

Colombia



Map



Background

- **Land and Climate:** With 1,138,910 sq km, 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 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.

People

- **Population:** Colombia's population of about 44.4 million is growing at 1.43 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 country because of drugs and violence. People of mixed Spanish, indigenous, and black origins compose 58 percent of the population. Caucasians account for 20 percent. Others include mixed black-Caucasian (14 percent), black (4 percent), mixed indigenous-black (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.
- **Language and Greeting:** 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. Formal; education must be bi lingual. In introductions, it is customary to address people by title (*Señor, Señora, Doctor*, etc.) rather than first name.
- **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.
- **General Attitude:** Colombians take pride in their rich and diverse culture. 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. 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.
- **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. Women often wear comfortable dresses, and young people in urban areas 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*.

Lifestyle

- **Diet and Eating:** 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. 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.

- **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.
- **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 and Currency:** Colombia workweek is basically 8a.m to 6p.m, Monday through Friday. Banks generally close at 4p.m, but some offer extended service. The currency used in Colombia is the Colombian Peso and the exchange rate is 1US dollar to 2400 Colombian Peso.

Society

- **Transportation and Communication:** 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 owned by the government, but stations are privately operated. The country's free press has played a role in investigating and protesting corruption and terrorist violence.
- **Health:** Colombia's healthcare system is changing from a public to a mixed system that includes public and private options. Private clinics and public or charity hospitals are available in cities but are lacking in rural areas. Urban facilities are better equipped. Violence remains the leading cause of death in Colombia.