



# Paraguay:

## Quiet Beauty of South America's Heartland

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### Physical and Human Geography

Brazil, Bolivia, and Argentina surround the landlocked country of Paraguay in the heart of South America. Though Paraguay is small in comparison to these neighbors, the geographical variation of the territory is striking. The environment ranges from semi-desert to tropical forests and swamps, and rainfall varies dramatically between a mere 16 inches in the Northeast to 71 inches in the Paraná River Basin in the Southeast.

The Paraguay River separates the country into two regions that differ physically and socially. The western region of Chaco comprises approximately 60% of Paraguayan territory but is home to only 4% of the population. Rainfall is below average, and in many places, the climate alternates between droughts and floods. Forest covers most of the land, but there are also marshy plains and grassy uplands in the Chaco.

In the eastern region where population is denser, rural life still predominates. The capital city of Asunción is located there and with 650,000 inhabitants, is the largest population center in the country. A moist climate, regular rainfall, and fertile soils allow effective cultivation of crops, and most Paraguayans participate directly in agricultural pursuits. As a result, much of the tropical forest has been destroyed to create pasture or cropland, though substantial forests still remain, particularly along the Brazilian border.

The majority of the population of Paraguay is ethnically and culturally homogeneous. About 95% of the population are of mixed Spanish and Guaraní descent, though

the remaining 5% are an eclectic group of immigrants and indigenous peoples. About 3% of Paraguayans are German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Argentine, or Brazilian immigrants, while another 2% belong to one of 18 Indian groups.

### Historical Background

Though the population is fairly homogeneous, the history of Paraguay is complex. When the first Spanish expedition arrived in the late 1520s, various indigenous groups inhabited the territory. The largest of these was the Guaraní, relatively settled cultivators. Unlike other groups to the south who resisted the Spanish with violence, the Guaraní were amiable toward the Europeans. This friendly attitude of the Guaraní eventually prompted besieged Spanish colonizers living at the mouth of the Río de la Plata to move to Asunción, a fort founded on August 15, 1537.

Though racial mixing occurred between the Spanish and Guaraní, the Spanish never considered the Indians their social equals. Spanish law stated that Indians had souls and prohibited their enslavement and abuse, but colonists often ignored and violated these guarantees. Indians were often enslaved directly or indirectly by means of debt servitude.

When Jesuit missionaries arrived early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to convert the Guaraní to Catholicism, tensions developed between their order and the Spanish colonists. The Jesuits had spectacular success in converting the Guaraní, and they organized the new converts into religious communities called *reducciones* (reductions). These *reducciones* protected Indians from enslavement.

*Criollo* (Spanish individuals born in the Americas) opposition to Jesuit activity intensified and led to open warfare against them a century later. By 1735 the colonists had defeated a coalition of reduction armies and royal troops. Though the Spanish Crown expelled Jesuits from the empire in 1767, *criollo* dissatisfaction with Spanish rule increased in the following decades. After successfully fighting an Argentine attempt to liberate (and most assuredly annex) Paraguay, the colonists won their independence from Spain in a bloodless coup d'état in 1811.

The establishment of a new government was a considerably more difficult task than the achievement of independence. Since Paraguay had contributed little wealth to Spain's coffers, its secession concerned royal officials less than the secessions of Mexico and Peru. After independence, Paraguay remained undeveloped, and few among even the elite were literate. The inexperienced and incompetent military junta that initially governed the state soon handed power to the most educated of its members, Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (who held a doctorate in theology).

The threat to Paraguayan independence posed by expansionist governments in Brazil and Argentina became the most pressing concern for Francia. To counter this threat, Francia demanded and received considerable powers to assure internal order and to create a national defense. In 1814, he became dictator for life with the official title of "*El Supremo*" (the Supreme). Assured of his authority, Francia sealed the borders of the country, nationalized agriculture and industry, and channeled all available resources into the maintenance of a large standing army.

Following Francia's death in 1840, a mestizo named Carlos Antonio López became

president. López ended slavery (though not debt servitude) and opened the borders of Paraguay to international trade. His government used the revenue generated by trade to contract British engineers for the construction of public buildings and the first South American railroad, completed in 1861. When Carlos Antonio's son, Francisco Solano López, took power upon his father's death in 1862, the country was relatively prosperous and had treaties of friendship with Brazil and Argentina.

