



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Paraguay is a landlocked country in central South America. Covering 157,006 square miles (406,752 square kilometers), it is slightly smaller than California. About one-third of the country is forest or woodlands, although that amount is dwindling, as deforestation is a significant problem. About 7.5 percent of the land is suitable for cultivation. There are some hilly areas, but few high elevations. The Río Paraguay (Paraguay River) divides the country into two regions. In the northwest lies the sparsely settled arid region known as the Gran Chaco, or simply Chaco. Near the river, the Chaco is mostly wetlands. Southeast of the river is the fertile Paraná Plateau, where the main population and agricultural centers are located. The plateau is subtropical and has a hot, humid, and rainy climate. Because Paraguay is south of the equator, the country's seasonal changes are opposite those in the Northern Hemisphere. The warm season is from September through May. The cooler rainy season is from June through August.

### History

What is now Paraguay was occupied by the Guaraní thousands of years before Europeans arrived. The Guaraní lived in small villages, hunting, growing crops, and at times waging war with neighboring groups. Spanish explorers came to Paraguay in 1524 and established Asunción in 1537. Colonial rule lasted until the 19th century. Paraguay peacefully gained independence in 1811, and José Gaspar

Rodríguez Francia established the first in a long line of dictatorships. He closed the country to the outside world and ruled until his death in 1840.

The next ruler, Carlos Antonio López, began modernizing the country. But in 1865, his son Francisco Solano López took Paraguay into the War of the Triple Alliance against Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. Ultimately, Paraguay lost the war (1870), along with 55,000 square miles (142,450 square kilometers) of territory and as much as two-thirds of its adult male population. Foreign troops stayed until 1876, and Paraguay remained politically unstable for another generation.

In 1932, Paraguay waged the three-year Chaco War with Bolivia over a territorial dispute. Although Paraguay gained two-thirds of the disputed Chaco territory, even more of the country's male population died.

Various dictators and one elected president ruled until 1954, when General Alfredo Stroessner, commander of the army, took control of the Paraguayan government and established a long-term dictatorship. Although his tenure brought some economic development (mainly in the form of three hydroelectric dams), his government was responsible for human-rights violations, corruption, and oppression.

A coup in 1989 ousted Stroessner, and the coup's leader, General Andrés Rodríguez Pedotti, was elected president. President Rodríguez restored civil rights, legalized political parties, and promised not to serve past 1993. He was the first leader to successfully implement many democratic reforms. A new constitution was ratified in June 1992. Rodríguez's administration helped Paraguay emerge from its isolation under decades of dictatorship to join in regional and

international organizations.

The nation's commitment to democracy was tested during an attempted coup in 1996. General Lino Oviedo, who led the coup, was sentenced to 10 years in prison. He ran for the presidency from his prison cell until a Supreme Court ruling forced him to withdraw his candidacy. His running mate, Raul Cubas, ran in his place and won in 1998. Oviedo received a presidential pardon, which was overturned by the Supreme Court, who ordered that Oviedo be returned to jail. In 1999, both Oviedo and Cubas fled the country after allegations that they were involved in the assassination of Paraguay's vice president, who was of an opposing party.

Since 1999 there have been three more presidents, the most recent being Fernando Lugo, a former Roman Catholic bishop who beat the Colorado Party's Nicanor Duarte Frutos's bid for reelection. Although tainted by scandal, the Colorado Party ruled Paraguay for more than 60 years. The president faces serious challenges because of societal unrest related to political corruption and economic hardships.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Paraguay's population of nearly 6.38 million is growing annually at 1.3 percent. Paraguay is the most ethnically homogeneous country in South America, partially due to its many years of virtual isolation. As much as 95 percent of the population is mestizo, or of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage. Pure indigenous Guaraní are few in number today; most live around Asunción or in northern Paraguay. Descendants of German and Italian immigrants have assimilated into mestizo society. Some Koreans (who generally are merchants), Japanese, other Asians, and Arabs also reside in Paraguay, but they have not assimilated into Paraguayan culture. A small number of Mennonites, mostly around Filadelfia, maintain a distinct lifestyle based on their European agricultural heritage. About 62 percent of Paraguayans live in urban areas. Roughly 37 percent of the population is younger than age 15.

### Language

Paraguay has two official languages: Spanish and Guaraní. Spanish is the language of government, urban commerce, and most schooling, but Guaraní is the common language. In rural areas, some people speak only Guaraní, although many adults cannot read or write it. To remedy this, schools now teach students pure Guaraní as it is expressed in literature. Most people also speak or understand Spanish. Portuguese is spoken along the Brazilian border. Paraguay's Spanish is called *Castellano* (Castilian), not *Español*. Paraguayans mix many Guaraní words with Spanish, and many of their vocabulary words differ from those of other Spanish-speaking countries. The Jopará dialect combines Spanish and Guaraní and is used informally throughout Paraguay. They generally use the *vos* rather than the *tú* form for informal address.

