
I. THE COUNTRY

Nigeria is situated on the west coast of Africa between 4 and 14 north latitudes. Roughly the size of British Columbia, the country is 923,769 square kilometres (356,669 square miles) in area, spans 1,046 kilometres (650 miles) from north to south and 1,126 kilometres (700 miles) from east to west. Nigeria has common borders with Benin (formerly Dahomey) on the west, Niger on the north, Chad on the northeast, and Cameroon on the east. Two major rivers, the Niger and the Benue, meet in the centre of the country, at which point the Niger changes its course southward to the Gulf of Guinea.

Wide variations in topography are found throughout the country. The southern coastal area comprises swampy, tropical rain forest. Savanna and open woodland are found in the central areas. The central Jos Plateau covers an area of about 7,700 square kilometres (3,000 square miles), with elevations as high as 1,830 metres (6,000 feet) above sea level. The extreme north, which borders on the Sahara Desert, is arid.

History and Government

Archaeological evidence indicates that Nigeria has been inhabited by man since ancient times. In the absence of written records, however, little is known of Nigeria's history until the arrival of Portuguese explorers and traders in the fifteenth century. Early European contact with Nigeria was based principally on agricultural trade, notably vegetable oil and palm kernels. Nigeria was also a major centre of the slave trade for North America, South America and the Caribbean.

The country came under British influence in the nineteenth century when Lagos became a crown colony in 1862. In 1914, Lagos and the Protectorate of Northern and Southern Nigeria merged and became the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Forty years later, the 1954 constitution made provision for a federal government in Lagos and separate governments in three regions, each of which attained internal self-government by 1959.