

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
FUN FACTS ABOUT LATIN AMERICA.....	2
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....	2
FAMILIARITY WITH LATIN AMERICA.....	3
MATCH THE COUNTRY WITH ITS CAPITAL.....	4
MEXICO & CENTRAL AMERICA...	5
SOUTH AMERICA.....	10
THE CARIBBEAN.....	20

INTRODUCTION

This study guide is intended to provide some brief, interesting information about the countries and regions depicted in GeoToys' Latin America GeoPuzzle®.

First, you'll find some fun facts, and discussion questions appropriate for grade schoolers. Then, you'll find some information in a little greater depth on each country for older children, parents, and teachers.

Latin America is a huge and varied region, and whole books have been written on the smallest aspects of particular countries, cultures, etc. We cannot hope to do justice to the incredible variety of cultures, landscapes, and wildlife in the region.

Because GeoToys' GeoPuzzles® are based on political maps, we have grouped countries as our organizational units and also concentrate on political and historical facts, though we try to mix in natural history, geography, economics, and other fields of nature.

You might ask, "Latin America?" "Why 'Latin' America? No one there speaks Latin, right?" Correct (with apologies to the region's doctors, lawyers, priests, and classicists). The name Latin America was first applied to the region south of the U.S. in France in the nineteenth century, as the French (then rulers of Mexico) wished to draw a commonality between France and the other Romance-language countries of

the Americas. The term didn't catch on in English until the twentieth century, when it finally displaced "Spanish America."

Technically, Latin America denotes the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries of the Americas. This GeoPuzzle contains a map of the entire region south of the U.S., including many countries which do not speak Spanish or Portuguese or a Romance language at all, but we've used the term "Latin America" for its handiness, even if it's slightly overbroad. If we'd been pedantic about it, you might be opening your "GeoToys *All the Americas South of the United States* GeoPuzzle®" which, we suspect, might have put you to sleep halfway through reading the box.

One note on our listing of famous people from various Latin American nations. The Spanish-speaking world is vast enough that it enjoys thousands of celebrities and notables not well known among speakers of other languages. As this guide is aimed at English speakers, we have not included many of these individuals. Their omission is not a sign of disrespect, but a matter of limitation of space. As English speakers are our primary audience, we've listed people who are well known in the English-speaking world.

Note to teachers: Some of the information in this guide was gathered from online reference sources including Wikipedia. While we are confident that these descriptions are accurate, we cannot rule out that they may contain errors. If you are using this guide for classroom lessons (rather than as a limited tool), you should do some additional reading.

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

FUN FACTS ABOUT LATIN AMERICA

- Almost one in ten human beings lives in the Americas south of the U.S. and Canada
- Spanish is the dominant language of the region, but the largest country, Brazil is Portuguese-speaking
- Most countries of the region have mixed cultural heritages, combining indigenous Indian cultures, European influence, traditions brought from Africa, and occasionally influences from as far as India or China
- Latin America dominated the western world's literary scene, particularly with regard to novels, throughout the second half of the twentieth century
- Latin America has produced some of the world's most popular music and dance styles, including samba, salsa, merengue, tango, calypso, bossa nova, and various flavors of Latin pop. The Caribbean created reggae and steelpan, among other genres.
- Mexico was considered one of the world's great movie-making cultures in the 1940s. Since then, Latin cinema's center of gravity has moved somewhat south, with Argentina and Brazil producing world-class films. Hollywood has many actors, directors, and technical artists from Latin America.
- South America is the fourth-largest continent (after Asia, Africa, and North America), and the fifth-most populated (after Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America)
- South America has the highest mountains outside of Asia in the Andes, the largest river by volume and the largest rainforest in the world in the Amazon, the driest desert in the Atacama Desert (mostly in Chile), the highest navigable lake in the world in Lake Titicaca between Bolivia and Peru, the highest railroad in the world in Peru, the highest capital in the world in La Paz, Bolivia, and the world's southernmost town in Puerto Toro, Chile
- The Amazon moves so much fresh water that "ocean water" in sight of the coastline at its mouth can still be drunk, and the water a hundred miles offshore is noticeably less saline

than most sea water

- In an historical oddity probably linked to the lack of draft animals, no New World culture invented the wheel proper.
- South America is home to some of the world's most unusual species, including the jaguar, llama, alpaca, vicuña, tapir, anaconda, and piranha. Central and South America possess enormous biodiversity, especially in their many rainforests.
- Many places consider North, Central, and South America a single continent. English-speaking geographers consider everything north of Colombia to be North America, including all the islands of the Caribbean.
- The Caribbean Sea takes its name from the Carib Indians who inhabited most of its islands when the Spanish arrived. It's also been called the West Indies and the Antilles.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Central America is generally defined as the countries between Mexico and Colombia. Can you name those countries? (*Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama.*)
2. Why was the Panama Canal built in Panama? (*The isthmus of Panama is the Americas' narrowest point between the Atlantic [Caribbean] and Pacific.*)
3. Three of the largest, wealthiest South American countries are sometimes referred to as the "ABC Countries." Can you figure out which countries they might be and why they're called that? (*Argentina, Brazil, Chile.*)
4. Three tiny Dutch-held islands are nicknamed the "ABC Islands." Can you figure out what they are and find them on the map? (*Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao. Just north of Venezuela.*)
5. Using the puzzle, what are the largest countries south of the U.S.? (*Brazil, Mexico, Argentina.*)
6. If you wanted to plan a Caribbean cruise to five islands that speak English, where could you go? (*Bahamas, Barbados, Anguilla, Antigua &*

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

Barbuda, U.S. Virgin Islands, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Trinidad & Tobago, Turks & Caicos. Also, the unlabeled Cayman Islands.)

- Do you know any famous people from Latin America or the Caribbean?

7. The southern tip of South America is known as Cape Horn, after the Dutch city of Hoorn which sponsored an expedition to attempt to circumnavigate it. What country is Cape Horn in today? (*Chile.*)

8. The Amazon river's headwaters are in Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador. Its mouth is in Brazil. Which direction does it flow? (*West to east.*)

9. What are the three major bodies of water that surround the Americas? (*The Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and the Pacific Ocean.*)

10. Lake Titicaca is the highest navigable freshwater lake in the world and the largest lake in South America. What is the largest lake near where you live? In your country? On your continent? (*Africa, L. Victoria; Asia, Caspian Sea; Australia, L. Eyre; Europe, L. Ladoga; North America, L. Superior; S. America, L. Titicaca.*) In the world? (*The Caspian Sea.*)

11. At 22,840 feet, Mount Aconcagua in Argentina is the highest mountain in the Americas and the highest mountain outside Asia. It is the fourth largest mountain in the world. What is the highest mountain on your continent? (*Asia, Mt. Everest [Nepal]; Europe, Mt. Elbrus [Russian Caucasus] or Mont Blanc [France/Switzerland]; N. America, Mt. McKinley/Mt. Denali [U.S.A.]; S. America, Mt. Aconcagua [Argentina].*) In the world? (*Mt. Everest.*)

FAMILIARITY WITH LATIN AMERICA

- Has anyone in the class ever been to Latin America or the Caribbean?
- Is anyone in the class from the region?
- Do any students have ancestors from the region? What current country did their ancestors come from?

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

MATCH THE COUNTRY WITH ITS CAPITAL

MEXICO & CENTRAL AMERICA

- | | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| 1. Mexico | a. Tegucigalpa |
| 2. Belize | b. Managua |
| 3. Guatemala | c. Panama City |
| 4. Honduras | d. Mexico City |
| 5. El Salvador | e. Guatemala City |
| 6. Nicaragua | f. Belize City |
| 7. Costa Rica | g. San José |
| 8. Panama | h. San Salvador |

SOUTH AMERICA

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Argentina | a. Brasília |
| 2. Bolivia | b. Stanley |
| 3. Brazil | c. Cayenne |
| 4. Chile | d. Quito |
| 5. Colombia | e. Caracas |
| 6. Ecuador | f. Lima |
| 7. Falkland Islands | g. Asunción |
| 8. French Guiana | h. La Paz |
| 9. Guyana | i. Paramaribo |
| 10. Paraguay | j. Georgetown |
| 11. Peru | k. Montevideo |
| 12. Suriname | l. Buenos Aires |
| 13. Uruguay | m. Santiago |
| 14. Venezuela | n. Bogotá |

THE CARIBBEAN

BAHAMAS & GREATER ANTILLES

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Cuba | a. Kingston |
| 2. Puerto Rico | b. Santo Domingo |
| 3. Jamaica | c. San Juan |
| 4. Haiti | d. Havana |
| 5. Dominican Rep. | e. Port-au-Prince |
| 6. The Bahamas | f. Nassau |

LESSER ANTILLES: LEEWARD ISLANDS

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. U.S. Virgin Islands | a. Basseterre |
| 2. U.K. Virgin Islands | b. St. John's |
| 3. Anguilla | c. Basse-Terre |
| 4. St. Maarten | d. Road Town |
| 5. St. Martin | e. Plymouth |
| 6. St. Kitts & Nevis | f. Philipsburg |
| 7. Antigua & Barbuda | g. Charlotte Amalie |
| 8. Guadeloupe | h. Roseau |
| 9. Montserrat | i. Marigot |
| 10. Dominica | j. The Valley |

LESSER ANTILLES: WINDWARD ISLANDS AND LEEWARD ANTILLES

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Martinique | a. Bridgetown |
| 2. St. Lucia | b. Fort-de-France |
| 3. Barbados | c. Castries |
| 4. St. Vincent & the Grenadines | d. St. George's |
| 5. Grenada | e. Port of Spain |
| 6. Trinidad & Tobago | f. Kingstown |
| 7. Netherlands Antilles | g. Oranjestad |
| 8. Aruba | h. Willemstad |

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

MEXICO & CENTRAL AMERICA

MEXICO

Mexico is classified by geographers with the U.S. and Canada as belonging to North America, the only country in this puzzle of which that's the case. It is the smallest country in North America, but is nevertheless a very large country by world standards, the fifth largest in the Americas and the fourteenth-largest in the world. It's almost three times the size of Texas.

As of 2007, Mexico's economy is also world-class, with a \$1.2 trillion GDP that ranks in the top fifteen in the world. With almost 110 million people (about eleventh in the world), this gives them a decent per-capita GDP, approximately equal to Russia. Mexico, alas, shares the problem of a lot of Latin America in that a small, Spanish-descended elite tends to control the vast majority of economic assets and political power, with the *mestizo* (mixed-race) majority having much less access to opportunity, and Indian minorities ranking as the poorest groups in the country.

The name Mexico comes from Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, who called themselves Mexica. "Mexico" means "place of the Mexica," and was the name of their capital, Mexico-Tenochtitlan, which was built on an island in a lake on the site of today's Mexico City.

The heritage of today's Mexico extends far back into history. Before the Aztecs established their empire in the northern half of the country (c. 1428) at the expense of the Toltecs, the Mayan Empire in the south had risen and fallen (c. 250-900 A.D.), and before either of them, the Olmecs (1200-400 B.C.) ruled a great empire.

In one of history's massive improbabilities, the tiny 1519 expedition of Hernán Cortés managed to cause the collapse of the Aztec Empire, inaugurating Spanish rule in the area. Mexico, as "New Spain," became by far the most important, economically significant, and most populated province in the Spanish Empire. Independence came to Mexico in 1821. The nature of the government changed several

times. Gen. A.L. de Santa Anna came to power and passed the Seven Laws which made the country a centralized dictatorship. Texas seceded as a result, and its resulting annexation by the U.S. caused border disputes between the two countries, resulting in the Mexican-American War, at the end of which the Mexicans signed the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) ceding the northern third of the country to the U.S. (now the states of California, Arizona, Utah, and parts of Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico).

Mexico's political history was very turbulent throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The twentieth century was dominated by the one-party, somewhat authoritarian rule of the PRI party, with political liberalization only coming in the 1990s.

Modern Mexico is composed of thirty-one states and the federal district of Mexico City. Mexico City, the capital, is the second-most populous city in the world with almost twenty million people living in the greater metropolitan area.

