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The Culture and Attractions of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay

The area known to history as *Banda Oriental* today is the Oriental Republic of Uruguay. It is a small but proud nation of around 3,500,000 inhabitants who can trace their ancestry back to the Spanish and Portuguese colonists of the region in the 1500s. Since its colonization the *Banda Oriental* has seen many changes in its rulers due to its geographical location sandwiched between two of South America’s largest powers: Argentina and Brazil. As such, much of the culture and language Uruguay is a unique mix of its larger neighbors which gives the country its distinctive own identity. Ethnically, the country is nearly homogenous and urbanized. Per Country Reports, Uruguay’s urban population makes up nearly 92.5% of the total inhabitants in the country, with nearly 1,672,000 living in the capital of the country, Montevideo, alone (Countryreports).

Spanish is the official language of the country and spoken nearly everywhere. It is nearly identical to the Spanish dialect spoken in Buenos Aires and considered much softer than Castilian Spanish. Major differences include the change in pronunciation of “ll” and “y” in Spanish to a “sh” sound. Storylearning.com gives the example of “*Yo quiero que llueve*” (I want it to rain) would be pronounced as “*Sho quiero que shueva*”. Another difference is the atypical combination of “*voseo*” and “*tuteo*” when informally referring to someone directly, like “*Tú sos*” for “you are” instead of “*Tú* *eres*”. A third example of linguistic differences is the addition of language “fillers” like those common in modern English such as “hey!”. These are common in South American countries (Argentina uses “*Che*”), and Uruguay is no different with “*bo*” and “*ta*” as common in everyday conversation (Storylearning.com).

Uruguay has a proud cultural tradition that revolves around its main economic export: cattle. The beef/ranching industry is a hallmark of Uruguay that has vastly shaped the cultural identity of its people. As such beef/lamb and other red meats are eaten in many of Uruguay’s traditional meals due to its local high quality and cheap abundance. The “national dish” of Uruguay is known as *Chivito* (a steak and egg sandwich) and is taken as seriously in Uruguay as fish and chips are to the UK or perhaps the American hotdog/burger. The sandwich features *churrasco*, which is thin-sliced beef and also typically has egg, mozzarella, lettuce, tomato, etc (Blazes). Another major dish enjoyed in the country includes *Asado Uruguayo* which is an open-air barbecue over hot coals and a spit. *Maté*, a herbal-infused drink, is made by steeping dried leaves from yerba mate in hot water similar to tea. Uruguayans traditionally drink *Maté* in a special gourd (also called a mate) with a special medal straw known as a *bombilla*.

One of Uruguay’s most famous symbols: the “*Gaucho*” was a pivotal reason for the country’s successful cattle industry. Their historical roots come from the ranchers and frontiersmen who worked for Jesuit missionaries in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The *Gauchos* were described by Charles Darwin in 1832 as

“The gaucho is invariably most obliging, polite, and hospitable: I did not meet with even one instance of rudeness or inhospitability. He is modest, both respecting himself and country, but at the same time a spirited, bold fellow” (Burford).

As such the *gaucho* in Uruguay is seen in the same light as the romanticized American *cowboys* or Mexican *vaqueros* and are fondly remembered as pillars of chivalry and greatly respected for their dexterity in ranching. Today the adjective “*gauchada*” in Uruguay refers to an act of kindness or a good deed. During the second week of March the town of Tacuarembó holds the “Fiesta de la Patria Gaucha” as a cultural festival and celebration with rodeos, cattle contests, shopping, etc (Burford).

Outside of food and the *gaucho* tradition Uruguay has a rich cultural background and a fledgling movie industry. Montevideo is home to one of the most recognizable and famous tango compositions of all time: *La Cumparsita* (the Little Parade). In 1916 Argentine composer and pianist Roberto Firpo was approached by a local teenager, Gerardo Hernan “Becho” Matos Rodríguez, who gave Firpo a tango composition he had written while Firpo was dining at The Giralda, a then-famous cafe in Montevideo for musicians. The tango eventually would become worldly renown after its revival in 1924 and see commercial success after lyrics were added (Brisbane). UNESCO, in 2009, inscribed *candombe* as an important cultural dance to be added to their “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity”. *Candombe* originates from freed African-slaves who integrated into Uruguayan society and brought the drums and festivities of their people to Montevideo. The *Candombe* is traditionally played during the latter half of Carnival in Uruguay around mid to late March and is most recognizable by parades of drummers performing call-and-response style music for folk dancers and onlookers to enjoy (UNESCO).

By far the most important cultural unifier in Uruguay is fútbol. The country has one of the most historic and successful international teams in world fútbol history. The country hosted one of the first ever international games outside of the British Isles when a match between representatives of Argentina and Uruguay was played in Montevideo in 1902. The country’s first officially recorded match took place in 1881 between the Montevideo Rowing Club and the Montevideo Cricket Club (wikipedia). Albion F.C. became the first official fútbol club in the country in 1891 thanks to growing popularity from British team-tourism across South American in the late 1880s. Currently the Uruguayan domestic league (Primera Division) is dominated by two major clubs: Peñarol and Nacional. The domestic league has not grown as prominent as those in neighboring Brazil and Argentina, however this is made up for in Uruguay’s rich history playing internationally as a country.The *Selección de fútbol de Uruguay*, known better by their nickname *La Celeste* (Sky Blue after their distinctive kits), has won the FIFA World Cup twice in 1930 and 1950, and have won the Copa America sixteen times making them the most successful South American team in that tournament tied only with Argentina for most all-time (wikipedia). The national team has recently seen a revival in success under their current captain and all-time leading goalscorer Luis Suárez who has been one of the best attacking players of the last two decades.

Uruguay’s major cities and attractions are centered around the capital, Montevideo. The city is home to nearly half of Uruguay’s population at between 1.7 million and 1.9 million of the country’s estimated 3.5 million inhabitants. The city’s old town offers a rich look at the history of the country. Within the old town of Montevideo is the Teatro Solís, which is the second oldest active theater in South America. The theater focuses today on the performing arts and continuing the cultural and artistic education of Montevideo. The city also houses Uruguay’s national museum of fine arts: the Juan Manuel Blanes Museum of Fine Arts, named after one of Uruguay’s great artists Juan Blanes. The museum was made in reverence to Italian Renaissance style villas and displays Uruguayan and international arts (and a Japanese style garden) (Reininger).

Despite being a small nation, Uruguay’s cultural identity is very much at the center of all of South America’s traditions and ideals. The country shares its *Gaucho* roots with her larger neighbors in Argentina, and, like Argentina, has her culture intertwined with the rough and self-sufficient nature of the *Gauchos*. The country revolves around their lucrative beef industry: the food, culture, and identity of the Uruguayan people are mixed with the nature of what Americans would think as frontiersmen/cowboys. The country’s musical industry and the arts in contrast appears to focus more on the decadence of the city life, like *La Cumparsita* and the consumption of mate in elaborate calabash gourds and metal *bombillas*. Overall their people and culture is incredibly similar to the American midwestern culture despite the very different origins, which is incredibly fascinating!

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