

Countries Of The World: Peru



Image 1: Machu Picchu is a popular destination in Peru for tourists and natives alike. It was once home to an Incan civilization in the 1400s. Photo by: Getty Images/SinghaphanAllB.

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Peru is the third-largest country in South America after Brazil and Argentina. It is made up of a variety of landscapes, from mountains and beaches to deserts and rain forests.

About half the population of Peru lives in the Andean highlands where important cities like Cusco are located. The Andes stretch for almost a thousand miles from the bottom to the top of Peru. Ancient people first inhabited this region thousands of years ago. Some, like the Chavín, built pyramids and complex irrigation systems.

The coastal desert makes up only about 10 percent of Peru. This small portion of land is home to about one-third of all Peruvians.

The western edge of the Amazon jungle covers almost half of Peru. Called the selva in Spanish, this huge jungle, which also covers half of Brazil, is home to plants and animals that do not live anywhere else on Earth. Some scientists think there may even be native tribes there that have never seen the outside world.

The second highest mountain range in the world runs through Peru. These peaks, called the Andes, are tall and forbidding. The Inca people thought some peaks were the way the gods appeared on Earth. The Andes run from north to south. They can be seen from Peru's beaches 50 miles to the west. The highest peak, Mount Huascarán, is 22,205 feet high.

Nature

Map 1: mapchart.net/Newsela staff.

Because it has so many different ecosystems, Peru is home to a wider variety of plants and animals than most other countries on Earth. For many reasons, Peruvians have not had as much of an impact on their natural world as many other countries, and much of these ecosystems have been undisturbed.

Any 250-acre plot of Peruvian rain forest could be home to hundreds, maybe thousands, of species of animals and plants. There are hundreds of species that are only found in the Amazon. To protect these plants and animals, Peru has created special forest areas called reserves.

On the Pacific coast, many interesting plant and animal species have adapted to the dry desert climate. And off the coast, the Peru Current nourishes huge numbers of small fish. These in turn support large populations of bigger fish and seabirds, including Humboldt penguins.

Peru's mountains support special types of grasses and plants, which provide food for mammals like llamas, alpacas and vicuñas. One plant that grows in the Andes, the *Puya raimondii*, grows for 80 years before blooming.

People And Culture

Image 2: Newsela staff.

The people of Peru are a mix of many different cultures, including native people, Spaniards and other Europeans, descendants of African slaves, and Asians. Until recently, most people lived in the countryside. About 80 percent live in cities now. Most Peruvians follow the Roman Catholic religion introduced by the Spanish.

Government And Economy

Peru is a constitutional republic, with a president, a congress and a supreme court. Peruvians are required to vote by law. Presidents serve five-year terms and cannot be elected twice in a row.

Peru is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of natural resources. Gold, silver, copper, zinc, lead and iron are found across the country. There are also reserves of oil and natural gas. Since the 1990s, Peru has reduced poverty and made significant improvements to the growth of its economy.

History

Map 2: mapchart.net/Newsela staff.

Peru is a very long history. The earliest inhabitants arrived there about 15,000 years ago. Complex societies with pyramids and towns emerged in the northern mountains more than 5,000 years ago. These included the Chavín, the Moche and the Nazca.

One of the most important Peruvian cultures was the Inca, who lived in Peru around 600 years ago. Their capital, Cusco, is still a major city today. The Inca also built Machu Picchu, a mysterious, abandoned site in the Andes. This was the emperor's retreat. The Inca quickly grew into the largest empire in the world at the time, until they were defeated by the Spanish in 1532.