

# Caracas



It's not often that a pretty picture is painted of Caracas. If you've seen the film *Sequestro Express* or paid much attention to the news, you'll know that violence, kidnappings and political unrest are often the attention-grabbing headlines. But there are two sides to this vibrant South American giant, once one of Latin America's most sophisticated and intellectual epicenters – a title to which small pockets desperately cling after a decade of political polarization. Your introduction to Venezuela may be an intense assault on all your senses, both thrilling and unpleasant, like opposing forces constantly colliding in a metropoliptic buzz of culture and crime.

Spreading along a high plateau that's partitioned from the sea by towering green mountains, Caracas is a dense urban fabric – for every modern skyscraper sticking out of a mass of low-rise buildings, there's a *barrio* (shantytown) carpeting the hillsides like a pandemic brick-and-mortar virus. But beneath the city's dirty fingernails (that headline-grabbing rampant violence and frightening degree of kidnappings, as well as stifling traffic and a woefully wide disparity between rich and poor), there's an impressive array of cultural activity, wonderful museums, eclectic cuisine and sunrise-be-damned nightlife. Art aficionados will appreciate the enclave of world-class museums around Parque Central, including the world's most extensive exhibition of Picasso engravings. Foodies will genuflect at the wealth of haute cuisine on offer in suburbs like Altamira and Los Palos Grandes. Night owls will overdose on the eternal pounding pulse of nightlife in Las Mercedes. Nature addicts will thrive amid the steep, wooded slopes of Parque Nacional El Ávila, where miles of walking trails wind through scented forests – all hovering just over the city like an eco-guardian angel.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Take flight over the city in the soaring **teleférico** (cable car; p82) ride to the summit of El Ávila
- Ride the *rumba* (party) through the night at the clubs and bars of **Las Mercedes** (p76)
- Lunch in colonial style as you tasca-hop through **La Candelaria** district (p69)
- Admire art treasures at the **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas** (p62), **Museo de Bellas Artes** (p62) and the **Galería de Arte Nacional** (p62) in the Parque Central complex
- Get lost in Venezuelan *béisbol* (baseball) madness at a Leones de Caracas game at **Estadio Universitario** (p76)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 1212

■ POPULATION: 6 MILLION

## HISTORY

Caracas had a precarious beginning in 1560 when Francisco Fajardo of Isla de Margarita discovered the emerald valley – then inhabited by the Toromaima people. He founded a settlement named San Francisco, but was soon driven out by the indigenous inhabitants. A year later the town was resurrected, but years of bitter struggle against Toromaima attacks followed.

In 1567, a decisive conquest of the valley was ordered and 136 men led by Diego de Losada overcame a brave indigenous resistance before re-establishing the settlement once and for all on July 25. The new township was named Santiago de León de Caracas, ‘Caracas’ being the name of a decidedly less troublesome indigenous group that inhabited the coastal cordillera (mountain range).

A decade later, provincial governor, Juan de Pimentel, chose the young town to be the capital of Venezuela. But from the beginning, Caracas was besieged by vicious pirate raids, plagues and natural disasters, including a devastating earthquake in 1641. More calamity awaited the early 1700s, when a Basque

trading company called the Real Compañía Guipuzcoana was based in La Guaira and given a monopoly over trade with Spain. The company’s flagrantly corrupt methods aroused widespread anger among the colonists, and the ensuing riots sowed the seeds of the independence movement.

On March 28, 1750, Caracas became the birthplace of Francisco de Miranda, and on July 24, 1783, that of Simón Bolívar. The former was to pave the way to independence; the latter was to realize that aim. On April 19, 1810, a group of councilors and notable *caraqueños* denounced the Spanish governor and formed a Supreme Junta to replace the government. The political struggle raged until July 5, 1811, when congress declared the country’s independence.

The following year, on Maundy Thursday, an earthquake wrecked the town, killing some 10,000 people. The conservative clergy swiftly declared that it was a punishment from heaven for the rebellion, but the independence movement was not to be stopped. It eventually reached its aim nine years later, sealed by Bolívar’s victory at the Battle of Carabobo on