### Religion

About 90 percent of Paraguayans are Roman Catholic.

Catholic rituals and holidays play an important role in society. However, various Protestant and other Christian churches also have members in Paraguay. Mennonites practice their own religion. Paraguayan women tend to be more religious than men. Many rural people mix Christian beliefs and traditional beliefs in their worship. Few rural areas have a full-time priest. Instead, people in rural areas hire a priest to come for special occasions such as baptisms, weddings, and religious holidays.

### General Attitudes

Paraguayans are proud of being Paraguayan. They consider their country the heart of South America (*el corazón de Sudamerica*). Paraguayans often define themselves by three aspects of their culture: speaking Guaraní, drinking *yerba* (herb) tea, and eating *mandioca* (cassava). Paraguayans say that Spanish is the language of the head, but Guaraní is the language of the heart. *Yerba* tea has been part of the culture for hundreds of years. *Mandioca* is served at nearly every meal. *Mate* (MAH-tay) leaves are made into a mildly stimulating *yerba* tea. Served cold, it is called *tereré*. Served hot, it is *mate*.

Paraguay is a traditional society. Large families, property, beauty, virility, money, and status are valued. A major goal for many is to not have problems; they desire *tranquilidad* (tranquility). Deviations from traditional values and loud, disruptive behavior are not appreciated. Although most people are very welcoming, generations of isolation and wars with neighboring countries mean the population lacks experience with diverse groups. For example, the mestizo population tends to look down on people with darker skin tones, and there may be negative attitudes toward unfamiliar religions or cultures.

Paraguayans do not appreciate stereotypes about poverty and inferiority in developing countries; they are proud of their particular heritage. At the same time, they feel that other countries take advantage of their nation. As South Americans, Paraguayans do not appreciate U.S. citizens referring to themselves as "Americans." They prefer to call residents of the United States *norteamericanos* (North Americans).

### Personal Appearance

North American and European fashions are worn throughout Paraguay. Cleanliness is emphasized; even the poorest people have clean clothing and clean shoes. Adults do not wear shorts in public. Men generally do not wear sandals. Urban men wear slacks and a shirt for working, but suits and ties are less common because of the hot climate. Clothing is often lightweight; cotton is a popular fabric. Rural men wear work clothes and a hat when farming. A common style of clothing is *ao po'i*, a loosely woven cotton fabric with handstitched lines. Flip flops are worn around the home but are not usually worn in public.

Women generally pay particular attention to their appearance, regardless of economic conditions. Styled hair, manicured nails, jewelry, and makeup are popular in cities but less common in rural areas. Rural women nearly always wear dresses or skirts. Society generally considers beauty an important quality in women.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Spanish greetings, such as *Mucho gusto* (Pleased to meet you), are often used with strangers or for formal situations. Acquaintances might use less formal Spanish, such as *Hola. ¿Cómo estás?* (Hi. How are you?), but friends and relatives more often use Guaraní greetings. The most common phrase is *¿Mba'eichapa?* (pronounced "m-buy-ay-SHA-pah"), which means "How are you?" The reply is almost always *Iporã* (Just fine). In the countryside, it is friendly and polite to call out a greeting to a friend passing one's house. People also greet one another as they pass on the street, whether walking, riding a bicycle, or driving a horse- or ox-drawn cart. Rather than saying *Hola* (Hello) though, in this case people more often say *Adiós* (Good-bye), but drop the *s* and hold out the *o*.

Except in the workplace, men and women always shake hands when greeting, even if for the second or third time in a day. Friends greeting for the first time in a day (if at least one is a woman) will kiss each other on each cheek as well as shake hands. Rural women are more likely to pat the other's arm than kiss. When departing, most people repeat whatever gesture they used in greeting.

Urban men are addressed respectfully by last name, often accompanied by *Don*. For women, *Doña* customarily accompanies the first name. Using a person's professional title also shows respect. Young people refer to each other by first name. In rural areas, *campesinos* (farmers) commonly address one another by first name, preceded by *Ña* (for women) or *Karai* (for men). Paraguayans often greet a respected elder by holding their hands in prayer position and waiting for the elder to bless them by making the sign of the cross (a gesture made by tracing two perpendicular lines in the air, representing a Christian cross).