However, in 1864, Francisco Solano López led Paraguay into war against Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. Brazil had installed a puppet government in Uruguay, and López resorted to military action to drive this government from office. In order to undertake this venture in Uruguay, Paraguayan troops had to cross a strip of Argentine territory. Argentina responded to this action by forming an alliance with Brazil and Uruguay. This triple alliance of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay then entered into war with Paraguay. The "War of the Triple Alliance" ended with the death of López and approximately one-half of the population, including more than 90% of Paraguayan males. The nation also lost more than 60,000 square miles of territory.

A series of unstable governments followed this war. Paraguayan exiles that had lived in Buenos Aires during the years of dictatorship returned to the country and headed the new post-war administrations. However, in 1880, war veteran General Bernardino Caballero gained power after an army coup. Caballero identified politically with the authoritarian socialist tendencies of the Francia and López administrations. He eventually formed the Colorado Party, the same political party that has governed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Liberal Party opposition was formed by exiles that professed commitment to free market ideals and parliamentary

democracy after they were removed from office.

The Colorados eventually became divided, and in 1904 Liberal exiles staged a coup with the help of the Argentines. However, divisions and disputes plagued the Liberal Party as well. Eighteen Liberal administrations held power between 1904 and 1936, and civil war erupted between factions in 1922. This apparent power vacuum in Paraguay presented neighboring Bolivia with an opportunity to press its territorial claim to the Chaco.

The arrival of Bolivian troops within a few kilometers of Asunción in 1932 was perhaps the only event capable of uniting a very fragmented Paraguay. During the next three years, Paraguayans successfully restored nearly all of their national territory, but the population again became depleted. After the war, internal turmoil resumed. The short-lived *Febrerista* party overthrew the Liberals in 1936, but instability continued over the next decade. Civil war erupted again in 1947, and at the end of this period, an estimated 91% of the population was under 20 years of age, with 88% under the age of 15.

From 1947 to 1954 the Colorados repressed Liberal and Febrerista parties, but they were unable to overcome their own dissensions. A series of palace coups kept the government in chaos until General Alfredo Stroessner became president in August 1954. Stroessner managed to maintain power by allying himself with various factions in order to annihilate others. His strategy was to form alliances and then to turn on these allies to prevent them from securing power at his expense. Throughout these political machinations, Stroessner retained tight control of the armed forces. He also forged the Colorado Party into a mass organization rather than a club for

political elites, and in the process, he secured his own power base among the populace at large.

Stroessner founded one of the most enduring dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When he first assumed power, many Paraguayans undoubtedly found the prospect of peace under Stroessner a positive alternative to the preceding political chaos, but sentiments changed as Stroessner became entrenched in office. When the commander of the cavalry, General Andrés Rodríguez, finally overthrew Stroessner in February 1989, the country exploded into general celebration. Rodríguez became president after the first open and honest election in Paraguayan history. He was succeeded in office by Juan Carlos Wasmosy in 1993 and Raúl Cubas Grau in 1998, both of whom were selected as presidents in regular elections.

## Slide Descriptions



1. *HIGH GRASS PLAINS*. In the western region, droughts and floods alternate on the plains. The grasses are fairly tall and are generally good for cattle forage. In the background is the forest that envelops most of the Chaco. (Photograph courtesy of Efraín Hernán González)
2. *PALM SAVANNA*. Tall grasses and Caranday palms grow together in transition areas between the higher plains and low-lying swamps and marshlands. These low areas are important nesting grounds for many of Paraguay's aquatic birds. It is not unusual to see flocks of water fowl, such as these cranes, in what appear to be dry flatlands. (Photograph courtesy of Efraín Hernán González)
3. *CATTLE RANCHING*. A large portion of Paraguay's agricultural production revolves around the cattle industry. About 38% of the 6.4 million head of cattle are raised in the western region where soil and weather conditions make crop production a less feasible enterprise. (Photograph courtesy of Efraín Hernán González)
4. *PLAZA DE LA INDEPENDENCIA AND CONGRESS BUILDING, ASUNCION*. Located on the Paraguay River that divides the eastern and western regions of the country, Asunción was originally established as a Spanish fort on August 15, 1537.
5. *ROOFTOPS IN DOWNTOWN ASUNCIÓN*. Asunción exhibits neither the stolid commitment to architectural preservation of some European cities nor the wholesale redevelopment that has taken place in the United States. A patchwork of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings forms Asunción's urban landscape. Note especially the domed *Panteón de los Héroes* (Pantheon of Heroes) in the center of this frame.
6. *CATHEDRAL OF ASUNCIÓN*. The Cathedral lies at the northern end of the Plaza de la Independencia. It was constructed several times, most recently between 1842 and 1849 under the regime of President Carlos Antonio López.
7. *PANTEÓN DE LOS HÉROES Y OROTORIO DE LA VIRGEN DE LA ASUNCIÓN*. The Pantheon is located at one corner of the Plaza of Heroes, the central plaza in Asunción. Construction began in 1863 but was interrupted by the War of the Triple Alliance that began in 1865. It was finally completed in 1936 after the War of the Chaco and houses the remains of venerated war heroes.
8. *GOVERNMENT PALACE*. This building houses the presidential administrative offices but is not the president's residence. It was built between 1861 and 1867.
9. *EL CEMENTERIO DE LA RECOLETA*. Though the cemetery was far from city limits in colonial times, urban growth has surrounded it in recent years. The cemetery is still in use today.

