

# History

## THE FIRST FEW MILLENNIA

It is generally believed that the first inhabitants of the Americas came from Siberia across the Bering Strait, spread over the North American continent, then moved down to Central and South America in several waves of migration.

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 warlike Carib tribes occupied the central and eastern coast, living off fishing and shifting agriculture. Various Arawak groups were scattered over the western plains and north up to the coast. They lived off hunting and food-gathering, and occasionally practiced farming.

The Timote-Cuica tribes, of the Chibcha linguistic family, were the most advanced of Venezuela's pre-Hispanic societies. They lived in the Andes and developed advanced 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. No major architectural works have survived, though some smaller sites in the Andean region have recently been unearthed and will be opening for tourism in the next few years.

## THE SPANISH ARE COMING!

In 1498, on his third trip to the New World, Christopher Columbus anchored at Venezuela's northeastern tip. 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, explorer Alonso de Ojeda, accompanied by the Italian Amerigo Vespucci, sailed up to the Península de la Guajira, at the western end of present-day Venezuela. On entering Lago de Maracaibo, the Spaniards saw the local indigenous people living in *palafitos* (thatched huts on stilts above the water). They called the land Venezuela (literally 'Little Venice') – perhaps as a sarcastic sailor joke, as these rustic reed dwellings didn't exactly match the opulent palaces of the Italian city they knew. The name of Venezuela appeared for the first time on a map in 1500 and has remained to this day. Laguna de Sinamaica (p149) is reputedly the place where the first Spanish sailors saw the *palafitos*, and you can see similar huts there today.

Alonso de Ojeda sailed further west along the coast and briefly explored parts of what is now Colombia. He saw local aborigines wearing gold adornments and was astonished by their wealth. Their stories about fabulous

For a concise and to-the-point introduction to the country's historic, economic, societal and contemporary issues, read *In Focus: Venezuela – A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture*, by James Ferguson.

John Hemming's *The Search for El Dorado* is a fascinating insight into the Spanish conquest of Venezuela and Colombia. It reads like a thriller, yet is admirably factual.

## TIMELINE

**13,000 BC**

There is evidence of human habitation in northwest Venezuela going back more than 15,000 years. Steady agriculture is established around the 1st millennium, leading to the first year-round settlements.

**AD 1498**

Christopher Columbus lands in northeastern Venezuela. He anchors at the Península de Paría, just opposite Trinidad, becoming the first European to see the South American continent.

**1527**

Coro is made the first capital of colonial Venezuela by the Spanish. Though today a Unesco World Heritage site, it has been on the *List of World Heritage in Danger* since 2005 due to continued water damage from torrential rains.

treasures inland gave birth to the myth of El Dorado (The Golden One), a mysterious land abundant in gold. Attracted by these supposed riches, the shores of Venezuela and Colombia became the target of Spanish expeditions, an obsession with El Dorado driving them into the interior. Their search resulted in the rapid colonization of the land, though El Dorado was never found.

The Spanish established their first settlement on Venezuelan soil around 1500, at Nueva Cádiz, on the small island of Cubagua, just south of Isla de Margarita. Pearl harvesting provided a livelihood for the settlers, and the town developed into a busy port until an earthquake and tidal wave destroyed it in 1541.

Officially, most of Venezuela was ruled by Spain from Santo Domingo (present-day capital of the Dominican Republic) until 1717, when it fell under the administration of the newly created viceroyalty of Nueva Granada, with its capital in Bogotá.

The colony's population of indigenous communities and Spanish invaders diversified with the arrival of African slaves, brought from Africa to serve as the workforce. Most of them were set to work on plantations on the Caribbean coast. By the 18th century, Africans surpassed the indigenous population in number.

## OUT FROM UNDER THE YOKE

With few exploited gold mines, Venezuela lurked in the shadows of the Spanish Empire for its first three centuries. The country took a more prominent role at the beginning of the 19th century, when Venezuela gave Latin America one of its greatest heroes, Simón Bolívar (see the boxed text, p24).

Francisco de Miranda lit the initial revolutionary flame in 1806. However, his efforts to set up an independent administration in Caracas ended when fellow conspirators handed him over to the Spanish. He was shipped to Spain and died in jail. Bolívar then assumed leadership of the revolution. After unsuccessful initial attempts to defeat the Spaniards at home, he withdrew to Colombia, then to Jamaica, until the opportune moment came in 1817.

The Napoleonic Wars had just ended, and Bolívar's agent in London was able to raise money and arms, and recruit a small number of British Legion veterans of the Peninsular War. With this force and an army of horsemen from Los Llanos, Bolívar marched over the Andes and defeated the Spanish at the Battle of Boyacá, bringing independence to Colombia in August 1819. Though the least important of Gran Colombia's (Great Colombia) three provinces, Venezuela bore the brunt of the fighting. Venezuelan patriots fought not only on their own territory, but also in the armies that Bolívar led into Colombia and down the Pacific coast. It's estimated that a quarter of the Venezuelan population died in the independence wars.

Venezuela is the only South American mainland country where Columbus landed.

The earliest Venezuelan town still in existence, Cumaná (p215), on the northeast coast, dates from 1521 and is an enjoyable place to visit, even though earthquakes ruined much of the early Spanish colonial architecture.

1577

Caracas, founded in 1567 by Captain Diego de Losada, becomes the capital of the Province of Venezuela. A mere 60 families populate its original 25 blocks.

1725

Venezuela's first university, the Universidad Real y Pontificia de Caracas, is founded, and continues today at the Unesco World Heritage site of the Universidad Central de Venezuela.

1783

National hero Simón Bolívar is born in Caracas on July 24 into a wealthy Creole family that had emigrated some 200 years previously.