

# Paraguay:

## A Case Study of a Developing Nation

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Because textbooks, news reports, and social studies curricula often focus on the “major powers” in a region, students may have little opportunity to consider the richness brought to the world by the developing nations. Studying one or more developing nations can address to some extent all social studies standards, but especially **1 CULTURE** and **10 PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS**.<sup>1</sup> It also offers opportunities to address Standard **10 GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**. In studying various developing nations students will find a diversity of cultures, geographies, economies, and histories. How can each of these nations adapt to the modern world? Which outside ideas will they choose to make their own? What parts of their traditional culture can they preserve?

Because it is not considered a politically or economically powerful nation in the region (as are Argentina, Brazil, and Chile) Paraguay is often overlooked. Yet Paraguay is representative of many of the world’s nations: partly modern and partly traditional, Paraguay strives to maintain a clear cultural identity as it develops economically and socially.

### An Overview of Paraguay

This travelogue is intended to give upper-elementary students an initial sense of Paraguay’s uniqueness, problems, and contributions to the world. Landlocked Paraguay is surrounded by Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia. Through it runs the third largest river in the Western Hemisphere, the Rio Paraguay, which divides the country into two unequal portions. West of the river is the Chaco, a sparsely populated and largely infertile region with 60 percent of the nation’s area but few of its people. Most of Paraguay’s 5.5 million people live east of the river in a well-watered, elevated grassland plateau with some subtropical forests. The Rio Parana separates it from Brazil and Argentina. Native wildlife, including jaguars and the hyacinth macaw, are disappearing in the eastern region because of the density of the human population, with intensive use of the land for farming and ranching. The average temperature is high in summer (January through March), but sometimes close to freezing in winter (July through September). The climate and soils support agriculture, but there are few minerals for mining.

Thus, the economic base is primarily agricultural.

The native, semi-nomadic people, the Guarani, gradually absorbed Spanish immigrants, which created a Spanish-Guarani society. Spaniards adopted much of Guarani food, language, and customs, while the mestizos adopted Spanish cultural values and political systems. The Jesuits built large *reducciones*, theocratic communes, where the Guarani grew skilled at European forms of masonry, painting, and sculpture. The *reducciones* fell into ruins when the Spanish expelled missionaries from the country in 1787.

Paraguay’s Declaration of Independence in 1811 was not opposed by Spain. But soon after, the nation fell under the dictatorship of “El Supremo,” Jose Gaspar Rodrigues de Francia. Paraguay fought in the disastrous War of the Triple Alliance with powerful neighbors and thus lost much territory and one-fourth of its people (1864-70). It fought another war with Bolivia in 1932. Over the decades, dictators often ruled Paraguay, most recently Alfredo Stroessner, who used brutal means to remain in power for thirty-five years. Since his overthrow in 1989, Paraguay has struggled to establish a representative democracy.

Paraguay shares some characteristics found in many developing nations, including difficulties in establishing a democracy, traditional dependence on agriculture, a rich oral history, and melding of indigenous culture with European culture.

### Organizing Questions for Studying Developing Nations

Upper elementary students can use five organizing questions to frame the study of a developing nation such as Paraguay: “What is the place like?” “Who are the people?” “How do they live?” “What is special, or unique, about the nation we are studying?” and “What is similar between that nation and ours?”

Useful resources for teachers include the country studies produced by the United States Federal Research Division, which provide extensive information on a nation’s history, geography, society, economy, transportation and communications, government and politics, and national security.<sup>2</sup> Capital cities usually have an American international school that serves the children of Americans living in that nation and often also serves local students. These schools frequently maintain websites offering opportunities to use technology to connect students in the United States with English-





This first grade student is studying English through science and social studies activities. After exploring trees on the school's grounds, she pastes pictures in a scrapbook and learns the English words for the parts of a tree.

speaking students in another country. Finally, many countries have websites with basic geographic and social information.

Investigating a developing nation, or a set of such nations, using the five organizing questions is best accomplished through the use of cooperative groups. Each group can divide up the organizing questions among its members and then use a strategy, such as the jigsaw, to share information.<sup>3</sup> Another strategy that can be successfully used in sharing information is a data retrieval chart (see Tables 1, 2). Each column of the chart is labeled with one organizing question. Each small group, or each student, completes information on the chart.

Teachers may plan a unit of study around one developing nation that is studied in some depth, such as Paraguay. Once students have developed responses for each of the five organizing questions, they can be asked to identify one or more additional nations they would like to investigate. Then, organizing questions can be divided up among group members, and a data retrieval chart can be constructed that summarizes the data for each nation (for example, Paraguay, Nigeria, and Thailand). Students can use a red marker to highlight similarities among the nations, and a blue marker to highlight dissimilarities. Students can then try to organize highlighted information on the chart into patterns of similarity and dissimilarity (Table 2).