### Gestures

Perhaps the most common hand gesture is a "thumbs up" (referred to as *al pelo*), which expresses anything positive or encouraging. A person uses the gesture when saying *Al pelo* (meaning that everything is good) or *Iporã* or when answering a question. Wagging a vertical index finger means "no" or "I don't think so." One beckons by waving all fingers of the hand with the palm facing out or down. Winking has romantic, even sexual, connotations; it is not used as a casual gesture.

Paraguayans are soft-spoken; they do not shout to get someone's attention. If making a "tsst tsst" sound does not work, a Paraguayan might whistle or run after the person. Paraguayan men usually give up their bus seats to older or pregnant women or women with babies. Seated bus passengers usually offer to hold packages or children for standing passengers.

### Visiting

Paraguayans visit one another often. Unannounced visits are common and welcome. Paraguayans enjoy hosting friends and new acquaintances. Guests usually are offered

refreshments. If the hosts are eating a meal or drinking *tereré*, they will usually invite visitors to join in. Otherwise, guests might be offered a soft drink (in the city), coffee, juice, or water. Hosts only give *tereré* to unannounced visitors if they want them to stay a while. People often drink the tea from a common *guampa* (container, usually made of wood, cattle horns, or gourds) through a *bombilla* (metal straw). The host passes the *guampa* to one person, who drinks and returns the container to the host, who makes another portion for the next person. Participants enjoy this important social custom while relaxing and conversing.

People often congregate in plazas to relax, chat, and eat. Urban residents like to invite friends to their homes for a meal; rural people generally extend invitations only for special occasions. Guests need not be punctual; being late is accepted and more comfortable for all involved. Guests may be traveling from a variety of distances under a variety of circumstances, so it is accepted that people arrive when they can. Invited dinner guests might bring a gift of wine, beer, or a dessert. Guests usually are expected to stay after a meal for conversation and tea. To make one's presence known at a home, one claps at the gate. It is impolite to enter the yard until invited.

### Eating

Mealtimes and eating habits vary according to region and family. Rather than sit down to a daily family meal, rural people often eat when they can. Farmers might eat lunch in their fields, for example, rather than go home. Urban families usually eat their main meal together.

Many people drink *mate* first thing in the morning and shortly before going to bed. People take breaks for *tereré* a few times a day, often at 9 a.m., 11 a.m., 3 p.m., and 5 p.m. Not only are these breaks an important social custom, but they also help people to stay hydrated in the hot climate. Many people add *yuyos* (pronounced "jew-jos," plants meant to add health benefits and flavor) to their *mate* or *tereré*.

Children might eat before guests (who are not relatives) arrive or are served. Guests usually receive their plates of food fully served. They may take additional portions from serving dishes on the table. Not finishing one's food is considered an insult to the cook. Hosts usually insist their guests take second helpings. Proper etiquette is important in formal situations, including not placing hands in the lap (they rest on the table edge) and waiting for the hosts to begin eating. Napkins are reserved for special occasions. At a typical meal, people wipe their hands on the tablecloth.

Few people, especially in rural areas, drink during meals. At rural parties or celebrations, women eat after men do, or they eat at separate tables. The *asado* (barbecue) is a popular family gathering in many areas.

Street vendors sell a great deal of food on urban streets; eating or drinking in public is common. Sharing food or drink is a common custom. In restaurants, one rarely buys a drink for oneself; one orders a large pitcher for all at the table. Additional rounds are ordered by other diners. When eating a snack or small meal, Paraguayans offer the food to whoever is around. Declining the offer is not considered impolite. In restaurants, service is included in the bill and tips are not

expected.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

Paraguayan society centers on the extended family. It is common for children to live with their parents until they marry. After children marry, families sometimes build an extra room onto the house for the new couple to live in. Three or four generations might live in one home or on one farm. Most children are well behaved and polite. Adult children usually care for their aging parents. The father heads the family, and the mother takes care of the household. Most rural women, like the men, are involved in agriculture. As much as 40 percent of the urban labor force is female. Many people move to urban areas or foreign countries to work, often leaving their children to be cared for by grandparents.

### Housing

Many rural families have electricity, televisions, and radios but do not have other modern conveniences such as plumbing. Water for drinking and cooking is carried from wells or local streams, where laundry and bathing is done. Rural families live in wooden or brick homes with dirt or brick floors and straw or tin roofs. People keep their doors and windows open throughout the day to combat the heat and to welcome visitors. Most families own a dog as protection for the home.

In urban shantytowns, shelters are made from cardboard or tin. However, most urban homes consist of concrete and have tile roofs. Nearly all homes in Asunción have running water and electricity. In rural areas, most homes lack indoor plumbing. Wealthier Paraguayans have hot water heaters; otherwise, showers are heated by manually turning on an electric unit located on the showerhead.

