



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Uruguay covers 68,037 square miles (176,215 square kilometers) and is about the same size as Washington State. Bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, the estuary of the Río de la Plata, and two other rivers (Uruguay and Cuareim), Uruguay is nearly enclosed by water. Rolling lowland plains covered with prairie grass extend across most (about 78 percent) of the country. These plains provide excellent pastures for ranching and farming. Forests and hills dominate the northeast region. Uruguay's coastline has several fine beaches. Because the land is free of many natural disasters, it has remained relatively unchanged over time. The climate is temperate and the seasons are opposite those in North America. Temperatures in July average 52°F (11°C); January is the warmest month, with temperatures averaging 73°F (23°C).

History

Originally, Uruguay was home to small groups of indigenous tribes, including the Guaraní and Charrúas. Although the tribes traded with the colonists early on, nearly all the indigenous population was conquered, killed, or driven out during European colonization. Spanish explorers first landed in the area in 1516. The Portuguese founded Colonia del Sacramento in 1680 and maintained a presence in the region until 1726, when the Spanish drove them out and began to colonize, founding Montevideo (MOAN-tay-vee-DAY-oh).

In conjunction with a general uprising throughout South America, a Uruguayan war of independence from Spain

began in 1811. Under the leadership of José Gervasio Artigas, Uruguayans joined forces with Argentina to make significant gains against the Spanish, even achieving unofficial independence for a time. However, in 1816 Portuguese forces from Brazil saw an opportunity to seize unprotected territory, and when Artigas was unable to stop them, he fled to Paraguay. Even so, Artigas is considered the “father of Uruguay.” His efforts inspired another uprising in 1825, when patriots known as the Thirty-Three Immortals rebelled against Portuguese domination and declared independence. Three years later, Brazil granted Uruguay full independence.

Civil war raged between conservative, landowner *Blancos* (Whites) and liberal, urban *Colorados* (Reds) from 1839 to 1851. These two groups dominated Uruguayan politics for much of the 19th and 20th centuries. War with Paraguay (1865–70) was followed by a period of dictatorship. A president, José Batlle y Ordóñez, was finally elected in 1903. Ordóñez was a major force in national politics for two decades and laid the groundwork for a modern democracy. Throughout the first part of the 20th century, successive liberal governments instituted a variety of social programs. Uruguay became one of the first South American countries to legalize divorce (1907), give women the right to vote (1932), and recognize the rights of trade unions (1934).

Severe economic problems in the 1950s and 1960s led to unrest and urban terrorist violence. In the early 1970s, under pressure from the military, President Juan María Bordaberry attempted to restore order by suspending the constitution, dissolving the legislature, and banning all political activity. The military had ousted him from power by 1976. A decade of brutal military rule followed, during which thousands were

detained and tortured. A vote in 1980 determined that the armed forces should relinquish control of the government, but the military refused to recognize the results and appointed General Gregorio Alvarez president in 1981.

Public pressure paved the way for general elections in 1984. The military stepped down when the elected president, Julio María Sanguinetti of the Colorado Party, took office in 1985. The new government restored basic human rights. To avoid clashes with the military, amnesty was subsequently granted to personnel suspected of human-rights violations. The 1989 elections marked the first democratic transfer of power from one elected government to another since 1971.

