



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. With 439,736 square miles (1,138,910 square kilometers), Colombia is about the size of California and Texas combined. It is located at the juncture between Central and South America and features an extremely diverse landscape. Divided by three branches of the Andes Mountains, Colombia has low coastal plains on the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean; cool mountain plateaus, valleys, and active volcanoes in the central Región Andina; and an eastern region with plains in the north and tropical jungle in the south. The country also includes several islands. While minor earthquakes are fairly common in Colombia, periodic, more serious tremors have also taken their toll.

There are no distinct seasons in Colombia, but differing elevations experience a variety of temperatures. Medellín, at 5,000 feet (1,524 meters) above sea level, averages 70°F (21°C), while Bogotá, the capital, at 8,000 feet (2,438 meters) averages 55°F (13°C). The coast is hot and humid. With such diversity in temperature, altitude, and rainfall, Colombia produces an incredible variety and abundance of vegetation and animal life. Coffee seeds brought to Colombia by Spanish missionaries found a perfect climate in Colombia. Coffee is one of the country's most important export crops.

History. The history of Colombia before the arrival of Europeans is uncertain, but many groups thrived in the area, producing sophisticated art, stone, and gold work. Chibcha, Carib, Arawak, Tairona, and Muisca peoples were present when the Spanish began settling the region in the 1500s. The area was soon part of New Granada, which also encompassed present-day Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama. Resentment against Spanish rule grew in the late 1700s until 1810, when nationalists claimed independence. However, independence was not

really achieved until Simón Bolívar assembled an army to defeat Spanish troops at the Battle of Boyacá in 1819. He established the new *Gran Colombia* republic, from which Venezuela and Ecuador withdrew in 1830. With U.S. support, Panama declared itself independent in 1903 to make way for construction of the Panama Canal.

Colombia's name, originally the State of New Granada, changed several times before it became the Republic of Colombia. Civil war (*La Violencia*) between conservatives and liberals from 1948 to 1957 led to a constitutional amendment requiring the presidency to alternate between the Liberal and Conservative Parties until 1974. Fully competitive elections have been held since that time.

The Medellín and Cali drug cartels and various guerrilla movements, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and National Liberation Army (ELN), began in the 1980s to cause unrest and violence. Some guerrilla factions eventually joined the democratic process in the 1990 presidential elections. Although drug traffickers killed several presidential candidates and committed violent acts to dissuade Colombians from voting, elections were held and César Gaviria Trujillo was elected president.

Gaviria took a solid stand against drug trafficking and violence. However, to encourage peace, he offered guerrilla groups the right to participate in a constitutional convention if they would disarm and renounce violence. Most groups accepted the offer and began participating in the political process. Gaviria also offered drug traffickers leniency and certain rights if they would confess and renounce their crimes. Not all guerrillas and drug traffickers cooperated with the government, but the violence did diminish for a short time.

Colombia

In 1990, a national assembly—including indigenous groups, guerrilla organizations, and nontraditional political parties—was formed to rewrite the 1886 constitution. The country's new constitution, which encourages political pluralism, the rule of law, and special rights for the long-ignored indigenous and black populations, took effect on 4 July 1991.

However, the rebel uprising has continued. Thousands of people—many of them civilians—have died by violence from these groups. Much of the killing, kidnapping, and extortion involves drug-related lands and moneys. In 1998, the government withdrew thousands of troops and police from the south-east, a FARC stronghold, to meet FARC's precondition for peace talks. Nevertheless, the peace talks faltered, bombings and attacks by guerrilla groups continued, and the government repealed FARC's safe haven.

Elected in 2002 on a promise to use the military to disable rebel groups, Alvaro Uribe has armed peasants, granted security forces new powers, and set up a civilian spy system that includes hefty financial rewards for informants. The violence continues to escalate and in many areas has reached the level of all-out war.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Colombia's population of about 42 million is growing at almost 1.6 percent annually. The majority of Colombians live in the west; much of the southeast is covered by jungle. The growth rate has been decreasing as Colombians flee the drugs and violence. People of mixed Spanish, indigenous, and black origins compose 58 percent of the population. Caucasians account for 20 percent. Others include a black-Caucasian mix (14 percent), black (4 percent), an indigenous-black mix (3 percent), and indigenous (1 percent). The black population descends from African slaves imported during the colonial era. Many Africans mixed with other peoples, especially after slavery was abolished in 1851. Black Colombians generally live along the coasts, comprising the majority of some cities, including Quibdó. The largest metropolitan areas are Bogotá, Medellín, Baranquilla, and Cali. Approximately 75 percent of the population lives in urban areas, and about one-third of the population is younger than age 15.