Traditional Catholic families may display small religious statues, artwork, rosary beads, and candles in a corner of the living room or bedroom. Patios and balconies are common and are usually furnished and decorated with plants, providing a comfortable place to relax outside. Women take great pride in their patios and front yards because this is where guests come to drink *tereré* and socialize. Most visits take place entirely in the front yard and patio.

### Dating and Marriage

Most Paraguayan young women have an elaborate party, called a *quinceañera*, at age 15 to celebrate becoming a *señorita*, or young woman. They are then allowed to go to dances, although usually accompanied by their mothers or another family member at *fiestas* (parties). In traditional homes, girls are not allowed to date for another year or two. Young people get to know each other at community *fiestas*, large family gatherings, dances, and so forth. In rural areas, a young man must have permission from a young woman's parents to date her. Generally, the man starts the courtship by visiting the young woman at her home until the family gets to know him. He can only visit her on traditional visiting days (Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday). Later in a relationship, a relative of the young woman might chaperone

the couple. Urban families are generally less strict on these rules, and young people in cities often go to dance clubs without chaperones.

Parents generally expect to approve marriage partners. For a marriage to be legal, the wedding must be performed civilly. In addition, couples may have a church wedding. Paraguayan weddings are elaborate and expensive affairs. Many couples enter into common-law relationships. Others have children together but do not live together.

Infidelity is widespread and generally accepted, particularly for men. Single-parent families are common, and children nearly always live with the mother. Children born out of wedlock are generally well accepted in the community. However, women who give birth to children out of wedlock may be stigmatized, teased, or viewed as untrustworthy.

### Life Cycle

In rural areas, babies are born at local health clinics or at home with the help of a midwife. In cities, most women give birth in hospitals. Catholic babies are baptized soon after birth. Some children are named after the saint on whose day they were born. A child's first birthday is cause for a large celebration. When a person dies, his or her body is kept in the family's home until burial (typically the next day). Relatives, friends, and neighbors come to the home to pay their final respects. After funeral services are held, the funeral party joins in a procession to the cemetery. Friends and relatives of Catholic families are invited to pray the *novena* (nine days of consecutive prayer) for the deceased. After the prayer, the family of the deceased usually provides snacks, such as candy, cookies, or *chipa* (hard cheese bread). The last day of the *novena* is celebrated with a large lunch. Paraguayan cemeteries have mausoleums instead of underground graves. Cemeteries are located on the highest ground in the area so that the dead will be closer to God.

### Diet

Breakfast usually consists of *cocido* (a hot drink of *mate*, cooked sugar, and milk) or coffee, bread and margarine, and rolls or pastries. Lunch (the main meal) is eaten around midday, and dinner often is served after dark when work is finished. The most important staple foods include *mandioca*, *sopa Paraguaya* (cornbread baked with cheese, onions, and sometimes meat), *chipa*, tortillas, and *empanadas* (deep-fried meat or vegetable turnovers). Small rural gardens provide *campesino* families with tomatoes, onions, carrots, garlic, squash, watermelon, cabbage, and other produce. Surrounding trees and bushes provide fruit. Beef is a common part of the adult diet. Paraguayans also eat chicken and pork dishes.

### Recreation

Soccer is the most popular spectator sport in Paraguay; both soccer and volleyball are common participation sports. Urban men often play sports in the evenings. Many enjoy tennis and basketball. Women generally did not play sports in the past, but recently more have started participating. Urban people might go to the theater, the movies, or to other cultural events. Most households have televisions, and families enjoy watching sports, the news, movies, and soap operas. Local

radio broadcasts are popular. Rural and urban people alike relax by drinking *tereré* and *mate* and visiting each other.

### The Arts

Arts reflect the people's Spanish and Guaraní heritage. Paraguay's famous *ñandutí* lace is known for its intricate and delicate designs. Other popular crafts include wood and stone carving, pottery, and embroidery. Several groups have been formed to preserve Guaraní culture.

Popular music tends to have Western influences and includes Latino polkas and ballads. Dancing is a popular form of recreation and shows heavy influence from Spain. Young people enjoy music with a distinct beat (disco, rap, etc.). The Paraguayan harp is a famous instrument.

