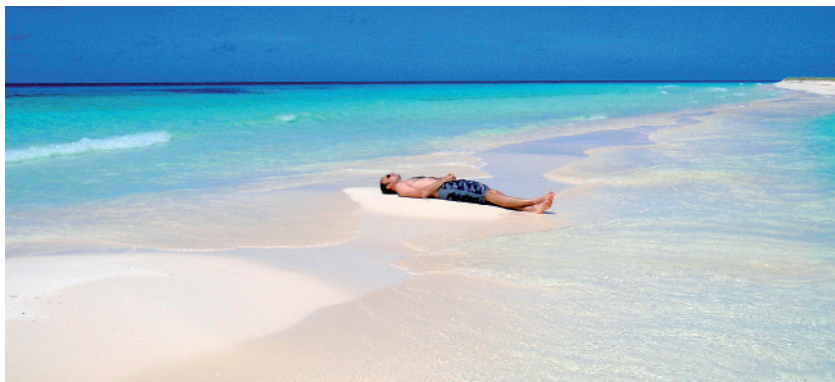


On the Road



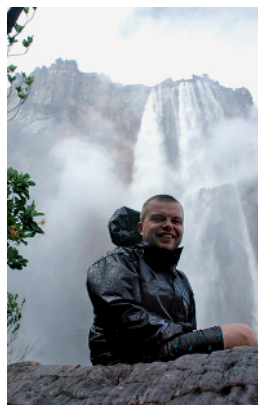
KEVIN RAUB *Coordinating Author*

This skinny sandbar in the Archipiélago Los Roques is called Cayo de Agua (p88). I arrived early, so I had it to myself, this pristine strip of sand bound by shockingly turquoise waters. You cannot photoshop this sort of paradise! Only Mother Nature could have pulled off something this spectacular.



BRIAN KLUEPFEL Never smile at a crocodile? I wasn't after a 12-footer actually roared at me. My nervous smile betrays my lack of confidence in the croc's ability to read. One really appreciates how tough the *llaneros* (inhabitants of Los Llanos) are, scratching a living out of this land while living in a place where the wild beasts (p186) still kind of run the show.

TOM MASTERS After torrential rain all night we awoke to find the river had risen by about 5m, making crossing it and climbing up to the Mirador Laime a slippery and challenging experience! We were thoroughly soaked by the time we got there, but Angel Falls (Salto Ángel; p247) looked absolutely spectacular at full power.



For full author biographies see p301.

Destination Venezuela

Venezuela is an intriguing beast indeed, depending on whom you ask – a *ménage à trois* of viewpoints that might be a brash, woefully troubled petrostate run by a leftist bully to a Chacao intellectual; to an oil baron, an exotic Andean-Caribbean playground for the wealthy and privileged, with crystalline coastline and mountainous majesty rivaling all of its neighboring nations; or a socialist wonderland of the future to a Chavista (supporter of President Hugo Chávez). What makes Venezuela a good time is that it's in some respects all three – a tsunami of discord and bounty of splendor that battle it out in a living, breathing, sensationalizing war of contradiction.

While other South American countries are romanticized for the tango, Machu Picchu or Carnaval, Venezuela's international reputation swirls around oil, the aggressive political style of Chávez and the next international beauty pageant winner. But through the rhetorical looking glass lies a little-known secret: Venezuela can be shockingly gorgeous and, though criminally underserviced, offers more to travelers than even the most intrepid explorers are aware. Yes, *La Tierra de Gracia* (Land of Grace), as Christopher Columbus put it in 1498, is nothing if not strangely beautiful and beautifully strange.

The sixth largest country in South America boasts Andean peaks; the longest stretch of Caribbean coastline to be found in any single nation; tranquil offshore islands set amid turquoise seas; wetlands teeming with caimans, capybaras, piranhas and anacondas; the steamy Amazon; and rolling savanna punctuated by flat-topped mountains called tepuis. The world's highest waterfall, Angel Falls (Salto Ángel), plummets 979m from the top of a tepui in Parque Nacional Canaima. Those seeking adventure will find hiking, snorkeling, scuba diving, kitesurfing, windsurfing, paragliding and more. Even better, Venezuela is relatively compact – no thrill is discouragingly too far from the next.