Mexico is the largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, and 97% of the population speaks Spanish. About 1.5 million people also speak Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, 800,000 speak Maya. About another 60 indigenous languages are recognized by the government. Most Mexicans (almost 90%) are Roman Catholics, though the Mexican state is officially secular (and has historically been expressly anti-clerical, enacting measures against the Catholic Church, the last legal restrictions on which were only lifted in 1992). After Brazil, Mexico has more Catholics than any country in the world.

Soccer is Mexico's favorite sport. Also popular are baseball, bullfighting, basketball, American football, rodeo (the indigenous version, "charrería" is the national sport), professional wrestling, and sport fishing.

Mexican food is enjoyed world-wide, and Mexican music (e.g., mariachi) is also internationally popular.

Famous Mexicans include the Catholic saints Juan Diego, Fr. Cristóbal Magallanes Jara, and Fr. Felipe de Jesús; artists Diego Rivera, Frida

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

Kahlo, and Miguel Covarrubias; architect Ricardo Legorreta Vilchis; novelists Laura Esquivel and Nobel winner Octavio Paz; guitarist Carlos Santana; film directors Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón, and Alejandro González Iñárritu; actors Alonso Arau, Pedro Armendariz Sr. & Jr., Lumi Cavazos, Gael García Bernal, Salma Hayek, Laura Harring, Ricardo Montalban, Anthony Quinn, and Paul Rodríguez; Nobel-winning chemist Mario Molina; boxer Julio César Chávez; and baseball player Nomar Garciaparra.

BELIZE

Belize is the only English-speaking country in Central America, a legacy of its centuries as a British settlement and then colony (1638–1981). The British and Spanish disputed the territory for centuries, an argument that echoes in Guatemala's continued claims on Belize's territory (Guatemala only recognized Belize's government in 1992). Slightly smaller than Massachusetts and home to fewer than 300,000 people, Belize is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world. Belize's original inhabitants, like those of the Yucatan and Guatemala, were the Maya from whose language the term 'Belize' may come. The name's origins are uncertain, but it might come from Maya *belix*, meaning "muddy water," referring to the Belize River.

Belize possesses the Great Belize Reef, the world's second-longest coral reef, a flat, forested plain in the north, and the low Maya Mountains in the south. Its climate is humid and tropical. Tourism, sugar, and bananas are Belize's major industries. Its rich jungles, biodiversity, and underwater attractions make it a popular tourist destination.

Belizeans are a multi-ethnic people. Fifty percent identify themselves as mestizo (mixed Indian and white) or creole (descendants of black slaves and white owners). Other groups include whites (mostly of English and Scottish descent); Yucatec, Kekchi, and Mopan Maya; and more recent East Asian, Arab, and Indian immigrants, as well as a whole host of tiny groups (e.g., German Mennonites, Jamaicans,

various Central Americans, etc.). Most Belizeans profess Christianity; about half are Catholics and a quarter Protestants.

GUATEMALA

One of the northern-most countries in Central America, Guatemala is also the region's most populous country, with almost thirteen million people. It's about the size of Tennessee. The land of today's Guatemala has been inhabited since at least 10,000 B.C. The Mayan civilization's zenith (c. 250–900 A.D.) marked the greatest era in pre-modern Guatemalan history. "Guatemala" is a second-degree translation of the Maya word for forest, *k'ü'chee'* ("many trees"), by means of Nahuatl *Cuaubtémallán*. It was conquered by a companion of Hernán Cortés, Pedro de Alvarado, along with his local Cakchiquel allies. Guatemala declared independence from Spain in 1821 and joined the Mexican Empire. At the time, the Captaincy-General of Guatemala included Chiapas (in southern Mexico), El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras. Chiapas remained with Mexico, but the rest seceded within a few years.

Guatemalan political history has been turbulent, with any number of coups and counter-coups (including a 1954 coup sponsored by the CIA). The country suffered a dreadful civil war from 1960–96, with over 100,000 dead and as many as a million refugees.

Guatemala is mountainous and subject to frequent earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods. Its vast uninhabited jungles and wetlands have tremendous biodiversity.

Indians comprise 40% of Guatemala's population (the Quiché Maya the largest group at about 9%), with the rest of the country Spanish-speakers of various descents (mostly European and Indian).

Coffee and sugar are Guatemala's most important exports.

About two-thirds of Guatemalans are Catholic, a third Protestant, and about one percent follow traditional Indian religions.

Famous Guatemalans include soccer player Carlos Ruiz; Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú (though the veracity of her

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

most famous book has been brought into serious question); and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature Miguel Ángel Asturias, a novelist and Indian folklorist. Actress Daphne Zuniga's father came to the U.S. from Guatemala.

HONDURAS

Slightly larger than Tennessee and home to seven and a half million people, Honduras borders Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and the Caribbean, with the small Gulf of Fonseca giving it a Pacific coastline as well.

The great Mayan city of Cópán was in western Honduras. By 1502, when Columbus arrived on his final voyage, the Maya were long gone from Honduras, displaced by the Lencas.

The capital Tegucigalpa got its name from Nahuatl ("Aztec") *teguz-galpa*, meaning "silver hills," indicating the historic importance of silver mining in the area. Honduras became independent from Spain in 1821 (see under Guatemala for details).

For a week in 1969, Honduras and El Salvador fought the uniquely-named but inconclusive Football War.

Honduras became democratic in 1981, ending decades of military rule.

Although rich in natural resources, Honduras is the second-poorest country in the Western Hemisphere; however its signing the 2005 Central American Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. will likely improve its economy, which along with much of the country's infrastructure, was devastated by Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

The Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in the northeast is a jungle famous for its biodiversity. Except for some English-speaking communities on its north coast (with similar backgrounds as Belizeans), most Hondurans (≈90%) are mestizos, with the remainder Indians (7%), blacks (2%), or whites (1%).

Famous Hondurans include the comedian Carlos Mencia; Óscar Andrés Cardinal Rodríguez, Archbishop of Tegucigalpa; and scientist Salvador Moncada. Actress America Ferrera is the American daughter of Honduran immigrants.

EL SALVADOR

With seven million people living in an area slightly smaller than Massachusetts, El Salvador is the most densely-populated country in the Americas. It is the smallest country in Central America, but enjoys the third-largest (though somewhat stagnant) economy. It suffered a 12-year civil war from 1980–92.

Coffee has been El Salvador's main export for almost its entire existence, and the control of that trade by a relatively few families created a small, wealthy elite above a mostly poor population. Since the 1990s, the government has committed to free-market reforms and privatization initiatives aimed at increasing wealth and reducing its concentration.

El Salvador is subject to any number of natural disasters. Part of the Pacific's Ring of Fire, it's plagued by earthquakes and volcanic activity. In addition, droughts sometime alternate with floods due to the severe weather patterns brought ashore by Pacific winds (e.g., El Niño, La Niña, etc.), as well as the rarer effects of a Caribbean hurricane from across the Central American isthmus.

Most Salvadorans are Catholic. Ninety percent are mestizos, nine percent are white (mostly of Spanish descent), and one percent are Indians (mostly Lenca and Pipil).

NICARAGUA

Nicaragua is Central America's largest country, almost the size of New York State; but, with only 5.6 million people, it's also its most sparsely-populated country. Columbus reached Nicaragua in 1502, and it was a Spanish colony until 1821, with the exception of the Bluefields region on the eastern Mosquito Coast which was British from about 1666 to 1796 (and takes its name from a Dutch privateer named Abraham Blauveldt who mapped the area for the Dutch West Indies Company).

Nicaraguan history is filled with a variety of colorful characters and turbulent episodes, including a number of U.S. interventions, with the Marines sent in at least five times between 1894 and 1910, and a 20-year occupation from 1912–1933. The earliest rogue to run Nicaragua was the American-born William Walker who appointed himself president in 1856, only to be

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

driven out by Nicaragua's neighbors and be executed in Honduras in 1860.

The next famous rebel was Augusto Sandino, a general who led a racially-tinged resistance to the U.S. occupation from 1927–1933. The Great Depression and the Good Neighbor Policy led the U.S. to withdraw in 1933, after the inauguration of President Juan Bautista Sacasa. General Anastasio Somoza, head of the National Guard, had Sandino assassinated in 1934 and Sacasa deposed in 1936, taking power for himself. Somoza was assassinated by a poet in 1956 and succeeded in office by his son, Luis, who was less dictatorial, but died of a heart attack in 1963. The Somoza family continued to run the country, despite other men being elected president in the interim. Anastasio Somoza Debayle, Luis's brother, effectively ruled the country from 1967–1979, ruling as heavy-handedly as his father had.

In 1972, an earthquake destroyed Managua, setting back Nicaragua's economy by decades. In the 1960s, it had been one of the fastest-growing countries in the world, and the richest in the region. The ensuing poverty did much to win support for the anti-Somoza rebels who had christened themselves "Sandinistas" in honor of the original rebels led by Sandino. When Somoza was held responsible for the assassination of Pedro Chamorro, editor of the popular newspaper, *La Prensa*, in 1978, the public turned decisively against him.

The Sandinistas took power in 1979; Somoza fled to Paraguay where he would be assassinated the following year.

The Sandinistas quickly revealed themselves to be a communist movement taking inspiration and money from the Soviet Union. This resulted in U.S. aid being cut off by the newly-elected president Reagan, who then backed the Contras who were fighting against the regime. In 1990, the Sandinistas felt secure enough to hold multi-party elections, which to the shock of the world, they lost, with Pedro Chamorro's widow Violeta being elected president.

The Sandinistas had ruined Nicaragua's economy, with per-capita income having dropped over 80% in the 1980s, but President Chamorro led a surprisingly effective and stable

government that disarmed many of the armed groups throughout the country and put it back on the path to international respectability. In 1996, Chamorro was succeeded by Arnoldo Alemán of the PLC party which also provided the country's next president, Enrique Bolaños, in 2001. Bolaños proved to have massive corruption problems, and in 2007, Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega was elected with just under 38% of the vote. So far, he has shown no inclination to reestablish a dictatorship, but his warm ties with the dictators of Venezuela and Iran do not bode well.

Nicaragua is a land of natural wonders, with almost a fifth of the country's area given over to national parks and nature reserves.

The lowlands along the Pacific, where Managua, Granada, and other large cities are located, are home to almost 90% of Nicaraguans. Granada is one of the oldest cities in the Western Hemisphere, dating from 1524. The uplands towards the middle of the country are the center of the coffee-growing industry, and the Atlantic lowlands are very sparsely populated, and mostly jungle.

Nicaraguans are about 69% mestizo, 17% white, and 9% black, or Afro-Nicaragüense. Most of the last group lives on the Atlantic Coast, as descendants of arrivals from the West Indies. They enjoy semi-autonomous government along with the Miskito, Rama, and Sumo Indians of the region. There are also small numbers of Arab, Armenian, Jewish, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Chinese Nicaraguans. Spanish is Nicaragua's main language, though the black population in the east are native English speakers. Miskito, Sumo, and Rama are the main Indian languages still widely spoken. Nicaragua's favorite sport is baseball, reflecting its frequent contact with the U.S., followed by soccer and boxing.

Dennis Martínez was the first Nicaraguan to play Major League Baseball, coming up through the Orioles' system. He would go on to pitch a perfect game. Boxing champs Alexis Argüello and Ricardo Mayorga are Nicaraguan as well. Other famous Nicaraguans include model/actress Barbara Carrera, and Bianca Jagger.

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

COSTA RICA

Costa Rica, “the rich coast,” was historically one of the more isolated regions of South America, becoming further marginalized when Old World diseases wiped out most of its indigenous inhabitants after the arrival of the Spanish.

Perhaps because of its isolation and lack of social stratification, Costa Rica has easily the longest democratic tradition in Latin America, with six decades of uninterrupted democracy, and almost 120 years of “interrupted” democracy. It has enjoyed political stability that is the envy of the region.

Costa Rica has a very healthy economy, and is a member of most global and regional economic organizations.

Costa Rica is incredibly rich in wildlife, with its 0.1% of the world's landmass harboring 5% of its species.

Costa Ricans are a diverse bunch as well, mostly of European or *mestizo* descent, but with a significant minority of English-speaking Afro-Costa Ricans, the descendants of nineteenth-century immigrants from Jamaica.

