Brazil

Location, geography, and climate

The geographic landscape of Brazil varies greatly within the nation. The total area of Brazil is approximately 8,547,403.5 square kilometers and borders every South American country except Chile and Ecuador. In addition to its boundary with other countries, Brazil has a 7,367-kilometer western border with the Atlantic Ocean. Running parallel along this oceanic border, exists the Serra do Mar, the principle mountain range of Brazil. Although the Brazilian highlands do not exceed 1.9 miles, the average altitude is roughly 0.3 mile. The highest mountain in Brazil is the Pico de Neblina which measures 1.9 miles and is located near the border of the state of Amazonas.

The northern area of Brazil, near the Equator, experiences tropical weather conditions, while the South is considered temperate with snowfall at times. The average winter temperature for the months May-August is between 55-65 degrees Fahrenheit in Rio de Janeiro. The northeastern part of Brazil is susceptible to droughts and averages roughly 500 millimeters of rainfall each year. In contrast to the northeast, the world's largest existing rain forest can be found in the Amazon basin towards the interior of the nation. The Amazon basin, combined with the Tocantis-Araguia basin, forms 56% of the total Brazilian drainage area. The Amazon is also the world's largest river in terms of volume. In addition to the Amazon, the waterfalls (Foz do Iguacu), are found at the southern border with Argentina and Paraguay.

History

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to settle what was to become Brazil. The history of Portuguese Brazil began in 1500 when Pedro Alvares Cabral discovered the country by accident. Before the settlement of Brazil by Europeans, many small indigenous tribes inhabited the area.
Due to the susceptibility by the natives to European diseases, it is estimated that diseases such as small pox and influenza annihilated tens of thousands (along with whole indigenous groups who had direct contact with European traders).

In 1815, Brazil was raised to kingdom status equal to that of Portugal. Independence from Portugal was declared in 1822. Brazil has had a number of governments and most recently, (1985), experienced democratization.

Population and language

Drawing on the previously mentioned geographic conditions, the population centers of Brazil tend to be near the most favorable living conditions. With a population of close to 160,960,881 people in 1998, about 63 million live in the southeast, in cities such as Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro, contributing to the 80% urbanization rate. More than half the population live in cities; the majority living in Rio and Sao Paolo. Since the industrialization of Brazil caused many families to move towards cities where the majority of the jobs existed, less and less people were and still are tending to choose rural over urban locations. The number of Brazilians that live in the rest of Brazil compared with the 63 million that live in the southeast where the two largest cities are located can see this. Forty five million live in the Northeast, 23.1 million live in the south. 11.1 million live in the North, and 10.2 million live in the Center-West. Overall, the annual population growth rate for the years 1992-1998 was 1.4 percent. Moreover, the birth rates for 1995 are estimated at 21.16 births per 1,000 while death rates for the same year are estimated at eight per 1,000.

While Portuguese is the official language of Brazil, Spanish (especially near Uruguay), and other language (including Guarani, language of the native population), are commonly used. The dialect in Rio Grande do Sul is called Portunol, which is a combination of Spanish and Portuguese. The cultural diversity of Brazil can be seen in the percentages of ethnic groups that
compose the population. Fifty-five percent are of Portuguese, German, Italian, Spanish, and Polish descent, 38 percent are of African and Caucasian mixed descent, 6 percent are of African slave descent, and less than one percent claim to be descendants of Amerindians, Japanese, Asian, and/or Arab ancestry.

**Education**

In Brazil, recent increases in government spending on education has made schooling more attainable for many people. However, many inequalities exist. Schooling is required for ages seven to fourteen, but dropouts are frequent and common in poorer states, especially in the northeast. Approximately 19 percent of Brazilians in 1990 were illiterate, with functional illiteracy immeasurable but predictably high. Spending on university programs increased dramatically in relation to spending on elementary education in 1995. Private schools help students prepare for the many public and private universities. Public schools do not prepare students well enough for the university examination, as a result, the majority of college students are middle to upper class and have attended private schools all their lives.

