



# Brazil

## Introduction

Official Name: Federative Republic of Brazil  
Nationality: Brazilian  
Area: 8.51 million square kilometers (3.25 million square miles)  
Languages: Portuguese (official), Spanish, English, French  
Currency: Real (BRL)  
Location: South America; borders all other South American countries except for Chile and Ecuador

## Statistical Information

Population	190 million
0-14 years	25.3 percent
15-64 years	68.4 percent
65+ years	6.3 percent
Birth rate	16 births/1,000
Death rate	6 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	1.9 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	1.008 percent
Life expectancy	72 years
Literacy	88.6 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	0.7 percent
Below poverty line	31 percent
Ethnic groups	53.7 percent white 38.5 percent mulatto 6.2 percent black 0.9 percent other 0.7 percent unspecified
Religion	73.6 percent Roman Catholic 15.4 percent Protestant 1.3 percent Spiritist 0.3 percent Candomblé/African 7.4 percent nonreligious 1.8 percent other

## Economy

Brazil has a well-developed economy, characterized by large mining, service, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors. The country is currently

expanding its presence in world markets. One of Brazil's biggest economic challenges is its large amount of governmental debt, nearly all of which is domestic. Future steps to relieve the government's debt problem will be critical to the growth of Brazil's economy. Although the economy in general is quite stable, highly unequal income distribution remains a pressing problem; in Brazil, the top 10 percent of people receive 45 percent of the income, while the bottom 10 percent receive less than one percent.

## Government

Capital: Brasilia

Brazil is a federal republic, divided into 26 states and one federal district. The president, both the chief of state and head of government, is elected by popular vote for a four-year term. Suffrage is compulsory for all literate citizens between the ages of 18 and 70. The legislative branch consists of the two-house National Congress, encompassing the 81-seat Federal Senate and the 513-seat Chamber of Deputies. Each state and the federal district receive three seats in the Federal Senate, while representation in the Chamber of Deputies is proportional to each state's population, similar to the United States' House of Representatives.

## Climate

Brazil is mostly tropical; much of the Brazilian interior is deep in the Amazon rain forest. The southern regions of Brazil are temperate.

## Environmental Concerns

Deforestation in the Amazon Basin destroys habitat and endangers innumerable indigenous plant and wildlife species not found anywhere else. Brazil also has a lucrative illegal exotic animal trade. Large cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo have high levels of air and water pollution. Improper mining activities also contribute heavily to water pollution along with land degradation.

## History

Long before the Portuguese arrived, Brazil was occupied by bands of semi-nomadic indigenous peoples. Very little is known about them, since they never developed written records or monumental architecture like the more settled agrarian populations of western South America.

It is generally accepted that the first European to set foot in Brazil was Pedro Álvares Cabral on April 22, 1500. The new Portuguese colony received its name from its major export, a tree known as brazilwood whose trunk contains a valuable red dye. Beginning in the 17th century, sugarcane plantations along the coastline of northeast Brazil became the colony's main industry. At first, colonists attempted to enslave the native South Americans. When that proved ineffective, the colony began importing slaves from West Africa. Conditions on the sugar plantations were bad, and many African slaves tried to escape. Successful escapees formed their own colonies in remote areas; the colony of Palmares was the largest runaway slave settlement in the Americas with around 30,000 inhabitants in the 1670s. These runaway settlements were largely hunted down and destroyed by government and private troops, but Africans eventually became an important sector of the Brazilian population.

During the first two centuries of the colonial period, both the French and the Dutch attempted to settle parts of Brazil. The Dutch were the most troublesome to the Portuguese, as Dutch privateers would plunder the Brazilian coastline and attack Portuguese settlements. They controlled parts of the northeastern coastline from 1630 to 1654. After several years of open warfare with the Portuguese, however, the Dutch formally withdrew in 1661. Neither the French nor the Dutch left any lasting cultural influences in Brazil.

