



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

▶ CENTRAL AMERICA

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. With 8,124 square miles (21,041 square kilometers), El Salvador is just smaller than Massachusetts. A narrow band of coastal lowlands is divided from the mostly mountainous east and north by a central plateau. El Salvador is called Land of the Volcanoes for its more than two hundred extinct volcanoes that have enriched the country's soil. Some mountain peaks rise to between 6,000 and 8,000 feet (1,829–2,438 meters). Although deforestation has taken a heavy toll on the country's forests—the country has only about 2 percent of its virgin forests—the government and private citizens are working now to protect endangered species of animals and plants.

The climate is tropical in the lowlands, with an average annual temperature of around 85°F (29°C); semitropical on the plateau, with lower temperatures and less humidity; and temperate in the mountains. Temperatures rarely fluctuate more than 10 degrees year-round. El Salvador has only two seasons: a rainy season, from May to October, and a dry season. Most of the rain falls in short evening storms. San Salvador, the capital, lies on a plateau at the foot of the San Salvador Volcano. Small earthquakes are not uncommon; one region or another suffers a significant quake every 30 years or so.

History. Various native civilizations (including Maya, Lenca, and Nahuat) inhabited the area long before the Spanish conquest. Ruins of their cultures remain at Tazumal, Joya de Cerén, and Quelepa. The Pipil, of Aztec origin, were those encountered by the Spaniards. The natives called the region Cuscatlán. In 1524, Pedro de Alvarado conquered the area for Spain, which ruled for almost three hundred years. The native population was nearly wiped out under harsh colonial rule. For most of its early history, El Salvador was a minor province of

Guatemala. Attempts by Father José Matías Delgado to gain independence from Spain in 1811 and 1814 were unsuccessful but earned Delgado national recognition.

A wider regional attempt to gain independence was successful in 1821, but two years of instability followed as Mexico's emperor Agustín de Iturbide tried to annex Central America. When his empire collapsed, El Salvador and its neighbors formed the United Provinces of Central America, which disbanded in 1838. El Salvador claimed sovereignty in 1841 but was dominated intermittently by Guatemala through the end of the century.

The 1871 constitution marked the true birth of the nation. During the relatively stable period that followed (1871–1931), most present-day educational, artistic, and government institutions and large businesses were formed. A new wave of upwardly mobile European and Palestinian immigrants also arrived during this time; their descendants comprise the bulk of today's affluent urban class. Much of the prosperity was built on the coffee industry. However, coffee became so successful that the government seized Pipil lands on which most of it was grown, marginalizing small farmers. In 1932, coffee prices collapsed, and already harsh treatment of natives was exacerbated, so the farmers rebelled. Many Pipil joined Agustín Farabundo Martí, a communist, in destroying property and killing scores of people. They were defeated quickly by government forces, who killed at least 10,000 natives. Native culture nearly died with the massacre as the indigenous people feared to be considered anything but Spanish.

For more than 50 years, El Salvador was plagued with internal strife and military dictatorships. Governments were hard on those who voiced dissent. A rebel movement born in the

El Salvador

1960s began to mature in the late 1970s. In 1979, a rival faction of the military overthrew the government. The next year, rebel groups formed the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), named for the executed leader of the 1932 rebellion. The FMLN launched a civil war to force a change in leadership. In the midst of war, a new constitution was adopted (1983) and the Christian Democratic Party's candidate, José Napoleón Duarte, was elected president in 1984. His government was accused of serious human-rights violations, corruption, and other abuses of power.

Alfredo Cristiani of the National Republican Alliance (ARENA) became president following 1989 elections. Violence marred the elections, peace talks broke down, and the war intensified. Cristiani reopened discussions with FMLN leaders in 1990, and both sides accepted the United Nations as a mediator. Eventually, key concessions from both sides led to a 1992 UN-sponsored peace agreement between the leftist FMLN and the right-wing government. As many as 75,000 people died during the years of violence.

Formal peace was declared in December 1992 amid huge celebrations. As part of the peace agreement, the FMLN became a legal political party, the size of the military was dramatically reduced, and a civilian national police force was established. The government has developed better trade relations with its neighbors, controlled inflation, and improved democratic institutions.

THE PEOPLE

Population. El Salvador's population of nearly 6.5 million is growing at about 1.8 percent annually. Roughly half of all people live in rural areas. Major cities include the greater San Salvador area, Santa Ana, and San Miguel. Nearly two million Salvadorans reside in the United States. The majority of Salvadorans (90 percent) are mestizos, or people of mixed race, while about 1 percent are Native American. Most of the other people are white, though there is also a Palestinian presence.