But Venezuela can just as well be more guns than roses. Best described as a rich nation with poor citizens, the economy is kept afloat by huge amounts of public spending, while private investors are driven away by strict currency and price controls. Oil, the battle against corruption, alarming street crime (the murder rate has increased 125% since 1998), Chávez's continued nationalization of major industries, his assistance to other Latin American Leftist governments and an acrid relationship with the US are serious issues that dominate the headlines in Venezuela. As a result, much of the bourgeoisie has jumped ship for Europe or the US, content to live abroad until the country's political and economic woes shake themselves out. As one local put it, 'Eighty percent of Venezuela is poor; the other 20% left.'

For those that stayed behind, the current state of affairs is no Hollywood honeymoon: inflation expected to reach 40% by 2011 is crippling the economy and, to add insult to injury, an energy and water crisis is leaving the country all too often in the dark and out to dry. Total power consumption has risen about 25% since 2004 while electricity rates have been frozen, leaving little incentive to save energy. Chávez has even gone so far as to temporarily ban imports of household appliances for personal use. Mandatory water rationing and controlled blackouts were commonplace at the time of writing and a state of emergency was declared. Chávez blames El Niño and global warming for the woefully depleted water

FAST FACTS

Population (est 2010):	28.6 million
Population growth rate:	1.5%
Adult literacy: 93%	
Area: 912,050 sq km	
Inflation (2010):	32%
GDP growth rate (2010):	-4.8%
Unemployment (2009):	8.4%
Number of Miss World, Miss Universe and Miss Earth pageants won by Venezuelans:	12

reservoirs, but his critics aren't buying it. They say the blame is squarely on aging infrastructure and mismanagement. At the time of writing, the Guri Dam, which supplies more than two-thirds of Venezuela's power, was only 46% full – down from 60% just two months earlier – and on the verge of complete collapse.

On the brighter side, Venezuela is enamored of baseball, beauty queens, *telenovelas*, music, whisky, dance and ice-cold beers (sold in miniature bottles so consumption beats out convection every time). Its festivals are devilish delights of kaleidoscopic percussion; its natural grandeur is second to none (one dip into the stunning waters of Archipiélago of Los Roques or a flyby over towering tepuis in Parque Nacional Canaima reiterates that point).

Like an undiscovered ruin, Venezuela might sit buried in discarded neglect and political hyperbole, but beneath the rhetoric is an unseen adventureland, one of the continent's last. While its politics and economics wage war, the rest of the country hides in the shadows, a diamond in the rough.

Getting Started

Venezuela is a destination at odds with itself: after a decade of socialist government initiatives and deteriorating economic conditions, street violence and alleged authoritarian corruption have reached levels that scare many travelers away. Perhaps surprisingly, tourism is on the rise, and the travelers that do venture into the country often find Venezuela's astonishing natural wonders, pristine beaches and adventurous terrains nearly to themselves. The main things to check before your departure are the vaccination requirements (p285), weather conditions in the part of the country that you wish to visit, and the latest exchange rates and safety situations, both of which can be volatile.

WHEN TO GO

The tourist season in Venezuela runs year-round, but consider the climate and Venezuelan holidays before finalizing your travel plans.

Venezuela has one dry season (roughly November/December to April/May) and one wet season (the rest of the year). The dry season is certainly more pleasant for traveling, particularly for hiking or other outdoor activities, though sightseeing in cities or towns won't be greatly disturbed by rain. Some sights, such as waterfalls, are actually more impressive in the wet season. Angel Falls (Salto Ángel), for example, is absolutely spectacular after heavy rains in the wet months, but in the dry season, flow can be reduced to a dribble and it's a royal pain to reach when the rivers are low. See Climate Charts (p268) for more information.

Venezuelans are mad about traveling over the Christmas season (running up till mid-January), Carnival (several days prior to Ash Wednesday) and Holy Week (the week before Easter Sunday). During these three peak times, air and bus transportation are busy and hotels fill up quickly, so you'll have to book ahead. On the other hand, these periods are colorful and lively, with a host of festivities. Schools also break for annual vacations in August, but this doesn't significantly affect public transportation or accommodations.

COSTS & MONEY

At first glance, Venezuela – especially Caracas – is absurdly expensive, the latter taking the honor of the most expensive Latin American city for expats in 2009. At the former official exchange rate, a Big Mac combo at McDonald's would have set you back a whopping US\$16 – nearly three times the London price!