In 1999, Jorge Batlle Ibañez of the Colorado Party became president at the age of 72. He moved cautiously toward implementing free-market reforms and attracting foreign investment while retaining the country's social programs. However, economic turmoil in Brazil and Argentina hurt the Uruguayan economy, making him unpopular. In 2004, a candidate from the Colorado Party lost presidential elections to liberal politician Tabaré Vázquez. As a member of the Broad Front Coalition, Vázquez ended 170 years of rule by the Colorado and Blanco parties. His goals included alleviating poverty, strengthening the economy, and focusing on human rights. This focus was highlighted in November 2006, when former president Juan María Bordaberry was arrested for involvement in the killing of four political opponents in 1976. He was convicted in 2010 and sentenced to 30 years in prison. Elections in 2010 installed former guerrilla leader José Mujica as president.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Uruguay has a population of 3.51 million. Unlike most other nations in South America, it has a low annual growth rate of roughly 0.4 percent. People of European descent, mostly of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese heritage, account for 88 percent of the total population. This heritage is also dissimilar to most South American countries, where mestizos—people of mixed European and indigenous blood—are usually the majority ethnic group. In Uruguay, mestizos comprise only 8 percent of the population. Four percent of the people are black (descendants of slaves who were imported by the Spanish). More than 90 percent of the people live in urban areas. Montevideo is the capital and largest city, with about 1.5 million people. It is the country's financial, political, and cultural center.

Language

Spanish is the official language of Uruguay and is spoken by nearly the entire population. People in northern towns that border Brazil often speak a mixture of Spanish and Portuguese known as *Portuñol* or *Brazilero*. The Uruguayan accent is quite different from those in other Spanish-speaking countries. Most notable is the Uruguayan “sh” pronunciation of *y* and *ll*. For instance, *yo* (I) is pronounced more like “show” than “yoh.” Common second languages include Portuguese and English. Small minority groups speak Italian

and other languages.

Religion

Uruguay is one of the most secular countries in Latin American. There is no official religion, church and state are strictly separated, and religious freedom is guaranteed. Although 47 percent of the population belongs to the Roman Catholic Church, less than half regularly attend services. Non-Catholic Christians make up about 11 percent, while 23 percent are members of non-denominational churches. Less than 1 percent is Jewish. Just over 17 percent professes no religion.

General Attitudes

Uruguayans often view their country as one of the more culturally advanced nations in South America. They are also proud of their country's traditions and symbols, such as the *gaucho* (a cowboy-like figure), which is regarded as an example of Uruguay's rugged independence. People are conservative and often distrustful of change. Uruguayans can be pessimistic, opinionated, and individualistic, but they do not appreciate aggressiveness or arrogance. Occupation, power, and money may grant social status, but flashy displays of wealth or power are frowned upon. Education is held in high esteem. Parents go to great lengths to ensure their children have good schooling. The democratic view that *Nadie es más que nadie* (No one is better than anyone else) is shared by most. Although the government is considered bureaucratic and inefficient, many people think it should run the economy rather than foreign companies, which are generally viewed with suspicion.

Punctuality is admired but not always practiced. Arriving later than a scheduled time is not improper. However, the more formal an appointment, the more important it is to be on time. Uruguayans are extremely proud of their country, but they are also aware of its problems. They do not appreciate individuals who praise other countries more than Uruguay—not because they dislike other countries but because they do not want to be treated as inferior.

Personal Appearance

Conservative, well-tailored clothing is the general rule in Uruguay. Subdued colors (blue, brown, and gray) are pervasive. Fashion generally indicates a person's social status. European fashions are common. Women do not usually wear much makeup or jewelry. Popular casual clothing includes jeans and T-shirts. In interior (rural) areas, some men wear *bombachas* (loose-legged trousers) with wide belts, boots, and hats or berets.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Men usually greet others with a warm, firm handshake. With family or close friends they may offer an *abrazo* (hearty hug) and occasionally a kiss. Women (and sometimes men) appear to kiss one cheek when they greet each other. Actually, they only brush cheeks and “kiss the air.” If a woman greets a

person with an *abrazo*, it is always accompanied with a “kiss.” Verbal greetings depend on the time of day or situation. *Hola* (Hi) and *¿Cómo estás?* (How's it going?) are common casual greetings. The *usted* form of greeting (*¿Cómo está?*) is used toward older people and to show respect. A greeting that is especially popular in the morning is *Buen día* (Good day). After lunch, *Buenas tardes* (Good afternoon) is used and after dusk, *Buenas noches* (Good evening).

