

All Around This World: Latin America Country-by-Country Overview



Latin America’s history is a grand narrative full of joy and heartache, one of great ambition fulfilled and vast potential unrealized, a past that includes both undeniable devastation and a consistent ability to face adversity upon adversity and live on. From a 1492 “stumble-upon” by Christopher Columbus, who “discovered” a part of the world that was already full of millions of people and their many proud civilizations, waves of European colonizers, primarily from Spain and Portugal, claimed the area we now know as Latin America as their own. Some of these colonizers viewed the land with actual hope, others as only a resource to abuse. Whatever their intent, colonial governments trounced the indigenous population, brought humans from Africa as slaves and extracted as much wealth as possible from the fertile land. At the same time, as a not insignificant side-effect of their domination, the Europeans—again, mainly the Spanish and Portuguese—also brought with them their own European culture, Iberian poetry and cuisine, and most relevant to us, their melodic and passionate music.

In our All Around This World classes we explore Latin America by taking a tour from the Southern tip of Chile up to Mexico then back down south to Brazil. While we enjoy some music from Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, we mainly leave the Caribbean to star in its own full season of adventure.

If you’re not in an All Around This World classroom but instead following along at home, you can still join us as we travel to:

- **Chile**: the longest, thinnest country in the world, where we longly and thinly prance around like roosters courting chickens while dancing “the Chilean national dance,” the cueca.
- **Argentina**: we dare to be dramatic while dancing the tango.
- **Uruguay**: we land on the pampas (plains) of Uruguay and commune with the most mellow of all cowboys, the Uruguayan gauchos.
- **Ecuador**: we dance the bomba balancing empty wine bottles on our heads—okay, in class we use beanbags.
- **Colombia**: we time-warp to dance three generations of cumbia.

- **Honduras:** we shake our bottoms with abandon as we dance a modern version of the Garifuna punta.
- **Mexico:** we each don an impressive (imaginary) headdress to honor the earth with an Aztec dance.
- **The Guianas:** we celebrate the walking-ist of all the world's four day walking festivals– Suriname's Wandelmars!
- **Venezuela:** we visit the Yanomami and learn how to count to 10 Yanomamo-style, using just three numbers and our hands
- **Brazil:** we end our tour in Brazil where the kick, leap and cartwheel through the air, as we play/dance/"do" capoeira



Week 1: CHILE

In the mid-1500s when Spanish conquistadors “discovered” Chile they also discovered tens of thousands other people who already lived there. The Mapuche and other Native South Americans fought them for the next two hundred years, but eventually Spanish language and culture dominated the land. By the late 18th century, nearly 3/4 of Chile’s population was of at least some European descent.

By the late 19th century the Chileans themselves had started acquiring other lands, islands such as Juan Fernández (“Robinson Crusoe Island”), Sala y Gómez and Desventuradas, as well as 480,000 square miles of Antarctica. Chile’s domain also extends as far as two thousand miles into the Pacific, all the way to the world’s most isolated inhabited place – Easter Island. Originally referred to by the indigenous population as “Te Pito o Te Henua,” meaning ‘the center [or navel] of the world,’ or Mata-Ki-Te-Rani, meaning ‘Eyes Looking at Heaven,’ and today, in Polynesian as “Rapa Nui,” Easter Island is most famous for its mysterious 887 monumental statues – the moai.

In the early 1970s Salvador Allende and his “Popular Unity” party won national elections and ushered in a short era of socialist reforms. In 1973, Augusto Pinochet led a military coup to overthrow Allende, beginning a very difficult fifteen years of his rule. Today, after voting Pinochet out of power and holding several subsequent democratic elections, Chile is one of the most economically and politically stable nations in South America. Even so, as regular earthquakes like massive 8.8 magnitude quake that hit Chile in February 2010 demonstrates, it literally sits on shaky ground.



