

## LAND



Pic. 1: Venezuela

## FACTS

<b>Surface:</b>	916 445 km <sup>2</sup>
<b>Capital:</b>	Caracas
<b>Form of government:</b>	presidential democracy
<b>Inhabitants:</b>	25 mio
<b>Population Density:</b>	28/km <sup>2</sup>
<b>GNP per capita:</b>	4080 US\$
<b>Life Expectancy:</b>	77 (W)/71 (M)
<b>Language:</b>	Spanish
<b>Religion:</b>	96% catholic, 2% protestants

## HISTORY

The first evidence of life in Venezuela has been dated 14.000 BC in the Northwest of the country. Before Spanish conquest at the end of the 15th century 300.000-400.000 indigenous people lived in Venezuela. After conquest through Columbus on his third journey to America, Alonso de Ojeda, accompanied by the Italian Amerigo Vespucci, entered the country at the lake Maracaibo, where the indigenous people lived in lake dwellings on columns, called palafitos. Inspired by them they called the country "little Venice" – Venezuela.

Colonization happened rapidly due to the expectation of gold. In the 18th century the number of Africans surpassed

the number of indigenous people and the mixture of cultures between Africans, Europeans and Indians varied the existing ethnic groups.

With help of Simón Bolívar "El Libertador" Venezuela gained independence of Spanish rule in 1811. Until 1830 Venezuela belonged to Great Columbia with Simón Bolívar as president. In 1914 the oil was discovered, which soon turned Venezuela into one of South Americas richest countries.

From 1830 on it was ruled by several military dictatorships. The last dictator, Colonel Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who introduced the modernization of the country with oil money, especially its capital of Caracas, was overthrown in 1958.

Head of the first presidential democracy in 1961 was President Rómulo Betancourt, after him President Rafael Caldera and then President Carlos Andrés Pérez.

An economical crisis due to the international recession and oil glut led to unemployment, inflation and national debt. Austerity measures, in 1989 by President Pérez triggered a wave of protests, culminating in bloody riots, uprising in the "barrios", called "El Caracazo", claiming 300 lives.

There were two attempted coups in 1992, one in February led by Colonel Hugo Chávez, who was sentenced to imprisonment, and one in November, led by air force officers. The presidential palace was bombed and more than 100 people died.

In 1993 Pérez was suspended because of misuse of public funds and corruption. During presidency of Rafael Caldera a financial crisis and the failure of several banks in 1995 were followed by drastic rescue measures. In 1998 2/3 of Venezuela's inhabitants lived below poverty line. Drug traffic, crime and guerrilla movement at the Columbian border increased.

After being pardoned and having concentrated on an aggressive populist campaign with nationalist Bolivarian rhetoric targeting the poor, Hugo Chávez Frías became president with his Party "Movimiento Quinta Republica" in 1999 and started the "Bolivarian Revolution".

The opposition became restless. The new constitution of 2000 and further decree laws resulted in April 2002 in a protest by half a million people, claiming 24 lives. Culminating in a coup led by military leaders, Chávez was taken under military custody, but one day later regained power.

While tension rose, the opposition called a general strike in December 2002, which paralyzed the country and lasted 63 days.

In November 2003 the opposition came up with another try to oust Chávez by saying they collected over 3.5 million signatures, referring to the constitution requiring 20% of the electorate to call a referendum. Delays of publication of the result led

again in 2004 to bloody street riots. In August 2004 the referendum confirms Chávez with 59%.

## POLITICAL SITUATION

The "República Bolivariana de Venezuela" is a democratic federal republic with 23 states and the capital district. The executive is the President, who is elected for six years, and his government.

A deep dislike towards the traditional parties because of corruption led 1999 to the election of ex-insurgent Hugo Chávez ("Movimiento Quinta República"), whose main supporters are the poor districts. Calling for the "Bolivarian Revolution", he tries to enforce a fundamental political change in the country, introducing a new constitution, which gives more power to the president, new laws and more rights for indigenous groups and poor people. He names his political goal the "socialism of the 21st century".

His politics led to a growing split of the Venezuelan society. Though tensions between opposition and Chávez supporters resulted until today in heavy confrontations, the inner political unsteadiness temporarily ended.

The success of President Chávez can mainly be attributed to his social and educational programmes, called "misiones", which are introduced to improve the conditions and situation in the "barrios" and poor areas. Indigenous and poor people are also encouraged to organize and emancipate themselves.