People generally do not greet strangers when passing on the street, particularly in cities. The other person might misunderstand if one were to extend a greeting or even a smile. Rural people are more open and more likely to greet passing strangers with *Chau* (Good-bye). They use *Chau* because they are passing (not stopping) and therefore saying “good-bye” more than “hello.”

One greets all individuals in a small group when one arrives at a social function. Group greetings and farewells are usually considered impolite. In general, people address each other by an appropriate title and surname. For example, *Señor* (Mr.), *Señora* (Mrs.), or *Señorita* (Miss) is used with the family name. Only close friends and family members address each other by given name.

Gestures

To beckon, one might make a “ch-ch” sound. The “ch-ch” sound is used for many purposes, such as getting someone's attention or stopping a bus. People often use hand gestures in conversation. One avoids hiding the hands or fidgeting with them when conversing because such actions can convey unintended messages. Forming a zero with the thumb and index finger is extremely rude. Brushing the back of the fingers under the chin means “I don't know.” Raising one's shoulders quickly can mean “I don't know” or “What's up?” Placing the thumb and index finger on the upper lip in an upward “V” is called a *bigote para arriba* (upward mustache) and means “Everything is all right.” People do not rest their feet on objects in a room.

Visiting

Uruguayans commonly visit for hours at a time in cafés and bars. Visiting friends and relatives at home is important, but busy schedules make this increasingly difficult. People in rural areas often visit in the late afternoon or early evening. It is impolite to visit unannounced during regular mealtimes. Invited guests are not expected to bring gifts to their hosts, but flowers or chocolates are considered a nice gesture. Guests invited to a meal may bring wine or a dessert. Hosts always offer their guests refreshments (soft drinks, tea, coffee, etc.). The length of a visit often depends on the familiarity between host and guest, but a guest may leave comfortably after eating and staying for coffee or tea. It would be rude for a host to suggest that a guest leave.

On weekends or during the summer, hosts may invite lunch guests over for a round of *mate* (pronounced “MAH-tay”). *Mate* is a strong, bitter herbal tea that is drunk from a gourd through a silver straw (*bombilla*). The gourd is filled almost to the brim with *mate* and is repeatedly filled with hot water for each person to finish and pass on to the next. Holding on too long to a passed *mate* is impolite. Many

Uruguayans, particularly men, appreciate having friends come by to discuss sports, politics, or family matters and share a round of *mate*. Women may share *mate dulce* (*mate* with sugar). Sharing *mate* with someone is a sign of acceptance, and strangers are seldom invited to participate in a round. The activity has become a cultural ritual for many. Uruguayans drink *mate* at any time and any place (in a park, walking on the street, etc.).

Eating

Uruguayans eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. During the meal, they keep the hands (not elbows) above the table rather than in the lap. People often wipe their plates clean with bread as they finish eating. Taking second helpings indicates one likes the food. When finished, one places the utensils side by side on the plate. Dinner guests remain at the table until all have finished eating. Using a toothpick in public or reading a newspaper at the family table (at any meal besides breakfast) is impolite.

Although habits in urban areas are changing to accommodate schedules, Uruguayans traditionally eat a light breakfast of coffee and bread. They have their main meal at 1 or 2 p.m. When possible, the whole family will go home for this meal, but few are able to do so. Supper is lighter and later in the evening (8 or 9 p.m.). Children usually have a snack when they get home from school, and adults may snack around 5 p.m.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Strong ties traditionally unite the Uruguayan family. The average family has two children, and nuclear families are the norm. Although extended families usually do not live together, they play a significant role in the social lives of Uruguayans. Though single-parent homes headed by women are now common, traditionally the father presided in the home and this patriarchal order is still present in many two-parent families. A large percentage of women work or study outside the home. Uruguay has more professional women than men; however, men are still expected to earn the better salary. Many couples today share family responsibilities more evenly. Nannies or family members often care for children while the mother is at work. Because of housing costs, some children may remain at home until they marry, regardless of their age. Young university students from the interior might stay with relatives in Montevideo while attending college.