Week 2: ARGENTINA:

Long before the Spanish arrived in the early 16th century to colonize the land we now know as Argentina a number of indigenous peoples lived there, such as the Diaguita in the Andes mountains and the Guarani, who lived further south and east. Both groups were strong enough to repel Spanish military invasions, which came in waves throughout the century, but ultimately they were not able to fight the diseases that Europeans brought with them; the Spanish firmly established Buenos Aires in the 1580s. After securing the area, the Spanish paid little attention to it for centuries, choosing instead to dedicate their resources toward Lima in Peru. Forbidden to trade with foreign nations, Buenos Aires became a haunt of smugglers, and of fiercely independent colonizers from a variety of European nations. When the British tried to claim Buenos Aires in 1806 and 1807 the locals boldly repelled them with little assistance from Spain. Starting with a revolution in May of 1810, a group of Argentine patriots, including Jose de

San Martin, declared Argentina an independent nation. San Martin went on to help liberate Chile and Peru from Spanish rule.

For decades after independence Argentina experienced civil war between the unitarians, who wanted Buenos Aires to rule the land with a strong central government, and the federalists, who wanted Argentina to be a federation of relatively autonomous areas. The two sides struggled throughout the 19th century but were able to unify to develop a constitution and establish Buenos Aires as a growing center for international trade. Immigrants flowed in from many European nations, both to Buenos Aires and the southern region of Patagonia, which Argentine leaders brutally cleared of indigenous peoples like the Mapuche.

Argentina's national economy grew throughout the early 1900s but when it slumped with the world's economy during the Great Depression the military took command, including visionary colonel Juan Domingo Perón, who became a popular figure in the early 1940s. With his admired wife Eva ("Evita") at his side, he won the presidency in 1946 and installed a dynamic regime that simultaneously promoted itself as a voice of social justice—it granted unprecedented power to laborers and trade unions—while it autocratically stifled opposition dissent. Evita passed away in 1952 and a military coup overthrew Perón in 1955, sending him into exile in Spain. Two decades of coups and multiple elections followed, throughout which "Peronistas" mainly battled the military for power. Perón returned in 1974, but died soon thereafter and left Argentina's leadership to his third wife, Isabel, who proved ineffective and herself fell victim to a coup in 1976. From 1976 to 1983 Argentina suffered "The Dirty War," in which General Jorge Rafael Videla's troops "disappeared" tens of thousands of Argentines. When Argentina tried and failed to push the British out of the nearby Falkland Islands in 1982, anti-military sentiments rose and in 1983 a civilian government won the presidency.

Since the civilians took power Argentina has experienced a period of pronounced (but ultimately empty) economic boom under president Carlos Menem, a stunning and very near-fatal economic collapse (known locally as "La Crisis"), then a revival led by president Nestor Kirchner. Today Argentina's economy seems stable, though there is still high inflation and poverty levels remain high. Whatever the state of the economy, the dark years of "Dirty War" seem further and further in the past, and Argentina bounds confidently, though unpredictably, forward.



Week 3: URUGUAY

Uruguay may not have a lot of big-name recognition in the U.S., but since emerging from years of military rule in the '70s and early '80s, it has become not just one of Latin America's most politically and economically stable nations, but truly "a hidden gem." Uruguay boasts almost everything a visitor would hope to find in a welcoming Latin America country: tourist-ready beaches, pristine coastal wetlands mountain uplands where proud cowboys ("gauchos") still roam, the tango!, and energizing, Afro-Uruguayan music. It also seems to have much of what a resident would want: a generally high standard of living, a relatively favorable view of its government (according to the Ibero-American Consortium of Market and Research and Advise – and

how could they be wrong?), and, apparently, lots of people wearing pink. Almost 90% of Uruguayans are of European immigrant descent – mainly Spanish, but also Italian, French, British and Portuguese – but the country's shared identity acknowledges the nation's more nuanced history. According to Everyculture.com's Uruguay overview, "The [Uruguayan] national identity is a historical blend resulting from the struggle to maintain freedom from Spain and later from Argentina and Brazil, the gaucho culture, African slave roots, political caudillismo; and a European cultural and intellectual model."



