



► SOUTH AMERICA

Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** With an area of 1,068,296 square miles (2,766,874 square kilometers), Argentina is the eighth largest country in the world; it is one-third the size of the United States. Its name comes from the Latin word “*argentum*,” which means “silver.” Laced with rivers, Argentina is a large plain rising from the Atlantic Ocean in the east to the towering Andes Mountains in the west along the Chilean border. The Chaco region in the northeast is dry except during the summer rainy season. Las Pampas, the central plains, are famous for wheat and cattle production. Patagonia, to the south, consists of lakes and rolling hills and is known for its sheep. Approximately one-half of the land is used for agriculture; another 19 percent is forested.

The nation has a varied landscape, containing such wonders as the Iguazú Falls (1.5 times higher than Niagara Falls) in the north and the Perito Moreno Glacier of Santa Cruz to the south. Argentina’s climate is generally temperate, though hot in the subtropical north and cold in the subantarctic region of southern Patagonia. Cool ocean breezes help keep Buenos Aires relatively smog-free. The seasons are opposite those in the Northern Hemisphere: the warmest month is January and the coolest is July.

**History.** Before the Spanish began to colonize Argentina in the 1500s, the area was populated by indigenous groups, some of whom belonged to the Incan Empire. However, most groups were nomadic or autonomous. Colonization began slowly, but in the 1700s the Spanish became well established, and indige-

nous peoples became increasingly marginalized. The British tried to capture Buenos Aires in 1806 but were defeated. The British attempt to conquer the land, coupled with friction with Spain, led to calls for independence. At the time, the colony included Paraguay and Uruguay as well as Argentina.

A revolution erupted in 1810 and lasted six years before independence was finally declared. *Porteños* (coastal inhabitants favoring a centrist government based in Buenos Aires) then fought with those who favored a federal form of government. The actual fighting did not last long, but tensions remained. Argentina finally became a unified nation in 1862. (Paraguay and Uruguay had long since become independent.) Civilian rule, enhanced by the Saenz-Peña suffrage law of 1912, was generally peaceful but weak and vulnerable to coups. After a military coup in 1943, Juan Domingo Perón (a key figure in the coup) emerged as the country’s leader. He was elected president in 1946. He and his wife Evita gained a kind of hero status during that time. Perón ruled until he was overthrown in 1955. After a series of military and elected governments, Perón returned to power in 1973 but died in 1974, leaving his third wife, Isabel, to rule. She was ousted in 1976 by the military, which then waged a seven-year-long “dirty war” against armed and unarmed civilians in its efforts to reconstruct the Argentine nation. Between 10,000 and 30,000 civilians were killed or “disappeared” with the government’s approval.

In 1982, Argentina went to war with Great Britain over las

## Argentina

Islas Malvinas (the Falkland Islands). The military's defeat in the war led to 1983 elections that ended military rule and brought Raúl Alfonsín to power. Carlos Saúl Menem (of the Partido Justicialista, also known as the Peronist Party) was voted president in 1989, becoming the first democratically elected Argentine president to peacefully replace another president who had been elected. Menem worked toward containing runaway inflation, privatizing state-held enterprises, and stabilizing democratic institutions.

A new constitution that lifted the ban on reelections and reduced the presidential term to four years enabled Menem to be reelected in 1995. He pursued an agenda of economic reform, but the economy worsened. A quick succession of presidents followed as several left office over the economy. In May 2002, Eduardo Duhalde became the 5th president in 2 weeks. The economy has since improved, but unemployment, social and political unrest, and a large government deficit are still major challenges.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** The population of Argentina is nearly 39 million (the second largest in South America) and is growing annually at about 1 percent. About 90 percent of the residents live in urban areas. With more than 13 million people in its metropolitan area, the capital city of Buenos Aires is one of the most populated cities in the world. Ninety to 97 percent of the population descends from European immigrants (Italian, Spanish, German, Welsh, English, French, and Russian). Mestizos (people of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage), indigenous people, and others comprise the remaining percentage.

**Language.** While Spanish is the official language of Argentina, accents vary by region. Perhaps the most distinctive is the *porteño* (Buenos Aires) accent, which has been influenced by Italian. The *porteño* pronunciation of *y* and *ll* as “sh” is particularly distinctive. For example, *llamar* (to call) is pronounced more like “shah-MAHR” than the typical “yah-MAHR.” People throughout Argentina also commonly use *vos* rather than the *tú* or *usted* forms of address. Italian, German, French, and English are spoken by members of the older generation and by some of their descendants. Quechua, Guaraní, and Mapuche are languages spoken by indigenous peoples.