Famous Costa Ricans include Nobel Peace Prize winner Oscar Arias Sanchez and Olympic medalist swimmers Silvia and Claudia Poll.

PANAMA

About the size of South Carolina, Panama is home to only about 3.2 million people, making it the smallest in Latin America in terms of population.

Modern Panama dates to 1903 when it declared independence from Colombia with U.S. support.

The famous Panama Canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific opened in 1914 and was administered by the U.S. until President Carter turned it over to Panamanian administration in 1977 with treaties that took full effect in 2000. The U.S. deposed Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in 1989 because of his involvement in drug-trafficking. If Noriega is ever granted parole from his Florida prison, the Panamanian government will try him for a number of murders.

Panama is a fairly poor country with almost nine percent unemployment, however its

economy has boomed somewhat in recent years.

As a commercial entrepôt, Panama is something of an ethnic melting pot, with descendants of Europeans, mestizos, Indians, Africans, and Chinese all making up significant portions of the population.

Famous Panamanians include singer Rubén Blades (once a presidential candidate); baseball Hall-of-Famer Rod Carew; MLB players Mariano Rivera and Carlos Lee; boxing champion Roberto Durán; and Miss Universe 2002 Justine Pasek. The late singer Jeff Buckley's mother was a Panama Canal Zonian of American, French, Greek, and Panamanian descent. Actress Jordana Brewster was born in Panama City. Journalist Juan Williams was born in Colón, Panama.

CLIPPERTON

Clipperton Island, also known in French as *Île de la Passion*, is a tiny (3½ sq. mi.), uninhabited coral reef in the Pacific. It is a ring-shaped island that encloses a lagoon. The lagoon is stagnant and its water sulphuric. Its deep point is named the *Trou sans Fond*, or “Bottomless Pit.” The sole economic activity near Clipperton is tuna fishing.

Clipperton bears the name of John Clipperton, an English privateer and pirate rumored to have used it as a base, though there is no hard evidence of this. Its French discoverers named it *Île de la Passion* because they found it on Holy Thursday, 1711. They annexed it to France, to which it still belongs today.

It was briefly and secretly occupied by the U.S. during World War II, since which it has been entirely unpopulated. It is periodically visited by the French Navy as well as fishermen and scientific expeditions.

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

SOUTH AMERICA

COLOMBIA

Colombia is the fourth-largest country in South America, twice the size of France. With almost 45 million inhabitants, it is the second-most populous country in South America and the most populous Spanish-speaking country on the continent. Only Brazil and Mexico are larger in all of Latin America.

Colombia is the sole South American country that borders both the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans (the former through the Caribbean).

Colombia's geographic variety includes the northern Andes, the Amazon basin, and its vast northern coastal plain.

Colombia has been settled since at least 10,000 B.C. Its Precolumbian zenith was under the Muisca Confederation (c. 900–c. 1550), centered in the highlands near today's Bogotá.

The first European settlement on the American mainland was located in Colombia. The town of Santa María la Antigua del Darién was founded in 1510 and lasted until 1524 when it was burned to the ground by local Indians.

Colombia became independent of Spain in 1819 when the general and rebel Simón Bolívar became the first president of *Gran Colombia*, which included the lands of what are now Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama, as well as small parts of Brazil, Peru, Costa Rica, and Guyana. Ecuador and Venezuela seceded in 1830, and Panama became independent in 1903. Thereafter, Colombia was a stable nation until the political struggle which became known as "the Violence" (*La Violencia*, c. 1948–c. 1958) cost as many as a quarter million Colombians their lives. A 1953 military coup ended the remaining quarrels by taking over the political system entirely. In 1957, civilian rule was somewhat restored under a power-sharing arrangement.

The 1960s gave birth to several radical armed groups who destabilized the country with terrorism and political violence, principally the communist FARC and ELN. In the 1970s, the revolutionary M-19 group emerged as well. Even more problematic in the long-term were the establishment of drug cartels, whose wealth and lack of scruples about violence created

tremendous terror campaigns, assassinations of judges and politicians, and other violence aimed at destroying the state's ability and ordinary Colombians' ability to resist them. The most powerful of these in the '70s and '80s was the Medellín Cartel under Pablo Escobar until the death of many of its leaders (Escobar was killed by police in 1993) cleared the way for its rival, the Cali Cartel, which enjoyed a heyday into the 1990s, when it too was eventually suppressed by the government.

Colombia still suffers from drug cartels and revolutionary groups, but at a lower intensity than in the past.

For all its problems, Colombia has a fairly advanced economy and its tourist sector is beginning to revive with the waning of lawless violence.

Most Colombians live on the northern coast or in the mountainous west, with Bogotá being by far the largest city. The south and east are largely populated by indigenous tribes. Nine in ten Colombians are Roman Catholics, and the vast majority speak Spanish, though there are about 80 indigenous languages still spoken in varying degrees.

Famous contemporary Colombians include racecar driver Juan Pablo Montoya; baseball players Edgar Rentería, and Orlando Cabrera; Nobel-winning novelist Gabriel García Márquez; Vatican official Darío Cardinal Castrillón Hoyos; actor John Leguizamo; singer Shakira; model/actress Sofía Vergara.

VENEZUELA

Like Colombia, Venezuela is a successor to Bolívar's Gran Colombia. It's said to have received its name from explorer Amerigo Vespucci's likening the stilt-houses built by Añu Indians over water to Venice, Italy. Hence, Venezuela, "little Venice."

Venezuela's political history has been turbulent, and not even the marked prosperity brought about by the petroleum industry in the 20th century has created a "normal" political system. Currently, Hugo Chávez, a former military man who tried to seize power in 1992, was elected to power in 2002, since which he's governed as a flamboyant demagogue who's spent the country's petroleum wealth profligately in order

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

to buy support, as well as foment trouble in neighboring countries. Chávez pursues a nationalizing socialist economic policy at home, as well as eliminating all independent media, and an anti-Western, strongly anti-American foreign policy abroad, making ostentatious alliances with Cuba, Iran, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Libya, Zimbabwe, and other rogue states.

Venezuela enjoys amazing natural diversity of landscapes, climates, flora, and fauna.

Venezuela's economy is over-dependent on petroleum, which is about a third of GDP, three-quarters of exports, and half of government revenues. Moreover, as a resource economy, Venezuela is subject to large inequalities in wealth, with almost 40% of the people living in poverty, and almost 9% unemployment.

All but 4% of Venezuelans are at least nominally Catholic, almost all speak Spanish, and the vast majority are of mestizo or immigrant stock, with only about 1% of the country being of indigenous stock.

Baseball is Venezuela's favorite sport, and many Venezuelans have played in the major leagues, including Hall of Famer Luis Aparicio, Dave Concepción, Ozzie Guillén, Andrés Gallaraga, Omar Vizquel, Luis Sojo, Miguel Cabrera, Bobby Abreu, Félix Hernández, Melvin Mora, Carlos Zambrano, Magglio Ordóñez, Ugueth Urbina, and Johan Santana.

Venezuela has also produced many beauty queens, including four Miss Universes. Other famous Venezuelans include fashion designer Carolina Herrera; actress María Conchita Alonso; actor Wilmer Valderrama; and Venezuelan-American Dr. Baruj Bencerraf, Nobelist for medicine (1980) for discovering how the body rejects transplanted organs.

GUYANA

Unlike much of South America, Guyana was not colonized by Spain, but the Dutch, who arrived relatively late (1616) and stayed for almost 200 years until handing it over to the British in 1814.

Modern Guyana became independent in 1966 and remains a member of the British Commonwealth.

Most Guyanese live along the marshy Atlantic coastal plain. The center of the country contains a band of thick jungle, which gives way to a flat savannah grassland in the south, and then finally high mountains along the border with Brazil.

The Guyana Highlands (which continue into Venezuela as well) are famed for their *tepui*s ("houses of the gods"), large, isolated mesas (flat-topped mountains) which often have completely different, and unique, ecosystems on them from the forests below. The most famous of these is Mount Roraima (or *Roraimatepui*) at the point where the Venezuelan, Brazilian, and Guyanese borders meet. Roraima is essentially a huge sandstone rock onto which rain falls every day, cascading down in some of the world's highest waterfalls. It is one of the harshest, most inhospitable environments on earth. Nevertheless, plants and animals do survive there, as many as a third of the species found nowhere else on earth. Explorers' reports of Mount Roraima inspired Sherlock Holmes' creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, to write his famous adventure story, *The Lost World* (1912), about a South American plateau (called "Tepuyes") where dinosaurs survived.

Guyana has one of the most interesting population mixtures in South America. The majority population is East Indian, descended from immigrants from India (≈44%), followed by those of African descent (≈30%), then people of mixed race (≈17%), then indigenous people, mostly Carib Indians (≈9%).

Descendants of Portuguese (1,476 people in 2002), Chinese (1,395), and other Europeans (476) are tiny minorities. English is the country's official and common language.

Guyana has three widely-practiced religions in Christianity (≈40%, mostly Protestant), Hinduism (≈30%), Islam (≈7%).

Politics in Guyana are democratic, but often turbulent, with the two major parties essentially representing the East Indian and Afro-Guyanese ethnic groups' interests.

Guyana's economy is very weak, and it's one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere.

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

Guyana's culture resembles more closely those of the other former British nations of the Caribbean than that of its Latin neighbors. Cricket, for example, is the country's favorite sport.

Musician and producer Eddy Grant may be Guyana's most famous son.

The infamous 1978 Jonestown Massacre, a mass suicide of over 900 members of a utopian communist cult moved from California to the Guyana jungle by Jim Jones, is probably most Americans' strongest association with Guyana, although the cult was entirely foreign.

SURINAME

Like Guyana next door, Suriname—South America's smallest country—was originally colonized by the Dutch in the 17th century. A cruel system of slave labor sustained the colony, with the slave trade only being abolished in 1863 and slaves not being emancipated until 1873.

Suriname became autonomous in 1954 and independent in 1975. Almost a third of its inhabitants moved to the Netherlands in the late '70s, worried about the new country's odds for survival. Democracy seems to have taken root in Suriname in the 1990s, after a number of military coups in the '70s and '80s.

Suriname's topography mirrors Guyana's somewhat, with a populated coastal plain containing 90% of its people, a belt of rainforest across its middle, and a savannah in the south along the Brazilian border.

Bauxite mining dominates Suriname's economy, along with rice and banana cultivation.

Suriname is home to fewer than a half million people. As in Guyana, the largest single group are East Indians, descendents of workers who immigrated in the 19th century (≈35%). Creoles, mixed-race descendents of African slaves and Europeans, are next (≈30%), followed by descendents of Javanese immigrants from what's now Indonesia (≈15%), and Maroons, the descendents of escaped African slaves who moved into the jungle (≈10%). Small groups include indigenous peoples, and descendants of Chinese, Dutch, and Jewish immigrants. Dutch is Suriname's official language, but Sranan Tongo ("Suriname Tongue") is an English-based

creole that is widely used.

Cynthia McLeod, writing in Dutch, is Suriname's most famous novelist. The great Dutch soccer players Frank Rijkaard and Ruud Gullit are both of Surinamese descent.

FRENCH GUIANA

French Guiana is not an independent country. It is an overseas possession of France. Like many New World colonies, French Guiana imported African slaves to work on plantations, harvesting sugar, hardwoods, and the spice that bears the name of its capital, Cayenne pepper. In the nineteenth century, French Guiana became famous as a penal colony, with islands off its coast being used as virtually inescapable, legendarily harsh prisons of which Devil's Island was the most famous.

The most famous inhabitants of Devil's Island were the prisoners Alfred Dreyfus, the innocent man framed in the anti-Semitic Dreyfus Affair, and Henri Charrière, whose autobiography *Papillon* purports to be the tale of his escape from the French penal colony.

The prisons were only closed in 1951. In 1958, the Guiana Space Center was built to launch France's satellites.

In addition to the people of African descent (60–70%) and European descent (15%), French Guiana also is home to small communities of Chinese immigrants, Hmong resettled from Laos in the 1970s, Maroons (see Suriname), and indigenous Indians, of whom the Arawak are the largest group.