### What is the Place Like?

Because Paraguay is located south of the Equator, its seasons are the reverse of those found in North America. Thus, winter holidays are hot, in March the constellation of the Southern Cross is seen in the night sky, and students' "summer" vacations occur in the winter season.

Asunción, the capital city, has a population of one-half million. Its architecture is mostly low-rise buildings, some upscale new shopping malls, a traditional fish market near the river, a few Spanish colonial buildings, a cathedral from the 1800s, large

government buildings downtown, and some ramshackle housing along the river's edge next to the Palacio de Gobierno, the major seat of government. Other cities are considerably smaller.

Traveling east from Asunción along a paved highway, one views mostly grasslands, small towns, and many well-kept dwellings. One can see Paraguayan cowboys herd cattle by horse, but also modern farming equipment. Ruins of *reducciones* are easily reached by bus in eastern Paraguay. The Itaipu Dam on the border with Brazil is the world's largest hydroelectric project. Traveling west across the Rio Paraguay on the Ruta Trans-Chaco, which is the only paved highway going west, the land becomes dry and the vegetation sparse. The traveler comes to the Parque Nacional Cerro Cora, a dry tropical forest and savanna in steep, isolated hills. Many native species of plants and animals survive here. Petroglyphs as well as more recent landmarks of cultural and historical importance are found.

The characteristics of a place determine how its people live, what they eat, how they dress, and a multitude of other aspects of their society. Primary characteristics, such as Paraguay's rural expanses, can be found in many other developing nations such as Bangladesh, Cameroon, and Peru. Paraguay's range of climate from wet to quite dry is found in other nations as well. Cameroon, for example, has nearly desert conditions in its north, yet ranges to tropical rainforests in its south. The landlocked position of Paraguay is shared by nations such as Uzbekistan. Rural Paraguayans moved to the city looking for prosperity in the last half of the twentieth century and continue to do so. Political leaders find it hard to provide the infrastructure needed to cope with the expanding population.

Students can be encouraged to follow up the information they gather on "What is the place like?" by considering further questions, such as some dealing with the growth of a large dominant city, "Why is Asunción so much larger than other Paraguayan cities?" "Do we have a similar pattern in the U.S.A, or in our state?" "Do we find this pattern in a Middle Eastern country such as Syria and in an African country such as Tanzania?" Or students might

A street scene with covered sidewalk market stalls on a Friday morning in Caacupe, a small town east of Asunción.



Table 1  
National Characteristics: Paraguay

What is the place like?	Who are the people?	How do they live?	What is special about Paraguay?	What characteristics do we share?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South of the Equator</li> <li>• Constellation of the Southern Cross</li> <li>• Biggest city: Asuncion</li> <li>• Very rural</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guarani heritage</li> <li>• Mestizos</li> <li>• Spanish, some German heritage</li> <li>• Many speak Guarani</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well kept houses</li> <li>• Western style clothes</li> <li>• No central heating</li> <li>• Have public schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spanish-Guarani culture</li> <li>• Lots of storytelling</li> <li>• Slower pace of life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• U.S. plains states similar</li> <li>• Some of the same crops</li> <li>• Both like different kinds of music</li> <li>• Lots of people like barbecues</li> </ul>

look at road patterns and then consider a question such as: “What places are connected by major roads?” There are many possibilities for identifying patterns within a developing nation and for making comparisons between a set of developing nations.

### Who Are the People?

The second question, “Who are the people?” is often answered through a study of migration. The citizenry of many nations includes diverse groups who have moved into the area at different periods in time. Migrants often clash with residents. In Paraguay, many current citizens are descendants of Europeans. This can lead to a consideration of migration and why people migrate. Paraguay also has many citizens with Guarani heritage. Paraguay has achieved a blend of both cultures with many people speaking primarily Guarani. German Mennonites who settled in the Chaco make up around 3 percent of the population.

Paraguayan meals demonstrate the influence of indigenous foodstuffs and culture, often featuring *mbaipy so-o*, a hot maize pudding with meat chunks, and *tereré*, a popular tea. Theatre is performed in Guarani as well as in Spanish. Yet, Paraguayan music shows few Guarani influences.

Students might read a folk tale or traditional story from the nation and talk about how the people are represented in it. They might listen to traditional and modern music from the nation and compare it to music with which they are familiar. Or, they might do an in-class survey to determine the ethnic heritage by which they identify themselves.