Language. Spanish (also called *Castellano*) is the official language of El Salvador. Only a few thousand people continue to speak the Native American language Nahuatl. School instruction is in Spanish, although English is strongly emphasized. Many Salvadorans with more formal education speak English in addition to Spanish.

Religion. El Salvador is a Christian nation; approximately 70 percent of the people belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Another 25 percent belong to a variety of other Christian faiths, including several Protestant movements whose memberships are growing. The state itself is secular; the only reference to religion in the constitution is a provision preventing clergy from holding public office. Still, priests usually pray or speak at school ceremonies and public meetings.

General Attitudes. Salvadorans are proud of their country and its accomplishments. Having endured 12 years of war, they now look forward to a future of peace and democracy. Past feelings of hatred and revenge gradually are being replaced with hope, optimism, and cooperation. Parents hope for a bright future for their children, even as they struggle with the devastation that war and natural disasters have brought to their country.

Salvadorans have a strong work ethic. Honest work is more important than income in determining social standing. All family members contribute to the family's well-being. Social status is also measured by occupation and landownership. Most people value personal relationships, friendships, and

security. Devotion to the group is more important than individualism. Time is considered flexible: people are more important than schedules, and social events usually begin later than planned.

Some Salvadorans are offended when people from the United States introduce themselves as Americans because Salvadorans also consider themselves Americans. It is best to identify oneself as a U.S. citizen (*estadounidense*).

Personal Appearance. Because of the warm climate, summer clothing is suitable all year. For women, dresses are more common than slacks. During the dry season, light jackets are sometimes necessary at night. Although the poor do not have extensive wardrobes, they keep their appearance neat and clean. Daily showers are considered a must. People without running water will go to considerable lengths to keep themselves, or at least their children, bathed as frequently as possible.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. In urban areas, a brief, firm handshake is the customary formal greeting. People sometimes also slightly nod the head. Members of the opposite sex usually do not shake each other's hands. Weaker handshakes are common in rural areas. It is considered rude not to shake the hands of others around the area. Children appreciate adults shaking their hands. In cities, friends and relatives of the opposite sex kiss lightly on one cheek. Friends or relatives who have not seen each other for a while exchange hugs. Placing an arm around the shoulders of another person shows friendship. Friends often stand very close when conversing.

The most common daily greetings include *¡Buenos días!* (Good morning), *¡Buenas tardes!* (Good afternoon), and *¡Buenas noches!* (Good evening). *Adiós* or *Hasta luego* are formal parting terms, while less formal good-byes are *Chao* or *Nos vemos* (See you later).

When addressing people older than themselves, Salvadorans show friendly respect by using the title *Don* (for men) or *Doña* (for women) with the first name (e.g., *Doña Mélida*). *Niña*, a less formal title, is also used for women. Among peers, professional and courtesy titles are used with the family name (e.g., *Señor Moreno*) or with full names (e.g., *Doctora Isabel Pérez López*). Only close friends and relatives address each other by first name.

Gestures. In some circles, using excessive hand gestures is considered poor taste. But for many Salvadorans, hand gesturing is such an essential part of communicating that people jest they could not talk if their hands were tied. Although pointing directly at people with the index finger is impolite, pointing at objects or animals is acceptable. One points at an angle to the street to hail a taxi or bus. To indicate "no," one wags the vertical index finger from side to side. Touching the tip of the thumb and index finger together while facing the palm inward means "money," but facing the palm outward means "OK." A person can beckon to a friend with a hand wave, but strangers are summoned verbally.

Visiting. Friends and relatives visit one another frequently as a way to maintain strong relationships. Most people drop by without prior arrangement, although urban residents with phones try to call ahead when possible. Hosts usually serve guests refreshments or coffee. Visiting in the evening or on weekends is most popular. Visitors from out of town or who have not visited for a while commonly bring small gifts—fruit, pastries, and so on. Guests are expected to show dignity, courtesy, warmth, and friendship. It is appropriate to stand when a

woman enters the room and when meeting other people. In rural areas, it is common for people to walk into each other's homes without knocking. Polite hosts entertain guests until the guests are ready to leave. At the end of a visit, hosts walk their guests to the door and wait there while the visitors walk or drive away.

Eating. Families usually eat at least the main meal together, whether it is at midday or in the evening. In urban homes, food usually is served on dishes from which diners choose their portions. In rural homes, plates are more often served prepared.

Guests compliment their hosts on the meal as a way of assuring the hosts they feel welcome. Hosts usually offer second helpings and feel complimented when they are accepted. However, one is careful in a poorer home not to eat too much since the family may not have much food. Hosts will continue to offer food until the guest says *No, gracias; estoy satisfecho* (No, thank you; I am satisfied). It is less common to say *Estoy lleno* (I am full). In rural areas, the wife will eat alone after the guests have been properly fed and attended to. Men commonly stand when a woman leaves the table. People leaving the table say *Buen provecho* (roughly, "enjoy your meal").