**Religion.** Roughly 85 percent of the people belong to the Roman Catholic Church, which exercises great influence over many social customs and celebrations. For example, the Argentine Constitution requires that a candidate for the office of president or vice president be Roman Catholic. Most weddings and funerals follow traditional Catholic norms. In spite of this influence, the majority of Catholics are not actively involved with their church, and Argentine society is somewhat more secularized than other Latin American countries.

Non-Catholic Christian churches are gaining popularity. Approximately 7 percent of the people are members of various Protestant churches, another 2 percent are Jewish, and the remaining 6 percent belong to other religious organizations. Religious freedom is guaranteed, and church and state are officially separate.

**General Attitudes.** Argentines are proud of their nation, which has risen above difficult times to become a modern and democratic state. The days of the “dirty war” are past, and today, political problems are usually solved through democratic institutions rather than coups. People want to improve their economic and social status and provide a better future for their children, but many are worried that because of the economic

decline, prosperity is becoming elusive and perhaps unattainable. Financial security, home ownership, and strong personal and family relationships are important to Argentines. Having political or social power or being close to someone who has power is an indicator of social status. Higher education has a long history in Argentina and is also considered a mark of social status and refinement.

Urban Argentines tend to be cosmopolitan, progressive, and outgoing. Proud of their educational institutions and European heritage, they consider themselves somewhat superior to their rural countrymen and to residents of other Latin American countries. Rural Argentines are more conservative.

**Personal Appearance.** While dress may differ considerably from region to region, it generally is conservative. People desire to be well dressed in public. In Buenos Aires, European and North American fashions are popular. Argentine women consider European designs to be more fashionable than styles from North America. Older women usually wear skirts, but the younger generation prefers dressing more casually. In other areas, dress may reflect regional culture. For example, the *gauchos* (cowboys) of the Pampas region wear traditional clothing, including a wide-brimmed hat, neckerchief, *bombachas* (wide-legged pants), and boots.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** When greeting formally or for the first time, Argentines shake hands and nod slightly to show respect. In urban areas, a brief embrace with a kiss on the cheek is common. Both men and women will greet friends, whether male or female, with a kiss on the cheek. A person might wave and smile at an acquaintance who is too distant to greet verbally; it is impolite to call out a greeting. *¡Buenos días!* (Good morning—*¡Buen día!* in Buenos Aires) or *¡Buenas tardes!* (Good afternoon) are commonly used when people pass on the street or greet friends and acquaintances. When one approaches a stranger or an official for information, it is polite to greet the person before asking questions.

When first introduced or in formal situations, Argentines customarily address people by title (*Señor*, *Señora*, etc.) followed by the surname, if known. Friends and relatives use given names. Older, respected persons are addressed by first name, preceded by the title *Don* (for men) or *Doña* (for women).

**Gestures.** Argentines often use hand gestures in daily conversation to supplement verbal communication. They may also use gestures to communicate with others from a distance. For example, to order a cup of coffee from a distant server, Argentines hold up an extended thumb and index finger separated slightly, with the other fingers folded in a fist.

During conversation, personal space tends to be limited, and individuals might touch each other or stand close; eye contact is considered important. Passing between conversing individuals is considered rude; if it is necessary, one excuses the action by saying *Con permiso*. Yawning without covering one's mouth is impolite, as is placing one's hands on the hips. Pointing with the index finger is considered rude. It is improper for a man and woman to show affection in public. Men remove hats in buildings, elevators, and in the presence of women. Opening doors for and forfeiting seats to women and the elderly are common practices. Argentines generally do not consider it rude to comment on a person's physical characteristics. For example, *negrito* (little dark one) and *gordita* (little fat one) are typical terms of endearment.

**Visiting.** Argentines often visit friends and relatives without prior arrangement. People enjoy having guests in the home and usually offer them refreshments, such as espresso-style coffee. In some regions, friends and relatives commonly share a ritualistic round of *mate* (MAH-tay), an herbal tea drunk from a communal cup with a *bombilla* (metal straw). Sharing a round of *mate* is a sign of friendship and acceptance.

Invited guests are not expected to arrive on time, as punctuality is not as important as the individual person. Guests will not offend hosts by arriving up to 30 minutes late or more. Visitors greet each person in the group individually; a group greeting is inappropriate. Dinner guests often bring a small gift, such as flowers, candy, or pastries, to their hosts. Guests do not take a seat until the hosts direct them to do so. Compliments about the home, meal, or hosts' family are appreciated. When leaving, guests again address every person present, using such common parting phrases as *¡Chau!* (bye!) or *Hasta luego* (until later). The hosts usually open the door for guests when they leave.