Language. The majority of Colombians speak Spanish, the country's official language. Most indigenous ethnic groups have their own languages. Among 80 groups, 40 languages are spoken. Dialects spoken by some black groups reflect their African roots. Many people from the San Andrés and Providencia Islands in the Caribbean speak Creole. Ethnic languages and dialects share official status with Spanish in certain areas, where formal education must be bilingual.

Religion. While Colombia's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, nearly 90 percent of the people belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Protestant and other Christian organizations have small but growing memberships. Many indigenous and black peoples retain beliefs from non-Christian, traditional worship systems. Although society is becoming more secularized, Catholicism remains an important cultural influence. For example, Catholic religious instruction, though no longer mandatory, still takes place in most public schools. Colombians commonly express their faith with phrases like *Si Dios quiere* (God willing) and *Que sea lo que Dios quiera* (Whatever God wills).

General Attitudes. Colombians take pride in their rich and diverse culture. The country's various geographic regions, climates, and subcultures enrich its food, music, dance, and art.

Colombians are also proud of their *rumbero* spirit—their ability to both work and play hard. The family is a great source of pride, and family solidarity and mutual support are important. The individual is also important and takes precedence over timetables and punctuality. Most people value honesty, loyalty, a good sense of humor, and education. They find selfishness, arrogance, and dishonesty distasteful.

Colombians may seem rather cautious around outsiders. However, an initial lack of trust is more a survival skill than a lack of courtesy. Gaining someone's trust may require guarantees and manifestations of good faith. Citizens are proud of their history of democracy and independence. They may be critical of their own social problems but do not appreciate outside interference or criticism. While minorities traditionally have been marginalized, the new constitution embodies people's hopes for equal treatment and opportunity for all. Most people are forward-looking and confident they can overcome their challenges. They take pride in the fact that, despite violence and political turmoil, Colombia's human and natural resources have allowed the country to reach high levels of economic development.

Personal Appearance. In Colombia, clothing is conservative, clean, and well kept. Appropriate attire for each occasion is essential. In urban areas, men wear suits, white shirts, and ties. In cities nearer the coast, suits generally are lighter in color. Women wear comfortable dresses, and urban youth dress casually. Dress in rural areas is less fashionable, but the people wear neat, clean clothing. Indigenous peoples often wear traditional clothing, which can include wraparound dresses, bowler hats, and *ponchos*.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Men commonly shake hands (not too vigorously) with everyone when entering a home, greeting a group, or leaving. Women kiss each other on the cheek if they are acquainted but offer a verbal greeting or handshake otherwise. Close friends or relatives may greet each other with an *abrazo* (hug), sometimes accompanied by a kiss on the cheek. Youth of the opposite sex and young girls will also kiss each other on the cheek. In introductions, it is customary to address people by title (*Señor, Señora, Doctor*, etc.) rather than first name. Common greetings include *¡Buenos días!* (Good morning), *¡Buenas tardes!* (Good afternoon), *¡Buenas noches!* (Good evening), and *¿Cómo está?* (How are you?). *¡Hasta luego!* and, less formally, *¡Chao!* and *¡Nos vemos!* are popular parting phrases. Colombians commonly have two family names: the last name is the mother's family name and the second-to-last name is the father's family name. The father's family name is the official surname. Therefore, a person named José Muñoz Gómez would be called *Señor Muñoz*.

Gestures. During conversation, Colombians tend to be expressive with their hands and face, particularly if the discussion becomes animated or heated. Maintaining eye contact and standing close are important; interrupting or backing away from the other person is considered rude. People beckon others with the palm down, waving the fingers or the whole hand. Smiling is an important gesture of goodwill. Colombian males may show deference and respect to women and the elderly by forfeiting seats, opening doors, or offering other assistance.

Visiting. While visiting is an important part of Colombian culture, customs vary with ethnic group and region. For example, in smaller towns with warm climates, people often sit on their porches and converse with passersby. Friends and relatives

may visit unannounced, especially in rural areas where telephones are not widely available, but otherwise it is polite to make arrangements in advance. Colombian hosts are gracious and attempt to make guests feel comfortable, usually offering refreshments such as coffee, fruit juice, or soft drinks. Dinner guests generally arrive at least a few minutes late, and often much later. They may bring a small gift to the hosts, but this is not expected. Hosts commonly offer dinner guests an alcoholic beverage (rum, beer, etc.) before and after dinner. Politeness and etiquette are emphasized in Colombia. During formal visits, guests wait to sit until the hosts direct them to a seat. It is improper to put one's feet on furniture when visiting. Hosts often accompany departing guests out the door and even down the street.

Eating. Good manners and courtesy when eating are important to Colombians. Pleasant conversation is welcome at the table, as it stimulates a feeling of goodwill. Overeating is impolite; a host may offer more helpings, but these can be politely refused. Many consider it important to keep hands above the table. In a group, it is impolite to take anything to eat without first offering it to others. Eating on the street is improper. Tipping is not mandatory in restaurants, but some people leave a tip of about 10 percent.