10. *SHOE SHINE STANDS IN THE PLAZA OF HEROES*. Though densely populated, Asunción conserves several large, open, green spaces in its plazas.
11. *FLOWER STAND IN FRONT OF THE RECOLETA*. Flower stands skirt the cemetery on all sides. Though Asunceños carry flowers to family graves less frequently than in the past, the area is a good place to purchase flowers for any purpose. Concessions are rented from the municipality. The woman pictured has attended this stand for the last 50 years.
12. *BUSES IN DOWNTOWN ASUNCIÓN*. Though automobile traffic is becoming heavier in Asunción, most people travel by bus. Business is lucrative enough that the municipal government rents concession rights and controls fares for each route.
13. *FOLK MUSICIAN ON HIS WAY TO AN ENGAGEMENT*. The harp plays a central role in the Paraguayan polka, a traditional musical style that is still the nation's most popular form. The hand-crafted wooden harps of Paraguay are famous throughout South America, where they are prized for their high quality.
14. *WOOD-BURNING TRAIN*. Though buses are the more rapid, trains have the advantage of being able to continue service in the rain when many unpaved roads are closed. Paraguay's rail system was the first in South America, but the country has not upgraded it since. The same train inaugurated in 1861 still shuttles between Asunción and Encarnación. It is the oldest commercially operated train in the world.
15. *COBBLESTONE STREET*. Less costly to install and maintain than asphalt, cobblestones are commonly used to pave roads in rural towns. Note also the electric lines alongside the road. The posts of these are made from trunks of the Caranday palm.
16. *OX CART*. When all else fails, the oxcart is still a viable means of transport. Ox carts are widely used in the countryside for carrying loads.
17. *OX CART*. Ox carts are not only more affordable than trucks, but they can also traverse muddy tracks that are impassable for other vehicles.
18. *PATIO OF A COUNTRY HOUSE*. Traditional brick-covered patios with gardens are still more popular than open lawns, even in smaller towns.
19. *TYPICAL SMALL TOWN HOUSE*. Aside from patios, Paraguayan houses typically include a covered open-air gallery along one side. This design allows people to gather and talk outdoors while remaining sheltered from the rain and intense sun of summer. Note the mosquito netting (hanging as a small blue bundle from the roof) that can be opened and used to protect a cot on a hot summer night.
20. *COUNTRY HOME SEEN FROM THE TRAIN*. Note the pipe running from the well in front to a water storage tank above the main part of the house. Water is pumped by hand into the tank where it serves as a reservoir for the gravity-operated indoor plumbing system.