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Recommended vaccinations (p285)
- Comprehensive insurance policy (p284)
- Photocopies of your essential documents
- Electrical adapter (p265)
- Flashlight/Torch – useful for most off-the-beaten-track excursions
- Insect repellent – essential for a Roraima trek, Los Roques and in many other areas
- Sunscreen
- Small Spanish-English dictionary and/or Lonely Planet *Latin American Spanish* phrasebook
- Flip-flops or thongs – to protect feet against fungal infections in hotel bathrooms

After the devaluation (see the boxed text, below), the price dropped to around \$8, which isn't exactly a bargain, either, and it was likely to have risen significantly by the time you read this due to inflationary reaction. Banks, official *casa de cambios* (money-exchange office) and ATM machines always work with the new official rate; elsewhere, cold hard cash dollars are exchanged using the parallel exchange rate, or *dólar paralelo*, for rates that can push BsF7 for crafty financial transactions (legally known as the 'swap market') and BsF5 to BsF6 on the street, depending on the demand for non-official currency exchange. The dilemma, of course, is bringing in large amounts of cash into a country with less-than-stellar security. See below for more information.

Many of the more far-flung destinations in Guayana, Los Llanos and Amazonas, as well as many outdoor, ecotourism and adventure trips, are best visited in groups organized by travel agencies in urban centers. Even travelers who are fervently independent find themselves visiting such places as Roraima, Angel Falls and Los Llanos with groups as it's neither cost effective nor practical to make solo trips.

Budget travelers prepared for basic conditions can get by on BsF125 to BsF150 per day (considerably more in Caracas, which has little budget infrastructure). This would cover accommodations in bare-bones posadas, food in budget to midrange restaurants and travel by bus, and should still leave a small amount for some drinks and taxis. You shouldn't have to spend more than BsF50 to BsF175 per night (on average) for accommodations, and the cost will be lower if you travel with someone else, especially if you're sharing a bed (see *matrimoniales*, p265). For budget dining, the set lunch or dinner will cost BsF25 to BsF45 each. This budget wouldn't account for tours or internal flights.

PRICE WARNING!

Due to the Venezuelan government's strict currency controls and a high inflation rate, prices of goods and services are extremely volatile and rise frequently. Prices in this book are given in BsF, but a 25% to 32% year-on-year inflationary expectation means by the time you read this, prices will have significantly changed. Adding insult to injury, Venezuela announced 17% and 50% devaluations, respectively, of its currency post-research, which on the surface seems like a good deal for tourists, with the official exchange rate jumping from BsF2.15 to BsF4.30 to the US dollar on most tourist-related goods and services. However, this is expected to cause a significant inflationary reaction (economists predict 30% to 60% inflation in 2010), causing prices to rise considerably moving forward, erasing whatever gains the preferable exchange rate might have afforded.

An additional complication is the black market. Currency controls have pegged the bolívar fuerte to the US dollar at an artificially high rate since 2005, resulting in a two-tier market for changing money within Venezuela. Officially speaking, exchange rates in Venezuela are now fixed in a dual system: BsF2.60 per dollar for priority imports like food, health, machinery and equipment, science and technology, books and education items; and BsF4.30 for everything else (alcohol, cars, tobacco, chemicals, energy etc – a move designed to combat the black market). When changing traveler's checks, using credit cards or ATMs, or exchanging money at a bank or *casa de cambio* (money exchange bureau), you will always receive the latter rate.

An active black market (called the *dólar paralelo*) buys and sells the more stable dollars and euros, with rates boomeranging between BsF5 to BsF7 per dollar. Exchanging cash dollars this way is illegal (though exchanging titles and bonds is not). Many established posadas and tour operators will clandestinely accept payment or arrange BsF cash for you at the black market rate through online money transfers to international bank accounts. The devaluation lessened the impact of this somewhat (per design), but it can still add up if you're paying US\$23 instead of US\$15 per night to stay at a BsF100 budget posada, so some tourists opt to bring well-hidden cash to change or else make arrangements with an established posada or tour operator to wire money before their arrival.

Travelers who want more comfort, including midrange hotels and restaurants, will find that BsF250 to BsF400 per day should easily cover their expenses, and possibly allow an occasional flight. Midrange travelers can expect to spend between BsF200 and BsF300 per day on accommodations, less if traveling in a party or as a couple. A fine à la carte dinner will start at BsF40 to BsF60 for an average main course without drinks.

