

Venezuela is a country of epic proportions. It has South America's largest lake and third-longest river, the highest waterfall in the world, and the longest of all snakes. It also has jaguars, armadillos and some of the most spectacular landscapes you will ever see.

There are the snowcapped peaks of the Andes in the west; steamy Amazonian jungles in the south; the hauntingly beautiful Gran Sabana plateau, the 'Lost World' tableland with its strange flat-topped mountains and miles of white-sand beaches fringed with coconut palms on the Caribbean coast

Its history has been chequered with periods of political turbulence and (oil-generated) extreme opulence. The legacy of the oil-boom years includes an infrastructure that makes Venezuela an easy country to get around. A network of fast (if increasingly pot-holed) roads, and frequent flights means that within a relatively short stay a visitor can enjoy a wide variety of activities.

Venezuela's culture is largely influenced by its North American neighbour - there is a passion for baseball and beauty pageants, fast-food and shopping malls. But in the countryside life has scarcely changed in centuries, and the people are friendly and very welcoming.

Electricity: 110V, 60Hz
Time Zone: GMT/UTC -4
Dialling Code: 58

Climate

Typically, the dry season (summer) falls between December and May while the wet season (winter) runs from June to November.

Festival Calendar

February 1st - Danceros de la Candelaria - (Merida State)

February/March - Carnival - Probably the largest celebration in the country,

Carnival falls on the Monday and Thursday prior to Ash Wednesday. The celebrations vary from region to region but you can be sure to see parades, dancing and masquerades to honour this holiday

March/April- Semana Santa

April - International Theatre Festival in Caracas (every even year)

May 3rd - Velorio de las Cruz de Mayo, celebrated with dancing and parties

May/June - Los Diablos Danzantes (Devil Dancers) is Venezuela's most colourful event and takes place in San Francisco de Yare (60 km outside of Caracas) – the actual date changes every year.

June 24th - Battle of Carabobo

June 23rd – 28th- Fiesta de San Juan - (Miranda State) – A holiday with a lot of African flavour in the music and the food

July 5th - Independence Day

Currency

The local currency is the Venezuelan Bolívar. However, the best way to travel in Venezuela is with a credit card. American Express, Visa and MasterCard are all widely accepted. The odd thing about Venezuela is that while the banks are generally open from 8:30am to 11:30am and 2pm to 4:30pm from Monday to Friday, the hours when they are willing to exchange money are infrequent. Some banks claim that they won't do it at all but they seem to be happy to issue cash advances in Bolivares from credit cards. If you should be told by a bank teller that foreign exchange is not offered, don't just leave it at that. Be sure to ask another teller to reconfirm this policy. In some of the less touristy regions, some tellers may not even be aware that their bank offers this service. In larger cities, banks offer better exchange rates than casas de cambio. The advantage to the casas de cambio is that transactions there are often quicker.

Visas

Most foreigners do not require a visa for travel in Venezuela, provided that they arrive by air. Tourist cards are required but can be issued at the airport free of charge and allow stays of up to 60 days. Tourists arriving overland require a visa, and this should be obtained in their country of residence as they are difficult to arrange whilst en route. These visas are usually valid for up to 1 year from date of issue. Reconfirm current entry requirements prior to departure.

Health

Take precautions against yellow fever, malaria, cholera, hepatitis and dengue fever.

Best time to go

Temperatures in Venezuela remain constant throughout the year, so there really isn't a high season or low tourist season. Most areas are within 1000m above sea level, so the average temperature is about 24C, a little warmer and more humid along the coast. Only in the Central highland regions that we visit will jackets be appropriate. Typically, the dry season (summer) falls between December and May while the wet season (winter) runs from June to November. Though in reality this varies depending on where you travel. Caracas and other coastal areas, for example, receive little rainfall year-round, whereas in the Amazon region you can expect rain regardless of when you go. The tourist season in Venezuela runs year-round so, theoretically, any time you visit is OK. However, the dry season is more pleasant for traveling, though some sights - including the famous Angel Falls - are certainly more impressive in the wet season.