Week 4: ECUADOR

Ecuador may be the second smallest country in South America but it boasts an enormous amount of geographic, biological and ethnic diversity. Ecuador benefits from being home to thousands of species of animals and plants, as well as a wealth of ethnic and racial groups. Over 60% of Ecuadorians are of mixed European and American-Indian heritage, and 25% describe themselves as being born of one of the nation's indigenous peoples. Despite this pervasive mixing, deep regional rivalries, such as a protracted rivalry between coastal city Guayaquil and the Andean capital, Quito, remain a staple of Ecuador's internal politics. Ecuador also has an unofficial, yet deeply

entrenched, "caste" system, based upon race and ancestral history.

Ecuador is the nation of the Galapagos Islands – a haunt of Darwin in his younger days – which are extraordinarily biologically diverse (and relatively well-conserved) natural gems. As of 2008, Ecuador is the first country in the world to include a section in its constitution confirming the "rights of nature": "Nature or Pachamama (the Andean earth goddess), where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure,

functions and its processes in evolution. Every person, people, community or nationality, will be able to demand the recognition of rights for nature before the public bodies.”



WEEK 5 COLOMBIA

Colombia, an Andean mountain nation found in the northern part of South America, has endured many disasters, both natural and man-made. While, Colombia has fifteen major volcanoes, rests atop a number of geological faults that have caused many devastating earthquakes, and is subject to heavy flooding, especially in areas that have experienced substantial deforestation, Colombia is notorious in the U.S. for its long history of civil wars, political coups, left-wing guerrilla armies and right-wing paramilitaries, not to mention vicious narcotics cartels....oy.

What many “norteamericanos” don’t know about Colombia is its proud tradition of independence (most notably its role in the early 19th century anti-Spanish liberation wars of Simon Bolivar), its enthusiastic Spanish/African/Carib multiculturalism and its “megadiverse” ecological wonders. Despite its many political and natural problems, today’s Colombia, far more politically and economically stable than it was in the drug cartel-and Marxist-militia-dominated ’80s and ’90s, is a country full of promise



WEEK 6: HONDURAS

About 1500 years ago the land we now know as Honduras was the site of a major Mayan kingdom known as Xukpi (Copán). Mayan population declined by about the year 900, but there were still non-Mayan inhabitants around when Columbus and other Spaniards landed in the early 16th century. In 1537 the warrior Lempira unified two hundred Native American tribes in an effort to expel the Spanish and made a strong stand at the fortress of Cerquín. The Spanish captain invited Lempira to a peace conference, ordered a marksman to shoot him and then, after he fell to his end from the high cliffs, chased his warriors away.

The Spanish eventually consolidated control and ruled Honduras until the 1820s. Since then, Honduras has had, according to Honduras.com, “nearly 300 incidents of unrest, including internal rebellions, civil wars, and changes of government—more than half of which occurred during the 20th century.” Honduras has had military leaders, civilian leaders, elected leaders, leaders by coup and almost every possible permutation thereof. For example, a coup took place in 2009 when military leaders forced President

Manuel Zelaya into exile. Why? There are many conflicting ideas, but his 2009 supporters believed international business interests and the Honduran elite engineered the coup to prevent him from pursuing policies that advanced the well-being of the Honduran people. (Foreign businesses, especially international banana companies, have played a major role in Honduran politics, especially during the Great Depression-era dictatorship of Gen. Tiburcio Carías Andino.)



Week 7: MEXICO

For the couple thousand years before the first Spanish conquistadors landed in what we now call Mexico and declared it property of their King, vast and vibrant empires such as those of the Olmecs, the Maya and the Aztecs ruled in successive waves. (Check out this possible timeline.) When the Spanish explorer Francisco Hernández de Córdoba arrived in 1519 some indigenous Mexicans welcomed him, others were wary. (If you were an Aztec in 1519 living in the capital Tenochtitlan under the rule of Montezuma II and you met a Spanish man named Hernán Cortés in a dark alley you were wise to be wary.)

