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St. Vincent and the Grenadines

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St. Vincent and the Grenadines

The West Indies is an island chain, or archipelago (ar-kih-PELL-ago) in the **Caribbean** Sea. Thirty-two of its 7,000 islands belong to St. Vincent and the Grenadines (saynt VIN-sent and the GRE-nuh-deenz). This British Commonwealth country belongs to a group called the Windward Islands not far from South America. After St. Vincent, the two largest islands are Bequia (BECK-WAY) and Union Island. Its closest neighbors are Barbados to the east and St. Lucia to the northeast. St. Vincent's **culture** has much in common with its **Caribbean** neighbors, especially Grenada.

[\(See map, "St. Vincent and the Grenadines."\)](#)

Like other **Caribbean** islands, St. Vincent and the Grenadines had its earliest settlers when the Ciboney, or stone people, arrived. But the Carib tribe of South America drove out earlier peoples. Columbus claimed the land for Spain when he spotted it on January 22, 1498--St. Vincent's Day. The Carib were so fierce, however, that Europeans did not try to settle the land for many years. In 1675, a slave ship from Africa sank off the coast. Shipwrecked slaves swam to safety--and freedom--on St. Vincent. The Carib did not fight off these newcomers. Instead, they intermarried and produced a new **culture** called the Black Carib.

In the 1720s the French arrived with African slaves and started the first sugar plantations. The French and English fought over the land for many years. The Carib fought, too. In one uprising, they crushed rich Europeans in their own sugar presses! When slavery ended, indentured servants arrived from India and Portugal to take over the backbreaking work.



People of St. Vincent and the Grenadines

Daily Life

About two-thirds of today's residents descend from slaves. Another 20% have mixed backgrounds. There are also small minorities of European, East Indian and West Indian. About 2% are Carib. Most of the nation's 113,000 people live on the island of St. Vincent. The capital city, Kingstown, is located there. Another 4,850 live on Bequia and 1,900 on Union Island. Many people live in small fishing or farming villages.

Most of the people are poor. They often do not have enough work. Some have no jobs at all. Despite these conditions, the British tradition of education continues, at least at the lower levels. Most people can read and write. However, those who want to continue their schooling must attend, and pay for, a private religious school.

Like many one-time British colonies, St. Vincent maintains a love of cricket. People have been known to play this long, complicated lawn game in the water! Soccer, volleyball and basketball are other popular sports.

Language

The official language is English. However, many people speak patois (PAT-wah). It's a simple version of French mixed with African and native languages.

Food

Tropical fruit trees and sparkling seas provide many meals in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Bananas are exported, but locals eat them too. One type, called the plantain, is often served fried as a side dish. Breadfruit can also be fried, baked or roasted. Other fruits include guava, mangoes, coconuts and a melon-like fruit from the pawpaw tree. "Ground provisions" form a large part of the diet. These include root vegetables such as dasheen, yams and potatoes. Seafood is popular, especially *lambi*, or conch. French cooking and island resources blend in dishes such as pumpkin and garlic soup and chicken stew with molasses and coconut.

Arts & Music

Calypso music fills the air of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, as it does throughout the **Caribbean**. Steel bands are popular, and people love to dance.

Local craftspeople make sculptures, woodcarvings, pottery, jewelry and silkscreen fabrics.

History can be seen simply by walking past colonial cannons and forts. It is also visible in ancient petroglyphs, or rock drawings. The Archaeological Museum in the Botanical Gardens exhibits pottery, tools and other artifacts from early cultures.

Religion

About half of the islanders belong to the Church of England. Many others belong to the Roman Catholic or Methodist faith. African and island beliefs mix with Christian ones to form a **Caribbean** style of worship.

Holidays, Traditions & Folklore

St. Vincent and the Grenadines follows the same holidays as Great Britain. These include Good Friday, Easter Monday, Whit Monday, Christmas, Boxing Day and New Year's. It also follows **Caribbean** and South American traditions such as Carnival. Here, it is celebrated in July and may be called Vincy Mas. The celebration includes parties, "jump-ups" or dances, parades and competitions. The Calypso King is crowned during Carnival. So are the King and Queen of Bands. The nation's Independence Day is October 27th. January 22 is St. Vincent and the Grenadines Day. National festivals throughout the year celebrate music, dance and drama.

Fun Facts

A local historian doesn't believe that the first Africans arrived in the 1675 shipwreck. He thinks Abubakar, "the Mariner Prince of Mali," came here in the thirteenth century.

African royalty definitely came in the nineteenth century. King JaJa of Opobo began his exile here in 1888.

Bequia has one of the world's last whaling industries. Recognizing the island's long-time whaling tradition, an international agency allows it to catch three of the endangered mammals a year. Usually the whalers take only one whale. A big celebration results!

Sources

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