Brazil became the center of the Portuguese empire from 1808 to 1821, when the Portuguese court fled from Napoleon, who had invaded Portugal. In 1821, when the Portuguese king John VI returned his court to Portugal, he left his eldest son Pedro as regent of Brazil. In 1822, Pedro wrote a paper enumerating the reasons for Brazil's secession from Portugal. He instituted a constitutional monarchy and proclaimed himself Emperor Pedro I of Brazil, known commonly as Dom Pedro. Although popular with the common people, Dom Pedro displeased the landed elite, who found him too liberal, and the intellectuals, who felt he was not liberal enough. In 1831 Pedro abdicated his throne and returned to Portugal, leaving his five-year-old son behind as Emperor Pedro II. After nine

years of regencies Pedro II was officially proclaimed emperor in 1840. He initiated parliamentary reign and in 1888 succeeded in abolishing slavery in Brazil. In 1889, however, he was deposed by a military coup, ushering in a republican government.

General Deodoro de Fonseca became the country's first military president on November 15, 1889. The country's name was changed to the Republic of the United States of Brazil, and Brazil became a constitutional democracy. During the period from 1889 to 1930, called the Old Republic, Brazil's main export shifted from sugar to coffee, attracting European immigrants and bolstering the economy.

After a military coup in 1930, civilian Getúlio Vargas took power as a dictator. He was a democratically elected president for a few years, from 1934 to 1937, but then returned to dictatorial rule. He remained in power until his suicide in 1954.

A democratic government prevailed until 1964, characterized by rising levels of populism, nationalism, and developmentalism. From 1961 to 1964, President João Goulart initiated economic and social reforms that failed to satisfy either Brazil's landed elite or the working class. Brazil's economy sagged, and inflation and strike rates skyrocketed. In 1964 the military intervened, taking power in a coup which resulted in direct military government from 1964 to 1985.

Under the military regime, Brazil's economy began to rebound due to economic reforms. By the end of the regime, however, the economy was in shambles. Brazil was saddled with soaring inequalities in the distribution of wealth and a huge national debt. In addition, thousands of Brazilians were deported, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered because of their dissenting political views. Official censorship also drove many artists out of the country.

The country returned to democracy in 1985 with the election of a civilian as president. The series of governments since 1985 have been focused on reforms such as privatization of various formerly government-owned enterprises and the support of free trade.

Economic inequity continued to plague Brazil. In 1990, more than one quarter of all Brazilians were surviving on less than one dollar a day. This paved the way for the election in 2002 of the country's current president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a left-wing politician. During his presidency he has significantly increased the minimum wage and cut

retirement benefits for public servants in an attempt to reduce the drastic economic inequalities. His most famous social program, Fome Zero (Zero Hunger), focuses on providing three meals a day to all Brazilians. Despite accusations of corruption and scandal within his cabinet, Lula managed to win reelection in 2006 by focusing his campaign on his reforms and successes.

### **Ethnic Groups**

Brazil's population is composed of three major groups: indigenous peoples, those of African descent, and those of European descent. These distinctions are misleading, however, since nearly all Brazilians are of mixed descent with the exception of indigenous tribes in the Amazon interior who have had little or no contact with the rest of Brazil.

**Indigenous**—In 1500, when Portugal claimed Brazil as a colony, historians estimate there were around 2,000 indigenous tribes and nations in Brazil, reaching a high of around 4 million people in pre-colonial times. Many of these tribes died out as a result of European colonization or were assimilated into Brazilian populations. A 1997 census estimated the number of indigenous people still living in Brazil at 300,000 people grouped into around 200 tribes. Due to governmental protection, indigenous populations are now increasing. In addition to known indigenous populations, there remain indigenous populations deep within the Amazon rain forest that have never had contact with the outside world. In January 2007 the Brazilian National Indian Foundation reported that it had confirmed the presence of 67 uncontacted indigenous tribes in Brazil.

