



# Venezuela

## Introduction

Official Name: Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

Nationality: Venezuelan

Area: 912,050 square kilometers (352,144 square miles)

Languages: Spanish (official), numerous indigenous dialects

Currency: bolívar (VEB)

Location: South America, bordered by Brazil, Columbia, and Guyana with coastline on the Caribbean Sea and North Atlantic Ocean

## Statistical Information

Population	26 million
0-14 years	31.6 percent
15-64 years	63.4 percent
65+ years	5.1 percent
Birth rate	21 births/1,000
Death rate	5 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	2.6 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	1.486 percent
Life expectancy	73.3 years
Literacy	93 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	0.7 percent
Below poverty line	37.9 percent
Ethnic groups	Spanish Portuguese Indigenous peoples Italian German Arab African
Religion	96 percent Roman Catholic 2 percent Protestant 2 percent other

## Economy

Venezuela's economy is highly dependent upon oil revenues, which account for more than half of all government revenues. A nationwide oil strike from December 2002 to February 2003 dealt the economy

a blow, but since then economic growth has recovered strongly. Recent increases in minimum wage and increased access to domestic credit have helped fuel a consumption boom, but have come at the price of a high inflation rate, around 20 percent in 2007. In 2007, President Hugo Chávez nationalized companies in the petroleum, communications, and electricity sectors. The nationalization reduced foreign influence in the economy, shifting the influence to Chávez. Although Venezuelan voters rejected the constitutional changes Chávez proposed in December 2007, the president intends to continue to consolidate and centralize the government's authority over the economy under a program of "21st Century Socialism."

## Government

Capital: Caracas

Venezuela is a federal republic. The president is both chief of state and head of government, and is elected by popular vote to serve a six-year term. The legislature consists of the unicameral National Assembly, or *Asamblea Nacional*, whose 167 members are elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms. Three seats in the National Assembly are reserved for representatives of the indigenous peoples of Venezuela.

## Climate

The entire region of Venezuela lies in the tropical zone, but the climate ranges from tropical humid to semiarid alpine. Seasons are defined more by rainfall than by temperature. The rainy season, May through November, is generally referred to as winter, while the rest of the year is summer. Varying elevations produce four horizontal temperature zones. In the tropical zone, which lies below 800 meters, the temperature is hot year-round. The temperate zone, areas between 800 and 2,000 meters in elevation, contains many of Venezuela's cities, including Caracas. The cool zone, areas that lie between 2,000

and 3,000 meters above sea level, experiences colder conditions. Much of the high mountain areas known as the *páramos*, which are above 3,000 feet in elevation, are permanent snowfields.

### **Environmental Concerns**

One of Venezuela's major environmental problems is pollution. Lago de Valencia experiences sewage pollution, and oil and urban wastes pollute Lago de Maracaibo. Irresponsible mining activities threaten the fragile Amazon rainforest ecosystem.

### **History**

The Arawak and Carib Amerindians were the earliest inhabitants of Venezuela, along with smaller nomadic hunting and fishing tribes. The Arawaks and Caribs later migrated to the Caribbean islands.

In 1498, Columbus discovered the mouths of the Orinoco River. Explorers Alonso de Ojeda and Amerigo Vespucci explored the Venezuelan coast in 1499. Vespucci nicknamed an island, probably Aruba, Venezuela (little Venice) after seeing native villages built on stilts above the water. The name stuck, and was soon applied to the mainland. In 1520 and 1527, Spanish settlements were established at Cumaná and Santa Ana de Coro, which became the base for Spanish explorations into the interior.

From 1528 to 1546, the Spanish crown leased the settlement of Santa Ana de Coro to German bankers. The major part of the conquest of Venezuela's interior was done by German explorers hired by the bankers, such as Ambrosio de Alfinger, George de Speyer, and Nikolaus Federmann. During the colonial period, Venezuela was part of the Spanish colony of New Granada, which at its height included Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama. Cocoa farming was the mainstay of the colony's economy.

From the 16th to the 18th century, the Venezuelan coastline endured repeated attacks by English buccaneers and pirates. By the 18th century, a significant smuggling trade had grown up between Venezuela and the British colonies in the West Indies.

There was an uprising against Spanish rule in 1795, but it wasn't until 1810, after Napoleon had taken control of Spain, that a full-scale revolution began. Venezuelan colonists fought for their independence, led by Francisco de Miranda. In 1811, Venezuela declared complete independence from Spain, but the revolutionaries began to encounter trouble. In 1812, an earthquake destroyed important revolutionary cities, giving the royalists an advantage.

