



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 439,736

Area (sq. km.): 1,138,910

Colombia is slightly smaller than South Africa, or 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 country also includes several islands. While minor earthquakes are fairly common in Colombia, more serious tremors have periodically taken their toll. There are no distinct seasons in Colombia, but differing elevations experience a variety of temperatures. Medellín, at 5,000 feet (1,524 meters) above sea level, averages 70°F (21°C), while Bogotá, the capital, at 8,629 feet (2,630 meters), averages 55°F (13°C). 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.

History

Indigenous Peoples and Colonization

Before the arrival of Europeans, many groups thrived in the area that today makes up Colombia, producing sophisticated

art, stone, and gold work. Carib, Arawak, Tairona, and Muisca peoples were present when the Spanish began settling the region in the 1500s. The area was soon part of New Granada, which also encompassed present-day Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama.

Independence

Resentment against Spanish rule grew from the late 1700s until 1810, when nationalists claimed independence. However, independence was not really achieved until Simón Bolívar assembled an army to defeat Spanish troops at the Battle of Boyacá, in 1819. He established the new Gran Colombia republic, from which Venezuela and Ecuador withdrew in 1830. With U.S. support, Panama declared itself independent in 1903 to make way for construction of the Panama Canal. Colombia's name, originally the State of New Granada, changed several times before it became the Republic of Colombia.

Civil Conflicts

Between independence and the mid-1950s, Colombians fought six major civil conflicts. Most of this fighting was between members and supporters of what became Colombia's Conservative and Liberal parties. The most brutal fighting occurred in the civil war now referred to as *La Violencia* (The Violence). It ended in 1957, when the *Frente Nacional* (National Front) was created, an accord between the Conservatives and Liberals in which they agreed to take turns as head of government for 16 years.

Guerrillas and Paramilitaries

La Violencia spawned guerrilla units intent on using violence to pressure the government to redistribute Colombia's resources more equitably. The most famous of these was the

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); the National Liberation Army (ELN) was another significant guerrilla group that emerged in later years. To protect their property from guerrilla attacks, wealthy landowners funded and organized paramilitaries, who eventually gathered under the umbrella organization of the United Self-Defense Units of Colombia (AUC). The AUC targeted guerrillas and guerrilla supporters, including union leaders and left-leaning academics.

Drug Industry

The rise of the Colombian drug industry in the 1970s and 1980s escalated the civil conflict. Both the FARC and the AUC offered protection to the Medellín and Cali drug cartels in return for money, which they used for weapons and attracting new recruits. The FARC experimented with politics in the 1980s, putting forth a number of candidates in elections. However, the FARC's refusal to disarm outraged the paramilitaries and their sponsors. Between 1984 and 1987, AUC-linked death squads murdered three thousand of the FARC's candidates, prompting the guerrillas to return to terrorism.

New Constitution

In 1990, a national assembly—including indigenous groups and nontraditional political parties—was formed to rewrite the 1886 constitution. The country's new constitution, which encourages political pluralism, the rule of law, and special rights for the long-ignored indigenous and black populations, took effect on 4 July 1991.

Continued Violence

However, guerrilla and paramilitary violence persisted. Thousands of people—many of them civilians—continued to suffer at the hands of these groups. Much of the killing, kidnapping, and extortion involved drug-related lands and money. In 1998, the government demilitarized a zone in the southeast, a FARC stronghold, to meet the guerrillas' precondition for peace talks. Nevertheless, the peace talks faltered when it became clear that the guerrillas had no intention of abandoning violence.

Presidents' Efforts

Elected in 2002 on a promise to use the military to disable all the illegal military groups, Álvaro Uribe established peasant brigades, granted the security forces new powers, and escalated military actions against the guerrillas. He also negotiated a cease-fire with the paramilitaries and later persuaded thousands of them to lay down their arms. However, paramilitary violence continues and the drug trade still flourishes, despite the expenditure of large sums of money (much of it from the United States) on aerial spraying programs.

