



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Venezuela is a tropical land located at the top of South America. Covering 352,143 square miles (912,050 square kilometers), it is slightly larger than Texas and Oklahoma combined. The country is divided roughly into four geographic zones: west, central, east, and south. The Andes Mountains dominate the west, where the highest peak, Pico Bolívar, rises 16,427 feet (5,007 meters) above sea level. The central zone includes the northern coast and Venezuela's largest cities. To the east of the Orinoco River is Los Llanos ("the plains"), a region occupying one-third of the country. Jungles and high plateaus are common in the west. Angel Falls, the highest waterfall in the world, at 3,212 feet (979 meters), is in southeastern Venezuela. In the far south is a reserve for the country's Yanomami tribes. Covering 32,000 square miles (almost 83,000 square kilometers), the area is off-limits to farmers, miners, and all non-Yanomami settlers.

There are two seasons in most of Venezuela: wet and dry. The rainy season is from May to November. Temperatures average 70–85°F (21–29°C), but the mountains can experience cool temperatures, and some Andean peaks are snowcapped year-round. Earthquakes are frequent.

History

Before the arrival of Columbus, Venezuela was inhabited by a number of indigenous groups, including the Caracas, Arawak, and Cumanagotos. In 1498, Columbus became the first European to explore the area. The Spanish soon began

conquering offshore islands and coastal regions. They named the area Venezuela ("little Venice") because the coastal homes were built on stilts, reminding them of Venice, Italy. Caracas, the capital, was founded in 1567. The Spanish Crown, which claimed the territory, controlled Venezuela through the 18th century. After various failed revolts by American-born Spanish elite, a congress formed and declared independence in 1811. This began a 10-year struggle to create a truly free and united country. Finally, in 1821, the forces of Simón Bolívar were victorious at the Battle of Carabobo, and a republic was established. The republic (called *Gran Colombia*) contained Venezuela, Ecuador, and Colombia. The republic dissolved in 1830, and Venezuela became an independent country.

Venezuela experienced instability and dictatorships for many years. The 20th century began under the dictator Cipriano Castro. He was deposed by Juan Vicente Gómez, his vice president, who ruled as a brutal dictator until his death in 1935. More political instability and military coups followed.

A freely elected president came to power in 1958, and democratic elections have taken place since. For a time, Venezuela was the most stable South American country and was also one of the wealthiest in the region. It has some of the world's largest oil reserves outside of the Persian Gulf area, and it benefited from high oil prices in the 1970s and 1980s. Carlos Andrés Pérez, who became president in 1989, introduced a controversial economic austerity plan to address the plummeting price of oil and rising foreign debt. The reforms boosted gross domestic product, but the wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few. Poverty, inflation, and unemployment increased, and violent opposition soon rose to

challenge Pérez. He was nearly overthrown by two coups in 1992. Pérez was impeached in 1993 and later imprisoned for misusing government security funds.

December 1993 elections brought a former president, Rafael Caldera, to office. He promised to end corruption, stabilize the economy, and slow privatization begun under Pérez, but austerity measures and high inflation sparked public protests, and the standard of living for most Venezuelans declined dramatically under Caldera's leadership.

