

BIG FIVE
TOURS & EXPEDITIONS



República Bolivariana de

VENEZUELA

Travel Guide

The following general outline offers practical information, suggestions, and answers to some frequently asked questions. It is not intended to be the definitive guide for your trip. Be sure to check the reading listing included here for more information.



*"I took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."
~ Robert Frost ~*

Caracas, Venezuela

Average Temperature												
°F	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
	70	72	74	75	76	75	74	74	75	74	74	72
Average Rainfall												
inches	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
	0.9	0.4	0.5	1.4	3.1	4.1	4.1	4.3	3.9	4.4	3.5	1.8

CLIMATE

Venezuela's climate is predominantly tropical, with a warm temperate zone extending along the coast. Temperatures rarely vary more than a few degrees; consequently, the climatic zones are defined by rainfall rather than by differences in temperature. The northern coastal lowlands are relatively arid, but rainfall increases over the Llanos and the Guayana Highlands, with average yearly readings reaching 150cm (58in) in both regions. The dry season (called the *verano*) extends from December to April, and the wet season (*invierno*) covers the remainder of the year. The Amazon region has no distinct dry season, and annual rainfall exceeds 200cm (78in), distributed evenly throughout the year.

CLOTHING

Clothing worn in Venezuela is similar to that which is worn in the United States. Clothing should be comfortable, and appropriate to the venue. A general packing list is included in this travel guide for your convenience.

Laundry Facilities: Laundry can be done at the major hotels at the appropriate charges imposed by the hotels. There are no laundry facilities in remote areas or on cruise vessels.

TIME ZONE & FLIGHT TIME

Time Zone: GMT – 4 (Eastern -1). In summer, it is GMT -5

Flight times (approximate): 3 hours from Miami to Caracas.

PASSPORTS / VISAS

Passports: For international travel, a U.S. passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing **at least** two blank pages is necessary.

Visas: U.S. and Canadian citizens do not require visas in advance. Citizens from other countries, consult the nearest Venezuela consulate.

Important: Please look at your passport prior to travel to insure that:

- 1) Your passport is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries.

Please note: Pages reserved for amendments and endorsements cannot be used for visas

AIRPORT FORMALITIES

On Arrival: Upon your arrival, proceed through Customs and Immigration, obtain your luggage, and exit the airport. If you have booked a complete package with Big Five tours, a representative will be holding a sign identifying you or him /

her. If you have not made hotel and transfer arrangements with Big Five Tours & Expeditions, then please follow the instructions in your final itinerary. We recommend you change money at airports, hotels, or local banks. ATM's are widespread in major cities. Please note if you have two pin errors, your card will cease to work.

International Departure Tax: Bs58,200 (adults) or Bs38,800 (children aged 2-15) leaving Venezuela on international flights from all international airports. Transit passengers and children under 2 years are exempt.

Customs: Items that may be brought into Venezuela without incurring customs duty: 200 cigarettes and 25 cigars; 2L of alcoholic beverages; 4 small bottles of perfume; new goods up to a value of US\$1000 for personal use

Prohibited Items: plants and flower products, meats, fruit and birds or bird products.

U.S. Customs: Your personal exemption will be \$800. There are also limits on the amount of alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, cigars, and other tobacco products you may include in your duty-free personal exemption.

Regulations frequently change. For more information, contact the U.S. Customs Service at PO Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044, or visit the Customs & Border Protection website: www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml

LUGGAGE

Traveling light is always the first and best rule! We recommend passengers limit their luggage to one medium-sized soft bag per person or two small duffle bags. In this security conscious era, airline luggage restrictions may change without notice. Also, luggage limits vary depending on ticket class, plane size, destinations, etc. It is always best to confirm with airlines for specific limitations.

Generally speaking, from the US, economy class passengers are allowed to check in two (2) normal size pieces of luggage (each piece measuring no more than about 62 linear inches, which means length plus width plus height), and not exceeding 70 pounds per bag.

Scheduled flights from other countries and within foreign countries generally limit luggage to 44 pounds total, plus one carry-on personal item. Further restrictions apply for charter flights. We will advise you of those restrictions.

Most airlines now allow only one carry-on bag in addition to one personal item such as a laptop or handbag. Most bags within the 22 x 14 x 9 (or, a total of 45 linear inches) size restriction will be considered legal carry-on size by major domestic U.S. airlines. Many US airlines check-in desks have sizing boxes within which your bag must fit. Obviously, no knives or cutting instruments are allowed in carry-on baggage.