**African**—The practice of slavery in Brazil led to the forcible importation of many Africans. Estimates of the number of Africans taken to Brazil and enslaved range anywhere from three to four million. Since many Portuguese colonists were single males, many took African or indigenous wives, contributing to Brazil's racial melting pot.

**European**—The majority of Brazilians with European heritage are of Portuguese descent, but the 19th and 20th centuries saw an influx of immigrants from Italy, Germany, and Spain.

Since 1950, there are also growing numbers of Brazilians of Japanese and Korean ancestry.

### **Religion**

Brazil has an incredibly diverse set of religious traditions, including influences from African religions, Christianity, and native Amerindian traditions. Nearly all of these religious traditions have accepted influence from the others, creating new and sometimes contradictory blends.

**Roman Catholicism**—Nearly three-quarters of Brazilians call themselves Roman Catholic; Brazil has the largest number of baptized Roman Catholics in the world. Catholicism was introduced by missionaries traveling with Portuguese explorers in the 16th century. In some areas of Brazil it has been mixed with indigenous religions and African traditions carried over by black slaves during colonial times.

**Protestant**—Brazil has a small percentage of Christians who call themselves Protestant. Protestantism in Brazil is the purest religion in the country, relatively free from syncretism. The designation of Protestant encompasses many different offshoots, such as Pentecostal, Baptist, and Methodist. Also included in this category are Jehovah's Witnesses, of whom there are over a million, and Latter-day Saints, numbering somewhere around 600,000.

**Spiritism**—Also called Kardecist Spiritism, this philosophical doctrine is based on books written by a Frenchman under the pseudonym of Allan Kardec in the 19th century. Spiritism is not considered to be a religion by all of its adherents, although in Brazil it is frequently practiced along with other tribal religions in the African tradition. Spiritism centers around the belief that spirits can communicate with human beings. Séances, "talking boards," and mediums, people whom spiritists believe can communicate with spirits, are all associated with spiritism.

**Candomblé**—Candomblé is a religion with African roots that is practiced primarily in Brazil. Its practices and beliefs were imported from Africa as a result of the slave trade during the colonial period. Candomblé has highly ritualistic practices, including animal sacrifice, healing, dancing, drumming, and possession of participants by Orishas. Orishas are Candomblé deities with individual personalities, ritual preferences, and links to specific natural phenomena. There are various "nations," or sects, of Candomblé, each of which has its own particular set of deities, although deities from one nation may be

taken into another nation as “guest” deities. Candomblé rituals have two parts: the preparation, attended only by priests and initiates, which may last for up to a week before the ceremony; and a public banquet that begins in late evening and lasts until midnight. During the preparation, priests perform animal sacrifices and cowrie-shell divinations. In the public part of the ritual, priests call on the Orishas and fall into a trance-like state, performing ritual dances. A large amount of syncretism can be seen in Candomblé, mainly due to Catholic persecution of followers of Candomblé. The Catholic Church condemned the African-based religion in colonial times, so followers of Candomblé disguised their religion within Catholicism. As a result, certain Orishas have come to be identified with Catholic saints, and many Candomblé altars have crucifixes hanging from them. Many followers of Candomblé also consider themselves Catholic.

**Umbanda**—This religion blends elements of Catholicism, Candomblé, and Kardecist Spiritism. It originated in Brazil in the early 20th century and is growing today. Many Umbandists claim also to be devout Catholics, although the Catholic Church condemns their beliefs. Umbandists believe that spirits are reincarnated, and also that priests and mediums can channel spirits.

**Macumba**—Also called Quimbanda, this Afro-Brazilian religion’s rituals involve necromancy, divination, amulets, and potions. Although it bears resemblance to Candomblé and Umbanda, its rituals are more akin to European witchcraft. The word Macumba is used derogatively in Brazil to refer to any Afro-Brazilian religion associated by outsiders with witchcraft and spirit possession, such as Candomblé.