Upon arrival

Once you've reclaimed your baggage and cleared customs, you will be warmly welcomed to Venezuela, assisted with your luggage and taken you to your hotel by private air-conditioned minivan/bus. Please do not leave the airport terminal building unless you have made contact with Amazing Peru staff. Also ignore the calls from taxi drivers as your private transport has been provided for you.

Food and drink

Drink only bottled water. Pasteurised milk is widely available. Avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Avoid street food vendors and the cheaper restaurants.

Highlights

Caracas

Caracas is located on the edge of Monte Avila National Park, which offers spectacular views of the city. Plaza Bolivar - Found at the corner of Av Norte and Av Oeste - the city's cultural centre if not the geographical one. There is a monument of the liberator and hero of the country in the middle. It's a good place for people watching as it has become a playground for the locals. The city's most famous cathedral can be found on the east side of the plaza

Capitolio Nacional - Southwest of the Plaza. Capitolio Nacional is the neoclassical complex commissioned in 1870 by Guzman Blanco. The main reason to visit these buildings is to view the Salon Eliptico, an oval hall with a large mural on its domed ceiling depicting the Battle of Carabobo painted by Martin Tovar y Tovar, Venezuela's most notable artist

Museo Bolivariano - Located on Av Norte 1 between the blocks of Oeste 2 and Avenida Universidad. This museum is a good place to see a variety of independence memorabilia such as weapons and documents. It is also one of the best preserved colonial homes

Panteon Nacional - Located at Plaza Panteon, Av Norte y Av Panteon. Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 9am to noon and 2:30pm to 5pm. Houses the remains of Simon Bolivar as well as the tomb of Francisco Miranda (the Precursor of Independence), which lies open in wait for the return of his body. There are other notables buried within. The changing of the guard takes place around 4:30pm every day

Museo de Arte Colonial - Found in the Quinta de Anauco colonial country mansion in the San Bernadino suburb. This museum is difficult to get to, but probably one of Caracas' best. The grounds are open from Tuesday to Saturday, 8:30am to 11:30am and 2pm to 4:30 p.m. with free concerts on Sundays at 11am.

Nightlife - The districts of Las Mercedes, El Rosal, La Floresta or La Castellana are the best areas.

Around Caracas

Parque Nacional El Avila - This park offers the best tourist facilities of any in the country. There are about 200 km of walking trails accessible from any entrance off Avenida Boyaca for a nominal park entry fee. The teleferico or cable car used to be the best way to get to the top of this park but it has been closed for years and no one knows when it is set to reopen. We suggest you head to the Hotel Humboldt, which was closed down when the cable car became inoperable. It is still a fantastic landmark offering great photo opportunities.

Amazon Jungle

The southern Amazonas region is thick with tropical rain forest, crisscrossed by rivers, and home to a number of isolated Indian tribes. The charming, balmy town of Puerto Ayacucho is the starting point for tours into the Venezuelan Amazon on the Orinoco, Sipapo or Autana rivers.

Caribbean Coast

The northeast coast is the place to go for outdoor activities such as snorkelling, scuba diving, fishing, sailing or just lying around and enjoying the sun. The county's beaches are at their idyllic best here - long expanses of white sand lapped by turquoise waters and fringed with coconut palms.

Isla de Margarita, 40km (25mi) is one of the best isles that is easily accessible from the mainland. A favourite for beach-lovers and a popular holiday destination for Venezuelans, it's an enjoyable ferry ride from Cumaná and Puerto La Cruz on the mainland.

Coro

Located on the Caribbean coast at the base of the Península de Paraguaná, Coro is a pleasant, peaceful, cultured town with some of the best colonial architecture in Venezuela. The historic town centre was declared a national monument in the 1950s and a number of buildings have been restored. Founded in 1527, it was one of the earliest colonial settlements on the continent, but most of the interesting architecture dates from the 18th century, when Coro flourished as a contraband centre trading with the islands of Curaçao and Bonaire.

