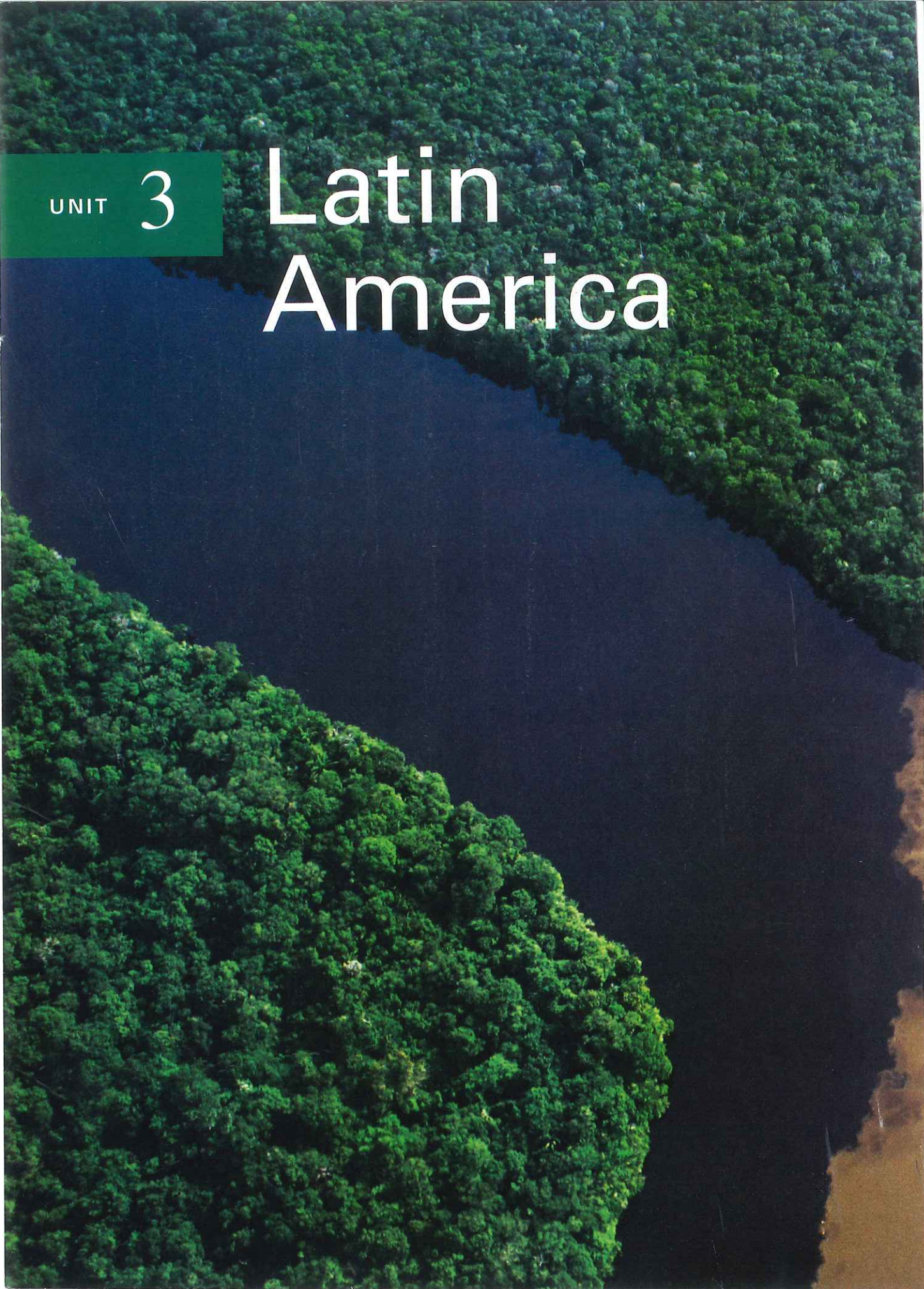


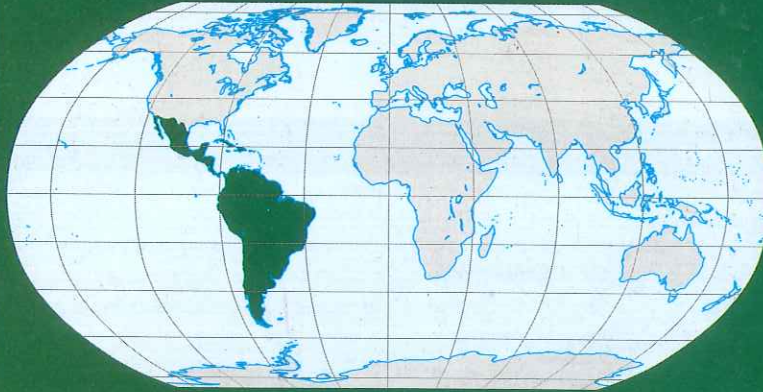
UNIT

3

Latin America



Introducing the Region:
Physical and Human Geography



Chapter 9

Spatial Inequality in Mexico City:
From Cardboard to Castles

Chapter 10

Indigenous Cultures: The Survival
of the Maya of Mesoamerica

Chapter 11

Dealing with Extreme Weather:
Hurricanes in the Caribbean

Chapter 12

Land Use Conflict in the
Amazon Rainforest

Chapter 13

Life in the Central Andes: Adapting
to a Mountainous Region

What do you see in this photograph?
See page 514 for details.



Introducing the Region: Physical Geography

Latin America includes all the countries in the Western Hemisphere, except the United States and Canada. It has three sub-regions: Mexico and Central America, the Caribbean islands, and South America.

To the north lies Mexico, which shares a border with the United States. Mexico is

connected to South America by a 1,200-mile-long land bridge. This land bridge is known as Central America. East of Central America lie the many islands of the Caribbean Sea. South America is a long continent. Its hot northern lands span the equator. Its cool southern tip reaches toward the Antarctic Circle.



Physical Features

Smoking **volcanoes**, dripping **rainforests**, and bone-dry **deserts**—Latin America has them all. Almost every physical feature on Earth is found in this vast **region**. But one feature runs from the north of Mexico to the tip of South America: mountains. For centuries, these mountains have kept the peoples of Latin America isolated from one another.