## **Culture**

Brazilian culture is a vibrant blend of European and African traditions, although much of its cultural influence is Portuguese. There are many cultural traditions which are distinctly Brazilian.

**Body language**—Brazilians use a variety of hand and arm motions to express themselves. The thumbs-up sign is used much the same as it is in the U.S., and is safe to use to express enjoyment or pleasure. The American hand signal for “OK,” however, should never be used in Brazil; it has an obscene and offensive

meaning. Another important hand signal is one used by Brazilian taxi drivers. They will hold their hand out, palm up, put all five fingers together, then open and close them. They use this sign to indicate that their cab is full and cannot accept any more passengers.

**Eating schedule**—Breakfast is a simple affair, usually bread and fruit, with coffee or juice to drink. Lunch is the big meal of the day, and people take their time; Brazilians would be appalled at the idea of a half-hour lunch break. Some Brazilians eat lunch at a restaurant. There are buffet-style restaurants in Brazil that sell lunches by the kilogram; the customer loads up his or her plate, the staff weighs it and charges accordingly. Dinnertime for Brazilians is later than the average American dinner, and is usually a lighter meal than lunch. It is common to see families in restaurants in the late evenings, having dinner.

**Eating habits**—When food is purchased at a snack bar, Brazilians will remain standing there while they eat it. It is considered rude in Brazil to eat or drink on the go. Brazilians never have cups of coffee in their cars, and no one eats or drinks while using public transportation. There are places, such as restaurants, dining rooms, and snack bars, which are designed for eating, and most Brazilians find it rude to eat anywhere else. Also, Brazilians use utensils regardless of what they are eating; there is no concept of “finger food” as in the States. Even things such as pizza are eaten with a fork and knife in Brazil.

**Marriage**—Both civil and religious marriages exist in Brazil, but the number of religious marriages is declining. The poor are less likely to legalize their unions. Divorce was not legalized in Brazil until 1977 due to the strong influence of the Catholic Church.

**Education**—Educational opportunities are tied to social class, race, and geography. A white Brazilian from the southeast is likely to have twice as many years of education as a darker-skinned Brazilian from the northeast. Brazil has never focused on public education, so many middle- and upper-class families send their children to private schools. Two-thirds of all the money Brazil allocates for education is spent on public universities, while public primary and secondary schools receive the other third. As a result, public universities in Brazil are superior to private ones. Although public universities charge no tuition, they

have highly competitive entrance exams that favor students who have received a superior private education.

**Family**—When Brazilians speak of their family, they refer not only to their immediate family, but to their entire extended family group (aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents). They maintain close family ties and interact with their extended family almost daily. Brazilians also remain geographically close to their families, ideally even after they marry.

**Etiquette**—Brazilians have less sense of personal space than Americans do. They are very physically expressive and convey their meanings through touch. Greetings usually consist of a hug or kisses on both cheeks. Brazilians tend to be informal in conversation, and usually address professionals by their title followed by their first name.

**Cafezinho**—The Portuguese diminutive for the word “coffee,” cafezinho refers to a distinctly Brazilian drink. Cafezinho is served in a small, demitasse-sized cup, and is extremely strong. Nearly everyone in Brazil drinks cafezinho, usually more than once a day. Visitors will frequently be offered a cup of cafezinho the moment they walk through the door. Offering cafezinho is a common welcome.

**Futebol**—This is the sport Americans call soccer. Soccer is wildly popular all through Brazil, and Brazilian players dominate the soccer world. Brazil virtually shuts down during the World Cup series, as the nation’s attention focuses on the playing field. Soccer is a source of national pride, and soccer fans will wear green and yellow (the national colors) and wave Brazilian flags whenever Brazil wins the World Cup, which it has more often than any other country.