Record-low oil prices in the late 1990s deepened Venezuela's economic crisis. Claiming to represent the needs of the poor, Hugo Chávez Frias was elected president by a large majority in the December 1998 elections. Chávez, who had led a coup attempt in 1992, began to transform Venezuela's political system after coming to office, promising complete social reform. Under a new constitution in 1999, Chávez dissolved the bicameral parliament, established a single National Assembly, and gave greater powers to the president. Chávez's reforms increasingly polarized the country and led to violent antigovernment protests. In April 2002, a military coup temporarily replaced Chávez with businessman Pedro Carmona. However, two days later, Chávez returned to power. Political struggles continued with a nine-week general strike that paralyzed the nation and with a subsequent referendum on Chávez's rule. Chávez survived the strike and referendum and was elected to a third term in December 2006. Because the opposition began boycotting Parliament in 2005, the legislature was able to give Chávez broad powers to proceed with his agenda, which included nationalizing sectors of the telecommunications and energy industries and land redistribution. In 2010, opposition candidates ran in parliamentary elections, ending their five-year boycott of congress. Recently Venezuela has cooperated with Russia in energy policy and military activity. Reports continue of increasing crime rates, censorship of the press, and a corrupt justice system.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Venezuela has a population of about 27.22 million, which is growing around 1.5 percent annually. Venezuela is the most urbanized country in South America; more than 90 percent of the people live in urban areas. Caracas has nearly 5 million inhabitants. Venezuela's other major cities include Maracaibo, Valencia, and Maracay. In general the population is a racial mixture, and the majority of the population is of mixed European and indigenous or black heritage. Roughly one quarter is white and of European (mostly Italian or Spanish) descent. About 10 percent of the population is black. A small part (perhaps 1 percent) of the population is made up of indigenous peoples, including the Goajiros, who live in the west, and the Yanomamis, who live in the south.

Language

Spanish is the official language and is spoken by almost everyone, with the exception of some indigenous people

living in remote areas. These indigenous groups speak a variety of languages. The Spanish spoken in Venezuela is known for its many unique words and phrases. *Chévere* means "very well" or "cool." *Estar pelado* (to be bald) and *estar limpio* (to be clean) can also mean "to be broke," or out of money. *Ponerse las pilas* (to insert batteries) means "to be aware" or "watch out." *Dejar el pelero* (leave the hair) means "to leave a mess." English is required in high school.

Religion

Religious freedom is guaranteed by the constitution. Still, the Roman Catholic Church has historically had a large voice in government. Catholicism is deeply ingrained in the culture, and over 95 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. While many Catholics do not attend church services regularly, most profess some faith in God, the Catholic saints, and the Virgin Mary. Protestant and other Christian faiths are becoming more prevalent. In general, Venezuelans are somewhat less religious than other Latin Americans. Rural people tend to be more devoted to their faith than are urban residents.

General Attitudes

Venezuelans take great pride in their country and the heroes of the independence movement. The South American liberator Simón Bolívar was Venezuelan, and while he is honored in many other nations, he is a national treasure to Venezuela. Most cities have a *Plaza Bolívar* that occupies a block near the city center. It is rude to behave disrespectfully in that plaza or to refer negatively to Bolívar.

Venezuelans admire honesty, generosity, and a good sense of humor. Their fondness of talking, joking, laughing, and spontaneity often creates a party-like atmosphere wherever they are. People are more important than schedules, and arriving a few minutes late is not offensive. Scheduled events may last longer than expected. Venezuelans are proud of the beauty of their country and of Venezuelan women; they proudly point out that winners of international beauty contests are frequently from Venezuela. Loss of prosperity over the last decade has caused Venezuela's once relatively large middle class to focus on making ends meet. Still, many are optimistic that they can work out their current problems.

Personal Appearance

Venezuelans tend to be quite fashion-conscious and take great care of their appearance; urban people dress in current European styles. Professional men and women wear suits or more casual clothing, which is always neat and clean. In Caracas, business dress tends to be more formal. Shorts and swimwear are worn only in urban recreation areas and at the beach. Native peoples may wear European or traditional dress or a combination of both.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Men greet close friends with an *abrazo* (a full embrace, while patting each other on the back); women both greet and part

with an *abrazo* and a kiss on the cheek. Usually a man and a woman exchange an *abrazo* only if they are close friends or relatives. A firm handshake is a common greeting and parting gesture among acquaintances and strangers, which may be accompanied by a pat on the back.

During conversation, most people in Venezuela stand closer than do people in the United States, and backing away is usually improper. However, people in the Andes region often stand farther apart than other Venezuelans. Common greetings include *Buenos días* (Good morning), *Buenas tardes* (Good afternoon), and *Buenas noches* (Good evening). Young people generally use the casual *Hola* (Hi). Greetings often include polite inquiries about a person's health. Common parting phrases include *Hasta luego* (Until later), *Nos vemos* (We'll see you), and *Chao* (Good-bye). *Adiós* (Good-bye) is rarely used as it implies a permanent farewell.

