



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Suriname is located on the northeastern shoulder of South America. With an area of 63,235 square miles (163,820 square kilometers), it is nearly as large as Florida. The population is concentrated along the Atlantic coast, leaving about 80 percent of the country covered with pristine tropical rainforest. The absence of roads and the difficult navigability of Suriname's rivers have long protected rainforest biodiversity in the interior, but the growth of the logging and mining (bauxite and gold) industries now threatens some regions. Rainforest wildlife includes eight primate species, the cock-of-the-rock bird, and the spectacled caiman alligator. Coastal species include the giant leatherback sea turtle.

Lying just north of the equator, Suriname has a tropical climate with little seasonal variation in temperature. Daytime coastal temperatures usually stay between 73 and 88°F (23–31°C) year-round. Each year, Suriname experiences two rainy seasons (December to January, May to mid-August) and two dry seasons (February to April, mid-August to November). Rainfall averages 87 inches (2,200 millimeters) per year.

History

Amerindians were the original inhabitants of what is now Suriname. As many as 70,000 Amerindians lived in the region when European explorers arrived in the 16th century. Warfare, slavery, and disease soon decimated their population.

The English colonized Suriname in the early 17th century but ceded control to the Netherlands in 1667. Sugarcane and coffee plantations, the backbone of the colonial economy, depended almost exclusively on African labor. Roughly 200,000 Africans arrived on slave ships over the next two centuries. Despite harsh punishments, many slaves escaped. Referred to as Maroons, the escaped slaves formed resistance groups in the forested interior. Expensive but ultimately failed attempts to exterminate the groups forced the Dutch to conclude peace treaties with them in the 1760s.

Despite resistance from plantation owners, slavery was officially abolished in 1863 (though the colony's 33,000 slaves were required to work on the plantations another 10 years). To compensate for the resulting labor shortage, the Dutch colonial government recruited contract laborers from China, India, and the Indonesian island of Java. Poor working conditions led many disillusioned laborers to return to their homelands after their contracts had ended, but the majority settled in Suriname and became small-scale farmers, wage laborers, and traders.

After two decades of autonomy, Suriname was granted full independence in 1975. Economic development lagged far behind expectations, so many Surinamers chose not to protest when a February 1980 coup installed a leftist military government. Led by Desi Bouterse, the regime dissolved parliament, suspended the constitution, and, in 1982, executed 15 supporters of the democratic opposition movement. To protest the regime's brutal tactics, the Netherlands cut off aid to Suriname. The Surinamese Liberation Army (SLA), a group of mostly Maroon anti-government insurgents, began strikes on strategic economic targets in 1986. The army

responded with attacks on Maroon villages suspected of supporting the rebels. Many of the Maroon villagers were killed or sought refuge abroad.

Under international pressure, Bouterse allowed elections and a return to civilian rule in 1988. Bouterse seized power again in 1990 but allowed elections the following year. Ronald Venetiaan, the elected president, signed a peace accord with the SLA in 1992 but failed to materialize economic recovery, leading to the election of Jules Wijdenbosch in 1996. Public expenditures under Wijdenbosch were offset by massive price increases. Street protests forced Wijdenbosch to step down, and Venetiaan was voted back into power in 2000. In 2005, after months of political deadlock, Venetiaan was narrowly reelected. A 2007 UN tribunal redrew the maritime borders to give both Suriname and Guyana access to a disputed, potentially oil-rich offshore area. In 2010, Desi Bouterse was elected president. He remains a controversial figure because of his role in past military coups, charges of killing political opponents, and a drug-trafficking conviction in the Netherlands.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Suriname has a population of roughly 486,600. About 90 percent of Surinamers inhabit the coastal plain. Roughly 69 percent live in urban areas, concentrated in the capital city of Paramaribo. Suriname's interior is inhabited primarily by Amerindians and Maroons in small villages. Population growth is low (1.1 percent) due to a high rate of emigration, largely to the Netherlands.

