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### Honduras

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The Republic of Honduras occupies a prominent pivotal position in the seven-country Central America land bridge that connects North and South America. Stretching 175 miles (282 kilometers) across the isthmus from the Caribbean Sea to the Gulf of Fonseca on the Pacific Ocean, Honduras borders Guatemala on the northwest, El Salvador on the southwest, and Nicaragua on the southeast. In area Honduras, with more than 43,000 square miles (112,000 square kilometers), is the second largest country in Central America, only a bit smaller than neighboring Nicaragua.

#### Land and Climate

Throughout western and central Honduras rugged mountains of moderate height, reaching 9,000 feet (2,750 meters) above sea level in a few places, are interspersed with many upland valleys. The mountain ranges are generally from west to east, but some valleys trend northward and southward, as around the 112,000-acre (45,000-hectare) Comayagua Valley of central Honduras. These well-watered zones of little slope have been the most favored sites of human settlement in both aboriginal and modern times.

Temperatures in Honduras are not as high as might be expected from its tropical location only 15 to 16 degrees north of the Equator. Near the lowland coastal plains the onshore winds are a moderating influence, and the increased elevation of the mountainous interior brings cooler temperatures.

The seasons are expressed not so much according to temperatures, as in most of North America, but more according to the distribution of rainfall throughout the year, as in Spain. Between January and May the *verano*, or dry period, occurs, and *invierno*, the wet season, extends from June to December. In the Pacific coast lowland *departamentos* of Choluteca and Valle, droughts are occasionally severe.

Winds normally flow over the country from the east and northeast toward the west—the famous Trade Winds renowned for their consistency of direction. The strongest winds, those coming with the Caribbean hurricanes, are not a yearly threat, but on occasion a disastrous tropical storm strikes the offshore islands and adjacent mainland lowlands. *Fifi*, the worst hurricane, passed over the length of the north coast in the fall of 1974 blowing down the banana plants and producing floods and mudslides that destroyed the town of Choloma and left multitudes of citizens homeless.

Almost all of the major rivers flow into the Caribbean Sea, reflecting the distribution of the highest mountains in the west and the origins of the moisture-laden winds from the east coast. They are the Ulúa, Aguán, Negro, Plátano, Patuca, and, on the Nicaragua border, the Río Coco, the longest in Central America. The downstream

portions of these rivers are navigable to shallow-draft vessels, but upstream from the first rapids only dugout canoes can be used for local travel and commerce. Lake Yojoa, a large highland lake, 16 kilometers long, is remarkable for its beautiful mountain landscapes and world-class largemouth bass.

Honduras can be partitioned into three grand regions according to physical geography, population composition, and local attitude. The largest of these subdivisions is the western and central highlands where Spanish-speaking people of Indian-Spanish (mestizo) heritage comprise the bulk of the population. A second large zone in the east is known as La Mosquitia, which is a region of pine savannas, coastal lowlands, and shallow lagoons. The slight population of less than 0.8 persons per square kilometer is primarily indigenous and they often are speakers of creole English. A third region is La Costa Norte, the north coast, including the Islas de la Bahía just offshore. Minority cultures make up a considerable proportion of the population. They include the Garífuna (Black Caribs), the English-speaking Bay Islanders, whose ancestors once occupied the Cayman Islands, and the black English Creoles, who have worked the coastal banana plantations.

In spite of serious deforestation from the mid-1960s Honduras remains a wooded land. The central and western highlands are pine covered, and the eastern lowlands and the north coast grow tropical hardwoods. A vibrant forest products industry and the desire to clear lands for pasture often produce conflicts over the best policy for forestry developments. A government agency has the responsibility of overseeing the exploitation and conservation of this major renewable resource.

As might be expected in such a lush tropical environment, variation in habitats, as well as plant and animal communities, is enormous. The lands surrounding the mouth and lower course of the Plátano River in La Mosquitia are designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, a protected refuge for an unusually diverse plant and animal community.

## People

Among themselves Hondurans are known affectionately as *catrachos*. Generally they live concentrated in the central and western upland valleys and along La Costa Norte. Population decreases to the south and east. Almost two thirds of the people live in rural settlements. The largest urban centers are the capital, Tegucigalpa; San Pedro Sula, the center of the industrial and commercial agriculture complex of the lower Ulúa Valley; La Ceiba, home of the former Standard Fruit Company; and Choluteca, the focus of activities in southern Honduras.

Perhaps 93 percent of the population can be classified as ladinos or mestizos—Spanish-speaking persons of Indian-Spanish heritage. Another 5 percent come from six indigenous groups: Chortí, Lenca, Tol (Jicaque), Pech (Paya), Tawahka(Sumu), and Miskito. While many cultural remnants of the native people still exist, very few Honduran Indians retain their original languages. Afro- and Anglo-Antilleans who migrated to Honduras more than 100 years ago from Caribbean islands occupy the north

coast and the Bay Islands. The largest component of this community are the Garífuna, or Black Caribs, who live in 44 coastal villages. Very small groups of German and Middle Eastern ancestry are also prominent in the business activities of the north coast.