**Carnaval (Carnival)**—This is the celebration Brazil is perhaps most famous for. Carnaval is a four-day celebration leading up to Ash Wednesday, during which there are parades, formal balls, musical competitions, and costumed dances. Carnaval is characterized not only by its wild and vibrant energy but also by its temporary suspension of reality. For four days, class distinctions and wealth disparities are set aside, and Brazilians can be whomever they want to be through the use of costumes (*fantasia*). During Carnaval time, poverty is forgotten, leisure replaces work, men may dress as women, and the widely

disparate elements of Brazilian culture blend together in a colorful blaze.

### **Dress**

The Brazilian view of nudity and the body in general is very relaxed. The Brazilian concept of a bikini is in general much smaller than its American counterpart, and nearly every woman in Brazil, regardless of age, wears one at Brazil’s public beaches. During Carnaval time, dancers wear scanty costumes and men can be seen dressed as women. In general, be prepared to see a lot of skin in Brazil, especially at the beach or during Carnaval time, right before Lent.

### **Travel/Transportation**

Road conditions vary throughout Brazil. State roads, especially in the south, are generally well-maintained while federal and interstate roads are usually in poor condition. In rural areas, dirt roads prevail, and may become dangerous or impassable in rainy weather.

Municipal, federal, and rural state roads are often full of potholes, with uneven and bumpy surfaces. Municipal roads are frequently poorly marked, with haphazard merge lanes and exits. Many cities and towns have installed speed bumps, which are frequently very severe and unmarked. Many cities also utilize electronic speed traps, which photograph offenders’ cars; Brazilian drivers tend to brake suddenly when encountering these devices. Use caution when driving in Brazilian cities.

Brazilian inter-city roads are among the most dangerous in the world. Nearly all inter-city roads have only two lanes, and are often poorly maintained. Some inter-city roads through the Amazon rain forest are impassable for most of the year. These roads always have heavy commercial truck traffic. Truckers in Brazil have no mandatory rest stops, so they often drive for excessive periods of time, leading to overtiredness and reckless driving.

Brazil has few railroads, so passenger train travel is virtually nonexistent. Private cars or public buses are the best ways to travel in Brazil. Public buses can be well-maintained or mechanically unsound, depending on the route and the cost.

Travelers should apply for an Inter-American Driving Permit if they intend to drive in Brazil. This is a document which allows a motorist to operate a vehicle in Brazil when accompanied by a valid driver’s license from the United States. The permit is not a license in and of itself; it is only valid when accompanied by a valid U.S. driver’s license.

You can apply for an Inter-American Driving Permit in the United States before you travel. The American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are the only organizations in the U.S. authorized by the State Department to issue the permits. The cost of an Inter-American Driving Permit is \$15, and the application will need to be accompanied by two passport-sized photos.

### **Illness/Injury**

Brazilian hospitals and healthcare facilities are generally very good, although they may not be up to U.S. standards outside the major cities. The U.S. State Department suggests the Albert Einstein Hospital in São Paulo.

Many of Brazil's most serious illnesses are transmitted through mosquitoes: yellow fever, dengue fever, and malaria. To reduce the risk of contracting an insect-borne disease, use insect repellent and sleep under treated mosquito netting if you are in a particularly high-risk area.

There are special safety precautions if you intend to travel to remote areas of the Amazon. Make sure your guide is experienced in the Amazon basin and follow the basic safety guidelines the guide sets down.

### **Crime**

Crime levels in Brazil are extremely high and continue to rise. Brazil's murder rate is nearly four times that of the United States, and the rates of other crimes are similarly high. The majority of crimes are never solved.

Street crime is common in Brazil, and foreigners are often targets. This is especially a problem at dusk and in the evening, although it can happen at any time of day. Although most tourist areas in Brazil experience these problems, the worst areas are Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, and Recife.

Crimes against tourists most commonly occur in and around nightclubs, discotheques, beaches, hotels, bars, and other establishments frequented by visitors. The incidence rate of this type of crime is heightened during Carnival time.