Top-end accommodations range from around BsF400 and up per night in smaller destinations to BsF600 to BsF800 in places like Los Roques, Caracas and Isla de Margarita. Top-end dining is not available in some smaller cities but can rival North American and Western European prices in Caracas and major tourist spots.

Bus is the main means of transportation, and it's reasonably priced, about BsF7 to BsF9 per hour of a journey. City buses are very cheap. Taxis aren't expensive either, particularly if you are willing to split fares with fellow travelers.

Churches and cathedrals don't have an admission charge. Most museums don't have an admission charge either, and those that do usually keep the fee low. Cultural events (cinema, theater, music etc) are all fairly inexpensive. On the other hand, a drinking session in a nightclub can deplete your funds quickly – especially if you drink at the same rate as Venezuelans.

The main cost in most travelers' budgets are organized tours. They cost roughly between BsF300 and BsF600 per day and are rarely single-day trips (though they usually include room and board).

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Venezuela's unique table mountains have captivated writers for over a century. One of the most unusual accounts is by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who, inspired by fabulous stories of explorers of Roraima, gave play to his imagination in the rollicking 1912 tale *The Lost World*, in which dinosaurs roam the top of the plateau.

Plenty of travelers were in turn inspired by Conan Doyle's story, including actor and author Brian Blessed, who tells how he fulfilled his childhood dream of visiting the 'Lost World' in his beautifully entertaining *Quest for the Lost World*.

Churún Merú, the Tallest Angel, by Ruth Robertson, is a report of the expedition to Auyantepui, during which the height of Angel Falls was measured for the first time, confirming its status as the world's highest waterfall.

The famous German geographer and botanist Alexander von Humboldt explored and studied various regions of Venezuela and describes it in his three-volume *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America During the Years 1799–1801*. Volume 2 covers the Venezuelan section of his journey. It may sound like a dry, scientific study, but it's fascinating reading, full of amazing details.

Of the useful local publications, *Guide to Camps, Posadas and Cabins in Venezuela*, by Elizabeth Kline, is a bilingual edition detailing 1200 accommodation options, and the bilingual *Guía Extrema*, by Arianna Arteaga Quintero, is the adventure sports bible. Both are updated yearly.

There are a number of books on Chávez and his 'Bolivarian Revolution,' though most sources take either a fervent pro- or anti-Chávez stance. Some of the more recent and widely sold titles are *Hugo Chávez: Oil, Politics, and the Challenge to the U.S.*, by Nikolas Kozloff; *Hugo!: The Hugo Chávez Story from Mud Hut to Perpetual Revolution*, by Bart Jones; *Chávez: Venezuela and the New Latin America*, by Hugo Chávez, David Deutschmann and Javier Salado; and *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution*, by Richard Gott.

HOW MUCH?

Arepa BsF18

Local 3-minute phone call
BsF2.25

Short taxi ride BsF20 (in
Caracas BsF30)

Double room in midrange
hotel BsF250

One-way Caracas–Ciudad
Bolívar airfare BsF290

TOP 10



TOP TEN HIDDEN JEWELS

Beyond Angel Falls, Roraima and Delta del Orinoco, there are plenty of lesser-known natural marvels that are just as fascinating.

- 1 Parque Nacional Ciénagas del Catatumbo (p150) – famous for its unique lightning without thunder
- 2 Salto Aponguaó (p250) – Gran Sabana’s most spectacular waterfall
- 3 Reserva Biológica de Montecano (p126) – small forest on arid Península de Paraguaná
- 4 Sierra de San Luis (p127) – attractive, lush mountains near Coro
- 5 Península de Paria (p225) – marvelous peninsula graced with coves and beaches
- 6 Salto Pará (p240) – lovely waterfall on the Río Caura
- 7 Quebrada de Jaspe (p255) – small waterfall rolling over amazing red jasper rock
- 8 Parque Nacional Médanos de Coro (p120) – striking mini-Sahara Desert near Coro
- 9 Cerro Autana (p264) – gigantic tree trunk-shaped tepui (flat-topped mountain) in Amazonas
- 10 Brazo Casiquiare (p259) – unusual water channel linking the Ríos Orinoco and Negro

FESTIVALS

Dancing devils and a handful of Carnaval celebrations highlight Venezuela’s festive offerings.