Venezuelan-born Simón Bolívar, working from Columbia, finally succeeded in liberating Venezuela. At the battle of Carabobo in 1821, Bolívar defeated the Spanish army, winning Venezuela's independence.

Venezuela became part of the federal republic of Greater Columbia, along with other territories. Almost immediately, a separatist movement led by José Antonio Páez began to agitate for complete independence. Páez had strong support from the *llaneros*, or cattlemen. Páez and the separatists gained the upper hand in 1830, and Venezuela seceded from Greater Columbia.

Conservative and Liberal parties emerged in the new state, but control of Venezuela was maintained by *caudillos*, or landowners. Páez became the first president of Venezuela. He was replaced in 1846 by Tadea Monagas, who struggled to prevent Páez from holding onto a large amount of power.

In 1858, Monagas was overthrown, and civil war among the *caudillos* ensued. From 1870 to 1888, the dictator Guzmán Blanco controlled Venezuela. He improved education, communications, and finances, and repressed the church. He was overthrown in 1888, but was replaced by the dictatorship of Joaquín Crespo in 1892. During Crespo's regime, tensions increased between Great Britain and Venezuela over the boundary between British Guiana (what is now Guyana) and Venezuela. An American commission decided the official border line in 1899; the border generally favored the British position.

In 1899, Cipriano Castro came to power. The level of financial corruption and incompetence of his dictatorship led to a new international incident in the form of the Venezuela Claims. In 1902, Britain, Germany, and Italy sought redress for unpaid loans they had made to Venezuela, which was in financial chaos. The three nations blockaded and shelled Venezuela's ports and captured Venezuelan ships.

In 1908, Juan Vicente Gómez came to power in Venezuela. He would be the longest-ruling Latin American dictator, remaining in power for 27 years until his death. The Gómez regime was tyrannical, although he did bring the state to relative economic prosperity. After his death in 1935, there were mass celebrations.

Gómez was succeeded first by Eleazar López Contreras and then Isafías Medina Angarita. Under Medina's administration, Venezuela entered World War II on the Allied side in 1945.

A military coup in November 1948 installed another repressive dictatorship. Colonel Marcos Pérez Jiménez became dictator in 1952, and made heavy use of police state tactics. In 1958 a popular revolt led by liberal forces within the army forced Pérez to flee the country, and the elections that followed restored democratic rule in Venezuela, which adopted a moderate program of economic reform.

The new administration faced challenges from left-wing groups such as the Communists, who opposed the administration. The Communists appealed to the restlessness of the lower classes and leftist elements in the military, sparking numerous uprisings. Conservative extremists also plotted against the administration. In the 1960s, the border dispute between Venezuela and Guyana flared again; Venezuela claimed around 60 percent of Guyana's territory.

In 1983, President Jaime Lusinchi came to power. He renegotiated the national debt, began austerity measures, and made budget cuts in social services, but inflation and unemployment continued to plague the country. In 1989, amid riots and demonstrations due to continually deteriorating economic conditions, Carlos Andrés Pérez Rodríguez became president. In 1992, he survived two attempted coups from the military, but in 1993 he was deposed on corruption charges, on which he was eventually convicted.

In the late 1990s, Venezuela's economy continued to sink and the budget deficit grew as oil prices fell. Venezuela's relations with Columbia, already strained by disputes over control of offshore oil reserves and illegal Colombian immigration to Venezuela, worsened when Venezuela accused Colombian guerrillas of trafficking drugs and guns over the border.

Hugo Chávez Frías won the presidency in 1999. He approved a law allowing him to rule by decree for six months, and cut Venezuelan production of oil in an effort to drive up world market prices. In July 1999, an assembly was elected to draft a new constitution. Chávez and the assembly engaged in a power struggle with the congress. The assembly stripped the congress of its powers and proceeded to draft a new constitution. The new constitution provided for a strong president with a six-year term, a unicameral National Assembly, and increased governmental control of the military and economy. The constitution was approved in December of 1999. In the same month, torrential rains caused devastating mudslides along the Caribbean coast, killing around 5,000 people.

Chávez reawakened the border dispute with Guyana, claiming that a satellite-launching facility being constructed by an American company would be a cover for American military presence in the area.

By 2001, Chávez had lost popularity, although he retained significant support among the lower classes. In early 2002, he attempted to take control of the state oil company, resulting in strikes and demonstrations. In April, a coup briefly ousted Chávez, but other Latin American nations refused to recognize the interim government, and Chávez returned to power fairly quickly.

A prolonged antigovernment oil strike from December 2002 to February 2003 sent Venezuela's economy into recession. The crisis eroded public support for the Chávez administration. Opposition leaders tried twice to call for a referendum to recall Chávez's presidency. In the second referendum, held in August 2004, 58 percent voted to retain Chávez.