**Religion**

Some of the private schools mentioned above have religious affiliations, such as the Roman Catholic Church. Roman Catholicism is the official religion of Brazil. Seventy percent of Brazilians are Catholic, 19.2 percent, are Protestant, and 10.8 report other religions. Afro-Brazilian religious practices are common in areas that once had slavery. These African traditions combine with Catholic teachings to produce unique practices throughout the north. Also, there are Jewish settlements in Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro.

**Trade and agriculture**

Again, to follow along geographic lines, Brazil’s economic role as one of the leading exporters of agricultural products is a result of its geography. Roughly 11 percent of the 1995 total GDP
of $717 billion was accounted for by the agricultural sector. In 1996, 73 million tons of grain was produced. Brazil continues to be one of the world's leading exporters of coffee, orange juice, tobacco, sugar and soybeans. Its major trading partners include the United States, other South American countries, and the European Union.

In addition to the agricultural sector's importance in GDP distribution, the industrial sector accounted for 42 percent while trading, and service occupied approximately 47 percent. Moreover, the GDP continues to rise as seen by the 1997 to 1998 real growth rate increasing from 3.7 percent to 4.0 percent.

Today, about 62 percent of exports are manufactured goods. Industrial growth surged to 3.9 percent in 1997 with an emphasis on aircraft and computer technology. Exports numbered $49.2 billion in 1997, which saw an increase from 1993 in which it was $39.6 billion. While exports play an important role in Brazil's economy, imports also should be taken into consideration. Imports saw an increase between 1993 and 1997. In 1993, $20.5 billion compared to 1997 when it was $60.1 billion. This is the result of a number of factors, including the decreasing import tariff that continued to drop between those years.

The total GDP was $775 billion for 1997. The GDP real growth rate for 1997 was 3.7 percent. The real growth rate saw an increase from 1997 to 1998 by 0.3 percent. Brazil as a whole nation had a GDP per capita of $5,128 in 1997 with an annual growth rate of 0.8 percent between the years 1985-94. However, this does not take into consideration the regional variations that exist. The poorer regions such as the northeast experience rather difficult economic constraints due to frequent droughts, while Sao Paolo is an important world banking center.

**Currency**
The currency of Brazil is the real. There are 100 centavos to 1 real. Centavos are coins, while reals can be coins or bills. Real notes come in 5, 10, 50 and 100 denominations. One real is equivalent to approximately US $1.78, but fluctuates often.

**Food**

*Feijoada* is the national Brazilian dish made with sausage, ribs, and rice. Vatapá is a dish of African origin made with seafood, coconut, and dende oil. Rice, beans and manioc flour (*Arroz, Feijao, and farofel*) are the staples of the Brazilian diet. Much fish, beef, and vegetables are consumed and there are a wide variety of ethnic foods available as well. Street food is also common and consists of batter fried mixtures of chicken and vegetables.

Fresh fruit is abundant. Juice bars that offer every type of juice available are easy to find in big cities like Rio de Janeiro. Rainforest and local fruits are exquisite and should be tried.

**Holidays and special events**

Brazil celebrates the following days: January 1 (New Year's Day), January 6 (Epiphany), April 21 (Tiradentes Day), May 1 (May Day), September 7 (Independence Day), October 1 (Our Lady of Aparecida Day), November 2 (All Soul's Day), November 15 (Proclamation Day), and December 25 (Christmas).

Regional celebrations differ considerably, but Carnival which takes place before Lent, is most celebrated in Rio de Janeiro. Easter is also met with much fanfare and anticipation. Local celebrations occur throughout the country for a wide variety of holy days as well as historical events.

**Landmarks**

Brazil's beaches are some of the most famous in the entire world. In Rio de Janeiro, Copacabana and Ipanema draw thousands of people each day. Also in Rio, *Cristo Redentor* rises
above the city and stands on top of Corcovado, a small mountain. Sugar Loaf is also a popular site among tourists in Rio as they can see the city from the top of the mound.

Salvador da Bahia used to be the second most important city to the Portuguese after Lisbon in the 18th century. Many cathedrals, such as the Cathedral Basilica, that are colonial style architecture can be found around the city. Also, the Amazon is a landmark, and as a result, many tours and hotels have been developed due to the many adventurers awaiting those who visit the Brazil.

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