The elderly and other respected people may be addressed as *Don* (for men) or *Doña* (for women), followed by the first name. Acquaintances and professionals are addressed by title (*Doctor*, *Señor*, *Señora*, etc.), usually followed by the surname. Friends often address one another by nickname.

Gestures

Venezuelans generally use their hands during conversation to communicate or emphasize a point. They may also use a gesture to communicate without speaking. For example, one can ask the price of an item or request payment by rubbing the thumb and index finger together while rotating the palm up. It is courteous to maintain eye contact while conversing. When sitting, a person does not slouch or prop the feet up on any object. Pointing with the index finger is considered rude; motioning with the entire hand is more polite. Passing between conversing individuals or interrupting a conversation is also rude; in such circumstances, one is expected to say *Con permiso* (With permission). People often offer their seats to the elderly on public transportation.

Visiting

Venezuelans enjoy visiting friends and relatives. Friends may visit unannounced, and such visits can be as long as two hours or more. People typically only invite close friends to their homes; business contacts and other visitors usually are invited to dine at a restaurant. Venezuelans are careful to provide for their guests. When visitors arrive at a home, business, or office, they often are served *un cafecito* (thick black coffee) in a very small cup. This is a gesture of hospitality and friendship. Polite discussion usually precedes any business matters. In the home, hosts may offer guests refreshments in addition to coffee. It is polite for guests to inquire about the health of the host's family members. As a guest, one should greet each person upon one's arrival and departure. Hosts generally do not expect gifts from visitors.

Eating

Lunch is the main meal of the day. Families traditionally eat together for midday and evening meals; however, this custom varies by region. Families in big cities no longer eat midday meals together. Parents usually sit at the head and foot of the dinner table. Some Venezuelans eat in the continental style,

with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Others use the style more common in the United States, with the fork in the right hand, unless the knife is picked up to cut something. When a person is finished, he or she places the utensils together or in an "X" at the center of the plate. Dining out, especially on business, is common. In restaurants, the bill usually includes a service charge (10 percent), but patrons are expected to leave a small additional tip. Streetside food stands are popular and serve hamburgers and hot dogs.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Family ties are strong and most families are close-knit. However, about half of all births in Venezuela are out of wedlock, many in common-law marriages. Households commonly include members of the extended family, usually grandparents. The father dominates in the home, but the responsibility for raising the children and managing the household traditionally rests with the mother. More couples are sharing responsibilities as an increasing number of women work outside the home, especially in Caracas. While women comprise almost half of the labor force, less than 10 percent of employers and managers are women. If members of a family are affluent, they customarily share their wealth with less-fortunate relatives.

Housing

Housing varies dramatically with class. The upper classes live in spacious (at least four bedroom, four bathroom) homes or in luxury apartments that include swimming pools and other amenities. Middle-class families usually live in houses or tall apartment buildings within well-organized communities called *urbanizaciones*. Because hospitality is so important to Venezuelans, most homes contain a room reserved for visitors. Homes are usually made of cement and brick, and it is not uncommon for them to be protected with alarm systems and large fences. Lower classes live in *barrios*, neighborhoods containing inadequate dwellings (called *ranchos*) built of cardboard and zinc and plastic sheeting. *Ranchos* are stacked on top of one another. Rural inhabitants lack basic services like electricity and water. Preserved Spanish colonial homes can be found in major cities. Such buildings were built using *bahareque*, a technique of adding mud to bamboo walls.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and courtship traditions in Venezuela are similar to those in other Western countries. Young people enjoy socializing and choosing their companions. Most weddings include two marriage ceremonies: a civil ceremony for legal recognition and an optional religious ceremony. Religious ceremonies are an important part of the Venezuelan culture because of the Roman Catholic tradition. Parties are usually held after the religious ceremony. Divorce has become more common, and more unmarried couples are living together prior to or instead of getting married.