In the 1970s and 1980s a new population—approximately 50,000 "legal" refugees—arrived in Honduras to escape the civil unrest in surrounding countries. Most are housed by the United Nations in camps relatively near the borders, but numerous uncounted "illegal" refugees are scattered throughout the country. More than 20,000 Salvadoran mestizos live in four camps in western Honduras; a similar number of Miskito and Sumu Indians from Nicaragua are in eastern Honduras.

Roman Catholicism is the predominant religion of Honduras. Ornate churches, a few dating from the late colonial period, are often found in sparsely settled rural areas.

## **Economy**

The country is normally regarded as the poorest in Central America, but the annual per capita income of about 1,400 *lempiras* (700 United States dollars) does not reflect the value of the large amount of foodstuffs produced for immediate consumption by the farmer and his family.

Honduras was once considered the most typical of the so-called "banana republics" in which foreign investors, especially those associated with large American-owned fruit companies, often attempted to direct the internal affairs of the country. During the first half of the 20th century, bananas by far dominated the export economy. In the second half, however, agricultural production has become more diversified. Foreign fruit companies no longer own and operate the plantations or manage the docks and railways of the country. The north coast towns of Tela, La Ceiba, and Trujillo, which grew because of the fruit company investments and transshipments of bananas, no longer provide the only outlets to shipping abroad. Today Puerto Cortes, the largest port in Central America, is the site of a new port that serves as the Caribbean terminus of the trans-isthmian route across the country. Honduras still produces more bananas than any of its Central American neighbors, but coffee, cattle, sugarcane, lumber, tobacco, and sea foods are significant contributors to regional economies.

Small-scale agriculture in corn, beans, and rice has long been the major economic activity, but the trend is toward more crop diversification and commercialization. Industrialization has also begun. The leading products are soft drinks, beer, cement, cooking oil, light textiles, seafood, and rum.

Tourism has great potential for producing much-desired foreign capital. The clear, warm Caribbean waters are ideal for sport diving, and the coral-sand beaches and moderate climate contribute to a setting favorable for international tourism. The famous Maya ruins at Copán, which date from the classic period of AD 300 to 900, the well-preserved colonial fort at Omoa, and the diversity of cultures are also attractive to many tourists.

## History and Government

Honduras was first brought to the attention of Europeans in 1502 during the fourth and last voyage of Christopher Columbus. He sailed along the north coast and made at least two stops to meet the local inhabitants and to take possession of the land for the Spanish crown. After inspecting the *Islas de la Bahía* and stopping at the large protected bay at Trujillo, the little fleet of four ships sailed around the eastern shore into more favorable weather. The exclamation "Gracias a Dios" is now the name of the easternmost cape in Honduras.

Hernando Cortez, Pedro Alvarado, and Francisco Montejo were among the early colonial administrators who directed the conquest and settlement by Europeans. The ports of Trujillo and Puerto Caballos (near modern Puerto Cortés) were the first centers. As the Spaniards penetrated the interior and subjugated the native Indians, regional towns of Spaniards grew at San Pedro, Gracias, Choluteca, Olancho, and Comayagua, the colonial capital. After the first century more than 100 Spanish-controlled villages had been formed for the purposes of religious conversion and economic tribute. Most of the natives, however, had been destroyed. They had no immunities to Old World diseases.

Spain organized colonial Honduras primarily for the exportation of gold and silver, but indigo, sarsaparilla, and dyewoods also found their way into European markets. During the 17th and 18th centuries English, French, and Dutch pirates had occasional successes in sacking Honduran ports and stealing the colonial produce of the Spaniards.

Emerging from the domination of the Spanish in 1821 and withstanding the internal wars of the 1830s, Honduras became one of those Latin American countries that is only now escaping the cycle of frequent disruptive changes in national government. Since 1821 the country has averaged almost one presidential change per year. The United States has often been criticized for interfering in the political affairs of the country.

The Honduran army has played a dominant role in the selection of civilian leadership. In the 1980s, however, the armed forces allowed civilian politicians to organize the government. In 1981 the Liberal party candidate, Dr. Roberto Suazo Cordova, a physician from a small city in the state of La Paz, was elected president. The election of 1985 was peaceful, unusually democratic, and brought Jose Azcona, also a Liberal candidate, to the presidency. This election highlighted the strength of democracy and the strong two-party system. Nearly 85 percent of the electorate voted, and the margin of victory in virtually all regions of the country was quite narrow. Throughout the 18 *departamentos* and most of the 282 *municipios* both major parties—Liberal and Nationalist—contested for positions in the national legislature. The Liberals won the national vote with 49.3 percent.

The newly found political stability was a critical factor in the completion of such development projects as El Cajón hydroelectric dam in central Honduras, the opening of new agricultural lands in the lower Aguán Valley, a land entitlement program under the agrarian reform agency, a road building program, and the construction of school houses in almost all rural communities.