Mexico and Central America

On a map, Mexico and Central America look like a kite with a long tail. Baja California dangles off the top of the kite. The Yucatán Peninsula juts out from the bottom into the Gulf of Mexico.

Two great mountain ranges run north and south through Mexico. The Sierra Madre Occidental lines the west coast. The Sierra Madre Oriental lines the east coast. A high plain called the Mexican Plateau lies between the two ranges.

Mountains also run through Central America. Many of these mountains are active volcanoes. From Panama's highest peak, you can look down on two different oceans.

The Isthmus of Panama connects Central America to South America. An **isthmus** is a narrow strip of land that links two larger **landmasses**. The Panama Canal was built across this isthmus in the early 1900s. It allows ships to travel between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans without going around all of South America.

The Caribbean Islands

The Caribbean islands curve in an arc from the tip of Florida to the north coast of South America. There are at least 7,000 dots of land in this island group. A few of these islands support large populations. Others are too small to put on most maps.

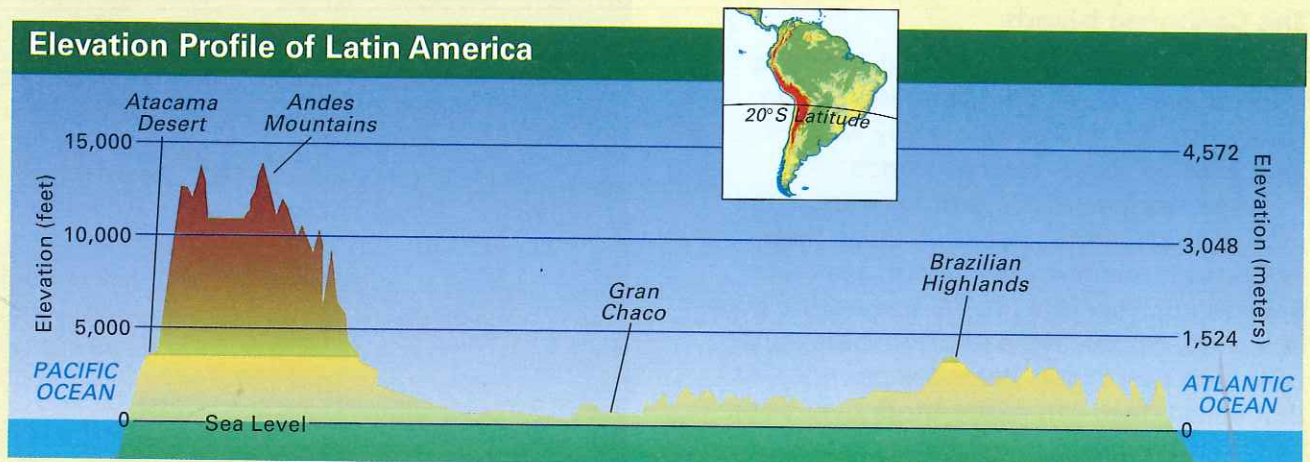
Many of these islands are the tops of submerged mountains. **Volcanic islands** rise steeply from warm beaches to rugged peaks. Tiny sea creatures known as coral formed other islands. Coral islands are flat and sandy.

