

Understand South America

SOUTH AMERICA TODAY1034

Brighter days have arrived, with growing economies and more social equality, but environmental threats and corruption remain.

HISTORY1036

A look at the forces that have shaped South America, from colonization and slavery to military dictatorships.

SOUTH AMERICAN PEOPLE & CULTURE1042

A portrait of the continent, covering multiculturalism, religion, lifestyles and music.

South America Today

There's optimism in the air across South America, with a rising middle class, falling poverty rates and strong economies. As the continent has veered to the left, wage disparities have fallen and social justice seems to be the hot topic of the day. Big challenges remain, however, particularly in the realm of public corruption. The economic good times may also be coming to an end, spurred in part by plummeting oil prices.

Best on Film

Motorcycle Diaries (2004) The road trip that made a revolutionary.

Central do Brasil (Central Station; 1998) Walter Salles' moving tale of a homeless boy and an older woman on a road trip across Brazil.

Fitzcarraldo (1982) Werner Herzog's wild tale of a foreigner obsessed with building an opera house in the jungle.

The Mission (1986) Jesuit missionaries in Guaraní communities of Spanish-controlled colonies.

Cidade de Deus (City of God; 2002) Fernando Meirelles' powerful portrait of life in a Rio favela.

Best in Print

The Lost City of Z (David Grann) Gripping journey into the Amazon to retrace the steps of lost explorer Colonel Fawcett.

In Patagonia (Bruce Chatwin) Evocative writing on Patagonia's history and mystique.

One Hundred Years of Solitude (Gabriel García Márquez) Magic realist masterpiece.

Aunt Julia & the Scriptwriter (Mario Vargas Llosa) A classic unconventional love story.

Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon (Jorge Amado) Hilarious tale set in Bahia, by Brazil's greatest writer.

A New Dawn

Brighter days have arrived in South America. A little over a generation ago, military dictatorships and repressive regimes ruled much of the continent. Thankfully, the era of bloody coups, guerrilla warfare and runaway inflation is now a thing of the past, and the gloom that seemed to hang over South America has lifted (save in Venezuela, where the economy remains on a perilous downward spiral). In place of right-wing regimes, South America has moved toward peace and prosperity, with more socially responsible leadership that's also mindful of fueling economic growth. Progressives like former Brazilian president Lula helped pave the way, demonstrating that you could both grow an economy and help lift people out of poverty. Income inequality has fallen – not only in Brazil but across South America, where the middle class is growing and fewer people than ever before are living in extreme poverty.

Breaking Down Barriers

Machismo has also taken a blow, with the first female presidents in South America helping to break down barriers. Cristina Kirchner of Argentina, Dilma Rousseff of Brazil and Michelle Bachelet of Chile have all recently served as presidents of some of South America's largest economies. Speaking of historic elections, Evo Morales (now in his third term) also deserves special mention, becoming the first president of Bolivia to hail from an indigenous background. He follows on the heels of Alejandro Toledo, who became Peru's first indigenous president back in 2001.

On other fronts, there have been equally dramatic changes in recent years. Gay marriage has been legalized in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, and three other countries (Chile, Colombia and Ecuador) have a form