



# Venezuelan Journey

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## **Tulane**

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# Venezuelan Journey



## Regions of Venezuela

Located on the northeastern coast of South America, Venezuela is a country of geographic and human diversity. Six distinctive geographic regions exist in a territory roughly the size of the state of Montana, and the population enjoys one of the highest standards of living in Latin America. People live in each of the six regions: the coast, Segovia highlands, Andes, Coastal Ranges, *llanos* (plains), and the Guayana region.

The coast of Venezuela stretches over 900 miles along the waters of the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Deltas at the mouths of several rivers create swamps and wetlands richly populated with wildlife, and rocky expanses and sandy beaches also punctuate the shoreline. The main city of the coastal region is Maracaibo, the second-largest city in Venezuela. Located on the western side of Lake Maracaibo, the city is closely tied to the petroleum industry. The Bolivar oil field is located under Lake Maracaibo and produces more oil than any other. Some of the earliest offshore drilling developed in this region, and the majority of coastal industry is still petroleum-related.

The Segovia highlands are a region of high plains and broken hills at the northeastern tip of the Andes mountain range. The region is hot and dry, and most of the vegetation is short and scrubby. The Segovia highlands cover only 9300 square miles, and the main city is Barquisimeto.

The northeastern extension of the Andes chain ends in Venezuela, where it forks into twin ranges surrounding Lake Maracaibo. In some locations, peaks exceed 16,000 feet, and the valleys in the range serve as sites for

most of the towns in this region. The main city is San Cristóbal, located in one of these valleys near the Colombian border.

The Coastal Ranges are directly behind the central section of the Venezuelan coast. They run parallel to the coast, parted in two halves by the Unare River Basin. The valleys of this region produce agricultural products for urban consumption and export. The capital city of Caracas lies in this region, and industry centers about this metropolis.

The *llanos* lie south of the Coastal Ranges and are expanses of grasslands and river systems. The cattle industry dominates this predominately rural region dotted with small towns. The Orinoco River forms the southern border of the *llanos*.

The Orinoco River divides the *llanos* from Guayana, a region further to the south. Accounting for almost half of Venezuela's territory, Guayana consists of vast plains and an area of broken mountain systems called *tepuis*. The *tepuis* are noted for their sharp vertical sides and plateau summits. The topography of this region produces a number of spectacular waterfalls, including Angel Falls, the highest in the world. The southern half of Guayana is part of the Amazon River basin. Covered with tropical forests and virtually uninhabited, the land is protected in a series of state parks. There are no great metropolitan centers in Guayana, though Ciudad Bolivar does host a number of industries based on the mining of ore and bauxite. There is also an important business in the construction and maintenance of hydroelectric facilities.

## History

Before the arrival of the Europeans, various indigenous groups inhabited the territory of Venezuela. These peoples had varying degrees of contact with the Spanish colonists that arrived after Columbus' third voyage, and indigenous traditions persisted longer outside the Coastal Ranges. Spanish presence was limited in the *llanos*, Andes, and Guayana, and Indians in these places were able to resist European domination.

In August 1498, Christopher Columbus landed on the Peninsula of Parí and had his first encounter with the South American continent. However, at the time, he thought he had landed on another island in the Caribbean chain. The discovery of pearl beds led to an interest in the coast, and by 1500 rumors of gold inland led conquistadors to begin extensive exploration of the coast and river regions. In the 1499 expedition of the Gulf of Venezuela, Alonso de Ojeda saw native houses supported over the water by poles and was reminded of Venice. The new region thus received its present name of Venezuela.

From 1528 to 1546 Venezuela was in the charge of German bankers. King Charles of Spain and Francis I of France were engaged in a bidding competition for the title of Holy Roman Emperor, and in exchange for funds, Charles gave the Germans an indefinite lease on Venezuela. The Germans soon began large-scale exploration of the interior of Venezuela in search of economic opportunities.

By 1600, after countless expeditions that encountered resistant indigenous peoples and hostile physical conditions, Europeans returned to the established centers on or near the coast. Agriculture became the main source of income for the colonists, and the region supplied the grow-

ing European demand for cacao and coffee. The increased economic activity required vast amounts of labor, supplied by Africans transported to the Americas and forced into slavery. The slave trade reached its peak in the mid-1700s, but slavery endured in the territory until independence was won from Spain.