South America

South America is shaped like giant triangle. The Andes Mountains line the western side of the triangle. Plains and **plateaus** cover the rest. The vast Amazon **basin** covers much of the center of the continent. Further south lie grassy plains called the *Pampas*.

South America has many amazing physical features. They include these:

- the Amazon River—the world's second longest river. The Amazon carries more water than any other river in the world.
- Lake Titicaca—the highest lake in the world that can be used for boat travel. This large lake has more than 40 islands.
- the Atacama Desert—one of the driest places on Earth. Average rainfall in the Atacama is only half an inch a year.
- Angel Falls—the world's highest waterfall. The water drops down a rocky cliff for nearly two thirds of a mile.



Climate

Latin America is a region of many **climates**. One reason is that it spans a huge range of latitudes. As you read in Chapter 2, climate generally varies with latitude. Low latitudes, close to the equator, have a tropical year-round climate. High latitudes, near the poles, have short summers and long, cold winters. Between those two extremes lie the middle latitudes, which have more **temperate**, or mild, climates.

Another reason Latin America has such diverse climates is its wide range of altitudes. Altitude has much the same effect on climate as latitude. The higher the altitude, the colder the climate. At lower elevations, mountain climates may be tropical. At higher elevations, the climate can be very cold.

Mexico and Central America

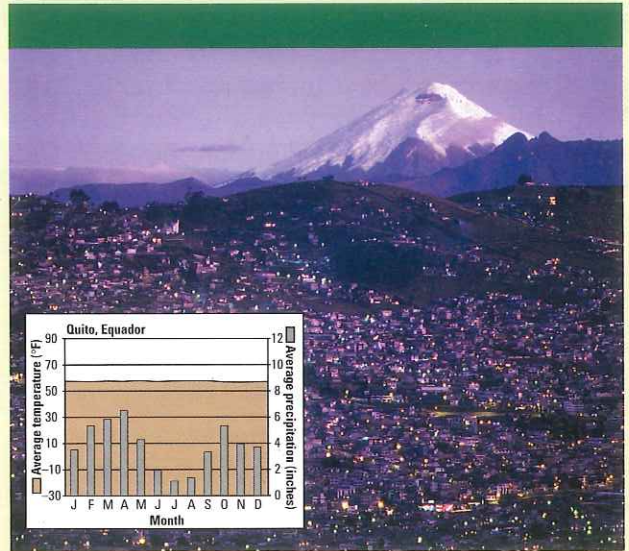
Mexico's climate ranges from **arid** in the north to tropical in the south. The Mexican Plateau is more temperate, with a **semiarid** climate. Closer to the coast, the climate becomes **tropical wet and dry**. Mexicans call this tropical area the "Tierra Caliente," or hot land.

The climate of Central America is tropical near the coast. The air becomes cooler in the mountains. The mountains of Costa Rica are home to a rare **ecosystem** known as a **cloud forest**. Low clouds hang over this forest all year round. Mist from the clouds collects on leaves and drips off the trees like rain. The result is a high-elevation rainforest.

The Caribbean Islands

Most of the Caribbean islands also have a tropical wet and dry climate. People from North America and Europe enjoy winter vacations on these tropical islands.