**Eating.** Argentines typically eat three meals each day. The main meal traditionally is served at midday. However, because of work schedules, urban families may be able to gather together only for supper, which often is served after 9 p.m. Many Argentines also enjoy an afternoon teatime, which includes a cup of tea and a snack.

Diners eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. It is considered polite to keep hands (but not elbows) above the table, not in the lap. Using a toothpick in public is considered bad manners, as is blowing one's nose, talking with one's mouth full, or clearing one's throat at the table. Eating in the street or on public transportation is inappropriate. Tipping is not required but is becoming customary in many restaurants.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Urban families tend to be rather small, averaging two children, but rural families are larger. The responsibility of raising children and managing household finances falls heavily on the mother, who, in turn, exerts great influence on family decisions. More women are working outside the home, but still comprise only about one-third of the workforce. Men tend to work long hours, often not coming home before 9 p.m. Children are central to the family and receive a great deal of attention. Families will sacrifice much to give their children a good education. Until 1987, divorce was illegal in Argentina, but it is now legal and on the rise.

As in most Latin American countries, Argentines have two family names. The last name is the mother's family name. The second-to-last name is the father's family name and acts as a surname. For example, Joaquín Martínez Goyena would be called Joaquín Martínez.

**Dating and Marriage.** Group activities between boys and girls begin at about age 15, when girls celebrate their most important birthday (*cumpleaños de quince*), which ends their childhood. A favorite activity of young couples is dancing. Youths also play sports, eat out, and go to movies. Serious relationships develop slowly over several years; most couples marry between 23 and 27 years of age. Weddings are often elaborate, containing three events: a civil ceremony, a church wedding, and a large reception with dinner and dancing.

**Diet.** Italian food, especially pasta, is the primary cuisine of most Argentines. French foods are widely available. Argentines traditionally have eaten more beef per capita than any

other people in the world. Because the country is a major beef producer, domestic prices are usually low enough for most people to eat beef every day. Road and construction companies are known to provide workers access to portable grills for use at lunchtime. A favorite way to entertain is the weekend *asado* (barbecue). Other common foods include *empanadas* (meat or vegetable turnovers) and baked, stuffed beef. Lamb, in addition to beef, is common fare in Patagonia. In northern provinces, a preferred winter stew is *locro* (made of meat, corn, and potatoes). In the summer, particularly in the north, people drink *tereré*, a cold version of *mate* mixed with lemonade. Soft drinks and local wines are also popular. Ice cream is a year-round favorite, and *Heladerías* (ice cream shops) generally offer more than 60 flavors. The average diet also includes chicken and a wide variety of fruits and vegetables.

**Recreation.** *El pato* (the duck) is a national sport in which players on horseback compete to toss a six-handled ball into a high basket. The game originated in Las Pampas, where it was initially a violent sport played with a leather-stuffed duck instead of a ball. Children and adults alike enjoy *fútbol* (soccer). A typical weekend *asado* often includes a game of *fútbol*. Other popular sports include basketball, volleyball, and rugby. Horse racing, field hockey, tennis, and polo are enjoyed by the upper class. In their leisure time, Argentines also enjoy watching television, reading, playing cards, relaxing with friends, and going to movies. Older men often play chess or *bochas* (lawn bowling) in public squares.

**The Arts.** European culture has strongly influenced Argentine art and music, particularly symphonic music and operas. Buenos Aires is home to a fine opera house (the *Colón*). Native American influence is evident in folk arts, including horn-carving, silver work, leather work, ceramics, and weaving. The National Foundation for the Arts is leading a movement to preserve these crafts.

The tango (the music and the dance) originated in Argentina. For years it has been more popular outside of Argentina than among Argentines, who prefer dancing and listening to salsa and other types of music from the United States, Argentina, or Central America. However, the tango is enjoying a revival among some young adults. The guitar, the violin, and the *bandoneón* (similar to an accordion) accompany the dancers.

Representing bravery, freedom, and self-sufficiency, the *gaucho* is an important Argentine symbol and a frequent subject in painting and literature. *El gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872), the national epic poem, describes *gaucho* life. Early 20th-century composers also incorporated *gaucho* themes into classical music.

**Holidays.** Argentines celebrate religious holidays more festively than national holidays, using the latter for leisure time or to do household repairs. On Christmas Eve, the extended family gathers at 9 p.m. for dinner, music, and often dancing. Candies are served just before midnight, when fireworks displays begin. The evening also includes opening gifts from *Papá Noel* (Father Christmas). New Year's Day is marked with fireworks as well. Other holidays include Good Friday and Easter; Labor Day (1 May); Anniversary of the May Revolution (25 May); Malvinas Day (10 June); Flag Day (20 June); Independence Day (9 July); Death of General José de San Martín, who is known as "the liberator" of Peru, Chile, and Argentina for his defeat of the Spanish in 1812 (17 Aug.); Student Day (21 September—first day of spring, marked by students gathering in parks for picnics and soccer); and Columbus Day (12 Oct.).