An estimated 37 percent of Surinamers are Hindustanis (descendants of indentured laborers from northern India). About 31 percent are Creoles (descendants of African slaves and people of mixed African-European heritage). The remainder consists of Javanese (15 percent), Maroons (10 percent), Amerindians (2 percent), Chinese (2 percent), and small groups of Lebanese, Europeans, Haitians, and Brazilians. Maroons are divided into six distinct groups: Ndyuka, Paramaka, Aluku, Saramaka, Matawai, and Kwinti. Amerindians include the Arawak and Carib peoples, on the coast, and the Trio and Wayana, in the interior.

Language

Most Surinamese speak Dutch, the official language, but Sranan Tongo (literally, "Suriname language"), a Creole language, is the most common language for informal conversation. English is also widely spoken. It is often called Taki-taki (literally, "Talking"). Most words can be traced to English, Dutch, or Portuguese, while the grammar contains African elements. In everyday speech, people often switch back and forth between Sranan Tongo and Dutch. The elderly are likely to speak Sarnami (among Hindustanis) and Javanese (among Javanese). The Hakka Chinese dialect is spoken among Chinese. Each of the six Maroon groups speaks its own language. In one language group are Ndyuka, Paramacca, Aluku, and Kwinti, while Saramaccan and

Matawai belong to another. The Amerindian groups speak their respective languages: Arawak, Carib, Trio, and Wayana.

Religion

Christians comprise 48 percent of the population, with about half of them Roman Catholic and one-half Moravian Protestant. Most Hindustani people are Hindus (27 percent of the population), while most Javanese and some Hindustanis are Muslims (20 percent). About 5 percent follow indigenous religions.

One of Suriname's most widely practiced indigenous religions is Winti. Originally practiced by Creoles and Maroons, Winti is now also popular among people of other ethnicities. Through music, singing, trances, and rituals, practitioners consult the spiritual world to solve a problem or illness believed to have been caused by supernatural forces. For many Javanese, *agama Djawa* (Javanese religion) is at least as important as Islam. Incorporating elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and animism, this belief centers on the world of spirits, which need to be appeased with food sacrifices (*sadjèn*). Harmony between the spirits and the living can be strengthened or repaired by holding a ritual feast (*slametan*), typically held for births, circumcisions, marriages, and funerals.

General Attitudes

Surinamese take great pride in their nation's cultural diversity and tolerance. Ethnic conflict is rare, and people of different groups routinely socialize and work together. Generosity is also highly valued. When a child does not share, or when someone finishes a plate of food without offering some to others, people call out *Saaang, I gridi!* (You are greedy!). Sharing is also at the root of Maroon and Amerindian subsistence economies. A successful hunter gives everyone in the village a portion; the next time he is less fortunate, he knows someone else will share food with him. Villagers who are considered greedy risk social isolation.

Education and owning a business are seen as high achievements due to the basis they provide for financial independence. Many Surinamese maintain a formal job for its pension and health benefits, while relying on the informal selling of goods and services (a practice known as *hosselen*) to earn extra money without the interference of a boss or the government. *Hosselen*, which derives from the English word *hustle*, may consist of baking for birthday celebrations, selling imported secondhand clothing, repairing bicycles, driving one's private car as a taxi, or other activities. Financial independence has a particular importance for women, as it enhances their power in relationships with men.

Personal Appearance

Most Surinamers wear casual Western clothing. For men, typical attire consists of jeans or cotton trousers with a T-shirt or buttoned shirt. Young women wear the same, as well as more open tops and skirts. Older women usually prefer more formal dresses. Suits and other business attire are common in offices.

Traditional ethnic clothing may be worn on special occasions. The *koto* is a Creole dress consisting of many

layers of colorful fabric; it is accompanied by an *angisa* (head scarf). For Hindustani women, traditional attire consists of a *salwar* (a long blouse worn over long pants with a matching shawl), *gharara* (a long blouse worn over a long skirt with a matching shawl), or *sari* (a brightly-colored wraparound dress). On formal occasions, Javanese women may wear a *sarong* (a long wraparound skirt) with a *klambi koeroeng* (a tight-fitting jacket) and *slendang* (a shoulder drape).