Huge storms called **hurricanes** are common during summer months. These huge swirling storms form over warm seas near the equator. Then they move toward the poles in a wide, destructive path. Hurricane winds can reach more than 150 miles per hour. At that speed, they can easily knock over trees and tear the roofs off houses.



Quito, Ecuador, lies high in the Andes Mountains. Based on the climograph, what would be the best month for a Quito family to go on a mountain hike?

South America

In South America, climate varies with both latitude and altitude. The northern half of the continent nearest the equator is mostly **tropical wet**. Further south, the climate becomes subtropical and even arid. The Andes Mountains have a **highlands** climate. This means that the climate varies by elevation, getting colder the higher one goes.



Vegetation

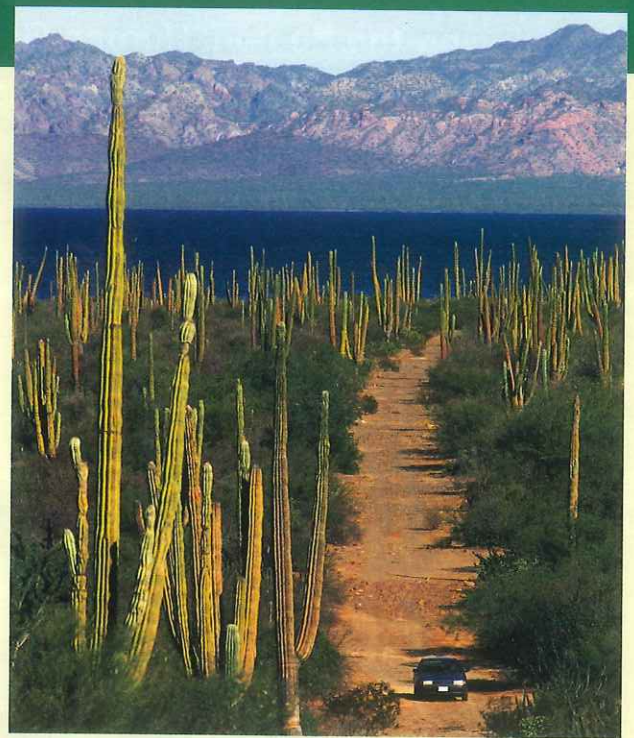
With so many climates, it is no surprise that Latin America is home to an incredible variety of plants. The most widespread type of vegetation is **broadleaf evergreen forest**. It occurs in both tropical wet and tropical wet and dry climate zones.

In a broadleaf evergreen forest, most or all of the trees have leaves rather than needles. But unlike broadleaf trees in cooler climates, these trees do not lose their leaves in winter. Instead they are green all year round. Rainforests and jungles are examples of broadleaf evergreen forests. So are the cloud forests of Central America.

Mexico and Central America

In Mexico, what plants grow where depends mainly on rainfall. **Desert scrub** covers the arid north. Cactus plants survive here with little water. Forest once covered the Mexican Plateau. Over time, most of the trees were cleared to make way for farms.

Southern Mexico and Central America are covered with broadleaf evergreen forest. Pine and oak trees are found in the high cloud forests. Along the coasts, palms, figs, vines, and Spanish moss create a dense rainforest.



Huge cactus plants grow with little rain in the deserts of northern Mexico.

The Caribbean Islands

The Caribbean islands have a mix of **tropical grasslands** and broadleaf evergreen forests. Black and red mangrove trees and coconut palms are typical trees. Underwater coral reefs circle many of the islands. These reefs are home to broad-leafed turtle grass, feathery green algae, and red algae that can make the coral look rusty.

South America

The largest **vegetation zone** in South America is the Amazon rainforest. This broadleaf evergreen forest is home to more kinds of plants than any other place on Earth. There are hardwood trees, such as mahogany and rosewood, which people use to make furniture. There are also Brazil nut and rubber trees. The **forest floor** is a tangle of plants, vines, and colorful orchids.

Tropical grasslands and **temperate grasslands** cover most of the rest of South America. Cacti and flowering plants bloom in desert scrub regions. The Atacama Desert is so dry that almost no plants survive there.

A unique ecosystem known as a cloud forest is found in the mountains of Central America.

Latin America is home to 33 countries and more than 500 million people. Brazil is the largest country in both area and population. About 180 million people lived in Brazil in 2000. This means that one Latin American out of three was a Brazilian. Brazil is the largest country in the world where Portuguese is the first language.