LIFESTYLE

Family. The nuclear family is the basis of Salvadoran society. The father typically is head of the family, which has an average of five members. Single-parent families are also common, and many unwed women give birth at young ages. Some men consider it a sign of virility to father children by more than one woman. Families usually live close to each other. Most young adults remain at home until they marry. Excepting urban professionals, unmarried adults with children also usually live with their parents. Elderly parents often move in with their married children.

Women care for the children and household, but a large number are also employed in the labor force. They may till the ground, clean homes, sew, run a small store (*tienda*) inside their home, or work as skilled labor. Men help with farm work or water transportation. The majority of families belong to the peasant class (*campesinos*, who work on the land but do not own it) and the blue-collar working class. The gap between rich and poor is wide and expanding. Domestic violence is a serious problem.

Dating and Marriage. Dating for both genders begins after the 15th birthday, when many girls celebrate a *Quince Años* (fifteen years) party—the traditional entrance for young women into the social world. Urban youth often begin dating earlier. Traditionally, it has been improper for couples to date openly unless engaged, but for the most part, only rural couples maintain this tradition today. Asking a young woman's parents for her hand in marriage is more or less a polite formality and often an occasion for a festive dinner. In most cases, wedding ceremonies follow Catholic traditions, even among the secularized population. In some rural areas, family and friends of the bride may celebrate at the bride's home while the groom's family and friends may celebrate separately at his home. *Campesinos* often enter into common-law relationships because they cannot afford the expense of formal weddings.

Diet. Salvadoran food is much less spicy than that of many other Latin American countries. Most people eat red beans (*frijoles*) cooked in many ways, thick corn tortillas, rice, eggs, and fruit. One of the most common dishes is *puspas* (thick tortillas stuffed with meat, beans, or cheese). People who can afford it consume beef, chicken, or fish regularly for lunch

and/or dinner. Poorer rural families eat tortillas, whatever they can grow, and an occasional pig or chicken, a number of which usually are kept around the house as domestic livestock.

Recreation. The national sport in El Salvador is soccer (*fútbol*). Basketball (*baloncesto*) is also popular. Most towns have a gym and athletic field. Young women play baseball or softball. In their leisure time, people like to visit, enjoy movies or music, or just relax. Many Salvadorans enjoy dancing at parties, discos (in larger cities), or dance halls (in smaller towns). Vacations are not common. Some people may take an excursion to the beach for the sunshine, fishing, and oysters.

The Arts. With the end of the civil war has come a return to traditional handicrafts and arts. Ilobasco, a little town in the center of the country, is known for its beautiful pottery, especially *sorpresas* (surprises)—small egg-shaped cases that display miniature scenes and figures of everyday life.

National issues and daily life have been subjects for Salvadoran writers for centuries. Religious subjects are popular for sculpture and painting. The sculpture of Christ in San Salvador's cathedral, called *Salvador Mundi*, is one of the few major works left after natural disasters ruined older works. Colorfully painted scenes from Christ's life can be found as part of the works of Fernando Llort.

Holidays. The Salvadoran love for beauty and fun finds expression in the many colorful festivals held throughout the country during the year. National holidays include New Year's Day; Easter Week (*Semana Santa*); Labor Day (1 May); Mother's Day (10 May); Father's Day (17 June); August religious festivities (1–5 Aug.); Independence Day, which commemorates the day five Central American countries separated from Spain (15 Sept.); Columbus Day (12 Oct.); and Christmas. Each town has its holy day, which is celebrated over a long weekend or week. Holiday celebrations often include dances.

Commerce. Most businesses are open from 8 a.m. to noon and from 2 to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. On Saturday they close at noon. Retail shops at large malls remain open through Sunday. Government offices open at 7:30 a.m. and close at 3:30 p.m. on weekdays. While fixed prices prevail in the stores, bargaining is common in open markets. People in small towns and in rural areas purchase produce and meat at open markets but other groceries (bread, milk, soap, rice, etc.) at small family-owned stores. In urban areas, this traditional retailing structure is quickly being replaced by *supermercado* (supermarket) shopping.

SOCIETY

Government. El Salvador is a democratic republic. The executive branch is led by a president and vice president. President Antonio Saca was elected in 2004 and will serve a five-year term. Both president and vice president are ineligible for immediate reelection. The unicameral, national Legislative Assembly has 84 members elected to three-year terms. The voting age is 18. Major political parties include ARENA, the FMLN, the Christian Democratic Party, and the National Conciliation Party. The country is divided into 14 departments and 262 municipalities. Although still weak, municipal power and autonomy, strengthened in the 1983 constitution, have been increasing steadily since 1990.