Wary or not, the Spanish defeated all indigenous armies, quickly absorbed the existing population into their empire, imposed an indentured-servitude-style system known as “encomienda,” brought Spanish language, culture and religion to the land, and ruled “New Spain” for three hundred years. An unlikely coalition of surviving indigenous people, the increasing population of indigenous/Spanish “mestizos,” and conservative Mexican landowners who objected to the comparatively liberal policies of France’s Napoleon I (who had conquered Spain in 1802, installing his brother to the Spanish throne), eventually earned the nation its independence in 1821. Many Mexican governments rose and fell over the next hundred years, leading to the general instability that made Mexico vulnerable to strengthening powers like the United States, which captured a substantial portion of Mexico’s land in the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, and even to France which invaded in 1861 and ruled until 1867. In the 1910s the Mexican population, following leaders such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, overthrew the ruling Spanish

landowners and declared Mexico a land for all its people. The revolutionary political party, eventually called the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), then effectively installed a system of one party rule. PRI dominance lasted for the next 70 years. In the year 2000 Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN) finally broke the PRI political monopoly and became president. Since then, Mexico has faced some challenging times, especially in recent years (the 2008 global recession, the 2009 swine flu epidemic, terrifying drug trade violence...).

On 1 January 1994, Mexico joined the United States and Canada in “free trade” by signing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) – like it or not. (Or, like the Zapatistas in Chiapas, really not.) This arrangement has softened trade borders, even while the issue of the physical Mexico/U.S. border and who is allowed to legally cross it continues to be contentious (to say the least). With several million Mexicans living in the U.S., legally documented or not, and problems on each side of the border flowing so freely to the other (the 2008 global recession, the 2009 swine flu epidemic, current and increasing drug trade violence), the futures of the United States and Mexico are inextricably, though not always comfortably, bound.



Week 8: THE GUIANAS

The overarching history of the Guianas for the last five hundred years is that of struggle against Europeans to maintain control over their rich natural and cultural resources. Despite their remaining Colonial attachments, all three Guianan countries have extremely heterogeneous populations that are a mix of Caribbean Amerindians, Maroons (descendants of escaped African slaves), a high percentage of Indian immigrants (over 40% of Guyanans are Indo-Guyanese and over 25% of Surinamese are Indo-Surinamese), and even some Jews.

While Americans are likely most familiar with Guyana as the site of the Jonestown Massacre, those

atGuyana.org would probably rather promote the country’s biodiversity (80% of the land is still rainforest), and its under-appreciated African heritage and its once-thriving industry of harvesting natural latex from the sap of the balatá tree. (From Wikipedia’s entry on Guyana: “Folk uses of balatá included the making of cricket balls, the temporary filling of troublesome tooth cavities, and the crafting of figurines and other decorative items [particularly by the Macushi people of the Kanuku mountains.]”)

Suriname is an ethnically, cultural and religiously diverse (25% are hindu) nation which is still very much a colonial outpost of the Netherlands. In the 1667 Treaty of Breda, the Dutch chose to maintain their plantations in what is now called Suriname, declining the British offer to exchange them for the recently captured city of New Amsterdam [now New York]. Whoops.

French Guiana is still a French “overseas department,” and therefore ruled by a French prefect. French is the official language, the official currency is the Euro, and the country is host to an important French spaceport.

Week 9: VENEZUELA



Archaeologists and anthropologists believe people have lived on the land now known as Venezuela for about fifteen thousand years. When the Spanish colonized in 1522 the local people, who were well used to ruling themselves, rebelled. Only three hundred years later, in 1811, did anti-colonialist Venezuelans formally oust the Spanish, setting up a series of republics. They only achieved real sovereignty in 1823 when Simon Bolivar and his anti-colonial armies secured it.