This region is called *Latin America* because most of its people speak Spanish or Portuguese. Both are modern languages based on Latin. This was a language spoken in the Roman Empire about 2,000 years ago. Languages based on Latin are called Romance languages because of their Roman roots.

Political Boundaries of Latin America



History

Over time, many peoples have come to Latin America. Each group has left its mark on the history of this region.

Early Times

The first Americans were probably hunter-gatherers from Asia. They may have followed animals they hunted across a land bridge that once connected Asia to Alaska. From Alaska, their descendents spread to the tip of South America.

Over time, some native peoples learned how to farm. Their most important crops were maize (corn) and the potato. Farming allowed native peoples to settle down in one place. It also led to the growth of civilizations.

The Maya created civilizations in Mexico and Central America. Four hundred years later, the Aztecs built their **empire** in Mexico. The Incas built a large empire that spread down the western coast of South America.

The Colonial Period

In 1492, a European explorer named Christopher Columbus landed on an island in the Caribbean. As news of his discovery spread, more Europeans came to the Americas. In the early 1500s, Spain conquered the Aztec and Inca empires.

These conquests began a long period of European colonization. Many native peoples died in wars against the colonists. But diseases brought by the Europeans proved even more deadly than war. As the native

peoples died out, the Europeans brought Africans over to work as slaves.

Eventually, Spain and Portugal controlled most of Latin America. During the colonial period, Spanish and Portuguese replaced many Native American languages. At the same time, many native peoples became Christians.

In time, Latin Americans began to rebel against their European rulers. The wars for independence began with an uprising of slaves in Haiti in 1791. By 1825, most of Latin America had thrown off colonial rule. One of the first acts of the newly independent countries was to outlaw slavery. The exception was Brazil, which did not free its slaves until 1888.

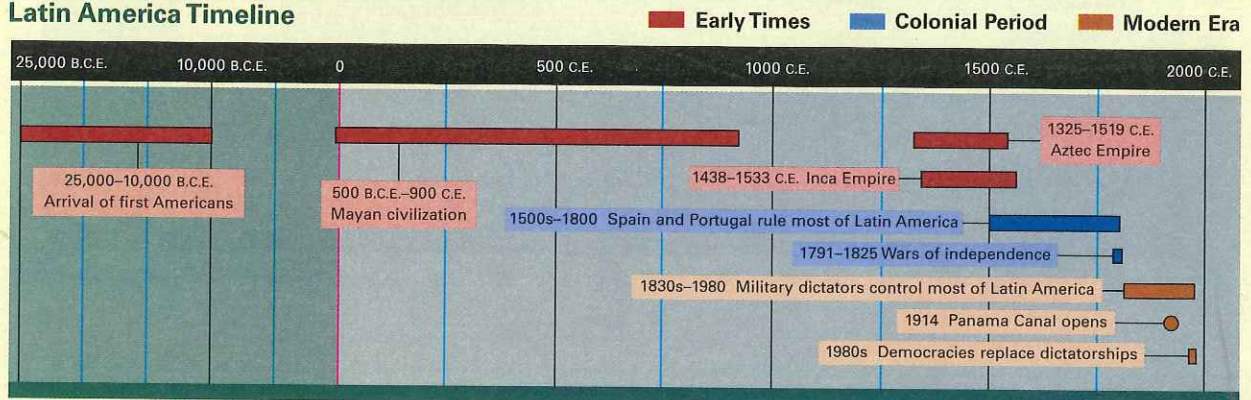
The Modern Era

Independence did not bring democracy to Latin America as it had to the United States. From Mexico to Argentina, military leaders seized power and ruled as **dictators**. Most dictators were only interested in holding onto power. They cared little about the rights or welfare of their people.

By the 1980s, Latin Americans were weary of dictators. In one country after another, the people demanded the right to choose their leaders. Today, elected governments run most Latin American countries.

Democracy has not solved all of Latin America's problems. Poverty is widespread. Schools are poor. Governments are not stable. Living standards remain low. But for many Latin Americans, the right to vote has brought with it hope for a better future.

