

Culture Box

El Salvador



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INTRODUCTION: El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America. It borders the Pacific Ocean and is the only country in Central America that does not touch the Caribbean Sea. It is also known as the Land of Volcanoes due to its frequent volcanic activity! The culture of El Salvador is a mix of European and native influences. The country has been the focus of international attention over the years due to its civil war and the ongoing presence of violent activity. Because of this, many El Salvadorans fled the country and live in the United States today. Follow along as the items in this box help tell El Salvador's story!



FLAG OF EL SALVADOR



THIS BOX INCLUDES:

1. Keychain of national bird *Torogoz*
2. Gourd Cups
3. Cocoa Beans
4. Coffee Beans
5. Corn
6. Corn Husk Doll
7. Corn Coffee
8. Hammock
9. "Capirucho" Barrel and Stick Game
10. Miniatures
11. La Palma Cross
12. Traditional Embroidered Blouse
13. Indigo Scarf
14. Independence Day Card



NATIONAL BIRD, *TOROGOZ*



DESCRIPTION

El Salvador's national bird is the *Torogoz*, also called the "turquoise-browed motmot". The bird is known for its bright, long feathers - including a wagging feather "tail" used to attract potential mates. The bird typically has a green-blue body, blue feathers tipped in black, and a turquoise stripe above its eyes. The *Torogoz* is omnivorous, eating fruits as well as insects and small reptiles. The *Torogoz* typically lives on the edge of the forest, and can often be seen around the remains of El Salvador's historic ruins and pyramids. The bird is known for its fearlessness around humans - many *Torogoz* will allow people to get very close to them. The *Torogoz* is also considered by some to be a symbol of family unity because both male and female birds participate in raising baby chicks.



GOURD CUPS



DESCRIPTION

These cups are made from the fruit of the *morro* tree, which grows in dry climates and products a round gourd with a milky seed inside.

The cups are traditionally used to serve *horchata*, a traditional drink made from the *morro* seed. The ground seeds are mixed with water or milk, sugar, and spices to make a refreshing cold drink - and one of El Salvador's most popular! Other versions of *horchata*, made with rice, barley, or other grains and flavored with different spices or fruits, can be found throughout Central and South America. Instant 'horchata' mix is also widely available for convenience.



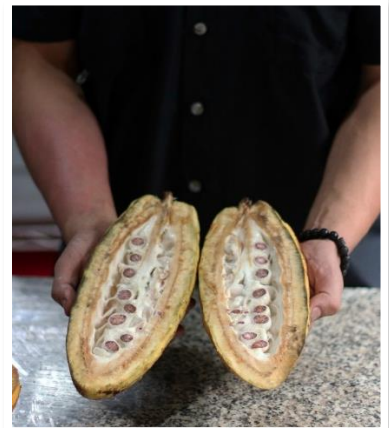
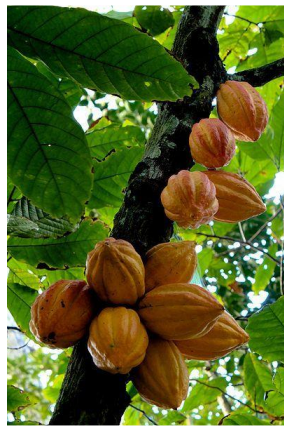
COCOA BEANS



DESCRIPTION

Cocoa beans are the dried seeds of the pods that grow on the cacao tree, and are used to make cocoa powder and cocoa butter - the basis for chocolate! The trees grow well in El Salvador's hot and humid climate. The cocoa pod itself is a leathery fruit containing an average of 30-40 seeds each; approximately 400 dried cocoa beans are needed to make one pound of chocolate.

Cocoa beans play a very important role in El Salvador's history and culture. The cocoa tree has grown in the country for thousands of years - for a time the beans themselves were so valuable, they were used as money to buy and sell goods, and as part of religious ceremonies. The cocoa beans became an important source of wealth in the 16th century for colonial Spaniards controlling the region, but was eventually replaced by other crops.



COFFEE BEANS



DESCRIPTION

The coffee plant grows well in El Salvador's volcanic soil, especially at higher, cooler altitudes. The plant produces bright red berries which each contain a coffee bean inside. The beans are dried, roasted, and crushed to make coffee. Most of the coffee grown in El Salvador is exported to other countries; coffee sales make up a significant part of the country's economy.

Coffee has played an important role in the country's history - not only has it been one of the primary sources of national wealth, but it has also influenced land ownership. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a few wealthy citizens owned most of the land, which prevented other citizens from benefiting from the sale of coffee. Later, land was redistributed by the government to give more people access to land and coffee growing. Today, most of the coffee in El Salvador is grown on small farms.