All luggage should have identification inside as well as secure baggage tags on the outside. Please note that the US National Transportation and Safety Board now suggests

that you not lock your checked luggage. If a screener has to open your bag, the locks may have to be broken. This applies to flights within the US and international flights originating in the US. This, however, does not address other international travel issues. We suggest that you lock your luggage and bring a couple of spare locks in the event one or more are cut off. But the choice is up to each individual traveler to make.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Always approach people with an attitude of respect and ask permission before taking photographs. Do not take anyone's picture without permission. Many times it is necessary to negotiate a fee beforehand. The same general rule about asking permission also applies to photographing places of worship, religious festivals, and rural homesteads. Never take any photos of airports, police or government buildings, military installations, or borders.

Equipment: Bring cameras and lenses you are comfortable using. If you get new equipment before you go, do so as far in advance as possible. Shoot and develop at least a dozen rolls before departure to work out problems. And, don't forget your camera operation manual, filters, and a flash unit. *Cameras should be packed with good cushioning.* The roads are sometimes rough, and vibration can do damage. Make sure you have lens caps for all your lenses. Clean your equipment frequently. Bring along a puffer brush and lens cleaning tissues.

Lenses: A combination of fixed and/or zoom lenses with focal lengths from 28 mm to 200 mm is a good for general travel photography, although you can take excellent photographs with only a 50 mm lens. Zoom lenses such as 35-80mm, 70-210 mm, or 100-300 mm will help you capture the sights in a variety of different settings. A macro lens is helpful for shooting close-ups, but a good set of extension tubes will work well. A 2x converter is also a handy. Point and shoot cameras are nice for a group or indoor shots, but leave something to be desired when photographing animals, scenics, and nature. Bring a small cleaning kit and blower brush to keep equipment clean.

Film: It is always best to bring whatever film you need with you. Film is generally more expensive abroad and it may be hard to locate. You'll be surprised at how much film you use when you are trying to capture all those special moments. Even those not all that interested in photography will probably shoot a couple of 36-exposure rolls per day, and enthusiastic shooters will easily double or triple that amount. Be sure film is fresh and, when possible, keep it refrigerated. A film speed of ASA/ISO 64 is an excellent choice for color slide film. Use this speed when possible rather than higher speed films. There is a noticeable difference in quality that it is worth the extra effort to keep your camera steady at a somewhat slower shutter speed than you would otherwise use. For color prints, there are several good choices, including Kodak and Fuji films (ASA/ISO 100 & 200) for daylight photography, ASA/ISO 400 & 1000 are good for lower light and nighttime situations.

It is helpful to set up a numbering system for your film, marking each roll with masking tape and numbers or letters, before leaving home. This way you can code the rolls of film and where they were shot. It's quite a job to sort through hundreds of pictures with no clue where or when they were taken.

Avoid airport x-ray machines whenever possible and request a hand search of your film. While security people are

often obliging, some are not so allow a little extra time. X-rays are cumulative on exposed and unexposed film so the more times film is x-rayed, the more risk of damage. This is especially true with older machines found in many countries. Lead bags for film are available for purchase and are worth the small investment. Do not have film in your camera because it may be opened for inspection.

Note: Recent news reports warn that new explosive detectors used in more than 100 US airports to scan checked baggage will ruin unprotected, unexposed film. This technology will eventually be in place at all airports worldwide. Experts suggest carrying your film in your carry-on luggage and placing film in safety, lead-lined bags to prevent X-ray damage.

Video: If you are planning to shoot video, be sure to bring plenty of tape and batteries with you. Do not plan to buy videotape in abroad. Videotape is not affected by airport x-ray - only magnetic fields or prolonged exposure to heat will damage videotape. Your battery charger should be capable of automatically adjusting to 240 volts. You will probably have no problem finding a plug in most of the lodges and larger tented camps, but be prepared with plenty of batteries

Batteries: Put fresh photo-quality batteries in your camera and other electric equipment before you leave and bring at least two sets of spare batteries with you. Your camera will be useless without them, and batteries tend to be expensive

HEALTH

Current health risks include cholera, dengue fever, hepatitis, malaria, and yellow fever. At this time there are no required vaccinations, but an International Certificate of Vaccination for Yellow Fever is required if arriving from infected area within five days.

Please keep in mind that these requirements change frequently. Consult your personal physician, county health department or and / or the Center of Disease Control in Atlanta, for any recommended general and/or specific health measures at the time of travel. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta has a fax information service with updated travel information. To receive these documents, call 404-332-4565 and follow the prompts.

DEALING WITH JET LAG

With the joys and adventures of international travel come certain unavoidable inconveniences such as occasional lost luggage or bouts of jet lag. In fact, studies reveal that as much as 90% of long distance travelers experience a degree of jet lag.

Jet lag describes that out-of-sorts feeling associated with long flights, particularly those across time zones. Symptoms and severity vary but may include drowsiness, fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating, headaches, insomnia, and swelling of the extremities.