Río Orinoco

At 2150km (1333mi), South America's third-longest river, the Orinoco runs from its source on the Brazilian border in the south of the country to its wide, flooded delta on the northeast coast. The myriad forested islands that make up the delta are home to the stilt houses of the Warao fishermen. At the reaches of the Lower Orinoco lies the site of ex-capital, Ciudad Bolívar (formerly Angostura), a city that boasts a glorious history and still retains much of its colonial charm. It was here that Simón Bolívar set up his base for the final stage of the War of Independence.

The Andes

The Cordillera de los Andes is a world of towering peaks, rocky cliffs and icy lakes – alpine scenery at its best. Mérida state, the heart of the Andes is an unmissable destination and adventure sports capital. It has the highest mountains and the best-developed tourist facilities. The two other Andean states, Trujillo and Táchira, also provide great adventure travel opportunities, but are almost untouched.

Colonia Tovar

This unusual mountain town sits at an altitude of 1800m (5900ft) amid the rolling forests of the Cordillera de la Costa, about 60km (37mi) west of Caracas. The town was founded in 1843 by a group of 376 German settlers from the Schwarzwald (Black Forest). Isolated from the outer world by the lack of roads and internal rules prohibiting marriage outside the colony, the village followed the mother culture, language and architecture for a century. Spanish was introduced as the official language in the 1940s and the marriage ban was abandoned.

Roraima

Straddling the borders of Venezuela, Guyana and Brazil is a 280 sq km (109 sq mi) plateau called Roraima that has become increasingly popular with travelers interested in trekking or botany. Though the trek involves extensive preparation, discomfiting amounts of rain, the climb is fascinating and the moonscape scenery at the top of the mesa is a science-fiction dream of blackened rock, misty gorges, pink beaches and bewildering plant life.

Salto Aponguao

One of the most impressive and photogenic waterfalls in La Gran Sabana is Salto Aponguao. However, it's rather difficult to reach unless you're prepared to expend a little time and energy. One way to see it is to leave the highway, then travel about 40km (25mi) on an unpaved road before coming to the Indian hamlet of Iboribó. The next step is to pay one of the locals to take you by *curiara* (dugout canoe) across the Río Aponguao, from where it's a half-hour trek to the falls. Another possibility is to arrange for a boat to take you directly there, and then return on foot. Either way, the 105m (344ft) Salto is spectacular. A

well-marked path leads to the foot of the falls, where you can bathe and swim in one of the natural pools. Nearby is an idyllic camping spot with excellent views of both the falls and the surrounding countryside.

Hotels

All the hotels we recommend are clean, well located and comfortable hotels varying in services according to their category. We rarely use hostels as the price difference is negligible between a good hostel and a hotel. In places like the Amazon, we work with clean lodges. We do endeavour to choose the best hotels in line with your budget. There are five star hotels all the way to modest three star establishments. We will always quote you with good hotels on all our programmes but upgrades or downgrades will be available as per your request. However, as the price will decrease with downgrades, this will ultimately reflect in the services and standards of the hotel.

Flights

Unless otherwise stated, we provide the internal flights in your programme. We can provide international flight quotes upon request. We work directly with the best airlines in South America but are not responsible for any changes in flight schedules or cancellations made by the airlines. This is the responsibility of the airline in question. We will always endeavour to minimise any delays or changes but cannot guarantee a successful outcome.

Insurance

It is a mandatory requirement that all our customers take out adequate travel insurance cover. Once you have obtained your insurance, it is company practice to check the validity and cover of your insurance policy and we hold the right to refuse travel to anyone whose insurance does not satisfy Amazing Peru's stringent criteria. These include cancellation and curtailment, death or injury, medical insurance, emergency repatriation, delayed baggage, loss and theft etc.