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Brief history of Brazil

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRAZIL

Good afternoon and thank you for another invitation to return to Heritage Village. Today, we have a topic suggested by one of you and that topic is very large: Brazil. To be precise, this nation of 3,286,487 square miles and home to some 194,000,000 people also possesses the sixth-largest economy in the world. I'd be providing a very brief history of her earlier centuries, a more detailed description of the modern era, a look at the economy, and a few Brazilian refreshments.

The first European explorer to land in Brazil, the Portuguese admiral Pedro Alvarez Cabral, arrived in 1500 with some thirteen ships. Either he or his navigator apparently erred a bit: they had been aiming for the west coast of Africa en route to India. They missed. However, they found their landing site idyllic with fine warm breezes, verdant land, and the curious, poorly armed, and friendly Tupi tribe.

In Brazil, the Portuguese created a plantation society. The economic and social base of Brazil would be agricultural and structured around commercial estates, known as *fazendas*. Their owners presided over the production of a variety of export crops using a combination of laborers that include free but poor men and a substantial force of slaves, both African and indigenous. For the first few decades, the colonists confined themselves to the coastal areas.

The first sense of independence probably began in 1625. In that year, Dutch invaders seized the colony. Although the Brazilians expected to be supported by Portugal in their efforts to drive out the would-be conquerors, the mother country disappointed them. The Dutch defeated the Portuguese relief force in a sea battle. So the Brazilians formed their own army and drove out the invaders in 1654. The sense of self-confidence that came with that victory led to a more assertive attitude. Following their military triumph, the colonists began migrating westward without the approval of the royal government. The Portuguese tended to govern with a light hand. They had little choice. Their nation was the smallest of the European powers and their Brazilian subjects did not consider themselves weak dependents of the mother nation. Day-to-day power resided with the plantation owners.

The token war of independence that took place in 1822 reflected that reality. That conflict began in 1808 when Portugal's king, faced with the unpleasant prospect of being captured by Napoleon's invading army, loaded 10,000 of his closest subordinates and friends and more than a bit of gold into merchant ships and sailed with his navy to Brazil. The surprised colonists welcomed him and his majesty in turn hand out patents of nobility and titles that gave the colonists much pleasure. Following the death of the king in Brazil, his son Joao VI declared Brazil a co-equal kingdom within the greater Portuguese kingdom. This was yet another step up the political and social ladder for the colonists who supported him.

After the British evicted the French from Portugal and sent Napoleon into exile, the Portuguese asked Joao VI, to return home and govern under the new somewhat democratic constitution

that limited his power. In doing so, he left his son Pedro behind as Prince Regent of Brazil. Unfortunately for all concerned, Portugal's national legislature did not want to accept Brazil as a kingdom and in 1821 ordered Pedro to return home. He hesitated. Pedro wasn't particular fond of any sort of democracy. Besides, he liked Brazil better than Portugal and he found that most of the plantation owners shared those sentiments. So on December 1, 1822, he dramatically tore up the ultimatum ordered him to return, shouting "Independence or Death." Given the plantation owners' support, the small size of the Portuguese army, and British opposition to effort to crush the revolt; Pedro, never faced a real prospect of death. After some token clashes with Portuguese garrisons, Brazil obtained recognition of her independence.

A few years after taking the title of Emperor Pedro I, he realized that modern monarchs were expected to preside over nations with a constitution. So in 1824 he dictated a constitution to his secretary. No one was fooled.

Both father and son embraced the aristocratic ideal of a plantation-based society in which a few men ruled. They and their supporters saw commerce and industry and urbanization as desirable only to the extent that those institutions supported their agricultural world. With fervor, those plantation owners successfully resisted the abolition of slavery until 1888. In 1899, a military revolt led by Marshall Floriano Peixoto deposed the monarch. He and his fellow officers did not seek any sort of democracy. The constitution they subsequently promulgated granted less than five per cent of the male population the right to vote. Instead, they wanted to make their nation a modern industrial power. To do so, they encouraged massive immigration in an effort to whiten the population. From Italy, from Germany, from Japan, from Spain, Russia, Poland and Portugal and Syria, millions arrived. While cities grew and exports of raw materials such as rubber and the traditional agricultural crops surged, the prosperity never was widespread and much of the population remained poor and illiterate.

Underneath the surface, matters were changing. Political opposition emerged across a wide spectrum that ran from citizens who wanted a greater voice in the existing process radicals who sought a basic restructuring of the social order. While the ruling coalition of mining and agricultural interests successfully resisted these groups, they could not stop the military officers who overthrew them in 1930.