The number of time zones crossed affects the severity of jet lag. The internal body clock follows circadian rhythm, which is controlled by the hypothalamus that processes nerve signals. That clock is designed for regular cycles of light and darkness. Depending on the number of time zones crossed, it may take several days for that rhythm to be restored.

But that is not the only influence. Other factors include cabin pressure, stale air, lack of humidity, and your overall physical condition at the beginning of your trip.

Although jet lag can not be completely avoided, there are some simple things you can do to help minimize its affects.

Consider the following for your next scheduled trip:

- Start your trip rested with a good night's sleep prior to departure.
- Drink plenty of fluids -- water and juices will help you to stay well hydrated. Seasoned travelers recommend that you carry drinking water with you and drink eight ounces every hour.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine, however, just before and during flights. Both possess diuretic properties that promote dehydration. Alcohol also causes drowsiness and contributes to feeling sluggish.
- Once comfortably onboard, reset your watch to the time zone to which you are traveling. This small act helps you begin adjusting to your destination's local time.
- As much as possible, create a dark environment on the plane. Bright lights have been shown to have a strong effect on individuals' body clocks. If necessary, try eye shades and earplugs to help block distractions and convince your body that it is nighttime. Closing window shades and turning off overhead lights may also help. Sleep on the plane if your flight has an early morning arrival time.
- Loose-fitting clothing and comfortable shoes will help in the event you experience mild swelling. Experienced travelers often bring lightweight slippers to wear during flights.
- Get adequate rest before starting on your journey to help minimize the amount of catching up you'll have to do when you arrive at the destination. Once home, try to schedule a day of rest before returning to work.
- Although not always feasible, look for opportunities to walk around while in flight. Do simple isometric exercises (contracting and relaxing as many muscle groups as possible) in your seat. These will improve circulation, help promote increased alertness, and reduce chances of swelling.
- If you arrive in the morning, plan to stay awake. If possible, wait until the local bedtime to sleep. Many people swear that this is key in determining how quickly they adapt to local conditions. You will sleep better and will be less likely to suffer insomnia than if you nap upon arrival.
- During extended stopovers, showers are sometimes available. Trans-Pacific pilots report that taking a shower helps them recover more quickly from the general effects of jet lag after the flight

SAFETY

Common sense safety precautions you normally observe when traveling anywhere should be followed to minimize the risk of personal injury or property loss.

Leave jewelry at home! Do not leave cash, traveler checks, airline tickets, etc. in an unattended room, even in a locked suitcase. Most of the lodges, hotels, and camps have safe deposit facilities at the front desk for your valuables. Use them. Be careful when carrying purses or cameras. Do not carry large amounts of currency or valuables. Use caution when using ATM machines as you would anywhere. Do not walk around unfamiliar cities alone at night. Be wary of entering into conversation with unknown people on the street.

These are the same precautions a visitor would observe in North American cities. Common sense is the best defense.

Don't carry a lot of packages at once. Purses should be zippered and have short shoulder straps so you can protect them with your upper arm. Wallets and passports should not be carried in your back pocket, and expensive watches, chains and jewelry should not be worn. Don't leave cameras or binoculars in sight of any open window. Do not leave any valuables or money unattended in your hotel room. If you follow these precautions, you probably should not have any trouble. Common sense is the best deterrent to theft.

Carry Your Passport. Please ensure that you carry your passport or tourist card (securely) at all times. Keep a copy of your passport with other valuables in hotel safes. Never go anywhere (not even the Post Office) without your passport or tourist card. Should you ever be asked, you should be able to present your identification, your passport, tourist card, or visa. Not having it with you could mean a trip to the Police Station.

Pamphlets addressing safety issues abroad are available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402, or Bureau of Consular Affairs' home page: <http://travel.state.gov>.

TRAVELER'S ETIQUETTE

In addition to looking out for one's own safety, the conscientious guest has the obligation of treating his/her hosts with respect and courtesy. An effort to speak the local language, no matter how rudimentary, is always appreciated as are good manners and discretion in the use of cameras. Above all, one must remember that the polite guest, in a country no less than in a private home, is obliged to learn from and adapt to the ways of his hosts, rather than expecting them to accept his customs.

Travel necessitates being a good-natured realist as well as a romantic, and requires an agreeable acceptance of situations as they exist, not as each of us might prefer them to be. A good attitude makes for an enjoyable travel experience. If you are this appreciative traveler, we want you with us because we know you'll be a wonderful companion and have the time of your life.

Political unrest is an unfortunate reality in the world today, and sometimes changes to your final itinerary may be necessary to ensure your safety while traveling.

A concern for conserving the remaining natural wonders, boundless beauty, and diversity of our small planet is necessary, and always appreciated.