Western clothing is increasingly common among rural Maroons and Amerindians. However, many Maroon women continue to wear a traditional wraparound dress called a *pangi* (in Ndyuka) or *kosu* (in Saramaccan), and some Amerindian men wear the *kamisa* (a cotton loincloth). Trio and Wayana Amerindians may still decorate their faces (and sometimes the entire body) with red and black paint as well as wear head dresses (*pumari*) made of toucan and parrot feathers.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

A woman may greet a friend she has not seen for a while with a hug and three kisses on alternating cheeks. In everyday encounters, however, greetings tend to be informal; people merely exchange oral greetings. In Sranan Tongo one might say “How are you?” with the greetings *Fa waka?* (How are you walking?), *Fa'y tan?* (How are you staying?), or *Fa'y go?* (How are you going?). The reply is *Mi de* (I'm fine) or *A'y go* (It goes). In Dutch, one could start the day with *Goedemorgen* (Good morning) or *Hoe gaat het?* (How's it going?). Young men greet one another by bumping their right fists against the other's and then on their own chests. In Maroon forest communities, one starts the day by greeting neighbors in a lengthy exchange. Such an exchange in Ndyuka would begin with *U-weekfi* (“Good morning,” literally “You have awakened”) and include questions such as *I sibi mooi?* (Did you sleep well?) and *Fa fu den sama?* (How is your family?).

Gestures

Surinamese express dissatisfaction or annoyance by using the *tjuri*: one points the lips and sucks in air between the teeth and lips, while looking away. Women express disapproval with the *skeer ai* (rolling and blinking the eyes) and by drawing the corners of the mouth down and the lower lip out. Some men use a wide variety of whistles, kissing sounds, and “psss-psss” sounds to draw the attention of women. Surinamers also use many gestures common to North Americans, such as tapping the index finger on the forehead to question someone's intelligence.

Visiting

It is common for family and friends to visit one another at home without prior notice. The host always provides something to drink or eat. Visits are not segregated by gender and can last anywhere from five minutes to several hours. If parents bring their children, the children are expected to play quietly and not interfere with the adults' conversation. Visits are usually informal, so the host is not expected to be nicely dressed or keep the visitor entertained. For example, a woman

receiving a female friend may continue cooking, washing clothes, or completing other household tasks while they talk. The friend, in turn, will not wait to be offered a chair and may look in the fridge for something to drink.

Eating

Families do not necessarily sit down together for meals. Children and adults who leave and arrive home at different times will eat whenever they are hungry. Generally, they have a simple breakfast before children go to school and parents leave for work. Lunch is the main meal of the day. It may be eaten at around 1 p.m., though it is more commonly eaten in late afternoon, when children are home from school and many adults end their workday. Around 7 or 8 p.m., people may have a sandwich or another light dinner. Options for dining out include restaurants, cantinas, and inexpensive street stands. Tipping is uncommon, but people may leave the change if they are pleased with the food.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Surinamers tend to live in nuclear units, though expensive housing often forces three or more generations to live in the same household. Elderly parents frequently live with their adult children.

Living together in a common-law relationship is customary among Creole, Maroon, and (to a lesser extent) Javanese couples. A large share of women are single mothers. In Hindustani society, living together and single motherhood are generally frowned upon, though families in Paramaribo tend to be more liberal than families elsewhere. It is not unusual for Surinamese men in common-law relationships to have a *buitenvrouw* (outside woman). This may be a short-term mistress or a more formal partner (with children) over several years. In traditional Maroon culture, a man is permitted to marry as many women as he can support (with their children). However, today, many urban Maroon men have multiple relationships without providing the required support. Women represent one-third of the formal work force, and at least half of the informal work force. Even if she is working full-time, the woman usually takes care of the children and the household. Some men discourage their wives from working outside the home, but economic necessity often overrules such objections.

Housing

City houses are usually freestanding structures of stone and wood. Families often live on the second floor and use the ground level for parking or storage. Inside, even poor people usually have a number of modern conveniences and electronics, including refrigerators, televisions, and DVD players. In the forest, Amerindians and Maroons live in wooden houses with holes for windows. Traditional Maroon houses sometimes have beautifully carved doors. Some or all family members sleep in hammocks.