Life Cycle

Baptism is one of the most important ceremonies in one's life. Baptism dresses are passed down through the generations of a family. Children are often named after a saint and celebrate their saint's day as well as their actual birthday. Godparents give their godchild a rosary, prayer book, or medal of a saint for the child's baptism and First Communion. All of these events are celebrated with large parties attended by extended family members. The *quinceañera* (fifteenth birthday) celebrates a girl's transition into womanhood. A reception is held that includes lots of food and music. The most important moment is when the young woman dances the waltz with her father. Upon a death, a viewing takes place at a funeral home, where family and friends stay all night, praying for their loved one's soul to reach heaven. Coffee and other beverages are served. A Mass and burial follows. Meals brought to the home after a death are welcomed gestures of support.

Diet

Common foods in Venezuela include pasta, rice, beans, plantains, white cheese, chicken, potatoes, and fish. Corn is the basis of many dishes, and fried foods are popular. One favorite is the *arepa*, a deep-fried thick pancake made from white corn flour and sometimes filled with butter, meat, and cheese. *Hallacas* are similar to *arepas* but are stuffed with stewed meat, potatoes, olives, raisins, and other spices; they are especially popular at Christmastime. Casseroles, meat pies, meatloaf, and stews are well liked, although rising prices have diminished meat's popularity somewhat. *Puntatrasera* is a favorite tender steak. *Pabellón criollo* consists of black beans, rice, shredded meat, plantains, and *arepas*.

In most cities, open-air markets provide a large variety of tropical fruits and fresh vegetables. Popular fruits include mangoes, *lechoza* (papaya), bananas, and watermelon. These may be eaten or made into *batidos de fruta* (fruit shakes), which are sold on the street at *refresquerias* (fruit-and-drink stands). *Quesillo* (similar to flan) is a popular desert. Hot chocolate is also common, particularly in the cooler Andean states.

Recreation

Baseball is very popular in Venezuela, followed by basketball. Soccer is much less popular than in other Latin American countries. Venezuelans enjoy watching horse racing and bullfighting. Fishing, swimming, cycling, and tennis are common participation sports. *Bolas criollas* is a well-loved game similar to lawn bowling. Many women enjoy walking, cycling, and playing softball. For entertainment, Venezuelans like to go dancing, to movies, or to cultural events. Playing dominoes and visiting are favorite leisure activities. *Telenovelas* (soap operas) have a large following, particularly among women. Going to the beaches or the mountains is a common vacation activity.

The Arts

Venezuelan art is a blend of European and indigenous influences. *Llaneros* (similar to cowboys) are often depicted, and the *Joropo* (traditional music of *Los Llanos* or "the plains") is the national dance, usually accompanied by

Maracas (rattles made of gourds) and the *cuatro* (a small guitar). Annual music festivals feature such popular music as *merengue*, *salsa*, *gaitas* (traditional Christmas music), and *aguinaldos* (traditional Christmas songs). Classical music is appreciated, and there are symphony orchestras in many cities.

Literature developed substantially during the 20th century, due largely to the influence of such writers as Arturo Uslar Pietri. Many people produce crafts such as canoes, saddles, and musical instruments.

Holidays

Official public holidays in Venezuela include New Year's Day, *Carnaval* (two days before Ash Wednesday), Ash Wednesday, Easter (Thursday–Sunday), Declaration of Independence Day (19 Apr.), Day of Workers (1 May), Battle of Carabobo (24 June), Independence Day (5 July), Simón Bolívar's Birthday (24 July), Day of Indigenous Resistance (formerly Columbus Day, 12 Oct.), Christmas Eve, Christmas, and New Year's Eve.

Many families vacation at the beach or in the mountains during the week preceding Easter, which is called *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) and during August. *Carnaval* is celebrated most in eastern Venezuela, where water fights, parades, dancing in the streets, and other activities are common.