SMOKING

Smoking customs follow European habits, and in most cases it is obvious where not to smoke. Some public buildings are also non-smoking areas.

We suggest that passengers refrain from smoking in public areas, sightseeing vehicles, and when aboard any cruise vessel while in the cabins, the dining area, or community areas. There are designated areas for smoking on cruise vessels. Please dispose of cigarette butts in the appropriate receptacles / ashtrays. Do not throw cigarette butts on the ground or overboard.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks & Exchange Bureaus: Mon-Fri 8:30 AM - 3:30 PM.

Business Offices hours: Mon-Fri 8:00 AM - 6:00 PM with a long midday break.

Restaurants and Shops: Shops are open from 9:00 AM-1:30 PM, and again from 3:00-7:00 PM.

CURRENCY / BANKING

You can change money at a bank or at a *casa de cambio* (authorized money-exchange office). Banks change both cash and travelers' checks, but *casas de cambio* deal only in cash.

The official currency in Venezuela is the Bolivar (Bs). 1,599.00 VEB (Venezuela Bolivares) is equal to \$1.00 USD (United States Dollar), and notes are in denominations of 50 thousand, 20 thousand, 10 thousand, 5 thousand, 2 thousand, 1 thousand, 500, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5. Coins are in denominations of Bs500, Bs100, Bs50, Bs25, Bs5, Bs2 and Bs1, and 50, 20, 10 and 5 céntimos. 1Bs = 100 céntimos.

Credit Cards: Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are accepted for both cash advances and for making payments in top-end hotels, restaurants and shops. Lines for ATMs can be very long, especially the first Monday of the month, when many banks are closed, and the day before holiday weekends, when machines are often cashed-out by midmorning. Also be aware that although Credit cards are widely accepted, a surcharge of up to 10% may be applied.

Traveler's Checks: American Express travelers' checks are by far the most popular, but you may be asked to produce a receipt of purchase when changing them in Venezuela.

SHOPPING

Local handicrafts are plentiful. Indian bows, arrows, mats, pipes and baskets, local footwear and hammocks can be lovely souvenirs. Also jewelry, cacique coins, gold, pearls, pompom slippers, reed necklaces, shoes and handbags.

The main shopping town on Margarita Island is Portlamar. The stores are distributed along two principal avenues, the 4 de Mayo and the Santiago Marino avenue, creating a T-formation in the heart of city.

Downtown, Guevara Boulevard and Gomez Boulevard allow visitors to search for better deals. This area is being redeveloped so as to give the downtown area a more cosmetic look and add additional services for the tourist.

Margarita Island has more than 2000 stores, giving credit to the island as the largest free port in the Caribbean. The island has liquor stores, jewelry, perfume stores, boutiques, hyper-markets, malls and many others, most of them representing well-known international brands.

To the north of Margarita Island is the city of Juan Griego, the second commercial port. Juan Griego has the majority of the stores located in its downtown area, offering the best in international brands. Perfume, footwear, clothing and jewelry stores with excellent prices can be found there.

Caracas also has several shopping centers, modern and luxurious, that make shopping an interesting activity. Tourists' most popular buys are jewelry and shoes.

FOOD & DRINK

Venezuelan snacks and dishes (referred to as *comida criolla*) consist mainly of pancakes, chicken, pork, beef, soups and stews. Local specialties include *empanadas* (deep-fried cornmeal turnovers with fillings of ground meat, cheese, beans or baby shark) and *pabellón criollo* (Venezuela's national dish, which consists of shredded beef, rice, black beans, cheese and fried plantain).

Some other Local Dishes: *Chicken with yellow rice:* A traditional meal cooked in a single pot. Beer adds moistness to this old time favorite. It is served on a platter garnished with pimiento slices and peas.

Chicken Pozole: It clears flu in an instant; this dish is served in the winter days. It is topped with a garnish of finely chopped cilantro, green onion and shredded cabbage, and served with a side of salsa and flour tortillas.

Chile Rellenos: This recipe for this dish uses fresh chiles, and is very hot, but it is very delicious and easy to prepare. The ingredients include grated parmesan cheese and fresh Anaheim chiles.

General Recommendations:

- Do not drink tap water at all.
- Do not drink your beverages with ice.
- Always drink bottled mineral water and soft drinks (diet soft drinks are not always available).
- Avoid any raw foods while traveling in the continent, except in recommended restaurants and hotels, where you may do so if you wish. Always choose cooked food.
- In places of altitudes above 8,000 feet, you may suffer digestive problems, light dizziness or headache. We recommend that you only eat light foods the first day or two, and avoid alcohol.
- Sudden dietary changes, from your daily consumption at home to exotic dishes, especially on the first day or two, may result in digestive problems, often leading to headache, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Please be careful.