ECUADOR

Before the Spanish arrived in the 1530s, what is now Ecuador was inhabited by a variety of indigenous civilizations, including the Quito around Quito, and the Cañari in the south. The Cañari eventually fell to the Incas, not long before the Incas fell to the Spanish.

Independent Ecuador came about in 1830 (see under Colombia above). Its politics have been very unstable throughout its history.

Peru and Ecuador long disputed territories in the Amazon Basin. In 1941, Peru invaded Ecuador to conquer them. With the intervention of the U.S., Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, a peace treaty was signed in 1942,

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

under which Peru kept the land it had conquered. Two more small wars, the Paquisha War (1981) and the Cenepa War (1995) continued the dispute over the next fifty years. Only in 1998, again under the auspices of the U.S., Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, was the dispute finally settled and formal border demarcation undertaken, beginning in 1999. Ecuador is composed of a western coastal plain, a north-south highland running through the middle of the country, and the jungles of the Amazon basin in the east. Quito, the capital and largest city, is in the highlands, with an elevation of 9,200 feet, making it the second-highest capital in the world after only La Paz, Bolivia. (Lhasa, Tibet, held the title before it was conquered by the Chinese in 1950.) In addition to the mainland, Ecuador controls a group of islands off its shore which includes the famous Galápagos Islands, which inspired Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. Ecuador exports mostly unfinished resources, like oil, flowers, bananas, and shrimp, and its economy has been extremely sensitive to fluctuations in their prices. Mismanagement of the currency (the *sucre*) led Ecuador to adopt the U.S. dollar as its currency in 2000, stabilizing its monetary policy. Almost all Ecuadorians are Roman Catholics, but ethnically, Ecuador is very diverse. Mestizos are the majority at about 65% of the population, followed by Indians who are about a quarter of the population, whites (mostly of Spanish descent) at about seven percent, and blacks at about three percent. Soccer is by far Ecuador's favorite sport. Ecuador has produced many artists well-known across Latin America. Mike Judge, creator of *Beavis & Butthead*, *King of the Hill*, *Office Space*, and *Idiocracy* is a New Mexican but was born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where his father was teaching anthropology.

PERU

Today's Peru was home to the oldest-known civilization in the Americas, the so-called Norte Chico civilization which had as many as thirty population centers along the north-central Peruvian coast between 3200–1800 B.C. Most famously, Peru also was home to the Inca

Empire, the largest state in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans.

The Spaniards under Francisco Pizarro defeated the Incas under their emperor, Atahualpa, in 1532. Peru was a main source for silver mining for the Spanish Empire for the next three centuries.

As independence movements swept South America in the 1800s, Peru's elite remained royalist. Not until two separate military campaigns from 1819–1824, were the Spanish driven out of Peru. From 1879–1884, Peru, allied with Bolivia, fought the Saltpeter War (or the War of the Pacific) against Chile. Chile emerged victorious and took some coastal territory from both countries, cutting Bolivia off from the sea. Peru eventually negotiated the return of some territory.

Peru and Ecuador also had one of the longest-running border conflicts in history. See above under Ecuador for details.

Peru's political history has included many unstable periods, alternating with repressive governments.

In the 1980s, like Colombia, Peru suffered from a potent combination of cocaine profits and armed guerilla groups, the most famous of which was the ruthless Maoist group, the Shining Path, which initiated a civil war in 1980. The Shining Path's fortunes declined between 1992–1999 when most of their leaders were captured by the government. Small factions still exist and provoke violence, but nothing on the widespread, terrifying scale of their 1980s heyday.

The most interesting political figure of contemporary Peru was President Alberto Fujimori, who managed to conduct serious economic reforms and suppress the Shining Path, before resigning and exiling himself to Japan, one step ahead of serious corruption charges.

Peru's geography is divided into three territories: the Amazon rainforest that covers almost 60% of the country in the east, the Andes mountains, and the narrow coastal plain along the Pacific.

Peru's economy has had its ups and downs, but a series of free-trade agreements is expected to

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

improve its fortunes. One such agreement has been pending with the U.S. since 2006, awaiting only U.S. congressional approval.

Peru is a multiethnic country, whose demographics break down roughly as: indigenous people 45%, mestizo 37%, white 15%, black, Japanese, Chinese, and other 3%. Nine out of ten Peruvians are Catholic, and eight out of ten consider Spanish their native language. The most widely spoken Indian language is the tongue of the Incas, Quechua (pronounced "KEH-chu-a"), spoken by over 15% of the populace.

Famous Peruvians include percussionist Alex Acuña; fantasy artist Boris Vallejo (now American); pin-up painter Alberto Vargas; singer Yma Súmac; molecular biologist Carlos Bustamante; cult novelist Carlos Castañeda; novelist, essayist, and one-time presidential candidate Mario Vargas Llosa; economist Hernando de Soto; and the Catholic saint, Rose of Lima.

BRAZIL

Brazil is by far the largest and most populous country south of the United States. With almost 190 million people, it is the fifth most populous country in the world, and with over three-and-a-quarter million square miles of land, it's also the fifth largest country in the world. Inhabited by humans for at least 8,000 years, Brazil was discovered by the Portuguese explorer Pedro Álvarez Cabral in 1500—or perhaps by a Portuguese explorer named Sancho Brandão in 1341, whose discovery was kept quiet until the Portuguese crown could establish legal right to colonize lands in that area. The former is the accepted history, but the latter case has gained some credibility over the past 70 years. The Portuguese ruled Brazil from 1500–1822, and conditions under Portuguese rule were not as bad as in many colonial lands. As fictionalized in the film *The Mission*, the Jesuit order both evangelized and protected many indigenous peoples from enslavement. Interestingly, when Napoleon invaded Portugal in 1808, the Portuguese court moved to Rio de Janeiro, and Brazil became a kingdom. In 1815, Rio became the capital of "the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil & the

Algarve." In 1822, however, the Portuguese regent, Dom Pedro, declared independence, naming himself Emperor Pedro I. The Empire ended in 1889 with a military coup, which ushered in an era of constitutional democracy, which lasted until a military junta took power in 1930. The dominant political figure of mid-century Brazil was Getúlio Dornelles Vargas, a populist who served in various roles from dictator, to president, to dictator again, to senator, and president yet again. The military again took power and ruled from 1964–85. Democracy was restored in 1985, but social instability has proven lasting, helping usher in the rule of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, or "Lula," a socialist-populist for the twenty-first century. Brazil consists of twenty-six states and the federal district of Brasília (analogous to the federal District of Columbia which houses the U.S. capital).

Brazil is covered by the Amazon rainforest in the north, has hilly, mountainous, but open terrain in the south, and several high mountain ranges along the southeastern coast, with peaks reaching above 9,000 feet.

Brazil's major geographic feature is indubitably the great Amazon River, the second-longest river in the world (almost 4,000 miles long, the distance from Washington D.C. to Copenhagen, Denmark) and by far the largest by volume of water—its flow is greater than the next eight rivers combined. The rainforest region around it, sometimes called "Amazônia" is probably the most biodiverse region on Earth. A number of factors have caused deforestation of large tracts, so that almost 20% of the 1970 forest cover was gone by 2006. The Amazon River itself remained mostly unknown for some 350 years after its discovery, until a law in 1850 permitted steam navigation along its waters, which spurred a boom in exploration.

Northern Brazil is considered the country's largest, least-inhabited region. The Northeast is the poorest region, but is a melting pot of Portuguese, African, and indigenous cultures. The Middle and West are sparsely populated, home to both the Pantanal, the world's largest swamp (slightly larger than the country of

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

Nepal) and the Cerrado, the world's largest savanna (slightly smaller than Mexico). Both of these have enormous biodiversity, and the latter is the center of Brazilian agriculture.

The Southeast is home to an enormous, wealthy urban setting which runs almost continuously between (and beyond) the large cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. This region's beaches are famed world-wide for their beauty. Southern Brazil has the coolest, most temperate climate, and perhaps because of that, it was most heavily settled by Europeans, especially Germans, Italians, Portuguese, and Slavs. It is the wealthiest part of the country *per capita*, even if none of its cities match Rio's or São Paulo's opulence.

Although Brazil has huge concentrations of wealth and huge concentrations of poverty, its economy is one of the largest in the world, ranking about tenth by most estimates. Its economy ranges from natural resource extraction, to agriculture, to very sophisticated manufacturing, to high technology and services. Alas, the benefits of this economy are hindered in spreading by political corruption, bureaucracy, illiteracy, and pockets of extreme poverty.

Brazil is famed for the diversity of its animals and plants, but it also boasts one of the most racially varied populations of humans as well. Its Indians are likely descended from Siberians who crossed the Bering Strait around 9,000 B.C., and perhaps even older populations who were there to meet the Siberians' descendants. The Portuguese came in great numbers during their colonial period, and more Europeans followed in waves in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as did significant numbers of Japanese and mostly Christian Arabs from Lebanon and Syria. Finally, there is very large group of Brazilians of African descent, whose ancestors came as slaves between 1500–1850. According to the 2000 census, the major ethnic groups of Brazil break down as: 54% white, 39% multiracial, 6.2% black.

Brazilian culture is a rich, complicated mixture of all these strains, recognized around the world. Most Brazilians are Roman Catholics ($\approx 75\%$).

Soccer is by far Brazil's most popular sport, and Brazil is arguably the world's greatest soccer-playing nation, having won the World Cup five times and produced some of the world's greatest players.

Famous Brazilians include the soccer players Pelé, Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, and Kaká; actors Rodrigo Santoro and Sônia Braga; entertainer Carmen Miranda; modernist architects Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa; director Fernando Meirelles; CEO Carlos Ghosn; model Gisele Bündchen; musician Sergio Mendes; racecar drivers Emerson Fittipaldi and Hélio Castroneves; Olympic basketball star Oscar Schmidt; NBA players Anderson Varejão, Leandro Barbosa, and Nenê; writer Jorge Amado; and many others less well known in medicine, the sciences, etc.

PARAGUAY

Paraguay dates to the European founding of Asunción in 1537. It became a Spanish colonial province and center of Jesuit missionary activities among the Guaraní Indians, among others. (Some of this history inspired the 1986 movie *The Mission*.) Paraguay became independent of Spain in 1811.

In 1864, Paraguay went to war against the Triple Alliance of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. Although they had superior forces at the beginning of the conflict, it stretched out for six years and resulted in Paraguay's utter, catastrophic defeat. Perhaps as many as 300,000 Paraguayans, or almost 60% of the pre-war population of 525,000, died in the bloodiest war ever fought in the Americas, including as much as 90% of the adult male population. There may only have been 28,000 adult men alive in the country by 1870. Brazil occupied Paraguay for six further years, fearing Argentinian designs on its territory. Paraguay slowly recovered from this disaster over the next sixty years.

Bolivia and Paraguay fought the Chaco War between 1932–35 over the province of Gran Chaco which was mistakenly thought to be rich in oil. Paraguay defeated Bolivia, but both countries suffered economic ruin. (The Chaco War inspired Hergé's Tintin adventure, *The Broken Ear*.)

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

Twelve years later, Paraguay suffered a brief civil war (March–August 1947).

In 1954, President Federico Chávez tried to arm the national police to strengthen his control over the country. The military objected and threw him out in a coup d'état led by General Alberto Stroessner, who ruled the country as a dictator for the next 35 years. The Catholic Church was arguably the sole institution in the country not controlled by the state.

Stroessner's anti-communism made him a useful Cold War ally to the U.S., but eventually Presidents Carter and Reagan curtailed U.S. relations with the country.

Stroessner did revive Paraguay's economy, and it had the highest growth rate in South America in the 1970s.

Stroessner was ousted in a coup in 1989. He fled to Brazil where he lived in exile until his 2006 death. Since his deposition, Paraguay has become relatively free and democratic.

Paraguay's economy is still developing and dominated by agriculture (especially soybean cultivation) and animal husbandry (with beef cattle being particularly important).

Unlike many South American countries, Paraguay is ethnically homogenous. Almost 90% of the population are Spanish-Guarani *mestizos*. Guarani is spoken by 94% of the population, and Spanish only by about three-quarters. A variety of small immigrant communities exist as well.

URUGUAY

Uruguay is the second-smallest independent country in South America after Suriname and the third-smallest territory including French Guiana.

