

# Cape Verde Islands

## Background

The Cape Verde archipelago is located approximately 375 miles off the coast of West Africa. It consists of nine inhabited islands and eight islets. The islands have a combined size of just over 4,000 square kilometers (roughly the size of Rhode Island). The islands are divided into the Barlavento (windward) islands of Santo Antão, São Vicente, Santa Luzia, São Nicolau, Sal, and Boavista; and the Sotavento (leeward) islands of Maio, Santiago, Fogo, and Brava. The largest island, both in size and population, is Santiago, where the capital, Praia, is situated.

Of volcanic origin, the spectacular islands, which boast some of the most beautiful beaches in the world, vary widely in terrain. A still active volcano on the island of Fogo is the highest point on the archipelago (elevation 2,829 meters). Extensive salt flats are found on Sal and Maio. On Santiago, Santo Antão, and São Nicolau, arid slopes give way in places to sugar cane fields or banana plantations spread along the base of towering mountains. The climate is tropical, but the archipelago's location in the Sahel belt makes it the victim of periodic and devastating droughts, interspersed with years of less-than-adequate rainfall. Two of the most severe droughts, from 1830 to 1834 and in 1963, claimed more than 30,000 lives each.

The Portuguese explored the Cape Verde Islands between 1460 and 1462 in expeditions led by Antonio de Noli, Diego Gomes, and Diego Afonso, but the archipelago was certainly known to the West African coastal empires and had been visited in antiquity by Arab geographers and even, some theories hold, by the Greeks. Most historians contend that the islands were uninhabited at the time of the first Portuguese explorations, but evidence suggests that Santiago Island was the refuge for a small group of shipwrecked Djalof seamen from the Cap-Vert peninsula in what is now Senegal.

As the slave trade to Cape Verde intensified over the next few centuries, so too did economic activity on the islands. Corn, brought from Brazil, quickly became the staple of the diet and was the earliest export crop. Beans, manioc and sweet potatoes were also imported and grown for domestic consumption. Sugar cane, introduced from the Canary Islands, became another valuable export crop in the form of *grogue*, or rum. Exports of raw cotton began as early as 1506, and wines for export were produced beginning in the late 18th century, but both of these declined in importance relatively rapidly: raw cotton exports ended with the importation of cloth from Guinea-Bissau, and wine exports in any significant quantity ceased in the late 19th century due to a lack of demand.

Besides agriculture, animal husbandry played an important part in the Cape Verdean economy from the 15th century on, and exports of salted beef and tanned hides began in 1490 from the islands of Boa Vista and Maio. For nearly 200 years the extraction of salt was the foundation of the country's biggest export. Cape Verdean salt found markets as far away as New England, the West Indies, Argentina, and Brazil. The industry crashed in 1862 when Brazil instituted an import tax on salt.

Emigration from Cape Verde began in the late 1600s and has continued since. Traditional points of destination have been Portugal, Brazil, Holland, France, and the United States. The majority of the early immigrants to the United States came from the islands of Fogo and Brava, serving on U.S. whaling ships operating in the tropical Atlantic. Many moved permanently to the United States. The Portuguese encouraged educated Cape Verdeans to enter the colonial service and move to other Portuguese territories. In the 1960s, Cape Verdeans were drafted into the Portuguese army and served in other overseas territories as soldiers. As a result, large Cape Verdean communities exist in Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Angola, and Mozambique. By far, though, the

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largest overseas Cape Verdean community is in the United States, principally in Rhode Island and the Boston area.

## Government

Cape Verde defines itself as a sovereign, democratic, and anti-imperialist republic. The government structure has three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. The national assembly constitutes the legislative branch. It determines fundamental internal and external policies and organizes and controls the political, economic, cultural, social, and defense lines of action. The assembly is directed by a steering committee composed of the president of the national assembly and four other members. Its members, *Deputados da Nação*, are elected through national elections every five years; all citizens may be candidates. The assembly ordinarily meets twice a year.

The executive branch is composed of the president, elected every five years, and the council of ministers, elected by the national assembly from within the ranks of the party with the most seats. The president is the head of state and of the armed forces. The council of ministers is the executive and administrative organism; it consists of the prime minister, who is the head of government, and a number of government ministers and secretaries of state.

The judicial branch is headed by a supreme court composed of five justices named by the president, the executive branch, and the lawyers' association.

On February 17, 1991, Cape Verde held its first free presidential elections. Former judge Antonio Mascarenhas Monteiro's victory marked the first time an African head of state voluntarily turned over power to his successor as the result of democratic elections.

## The Economy

Classified by the World Bank as a lower middle income country, Cape Verde has an economy oriented toward agriculture and fishing, although services (essentially government investment spending) account for the majority of GDP. After more than 10 years of drought, it rained sporadically for years after 1984. During 1997, the majority of the rain fell during one week, resulting in massive crop failures throughout the country. The year 1998 was worse. The country's small size, isolation, and lack of natural resources mean that, even without the handicap of drought, development possibilities would be limited. Given this, the economy has achieved an impressive growth record since independence. Meanwhile, a sufficient supply of food has been ensured by huge efforts to preserve the soil and vegetation and to improve water management, and by careful management of international aid. Despite all these moves, however, the majority of Cape Verdeans continue to eke out a living from the production of the islands' traditional dietary staples and small animal husbandry.

## Society and Culture

The European men who colonized Cape Verde did not usually bring wives or families with them. As female African slaves were brought to the island, European men took them as wives. The intermingling of European and African is not simply genetic; it extends to sociocultural patterns and language as well. The social and cultural patterns of the population are similar to those of rural Portugal, but some African patterns remain. Many still use the traditional African methods of carrying things on their heads and carrying children tied by scarves to their backs. The role of women in society also reflects the traditions of both Africa and Europe.

Western religion, to some extent, has diluted African cultural traditions. Catholicism, brought by the Portuguese, has always been Cape Verde's primary religion, though some Protestant sects

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(especially the Seventh Day Adventists, the Mormons, and the Nazarenes) have attracted followers. Despite bans by the Portuguese colonists, some vestiges of African animism remain in superstitions and magic rituals.

From: "Welcome to Cape Verde, Country Information Packet," Peace Corps, 2000