TIPPING

Tipping is solely at your discretion. In most bars and restaurants 10% gratuity will be added to the bill, and it is customary to leave another 10% on the table. Bellboys and chambermaids should be tipped. In Caracas tips are higher than elsewhere.

Your professional, licensed guide and driver, who accompany you, work very hard. They ensure that you receive the best BIG FIVE service, tour quality, and satisfaction. If you wish to reward them for their work, we suggest the following:

- \$5-\$10 per person per day for services rendered by any licensed guide / naturalist.
- \$2-\$4 per person per day for services rendered by driver.

INTRODUCTION TO VENEZUELA

Venezuela is a country of striking natural beauty and dramatic contrasts. It has snowcapped peaks of the Andes in the west. There are the steamy Amazonian jungles in the south. The hauntingly beautiful Gran Sabana plateau, with its strange flat-topped mountains, is in the east. A 13000km (1860mi) stretch of white-sand beaches fringed with coconut palms lines the Caribbean coast. South America's largest lake, Lake Maracaibo, and third-longest river, the Orinoco, are here. Venezuela also boasts the world's highest waterfall, Angel Falls, and is home to a wide variety of exotic plants and animals.

Area: 912,050 sq km (352,144 sq miles).

Population: 22,688,803 (2001). **Density:** 24.8 per sq km.

Capital: Caracas. **Population:** 1,975,787 (official est 2000).

Geography: Venezuela is bounded to the north by the Caribbean, to the east by Guyana and the Atlantic Ocean, to the south by Brazil, and to the west and southwest by Colombia. The country consists of four distinctive regions: the Venezuelan Highlands in the west; the Maracaibo Lowlands in the north; the vast central plain of the Llanos around the Orinoco; and the Guiana Highlands, which take up about half of the country.

Government: Republic. Gained independence from Spain in 1830. **Head of State and Government:** President Hugo Chávez Frías since 2000.

HOLIDAYS

The country's largest, most exuberant festival is Carnival, which takes place on the Monday and Tuesday preceding Ash Wednesday. Characterized by music, dancing, parades and masquerades, the flavor of the event varies from region to region. The town of Carúpano is famous throughout the country for its elaborately staged Carnival.

Given the strong Roman Catholic character of Venezuela, most other national celebrations are tied to the Christian calendar. Apart from Easter, Christmas and Corpus Christi, which are celebrated enthusiastically, there are many saints' days spread over the calendar year celebrated in various cities and towns.

Jan 1	-----	New Year's Day
Feb 23-24	-----	Carnival
Apr 8	-----	Holy Thursday
Apr 9	-----	Good Friday
Apr 19	-----	Declaration of Independence
May 1	-----	Labor Day
Jun 24	-----	Battle of Carabobo
Jul 5	-----	Independence Day
Jul 24	-----	Birth of Simón Bolívar
Oct 12	-----	Columbus Day
Dec 25	-----	Christmas Day
Dec 31	-----	New Year's Eve

COMMUNICATIONS

Language: Spanish is the main language of Venezuela, but Venezuelan Spanish differs in pronunciation from the language spoken in Spain. There are also some variations in vocabulary. Venezuelans call their language *castellano*. There are also some 25 indigenous tongues that are spoken by remote tribes.

English is spoken by some in urban centers, but even in better hotels the receptionists don't always speak English. It can be useful to learn at least some common phrases before your departure to Venezuela, or to carry a phrasebook.

Telephone: IDD is available. Country code: 58. Outgoing international code: 00.

Mobile telephone: GSM 900 network. Coverage is limited to around Caracas and major cities.

Fax: Available at the larger hotels.

Internet: E-mail can be accessed from Internet cafes in most urban areas.

Telegram: Services are available from public telegraph offices.

Post: There is an efficient mail service from Venezuela to the USA and Europe. Airmail to Europe takes 3 to 7 days. Internal mail can sometimes take longer. Surface mail to Europe takes at least 1 month.

ELECTRICITY

110V, 60 Hz - A voltage converter along with two and three prong adaptors will be necessary for US made appliances.

HISTORY

Up to 1900: Originally inhabited by Carib and Arawak Indians, Venezuela was claimed as a Spanish territory by Christopher Columbus in 1498. Spanish rule was administered from a distance, leaving the various regions to develop separately from the capital, Caracas, which was founded by Diego de Losada in 1567. In the 18th century, an attempt to inject a measure of unification by the Spanish was met with widespread resistance and uprisings led by Simón Bolívar.