Uruguay's primary indigenous inhabitants were the Charrua Indians, who were driven south by the Guarani. Largely ignored during the early colonial period, the first European settlement in the area wasn't founded until 1624. The Spanish founded Montevideo, now the capital, as a fort to keep out the Portuguese in 1724. Its excellent natural harbor allowed it to quickly grow into a commercial entrepôt.

Uruguay was enmeshed in the three-way rivalry between the Spanish, Portuguese, and British in the region throughout the eighteenth and

nineteenth century.

Today, Uruguay is one of the freest, most politically stable countries in Latin America. Uruguay has unusual demographics. Ninety-five percent of the population are descended from Europeans, with Spain being the leading place of origin but with many different lands being represented. The remaining five percent are of African descent (including some white Africans). Uruguay has no indigenous inhabitants.

Uruguay's favorite sport is, by a wide margin, soccer, in which it is a two-time Olympic and two-time World Cup champion. Basketball and rugby are also popular.

ARGENTINA

Argentina is the second-largest country in South America, after only Brazil. It received its name from the Spanish *Tierra Argentina*, "the silver land," because of the enormous silver mine at Potosí, Bolivia, among others.

Pre-Hispanic Argentina was ruled in part by the Incas in the northwest, in the northeast by the Guarani, and a variety of nomadic groups in the south. Spanish explorers arrived in 1516. Spain established a permanent colony in 1580 and left exactly three hundred years after their arrival, in 1816, when independence was declared. The territory ended up in some chaos until a constitution unified the country in 1853. From about 1880 until the end of World War II, Argentina became one of the most prosperous countries in the world, overtaking even some European countries, like France.

The election of General Juan Perón in 1946 proved to be disastrous for Argentina's future. Enormously popular, Perón's economic populism began the country's slow decline. His protection of Nazi war criminals earned the country international opprobrium, and his oppressive governmental style gave birth to terrorist opposition groups.

Perón was ousted in a 1955 coup led by Catholic nationalists, and went into exile under the protection of fellow Latin authoritarians Alberto Stroessner of Paraguay and Francisco Franco of Spain.

In the 1950s and '60s, military and civilian governments alternated frequently and the

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

economy continued its decline.

Perón returned to power in 1973, but died in 1974, and was succeeded by his widow Isabel, who was ousted by the military in 1976.

The junta which came to power began to prosecute a “dirty war” against its opponents, “disappearing” between 9,000 and 30,000 political opponents between 1976–1983.

Democracy was restored in 1983, but by the 1990s, economic problems had returned with a vengeance, with mismanagement of the currency resulting in hyperinflation and a prolonged crisis which didn't come to an end until 2002–2003. Currently, Argentina's economy is flourishing, and it is enjoying political stability.

Argentina's most famous geographic feature is the vast grasslands west of Buenos Aires known as the Pampas, but its varied terrain and diverse climates make it home to a wide variety of animals and plants.

Argentina's economy is advanced, with manufacturing its leading sector. Services, tourism, and agriculture are also large contributors.

Like only Uruguay in the region, Argentina's population is overwhelmingly of European descent, with Spain and Italy the most common sources of ancestry. Argentina also has one of the largest Jewish communities in the world, which unfortunately drew the attention of the terrorist, anti-Semitic government of Iran, which car-bombed a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994, killing 85 people. Argentina is one of the leading producers of movies in the Spanish-speaking world, producing about 60 original feature films a year, and having produced some 2,500 films since the 1890s.

Soccer is Argentina's major sport, and the country has won the World Cup twice and the Olympics once. Volleyball and basketball are also very popular, as well as rugby, field hockey, golf, and auto racing.

Argentina's most famous contribution to world music is the dramatic and romantic tango. Famous Argentinians include the writer, poet, and translator Jorge Luis Borges; the novelist Manuel Puig; the pianist and film composer

Lalo Schifrin; the pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim; László Biró, a Hungarian immigrant who invented the modern ballpoint pen; scandalous exotic dancer Fanne Foxe; internationally renowned architect César Pelli; golfer Ángel Cabrera; NFL kickers Bill & Martín Gramatica; tennis players Gabriela Sabatini and Guillermo Vilas; Princess Máxima of the Netherlands; Juan Perón's first wife, Eva; Nobel Prize-winning scientists Bernardo Houssay, Luis Federico Leloir, and César Milstein; Dr. René Favaloro, inventor of the coronary bypass; Formula One champion Juan Miguel Fangio; soccer great Diego Maradona; and NBA players Manu Ginobili, Andrés Nocioni, and Walter Herrmann.

The American actress Alexis Bledel's father is Argentinian and Spanish is her first language.

BOLIVIA

The Bolivian highlands were probably settled some 13,000 years ago. The Tiwanakan civilization arose around 200 B.C. and lasted until about 1200 A.D. The Aymara subsequently dominated the region until they were conquered by the Incas in the 1400s. The area became one of the Inca Empire's four main administrative units. The lowlands in the east and south, however, retained their independence until the Spanish Conquest. Bolivia and its partially enslaved populace were an important part of the Spanish silver-mining economy. The city of Potosí was founded at the foot of the Cerro Rico, a large mountain of silver ore. Over 45,000 tons of pure silver were mined at Potosí between 1556–1783, of which the Spanish crown received some 7,000 tons. It was the primary source for silver in the New World until it became depleted around 1800. The area was proclaimed independent in 1809, but a formal government was not established until 1825, when it was named Bolivia after Simón Bolívar.

Bolivia lost its access to the sea in the Saltpeter War (see above under Peru), and various other wars have cost it half of its original territory since independence. The late nineteenth century brought stability when the price of silver remained high. The early twentieth century brought some economic growth, but its

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

benefits didn't reach the mass of the people, who remained impoverished. The crisis brought about by the country's defeat in the Chaco War (see Paraguay, above) furthered the country's distress.

From 1952 until 1993, dozens of revolutionary, military, and civilian governments governed Bolivia—generally not well. The years of 1993–2001 saw economic liberalization and growth, as well as stable government.

Since about 2000, however, Bolivia has been painfully divided over the use of revenues from the country's substantial natural gas reserves. This brought to power Evo Morales, an avowed socialist and ethnic Aymara, in 2005. His term in office has been very tumultuous, with nationalization of the oil and gas sector, and an attempt to redraft the constitution fairly radically.

Bolivia has a large number of ecological zones and a varied topography. La Paz is the world's highest capital, at almost 12,000 feet. The country's highest peak is over 21,000 feet. It also has the world's largest salt flat.

Bolivia has the blessing and curse of being rich in natural resources. Despite, or because of this, it is the poorest country in South America and the second-poorest country in the hemisphere after only Haiti. Much of the blame for this has been laid at the feet of Spanish colonialism, but from a modern perspective, it must also be attributed to the fact that as a resource exporter, it's terribly dependent on the fluctuating prices of those resources, leading to repeated boom-bust cycles which don't produce sustained investment.

Bolivia's population is about 30% mestizo, 30% Quechua, 25% Aymara, and 15% whites, mostly of Spanish descent. This last group has formed an aristocracy back to Imperial days.

CHILE

Before the Spanish conquest, Chile was inhabited by the Mapuche Indians in its central and southern regions. The Incas tried to occupy its northern regions, but found the terrain too barren and forbidding.

The Mapuche resisted the Spaniards' expansion with uprisings throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Between 1810–1817, Chileans fought the Spanish for independence. The national hero Bernardo O'Higgins became president in 1818. Chilean society remained stratified, and the Mapuche were forcibly suppressed between 1861 and 1863, extending the reach of the state.

The Saltpeter War gave Chile important territorial gains at the expense of Bolivia and Peru.

A civil war in 1891 shifted the balance of power away from the presidency and to the parliament, but this did not bring good or popular government to the country, and political instability was the order of the next decades. Eduardo Frei's term of office from 1964–70 brought about many important reforms, but although he had been elected with an absolute majority, he lost a three-way election to radical senator Salvador Allende, and refused to make common cause with the third, oligarchical candidate to block Allende. Allende was an asset of the Soviet KGB, as recent documents have proven, and set up ties between the two countries' intelligence services. He began nationalizing industries and interfering in the financial system. Predictably, an economic and social crisis ensued. A military coup deposed Allende, during the course of which he committed suicide.

General Augusto Pinochet took control of the country as a dictator, and ruled with an iron fist, with some three thousand executions over the next sixteen years (a thousand of which took place in the first six months). Some 30,000 opponents fled the country, and some tens of thousands were imprisoned, and sometimes tortured.

Against this dismal record, Pinochet did liberalize Chile's economy and then voluntarily stepped down when a free election in 1988 voted him out of power. As a result, Chile has enjoyed great prosperity and surprising political stability since.

Stretching down between the Pacific and the western side of the Andes, Chile's geography is quite varied, from the Atacama Desert in the north, the small but densely populated Central Valley, home to Santiago, the capital, and most of the country's agriculture, down through the

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

forested south, which has volcanos, lakes, fjords, inlets, canals, peninsulas, and islands. Chile also controls Easter Island.

As said, Chile's economy is robust, but as might be predicted in a country that's had severe social stratification for hundreds of years, its wealth is very unevenly distributed. It should enjoy continued economic growth based on the variety of free-trade agreements it's signed with the U.S., Canada, Mexico, and Central America, as well as regional agreements with most major South American countries.

The Chilean population is relatively homogenous, with about 90% identifying themselves as mestizos, and about 10% as indigenous peoples (of those the vast majority are Mapuche). Unlike many South American countries, Chile does not have a history of attracting many immigrants.

Famous Chileans include the comedian Horatio Sanz; actresses Leonor Varela and Cote de Pablo; actor Santiago Cabrera; Nobel Prize-winning poet Pablo Neruda; the Catholic saints Teresa of the Andes and Alberto Hurtado; tennis player Marcelo Ríos; jockey José Santos; and novelists Isabel Allende, Ariel Dorfman, and Antonio Skármeta.

FALKLAND ISLANDS

The Falkland Islands are an archipeligo in the South Atlantic. Out of the 778 islands, East and West Falkland are the two largest. The capital, Stanley, is on East Falkland.

A variety of countries ruled or laid claim to the uninhabited Falklands, but the an invasion of 1833 established British control. Argentina has never surrendered its claim, and invaded the islands in 1982, only to be dislodged by the Royal Navy.

One of World War I's relatively few naval battles was fought at the Falklands in 1914, in which the British defeated the Germans.

British forces from the Falklands also participated in the 1939 Battle of the River Plate in which the German battleship *Graf Spee* was located and neutralized, scuttled by its crew, off the coast of Uruguay.

The Falklands have a cool climate, and their main industries are sheep-herding, fishing, and tourism.

The majority of the Falklands' 3,000 inhabitants are of Scottish descent, with a smattering of diverse nationalities added. One unusual hazard in the Falklands is the significant danger of landmines leftover from the 1982 war in certain areas, though they are fenced off and well-marked.

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

THE CARIBBEAN

THE BAHAMAS

The Bahamas are an archipelago of seven hundred islands and cays and two thousand keys. They were the site of Columbus's first landing in the New World, on San Salvador Island in the southern Bahamas. At the time, the Bahamas were inhabited by more than 40,000 Taino Indians. The Taino population (often known as Lucayans) plummeted in the sixteenth century due to disease, emigration, war, and slavers operating out of Hispaniola. By 1600 or so, the Bahamas were virtually uninhabited, and beginning in about 1647, British settlers began to move in. In 1718, the Bahamas became a British crown colony, and its population swelled in the 1770s with an influx of Americans loyal to the Crown, mostly from New York, Florida, and the Carolinas. Slavery was ended in 1834 in the Bahamas, making it an attractive destination for escaped slaves from the southern U.S. The Bahamas became self-governing in 1964, then fully independent in 1973, though they remain part of the British Commonwealth. Some of the largest islands in the Bahamas are Andros Island (the largest), Grand Bahama (home to Freeport), Great Abaco, Eleuthera, Cat Island, Great Exuma, Long Island, Crooked Island, Acklands, Mayaguna, and Great Inagua. Nassau, the capital, is on the island of New Providence.