21. *SMALL TOWN SOCCER FIELD.* Soccer is a very popular sport in Paraguay as it is elsewhere in Latin America. Even the smallest town in Paraguay has at least one team. Most towns have several, perhaps even one for young women.
22. *ROADSIDE FRUIT STAND.* Paraguay has three paved highways, and traffic is concentrated on these thoroughfares. Farmers often set up stands at crossroads or popular rest stops. Note the white bands of agricultural lime painted around the tree trunks. This lime is used to discourage insect and snail infestations.
23. *RURAL HOUSE.* Though thatched roofs are more prevalent, the construction and design of this home is otherwise typical of rural dwellings. Farming families spend little time indoors, and the house is generally reserved for cooking, sleeping, and protecting a few valued possessions from the elements. The kitchen of this house is next to the flower bush, while the bedroom is on the other side of the breezeway.
24. *BELL TOWER OF THE CHURCH OF YGUARÓN.* This splendid Franciscan-style church dates from the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is one of the oldest churches in Paraguay.
25. *CHURCH OF SAN LORENZO.* The San Lorenzo church is the only one in Paraguay that exhibits Gothic architectural influences. It is one of the few landmarks left to distinguish Paraguay's second-largest city from neighboring Asunción, where urban sprawl has all but enveloped traditional elements of the city.
26. *BASILICA OF CAACUPE.* Though it was inaugurated during the visit of Pope John Paul II, the Basilica nonetheless remains unfinished in its interior. The city of Caacupe where the Basilica is located is the religious center of the country. Each December 8<sup>th</sup>, Paraguayans congregate in Caacupe to honor the Virgin Mary in the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Many arrive on foot from tremendous distances.
27. *RUINS OF THE TRINITY REDUCTION.* From about 1609 until their expulsion in 1767, the Jesuit order of the Catholic Church organized Guaraní Indians in the Paraná River Basin into reductions. The most famous of these communal religious societies was the Trinity Reduction, about 40 miles outside of Encarnación. It is currently being restored in collaboration with UNESCO and various funding sources.
28. *THE CHURCH OF THE TRINITY REDUCTION.* Even in its ruined condition the church in Trinidad is one of the most architecturally magnificent of all the reduction churches. The 11 meter wide central nave and the 6 meter wide aisles were all covered with high vaulted ceilings. The walls were made of perfectly hewn sandstone blocks and decorated with high relief carvings of angelic musicians and local flora. The ceiling collapsed when a local administrator had stones removed from the vault buttress to build a house shortly after the Jesuits were expelled.

29. *INDIAN HOUSES*. Before the arrival of the Spanish, the Guaraní Indians lived in long, narrow, communal houses rather than in individual family dwellings. The Jesuits convinced them to live in family units, compromising in design by allowing for communal structures that were subdivided. The window in the center of this slide was once part of one of these subdivided communal houses. A covered, open-air corridor passed between the series of archways in the foreground and the windowed wall behind. Contemporary Paraguayan structures still use many of the same architectural features.
30. *THE ITAIPÚ HYDROELECTRIC POWER PLANT*. The largest hydroelectric dam in the world is on the Paraná River between Brazil and Paraguay. The dam is a joint Paraguayan and Brazilian development project. The huge amounts of rainfall in southeastern Paraguay gives the river tremendous hydroelectric potential. By 1990, the installed capacity of the Itaipú Power Plant will reach 12,600,000 kilowatts.
31. *ROCK QUARRY OF AREGUA*. An interesting rock formation occurs near the town of Aregua, about 45 minutes southeast of Asunción by bus. Recent geological investigations have proven that it is one of the most unique formations in South America. An unusual pattern of stress fractures has produced long, flat-sided, sandstone columns. Since these columns were being rapidly consumed for building, the fortunate discovery of its significance has saved the site from total destruction.
32. *RAINSTORM NEAR LAKE YPACARAI*. This slide was taken in January, during the height of summer in the Southern Hemisphere. Rainstorms often develop quite quickly in the summer. In the background of this frame the beginning of the Los Altos mountain range is visible.

Unless otherwise noted, slides are courtesy of Eric F. Nathanson and Weston I. Nathanson.

## Questions and Activities

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1. View the video entitled *Paraguay: The Forgotten Dictatorship* (available for loan from the CRC). Ask students to investigate and discuss the recent changes in Paraguay now that Alfredo Stroessner is no longer in power.
2. View the film entitled *The Mission*. This film presents the conflict between Jesuit priests and *criollo* colonists regarding the reductions and the enslavement of Native Americans in 18<sup>th</sup> century Paraguay.
3. Assign different aspects of Paraguayan life (culture, indigenous groups, education, contemporary political developments, economy, etc) to groups of students. Have them use the Internet to search for information. A good site at which to begin this search is the following: <<http://home.tampabay.rr.com/latinoconnect/paraguay.html>>

## Additional Readings

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International Institute for Environment and Development. *Environmental Profile of Paraguay*. Washington, DC: IIED, 1985. Good overview of the human and physical geography of Paraguay; makes particular reference to environmental issues.

Lewis, Paul K. *Paraguay under Stroessner*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1980. Detailed political history emphasizing the 1930-1980 period, particularly Stroessner's rise to power. Very well researched.

McNaspy, C.J. and J.M. Blanch. *Lost Cities of Paraguay*. Chicago: Loyola UP, 1982. Brief history of Jesuit reductions; emphasizes art and architecture. Interesting, easy reading with excellent photographs.

Roa Bastos, Augusto. *Yo el Supremo*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1975. Historical novel based on the life of José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, the first dictator of Paraguay. The English translation of the work is entitled *I, the Supreme*.

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