Juan Manuel Santos won 2010 presidential elections. He took office pledging to continue Uribe's efforts to fight crime and resolve internal conflicts. He has taken steps to compensate survivors of those killed in the decades of violence and to return land to displaced individuals. Throughout 2012, the Colombian government and the FARC took steps that helped pave the way for peace talks later in the year: the FARC released its remaining hostages and vowed to stop kidnapping civilians, while Congress passed a law that allows FARC and ELN members to receive softer sentences if

they confess their crimes and compensate their victims. Formal peace talks got underway in Norway in October 2012 and continue in Cuba. Tension continues between Colombia and its neighbors, especially Venezuela, who Colombia claims aids and shelters the FARC.

Recent Events and Trends

• **Strikes and demonstrations:** August 2013 saw several days of striking and demonstrations against government policies supporting privatization and free trade. What began with a movement among farmers soon spread to include groups such as doctors, teachers, miners, healthcare workers, and students. Demonstrations have sometimes involved violent clashes with police, and protestors have created roadblocks that have stalled transportation and created shortages of fuel and goods in some cities.

• **Peace talks progress:** By May 2013, peace talks between the government and the FARC had produced a deal that would increase access to land for poor farmers and provide for the development of rural areas. The deal was seen as a significant step in the peace process, though the difficulty of resolving remaining issues was highlighted in August 2013, when FARC rebels temporarily stepped away from the negotiating table following disagreement over the ratification process of a final peace deal.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Population: 45,745,783

Population Growth Rate: 1.1%

Urban Population: 75%

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 brought to the region during the colonial era. Many Africans mixed with other peoples, especially after slavery was abolished in 1851. Black Colombians generally live along the coasts, comprising the majority of some cities, including Quibdó.

Some of the largest metropolitan areas are Bogotá, Medellín, Baranquilla, and Cali. Colombia also has a fairly young population; about 27 percent of Colombians are younger than age 15.

Language

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. Ethnic languages and

dialects share official status with Spanish in certain areas, where formal education must be bilingual.

Religion

While Colombia's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, about 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. For example, Catholic religious instruction, though no longer mandatory, still takes place in most public schools. Colombians commonly express their faith with phrases like *Si Dios quiere* (God willing) and *Que sea lo que Dios quiera* (Whatever God wills).

General Attitudes

Colombians take pride in their rich and diverse culture. The country's various geographic regions, climates, and subcultures enrich its food, music, dance, and art. Colombians are proud of their resourcefulness and ability to work hard. They also possess the *rumbero* spirit—the ability to play hard and enjoy life even under difficult circumstances. 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.

Most people value honesty, loyalty, a good sense of humor, and education. They find selfishness, arrogance, and dishonesty distasteful. Colombians may seem rather cautious around outsiders, but an initial lack of trust is more a survival skill than a lack of courtesy. Gaining someone's trust may require guarantees and manifestations of good faith.

Citizens are proud of their history of democracy and independence. While minorities traditionally have been marginalized, the new constitution embodies hopes for equal treatment and opportunity for all. Most people are forward-looking and confident they can overcome their challenges. They take pride in the fact that, despite violence and political turmoil, Colombia's human and natural resources have allowed the country to reach high levels of economic development. 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. Dressing down for social gatherings is uncommon. In urban areas, fashionable clothing is the norm, especially in Medellín, which hosts a major annual fashion show and is home to a large textile industry. Throughout urban Colombia, professional men wear suits, white shirts, and ties. In cities nearer the coast, suits generally are lighter in color. Men who live along the Caribbean coast also wear *guayaberas* (traditional embroidered dress shirts), some of which are very expensive. Women often wear comfortable dresses. Youth in large cities tend to dress casually and express themselves through their clothing; trends vary according to class and

subculture. Dress in rural areas is less fashionable, but the people wear neat, clean clothing. Indigenous peoples often wear traditional clothing, which for women can include wraparound dresses, bowler hats, and *ruanas* (wool shawls).

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Men commonly shake hands (not too vigorously) with everyone when entering a home, greeting a group, or leaving. Women kiss each other on the cheek if they are acquainted but offer a verbal greeting or handshake otherwise. Close friends or relatives may greet each other with an *abrazo* (hug), sometimes accompanied by a kiss on the cheek. Young females or young people of the opposite sex will also kiss each other on the cheek.