Dating and Marriage

Youths may go out in couples or with groups of friends. Popular weekend spots in Paramaribo are shopping streets, malls, and river and creek beaches. On weekend nights, young people gather at dance clubs and pool cafés.

Among Creoles and Maroons, sexual relationships among unmarried couples are common and accepted (though more so for boys than for girls). Young Hindustani women are usually more strictly guarded by their families. Hindustani parents may arrange their daughter's marriage to a selected partner, though women from more liberal families select their own partners. Among Javanese families, arranged marriages have fallen out of custom, but the parents of the prospective groom still go to the young woman's parents to ask for her hand in a formal ritual called the *panglamaran*. Although Suriname prides itself on its cultural tolerance, interracial dating can cause friction. For example, even though a Hindustani family may be good friends with their Creole neighbors, they are likely to oppose their daughter dating a Creole man.

Wedding customs differ by religion and ethnicity. Javanese families may celebrate a marriage by holding a dance party called a *tajub*. A traditional Hindu wedding ceremony can last many hours, with prayers, readings, and rituals that include the bride and groom walking seven times around a sacrificial fire with the bridal *sari* and the groom's scarf tied together.

Life Cycle

In accordance with traditions believed to protect against harm, a Surinamese mother keeps her baby inside for eight days after birth and pins an *ogri ai krara* (evil eye bead) on its clothes. To prevent attracting the attention of the evil eye, Maroons express their admiration of newborn babies by calling them ugly (*taku fesi*). Maroons celebrate the passing of the deceased into the world of the ancestors by drumming, dancing, singing, feasting, and telling folktales. Cremation is common among Hindus, who spend the 11 days following a loved one's death performing the *shraddha*, a ritual designed to ensure safe passage to the other world, from which everyone returns in reincarnated form.

Diet

Surinamese of all ethnic groups enjoy cuisine with Asian, African, and European influences. Breakfast often includes milk or tea and a white bread bun with peanut butter, cheese, or jam. Lunch, the main meal, typically consists of rice, vegetables, and meat or fish. Popular vegetables include legumes and tropical vegetables such as *sopropo* (bitter melon). Favorite dishes include *pom* (a Creole dish named for the ingredient *pomtayer*, a local root), *bami* (a Javanese noodle dish), and *roti* (a Hindustani dish of curried chicken, vegetables, and potato, wrapped in a flour pancake). Meals may be accompanied by water, soft drinks, juice, ginger beer, milk (for children), or *stroop* (a sweet drink available in many flavors). The day is concluded with a light meal and tea. Surinamers enjoy tropical fruits such as plantains, mangos, watermelons, and mandarins. Baked goods include *boyo* (a coconut flavored pastry) and *viadu* (a sweet raisin-almond bread).

Recreation

Suriname's most popular sports are soccer, basketball, and swimming. Residents of Paramaribo often spend free time on the beaches of the city's rivers and creeks, where they picnic, swim, and socialize. Surinamers of all groups and ages enjoy listening and dancing to live music, which can be heard in many locations on weekends. Music festivals are common in August and September and during the December holiday season. The majority of Surinamers cannot afford to travel internationally, but the wealthy travel to the Netherlands (usually to visit family) and nearby Caribbean countries.

The Arts

Suriname's vibrant musical styles include *kaseko*, which combines traditional Creole music and Caribbean rhythms (calypso, salsa, and *zouk*) and uses call-and-response singing and percussion instruments such as the *skratsji* (a low wooden bench played with sticks). *Sranan bubbling*, a local variant of reggae music, is popular among Creoles and Maroons. Traditional Javanese music is played by the *gamelan*, an orchestra with gongs, xylophones, drums, and other percussion instruments. Hindustanis enjoy music that combines classical East Indian music with modern house, techno, and rock. These styles may mix traditional instruments (such as the *sitar*, a lute with a long neck) with synthesizers, electric guitars, and other modern electronic instruments. *Hindi-pop*, for example, is a blend of East Indian and traditional Creole music with European pop and Caribbean rhythms. Amerindian music incorporates flutes and percussion instruments such as the *seke-seke* (a closed piece of metal pipe with seeds or gravel, shaken rhythmically). Other popular art forms include theater, painting, and sculpture.