The Bahamas are home to about 300,000 Bahamians, an estimated 85% of whom are black, 12% are white, and the remainder belong to Asian and Hispanic ethnic groups. Bahamians are very religious, claiming to have the highest ratio of churches to people in the world. Eight out of ten Bahamians are Protestant Christians, with Baptists the largest denomination, followed by the Church of England. Roman Catholic Christians come next at about 15% of the population.

The Bahamas are an English-speaking country. The Bahamian economy is quite robust, based on the twin pillars of financial services and tourism. The Bahamas enjoys the third-highest per-capita GDP in the Western Hemisphere, after the U.S. and Canada, though wealth tends

to be concentrated on Grand Bahama and New Providence.

The Bahamas' main legal problem is its popularity as a drug-transshipment point. Its many islands, some quite isolated and unpopulated, make it very suitable for smugglers of all sorts, as it was back in the days when pirates and privateers roamed the Atlantic and Caribbean.

Famous Bahamians include the actors Sidney Poitier and Roxie Roker; and NBA players Mychal Thompson and Rick Fox.

In addition, the Bahamas are an extremely popular residence for the wealthy of the world, with Bill Gates, Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Sean Connery, Oprah Winfrey, Johnny Depp, Nicholas Cage, and many others owning property or even private islands there.

TURKS & CAICOS ISLANDS

The Turks & Caicos Islands are a British overseas possession. The history of their ownership and, later, status within the British Empire is quite complex. They remain a possession of Britain today.

Like the Bahamas, the Turks & Caicos are an archipelago, though much smaller, with only eight main, populated islands and twenty small islands and cays.

The nine main Caicos Islands have almost all the land area and 85% of the population of the group. The two largest Turks islands, Grand Turk and Salt Cay, have almost all the remainder of the population. Grand Turk is also home to the seat of government, Cockburn Town, the oldest settlement in the islands, founded by salt collectors in 1681.

The demographics of the Turks & Caicos are similar to those of the Bahamas, with the vast majority of the inhabitants of African descent and Protestant Christian religion. English is the language of the islands.

The islands' economy is not particularly strong, though tourism from the U.S. and Canada is a growing source of revenue.

Interestingly, there has been talk for several decades in Canada about admitting the Turks & Caicos Islands to Canada, based on their common head of state and membership in the Commonwealth. To date, not much has come

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

of this, but in 2004, the province of Nova Scotia invited the TCI to become part of the province, should they ever choose to become part of Canada.

CUBA

Inhabited by Taino Indians when Columbus arrived in 1492 (where the city of Baracoa is today), Cuba, then known as Fernandina after King Ferdinand of Spain, became the administrative center of all the Spanish colonies in the New World after 1511.

The indigenous Tainos disappeared within a few generations of the Spaniards' arrival, with smallpox the primary culprit, but war, enslavement, and emigration all contributed. Spain ruled Cuba (the original Taino name which early on replaced "Fernandina") for almost four centuries, during which time it was a major exporter of sugar, coffee, and tobacco. With the indigenous people mostly gone, the Spanish imported slaves from Africa to do most of the labor.

Slavery was only ended in 1886, and black Cubans given full rights as citizens in 1893 (though they were frequently not allowed exercise of those rights).

During the 1890s, pro-independence feeling swelled in Cuba, and a war broke out in 1895, with independence leader José Martí leading the Cuban forces. Martí was killed a month into the war, and has become the Cuban national hero *par excellence*.

The Spanish defeated the uprising, but the severity of their measures turned U.S. and European opinion strongly against them. In 1898, the U.S. battleship *Maine* exploded in Havana harbor. The cause has never been definitively determined, with heated arguments continuing as recently as 1999 over whether a mine in the harbor or an internal explosion was a more likely cause.

The sinking of the *Maine* combined with Spain's unpopularity caused Congress to declare war on Spain (though there has never been any evidence of Spain's guilt, it was assumed by many at the time), inaugurating the Spanish-American War. (A popular pro-war slogan was "Remember the *Maine*! To hell with Spain!") U.S. forces routed the Spanish in a few months,

and after on-going negotiations, Cuba became formally independent in 1902.

Cuba's politics after independence were tumultuous. The major figure who emerged was Fulgencio Batista, who ruled for seven years behind the scenes after a 1933 coup, was elected president from 1940-44, and then carried out another coup in 1952.

For the almost three decades that Batista dominated the political scene, Cuba's government was authoritarian, and Havana's atmosphere became free-wheelingly corrupt, with large-scale casino gambling and links to American organized crime taking pride of place. Batista ruled Cuba like the head of a crime family until going into exile in the Dominican Republic after losing U.S. support in 1958.

Batista's departure was inevitable, given the growing objections to his rule in the late '50s. As in Nicaragua, rebellion against a corrupt dictator grew into a revolution that spawned something worse: a totalitarian government. Fidel Castro's revolution of 1959 initially played coy as to its ideological character, but by 1960, it was clear that it was a Soviet client state, and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1961 made that fact inescapable.

By 1963, Castro had consolidated enough power to begin establishing a full-fledged, Soviet-style communist system. The U.S. responded with a complete trade embargo which remains in place today.

Communism predictably impoverished and decimated Cuban civil society. What had been a reasonably wealthy, if unequal and corrupt, developing country became a highly militarized prison island which people literally took to the seas on rafts to escape.

Cuba's eleven million people are a mixture of mixed-race (51%), white (37%), and black (11%). Unfortunately for the country's future, a combination of a low birth rate and high abortion rate looks to cause serious demographic problems in the future as the population ages and fewer young people come along to care for the elderly and replace the dying.

Cuba's restrictions on religious activity have

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

waned in recent years, and both the formerly preponderant Catholic faith and many smaller Protestant denominations have had resurgences.

Cuba's favorite sport is baseball by a wide margin, followed by boxing, basketball, and volleyball.

Cuban music is world-famous, with variants like salsa, mambo, rumba, and cha-cha-cha being danced in ballrooms around the world.

Famous Cubans and Cuban émigrés include: actor Andy Garcia; actor-musician Desi Arnaz; bandleader Xavier Cugat; singer Jon Secada; prima ballerina Alicia Alonso; boxers Sugar Ramos, Félix Savón, and Mario Kindelán; high-jump great Javier Sotomayor; "Mozart of Chess" José Raúl Capablanca; Grand Duchess Maria Teresa of Luxembourg; Nobel Prize-winning physicist Luis Alvarez; a number of U.S. politicians, including Miami mayors Manny Diaz & Xavier Suarez, Miami-Dade County mayors Alex Penelas & Carlos Alvarez, Florida governor Bob Martinez, New Hampshire governor John Sununu, Commerce Secretary & former Kellogg CEO Carlos Guitierrez, Reps. Lincoln & Mario Diaz-Balart, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Rep. Albio Sires, Sen. Mel Martinez; U.S. diplomat Otto Reich; Hall of Fame pitcher José Mendez of the Negro Leagues; and numerous Major League Baseball players, including José Canseco, José Contreras, Livan Hernández, Luis Tiant, Mike Cuellar, Minnie Miñoso, Orlando "El Duque" Hernández, Rafael Palmiero, Rey Ordóñez, and Tony Pérez.

JAMAICA

Settled by Arawak and Taino Indians from South America some millennia before the birth of Christ, Jamaica (from Taino *Xamayca*, "land of wood and water") was claimed by Columbus in 1494.

The Spanish administered Jamaica similar to Cuba, importing black slaves to replace the dwindling population of natives.

The British seized Jamaica in 1655 and invited pirates to dock at Port Royal to help deter the Spanish. Port Royal became one of the Caribbean's most notorious pirate havens until it was largely sunk into the ocean by an earthquake in 1692.

Jamaica was an enormously valuable asset to the British as one of the world's major sugar and coffee exporters. Slave revolts were common, as 90% of the population were slaves, until the British Empire abolished slavery in 1834.

Jamaica acquired political autonomy within the Empire beginning in the 1940s, culminating in full independence in 1962, though it remains part of the Commonwealth.

Jamaica is the largest English-speaking island in the Caribbean, and the third-largest island overall.

Jamaica's economy has had its ups and downs. Since the 1980s, the government has attempted to liberalize the economy and tighten monetary policy. These policies have generally been successful, though the economy contracted appreciably from 1995–98 due to a variety of factors, after which it regained its footing. Overall, however, Jamaica remains relatively, though not desperately, poor.

Nine out of ten Jamaicans are of African descent, another 7% are mixed-race; the remainder are composed of a small East Indian minority (1%) and tiny Chinese, white, and indigenous minorities.

Over the past decades, over a million Jamaicans have sought economic opportunity around the world, especially in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, and Brazil, with London and New York City possessing the largest populations of Jamaicans outside Jamaica.

Jamaicans have earned world-class victories in their favorite sports, cricket, soccer, and track and field, and their country famously fielded an internationally competitive bobsled team. Reggae is Jamaica's main contribution to world music.

Famous Jamaicans include black nationalist Marcus Garvey; Island Records founder Chris Blackwill; reggae greats Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff, and Peter Tosh; rapper Shaggy; model-singer-actress Grace Jones; sprinters Linford Christie, Asafa Powell, Merlene Ottey, and Ben Johnson; basketball great Patrick Ewing; and baseball player "Chili" Davis.

Famous people of Jamaican parentage include supermodel Naomi Campbell; four-star general

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

and first black American secretary of state Colin Powell; model-actor Tyson Beckford; calypso singer Harry Belafonte; actor Delroy Lindo; rapper Christopher "The Notorious B.I.G." Wallace; and boxer Lennox Lewis. Many famous people have chosen to live in Jamaica, including James Bond's creator, Ian Fleming, and actor Errol Flynn.

HAITI

Like Jamaica and Cuba, Haiti gets its name from the Taino language of its pre-Columbian inhabitants (in which it was "Ayiti").

Haiti occupies the western third of the island of Hispaniola, neighboring the Dominican Republic.

And like in Cuba and Jamaica, the Taino population fared ill after the arrival of the Spanish who ruled parts of the island until 1659 when it effectively fell under French control. Under French rule, Haiti prospered and became the richest colony in the hemisphere, as a huge sugar and coffee exporter. Unfortunately, the wealth remained in the hands of a few, about 30,000 whites and 28,000 free blacks, who ruled about half a million slaves.

In 1791, inspired by the French Revolution, a slave rebellion broke out and was soon led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, who brought together both the slaves, free blacks, and "maroons" (escaped slaves) against the French government.

L'Ouverture was tricked and arrested by an expeditionary force sent by Napoleon in 1802 which successfully pacified the revolt for two years, until such point that it became clear that the French intended to reimpose slavery. The French were defeated in 1803, and in 1804 Haiti became the first black republic in the world, the second independent nation in the Western Hemisphere, and the only nation ever to be created by a slave revolt.

In 1806, however, the nation split in two, with a republic in the south and a short-lived kingdom in the north.

In 1820, Haiti was reunited and in 1821 took over "Spanish Haiti," the eastern two-thirds of Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic), which it ruled until 1844 when the Spanish-speaking eastern two-thirds declared

independence and then returned to Spanish rule.

Continuing political turmoil for the rest of the nineteenth century culminated in the lynching and mutilation of the president who had executed 167 prisoners including his predecessor on July 27, 1915.

Fearful of chaos and claiming fears of a German invasion in the hemisphere, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson ordered troops into Haiti and occupied the country. U.S. occupation lasted 19 years, until 1934.

Rapid changes of government and a military coup ensued until Dr. François "Papa Doc" Duvalier was elected president. Duvalier declared himself "president for life" in 1964 and ruled by terror, with his secret police known as "Tontons Macoutes," committing terrible atrocities against the public. Duvalier was not the first Haitian president to essentially have a private militia (one reason the country was so unstable), but his surely ranked among the most vicious and powerful the country had seen. "Papa Doc" died in 1971 and was succeeded by his notoriously corrupt son Jean-Claude a/k/a "Baby Doc," who was ousted in 1986 by a coalition of groups, among which was the Catholic Church.

Unfortunately, the first freely elected president, the populist Catholic priest (expelled by his order and suspended from priestly duties in 1988 for preaching violence) Jean-Bertrand Aristide who would dominate Haitian politics for the next decade and a half (with the exception of a 1991-94 military government eventually ousted by the U.S.) proved a devotee of violence and corruption. Aristide was forced out of Haiti in 2004.

