

Venezuela

Location

Venezuela, officially the Republic of Venezuela, is a republic (1995 est. pop. 21,005,000), 352,143 sq mi. (912,050 sq. km), in the northern part of South America. With the Caribbean Sea in the north, Venezuela has a coastline of 1,750 long. It is bordered on the south by Brazil, on the west and southwest by Colombia, and on the east by Guyana. Dependencies include Margarita Island, Tortuga Island, and many smaller island groups in the Caribbean. Caracas is the capital and also the largest city in Venezuela.

Geography

Venezuela, a third larger than Texas, occupies most of the northern coast of South America on the Caribbean Sea. Mountain systems break Venezuela into four distinct areas: (1) the Maracaibo lowlands; (2) the mountainous region in the north and northwest; (3) the Orinoco basin, with the llanos (vast grass-covered plains) on its northern border and great forest areas in the south and southeast, and (4) the Guiana Highlands, south of the Orinoco, accounting for nearly half the national territory.

Food

The food in Venezuela is generally easy and flavorful. Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, claims to have a greater variety of restaurants than any other South American city, and it would certainly be a pleasure to try and prove it, even if you failed. Venezuelan cooking has European, indigenous, and African roots – a heterodox cuisine formed over the centuries by immigrants. Some of the native dishes include:

- Pabellon - stewed and shredded meat accompanied by rice, black beans, and baban
- Hallaca - a traditional Christmas dish.
- Cachapa - a type of sweet corn pancake served with cheese.
- Arepas - a type of round cornmeal biscuit.

Climate

Venezuela is located entirely in the tropics. The temperature varies very little during the year and most parts of the country maintain an average of over 25°C (72°F) and varies by only 4°C (8°F) over the year. However, the temperature drops with altitude. The mountainous regions can get cold, especially at night, and there is even snow in the highest parts of the Andes.

Like all tropical countries, Venezuela only has two seasons. One of them is known as the dry season, also known as verano. The other season, the rainy season, is known as invierno, which is marked by the difference in rainfall rather than temperature. Generally, the dry season is from December to April/May, and the rainy season lasts for the rest of the year. Rainfall, however, can occur during the dry season, and the rainy season often has dry months.

There are many regional variations in rainfall. While certain areas, such as the Caribbean Islands and the northern coastal region, remain dry with only 280mm (11 inches) of annual rainfall, the mountain slopes of northern Venezuela are generally wet, with annual rainfall reaching up to 1250mm (58 inches). Amazons remain wet for most of the year, and in the Llanos, a vast plain in the southwestern region, extensive floods during the rainy months are followed by severe droughts in the dry season.

Language

Spanish is the main language of Venezuela. However, Venezuelan Spanish differs in pronunciation from the Spanish spoken in Spain. There are also some variations in vocabulary.

Venezuelans call their language *Castellano*.

Besides Spanish, there are over 30 native Indian languages, of which several have common origins. In more remote areas, some Indians still only speak their own language and have no knowledge of Spanish.

Generally, the knowledge of foreign languages in Venezuela is very basic. Even in better hotels the receptionists don't always speak English. It is useful to learn at least some common phrases before your departure to Venezuela, or to carry a phrasebook.

Some Key Phrases

-Do you speak English? Hablas ingles?

-Yes si

-No no

-I don't speak Spanish No hablo espanol

-My name is... Me llamo...

Do you have rooms available? Hay habitaciones?

Where is the toilet? Donde esta el bano?

Agriculture

Venezuela has been carrying out an agricultural project called the Agrarian Reform. The typical system was of absentee ownership and vast unsettled areas of land, virtually unpopulated, lacking roads and communication. Under Agrarian Reform, the government resettled approximately 42,000 families on their own lands in the period between 1959 and 1962. Now there are approximately 400,000 families on farms, half of those are commercial, the rest produce enough for their own consumption.

Population

Most of the Venezuelan population is made up of a mixture of Amerindians, African Americans, and Spaniards. Today the population is roughly 70 percent mestizo and mulatto, 19 percent white, 2 percent Indian, and 9 percent African-American. In general, the geographic distribution of these peoples is as follows: the whites are found in the larger cities of the highlands, the African-Americans and mulattos in the coastal lowlands, and the pure Indians are in the backcountry. The mestizos live throughout the country. The pure Indians are disappearing as a significant element in Venezuela as civilization gradually closes in on them. The whites are on the increase because of a lot of immigration from Europe since the war, specifically from Spain, Italy, and Portugal. The mestizos and mulattos are still holding on to some ground.