1900 – 1990: The dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez, between 1909 and 1935, was a period of rapid economic development. This was largely driven by the exploitation of the country's substantial oilfields, which began in 1918. Venezuela is now essentially an oil economy and the national producer, PDVSA, is one of the world's largest companies. In 1936 and 1937, Venezuela held democratic elections for the presidency and National Assembly for the first time but the experiment in pluralism lasted only until 1945. The first of a rapid succession of military dictatorships lasted until 1961. That year, the current Venezuelan constitution came into force. From then until the 1990s, Venezuelan politics were dominated by the struggle between the *Partido Social Cristiano*, known as COPEI, and the social democratic *Acción Democrática* (AD). Following the 1973 price hike, Venezuela had enjoyed the benefits of large oil revenues accruing throughout the 1970s, and ran up a substantial overseas debt (although not on the scale of those burdening other Latin American countries). The country's oil wealth was far from evenly distributed – a relatively small section of the population enjoyed the benefits, while the vast majority was excluded. In the 1980s, successive governments struggled to stabilize the country and the economy in the face of persistent social and labor unrest, as well as external pressure from creditors pursuing scheduled loan repayments.

1990 – 2000: At the turn of the 1990s, the government's opponents found support from sections of the army, who considered themselves ill-equipped and badly paid. In February 1992, a number of army units launched a completely unexpected military coup. It was suppressed by the majority of the armed forces, which remained loyal to the government. However, the Perez government was fatally undermined and it was little surprise when he was removed from office by Congress the following year, before completing his term of office. Elections at the end of 1993 resulted in Rafael Caldera, who had served as president in the mid-1970s, assuming the post once again. Meanwhile, the leader of the 1992 coup attempt, Colonel Hugo Chavez, was seeking to establish himself as a national political figure, drawing on the support of millions of disaffected poor people, who had been disregarded during the oil boom. The established parties, dominated by wealthy and increasingly

corrupt interests, held little attraction for them. In 1997, Chavez announced the formation of his own party, the *Movimiento Quinta República*, and his candidacy at the 1998 presidential election. He won, while his party – with the support of other smaller groupings – was able to take control of the national assembly. Further polls in July 2000 secured his position and, de facto, an endorsement of the constitutional changes that he planned to increase presidential powers.

2000 – Present: Chavez's problems now began in earnest. Always a controversial figure, as a result of the 1992 coup attempt and his courting such heads of state as Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Cuba's Fidel Castro, Chavez has attracted powerful enemies both inside and outside Venezuela. In April 2002, a right-wing alliance of dissident military officers and prominent businessmen led by Pedro Carmona launched a coup against Chavez. At first, it appeared to be successful but, within 24 hours, the plotters had been outmaneuvered and Chavez returned to office. The government was certainly shaken by the coup. The economy was already facing serious difficulties following a currency collapse in February 2002 and the country was now close to a serious recession. Then, in December 2002, the opposition tried a different strategy. With the support of key union leaders, Venezuela was brought to a virtual standstill by a general strike. By the end of February 2003, after more than two months of paralysis, the strike appeared to be petering out, while Chavez – who still has the backing of the army – has tried to stabilize the country.

REGIONS OF VENEZUELA

Caracas: Nestling in a long narrow valley in the coastal mountain range 16km (10 miles) from the north coast, Caracas is typical of the 'new Venezuela', despite being one of the oldest established cities in the country (founded in 1567). The city is constantly growing and changing but, among the new developments, there are still areas of the old towns intact – San José and La Pastora, for example. Other periods of the country's history have left substantial monuments; these include the Plaza Bolívar, flanked by the old cathedral and the Archbishop's residence, the Casa Amarilla and the Capitol (the National Congress) building, erected in 1873 in just 114 days, which has a fine mural depicting Venezuelan military exploits. Other places worth visiting include the Panteon Nacional (which contains the body of Simon Bolívar), the Jardín Botánico, the Parque Nacional del Este, and, for recreation, the Country Club. Museums in the capital include the Museo de Bellas Artes, the Museo del Arte Colonial, the Museo del Arte Contemporáneo, the Museo de Transporte and the Casa Natal del Libertador (a reconstruction of the house where Bolívar was born; the first was destroyed in an earthquake). Next door is a museum containing the liberator's war relics.