Haiti's main hope of decent government seems to be René Preval, elected president in 2006. Préval had served as president from 1996-2001, and was the first Haitian president in history to voluntarily step down. He also cracked down on human-rights abuses and liberalized the economy. In his second term, however, he has benefited greatly from economic ties with Hugo Chávez's Venezuela, which is no beacon of liberty.

Haiti was a lush forest as recently as the 1920s,

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

but all but 1% of its woodlands are now gone, resulting in massive erosion and desertification. Political instability, environmental catastrophe, pervasive corruption, and populist economics have all contributed to Haiti's grinding poverty. Ninety-five percent of Haitians are of African descent, and like Jamaica, Haiti has a very sizable emigrant population residing abroad. Haiti's official languages are French and Haitian Creole.

Catholicism is the state and majority religion of Haiti. Protestantism tends to the souls of about 20% of the population. A large, but unknown number of Haitians practice voodoo, usually in addition to Christianity.

Well-known Haitians include basketballers Samuel Dalembert, Olden Polynice, and Mario Elie; NFL players Max Jean-Gilles, Jonathan Vilma, Carlos Joseph; the first-known settler of Chicago, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable; actress Garcelle Beauvais; singer Wyclef Jean; and the famous pirate Jean Lafitte.

The Franco-American ornithologist and illustrator John James Audubon was born in Haiti.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

The Dominican Republic's early history is similar to and closely entwined with that of Haiti, its neighbor on Hispaniola.

In 1844, the Dominican Republic declared independence from Haiti, then reverted to colonial status with Spain in 1861. After a war with the Spanish, the Dominican Republic became independent again. In the 1870s, the nation offered to sell itself as a colony to the United States. Some, including President Grant, were in favor, seeing it as a possible refuge for freed slaves to escape conditions in the American South. Ultimately, however, the idea went nowhere.

The dominant figure in the twentieth century was Gen. Rafael Trujillo, who ruled as a murderous tyrant from 1930 until he was assassinated in 1961.

Civil war broke out, and U.S. President Lyndon Johnson sent in the Marines to occupy the country in 1965. They departed a year later, having overseen elections in which Joaquín Balaguer was voted president. Balaguer ran a

mildly repressive government for a dozen years. In 1978, Balaguer stepped down when voted out in favor of Antonio Guzmán Fernández whose 1978–86 incumbency was almost entirely without repression. Balaguer regained office in 1986 and held office for ten years until international pressure forced a free election (in contrast to the allegedly fixed 1994 vote he won). The years 1996, 2000, and 2004 saw orderly peaceful changes of government through the ballot box.

The Dominican Republic is the second-largest country in the Caribbean after Cuba. Its climate is tropical and the country is largely mountainous. It possesses many rivers, and the highest peak and largest lake in the Caribbean. The Dominican Republic's economy is not strong, though recent years have shown a measurable, though not large, positive trend. Dominicans are 73% mixed-race, 16% white, 11% black, and a variety of small groups. Most "mixed-race" Dominicans have some significant African descent, but generally identify themselves as mixed-race and reject categorical racial statements.

Merengue music is the Dominican Republic's gift to world music, and bachata music is increasingly popular in the Latin world. Baseball is the Dominican Republic's paramount sport, and it has produced some of the sport's greatest names in recent years, including Pedro Martínez, Vladimir Guerrero, Albert Pujols, David Ortiz, Manny Ramirez, José Reyes, Francisco Liriano, Sammy Sosa, Miguel Tejada, and Alfonso Soriano, as well as Dominican-American Alex Rodriguez.

Other famous Dominicans include too many major-league baseball greats to name, though Hall of Famer Juan Marichal can't be left out; NBA players Tito & Al Horford and Charlie Villanueva; half-Dominican French Impressionist Camille Pissaro; and fashion giant Oscar de la Renta.

Dominican-American actors include Judy Reyes, Alfonso Ribiero, Michelle Rodriguez, and Zoë Saldaña.

PUERTO RICO

Puerto Rico, "the rich port," is a mountainous island about 3,500 square miles in area. It is a

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

self-governing territory of the United States with Commonwealth status.

Columbus arrived at the island, called Borikén by its Taino inhabitants. It became a formal Spanish colony in 1508 under Juan Ponce de León. The Tainos disappeared on Puerto Rico as they did on Cuba and elsewhere.

Spain ruled Puerto Rico until 1898 when they lost it in the Spanish-American War.

Currently, the main question in Puerto Rican politics is deciding on whether to maintain the status quo arrangement with the U.S., to apply for statehood, or to become independent.

According to the last U.S. Census, 80% of Puerto Ricans describe themselves as white, 8% as black, 12% mulatto, and 0.4% as Indian. Puerto Rico is fairly well-off by developing-country standards, but relatively poor by U.S. standards (its per-capita income coming in slightly below Mississippi, the poorest state). Puerto Rican culture is an interesting mixture of Taino, Spanish, African, and American influence.

Baseball is Puerto Rico's number-one sport, with boxing, basketball, and volleyball also very popular.

Famous Puerto Ricans include the actors José Ferrer, Luis Guzmán, and Raúl Juliá; Dierdre Connolly, president of Eli Lilly; the singer José Feliciano; pop star Ricky Martín; Brig. Gen. Ricardo Aponte, USAF; U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Modesto Cartagena, winner of the Distinguished Service Cross; PFC Fernando Garcia, USMC, KIA in Korea, winner of Medal of Honor; PFC Carlos Lozado, U.S. Army, KIA in Vietnam, winner of Medal of Honor; Lt. Col. Teofilo Marxuach, U.S. Army, fired first American shot of World War I; four-star Admiral Horacio Rivera, U.S. Navy; Maj. Fernando Rodriguez, DDS, U.S. Army, discovered bacteria that cause dental cavities; Capt. Humbert Roque Versace, U.S. Army, won Medal of Honor for valor as a POW in Vietnam, executed in captivity; Capt. Euripides Ribio, U.S. Army, KIA in Vietnam, awarded Medal of Honor; Sp4c Hector Santiago-Colon, U.S. Army, KIA in Vietnam, awarded Medal of Honor; New York politicians Herman Badillo and Adam Clayton Powell IV; U.S. Rep. José

Serrano; baseball players Roberto Alomar, Sandy Alomar Sr. & Jr., Carlos Beltrán, Carlos Delgado, Juan González, Javy Lopez, Édgar Martínez, Martínez Jackson (Reggie Jackson's father, a Negro League player), Ivan "Pudge" Rodríguez, and Bernie Williams; NBA players Carlos Arroyo; boxers Wilfredo Gomez, Félix Trinidad, Wilfredo Benitez, and Hector "Macho" Camacho; Hall of Fame jockey Angel Cordero; skier Jonny Moseley; NFL player Marco Rivera; golfer Juan "Chi-Chi" Rodríguez; and the pirate Roberto Cofreí.

The great Spanish cellist and conductor Pablo Casals chose to spend the last years of his life in Puerto Rico, where his mother had come from.

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

The U.S. Virgin Islands are a group of islands about fifty miles east of Puerto Rico. The four main islands are Saint Thomas (home to the capital and largest city Charlotte Amalie), Saint John, Saint Croix (the largest), and Water Island.

After being named for the legendary virgin followers of St. Ursula by Christopher Columbus in 1493, the Virgin Islands changed hands many times, being held at various times by Spain, Britain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and even the Knights of Malta. In 1754, the islands became Danish crown colonies, exporting sugarcane harvested by slaves. After Denmark abolished slavery in 1848, the islands became a drag on the Danish treasury and various attempts at selling them to the U.S. were floated over the next few decades. The U.S. bought the islands in 1917 for \$25 million, the ostensible reason that the Germans might invade Denmark, then establish a submarine base in the Virgin Islands. (Water Island remained in the hands of the Danish East Asiatic Company until 1944 when they sold it to the U.S. for \$10,000; it joined the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1996.) Interestingly, in Denmark, the islands are still usually called the *dansk-vestindiske øer*, "the Danish West Indian Islands."

The U.S. Virgin Islands send a delegate to the U.S. Congress but cannot vote in presidential elections.

The U.S. Virgin Islands' economy is based on

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

tourism.

About three-quarters of U.S. Virgin Islanders consider themselves black and about 13%, white.

The U.S. Virgin Islands are the only U.S. territory where people drive on the left. Famous people from the U.S. Virgin Islands include actor Kelsey Grammer; French Impressionist Camille Pissarro; baseball player and coach Elrod Hendricks; NBA players Raja Bell and Tim Duncan; rapper Doug E. Fresh; and civil-rights advocate Roy Innis.

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

The British Virgin Islands lie just east of the U.S. Virgin Islands. The main islands in the group are Virgin Gorda, Tortola, Jost Van Dyke, and Anegada. Tortola is the largest island and is home to the capital, Road Town.

The Spaniards first held the Virgin Islands, mining copper on Virgin Gorda. However, they changed hands frequently and became a notorious haven for pirates. The British took control of today's British Virgin Islands in the late seventeenth century. They were granted autonomy in 1967.

The British Virgin Islands is one of the world's leading off-shore finance centers and enjoys enviable wealth. Tourism is the second-most important pillar of the economy.

Most Islanders (83%) are of African descent, with about 7% white, and a variety of smaller ethnic groups. About 86% are Protestant Christians of some stripe, and another 10% are Roman Catholic.

The British Virgin Islands have attracted some famous part-time residents over the years, including anchorman Peter Jennings, actor Morgan Freeman, and billionaire Sir Richard Branson, not to mention one of its first seventeenth-century settlers, the Dutch pirate Joost van Dyk.

ANGUILLA

Anguilla is the northernmost of the Leeward Islands, which stretch down to Dominica. The country is composed of the main island of Anguilla and a number of small, uninhabited islands and cays, including Scrub Island, Seal Island, Prickley Pear Cays, Dog Island, and

Sombrero (or "Hat Island"). Its name (pronounced an-GWEE-la) comes from Spanish "eel," as the long, main island of Anguilla was thought to look like an eel. Anguilla was first settled by Englishmen coming from St. Kitts in 1650. The British tried to merge it into a single unit with St. Kitts & Nevis in the nineteenth century. The local population rebelled in 1967 and 1969, declaring independence. British rule was restored in 1969, and the Crown agreed to separate Anguilla from St. Kitts & Nevis.

Anguilla is warm and dry, but has thin soil unsuitable for agriculture. As a result, its economy is based on off-shore finance, tourism, and fishing. In recent years, Anguilla's economy has boomed.

The population of Anguilla is largely (90%) black, with a white minority. Recent years have seen an influx of Chinese, Indians, and Mexicans who have come to work in the booming tourist sector, since the small Anguillan population (≈14,000) doesn't provide enough resort workers. Most Anguillans are Protestant Christians.

Anguilla's capital is named the Valley, and is home to 1,100 people.

ST. MAARTEN

The island of Saint Martin at the north end of the Leeward Islands is divided between two political entities. It's the smallest inhabited sea island in the world to be so divided. The southern, Dutch half is the *Eilandgebied Sint-Maarten*, part of the Netherlands Antilles.

St. Maarten's 13 square miles are home to about 30,000 people who have their own university and medical school. Tourism is St. Maarten's main industry. St. Maarten is largely Protestant Christian. Its capital is Philipsburg.

ST. MARTIN

The French side of Saint Martin is the *Collectivité de Saint-Martin*. Its capital is Marigot. It has about 30,000 people in 20 sq. mi. Legend has it that the island was divided by a Frenchman walking south from the northern tip and a Dutchman walking north from the southern tip. By previous agreement, they'd each drunk a bottle their preferred spirit: wine

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

for the Frenchman, gin for the Dutchman. They would divide the island where they met. The Dutchman, under the influence of the more potent gin, had to stop and sleep it off, thereby allowing the French to gain more territory. Alas, history puts the lie to this terrific tale, reporting that it was, in fact, the French Navy that was able to force the Dutch to cede more territory.

ANTIGUA & BARBUDA

The eponymous islands are the two largest islands in this nation; the third is Redonda, an uninhabited island off Antigua. Antigua is larger than Barbuda and is home to the capital, Saint John's. Barbuda's sole city is Codrington.