- 1 Rumba with street devils in San Francisco de Yare at the Festival de los Diablos Danzantes (p93)
- 2 Imbibe in Venezuela’s largest Carnaval in Carúpano (p214)
- 3 Gorge on *sapoara* fish at Ciudad Bolívar’s river extravaganza, the Feria del Orinoco (p239)
- 4 Shimmy and shake to Calypso rhythms at El Callao’s Trinidad-influenced Carnaval (p214)
- 5 Party in the Andes during Mérida’s Feria del Sol (p158)
- 6 Overdose on chocolate, beaches and dancing devils during Chuao’s Festival de los Diablos Danzantes (p94)
- 7 Watch the locals play judge, jury and Jesus in the Good Friday Passion Play re-enactment of Tostós (p173)
- 8 Groove to the *gaita* at Maracaibo’s Feria de la Chinta (p147)
- 9 Gawk at life-size burning puppets stuffed with fireworks around Mérida during Despidida del Año Viejo (p158)
- 10 Samba the night away during Santa Elena’s Brazilian-infused Carnaval (p214)

TUNES

From salsa to dance-funk, load up your iPod with the following Venezuelan classics and you’ll own the *rumba* – and anything else the DJ spins your way.

- 1 *The New Sound of the Venezuelan Gozadera* (Amigos Invisibles, 1998)
- 2 *Songs of Venezuela* (Soledad Bravo, 1995)
- 3 *Donde Esta el Futuro* (Desorden Publico, 1999)
- 4 *40 Años 40 Exitos* (Aldemaro Romero, 2007)
- 5 *Al Pueblo lo que es de César* (Ali Primera, 1968)
- 6 *Carreño – Piano Works* (2000)
- 7 *Venezuela y su Folklore: A Taste of Venezuela*
- 8 *El Diablo Suelto: Guitar Music of Venezuela*
- 9 *Cómo se Llega a Belén* (Voz Veis, 2006)
- 10 *Oro* (Oscar D’León, 2004)

INTERNET RESOURCES

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Summaries on Venezuela travel; the Thorn Tree forum; travel news and links to useful travel resources.

onlinenewspapers.com (www.onlinenewspapers.com/venezuel.htm) Links to at least 30 Venezuelan online newspapers.

University of Texas (www1.lanic.utexas.edu/la/venezuela/) Comprehensive directory of Venezuelan websites provided by the Latin American Network Information Center of the University of Texas.

Venezuela Analysis (www.venezuelanalysis.com) Website containing articles analyzing the current political and economic issues.

Venezuelan Embassy in the USA (www.embavenez-us.org) Government information, including updates on visa regulations, plus plenty of links to everything from Venezuelan cuisine to beauty queens.

Venezuela Tuya (www.venezuelatuya.com) A comprehensive tourism portal for Venezuelan tourism.

Zmag (www.zmag.org/znet/places/Venezuela) Website containing articles analyzing the current political and economic issues from a pro-government perspective.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

VENEZUELA 101

Four to Six Weeks / Caracas to Caracas

Folks believe that since Venezuela has oil, it has never chosen to develop tourism. Whether true or not, the result is two-fold: the country's outstanding offerings remain under-visited; and those that touch down here won't have to share them with legions of fellow travelers.

Begin by spending a day or two in **Caracas** (p51), partaking in fabulous food, wild nightlife and interesting museums. From there, travel by air or an all-night bus ride to the Andean hot spot of **Mérida** (p153), an adventure sports region offering all manner of high-adrenaline activity – rafting, paragliding, trekking and mountain biking.

Next stop is **Ciudad Bolívar** (p235), where your priority is a three-day tour to the famous **Angel Falls** (Salto Ángel; p247). Back in town, take a four-day tour to the **Gran Sabana** (p250), an amazing rolling savanna dotted with table mountains and waterfalls. While there, consider the three-day summit of **Roraima** (p253), one of South America's epic treks.

Wind things down on Venezuela's Caribbean Eden, **Archipiélago Los Roques** (p86), where the swimming-pool-quality waters rival anywhere – you'll need to be torn from its sandy clutches to make your flight back to Caracas and home.

This best-of route will take four to six weeks, but can easily stretch beyond that if you are an outdoor adventure junkie, in which case plan extra days in Mérida, or an avid diver/snorkeler – Los Roques will demand more of your time.