Latin America Timeline



Population

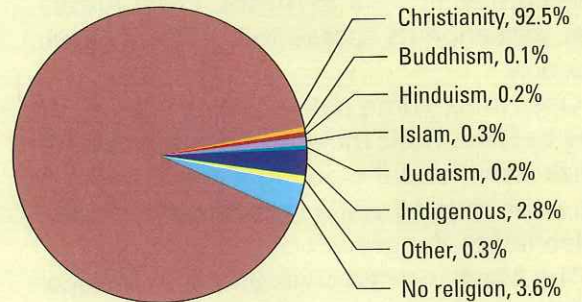
Latin America includes more than 15 percent of the world's land area. But it is home to less than 9 percent of the world's people. Still, its population is growing fast. From 1950 to 2000, the number of Latin Americans more than tripled. Only Africa has a higher growth rate.

As the population grows, it is becoming more **urban**. In 1950, more than half of Latin Americans lived on farms. Today, three fourths live in urban areas. Most large cities are located on the coasts.

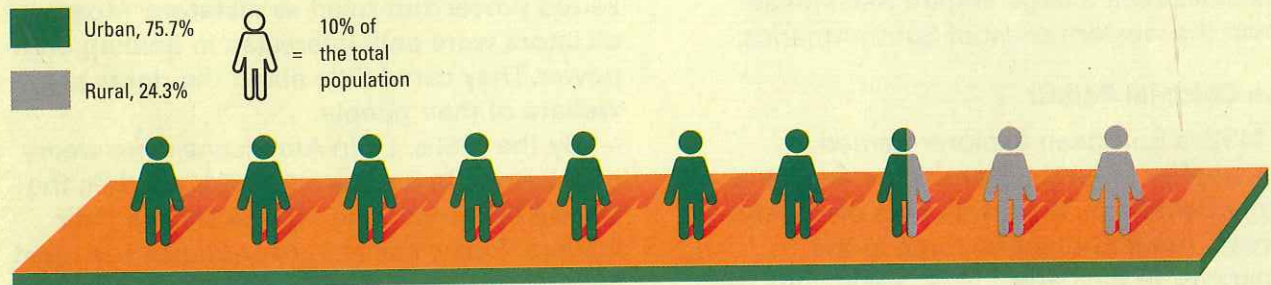
Most Latin Americans are Christian. This region is home to nearly half of the world's one billion Roman Catholics. However, other Christian churches are gaining members.

Some Latin Americans still follow indigenous religions. These are traditional beliefs held by native peoples. The *Other* category in the circle graph below includes several religious traditions. Some of these traditions were brought to the Americas long ago by Africans. Others were brought by more recent immigrants from Asia.