In the early 1700s, the Bourbon monarchs of Spain made an effort to promote economic growth in order to secure more revenue for the Spanish Crown. As part of this program, the Crown began to allocate charters to companies for economic development, and one of the most successful of these was the Caracas Company in Venezuela. Formed by Basque entrepreneurs in 1728, the company was successful economically but faced hostility from the local colonists. The Basques held a monopoly that excluded all others, not only *peninsulares* (Spanish people born in Spain) but also *criollos* (Spanish people born in the Americas). In 1749, a rebellion against the company was squelched, but the company eventually lost its monopoly in 1789. However, the conflict that arose among the inhabitants regarding the company left a legacy of resistance that would later prove important in the independence movement.

Francisco de Miranda led the first major independence movement in 1806. Miranda was an exceptional individual and an acquaintance of George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, William Pitt, and Catherine the Great. He served as Major General in revolutionary France in 1792 against the forces of Austria and Prussia and was one of the earliest proponents of the ideology of pan-Americanism. However, both of his attempts to liberate Venezuela ended in failure.

Soon, though, the rise of Napoleon dramatically altered the political situation in Europe, creating in the process favorable conditions for Latin American independence.

When Napoleon invaded Spain and usurped the throne of Ferdinand VII, Venezuelan nationals formed a junta loyal to the deposed king and governed the colony in his name. During this time of political uncertainty, Miranda returned with the blessing of the junta, and Bolívar accompanied him to stir the independence movement in Venezuela.

Simón Bolívar expressed at an early age a radical ideology contrary to the conservative one espoused by his wealthy Caracas family. He was well educated, and many of his teachers contributed to his revolutionary views. On his third trip to Europe, Bolívar met Francisco de Miranda in London, and the two men shared enthusiasm for Spanish American independence. Bolívar later became commander of two abortive attempts to liberate Venezuela from Spanish rule. Though these first efforts were failures, Bolívar did eventually lead the successful expedition of 1821. He then set out from Venezuela to liberate the rest of the continent from colonial rule and eventually brought independence to Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

Bolívar envisioned a unified Latin America named the “Gran Colombia,” but this never materialized, and the “Liberator” ultimately lost all the political power he had enjoyed in the regions he freed from Spanish rule. Ambitious local politicians had less lofty aspirations than Bolívar, and their territorial interests conflicted with his grand plans. The years following independence became a period of strife and political turbulence as various regional leaders competed for supremacy.

After the breakdown of Gran Colombia in 1830, Venezuela enjoyed relative peace and prosperity under a coffee-growing, rural-based Conservative oligarchy led by José Antonio Páez. Conflict between Conservative and Liberal factions eventually ended that peace and led to intermittent civil war. Gov-

ernment instability in 1870 led to the rule of Liberal Antonio Gúzman Blanco; he remained in power until 1888. Following the overthrow of this dictator, Liberal-Conservative conflicts continued until a band of revolutionaries descended from the Andes in 1899. A period of authoritarian rule began, and a succession of military figures governed until 1958 with only one interruption.

The central figure of the authoritarian period was Juan Vicente Gómez, known as the “tyrant of the Andes.” He exercised despotic rule from 1908 until his death in 1935. During the Gómez era, Venezuela underwent a transformation from an agricultural economy to an industrial, petroleum-based society. Organized labor also became important during this period, and the first major oil strike occurred in 1922.

After Gómez’s death, Rómulo Betancourt created and built the Democratic Action Party (AD), Venezuela’s first modern, mass-based political party. The party introduced major reforms during its time in office between 1945 and 1948. Opposition grew, however, and the military overthrew the AD in office.

A bleak period of political persecution, corruption, and repression followed under the dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez. Massive protests in 1958 forced Pérez Jiménez to flee from power and inaugurated the vibrant democracy that characterizes Venezuela today.

Venezuela continues to enjoy the benefits of democracy and petroleum-derived wealth. The development of the oil industry has brought Venezuela enormous revenues, and these in turn have made possible social and economic programs. Recently, though, Venezuela has begun to confront the uncertain realities of a post-petroleum economy and to implement alternative strategies for development.