Religion

Venezuela does not separate church and state. The government has the right of patronage over ecclesiastical officials of the Roman Catholic Church. This is the official and most dominant religion of Venezuela. In spite of the fact that the great majority of the country is nominally Catholic, there is freedom of religion. Protestantism expansion has been slow even though Protestant sects have established churches and missions.

Education

Venezuela believes that education is important for the future, and the government has made it compulsory for children 7 to 14 years old to attend school. The 13,000 elementary schools have more than 40,000 teachers for more than 2,000,000 students. Education in Venezuela has come a long way and there is no limit to how much more they are able to improve.

“We have made great progress, now the communities as a whole are involved directly in the education of their children,” says Flor Cartaya, coordinator of the Educational Communities and Pedagogic Projects, backed by the World Bank project. “In the end, an educated and participatory community might be the most effective way to keep hope and face the amassing challenges that I have for these children.”

History

During his third voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus first discovered the coast of Venezuela on August 1, 1498. After reaching the island of Trinidad, he sailed along the coast towards the west and saw new land that he mistook for another island and named it Holy Land or Land of Grace. Thus, it was on Venezuelan soil at a point called Macuro by the Indians (now called Cristobal Colon) that Columbus first set foot on continental America.

Shortly after Columbus' discovery, Venezuela got its name. In the 16th century, another explorer, Alonso de Ojedo, sailed along the north coast as far as Lake Maracaibo. While at Lake Maracaibo, Ojeda saw Indians living in groups of houses built on stilts over the water.

Trade

From 1503 to 1790, first in Seville and later in Cadiz, all questions connected with the trade between Spain and the Indies were regulated by the Casa De Contratacion (House of Trade). The basis

of the empire's commerce was a monopoly, since the Crown wanted the wealth of Venezuela for Spain alone. Trade quickly picked up with Spain.

Venezuela is known for its cacao. It was traded as contraband, and provided the basis for the Dutch reputation for exceptionally high-quality chocolate confections. In exchange for their wheat and cacao, Venezuelan merchants brought back small cargoes of manufactured products.

Important Dates

August 1, 1498- Christopher Columbus first discovered the coast of Venezuela

Jan. 1- New Year's Day

April 19th- signing of the Independence Act from Spain (like Easter for us).

May 1- International Worker's Day

June 24- Anniversary of the Battle of Caraboboo

July 5- Independence Day

July 24- Birthday of Simon Bolivar

December 25- Christmas Day

Currency

The basic currency unit for Venezuela is the bolivar. The bolivar gets its name after the great liberator of the country from Spanish rule in the 19th century. The Banco Central de Venezuela was established in 1940. Here, all paper currency is issued and is also responsible for regulating the amount of money that is in circulation. Venezuela is content with the stability of the bolivar. This contributes to lower interest rates on borrowing than in most other places in South America.

Landmarks

There are many landmarks in Venezuela that may pertain to specific areas of interest. For starters, there are the glamorous mountains. These include the Andes, the Perija Range, and the Coastal Range. The mountains extend north and south in an arc from Columbia in the southwest, and then east and west along the coast to the tip of the Paria Peninsula in the Caribbean Sea. Lake Maracaibo is another landmark. It lies in northwest Venezuela and is connected with the Gulf of Venezuela. Lake Maracaibo is very shallow and has been that way for millions of years. The great importance of Lake Maracaibo is the tremendous petroleum wealth located beneath its shallow water. More than one third of Venezuela is taken over by yet another landmark, The Plains (Los Llanos). Part of these are dense jungles and the other cleared savannahs. Venezuela is also known for having the eighth longest river in the world, The Orinoco River. Venezuela is proud of Angel Falls, the highest waterfall in the world. It is found on a branch of the Carrao River, an upper tributary of the Caroni River. Its total drop of 3,212 feet makes it almost three times higher than the Empire State Building and more that 15 times higher than Niagara Falls.

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