In January 2005, the president signed a decree establishing a land commission which would begin breaking up Venezuela's large estates and redistributing land. Venezuela became a full member of Mercosur, a South American trade organization, in mid-2006.

In December 2006, Chávez was reelected by a healthy majority. Venezuelan society is becoming increasingly polarized; the poorer classes largely support the president and his socialist programs. At his inauguration in January 2006, Chávez proclaimed "socialism or death." He moved to nationalize energy and power companies, along with Venezuela's largest communications entity. In May 2007, he shut down a popular television station which was critical of his administration. The move was highly unpopular, even among his supporters.

### **Ethnic Groups**

Since 1926, the Venezuelan census has not contained information about ethnicity, so percentages of ethnic groups are estimates.

Around 68 percent of the population is mestizo. In Venezuela, mestizo is defined as a mixture of any races, not just Spanish and Amerindian.

Another 21 percent of Venezuela's population is white, mostly Italians and Germans. There are small populations of Asians, most of whom have Arab, Turkish, or Chinese heritage. Afro-Venezuelans make up an important part of Venezuela's

population, although their numbers are not certain due to unclear census data.

Only around two percent of Venezuelans are indigenous. The Warao and Wayuu are indigenous groups native to Venezuela. The Warao live in the Orinoco River delta, and use canoes as their main form of transportation. Warao houses are built on stilts to protect against delta floods. The Wayuu are related to the early Arawak. Their language is called wayuunaiki, and many still follow their traditional religion. The Wayuu live in the arid La Guajira Peninsula.

### Religion

Ninety-six percent of Venezuelans identify with the Roman Catholic Church, although many are not practicing Catholics. Two percent of the population is Protestant, and the remaining two percent is divided into small communities of Christian Orthodox, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists.

### Culture

**Food**—*Arepas*, thick rounds of precooked cornmeal which are either fried or baked, are a distinctively Venezuelan food. Large arepas with various fillings (ham and cheese is popular) are eaten as snacks throughout the day. *Empanadas*, deep-fried pasties, and *cachapas*, which are like pancakes or crepes, are similar to arepas. Both empanadas and cachapas are filled with a mixture of cheese, ham, and bacon. *Pabellón criollo* is a dish consisting of black beans, fried sweet plantains, white rice, and shredded meat topped with a fried egg. Other popular meats are *pernil*, or roasted pork, *asado*, or roasted beef, *bistec a caballo*, or steak with fried egg, and pork chops. Fruit juices are common beverages. *Chicha* is a drink made from ground rice, salt, condensed milk, sugar, vanilla, and ice.

**Social status**—Venezuelan society is highly stratified. The traditional white elite hold most of the political power, while those of African and native ancestry are in the lowest tiers of society. Clothing, profession, and wealth are symbols of social status, and American pop culture heavily influences Venezuelan ideals of beauty and fashion.

**Marriage**—By law, there are few restrictions on Venezuelan marriages provided the couple is heterosexual and both parties are of legal age. There are social expectations surrounding marriage; Venezuelans are generally expected

to marry someone of the same or higher social status.

**Education**—Education is free and compulsory through twelfth grade. There are a wide variety of private and Catholic grade and high schools in Venezuela; these schools have better reputations and are where middle- and upper-class Venezuelans send their children. Only around 20 to 30 percent of Venezuelans go on to obtain a university degree.

**Etiquette**—Venezuelans tend to be outgoing and friendly. Traditional forms of greeting involve kissing on each cheek, even for new acquaintances. Between men, a strong-gripped handshake or a hug is substituted for the kisses. Venezuelans tend to use body language when speaking, but certain American signals have different meanings in Venezuela. The American hand sign for “ok,” for instance, is considered an insult in Venezuela. Pointing with one’s finger is also considered rude and vulgar.

### Dress

Venezuelans, especially those who live in urban areas, dress in Western styles. American fashions and pop culture are seen as socially acceptable. Most Venezuelans tend to dress a bit more formally than Americans; shorts and tank tops are acceptable on beaches, but people in cities hardly ever wear shorts.

### Travel/Transportation

Rules of the road in Venezuela are similar to those in the U.S. and Canada. Child car seats and seatbelts are not required, and many cars are not equipped with them.

Outside of major cities, driving at night may be hazardous due to unmarked road damage or repair work, unlighted vehicles, and animals. Road damage is often marked by a pile of rocks or sticks in or near a pothole, left by passersby.

The high volume of traffic in Caracas leads to heavy traffic jams during the day. Keep windows and doors locked, as some thieves use traffic jams to their advantage.