The North Coast: The 4000km (2800 miles) of Caribbean coastline has numerous excellent beaches and resorts ranging from the comparatively luxurious to the unashamedly opulent, which stretch along the coastline. Maiquetia is one of the best and most popular, offering wide beaches, an extensive range of watersports and some of the best fishing. There are daily air-shuttles from Maiquetia to Porlamar, on Margarita Island, a popular tourist resort with beautiful beaches, good hotels and extensive shopping centres. Also to the west of Caracas are Macuto, Marbella, Naiguata, Caraballeda, Leguna and Oriaco, all of which boast excellent

beaches. To the north of Maiquetia are the idyllic islands of Los Roques. The coastal resorts of Choroní, Ocumare de la Costa and Cata can be reached by way of the 1130m (3710ft) Portachuelo Pass through the central highlands – where clouded rainforest meets the sea. The coastline is dotted with fine beaches and islands, many inhabited only by flamingoes and scarlet ibis. Most can be reached by hired boat. Morrocoy, off the coast from Tucacas, is the most spectacular of these – hundreds of coral reefs with palm beaches ideal for scuba diving and fishing. Palma Sola and Chichiriviche are also popular. Ferries run from La Vela de Coro and Punto Fijo to the islands of Aruba and Curaçao. Journeys take about four hours and delays are to be expected. Puerto la Cruz is a popular coastal resort with bars and restaurants and good beaches. It is also a good centre for travelling to remoter beaches. There is the Morro marina development in the Lecherías area adjacent to Puerto la Cruz, and the attractive town of Pueblo Viejo with 'old' Caribbean architecture and a Venetian lagoon layout – boats are the only means of transport. The attractiveness of the Puerto la Cruz area means that there has been an increase of foreign investment here in recent years.

Central & Western Venezuela: The Llanos is an expansive, sparsely populated area of grassland east of the Cordillera de Mérida and north of the Orinoco, reaching up to the north coast. The area is the heart of the Venezuelan cattle country and the landscape is flat and only varied here and there by slight outcrops of land. It is veined by numerous slow-running rivers, forested along their banks. The swamps are the home of egrets, parrots, alligators and monkeys. The equestrian skills of the plainsmen can be seen at many rodeos throughout the Llanos, as well as exhibitions of cattle roping and the Joropo, Venezuela's national dance. Barquisimeto, one of the oldest settlements in Venezuela, is now the country's fourth-largest city and capital of the Llanos. Its cathedral is one of the most famous modern buildings in the country. Along the Colombian border is the Cordillera de Mérida and, to the east of this range, the Cordillera Oriental. Set in the area between these two ranges are the city of Maracaibo and Lake Maracaibo. Windless and excessively humid, the city and its environs are dominated by the machinery of oil production from the largest oil fields in the world, discovered in 1917. Sightseeing tours are available from here to the peninsula of Guajira to the north, where the Motilone and Guajiro Indians live. Their lifestyle has changed little since the days of the first Spanish settlers. Their houses are raised above the lake on stilts and are in fact the original inspiration for naming the country Venezuela, or 'Little Venice'. The Cordillera de Mérida are the only peaks in the country with a permanent snowline. Frosty plateaux and lofty summits characterize the landscape and many cities have grown up at the foot of the mountains, combining tradition with modern ways of life as well as diversified rural and urban scenery. The scenery in this area is extremely varied – lagoons, mountains, rivers, beaches, ancient villages, historical cities, oil camps, sand dunes and Indian lake dwellings on stilts. The Sierra Nevada National Park offers opportunities to ski between November and June but, at an altitude of 4270m (14,000ft), this is recommended only for the hardiest and most dedicated. Mérida, to the south, is today a city of wide modern avenues linking mainly large-scale 20th-century developments, although, wherever possible, relics of the colonial past have been allowed to stand. A university town and tourist centre, it nestles in the Sierra Nevada, overshadowed by Bolívar Peak (5007m/15,260ft) and Mirror Peak (where the world's highest cable car climbs to an

altitude of 4675m/14,250ft). Mérida has modern and colonial art museums and much more worth seeing, including the Valle Grande, the Flower Clock, Los Chorros de Milla, the lagoons of Mucubaji, Los Antejos, Tabay, Pogal, Los Patos, San-say and the famous Black Lagoon. A mountain railway runs from the town to Pico Espejo. The view from the summit looks over the highest peaks of the Cordillera and the Llanos. The Andean Club in Mérida arranges trips to Los Nervados, the highest village in the mountains. Again, this is only recommended for the hardy. Other excursions from Mérida include San Javier del Valle, a relaxing mountain retreat, Venezuela de Antier (a theme park showcasing Venezuelan culture during the presidency of Gomez) and Jaji, which has some fine examples of colonial architecture.