Holidays

National holidays are New Year's Day, Easter (Good Friday–Easter Monday), *Holi Phagwah* (the Hindustani spring festival, March or April), *Id ul Fitre* (the festival to end *Ramadan*, the Muslim month of fasting), Labor Day (1 May), *Keti Koti* (“chains broken,” 1 July), Independence Day (25 Nov.), Christmas (24–25 Dec.), and Boxing Day (26 Dec.).

SOCIETY

Government

The president (currently Desi Bouterse) is chief of state and head of government. The 51-seat National Assembly (DNA) is popularly elected and elects the country's president. Elections are held every five years. The voting age is 18. Many political parties are predominantly comprised of one ethnic group, though membership is not exclusively limited. In the interior, Maroon and Amerindian leaders known as *kapiteins* (chiefs) receive public salaries and have authority over some local matters.

Economy

Mining dominates the economy, with bauxite accounting for 70 percent of export earnings. Large-scale corporate gold

mining is expanding, though most profits flow out of the country. Other formal industries include logging, oil drilling, and food processing. Small-scale gold mining (typically informal and illegal) provides subsistence to thousands of people in the interior. Rice is the major crop, followed by bananas, palm kernels (for oil), coconuts, plantains, peanuts, and citrus fruits. Tourism offers potential for growth.

Suriname enjoys a high standard of living compared to other countries in the region, but large sections of the population remain impoverished, and some educated Surinamese must leave the country to find employment. Development aid remains a vital component of the economy, and the government is a major employer. Most people earn at least part of their income in the informal economy. The currency is the Suriname dollar (SRD). Large purchases (such as cars) are usually made in U.S. dollars or euros.

Transportation and Communications

In urban areas, Surinamese travel by car, minibus, motorcycle, and bicycle. Increases in car ownership have made Paramaribo heavily congested. Privately owned minibuses have no fixed schedules and leave from the stations when they are full. Most interior villages can only be accessed by motorized river canoes (*korjaals*). In the dry seasons, drops in river water levels make some villages inaccessible. Small private planes fly to the interior, but the unpaved airstrips become muddy and unusable during the rainy seasons.

Most urban households have a telephone connection, and most people own a cell phone. Paramaribo internet cafés have reliable service, but internet access is still too expensive for most people. Telephones are almost non-existent in the interior, where people communicate via a radio network that broadcasts news and local information. Several privately-owned daily newspapers are published in Paramaribo. Most urban families have a television; broadcasts include local, Dutch, U.S., and Indian programs. In forest villages (where electricity is rare), a wealthy person with a personal generator may show videos or DVDs for other villagers.

Education

The education system consists of preschool (two years), primary school (six), junior secondary school (four), and senior secondary school (two to four), followed by vocational training or university studies. Primary education is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 12. Families who cannot afford uniforms, books, and the small school fee can apply for public support. At the secondary level, enrollment drops to less than 65 percent. Many students drop out to find work. In remote areas, progression beyond primary school is hindered by limited transportation and lack of qualified teachers. Students in remote areas usually speak a local language at home and may have difficulty understanding classes in Dutch.

Health

Government employees receive public health insurance. Most other people are covered by their employer's health insurance

or have private insurance. Registered low-income families receive free medical care. Public hospitals offer a good standard of health care, though the technology and specialist knowledge are better at more expensive, private hospitals. Virtually all specialists have been educated in the Netherlands. Nurses are locally trained. Both rural and urban residents rely on a variety of forest medicines (*busi dresi*) and home medicines (*oso dresi*) typically linked to traditional religious rituals. Major health concerns are malaria and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	486,618 (rank=169)
Area, sq. mi.	63,235 (rank=91)
Area, sq. km.	163,820

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	94 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	NA
Real GDP per capita	\$9,500
Adult literacy rate	92% (male); 87% (female)
Infant mortality rate	18 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	71 (male); 77 (female)

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