Housing

Traditional dwellings made of clay and straw long ago gave way to modern houses built of brick and tin in the countryside. At the same time, the traditional *estancia* (a parcel of land on which livestock are bred) has been redefined. Now, instead of a big house accommodating a large staff, workers tend to live in more modest homes of their own. Urban architecture reveals European, especially

Spanish and Italian, influences. Most Uruguayans like to live in single-family houses or in highly desirable seaside apartments. In Montevideo, many people live in multi-storey apartment buildings. Others live in apartments that have been converted from houses in which extended families used to live. A strong co-op movement has achieved great success in providing decent housing for the poorer segments of the population.

Dating and Marriage

Dating customs are similar to those in the United States, although young people usually date only one person at a time. Some rural families have retained traditional European customs in which the young man asks the parents' permission to date the young woman for the first time. He must also ask her parents' permission before getting engaged. Young people enjoy dancing, dining out, going to the beach, and watching movies. Many couples live together before marrying, which may happen in their mid- to late twenties or when they decide to have children. Both families play a large role in preparing for a wedding, and they often associate closely after their children are married. The marriage reception usually includes a formal, catered party.

Life Cycle

At least by Latin American standards, Uruguayans are a secular people. They do not insist on rigidly observing all the life-cycle rituals prescribed by the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, many people in Uruguay do baptize their children. Most also mark a girl's fifteenth birthday. It is traditional to celebrate with a party that is part gala, part ball. Modern variations on these festivities include going abroad, often to a ski resort in the mountains of nearby Argentina. Legally, Uruguayans are considered adults at 18.

When a Uruguayan person dies, relatives meet in the funeral home prior to the burial. Some of them escort the coffin to the cemetery. Mourners may dress in black for at least the day of the funeral. After a funeral ceremony, the deceased is buried in a cemetery or, more commonly, placed in an above-ground niche or mausoleum. Between three and five years later, the coffin is exhumed and the bones are placed in an urn, which is returned to the tomb.

Diet

Uruguay produces most of its own food. Wide varieties of meat, fish, vegetables, and fruits are available. Wheat and rice are the principal grains. Beef is consumed in some form almost daily, though chicken (which is cheaper) is replacing beef at some meals. Pasta usually is served with the main meal. Families often eat roasts and stews served with potatoes and carrots. Meat pies are popular menu items. Traditional dishes include *asado* (grilled beef), *chivito* (steak and egg with cheese and mayonnaise), *milanesa* (fried, breaded steak), and *guiso* (ground beef with rice, onion, and egg). Homemade pasta is also common: *tallarines* is like spaghetti, and *ñoquis* is similar to the Italian dumpling dish called gnocchi.

Recreation

Fútbol (soccer) is the national sport. Uruguayans closely follow the country's national team, especially in World Cup competitions. Basketball, volleyball, cycling, swimming, and other water sports are also popular. Rowing is popular among some city dwellers who live near rivers and the coast. *Asados* (barbecues) are common social events. Beaches in the southeast are popular destinations during summer vacations in January. Uruguayans enjoy watching movies or television and attending cultural events.

The Arts

Uruguay has a rich national tradition in the arts and literature. Painting is influenced by international trends but often focuses on local themes such as rural life, history, and the *gaucho*. Rural groups carve *mate* gourds, crochet items, and make textiles.

The dance and the music of the tango are popular among older generations. The *milonga* is another traditional dance. The *candombe*, an African-influenced rhythm, is played with three *tamboriles* (drums) and is often performed at Carnival. Carnival theater productions are performed on *tablados* (stages) throughout Montevideo. Especially popular are *las murgas*, small groups of singers and actors who present parodies of the year's main events.