Eastern Venezuela: The coastal regions to the north of the Guiana Highlands have some fine tourist beaches and resorts. These include Higuerote, La Sabana and also Lecheria where the San Juan Drum Festival is held during late June. The Guiana Highlands lie to the south of the Orinoco River and constitute half the land area of the country. Their main value is as a source of gold and diamonds. The Orinoco and its delta have developed as major trade centers. Ciudad Bolívar, formerly known as Angostura, and the home of Angostura bitters, is an old city on the south bank of the Orinoco and still bears traces of its colonial past, although it is currently the centre of modern developments. The Gran Sabana National Reserve is the largest of the Venezuelan plateaus and has an extraordinary array of wildlife. Santa Elena, Guri Dam, a hydroelectric complex supplying electricity to most of Venezuela, and Danto Falls are all worth a visit. Santa Elena de Uairén is a rugged frontier town which holds a Fiesta in August. Mount Roraima, suggested as the site of Conan Doyle's Lost World, can be climbed on foot. A fortnight's supplies and full camping equipment should be taken as the trip can take up to two weeks. The nearest village to the mountain is Peraitepin. Tepuy Peak is also worth a visit. Trips can be arranged to the diamond mines at Los Caribes. In Icabán, after a heavy rainfall, it is common to see children searching the slopes for gold nuggets washed down from the slopes. It is possible to arrange trips by boat up the Orinoco River delta to La Tucupita. Canaima (one of the world's largest national parks, comprising 7,400,000 acres/3,000,000 hectares) is the setting for the spectacular Angel Falls, which carry the waters of the Churum River into an abyss. At 979m (3212ft), they are the highest in the world, a sight no visitor should miss. Trips can be arranged which take in the waterfalls and other nearby attractions, including many rare plants – Canaima has over 500 species of orchid alone.

SUGGESTED READING LIST

In addition to the many comprehensive and readily available guides produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, and others, there are many books relating to Venezuela. Here are a few selections we thought might interest you. These books may be obtained through most bookstores or on the World Wide Web.

THE MAGICAL STATE: NATURE, MONEY, AND MODERNITY IN VENEZUELA **Fernando Coronil**

In 1935, after the death of dictator General Juan Vicente Gómez, Venezuela consolidated its position as the world's major oil exporter and began to establish what today is South America's longest-lasting democratic regime. Endowed with

the power of state oil wealth, successive presidents appeared as transcendent figures who could magically transform Venezuela into a modern nation. During the 1974-78 oil boom, dazzling development projects promised finally to effect this transformation. Yet now the state must struggle to appease its foreign creditors, counter a declining economy, and contain a discontented citizenry. In critical dialogue with contemporary social theory, Fernando Coronil examines key transformations in Venezuela's polity, culture, and economy, recasting theories of development and highlighting the relevance of these processes for other postcolonial nations. The result is a timely and compelling historical ethnography of political power at the cutting edge of interdisciplinary reflections on modernity and the state.

THE LOST FLEET: THE DISCOVERY OF A SUNKEN ARMADA FROM THE GOLDEN AGE OF PIRACY **Barry Clifford**

Barry Clifford has written an interesting book on a fleet of French ships that were in pursuit of Dutch ships which led the French into the treacherous waters of the reef off of Las Aves Island near the coast of Venezuela in 1678. He states the wreckage of the French fleet on Las Aves was the beginning of some of the greatest pirate careers in history. British and French ships would attack Spanish ships as they returned to Spain after loading up on riches in the New World. Many pirates, Clifford states, met a brutal demise and he goes into detail in regard to a number of pirates to illustrate his point while one in particular, Thomas Paine (not the one of Common Sense fame), managed to retire and lead a somewhat respectable life. Clifford organized a team to visit the site in 1998 and locate the fleet for purposes of drawing and photographing whatever he may find of the remains. He was not interested in disturbing the reef by removing artifacts. Clifford goes into interesting detail on his team's visit to Las Aves as they go about doing their assigned work. Clifford alternates throughout the book covering piracy during the 1600's and his visit to the site during 1998.

IPHIGENIA **Teresa de la Parra (Author), Bertic Acker (Translator)**

Parra's book seems light years ahead of time, an insightful critique of Latin machismo and oppression that makes a frontal attack on forced matrimony, organized religion, sexual mores and the domestic sphere. Though the heroine's flightiness and indecision are bound to irritate some readers, its crucial to keep in mind that the author was single-handedly clearing space for a feminine (if not a Feminist) perspective within the confines of a deeply patriarchal and misogynistic narrative framework, one that systematically relegated women characters to passive, at times silent, roles. Here, Parra takes up a common enough trope--that of the orphaned young woman ripe for marriage and pursued by multiple suitors--and shatters the mold, giving her protagonist not only a voice, but a consciousness. Maria Eugenia is certainly one of the first heroines in Latin American fiction to openly question her position in society and to rail against the fact that she is little more than a pawn in the hands of men and older, scheming women. She is an unforgettable character even if--quite inevitably--she fails in the end to actually remove herself from the patriarchal structures that so violently work to keep her mind and body in check. The book is not perfect, of course, it could not be considering that its primary purpose seems to blaze a trail, but for all its windiness and occasional lapses into vapidness, it is an important work, one that deserves a critical revival, if not a wide readership.

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