In introductions, it is customary for Colombians to address people by title (*Señor, Señora, Doctor, etc.*) rather than first name. Common greetings include *Buenos días* (Good morning), *Buenas tardes* (Good afternoon), *Buenas noches* (Good evening), and *¿Cómo está?* (How are you?). *Hasta luego* (Until later) and, less formally, *Chao* and *Nos vemos* (See you later) are popular parting phrases. Colombians commonly have two family names: the second-to-last name is the father's family name, and the last name is the mother's family name. The father's family name is the official surname. Therefore, a person named José Muñoz Gómez would be called *Señor Muñoz*.

Gestures

During conversation, Colombians tend to be expressive with their hands and face, particularly if the discussion becomes lively or heated. Maintaining eye contact and standing close are important; interrupting or backing away from the other person is considered rude. People beckon others with the palm down, waving the fingers or the whole hand. People often point by puckering their lips in the intended direction. Smiling is an important gesture of goodwill. Colombian males may show deference and respect to women and the elderly by forfeiting seats, opening doors, or offering other assistance.

Visiting

While visiting is an important part of Colombian culture, customs vary with ethnic group and region. For example, in smaller towns with warm climates, people often sit on their porches and converse with passersby, whereas in urban areas characterized by high-rise buildings, visiting arrangements are usually made in advance. Colombian hosts are gracious and attempt to make guests feel comfortable, usually offering refreshments such as coffee, fruit juice, or soft drinks. Dinner guests generally arrive at least a few minutes late, and often much later. They may bring a small gift to the hosts, but this is not expected. Hosts commonly offer dinner guests an alcoholic beverage such as *aguardiente* (an anise-flavored beverage), rum, or beer. Politeness and etiquette are emphasized in Colombia. During formal visits, guests wait to sit until the hosts direct them to a seat. It is improper to put

one's feet on furniture when visiting. Hosts often accompany departing guests out the door and even down the street.

Eating

Colombians eat three meals a day and often snack in between. During the week, breakfast (*desayuno*) is often eaten individually, since family members leave for work and school at different times of the morning. It often consists of juice, coffee, and bread. Children usually have cereals with milk and fruit. On weekend mornings, families breakfast together, spending time at the table chatting over eggs, hot chocolate, cheese, and *arepas* (round cornmeal bread). In rural areas, breakfast includes *caldo de papa* (potato broth with cilantro and chives) and hot chocolate. Those along the coast commonly eat yucca rolls and, if available, fish. *Mediasnueves* is a mid-morning snack time, when people may eat cookies and fruit.

Lunch is eaten at school or work. To save money, many people bring home-cooked food with them. Alternatively, they eat at inexpensive restaurants that offer substantial meals consisting of soup (often made with potatoes and beef or chicken), a main dish (rice and potatoes, grains, and chicken or beef with sauce), salad, and dessert. *Onces* is a mid-afternoon teatime, when relatives and friends (often groups of women) may gather at someone's home for tea or coffee and cookies. Coffee breaks give people a chance to socialize and are taken throughout the day, whether at home or work. Families eat dinner together at home. Though traditionally a lighter meal than lunch, today dinner in urban areas is often a significant meal, as it is the only time of the day many families are able to eat together. Rice is nearly always served at dinner, accompanied by meat, chicken, fish, or pasta; potatoes; and salad.

Good manners and courtesy when eating are important to Colombians. Pleasant conversation is welcome at the table, as it stimulates a feeling of goodwill. Guests are always served before the rest of the family and are invited to start eating first. Diners are expected to stay at the table until everyone has finished eating. No matter the social class, hosts nearly always cook more food than necessary, and guests are invariably invited to have second helpings, which are polite to refuse once and then accept if they are offered again. In a group, it is impolite to take anything to eat without first offering it to others.

Colombian cities offer a wide variety of restaurants and cuisines at relatively affordable prices. Urban families eat out for special occasions such as holidays and birthdays. People also eat at restaurants when socializing with friends or dating. Tipping is not mandatory, but some people leave a tip of about 10 percent. Eating on the street is considered improper.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Family unity and support are important to Colombians, and family members share their good fortunes with one another. Family members are often involved in each other's important life decisions, such as those related to career or even

marriage. Traditional values still influence family relations.