Travelers should avoid wearing expensive jewelry or watches, and should not carry valuables. Pickpockets and thieves commonly target airports, hotel lobbies, bus stations, and other public places. Hand-held luggage and laptops are especially vulnerable items.

If using a credit card or ATM card while in Brazil, monitor statements carefully. Many Americans have had their cards cloned or duplicated without their knowledge, resulting in fraudulent charges.

If you are the victim of a theft, you should report it to the Brazilian police and get a copy of the police report even though it is most likely your stolen goods will not be recovered. Possession of a police report will make for a smoother exit from Brazil and will help when filing insurance claims.

Travelers should also be very careful in bars, nightclubs, and discotheques, especially in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, where there have been reports of tourists who were robbed after incapacitating drugs were slipped into their drinks. Never leave anything you are drinking unattended, and be aware of your surroundings.

At night, armed holdups of vehicles at stoplights are a danger. Always lock your doors and keep your windows rolled up at stoplights. In an effort to protect against intersection holdups, motorists in Rio de Janeiro are allowed to treat red lights as stop signs between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.

### **Safety and Security**

Avoid the poorer sections of major cities, known as *favelas*. Crime rates are especially high in these areas and Brazilian police often do not patrol them.

Shark attacks are reported every year at the beaches in the Recife district. Exercise caution and heed signs posted at the beaches indicating a higher-than-average risk of shark attack.

Avoid large gatherings where crowds have gathered to demonstrate or protest. Political and labor demonstrations occur sporadically in urban areas and have the potential to become violent.

Columbian terrorist groups have been known to operate along the borders of neighboring countries. Although there have been no threats specifically against Americans or Canadians, Columbian terrorists have been known to kidnap residents and tourists in border areas. Exercise caution when traveling near the Columbia-Brazil border.

If you are planning to visit remote parts of the Amazon, take care to respect local laws and customs. Make sure the guide you hire is experienced in the Amazon.

**Entry/Exit Requirements**

A passport and visa are required for entry into Brazil. A Brazilian visa must be obtained in advance from the Brazilian embassy. There are no “airport visas”; the Brazilian government will refuse entry to anyone not possessing a valid Brazilian visa. More information can be obtained from the Brazilian embassy website, [www.brasilemb.org](http://www.brasilemb.org).

On January 1, 2004, the Brazilian government began fingerprinting and photographing all U.S. citizens entering Brazil. In the first six weeks of 2004, two American citizens were fined for making obscene gestures while being photographed at a Brazilian port of entry. Travelers are subject to local law, and showing contempt to a government official is a serious offense in Brazil.

**Immunizations**

There are no required vaccinations for foreigners traveling to Brazil, although certain areas of Brazil are at-risk areas for malaria and yellow fever. Consult the CDC website ([www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel)) to determine whether the area of Brazil you are traveling to will put you at risk.

**Special Circumstances**

In the Amazon region, there is special concern regarding the export of biological material, which could have genetic value. Travelers who attempt to remove any type of biological matter (seeds, plant materials, or animals) from Brazil run the risk of being accused of biopiracy, a serious offense in Brazil. If you visit the Amazon basin, do not attempt to take any biological material as a souvenir.

**Electricity**

Brazil uses a variety of electrical voltages, sometimes even within the same city. Most hotels will label their outlets to let guests know what type of power they use. If in a private residence, it is a good idea to ask about the power supply before plugging in an appliance. American appliances are designed to run on 120V/60Hz, but travelers can buy a power converter, making it possible to run an American appliance on a higher voltage circuit. You may also need to purchase a set of adapter plugs, although many Brazilian outlets are designed to accept a variety of plug types. One important thing to remember is that an adapter plug does not contain a power converter, so merely adapting the plug on an appliance to fit into the outlet is not adequate if the outlet has a power supply other than 120V/60Hz.