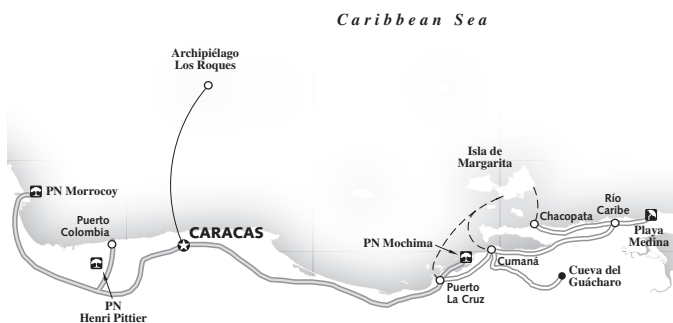


CARIBBEAN COASTLINE

One Month / Caracas to Isla de Margarita

With the longest stretch of Caribbean coastline in any single country, Venezuela will inundate you with its wealth of beautiful beaches, islands and other natural attractions. The exquisite coral **Archipiélago Los Roques** (p86) is many people's first or last destination, easily accessible from **Caracas** (p51). Once back on the mainland, it's a West-to-East aquatic odyssey. Start in the islands, islets and cays of **Parque Nacional Morrocoy** (p129), the single prettiest stretch of Venezuelan coastline after Los Roques. A little further east, you can take the scenic, nail-biting road up and over the coastal mountains, through the wildlife-rich cloud forests of **Parque Nacional Henri Pittier** (p101) and into the coastal village of **Puerto Colombia** (p103), surrounded by secluded beaches reached only by boat or a long hike.

Taking the long haul back past Caracas, **Puerto La Cruz** (p208) is the jumping-off point to explore the stunning beaches and islands of **Parque Nacional Mochima** (p211). You can hop on a ferry to Isla de Margarita here, or continue first to the historic city of **Cumaná** (p215). You may also want to take a detour southeast to the impressive **Cueva del Guácharo** (p227), or east to **Río Caribe** (p221) and the remote, undeveloped beaches nearby, including idyllic **Playa Medina** (p222). You can then take a boat from Chacopata or Cumaná to the soft, white shores of the tourist mecca that is **Isla de Margarita** (p195).



It's possible to cover this 2244km route in three weeks at a squeeze, but if you're after rest and relaxation don't try to fit in too much. Pick and choose your destinations carefully so you can spend more time chilling out on a beach rather than sitting on a bus.

ROADS LESS TRAVELED

MOUNTAINS HIGH, RIVERS LOW

Four to Six Weeks / Ciudad Bolívar
to Puerto Ayacucho

Venezuela's natural wonders are its biggest asset, none more so than those of the famed region of Guayana, one of the country's most traveled areas. Its endless savannas, breathtaking table mountains, soaring waterfalls and broad rivers have fascinated travelers for centuries, but many are well off-the-beaten-track and best visited on an organized tour.

Guayana's major traveler base is the colonial river port of **Ciudad Bolívar** (p235), easily accessible from Caracas by daily flights or a comfortable nine-hour bus ride. Stay a few days to stroll about the colorful and charming streets before taking a tour to **Canaima** (p244) and the famous **Angel Falls** (Salto Ángel; p247). Your next adventure might involve the vast, enchanting highlands of **Gran Sabana** (p250) and the massive table mountain of **Roraima** (p253). Tours to both can be bought in Ciudad Bolívar, or you can go by bus along a spectacular road to **Santa Elena de Uairén** (p255) and buy both tours more cheaply here.

Ciudad Bolívar is also a springboard for the **Río Caura** (p240), a lovely river 200km southwest, accessible only by tour. Guayana's other big attraction is the **Delta del Orinoco** (p231), and this trip can also be organized from Ciudad Bolívar, or you can go to **Tucupita** (p231) and shop around for a tour.

Some travelers bus to **Puerto Ayacucho** (p259) to see the upper Orinoco and Amazon basins – another off-the-beaten-track adventure and another tour.

Visiting all the listed attractions will take four to six weeks, and a large slice of your budget. Many travelers cross Guayana on their way to Brazil and just visit the main sights en route (Gran Sabana and Roraima, plus the spectacular Angel Falls). Put aside two weeks for these three sights.



TAILORED TRIPS

EXTREME VENEZUELA

Need a wake-up call? In Caracas, start your day on a thrilling sunrise tandem paragliding flight from the 1800m Picacho de Galipán over **Parque Nacional El Ávila** (p81) to the beach at Camuri Chico.