The typical family unit consists of a mother, father, and two to four children. The father is considered the head of the household and is the ultimate decision maker. He is expected to be the family's primary financial provider, even if both parents are employed. The mother is seen as the center of the family. She is considered an inspirational figure for her children, motivating them to work hard and succeed in life. The worst insult a Colombian can face is one addressed to his or her mother. Women are responsible for most domestic duties. However, an increasing number of women also work outside the home; more than one-third of the labor force is female. Poor women are often employed as secretaries or domestic workers in richer neighborhoods. More educated women are reaching highly regarded positions in society, though large companies are still managed by men in most cases, and men are usually paid more than women for the same work. Women have made progress in the arena of politics; by law, they must occupy 30 percent of government positions. Women also commonly work in education, humanities, psychology, textiles, and dental care fields. Attitudes are starting to change regarding the image of women as submissive members of Colombian society.

Children of middle-class and wealthy parents may be given token household chores to teach them discipline, whereas in many urban working class families and in rural areas, children work alongside their parents in small businesses or in the fields to help support the family. With few alternatives to a life of poverty, rural children also frequently join the illegal armed groups involved in Colombia's decades-long conflict, which has contributed to thousands of broken homes throughout the country. Children traditionally live with their parents until they marry, but more university students and young businesspeople are leaving home earlier. Adult children often care for a widowed parent. The elderly are respected and usually visited by younger family members on a weekly basis.

Many Colombians of all social classes move to countries such as Spain or the United States in search of better employment; it is considered a great sacrifice to leave family behind, and emigrants typically send money home to their families, many of whom depend on remittances to survive. Spending time together during holidays, especially Christmas, is considered a very important reason for Colombians to come home from abroad.

Housing

People below the poverty line often live on *tugurios*, small lots surrounded by cardboard walls reinforced with metal shingles. Structures within *tugurios* are generally unstable and made from whatever materials can be found. Low-income families typically live in buildings (single- or multi-storey) made out of clay bricks. In big cities, the poorest families often establish *barrios de invasion* (invasion neighborhoods), building makeshift brick houses on vacant land. In these areas crime and poverty are widespread.

Middle- and high-income families generally live in housing complexes called *urbanizaciones*. High-rise buildings surrounded by fences or walls are common. Floors are made

of ceramic tiles, and walls are stuccoed and painted. Each unit has two or three bedrooms, a kitchen, a living-dining room, and at least one bathroom. Crocheted decorations are commonly found on window sills, end tables, and the tops of televisions.

In the warmer areas of the country, people commonly relax and nap in hammocks located in front rooms or between the posts of interior patios. Rocking chairs made of wood or cast iron are also typical pieces of furniture in such places. It is common for those living along the Pacific coast to grow herbs and medicinal plants in large hollow logs located in backyards.

In rural areas, houses are typically made of wood and clay that is painted white, while porches and trim are painted in vibrant colors like blue, green, red, or orange. Small-land owners, or *campesinos*, own two- or three-bedroom houses that include a kitchen, living room, and a bathroom. Some rural houses lack electricity and indoor plumbing.

Dating and Marriage

Young people socialize with neighborhood friends and schoolmates. School activities such as fairs and sports events provide an important place for youth to interact. Depending on family custom, dating begins around age 14 or 15, though urban adolescents may begin dating at a younger age. Boys usually initiate dates. Popular activities include shopping at the mall, participating in sports, attending parties (where dancing is encouraged), and going to restaurants, movies, and discos. In urban areas, it is not uncommon for those in their early teens to engage in sexual relations. Rural relationships tend to advance more slowly; common dates include spending time at parks, going to the movies, and going out for ice cream. In rural areas, cohabitation is frowned upon. Throughout the country, couples who become pregnant out of wedlock are usually expected to marry.

Urban Colombians generally wait until they are financially stable before moving in together or having children. People marry around age 28 and soon begin families. Rural Colombians tend to marry a few years earlier. Before becoming engaged, it is traditional for the man to ask the woman's father for permission to marry. On the night before a wedding, the groom may hire a small band to serenade the bride. Marriage ceremonies generally follow Catholic traditions, including a mass, though non-religious civil weddings are becoming increasingly common. It is considered bad luck for the couple to see each other wearing their wedding clothes before the ceremony. As the couple exits the church after being married, the guests throw grains of rice on them as a symbol of prosperity and abundance. A reception, financed by the bride's family, follows the wedding. It includes food, music, and dancing at a club, restaurant, or home. Gifts may be given at a shower held prior to the wedding or at the reception itself. Some couples register for household items, while others ask for a *lluvia de sobres* (rain of envelopes), indicating they would prefer gifts of money.