### Holidays

Paraguayans celebrate New Year's Day, Epiphany (6 Jan.), *Carnaval* (a week of parades and parties in February), Heroes' Day (1 Mar.), *Semana Santa* (Holy Week before Easter), Labor Day (1 May), Independence Day (14–15 May), Mother's Day (15 May), the Chaco Armistice (12 June), *Día de la Amistad* (Friendship Day, 30 July), Founding of Asunción City (15 August, celebrated with large parades), Constitution Day (25 Aug.), Victory of Boqueron (29 Sept.), Columbus Day (12 Oct.), All Saints' Day (1 Nov.), Virgin of Cacupe (8 Dec.), and Christmas. *Semana Santa* is the most important holiday period and is a week for family gatherings.

## SOCIETY

### Government

Paraguay is a constitutional democracy divided into 17 *departamentos* (provinces) and the capital city. It is headed by an elected president who cannot serve two consecutive terms. The president, currently Fernando Lugo, is chief of state and head of government. Legislators in the 45-seat Chamber of Senators and 80-seat Chamber of Deputies are elected to five-year terms. The voting age is 18; the law requires that adults vote until age 75. Paraguay's principal political parties are the Colorado Party and the Authentic Radical Liberal Party.

### Economy

Paraguay's formal economy is based primarily on agriculture; most rural families grow cotton as their primary cash crop, though soybean production is becoming increasingly widespread. Beef is an important export; cattle are raised on expansive ranches usually owned by foreigners. Many Paraguayans work in the country's large informal sector, involving the resale of consumer goods.

The government has sought ways to decrease dependence on cotton, but little progress has been realized. Rural families commonly send one or more members to other countries to work. Political instability, foreign debt, and lack of infrastructure inhibit economic progress. Other challenges include lack of a trained workforce and high unemployment. Deforestation has effectively ruined the potential for a sustainable timber industry. Land redistribution, foreign

investment, and economic diversification are needed to improve conditions.

A small wealthy class has most of the nation's assets. While Paraguay's real gross domestic product has doubled in the last generation, more than a third of the population lives below the poverty line. Most economic opportunities are available only to urban residents.

In an effort to strengthen regional economic activity and boost foreign investment, Paraguay joined the Mercosur trade bloc, which includes Paraguay, Argentina, and Uruguay. However, the economy is still somewhat weak and unemployment remains high. Paraguay's currency is the *guaraní* (PYG). Currency inflation is another major problem: In 1999, one U.S. dollar was worth about 3,000 *guaranís*; in 2006 it was worth about 5,700.

### Transportation and Communications

Paraguay has some paved highways, but most roads are not paved. Buses serve as the main form of public transportation throughout the country. Wealthier urban residents have cars, but rural people often walk. Horse- or ox-drawn carts are common in the countryside. Taxis are available in Asunción. There are several television channels, and a private cable company services Asunción. Both AM and FM radio stations broadcast throughout the country. Most people do not have telephones, but public phones are available and cellular phones are becoming popular. The internet is widely used in the capital and is becoming more common elsewhere.

### Education

Public education is provided free of charge, but students must buy uniforms and are asked to help buy supplies. Schools tend to be crowded. Instruction is usually in Spanish, which can be a hardship on rural children whose primary language is Guaraní. Most children (about 84 percent) complete primary school. Enrollment drops in secondary schools. Opportunities for those who finish school are limited, and many either work in the fields or migrate to other countries to find work. There are some institutions of higher learning, but only a small percentage of the population attends college. The official literacy rate does not reflect reality in rural areas, where the literacy rate is substantially lower.

### Health

The healthcare system includes hospitals and clinics. The smaller the town, the smaller the clinic. Rural health posts are staffed a few days a week by a nurse. Rural people use traditional herbs and cures to treat minor ailments. While Paraguayans value cleanliness, unsanitary conditions such as poor sewage systems contribute to poor health. Malnutrition affects children. Severe dental problems afflict a majority of the population. Other major issues include cardiovascular disease, parasites, and pneumonia.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

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[www.embaparus.gov.py/index\\_english.html](http://www.embaparus.gov.py/index_english.html).

**POPULATION & AREA**

Population \_\_\_\_\_ 6,375,830 (rank=103)  
Area, sq. mi. \_\_\_\_\_ 157,006 (rank=60)  
Area, sq. km. \_\_\_\_\_ 406,752

**DEVELOPMENT DATA**

Human Dev. Index\* rank \_\_\_\_\_ 96 of 182 countries  
Gender inequality rank \_\_\_\_\_ 85 of 155 countries  
Real GDP per capita \_\_\_\_\_ \$4,600  
Adult literacy rate \_\_\_\_\_ 95% (male); 93% (female)  
Infant mortality rate \_\_\_\_\_ 24 per 1,000 births  
Life expectancy \_\_\_\_\_ 73 (male); 79 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).