

Venezuela

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Los Roques** (p933) Stretch out on white-sand beaches or snorkel and scuba dive the day away at these tiny, undeveloped Caribbean islands.
- **Los Llanos** (p948) Be on the lookout for capybaras, anacondas, caimans and other wildlife in the grassy flatlands of Venezuela's cowboy country.
- **Mérida** (p943) Experience nonstop outdoor activities, including paragliding, canyoning, rafting, hiking and more in the country's adventure-sports capital.
- **Salto Ángel (Angel Falls)** (p966) Marvel at the world's highest waterfall, dropping over 300 stories in Parque Nacional Canaima.
- **Best Journey** (p969) Hike to the lost world of the Roraima table mountain for moonscape scenery and unique plant life.
- **Off the Beaten Track** (p955) Spelunk through the darkness at Cueva del Guácharo, Venezuela's longest cave.

FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 912,050 sq km (twice the size of California)
- **Budget:** US\$60 to US\$120 a day (at official exchange rate)
- **Capital:** Caracas
- **Costs:** double room in a budget hotel US\$40 to US\$50, 1L bottled water US\$2, 1L gasoline US\$0.15 (at official exchange rate)
- **Country code:** ☎ 58
- **Language:** Spanish
- **Money:** US\$1 = 2.15BsF (bolívars fuertes) – but read Money Warning, p980
- **Population:** 26.8 million
- **Seasons:** high (Christmas, Carnival, Semana Santa, July and August), rainy (May to October)
- **Time:** GMT minus 4½ hours



TRAVEL HINTS

Bring warm clothes for bus travel as vehicles use powerful air conditioning. Keep your passport handy as there are military checkpoints along the highway.

OVERLAND ROUTES

There are four border crossings to Colombia, one to Brazil and a boat crossing to Trinidad. No official crossings exist between Venezuela and Guyana.

Venezuela receives considerably fewer visitors than other major South American countries. This is not the result of a lack of attractions. In fact, Venezuela is a land of stunning variety. The country has Andean peaks, endless Caribbean coastline, idyllic offshore islands, grasslands teeming with wildlife, the steamy Amazon and rolling savanna punctuated by flat-topped mountains called *tepuis*. The world's highest waterfall, Salto Ángel (Angel Falls), plummets 979m from the top of a *tepuí* in Parque Nacional Canaima. Those seeking adventure will find hiking, snorkeling, scuba diving, kite-surfing, windsurfing, paragliding and more. Even better, most of these attractions lie within a one-day bus trip of each other.

President Hugo Chávez and his socialist 'Bolivarian Revolution' of economic reforms and social programs has drawn spectators and volunteers to the country, but he remains a deeply polarizing figure both at home and abroad.

Tourism infrastructure exists, but it's primarily geared toward domestic travelers. An odd currency situation complicates travel here, as standard bank withdrawals and credit card transactions cost twice as much as exchanging cash on an active dollar-hungry black market. Still, with these peculiarities in mind, it's easy and inexpensive to travel the country, and well worth it.

CURRENT EVENTS

President Hugo Chávez scored a major victory in 2009 when voters passed a constitutional amendment to eliminate presidential term limits. His supporters hailed it as a means for him to continue his social and economic programs to benefit ordinary Venezuelans and the poor, while his opponents viewed it as an power grab by an increasingly centralized and autocratic federal government. The major issue on people's lips is the rise in crime nationwide, referred to as *la inseguridad* (insecurity). Other themes of interest include the possibility of a less adversarial relationship with the US since the election of President Barack Obama, the large-scale revocation of media licenses for radio and television stations critical of the government, and how falling oil prices will affect the nation's oil-based economy.

HISTORY

Pre-Columbian Times

There is evidence of human habitation in northwest Venezuela going back more than 10,000 years. Steady agriculture was established around the first millennium, leading to the first year-round settlements. Formerly nomadic groups began to develop into larger cultures belonging to three main linguistic families: Carib, Arawak and Chibcha. By the time of the Spanish conquest at the end of the 15th century, some 300,000 to 400,000 indigenous people inhabited the region that is now Venezuela.

The Timote-Cuica tribes, of the Chibcha linguistic family, were the most technologically developed of Venezuela's pre-Hispanic societies. They lived in the Andes and developed

complex agricultural techniques including irrigation and terracing. They were also skilled craftspeople, as we can judge by the artifacts they left behind – examples of their fine pottery are shown in museums across the country.

Spanish Conquest

Christopher Columbus was the first European to set foot on Venezuelan soil, which was also the only place where he landed on the South American mainland. On his third trip to the New World in 1498, he anchored at the eastern tip of the Peninsula de Paria, just opposite Trinidad. He originally believed that he was on another island, but the voluminous mouth of the Río Orinoco hinted that he had stumbled into something slightly larger.

A year later Alonso de Ojeda, accompanied by the Italian Amerigo Vespucci, sailed up to the Peninsula de la Guajira, on the western end of present-day Venezuela. On entering Lago de Maracaibo, the Spaniards saw indigenous people living in *palafitos* (thatched homes on stilts above the water). Perhaps as a bit of sarcasm, they called the waterside community 'Venezuela,' meaning 'Little Venice.' The first Spanish settlement on Venezuelan soil, Nueva Cádiz, was established around 1500 on the small island of Cubagua, just south of Isla de Margarita. The earliest Venezuelan town still in existence, Cumaná (on the mainland directly south of Isla Cubagua) dates from 1521.

Simón Bolívar & Independence

Venezuela lurked in the shadows of the Spanish empire through most of the colonial period. The country took a more primary role