Common-law marriages (*uniones libres*) are growing increasingly common in urban areas. Members of these relationships have rights and obligations similar to formally

married couples, provided they have registered their union after living together for at least two years. Rural couples who cannot afford formal marriages often live together as husband and wife and are recognized as such by their communities, though not by the law.

Marriage is considered an important institution that should be taken seriously. Divorce was once uncommon, due largely to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, but today it carries little social stigma, and the law has been reformed to better facilitate divorce. Children of divorced parents typically live with their mother and have regular visits with their father, who contributes financially to their educations and other needs. In some areas of Colombia, such as along the northern coast, infidelity among men is common and widely tolerated.

Life Cycle

Before a woman gives birth, female family and friends often throw her a baby shower. The shower takes place in the afternoon; guests bring presents for her baby and chat over coffee or tea and refreshments. After giving birth, a mother goes on a 40-day *dieta* (diet), during which she is forbidden from cooking, cleaning, and performing other household tasks.

Most Colombians are Catholics, and they baptize their babies a month or so after birth. A small family party follows. Parents ultimately choose their baby's name, but many relatives—especially the child's grandparents—influence the decision. In the past, many children were named according to the saint's day on which they were born. For example, if a boy was born on San Juan's day, he would be named Juan. This practice is declining, but biblical names remain the norm. Working-class families frequently use foreign names they hear in movies, such as John or Alexander, sometimes combining them with Colombian names (for example, Pablo Alexander). Couples in coastal regions commonly name their kids after their parents or grandparents.

At 15, Colombian girls are presented to society at a formal party (*Fiesta de Quince*, or "Party of 15") which starts with the girl and her father dancing a waltz. The birthday girl wears a special dress and high heels. Other important rituals for both girls and boys are First Communion and confirmation. In rural areas, youth are often treated as adults in their early teens, when many start working and contributing economically to their families. By law, children become adults at the age of 18, when they can vote and drink alcohol and when they receive their *cédula de ciudadanía* (national citizenship card). At 18, males begin a mandatory year of military service, which is often seen as a transition to adulthood.

When a person dies, the body is kept in a funeral home for 24 hours. Family and friends mourn the deceased and attend a mass called a *velorio*. In coastal regions, women called *plañideras* are hired to cry at the *velorio* for the deceased. Particularly in low-income families, close relatives and friends carry the coffin on their shoulders all the way to the cemetery. In other cases, the car carrying the coffin is followed by family and friends in a caravan of cars decorated with flowers that are later left by the grave. In cities,

cremation is also an option. After the burial or cremation, family and friends meet for the next nine nights to pray. Close relatives of the deceased commonly observe *luto* (mourning), which entails going without makeup, not attending parties, and wearing black clothing for at least nine days, though some choose to wear black for a number of months after the death of a loved one. After that, a yearly mass is held to pray for the salvation of the deceased's soul.

Diet

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. In smaller cities and towns, many businesses close during lunchtime, and families may gather for the meal. Eating the main meal in the evenings is a trend in urban areas. Supper is usually at 7 or 8 p.m. Staple foods include soup, rice, meat, potatoes, salad, and beans. *Arroz con pollo* (chicken with rice), *frijoles con chicharrón* (pork and beans), and *sancocho* (stew with chicken, fish, or meat and vegetables) are popular national dishes. An *arepa* is a cornmeal pancake, the preparation of which varies by region. Coffee is the favorite drink of many. Sugar and milk are primary ingredients in popular sweets and desserts like *arequipe* (caramel sauce) and *arroz con leche* (rice pudding with cinnamon and milk). Ice cream is a common Sunday treat.

Recreation

Colombians are passionate about *fútbol* (soccer), the most popular sport in Colombia. Thousands of people celebrate on the streets when the national team wins an international game. Soccer is played all over the country by people of all ages, but especially by men. A common sight in cities is construction workers playing soccer in parks during lunchtime. On the coast, young men often play on the beach after sunset, when their work is completed and the heat has subsided. Volleyball is a popular sport among women. Colombians also enjoy swimming, track-and-field, basketball, baseball, and cycle racing. Some cities have special roads for bicycles called *ciclorrutas* that run alongside roads used by cars and also branch off into parks and residential neighborhoods. The *ciclovía* is when many of a city's main roads are closed to vehicles on Sundays to make room for cycling, skating, jogging, and other recreational activities. Some Colombians enjoy attending bullfights, though these events are declining in popularity among young people.