Towns and cities hold annual *ferias* (festivals), honoring their local patron saint. The three most important *ferias* include the *Feria de San Sebastian*, in San Cristóbal; the *Feria del Sol*, in Mérida; and the *Feria de la Chinita*, in Maracaibo. Festivities include bullfighting, street dances, craft exhibits, and beauty contests. Flowers are important in Venezuelan celebrations. During each holiday, statues of Simón Bolívar, the father of Venezuela, are decorated with colorful wreaths.

SOCIETY

Government

Venezuela is a republic with a president who serves a six-year term. As chief of state and head of government, President Hugo Chávez governs with a Council of Ministers. The National Assembly is made up of 165 members, who are elected by popular vote. Three seats are reserved for members of the country's indigenous groups. Venezuela's traditional political parties, notably the Democratic Action Party (AD) and the Social Christian Party (COPEI), have been challenged by new political parties such as the Movement for a Fifth Republic (MVR) and *Un Nuevo Tiempo* (A New Era). The voting age is 18.

Economy

Venezuela is a member of OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), and oil is the cornerstone of the economy. It accounts for more than 80 percent of all export earnings and a substantial portion of all government revenues. Those revenues have allowed the country to develop a modern infrastructure. However, oil has also made Venezuela

subject to market changes, the most recent being a 2008 dip in oil prices that resulted in rising inflation. When oil prices drop, the entire economy suffers. Therefore, the government stresses economic diversification. Tourism, petrochemical, and gas sectors are potential sources of revenue. The country also exports some minerals and other raw materials. Agriculture employs about 13 percent of the population and produces grains, sugar, fruits, coffee, and rice.

Economic growth was somewhat erratic in the 1990s. Several major banks went bankrupt in 1994, which led to a severe currency devaluation of the *bolívar fuerte* (VEF) and added to concerns about economic stability. Unemployment and inflation are relatively high. Fluctuating oil prices, a large external debt, and strikes in 2002 and 2003 have severely damaged the Venezuelan economy. The standard of living of most Venezuelans is falling. A large portion of the population lives in poverty. The gap between rich and poor is widening as Venezuela's middle class continues to shrink. Benefits from Venezuela's oil wealth have eluded a significant proportion of the population. Access to health care, education, and a decent standard of living is limited for the general population.

Transportation and Communications

Most people use public transportation; few Venezuelans can afford to own a private car. Buses and taxis are common, but the *por puesto* is the most popular and cheapest form of transportation. It features a system of taxi-like automobiles that travel a regular route throughout the city, picking up and letting off passengers at any point. The cost is less than a taxi but more than a bus. Major cities are connected by highways, but driving can be unsafe on poorly maintained roads. Railroads generally are not used for passenger travel. Caracas has a modern underground subway system.

The communications system is modern and expanding. Private phones are expensive, but public phones are readily available. The popularity of cellular phones is growing. Several radio and television stations broadcast in Venezuela, though some outlets critical of President Chavez have been closed indefinitely. A number of daily national and regional newspapers also service the country.

Education

Education is compulsory (though not enforced) from ages seven to fourteen. All education, including university level, is free in public institutions. The government has taken great strides in improving the literacy rate. About three-fourths of all students complete primary school (nine years), and many of those children go on to secondary school (two years). However, about two-thirds of the overall school-age population does not attend a secondary school. Secondary school tracks are available in the sciences, humanities, and technical fields. Many families are unable to afford the necessary books and transportation. After secondary school, students may choose from a variety of three-year vocational schools or take an aptitude test to enter a university.

Health

Good medical facilities can be found in urban areas, but the

best are private and very expensive for the average citizen. Many facilities, particularly in rural areas, lack staff, equipment, and supplies. Strikes involving medical-care personnel are relatively frequent. Only about two-thirds of all infants are immunized against childhood diseases, but the government is trying to improve that percentage. Malnutrition is a challenge faced by many. Malaria, cholera, and dengue fever are active, especially in certain rural areas.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	27,223,228 (rank=45)
Area, sq. mi.	352,143 (rank=34)
Area, sq. km.	912,050

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	75 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	64 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$13,000
Adult literacy rate	93% (male); 93% (female)
Infant mortality rate	21 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	71 (male); 77 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).