Venezuela is a member of the OPEC and focuses on the stabilization of oil prices.

The relationship to Cuba is tight and friendly. Concerning politics in Latin America, Venezuela especially concentrates on his relations to Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay.

## CLIMATE

Venezuela has a dry season roughly from November to April and rainy season the rest of the year. Although the country lies within the tropics, its climate varies from tropical humid to alpine, depending on the region.

The country falls into four temperature zones: The tropical zone below 800m with yearly averages between 26° C and 30°C, the temperate zone between 800-2000m with averages from 12°C to 25°C, the cool zone between 2000 and 3000m with 9°C to 11°C and the high mountain areas, the páramos, above 3000m

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with snow and averages below 8°C. Humidity can vary from around 65% up to around 88% depending on the area. Yearly Rainfall in the lowlands and plains range from 430mm in the western part of the Caribbean coast to around 1000mm in the Orinoco Delta. Rainfall in mountainous areas and the Andes varies, but can be very heavy.

## TOPOGRAPHY

There are four defined regions: The Maracaibo lowlands in the northwest, the mountains of the Andes extending from east to west, the Orinoco plains of "los llanos" in central Venezuela and the highlands in the southeast.



Pic. 2: Caribbean Coast

Pic. 3: Caracas

The area of the Maracaibo lowlands is flat, partially swampy and significant for its rich agricultural land and petroleum deposits, but less populated.

The mountain chain of the Andes has the highest peaks in the country with Pico Bolívar (5007m), which is snow-capped year-round. The north eastern extension of the Andes on the Caribbean Coast goes up to an altitude of 4500m. The valleys contain most of Venezuela's population, industry and agriculture. Separated through the metropolitan area of Caracas, which hosts the densest population, most agriculture and best transportation network, there is another group of mountains in the east, rising steeply from the Caribbean.

Between the mountains and the Rio Orinoco lie the Orinoco plains known as "los llanos". The elevation here doesn't exceed 200m. North of the Rio Apure, rivers flowing out of the northern mountains cut shallow valleys.

South of Rio Apure the terrain is flatter and elevation lower.

### Images:

Pic.-Nr.1: wikipedia; Pic.-Nr.2-5: eigene

The highlands in the southeast are formed by erosion and comprise half of the country. The Gran Sabana, a large and deeply eroded plateau rises up 800m and brings up flat topped bluffs called "tepuis".



Pic. 4: Andes

Pic. 5: cloud forest

## VEGETATION

Venezuela hosts a diversity of vegetations. Most vegetation is tropical and evergreen or semi deciduous. Forests cover two-fifth of the land.

The most bio diverse rain forest is mainly found in Amazonas, Monagas, Zulia and Sucre. There are also great areas of evergreen cloud forest in the Andes, Miranda, Sucre, Monagas, Bolívar and Amazonas. Mangrove forests and swamps are found either on the Caribbean coast or in River deltas.

Parts of the states bordering the coast like Falcón, Sucre, Lara and the Federal District are covered with xerophytic forest, which is semi deciduous, relatively dry, hosting, bushes, smaller trees and cactuses.

One-third of the land is covered with savannah and grassland in the area of "los llanos" and the Orinoco region.

The vegetation of "páramo" is specialized to very cold and high regions found mainly in the Andes in the state of Mérida.

## SOCIETY

85% of the 25 million population lives in cities and 20% of all Venezuelans live in the capital of Caracas, which is fighting with problems of overpopulation and unemployment.

### Literature:

Ministerio del ambiente y de los recursos naturales renovables, Atlas de Venezuela, 1979, Venezuela;  
Krzysztof Dydynski/Charlotte Beech, Lonely Planet Venezuela, 2004, Victoria

67% of the population are of mixed European, Indian or African descent. 21% are European ancestry, which can be partially explained by around one million refugees having been coming from Spain, Italy and Portugal after World War II. 10% are African and only 2% of the Venezuelan population are indigenous people, counting about 532.000 belonging to 24 different indigenous groups. The largest indigenous groups are the Guajiro north of the Maracaibo lake, the Piaroa, Guajibó, Yekuana and the Yanomami in the Amazon region, the Warao on the Orinoco Delta and the Pemón in southeast Guayana. Most people with 96% are roman-catholic, 2% are protestants and only few Jewish, Muslim or of indigenous religion.

### Websites:

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