Tourism is the mainstay of the nation's economy.

Ninety-three percent of its citizens are black, and almost half are Anglican Christians. English is the official language, but Antiguan Creole is widely spoken, especially among poorer Antiguans. Antigua's culture is predominantly British-influenced, reflecting its Commonwealth status and colonial history. Antiguans and Barbudans are renowned for their friendliness and happiness.

ST. KITTS & NEVIS

St. Kitts & Nevis are two of the Caribbean's oldest-colonized territories. St. Kitts ("St. Kit's" from "St. Christopher," its original name) became the first British colony in the Caribbean in 1624, then the first French colony in 1625 when the British & French partitioned the island. In 1626, the indigenous Kalinago people realized that the Europeans were there to stay, and massed forces from nearby islands to wipe them out. Their plan was betrayed, however, and British & French forces combined and almost completely wiped the Kalinago off the island. St. Kitts and Nevis were always treated as separate entities despite their proximity until the 1890s when they were joined in a union that is sometimes uneasy. By far the most famous native of these islands was American founding father Alexander Hamilton, born on Nevis, then moving at about 10 to Christiansted, St. Croix. St. Kitts and Nevis are both volcanic islands

with uninhabited jungle highlands at their centers.

Sugar and tourism are the twin props of St. Kitts & Nevis' economy.

About 40,000 people reside in St. Kitts & Nevis. Cricket is the nation's favorite sport. The national soccer team is known as "the Christmas Apes" and has enjoyed regional success.

Sprinter Kim Collins won the world 100-meter championship in 2003, making him a national hero in his tiny country.

MONTSERRAT

Montserrat is a British territory sometimes called "The Emerald Isle of the Caribbean" due to its early Irish settlers and its resemblance to coastal Ireland.

Unlike many islands based on a single crop, Montserrat did not have a lasting economic crisis when the world sugar price fell in the 1860s, largely because of one man.

Philanthropist Joseph Sturge of Birmingham, England, founded the Montserrat Company which began to buy up unviable sugar estates in 1869, planting limes, founding a school, and selling plots of land as individual farms.

Montserrat caught the world's eye in the 1960s, when the Beatles' producer, George Martin, opened AIR Studios which attracted many famous musicians.

Nature has not been kind to Montserrat in recent years. Hurricane Hugo nearly destroyed the island in 1990, damaging almost all the structures on the island, causing AIR Studios to go out of business, and the tourist trade to contract massively. Having recovered over the next few years, Montserrat was hit by an even worse blow. The Soufrière Hills Volcano—dormant for all of recorded history—erupted in 1995. The southern half of Montserrat was rendered uninhabitable, Plymouth, the capital was buried in 40 feet of mud, and its port and airport were destroyed.

Smaller eruptions have followed, but fortunately none have been as severe.

Plymouth had to be completely abandoned in 1997, and half the island's population had to leave for lack of housing. The UK has approved over \$120 million for reconstruction, but half

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

Montserrat is expected to be uninhabitable for ten years or more.

GUADELOUPE

Discovered by Columbus in 1493, Guadeloupe is today a French territory comprised of five islands: Basse-Terre, Grande-Terre, La Désirade, Les Saints, and Marie-Galante. Its inhabitants are mostly black (70%) and Catholic (90%).

Guadeloupe's largest industry is tourism, which largely caters to fellow French nationals. Guadeloupe's most famous son is Saint-John Perse (real name: Alexis St.-Léger Léger), a French poet and diplomat who won the 1960 Nobel Prize for Literature.

DOMINICA

Also discovered by Columbus, Dominica, the southernmost of the Leeward Islands, became independent of the UK in 1978, but remains a Commonwealth nation.

Dominica's pride is its incredible natural beauty and richness of wildlife. The entire island is covered with mountains and rainforest.

Almost all 70,000 Dominicans are descendants of African slaves, although uniquely for the region, there is still a community of Carib Indians living on the island. About 3,000 Caribs live in villages on the east coast, having been granted the 3,700-acre territory by King Edward VII in 1903.

Novelist Jean Rhys is Dominica's most famous daughter, her 1966 novel *The Wide Sargasso Sea* having gained a world-wide readership.

Dominica was a filming location for the three *Pirates of the Caribbean* films.

Tourism and agriculture, particularly banana exports, are the mainstays of Dominica's economy.

MARTINIQUE

Like Guadeloupe and Clipperton, Martinique is an overseas possession of France. Its culture is a mixture of French, African, and Asian influences. Most inhabitants are descendants of African slaves. Its most famous son is bloodthirsty early-twentieth-century theorist of revolutionary violence, Frantz Fanon.

ST. LUCIA

St. Lucia is one of the Windward Islands, located just south of Martinique and north of Barbados.

St. Lucia was discovered by Arawaks c. 300, and Caribs who displaced the Arawaks c. 900.

Europeans ran across it c. 1500, and it was a known haunt of the French pirate François "Jamb de Bois" de Clerc in the 1550s. There was no European settlement until about 1600, when the Dutch arrived. The island changed hands a number of times, mostly between the French and British, before the French ceded it in 1815. Like most British colonies in the Caribbean, it received increasing amounts of autonomy and self-government and finally formal independence.

St. Lucia is a mountainous volcanic island, with the capital on the northwest coast, Castries, housing almost a third of its 160,000 inhabitants, most of whom live in coastal towns.

St. Lucia is not a rich country, but it's doing fairly well by developing-world standards, and seems to have good growth prospects.

Over 90% of the population trace their ancestry to African slaves brought to the island before the abolition of slavery. Most of the population (almost 70%) are Roman Catholics. Nobel Prize-winning poet and playwright Derek Walcott was born in Castries in 1930.

BARBADOS

Barbadian history is not unlike that of its neighbors with Arawak and Carib influxes followed by Europeans and African slaves. Somewhat unusually, a class between master and slave existed: Irish and Scottish indentured servants. Their descendants were often known derogatorily as "redlegs" and are often among the poorest Barbadians, even today. They were the majority as late as the 1600s or 1700s, but by the 1800s, the island's population was majority-black.

When large-scale sugar cultivation became the dominant industry, many smaller planters packed up and left, many of them traveling to South Carolina where they did much to shape the aristocratic slave-owning culture of the American South. (A third of the Carolina's first

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

21 governors were from Barbados.)

Today, Barbados enjoys a very strong economy and one of the world's highest standards of living, trailing only the U.S. and Canada in its hemisphere.

About 90% of the 280,000 Barbadians are descended from Africans.

Barbados' national sport is cricket, but golf and soccer are also popular.

Famous Barbadians include the singer Rihanna; world-class sprinter Obadele Thompson; rap pioneer Joseph "Grandmaster Flash" Saddler; and the great cricketers Sir Garfield Sobers and Sir Frank Worrell. NHL players Anson Carter and Kevin Weekes are both Canadians of Barbadian parents.

ST. VINCENT & THE GRENADINES

St. Vincent & the Grenadines is composed of the main island, St. Vincent, and the northern two-thirds of the Grenadines. St. Vincent's Carib inhabitants fought off European settlers until the seventeenth century. First a French colony using African slave labor, it changed hands a number of times between France and Britain, ending up in British hands. It gradually was given more and more autonomy until it became independent in 1979, like Barbados.

St. Vincent's economy is not strong, and many of its inhabitants emigrate.

Most of its inhabitants are black. The official language is English, but French Creole is used in places on the Grenadine Islands.

Wesley Charles is an international soccer player from St. Vincent.

GRENADA

The Caribs of Grenada also resisted European settlement, until they were conquered by the French in 1650. In 1763, the French ceded it to the British who granted it independence in 1974.

Grenada ran into trouble in the 1970s when it elected charismatic Marxist-Leninist Maurice Bishop. Alarming neighboring countries as well as the U.S., Bishop courted Cuban assistance assiduously, most prominently in building a new airport capable of serving military aircraft and bringing in armed Cuban "military advisors" and "construction workers." In 1983, Bishop

was overthrown by harder-line communists under Gen. Hudson Austin.

The coup precipitated a U.S. invasion eight days later, at the request of Dominica and other neighboring countries who assisted in the operation.

The U.S. spent about \$50 million in reconstruction of Grenada after the invasion, and its economy recovered fairly quickly until 2004 when Hurricane Ivan, a Category Four storm, hit the island directly, damaging almost all structures on the island. It was the first hurricane to strike Grenada in almost fifty years.

Fortunately, the island's economy has bounced back robustly. In 2007, Grenada was one of the hosts of the Cricket World Cup.

Grenada is composed of the island of Grenada proper and the southern third of the Grenadines.

Most Grenadians (over 80%) are of African descent, with a significant minority (about 12%) descended from East Indian indentured servants. The indigenous Carib and Arawaks did not survive the French colonial period. Almost all Grenadians are Christians, with about half Catholic.

TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

Trinidad & Tobago is a nation of 23 islands, the largest of which is Trinidad. Tobago is much smaller, and the remaining 21 are tiny.

Trinidad is well-known as the birthplace of steelpan, calypso, and limbo music.

Sugar, cacao, and now petroleum have successively dominated the nation's economy.

Trinidad & Tobago is a very prosperous nation by Caribbean standards and a liberal democracy.

The populace is a mixture of a large number of groups, with East Indian and African laborers' descendants together making up about 80% of the population. English is the main language, as in most former British colonies. Roman Catholics (26%) and Hindus (22%) are the largest religious groups in Trinidad.

Cricket is very popular. Soccer is as well, with the national team even qualifying for the World Cup in 2006—the smallest country ever to do so.

Pan-Africanist Stokely Carmichael spent most

GEO TOYS' LATIN AMERICA

of his childhood in Trinidad. Trinidadian actor, dancer, and choreographer Geoffrey Holder has one of the most famous voices and recognizable faces in Hollywood.

NETHERLANDS ANTILLES

As the name implies, the Netherlands Antilles (which includes St. Maarten, above) is a territory of the Netherlands. It will not be a unitary territory much longer. It is due to be disbanded on December 15, 2008, and become several individual territories associated with the Netherlands, as happened with Aruba, which left the Netherlands Antilles in 1986.

The Netherlands Antilles are composed of two groups of islands: the Leeward Islands of Curaçao & Bonaire, just off the coast of Venezuela, and the Windward Islands of St. Maarten, St. Eustatius, and Saba, southeast of the Virgin Islands.

The islands do very well from tourism and petroleum, and the population of about 180,000 enjoys a high per-capita income. The population is about 85% black, followed by Carib and white minorities. A Portuguese creole called Papiamentu is the dominant language in Curaçao & Bonaire (and Aruba nearby). In the Windwards, English is more common. Papiamentu and English were made official languages alongside Dutch in 2007. The baseball player Andruw Jones hails from Curaçao.

ARUBA

Aruba is a realm of the Netherlands which enjoys a warm, dry climate (indeed, cactuses grow across the island) outside the hurricane belt, which helps to attract tourists.

Aruba first came under Dutch rule in 1647, its first administrator was Peter Stuyvesant, who would later go on to become governor of New Netherland (later New York).

Aruba, surprisingly, was the site of military action in World War II. Its Lago oil refinery was one of the Allies' main sources of oil, and a German submarine conducted a surprise attack which failed only because a cap had not been removed from a deck gun, which exploded when it was fired, killing the sailor manning it. Aruba became a completely autonomous state

within the Netherlands in 1986, leaving the Netherlands Antilles, to which it had never wanted to belong.

The capital of Aruba is Oranjestad.

Aruba's economy is one of the strongest in the Caribbean, with tourism from Canada, Europe, and its largest trading partner, the U.S., driving it.

Aruba, almost alone in the hemisphere, escaped the scourge of slavery because its land is unsuitable for agriculture. Consequently, it has few inhabitants whose roots go back to Africa. Most Arubans have some combination of Arawak, Spanish, or Dutch ancestors. About four of five Arubans are Roman Catholics.

Aruba has the largest number of speakers of Papiamentu, a Portuguese-based creole. Dutch is also an official language.

Three Arubans have played in baseball's major leagues, all of whom were knighted by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. They are Eugene Kingsale, Calvin Maduro, and the mildly notorious Sidney Ponson.