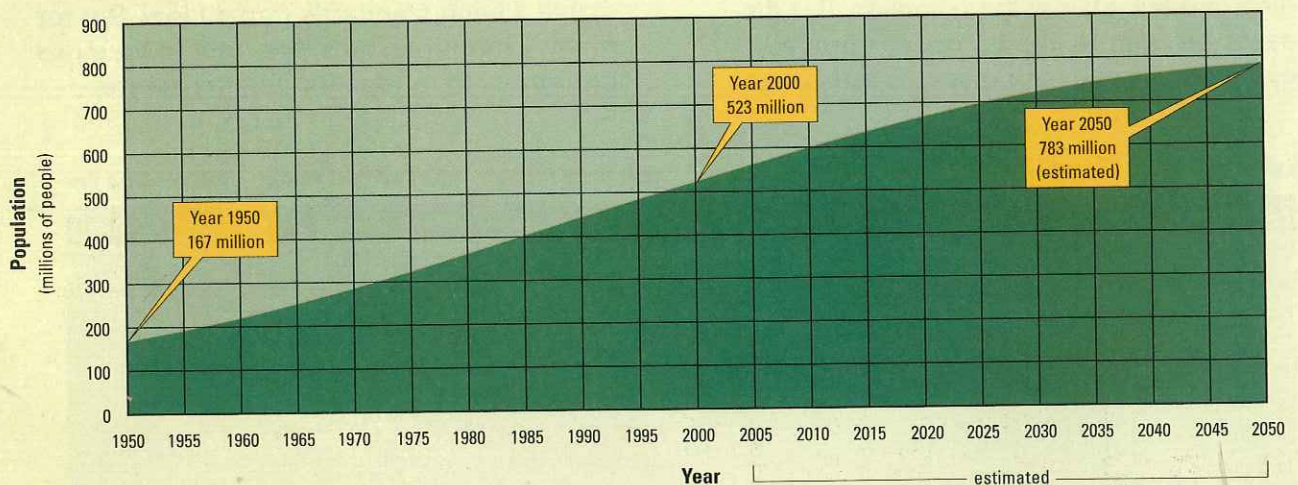
Latin America: Major Religions



Latin America: Urban and Rural Population, 2000



Latin America: Population Growth, 1950–2050



Sources: *Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, "World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision"* and *"World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision," esa.un.org/unpp. "Religion," Encyclopædia Britannica, 2005, Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service, www.britannica.com.*

Economic Activity

Latin America has a wealth of **natural resources**. Those resources support a broad range of **economic activities**. The most widespread economic activities are **livestock raising** and **subsistence farming**.

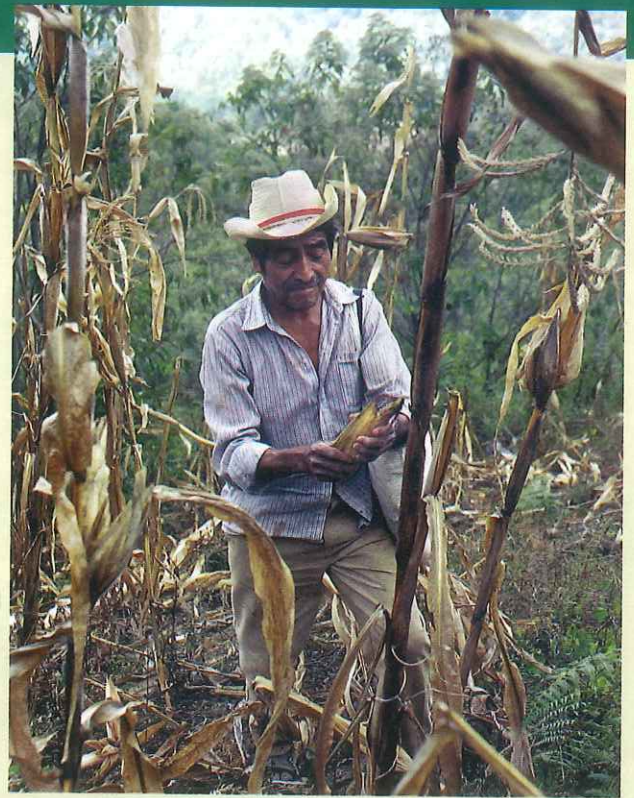
Subsistence farmers usually grow only enough food to feed their families. Good weather may sometimes allow them to produce a crop surplus. They can then sell or **barter** their extra food for other things they need. But surpluses are rare. As a result, subsistence farmers are generally poor. The most important crops grown by subsistence farmers are corn, potatoes, and beans.

Resources

The Europeans who first came to Latin America wanted its mineral wealth. They were interested mainly in mining silver and gold. Later, people mined copper, uranium, and other minerals as well. Most of these metals are found in the Andes Mountains.

Today Latin America is better known for its energy resources. This region has about 12 percent of the world's petroleum, or oil supply. Large oil deposits have been found in Mexico and Venezuela.

Latin American rivers are another source of energy. Dams on rivers in Brazil and Paraguay produce large amounts of **hydro-electric power**.



A subsistence farmer in Mexico harvests corn. Subsistence farming is widespread in Latin America.

Land Use

Farming and ranching are important across Latin America. One of the most important **commercial farming** crops is coffee. Coffee beans are grown on large **plantations** in Brazil, Colombia, and Central America. Ranchers raise mostly cattle and sheep. The largest cattle ranches are found on the Pampas of Argentina.

Forestry is another major industry. Many types of trees are harvested from Latin American forests. This wood is used for building materials and fuel. It is also used to make products such as furniture and musical instruments.

Some areas in Latin American specialize in a particular activity. The most important industry in the Caribbean islands, for example, is **tourism**. Mexico, in contrast, is strong in manufacturing. Many of the cars you see on American roads were made in Mexico.

This dam supplies electricity to industries in northern Brazil.