LIFESTYLE

Family. Family unity and support are important to Colombians, and family members share their good fortunes with one another. Traditional values still strongly influence family relations. Divorce is relatively uncommon, due largely to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. The typical family unit consists of a mother, father, and two to four children. The father usually provides for his family, and the mother is responsible for most domestic duties. However, an increasing number of women also work outside the home; more than one-third of the labor force is female. Children traditionally live with their parents until they marry, but more university students and young businesspeople are leaving home earlier. Adult children often care for a widowed parent. Upper-class families enjoy many modern conveniences, but most Colombians don't have these luxuries. More than half of the population lives below the poverty line. As Colombia becomes more urbanized, apartments are becoming more popular than single-family dwellings.

Dating and Marriage. Depending on family custom, dating begins around age 14 or 15. Urban youth may begin dating at a younger age. Popular activities include going to parties, restaurants, movies, and discos; shopping at the mall; and participating in sports. On the night before a wedding, the groom may hire a small band to serenade the bride. Marriage ceremonies generally follow Catholic traditions, including a Mass. A reception with music and dancing follows at a club, restaurant, or home. Common-law marriages are gaining acceptance in Colombia.

Diet. Breakfast foods vary by region and may include juice, coffee, hot chocolate, fruit, eggs, bread, or *changua* (potato-and-egg soup). A small midmorning *merienda* (snack) may consist of *empanadas* (meat turnovers) or bread and a drink. Lunch, usually between noon and 2 p.m., is the main meal of the day. In smaller cities and towns, the family may gather (many businesses close) for the meal. Eating the main meal in the evenings is a trend in urban areas. Supper is usually at 7 or 8 p.m. Staple foods include soup, rice, meat, potatoes, salad, and beans. *Arroz con pollo* (chicken with rice), *frijoles con chi-*

charrón (pork and beans), and *sancocho* (stew with chicken, fish or meat and vegetables) are popular national dishes. *Arepa* is a cornmeal pancake. Coffee is the favorite drink of many. Sugar and milk are primary ingredients in popular sweets and desserts like *arequipe* (caramel sauce) and *arroz de coco* (rice pudding with coconut and rum). Ice cream is a common Sunday treat.

Recreation. *Fútbol* (soccer) is the most popular sport in Colombia, particularly among men. Other favorite sports include cycle racing, swimming, track-and-field, volleyball, basketball, and baseball. Attending bullfights is also popular. Colombians enjoy participating in the country's many festivals and joining with friends and family there to talk, dance, and laugh. Visiting is another favorite pastime. People socialize in their homes, in restaurants, or while strolling down city streets.

The Arts. Music and dance are central to Colombian culture. Much music is influenced by African or indigenous styles. Tropical rhythms are popular, including salsa, *merengue*, and *vallenato*. The *cumbia*, of African-Colombian roots, is a favorite style of music that began along the Atlantic Coast. The *bambuco*, from the Andes, is the national song and dance. Classical music is appreciated as well, and many people frequent the orchestras scattered throughout the country. Literature is important to Colombians, and many people take great pride in Gabriel García Márquez, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1982.

Elaborate gold work is a legacy of the early indigenous peoples. Today's Colombian artists weave hammocks, sashes, bags, and blue and red *ruanas* (wool shawls). They also produce ceramics and decorative trim, called *passementerie*, for clothing or furniture.

Holidays. Holidays in Colombia include New Year's Day; Epiphany (6 Jan.); St. Joseph's Day (19 Mar.); Easter; Labor Day (1 May); Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul (29 June); Independence Day (20 July); Battle of Boyacá (7 Aug.); Assumption Day (15 Aug.); *Día de la Raza* (12 Oct.), which celebrates the discovery of the Americas and the resulting mix of ethnicities; All Saints' Day (1 Nov.); Independence of Cartagena (11 Nov.); and Christmas. Cities and towns also sponsor annual local festivals.

The nine days before Christmas (*la novena*) are marked by religious observances and parties. On Christmas Eve, families eat a large dinner, pray around *el pesebre* (the nativity), sing Christmas carols, and exchange gifts. Children receive gifts from the baby Jesus on Christmas Day.

Commerce. The Colombian workweek is basically 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. Shops open from 9 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., Monday through Saturday, with some closing early on Saturday. Shops in larger cities may stay open later. Many urbanites buy basic goods at supermarkets. Open-air and farmers' markets also sell fresh produce at cheaper prices. Banks generally close at 4 p.m., but some stay open later.