Holidays

The most important holidays are New Year's Day, *Día de los Reyes* (Day of the Kings, 6 Jan.), Carnival, Easter (including Holy Thursday and Good Friday), Landing of the Thirty-Three Patriots (19 Apr.), Labor Day (1 May), Constitution Day (18 July), Independence Day (25 Aug.), Christmas Eve, and Christmas. Some Catholics honor local patron saints with celebrations and may also celebrate name days, which honor the saint for whom one is named. Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve are celebrated with fireworks and large family parties. The week preceding Easter is also known as *Semana de Turismo* (Tourism Week), when people travel throughout the country and participate in local festivals.

SOCIETY

Government

Uruguay is a democratic republic divided into 19 *departamentos* (provinces). The executive branch is headed by the president, currently José Mujica, and the vice president. The constitution prohibits consecutive presidential terms. The legislature, or *Asamblea General* (General Assembly), has two houses: a 30-seat Chamber of Senators and a 99-seat Chamber of Representatives. Uruguay's major political parties include the Colorado Party, National (Blanco) Party, and Broad Front Coalition. A few smaller parties also have legislative representation. Uruguayan parties had presidential primary elections for the first time in April 1999. Beginning at age 18, all citizens are required to return to their place of birth to vote.

Economy

Uruguay's greatest natural resource is its fertile land, with much of it being used for agriculture and livestock production. Uruguay is a world leader in the production of cattle and wool. Other products include wheat, rice, corn, and sorghum. The industrial sector is tied to agriculture as well. The chief industries are meat processing, wool and hides, footwear, leather apparel, and fish processing. The services sector is growing in importance. Uruguay has been a member of Mercosur (Southern Common Market) since 1995.

The return to democracy and subsequent economic reforms initially spurred economic growth. For example, inflation lowered by more than 100 percent in less than 10 years. However, the Uruguayan economy has struggled since 1999, largely because of economic problems in neighboring Argentina and Brazil. During the past several years, inflation, high unemployment, and low wages have been consistent issues. However, debt restructuring in 2003 gave a boost to the economy, and 2004 saw strong economic growth, which has continued at a lesser rate in subsequent years. Incomes are generally sufficient to meet basic needs. Uruguayan women earn roughly one-third of their nation's income, the largest share among Latin American countries. People generally have access to education and health care. The country's currency is the Uruguayan *peso* (UYU).

Transportation and Communications

Buses are the primary form of public transportation. Many Uruguayans also travel in private automobiles. Taxis are readily available in the cities. Roads are generally developed around major urban areas but are less so in rural areas. Key highways are paved and well maintained. Uruguay has international airway links. The communications system is developing rapidly; the best facilities are in Montevideo. Private telephone lines are accessible and cell phones are widespread. The country has a national radio relay system and a number of radio and television stations. Most people own a radio and television. Several newspapers are widely circulated. Internet use is very common.

Education

Uruguay has one of the highest literacy rates in South America, at about 98 percent. Schooling is compulsory for nine years. Afterward, students may choose to enter a *liceo* (secondary school) or receive technical training at a vocational school. While the government provides education free of charge through postgraduate studies, general economic conditions do not allow everyone to continue their studies. Still, Uruguay boasts a large percentage of professionals (lawyers and doctors, for example). The University of Montevideo and the Catholic University in Montevideo have fine reputations throughout South America.

Health

Health care is available to all citizens. Those of low income receive such care for free, while others are mandated to pay a small percentage of their monthly salary to receive coverage. Uruguay has good health standards, with modern facilities available in larger cities. Health and other social programs are highly valued. Private health organizations with better

facilities also provide care for those who can afford to pay for it. Sanitation is generally good.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	3,510,386 (rank=132)
Area, sq. mi.	68,037 (rank=90)
Area, sq. km.	176,215

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	52 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	54 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$12,600
Adult literacy rate	98% (male); 98% (female)
Infant mortality rate	11 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	73 (male); 80 (female)

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