Known as the Lieutenant's Rebellion, this nearly bloodless coup ushered in a new era of modernization, political participation, and confusion. The new leader, Getulio Vargas, tried to blend Liberals, Conservatives, Fascists, and Communists into an umbrella organization that would create that which he called a New State, or *Nuevo Estado*. This society was to be one in which the government played a major role. While efforts such as the founding of nation's first comprehensive university proved to be a success, other project failed. From 1930 until 1964, Brazil lurched from one regime to another. This period, characterized by substantial political violence, triple digit inflation, and other sorts of economic instability ended with a 1964 military coup.

The generals who seized control of the government sought what they called a “cleansing” of the nation. This included not only the abolition of all existing political parties, but prolonged jailing of political opponents, censorship, torture, and executions that numbered into the tens of thousands. A federal legislature composed of deputies from two new government-formed parties proved quite obedient.

Realizing that much of Brazil’s instability at home and low reputation abroad flowed from her poor economic performance, the generals successfully sought to intensify the level of industrialization. Between 1964 and 1976 auto production grew from 184,000 vehicles to 986,000. Also, the regime launched massive infrastructure projects designed to transform the nation and its image. Foremost among these was the Itapu dam project on the Parana River. Until the recent completion of China’s Three Gorges Dam, this was the largest such structure on earth.

But by 1976, the generals changed course. Realizing the strength of public discontent and international condemnation, they authorized the formation of political parties. Also, they concluded that in spite of their economic successes, their nation was deeper in debt than ever before and the growing economy had failed to generate enough jobs for the millions of rural Brazilians now crowding into the ever-growing slums of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

A gradual opening or *abertura* continued, culminating with massive and largely peaceful 1984 demonstrations in every major Brazilian city calling for a return to democracy. The generals relinquished power in 1985. In 1988, a 275-article constitution guaranteeing representative government, civil liberties, and a wide range of social benefits became law. By this time, Brazilians had learned hard lessons they still remember.

Extremists of the Left now know that they never will succeed in violently seizing power. The military elite know that when they did take power, they could not hold that power permanently. The political parties of the right and of the left now understood that they never will succeed in ruling unopposed. The industrialists and their union opponents now understood that there exist limits beyond which neither party could go. The advocates of massive government spending now realize that they could not spend as much as they wished because doing so would trigger hyperinflation. Conversely, the supporters of very limited government now realize that some government actions are necessary for economic growth, such as creating comprehensive universities or building a Trans-Amazon Highway. Similarly, politicians of the Left have no hesitation in selecting free market alternatives. President Lula da Silva’s decision to privatize the major portion of the national oil company proved that. And one and all realized that the new constitution would protect as well limit every faction of Brazilian society. So, Brazil began to grow and had continued to do so until this day.

First and foremost comes growth in high tech fields and here the leading example is Embraer. Listed on the New York Stock Exchange, the firm builds a range of jet and propeller aircraft. Currently, they hold the largest share of the United States market for regional jets. Their basis

model is the one Continental flies out of McAllen. The company also makes military versions, one of which the United States Air Force recently decided to purchase. The company's stock ticker symbol is ERJ.

Another leading Brazilian company is Vale, the world largest producer of iron ore. Their rise is closely tied to their largest market, which is China. The company controls not only the mineral deposits and the mines, but also the rail lines that transport the ore and the dock facilities.

A third Brazilian company much in the news is Petroleos Brasileiros. Founded in 1953 by President Vargas, Petrobras was to be a state-owned company with exclusive rights to develop, refine, and market Brazil's oil. By the time the firm lost that monopoly status in 1997, Petrobras had matured into a successful oil and natural gas corporation with leading-edge deep water technology. Today, private investors hold the majority of the company, which is the largest business in Latin American as measured by market capitalization. The recent discovery of very substantial offshore oil reserves had attracted global attention and more than eighty foreign companies have sought partnerships with Petrobras to exploit this find.

As a monopoly, Petrobras enjoyed many favors from the government in its early days. The company still retains great political favor. The other side of that coin is that the interests of the government do not necessarily coincide with those of investors. For the moment, the company's high rate of growth and a five per cent dividend are quelling many of those doubts.

In Brazil, much of the government's intervention in the economy is welcomed by corporations. The corporations enjoy the partial protection from competition offered by high tariffs and profit from the requirements that government-funded projects make maximal use of Brazilian-made components.

The nation's economic prospects remain strong. In addition to the economic sectors I've mentioned, the highly capitalized and industrialized agricultural sector is globally competitive. Brazil's international presence has grown significantly. The nation now leads its own trading block, known as the *Mercado do Sur*, or Market of the South. With French assistance, the Brazilian Navy is assembling its first nuclear submarines.

On the negative side, the country remains economically polarized in spite of the massive growth of the middle class. There are few places in the world poorer, more violent, and more depressing than a Brazilian slum. In many cases, police entering these communities will be accompanied by army troops. My only hope is that the future for the people will be better than the present.

Now, please give me some questions.