SOCIETY

Government. The Republic of Colombia has a bicameral Congress; the Senate has 102 seats and the Chamber of Representatives has 166 seats. Senators are elected in a national vote, while representatives are elected regionally. President Alvaro Uribe is chief of state and head of government. The president and cabinet form the executive branch. The judicial branch is independent. The major political parties are the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, although increasing frustration with escalating violence has opened political possibilities for

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independent candidates. All citizens may vote at age 18. Colombia has 32 states (*departamentos*).

Economy. Agriculture plays a key role in Colombia's economy. Coffee accounts for a little less than one-third of all export earnings; freshly cut flowers and bananas are also important exports. Other agricultural products include sugarcane, cotton, rice, tobacco, and corn. Oil is surpassing coffee as the country's main legal export. Natural gas, coal, iron ore, nickel, gold, copper, textiles, and chemicals all contribute to the economy. More than 90 percent of the world's emeralds are mined in Colombia. With about half of the country covered by forests and woodlands, the timber industry is becoming important. Colombia produces 80 percent of the world's cocaine and 60 percent of the heroin sold in the United States, but drug earnings remain in the hands of relatively few. The currency is the Colombian *peso* (COP).

Free-market policies during the past decades have led to high rates of foreign investment and solid growth for Colombia. Its people are proud of the fact that they are current on all foreign debt payments and have never defaulted. While the country has had a reputation for sound economic management, it is challenged by decaying infrastructure, illegal drug trade, and violence. Unemployment has grown to about 20 percent, and the economy has struggled with recession. However, inflation has decreased to its lowest levels in 30 years. Rural poverty and an unequal distribution of income remain serious problems. Economic opportunities are more accessible to the ruling class.

Transportation and Communications. People in urban areas generally use public transportation, including buses, minibuses (*colectivos*), and taxis. A minority of people own cars; some use bicycles and motorcycles. Bus service is the most common link between cities, but travel by airplane is on the rise. While road construction has increased, only about 25 percent of all highways are paved and many are in poor condition; irregular terrain makes construction and maintenance costly. Coasts on two oceans provide shipping access to world markets. Colombia's television and radio infrastructure is government-owned, but stations are privately operated. The country's free press has played a role in investigating and protesting corruption and terrorist violence.

Education. Primary education is compulsory and is free in public schools; many schools are private. Colombia's literacy rate has risen substantially as the number of rural schools increased; unfortunately, the literacy rate remains only about 40 percent among the indigenous and black populations. Approximately 75 percent of all students complete primary education (five years) and continue to the secondary level (six years). Secondary schools are found in most municipalities and offer either technical or academic tracks; many are private. Vocational schools and universities are located in major cities. Bogotá has 15 major universities. Scholarly achievement has been important throughout Colombia's history.

Health. Colombia's health care system is changing from a public to a mixed (public and private) system. Individuals who can afford it usually seek private care. Private clinics and public or charity hospitals are available in cities but are lacking in rural areas. Urban facilities are better equipped. As many tropical

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	64 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	55 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$7,040
Adult literacy rate	92 percent (male); 92 (female)
Infant mortality rate	22 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	69 (male); 75 (female)

diseases have been eradicated, life expectancy has risen; however, malaria and yellow fever still affect rural and tropical regions, and tap water is often not safe for drinking. Sanitation remains a problem in rural areas. Infant mortality is significantly higher and life expectancy is lower among black and indigenous peoples. Violence remains the leading cause of death in Colombia.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- In October 2003, voters elected a Marxist politician as the mayor of Bogotá, a major setback for President Alvaro Uribe. The president was also blocked when most of the items on an anti-corruption referendum he had promoted failed to take effect because less than 25 percent of voters turned out.
- In February 2003, FARC rebels captured three U.S. contractors and executed two others who were conducting anti-drug operations in Colombia. The rebel group held the survivors in hopes of negotiating the release of prisoners held by the government, but the contractors were kept for nearly a year with no agreement reached. Another set of seven foreign backpackers was kidnapped in 2003 by ELN members. One man escaped, and two hostages were released in November, but the others were held until just before Christmas. Because of rebel groups, Colombia has the world's highest abduction rate; about 3,000 foreign visitors and local residents are kidnapped per year.
- In January 2003, U.S. special forces deployed in Colombia. It was the first direct involvement by the United States in Colombia's civil war. U.S. forces aimed to train Colombian troops and protect a key oil pipeline. However, the United States has contributed more than US\$2 billion to Colombia's anti-narcotics struggle since 1999. The United States wants to reduce Colombia's drug exports, which total more than 550 tons of cocaine and 10 tons of heroin each year.
- Economic and social turmoil caused by guerrilla groups prompted well over 1 million people (mostly from the educated upper and middle classes) to flee Colombia during the past several years.

Contact Information. Embassy of Colombia, Consular Section, 2118 Leroy Place NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 387-8338; web site www.colombiaemb.org.

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