were accused of buying the votes of some of its congressional coalition members. The charges, made by the leader of a party in coalition with the president, led to the resignation of the president's chief of staff (who was expelled from the congress late in the year) and of the Workers' party leader and treasurer and forced the president to reshuffle his cabinet to shore up coalition support for his government. A separate bribery scandal led to the resignation of the speaker of the House in September, and in Mar., 2006, the finance minister resigned when he also was ensnared in a bribery scandal. Although the president weathered the scandals, they led to the sidetracking of social-reform legislation he had proposed. Meanwhile, Amazonas state was hit by a severe drought in 2005 when the dry season saw much less rainfall than usual.

A weeklong outbreak of rampant gang violence and, in turn, police vengeance against the gangs erupted in mid-May, 2006, in São Paulo state when a gang sought revenge for a government attempt to break the influence of its imprisoned leaders and members. The violence exposed a variety of ills in Brazil criminal justice system, including corruption in the prisons and lawlessness among the police. São Paulo experienced outbreaks of criminal gang violence in July and August as well, and Rio de Janeiro experienced a series of gang attacks in late December.

The 2006 presidential election, in October, was inconclusive after the first round. Da Silva won a plurality, but failed to win the required majority; his campaign was hurt by the corruption scandals that affected the PT and a late-breaking dirty-tricks scandal involving his campaign organization. The runner-up, Geraldo Alckmin, the former governor of São Paulo state, saw his campaign hurt by the recent violence in the state. In the runoff at the end of the month, da Silva won handily, securing 60% of the vote. Corruption scandals continued to make news in 2007. The most prominent new cases occurred in May, when the energy minister resigned after corruption allegations against him became public and a major Brazilian newsmagazine reported that the Senate president had taken payoffs; toward the end of the year the Senate president resigned, though he remained a senator. In August, the supreme court voted to charge da Silva's former chief of staff and the former Workers' party treasurer with corruption. In Jan., 2008, Brazil became a net creditor nation, in large part due to debt-reduction measures undertaken by da Silva's government.

Bibliography

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Definition

Brazil or brazil from *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*

noun

1.
(also **Brazil nut**) an edible type of long white oily nut with a hard three-sided shell, obtained from a tropical American tree.
2.
(sometimes **Brazil wood**) a type of red wood from any of several tropical trees.

[14c in sense 2: the country of Brazil in S America was so named from the similarity of the red wood found there to that found in the East and known as *brasil*.]



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