Chess and various card games are popular throughout the country, while dominoes is played frequently in the north and *tejo* (tossing discs at a target of four paper triangles filled with gunpowder) is a common game in the highlands. Billiards is popular in urban areas. In the cities, kids enjoy marbles, tops, skipping, hopscotch, and hide-and-seek. *La lleva* (similar to tag) is especially popular. Colombian children often receive gifts of soccer balls and bicycles for Christmas or birthdays.

Urban Colombians go to parks and to the movies. People everywhere enjoy participating in the country's many festivals, where they join with friends and family to talk,

dance, and laugh. Visiting is another favorite pastime. People socialize in their homes, in restaurants, or while strolling down city streets. In rural areas, people often meet in the town's main square to chat. Topics can range from local gossip to religion, politics, traffic, or the weather. Conversations are often accompanied by coffee or beer. Colombians enjoy visiting different regions of the country during vacations. Those living in the interior and the highlands often head to the coast. Visiting relatives in other towns is also popular. As the security situation improves, camping is becoming increasingly popular among young people.

The Arts

Music and dance are central to Colombian culture. Much music is influenced by African or indigenous styles. Tropical rhythms are popular, including salsa and merengue. The *cumbia*, of African-Colombian roots, is a favorite style of music that began along the Atlantic coast. The *bambuco*, from the Andes, was long considered the national song and dance, though *vallenato*—a coastal rhythm—has since replaced it in popularity as a symbol of Colombia. Classical music is appreciated as well, and many people frequent the orchestras scattered throughout the country. Literature is important to Colombians, and many people take great pride in Gabriel García Márquez, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982.

Today's Colombian artists weave hammocks, sashes, bags, and *ruanas* (wool shawls). They also produce ceramics and decorative trim for clothing or furniture. Elaborate gold work is a legacy of the early indigenous peoples.

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. When minor holidays fall on a weekday, they are observed on the following Monday so that the workweek is uninterrupted and employees can enjoy a long weekend. It is common for those living in Bogotá to drive two or three hours to warmer areas during such holidays.

New Year's is surrounded by many superstitions, or *agüeros*. For example, on New Year's Eve, people may wear yellow underwear as a symbol of good fortune. Some put lentils in their pockets, representing abundance. Those wishing to travel in the new year might run around the block carrying a suitcase at midnight. More generally, at midnight, people drink champagne and eat 12 green grapes, one for each month of good fortune in the new year. In rural areas, people make dolls stuffed with newspaper and leave them at the entrances to their houses for a few days before the new year. These dolls, called *año viejo* (old year), represent the bad that people want to eliminate from the current year before

moving on to the next one. They are burned on 31 December at midnight, amidst cheering, drinks, and music. Another common rural custom involves predicting the new year's weather on the basis of the first 12 days of January. For example, if 1 January is overcast, the whole month of January will be predicted to be overcast as well; sun on 2 January would indicate a bright February, and so on.

Several festivals in Colombia have both indigenous and religious origins, including the Feria de Manizales, the Feria de Cali (famous for its bullfighting tradition), and the Festival de Blancos y Negros, all of which take place during the first week of January. The largest of these festivals is the Carnaval de Barranquilla, celebrated on the Caribbean coast during a week in February (just before Ash Wednesday). The festival is marked with parades and processions that include both Catholic saints and indigenous or Afro-Caribbean figures, music, dancing, and drinking. The carnival—one of the largest in Latin America—draws people from all over Colombia and the world.

The period surrounding Easter is one of the most important holiday seasons in Colombia. Forty days before Easter, people celebrate Ash Wednesday by going to Mass and getting a cross of ashes drawn on their forehead by a priest. The period between Ash Wednesday and Easter is called *cuaresma*; during this time, people pray often and abstain from eating red meat and drinking alcohol, especially on Fridays. *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) begins with Reed Sunday, when massive processions of people carrying reeds and statues of saints make their way along city roads and people carry palm leaves on their way to church. Colombians commemorate the Last Supper on Thursday and the Crucifixion on Saturday. Sunday, the day honoring the Resurrection, is considered a sacred day for Catholics; it is marked by processions across the country and a special mass. Today, many Colombians vacation during Holy Week and attend Mass on Easter weekend, while others choose to vacation during the weekend as well.