Economy. Because of the war and natural disasters, El Salvador has had one of the weakest economies in Latin America. But the economy recently has become more stable. Economic growth is low, but inflation remains under control.

El Salvador

Problems remain in areas such as income inequality, unemployment and underemployment (which affect more than half of the population), land reform, deforestation, and pollution. Opportunities for personal advancement are limited. Nearly 20 percent of the population is without access to the education, health care, and economic opportunities needed to rise above poverty. Training programs have been established to teach new skills, but a shortage of skilled labor remains a challenge. Salvadorans depend heavily on foreign aid and remittances from family members who have emigrated to the United States.

Coffee is the most important export, accounting for roughly one-third of all export earnings. It is grown on steep mountainsides: the higher the altitude, the higher the coffee-bean quality. Children often help their parents pick coffee during school vacations. El Salvador also exports sugar, cotton, shrimp, and clothing. Important domestic industries include food processing, cement, textiles, and petroleum processing. While agriculture employs about 30 percent of the workforce, the economy is becoming increasingly oriented toward manufacturing and services. In 2001, El Salvador adopted as its currency the U.S. dollar (USD), which will gradually replace the Salvadoran *colón* (SVC).

Transportation and Communications. Because few Salvadorans own cars, most travel by bus. Rural people also travel on foot or by pickup truck. Taxis are available in larger cities. Roads in and around cities are mostly pavement or gravel. However, rural roads are rarely paved and can be impassable during the rainy season. Many roads have not been rebuilt since they fell into disrepair during the war. Bridges and roads have been further damaged by the hurricane and earthquakes.

European firms have greatly improved the country's communications. Cell phones are common in urban areas, but some people in smaller towns don't have phones at all. Relatives who live apart and friends in rural areas often communicate through telegrams. The free press is growing, and there are two major daily newspapers in addition to a few smaller ones. Of the eleven television stations in El Salvador, nine are privately owned. There are also many private radio stations.

Education. Only about 35 percent of all rural adults are literate. The government is engaged in a vigorous campaign to increase that rate, building rural schools and encouraging enrollment. Because many war-torn public schools are of poor quality, El Salvador has hundreds of private schools and dozens of private universities. In all, there are 45 colleges or universities (public and private) in the country.

Elementary school (for ages 7–12) is compulsory. It is followed by an optional three years of *Educación Básica* (Basic Education), after which students may choose between three years of technical school or three years of *Bachillerato*, the college track. The school year begins in mid-January and runs through October. Most children wear uniforms. Although public schooling is free, including at the university level, most people stop attending school at various ages to begin working and contributing to the family income.

Health. Medical care in El Salvador is free at all state health facilities, but many were damaged either during the war or by natural disasters. Urban clinics and hospitals are in poor condition, and rural areas often lack clinics altogether. Patients

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	105 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	85 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$5,260
Adult literacy rate	82 percent (male); 77 (female)
Infant mortality rate	27 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	67 (male); 73 (female)

often must provide their own sheets, syringes, and medicine. In cities, a large, higher-quality, private health care system is available to those who can afford it. The government is trying to improve health conditions through free immunizations, hygiene and sanitation education, water and sewage system development, and more modern hospital administration. Still, cholera, malaria, measles, intestinal disorders, dengue fever, and other diseases have increased recently, particularly in rural areas.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- In March 2004, Antonio Saca of the ruling ARENA party was elected to be El Salvador's new president. Saca promised to crack down on gangs, improve government transparency, and continue free-market reforms.
- In October 2003, an international study by the World Values Survey found that El Salvador had the fourth highest percentage of happy people among 65 nations. Only Nigeria, Mexico, and Venezuela were ranked higher for overall satisfaction.
- In early 2003, a series of gruesome murders of women took place in El Salvador and neighboring Guatemala. Police believe the killings are linked to the large numbers of gangs in the area, many of which require random killings for initiation.
- In July 2002, two former Salvadoran generals were found guilty of ignoring reports that troops were torturing and murdering civilians during El Salvador's civil war. They now face fines of nearly \$55 million for their misdeeds.
- A series of devastating earthquakes in 2001 beset a land already struggling in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998. The earthquakes killed more than 1,200 people, left approximately 1 million homeless, and caused more than two billion dollars in damage. In 2002, El Salvador's situation worsened after serious drought, a drop in coffee prices, and a decrease in international aid after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. Many farmers lack funds to plant crops to replace the ones they have lost.

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