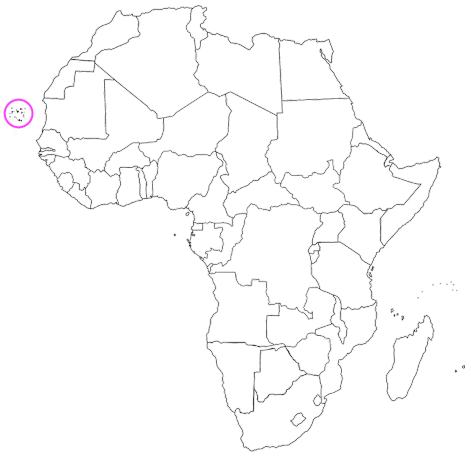
Republic of Cabo Verde (Cape Verde)



Area: 1,557 sq. miles
Population: 593,149 (2022 census).
Capital and largest city: Praia
Ethnic Groups: Multiethnic (West African and Portuguese descendent); majority (nearly 80%) Creole.
Languages: Portuguese (official), Cape Verdean Creole (Kriolu).
Religion: 89.1% Christianity, none 10.9%, Islam 1.3%, 1.2% others.
Life Expectancy: 76.06 years (2023).
Literacy: 91% adults; 98.74% youth (ages 15-24).
Economy: Service Oriented (including tourism); small agriculture, fishing, salt, wine, and limestone.
Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 42.4 (medium); country comparison to the world: 40.
Gender Inequality Index: 0.298 (low); half of all households are female-headed.

"The darker the night, the brighter the stars shine." – Cape Verdean proverb

Early Desire and Trade in Cape Verde

The independent island nation of Cape Verde (officially known as the Republic of Cabo Verde) is situated 354 miles off the West African coast (and 700 hundred miles east of Brazil) and consists of ten volcanic islands uninhabited until the 15th century. Portuguese explorers came upon the Cape Verde islands three decades before Columbus sailed to Hispaniola. Portugal established cotton and indigo plantations and imported enslaved Africans from the mainland to work them. The cloth (*panos*) was then traded for slaves.

In the 15th century, no spice was more exotic than the grains of paradise, the seeds from peppers (*Aframomum melegueta)* that are members of the ginger family, grown in West Africa and traded for centuries across the Sahara to Eurasia. The grains of paradise were believed to have magical properties to defy death and enhance sexual pleasure. Their lure induced the 15th-century Portuguese navigator Diogo Gomes to travel more than 250 miles up West Africa's Gambia River. His journey in turn enabled his royal patron of African maritime expeditions, Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), to claim the exclusive privilege to trade in the grains of paradise, primarily grown by African women and made available for trading interactions on the West African coast. Horses became another key item of trade between Cape Verde and the Senegambia, where flourishing cavalry states altered the balance of power. Cape Verde became a critical refueling and provisioning station in Atlantic voyages, including those of the slave trade. On the Upper Guinea coast between Sierra Leone and Senegal, 17th-century merchant centers administered by the Portuguese through Cape Verde began to thrive during a period of Mandinka expansion on the mainland and issued forth an era in which Cape Verde's residents drew from African, Catholic, Islamic, and Jewish religious traditions, dress and languages. Their successful reliance on diversity provided a multicultural and multilingual facility to negotiate the constantly shifting landscape.

Consequently, its earliest African populations came from many parts of West Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean, and Europe, eventually creating a rich and vibrant Creole culture that defined the Cape Verdean and modernity itself.

Decolonization, Economic Recovery, and Modern Arts

The Portuguese were among the earliest and harshest colonizers in Africa and among the last to leave. Revolutionary struggles were key to decolonization of their territories. In 1956, a Cape Verdean (born in Guinea-Bissau), Amílcar Cabral (1924-1973) founded the Partido Africano da Independência da Guinié a Cabo Verde (PAIGC) to secure justice for striking dockworkers and independence through the foment of a grassroots socialist struggle. According to Cabral, his aim was total liberation:

> We are not interested in the preservation of any of the structures of the colonial state. It is our opinion that it is necessary to totally destroy, to break, to reduce to ash all aspects of the colonial state in our country, to make everything possible for our people.[1]

The Portuguese soon found themselves fighting guerilla movements on multiple fronts, from Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau to Mozambique and Angola. Despite brutal repression, the struggles gained large-scale support, especially in rural areas. Cabral was assassinated in January 1973. The last of Portuguese troops withdrew in September 1974, with independence following in 1975. Given the ecological barrenness of Cape Verdean landscapes, the post-colonial economy has gradually shifted towards service industries and tourism. It has followed a policy of nonalignment.

The Cape Verdean and Grammy Award-winning singer Cesária Évora (1941-2011) was known for promoting the unique style of music called *morna.* Its lyrics convey nostalgia through themes of longing and love, as well as Cape Verdean historical memories in songs that relay the stories of forgotten heroes. Local achievements in cinema began to be noticed shortly after independence, with a similar mix of documentary storytelling and romantic dramas that explored the global realities of Creole identity, belonging, and displacement.

---*Written by Candice Goucher, 2025.*

Selected Reading and Viewing

Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Texts of Amilcar Cabral* [1973] (New York:
Monthly Review Press, 2023).
Manuel E. Costa, Sr., *The Making of the Cape Verdean* (AuthorHouse, 2011).
Basil Davidson, *No Fist is Big Enough to Hide the Sky: The Liberation of Guinea-Bissau and*
Cape Verde, 1963-74 (London: Zed Books,1984).
Denise Fernandes (Director), *Hanami* (Film) (Switzerland/Portugal/Cape Verde, 2024).

[1] Cabral quoted in Robert O. Collins, *Problems in African History* (1997), 163.