Christmas is another important time of year. If time and finances permit, those who live away from their relatives travel to be with them for the holiday. Streets and houses are decorated with colorful lights, and homes feature Christmas trees and *pesebres* (nativity scenes). The nine nights before Christmas are called *la novena*, when family and friends gather to take part in traditional Christmas prayers, sing carols, and eat customary Christmas snacks such as *natilla* (similar to flan) and *buñuelos* (fried dough balls). Each night the novena is celebrated in a different home, and these events often turn into parties that include drinking and dancing. On Christmas Eve, families eat a large dinner, pray around the *pesebre*, and sing Christmas carols. At midnight, they exchange presents. Children receive gifts such as dolls, bicycles, and soccer balls from the Baby Jesus, Papá Noel (Santa Claus), or both. Dancing and partying follow.

SOCIETY

Government

Head of State: Pres. Juan Manuel Santos

Head of Government: Pres. Juan Manuel Santos

Capital: Bogotá

Structure

Colombia is divided into 32 states (*departamentos*) and one capital district. The president is head of state and head of government. The president is elected by popular vote and serves four-year terms. The Republic of Colombia has a bicameral Congress composed of a 102-member Senate and a 166-member Chamber of Representatives. One hundred of the Senators are elected through a proportional representation system, with the remaining two senators chosen by indigenous communities. Representatives are elected through a proportional representation system. The judicial branch is independent.

Political Landscape

The president's Social Party of National Unity (U Party) is Colombia's largest political party and holds the greatest number of seats in the Senate. Other major political parties are the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, which have long been at the forefront of Colombian politics. Independent parties also exist in the multiparty state. The government faces opposition in the form of military guerilla groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), who often engage in kidnappings, drug trafficking, and extortion to finance their insurgency. Paramilitary groups are also prevalent throughout Colombia and are responsible for many of the country's political murders. Peace talks and cease-fires between the government and guerrilla groups have been enacted, but no permanent solution has been found.

Government and the People

While the constitution guarantees and generally respects freedom of religion and press, other rights like freedom of assembly and association are limited by violence. Corruption is prevalent throughout multiple levels of government. Elections are often surrounded by irregularities like vote-buying, intimidation, and suspicious campaign financing. Regional violence often affects voter turnout negatively. All citizens may vote at age 18.

Economy

GDP (PPP) in billions: \$500

GDP (PPP) per capita: \$10,700

Agriculture plays a key role in Colombia's economy. Coffee accounts for almost one-third of all export earnings; freshly cut flowers and bananas are also important exports. Other agricultural products include sugarcane, cotton, rice, tobacco, and corn. Oil is surpassing coffee as the country's main legal export. In May 2012, a free-trade agreement with the United States came into effect, facilitating the export of Colombian goods to that country. Colombia produces 80 percent of the world's cocaine and 60 percent of the heroin sold in the United States, but drug earnings remain in the hands of relatively few. Natural gas, coal, iron ore, nickel, gold, copper, textiles, and chemicals all contribute to the economy. About 90 percent of the world's emeralds are thought to be contained in Colombian mines. With about half of the country

covered by forests and woodlands, the timber industry is becoming important. The currency is the Colombian *peso* (COP).

Free-market policies during the past decades have led to high rates of foreign investment and solid growth for Colombia. Its people are proud of the fact that they are current on all foreign debt payments and have never defaulted. While the country has had a reputation for sound economic management, it is challenged by decaying infrastructure, illegal drug trade, and violence. Unemployment remains high—currently about 11 percent. The economy has struggled with periodic downturns. However, inflation has decreased to its lowest levels in 30 years. Rural poverty and an unequal distribution of income remain serious problems. Economic opportunities are more accessible to the ruling class. Many Colombians make ends meet by participating in a large informal economy, referred to as *La Economía del Rebusque*.