Drivers must stop at National Guard and police checkpoints. Be prepared to show vehicle and insurance papers as well as passports.

Visitors who plan to drive in Venezuela may wish to consider obtaining an Inter-American or International Driving Permit. These permits allow a motorist to operate a vehicle in a foreign country when

accompanied by a valid license from his or her own country.

Either of these permits can be obtained in the United States or Canada before traveling. The American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are the only organizations in the U.S. authorized by the State Department to issue Inter-American or International Driving Permits. The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) is authorized to issue Inter-American or International Driving Permits to Canadian citizens. The cost is under \$20; the application will need to be accompanied by two passport-sized photos.

### **Illness/Injury**

Private hospitals and clinics in Caracas can provide good medical care. Public hospitals may provide a lower level of care and sometimes run short of supplies. Most private medical facilities will require an advance cash payment for treatment, although a few will accept major credit cards. Those who cannot provide advance payment will likely be referred to a public hospital.

### **Crime**

Venezuela has a high rate of violent crime, both in the capital and the interior. Caracas has one of the highest per capita murder rates in the world. Armed robbery and “express kidnappings,” or kidnappings where a victim is seized in an attempt to obtain quick cash from him or her, are common. Most crimes committed against foreigners are money-related.

Travelers should avoid carrying large amounts of cash or wearing flashy or expensive clothing or jewelry. Pick-pocketing as well as theft from parked cars are common problems.

The poor neighborhoods in the hills around Caracas are very dangerous and have little to no police presence. Carjacking is most common at night, when there is little light outside the city.

### **Safety and Security**

The 1,000-mile border between Venezuela and Columbia is very dangerous. Cross-border violence, cattle-rustling, kidnapping, drug trafficking, and smuggling occur frequently.

Columbia’s National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) are both active in the kidnap-for-ransom trade. They target both Venezuelan citizens and foreigners and hold them for ransom. Some kidnap victims are

released after the ransom has been paid, and others are murdered. Columbian terrorists are suspected in the majority of kidnappings that occur along the Venezuelan-Columbian border. Travelers should consider avoiding a fifty-mile-wide strip the length of the border due to the risk of encountering Columbian terrorist groups or Venezuelan military-controlled areas. Those who enter Venezuelan military-controlled areas will be subject to search and possibly arrest.

Political marches and demonstrations are common in Caracas. They often take place on or near university campuses, business centers, and gathering places. Demonstrations are often nonviolent and pass without incident, but marches often occur on main roads and block traffic.

### **Entry/Exit Requirements**

A valid passport and a visa or tourist card are required to enter Venezuela. Persons staying for less than 90 days may obtain a tourist card on a flight from North America to Venezuela. Passports must be valid for at least six months past the date of entry into Venezuela, and must be in good condition. Venezuelan officials have occasionally refused entry to travelers whose passports are in poor condition.

An exit fee and airport tax must be paid when exiting Venezuela via airline. In many cases, the fees are not included in the price of the airplane ticket, and must be paid separately at the airport at the time of departure.

Anyone traveling to Venezuela for purposes other than tourism should contact the Venezuelan Embassy for information on visas. The Venezuelan Embassy is located at 1099 30th St. NW, Washington, DC 20007.

### **Immunizations**

Travelers entering Venezuela from a country where yellow fever is endemic must provide proof of yellow fever inoculation. The Venezuelan government recommends that all travelers consider being vaccinated for yellow fever before traveling to Venezuela.

Parts of Venezuela are malaria-risk areas, including rural areas of Apure, Amazonas, Barinas, Bolivar, Sucre, Tachira, and Delta Amacuro states. There is also malaria risk in Angel Falls. Consult a travel health professional to determine a course of antimalarial drugs if necessary. Chloroquine is not an effective antimalarial for Venezuela.

Other recommended vaccines include hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and typhoid.

**Special Circumstances**

Currency may be exchanged at approved exchange offices or commercial banks. Hotels are not allowed to exchange currency. Major credit cards are accepted at some establishments, but very few places will accept traveler's checks. Personal checks are not accepted, and many Venezuelan ATMs will not accept American ATM cards. Exchange offices are rare outside major cities, so travelers should ensure that they have a sufficient supply of local currency when traveling in rural areas.

In February 2007, the National Assembly granted President Chávez the right to rule by decree in 11 regions of the country for 18 months. This means that laws issued by the president go into effect immediately, and laws directly impacting visitors may come into effect with little warning.

**Electricity**

Venezuela uses 120V/60Hz power, so no power converter is necessary to use American appliances in Venezuela. A set of plug adapters will not be necessary either, as Venezuela uses types A and B plugs.