The discovery of oil in Venezuela during World War I brought unprecedented wealth. It also tied political and economic power in the country closely to the petroleum industry, especially to American companies

like Standard Oil which effectively wrote Venezuela's petroleum laws. Since then, history of Venezuela has been a series of pendulum swings between autocracy and democracy, as well as between oil-induced economic boom and bust. Venezuelan governments developed a reputation for being corrupt puppets of oil interests.

In 1992 an army paratrooper named Hugo Chavez staged a military coup, failed, and spent some years in jail. In 1998 he ran for president and won. He named his program of political reforms the "Bolivarian Revolution" and declared the public goal of redistributing Venezuela's oil wealth more equitably. He then survived a 2002 coup, an all-out national strike in 2002/2003, a 2004 recall referendum and several other elections.

Chavez, who passed away in 2013, was an outspoken critic of international economic and political interests and the dominating role they often play in nations like Venezuela. He was especially critical of the United States and the role it plays in global capitalism; he directed some of his most colorful criticism at former President Bush. Despite intense international and domestic opposition Chavez continued to consolidate political power, and in 2009 celebrated a successful popular referendum that changed Venezuela's constitution to abolish term limits for elected officials. Whether one viewed him as a legitimate champion of the people or a harsh, power-grabbing autocrat – or both – Hugo Chavez was a giant in Latin America.

Week 10: BRAZIL



Brazil's political past is a checkered one, full of colonial battles, failed republics and military coups. Despite all these ups and downs – or maybe in part because of them – Brazilians have historically focused on the wealth and breadth of their culture as their main source of national pride.

Brazil has been a Portuguese stronghold for five hundred years, ever since explorer Pedro Álvares Cabral — Portuguese noble, military commander, navigator and curator of a rather impressive beard — arrived there (whether on purpose or not). While the Spanish were off dominating most of the rest of the continent, Portugal's rulers supported increasing incursions into the Amazon, subjugating indigenous peoples as they went. For over a decade in the early 1800s, the Portuguese royal family, fleeing France and Napoleon, even called Brazil their home. When the dust cleared and the royals went home, Portugal tried to rule Brazil from afar again; enough Brazilians didn't like this that by 1825 the sprawling nation became independent under its newly crowned monarch, Dom Pedro I. Pedro I soon abandoned Brazil to go to Portugal to take part in a struggle for the Portuguese crown (with its many twists and turns), leaving his son Pedro II in charge. (Pedro II was five years old.) Pedro II's rule lasted for 58 years, until 1889, when a military coup, backed by former slave owners who were unhappy with Brazil's abolition of slavery, ushered in a republic.

Brazil's early attempts to form a stable republic didn't work and in 1930, Getúlio Vargas took power in a coup. He kept control through World War II, when Brazil sided with the Allies, then lost it in a coup, then was democratically elected in 1951. His regime was unstable, and so was he; he took his own life in 1954. In 1964 a military dictatorship took hold, censoring the press, jailing dissidents and taking hold of the economy . . . which actually boomed. Starting in the '70s a series of unstable regimes began a process of re-democratization which were supposed to be "slow, gradual and safe." They were at least slow — civilians didn't regain power until 1985.

Over the last twenty years Brazil has not only become politically stable, with Fernando Cardoso as president from 1994 to 2002 and the dynamic Luís Inácio "Lula" da Silva, from 2002 to 2010, but it is well on its way to being a global economic and political power. No one could have ever denied the power of its culture, which people worldwide have embraced for centuries, no matter which Brazilian politicians are in charge.

In our music classes we dispense with some of the usual rigmarole that would otherwise feature images of Brazil (stunning — look through before showing the kids), advice on whether to travel there (yes!) and its many languages (over 200 indigenous languages, but almost 100% speak Portuguese) to focus on the nation's undeniably awesome music.