Not far away from Caracas is the pretty German colonial town of **Colonia Tovar** (p100) – ain't it cute? Now, rappel down some waterfalls! Fourteen to be exact, ranging from 5m to 70m in height, on a canyoning excursion through Quebrada Tamaira to Puerto Cruz.

Most folks see **Angel Falls** (p247) from the air or from a small viewpoint several meters from its bottom. But why sit at the viewpoint staring up at Angel Falls when you can BASE jump from the top? Those with experience can take a leap of faith and hurl themselves from the summit in an exhilarating 900m BASE jump. Otherwise, rappelling down is another heart-stopping option. If that's not high enough for you, tackle the 4981m **Pico Bolívar** (p165), the highest mountain in Venezuela, a six-day trek just outside Venezuela's high-octane capital, **Mérida** (p153).

Santa Elena de Uairén (p255) is the jumping-off point for a 12-day kayak blockbuster on the River Karuai, where you'll navigate Class I and II rapids and encounter isolated Pemón tribes through one of the most remote and pristine areas of **Parque Nacional Canaima** (p244). All of these activities are bookable via one of the agencies listed in the Transportation chapter.



WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

From the seasonally flooded plains of Los Llanos to the verdant cloud forests around Caracas, Venezuela is rich with wildlife – especially birds, over 1300 species of which have been recorded, with many existing nowhere else.

A four-day wildlife safari to **Los Llanos** (p180), organized from Mérida, is far and away the best chance to see the widest range of wildlife, including capybaras, caimans, anacondas, ocelots, anteaters and ever-elusive jaguars. The region is also one of the planet's most important bird-breeding reserves. **Parque Nacional Henri Pittier** (p101), just two hours west of Caracas by bus, is held as legendary among neotropical birders – the 1078-sq-km park is home to over 500 recorded species.

For water's-edge viewing, a trip along the **Río Orinoco** (p231), organized from **Ciudad Bolívar** (p238) or **Tucupita** (p233), is a tough act to follow: Howler and spider monkeys, Orinoco crocodiles – the largest in the Americas – giant river otters, river dolphins and manatees all inhabit the diverse Orinoco Delta.

And let us not forget the longest continuous stretch of Caribbean coastline in the Americas – you'll find world-class diving in **Archipiélago Los Roques** (p86), a plethora of waterbirds in **Parque Nacional Morrocoy** (p129) and frequent pods of dolphins in **Parque Nacional Mochima** (p211).



The Authors



KEVIN RAUB

Coordinating Author, Caracas, The Central North

Kevin Raub grew up in Atlanta and started his career as a music journalist in New York, working for *Men's Journal* and *Rolling Stone* magazines. The rock 'n' roll lifestyle took its toll, so he needed an extended vacation and took up travel writing. He'd thought he'd seen it all in South America, until he watched the pilot of his flight to Canaima walk up to the plane holding a seat above his head or his pilot from Los Roques work his Blackberry shortly after takeoff! This is his 7th Lonely Planet title.



BRIAN KLUEPFEL

The Northwest, The Andes, Los Llanos

Brian Kluepfel has worked across the Americas as a travel writer and has lived in the Bronx, Berkeley and Bolivia (as the managing editor of the late, great *Bolivian Times*). He's written for various international periodicals, including *Guitar Player*, *Acoustic Guitar* and *Frontier Airlines'* in-flight magazine, *Wild Blue Yonder*. He is currently the music editor for the *Examiner News* in Westchester County, NY, and is working on a biography of the Irish guitar legend Rory Gallagher. During his travels in Venezuela, Brian was bitten by one dog and five mosquitoes, lost 5kg, and visited 19 Plaza Bolívars. He added several birds to his life list, including the amazing hoatzin.



TOM MASTERS

The Northeast, Guayana

Having traveled to Venezuela as both a backpacker in the pre-Chávez days and as a documentary producer in more recent times, Tom was delighted to return to a diet of *arepas* (hamburger-sized corn pancake stuffed with juicy fillings) and Polar Solera while researching the Guayana and Northeast chapters of this book. Traveling through the Canaima National Park, the Orinoco Delta and exploring the Penínsulas de Paria and de Araya were all unforgettable experiences. Tom currently lives in Berlin and more of his work can be seen at www.mastersmafia.com.

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