# Slide Descriptions

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1. *Ritual dance*. Native Americans in traditional dress perform a ritual dance. This particular dance precedes the planting of the corn crop.
2. *Ritual dance*. The three major indigenous communities in Venezuela are the Caribes, the Arawak, and the Chibcha. Over 25 Indian dialects are spoken, but the majority of the inhabitants of the country are *mestizo* (of mixed European and Indian ancestry). Unassimilated indigenous communities comprise only 1% of the population, and these live primarily around Lake Maracaibo and in the Orinoco and Amacuro river basins.
3. *The Gran Sabana*. Most of the Guayana region is dry. The majority of vegetation is shrubbery and grass.
4. *Guide to the tepuis*. To reach the *tepuis*, it is necessary to hike for a few days. Most hikers hire a guide who assists in carrying supplies. This guide has an exceptionally heavy load.
5. *Mt. Roraima*. Mt. Roraima is the largest and most famous of the *tepuis*. Located on the border of Venezuela, Guyana, and Brazil, it is 9,094 feet above sea level.
6. *Mt. Roraima*. It is possible to hike to the top of Mt. Roraima on paths without using climbing gear. However, the hike is extremely arduous and requires that the hiker be in excellent physical condition.
7. *Tepui plateau*. The top of the *tepuis* is a hostile environment of rock with sparse vegetation, some of which is specific to only that particular *tepuis*. The meager vegetation atop the *tepuis* is often in sharp contrast to the forest floor thousands of feet below.
8. *Waterfall*. Waterfalls are common in the *tepuis* region and are connected to several hydroelectric plants in the area.
9. *Angel Falls*. At 3,212 feet above sea level, Angel Falls is the highest waterfall in the world. The natural wonder is named in honor of United States Air Force pilot Jimmy Angel, who flew over the falls in March 1937.
10. *Angel Falls*. View of the entire falls.
11. *Central Business District, Caracas*. Caracas is one of the wealthiest, most cosmopolitan cities in Latin America with a world-famous nightlife. Despite the glamour of certain areas, slums and squatter settlements surround the city and house a growing number of unemployed urban residents.
12. *Downtown Caracas*.

13. *Cable car.* A cable car can be taken from the coast over the Coastal Range to Caracas. Caracas has an exceptional subway system designed along the French model and reminiscent of the subways of Mexico City and Washington, D.C. Although the Caracas metropolitan area has some of the most sophisticated freeways in the world, the most common type of transportation in Venezuela is bus travel.
14. *Independence Day celebration.* Venezuelan Independence Day celebrations take place on July 5<sup>th</sup>.
15. *Portrait of Simón Bolívar.* Painting of the great Venezuelan hero and visionary.
16. *Governmental palace.* Venezuelan government is based on republican, democratic, and representative principles. It employs a system of checks and balances similar to the United States.
17. *Government buildings.* The legislative branch of government is based on a bicameral system, with the Chamber of Deputies consisting of proportional representation. Presidents of Venezuela are elected to a term of five years.
18. *Government building.* Several parties compete in the Venezuelan political arena. The two most successful parties are the Democratic Action Party (social democratic) and the Committee for Independent Political and Electoral Organization (social Christian, known by the acronym COPEI). In foreign relations, Venezuela has consistently tried to promote democracy in Latin America. It has used revenue from petroleum to encourage economic development and stability, particularly in Central America. Along with Mexico, Venezuela agreed to sell oil at reduced prices to its poorer neighbors. Venezuela has had a relatively stable and friendly relationship with the United States, though there have been open disagreements between the two states over United States policy in Central America.
19. *View of the Orinoco River from Ciudad Bolívar.* The Orinoco is 1,700 miles long and forms part of the Venezuelan-Colombian border.
20. *Naval station.* Naval station on the Orinoco at Ciudad Bolívar.

## Questions and Activities

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1. Divide the students into six groups. Assign each group a geographic region of Venezuela, and have students determine the lifestyle of their region and the products they produce.
2. View the video *Doña Bárbara*, based on the novel by Rómulo Gallegos. Who is the protagonist of the story? Who is the antagonist? What similarities are there with the American West? Differences? Why did Doña Bárbara treat her daughter badly? It is often stated that Doña Bárbara represents evil and barbarism in this story. Do you agree or disagree? What is the relationship between the natural environment and the personalities of the characters?
3. Obtain a copy of “Venezuela’s Island in Time” by Uwe George and published in *National Geographic* 175.5 (May 1989): 526-61. Ask students to conduct a classroom discussion about the article. Why is the flora on a *tepui* particular to that specific plateau? How important is the constant existence of rain clouds around *tepuis*?
4. View the video entitled *Simón Bolívar: The Great Liberator* (40 minutes) distributed by Films for the Humanities and Sciences. Discuss the figure and legacy of Bolívar.

## Additional Readings

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