Transportation and Communications

Internet Users (per 100 people): 40

Cellular Phone Subscriptions (per 100 people): 98

Paved Roads: NA

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. In coastal areas, individuals who own motorcycles may operate them as *mototaxis*, giving passengers rides for a modest price. Bus service is the most common link between cities, but travel by airplane is on the rise. While road construction has increased and roads connecting major cities are paved, many are in poor condition; irregular terrain makes construction and maintenance costly. A large portion of smaller roads remain unpaved. 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. Most people own cell phones, but not everyone can afford a plan that allows for outgoing calls (incoming calls are free in Colombia). Therefore, a business has grown up around street phones (called *minutos*, or "minutes"), where customers pay street vendors a small fee to use their cell phones to make short outgoing calls. When using street phones, customers typically notify the person on the other end of the line to call them back on their personal cell phones. Internet is accessible across virtually all of Colombia, though computers may be scarce in rural areas.

Education

Adult Literacy: 90.4%

Mean Years of Schooling: 7.3

Primary education is compulsory. Students usually enter school when they are seven years old. In most cases, single institutions provide five years of primary education and six years of secondary education. Approximately 70 percent of

all students complete the primary level and continue on to secondary grades. At the secondary level, students at schools with sufficient resources to provide two tracks may choose between technical and academic emphases. A diploma, issued upon graduation, is vital for securing a job, as it tends to not only represent a certain level of knowledge but also signifies that a student has avoided violence, crime, and drugs—common downfalls of Colombian youth.

Public schools are free (though students must pay for some materials) and widely accessible, but they are usually of low quality. Many students attend private schools, many of which are Catholic. The quality of these schools is proportional to their cost, with more expensive schools offering higher academic standards and more qualified teachers. Many private schools are bilingual, offering classes in Spanish and English. Some also offer French, German, or Italian. Students at both private and public schools are required to wear uniforms.

Colombia's literacy rate has risen substantially as the number of rural schools has increased; however, the literacy rate remains much lower among the indigenous and black populations. Rural students and poor urban ones are often forced to drop out of school in order to work and help support their families. Colombians who have not had the opportunity to finish their studies often say they have received their educations from the "university of life," implying that the hardships they have faced have taught them to survive in a tough environment even if they are not academically prepared.

In recent years, authoritative teaching styles have begun to be replaced by a more discussion-based approach. Common classroom materials include blackboards, photocopies, and textbooks (in private schools, U.S. textbooks are often used). Nearly all urban schools provide access to computers and internet. In secondary levels, evaluation is based on a combination of exams, collaborative assignments, and individual papers. Students usually dedicate an average of one to two hours a day to homework. Cheating is common but perceived negatively and punished. Parents are involved in their children's educations and often attend meetings with teachers. Students have close relationships with their teachers, calling them by first name. Teachers often play sports with students at recess and mentor them individually in subjects they need help with. Schools often hold bazaars and fairs. Graduation prom parties and graduation trips are important social events.

Higher education consists of technical programs, which generally last about two years, and academic programs that take between four and five years to complete. About 35 percent of secondary school graduates go on to college. A small number of students complete graduate studies. Vocational schools and universities are located in major cities. Bogotá has 15 major universities, including the public *Universidad Nacional de Colombia* (National University of Colombia)—the country's largest. Business, law, and science-related fields, which are seen as good preparation for a career, are often chosen over those in the humanities. Scholarly achievement has been valued throughout Colombia's history.

Health

Colombia's healthcare system is changing from a public to a mixed system that includes public and private options. Individuals who can afford it usually seek private care. Private clinics and public or charity hospitals are available in cities but are lacking in rural areas. Urban facilities are better equipped. People often use herbal and home remedies in addition to seeking formal health care. As many tropical diseases have been eradicated, life expectancy has risen; however, malaria and yellow fever still affect rural and tropical regions. Tap water is often not safe for drinking, and sanitation remains a problem in rural areas. Infant mortality is significantly higher and life expectancy is lower among black and indigenous peoples. Violence remains a leading cause of death in Colombia.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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Country and Development Data

Capital	Bogotá
Population	45,745,783 (rank=29)
Area (sq. mi.)	439,736 (rank=27)
Area (sq. km.)	1,138,910
Human Development Index	91 of 187 countries
Gender Inequality Index	88 of 148 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$10,700
Adult Literacy	90% (male); 91% (female)
Infant Mortality	15.46 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	70 (male); 77 (female)
Currency	Colombian peso