### How Do They Live?

The third organizing question is made up of smaller ones: “How do people make a living?” “What do the inside of their homes look like?” “Do they have television access?” “What do people’s clothes

Table 2  
Comparing National Characteristics

	What is the place like?	Who are the people?	How do they live? (Clothing)	What is special about the country?	What characteristics do they share with Americans?
<b>Paraguay</b>	One large city but mostly rural	Guarani and Spanish heritage, often mixed	Lots of Western style clothes	Mixed Guarani and Spanish heritages	Like a lot of the same music and kinds of clothes.
<b>Nigeria</b>	Several large cities but mostly rural	Around 400 ethnic groups with little European mixing	Some Western style clothes but most wear local styles	Many subcultures without a single major culture	People start businesses and sell products they make.
<b>Thailand</b>	One very large city but mostly rural	Most are Thai with some different small groups	Lots of Western-style clothes but still some traditional clothes	Culture built mostly around life on a river	Like a lot of the same music, but also have traditional music

look like?” “Do most children attend elementary school?” or “How do they get from one place to another?” The teacher may encourage students to consider yet another query, “Which characteristics are of most interest and importance to you?”

Students should discover that most Paraguayans live in the countryside, in small, well kept houses. Many have access to a television, which if not located in the home, is stationed in a central place in the village. Dress is generally Western in style. Most homes do not have central heating, but may have a fireplace. Since homes are built to cope with the high temperatures during the long warm season, they are chilly when temperatures drop. So, people wear jackets and other warm clothing during the cold season. The population growth rate increased from 2.6 percent in 1950-1960 to 2.8 percent between 1990-2000, but is projected to drop to 1.4 percent by 2040-2050. The population increase has placed a strain on existing infrastructure and the economy. Public elementary education is available and many, but not all, children attend. Adult illiteracy is only about 7 percent. Buses ply the roadways and transportation is widely available by car and down the Rio Paraguay by boat.

### What is Special About this Nation?

Paraguay does not boast breathtaking landforms and has few ancient monuments. Instead, it has a unique culture with characteristics that makes it special.

The mostly Guarani-Spanish culture of Paraguay has survived war and dictatorship, enduring into the challenges presented by today’s world. Its rural character adapted as soybeans, an imported crop, became a major agricultural product. Paraguay is special because its indigenous Guarani culture melded with Spanish culture while maintaining a primary importance in language and cuisine. It has a rich oral tradition of stories and poetry, passed down even as dictators limited the press. Many people take a relaxed attitude toward life, having survived much hardship. The national parks indicate the people’s willingness to preserve an environment that has not produced great wealth and power, but has provided a basic living for most.

When asking students “what is special” about a developing nation, it is important to move beyond the landforms or major cultural artifacts that are often found on the front of tourist brochures. While these are impressive, any nation is much more than these. Focusing only on impressive landforms and cultural artifacts can stereotype a nation. Just as the U.S.A. is much more than the Grand Canyon and New York City, so also Egypt is more than its pyramids.

As teachers help students move beyond initial impressions, they should also help students examine the nation as it is today, and not assume that traditional cultures are unchanged. For example, students may find that, even though some familiar American soft drinks are popular, there are also popular local brands with flavors such as guava or green tea.

### What Characteristics Do We Share?

This final question is one that must be defined by students. Characteristics such as geography, population size, major products, or artistic traditions can be considered. In the case of Paraguay, its geography can be likened to that of the plains states in the United States, particularly regions such as western Kansas. Its capital, Asuncion, is similar in size to some U.S. cities such as Birmingham, Alabama. Its major products are agricultural—soybeans, cotton, timber, hides and skins, meatpacking, and sugarcane; each of these is an export of the U.S.A. as well.

Paraguay has produced highly unconventional visual arts. Its music traditions are mostly European, with the guitar and harp featured in slow-paced songs, while dances include polkas and other fast-stepping music. Paraguay boasts Agustin Barrios (1885-1944) as a revered Latin American composer of music for the guitar, who often performed in Guarani costume. Students will find familiar elements in Paraguayan music and a range of styles that indicates diverse interests.

Students may note that beef and barbecues are a common part of Paraguayan cuisine and social life. Internet photographs will show them that traffic congestion is a problem today in Asuncion. Large barges filled with agricultural products float down the Rio Paraguay, people wear very familiar clothing, many children go to school and do homework on school nights, and basketball is popular. These are characteristics also found in the U.S.A.

### Conclusion

The study of a country like Paraguay often leads to a final question: What other developing nations do we want to study? This, in turn, leads students into further inquiry. As they gain more knowledge about this pluralistic world in which they live, students will be better prepared for their role as world citizens. 🌐

### Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies. *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
2. Dennis Hanratty and Sandra Meditz, eds., *Paraguay: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1999), [lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/pytoc.html](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/pytoc.html).
3. R. E. Slavin, R. E. *Cooperative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988).

### Suggested Resources

Hanratty, D. M. and S. W. Meditz, eds. *Paraguay: A Country Study*. Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990, [memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/pytoc.html](http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/pytoc.html)

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*Rule by Fear: Paraguay after Thirty Years Under Stroessner*. New York: Americas Watch, 1985.

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