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**Commerce.** In Buenos Aires, stores generally open at 9 a.m. and close at 8 p.m. In other cities, they open weekdays at 8 a.m., close for lunch between noon and 3 or 4 p.m., and remain open until 8 p.m. On Saturday, stores close around 1 p.m. Offices typically are open between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. Banks generally open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Restaurants open their doors for dinner around 9 p.m.

Supermarkets and malls are becoming more common in urban areas. However, most Argentines still buy many basic items at neighborhood shops (*almacenes* or smaller *kioskos*).

## SOCIETY

**Government.** The Argentine Republic has 23 provinces and 1 federal district (Buenos Aires). The executive branch consists of a president, vice president, and cabinet. The president (currently Nestor Kirchner) is both chief of state and head of government. The National Congress has two houses: a 72-seat Senate and a 257-seat Chamber of Deputies. Members of the independent Supreme Court are appointed by the president. The voting age is 18.

**Economy.** Agriculture has always been the mainstay of the Argentine economy, although it employs a decreasing percentage of the population. Argentina is famous for its livestock and is one of the world's largest exporters of beef, hides, and wool. The country also exports large amounts of wheat, corn, and flaxseed, as well as soybean and cotton. Important industries include food processing, meat packing, motor vehicles, consumer goods, textiles, chemicals, printing, and metallurgy.

Former president Menem's reforms stimulated strong economic growth throughout the 1990s. Inflation decreased from 3,000 percent to less than 1 percent, and foreign investment increased substantially. However, an economic recession began in tandem with the global emerging markets crisis in 1998. Conditions worsened as Brazil, Argentina's largest trading partner, devalued its currency by more than 40 percent in January 1999. The loss of exports and foreign capital plunged Argentina into recession. In 2002, the government defaulted on its loans, the currency board (in which the *peso* was pegged to the U.S. dollar) collapsed and the *peso* rapidly devalued, unemployment skyrocketed, and more than half the population slipped into poverty. Although the economy has since become more stable, leaders must still manage the nation's huge foreign debts.

**Transportation and Communications.** Transportation and communications systems are well developed. While Argentines have access to private cars, taxis, subways, and trains, buses generally are the favored form of intra-city transportation. A few people ride motorcycles, but bicycles are reserved for recreation. Airlines link major cities in Argentina and neighboring countries. Buenos Aires is the most important seaport. Televisions and telephones are increasingly common and service is improving. Postal service is extensive but not always reliable. Newspapers are widely available and often represent a defined ideological perspective. Internet use is growing rapidly; a large percentage of households have internet access.

**Education.** School is compulsory and free from ages six through fourteen. Secondary and higher education are also free

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	34 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	34 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$11,320
Adult literacy rate	97 percent (male); 97 (female)
Infant mortality rate	16 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	70 (male); 77 (female)

but require an entrance examination. Nearly three-fourths of all eligible students are enrolled in secondary schools. Argentines may seek higher education at many national and private universities, as well as at teacher-training colleges, vocational schools, and other institutions. Argentina's adult literacy rate is one of the highest in Latin America. Most middle-class Argentines are educated in state-subsidized parochial schools.

**Health.** Argentines enjoy relatively good health and have access to both public and private health care facilities. Public hospitals provide care for citizens free of charge. The most modern facilities are found in Buenos Aires. Care is less reliable and less available in rural areas. Trade unions often provide health services for their members. Access to safe water and sanitation is still lacking in some rural areas and in suburban shantytowns.

## AT A GLANCE

### Events and Trends.

- In March 2004, Argentina was able to pay overdue debts totalling US\$3.15 billion to the International Monetary Fund. Argentina had considered defaulting on the payment unless the IMF cleared the way to loan Argentina more money.
- In October 2003, the stock market in Argentina hit its highest ever level since opening for business in 1986. Argentine stocks gained more than 70 percent in 2003, following the economic collapse of 2002. But some analysts were concerned the country had simply returned to a cycle of boom and bust.
- In August 2003, Iran cut cultural and economic ties with Argentina after the arrest of its former ambassador to Buenos Aires in Britain. The Iranian ambassador was arrested over his alleged role in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in which 85 people died.
- In May 2003, Nestor Kirchner was sworn in as president after a close race with former president Carlos Menem. Since taking office, Kirchner has made drastic changes, including pushing through a vote to overturn laws protecting former military officers from prosecution over human rights abuses during the military regime and "dirty war."

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