CORN



DESCRIPTION

Corn is the main staple of the Salvadoran diet - a key ingredient in the national dish, *pupusa* (flat bread stuffed with meat, cheese, or other fillings), as well as *tortillas* (flat bread), *tamales* (stuffed corn leaves), *atol* (a drink made from corn), and dozens of other foods. Corn is grown in white, yellow, and purple varieties. Today corn is the most popular crop grown in El Salvador, just as it was over a thousand years ago. Many of the word used to describe corn and corn dishes come from the ancient indigenous languages spoken before the arrival of Spanish.



CORN HUSK DOLL



DESCRIPTION

Corn is such an important part of the culture of El Salvador that it is not only used for food, but also to make toys! The stiff inner leaves of the corn, called husks, are soaked in water to become soft enough to bend into shapes. This doll, made entirely from corn husks, shows traditional Salvadoran clothing for women - a long and colorful dress paired with a headscarf.



CORN COFFEE



DESCRIPTION

Corn is so common in El Salvador; it is even used to make a drink similar to coffee. Corn kernels are roasted and crushed into a fine powder, and may be mixed with cinnamon or other spices for extra flavor. At one time, the price of coffee was too high for many people to afford, so they invented alternatives made from roasting other plants and seeds. Now, corn coffee is popular among people who want to avoid caffeine.



HAMMOCK



DESCRIPTION

Hammocks are very popular in El Salvador to use at home and while traveling - it is common to see them hanging outside between trees, in courtyards, on porches, and even in living rooms. Because the weather is warm all year, people can sleep outside comfortably even in winter. Hammocks are often brightly colored and come in all different sizes.

Some people call El Salvador the “land of hammocks” not only because they are so common, but also because the country is in an earthquake zone; when an earthquake strikes, the land sways “like a hammock”.



“CAPIRUCHO” BARREL AND STICK GAME



DESCRIPTION

Two versions of this wooden toy are popular in El Salvador. One is a cup-and-ball game, the other is a barrel-and-stick game, called *capi rucho*. To play *capi rucho*, hold the stick and let the barrel hang free. Then toss the barrel upwards to flip and land on the stick. A simple concept - but often requiring hours of practice! Other traditional toys in El Salvador include the yo-yo, spinning top, and sling shot.



CLAY MINIATURES



DESCRIPTION

These clay miniatures are also called *sorpresas* (surprises), because of the tiny scenes they hide inside. The outer covering is usually made to look like a fruit vegetable, or egg, and inside are figures showing traditional life in El Salvador. These miniatures are a traditional folk craft in the country, usually made by hand in the town of Ilobasco.

“LA PALMA” CROSS



DESCRIPTION

The name “El Salvador” is short for “El Salvador de Mundo”, or “The Savior of the World”, a direct reference to Jesus in the Christian tradition. The majority of Salvadorans are Catholic, and religion plays an important role in local culture. The style of art represented on this cross - with bright blocks of color showing village life - is called the “La Palma style” and is also traditional in El Salvador. This type of artwork can often be found in murals throughout the country.



TRADITIONAL EMBROIDERY



DESCRIPTION

Textile production is one of the main industries in the country, and many traditional sewing techniques are still used today. Embroidery, the special hand-stitching used to make intricate patterns and designs, is a tradition that dates back hundreds of years in El Salvador. Many indigenous communities would decorate their clothes with symbols of flowers or animals. Today these embroidered clothes are worn on special occasions.

INDIGO



DESCRIPTION

Indigo is a dark blue color that comes from the plant of the same name. The seeds of the plant produce a dark blue dye when crushed. The indigo plant is native to El Salvador, where it has been used for painting pottery and dyeing fabric for thousands of years.

When Europeans first colonized the region, they began to export the indigo plant and its seeds to Europe. At one time the seeds were so valuable that they were called “blue gold”. Demand for the natural indigo plant declined in the 1800s when artificial dyes were invented. Much of the land used for growing the indigo plant was replanted to grow coffee.



INDEPENDENCE DAY



DESCRIPTION

Spanish established rule over the indigenous population of El Salvador in 1525. After centuries of exploitation and growing unrest, the country gained independence from Spain in 1821. El Salvador's Independence Day is now celebrated every year on September 15.

After gaining independence, coffee production became the foundation of the nation economy, but power was concentrated in the hands of a small number of very rich families. Rural farmers were forced to work on large coffee plantations. Economic inequality and discrimination against the indigenous population led to a series of peasant uprisings and political coups during the 20th century. Continued instability led to the Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992), which led many people to leave El Salvador for neighboring countries and the US. Today, more than 6.4 million people live in the country, and an estimated 3.5 Salvadorans live outside of El Salvador.

For more information on El Salvador:

[National Geographic Kids: El Salvador](#)

[The World in a Pocket: El Salvador](#)

[Connecting Cultures Mobile Museum: El Salvador](#)