



Venezuela

Sitting on the north-eastern shoulder of South America, Venezuela borders the Caribbean to the north, and the Amazon basin to the south. A spur of the Andes crosses the western edge of the country with peaks reaching 5,000m, several with permanent snow.

The endless plains of the Llanos teem with wildlife, and in the south-east the extraordinary table mountains (immortalised by Conan Doyle in his 'Lost World') rear above the savanna. Such geographical diversity coupled with a good network of internal flights makes Venezuela an ideal introduction to South America.

A visit to Venezuela can be combined with Ecuador and the Galapagos, or Guyana.

Climate and when to go

As it is only just north of the Equator Venezuela has a hot climate all year. Increasing altitude in the Andes can mean cool nights and the coastal regions are hotter with very little rainfall at any time. There is a rainy season from May/June to October when short tropical downpours can be expected, and this is consequently a good time to see the waterfalls.



Angel Falls



Capybaras



Squirrel monkey



Caracas and Los Roques

Caracas has a pleasant climate because of its position high in the hills above the coast. The city fills several valleys, and is about an hour from the international airport. Apart from a few remnants of its colonial past and some interesting handicraft shops there is little to detain the tourist.

90 nautical miles north of Caracas, the **Los Roques** archipelago comprises around 42 reef-formed islands, the largest of which is Gran Roque, and many smaller islets covering a total area of 400 square kilometres. The water is crystal-clear and there are many exotic fish around the coral, wonderful for snorkelling and diving. On the cayes themselves there are miles of pristine, white sandy beaches (although very little natural shade).



Morrocoy



Gran Roque



Los Roques

The Caribbean Coast

The coast stretches over 2,000km from Lake Maracaibo in the west (where oil was first discovered in 1914) to the Paria Peninsula in the east, whose tip is only a few miles from the islands of Trinidad and Tobago.

West of Caracas, the bustling fishing village of **Choroní** is close to some pretty beaches framed by the stunning backdrop of coastal mountains. It borders the **Henri Pittier National Park**, more than 100,000 hectares of cloud forest which is home to 6.5% of the world's bird species. Further west you can see the giant dunes at Coro, or explore the wonders of the **Morrocoy National Park** - a beautiful collection of islands and mangrove swamps often full of flamingos, scarlet ibis and frigatebirds.

To the east of Caracas, a short drive from Barcelona, is the **Mochima National Park**, made up of a series of small, mostly uninhabited islands with white sandy beaches, offering excellent fishing, snorkelling and diving.

The island of **Margarita**, ringed by beaches, is a popular destination both for mass market packages and Venezuelans on holiday. While parts of the island have been spoilt by uncontrolled development, there are now some pretty *posadas* (inns) which provide a friendly base for exploration.



Pelicans



POSADA CARACOL



On the beach of Gran Roque island, Los Roques. A pretty blue and white guest house with 4 simple but charming rooms, each with a ceiling fan and bathroom (cold water only). Small roof terrace with views over the sea. Snorkelling, diving, fishing, boat trips to the cayes.

VILLA MAJAGUAL



On a private peninsula in the Mochima National Park. Rustic but charming cabañas with private bathrooms, hot water; ceiling fans and veranda. Very secluded setting, excellent food and great attention to detail, ideal for honeymoons. The park has some of the finest beaches in Venezuela, most of which are only accessible by boat. Snorkelling, sunbathing. Diving, beaches (by boat).

CASA CHIARA



A short walk from Playa Caribe, on the northern tip of Margarita and just north of the fishing village of Juan Griego. 4 cottages (each with 2 rooms, own veranda and hammock) around a lovely pool and within a walled enclosure. Excellent restaurant, island tours can be arranged.



WAKU LODGE



On the Canaima lagoon, where the Carrao river plunges over a series of beautiful falls. Comfortable rooms with terrace and hammock, en-suite bathroom, ceiling fans. Lovely gardens with plenty of wildlife. Activities include a canoe trip around the lagoon, visits to Sapo or Angel Falls.

The south: the Gran Sabana and the Amazon

In the south-eastern corner of Venezuela, comprising Bolívar and Amazonas states and covering 45% of the country, lie the Guayana highlands which are part of the pre-Cambrian Guiana Shield, one of the oldest rock formations in the world. Travelling south from Ciudad Bolívar, one enters the **Gran Sabana**, with its distinctive *tepuis*, or table-top mountains, rising with sheer walls from the surrounding forest. The highest is Roraima and the largest is Auyán-tepuy (700 square kilometres), the site of the 979m **Angel Falls** (highest in the world). There are over a hundred of these extraordinary structures, few of which have ever been climbed or properly explored. The fast-flowing rivers that cross the Gran Sabana, their waters usually dark brown from the high levels of tannin (an excellent insect repellent!), often plunge over rocks full of semi-precious minerals, creating spectacular falls and rapids.

Puerto Ayacucho is near the Orinoco's famous Atures and Maypures rapids, considered by Humboldt as the eighth wonder of the world. To the south, inaccessible by road, is the start of the **Amazon rainforest**, home of (among others) the Yanomami Indians. This area is also well known for peacock bass fishing.

The Orinoco Delta

The **Orinoco Delta**, where the mighty Orinoco finally discharges its sediment into the Atlantic through a maze of forested islands and floating reed beds, is the home of the Warao Indians. Totally adapted to their riverine life, they live in stilt houses (*palafitos*) on the banks of the many channels (*caños*) that take the waters of the Orinoco to the ocean.



Canaima lagoon



Canaima



Cerro Autana



The Llanos

Extending from Bolivia, Peru and Colombia, through 1,000km of Venezuela to the Orinoco Delta, the plains (*Llanos*) cover an area of about 320,000 square kilometres. In 'winter' (the rainy season) most of the 12 million cattle from the extensive ranches wade in the silt-bearing floodwater by day and sleep on higher banks at night, while in summer the dust and smoke from turtle-hunters' fires obscure the flat horizons, and wildly coloured birds cluster around the remaining pools of water.

The Llanos is a marvellous place to see wildlife. Apart from more than 300 species of birds (including scarlet ibis, hoatzin, screamers, soldier storks, roseate spoonbills and many more) you may be lucky enough to spot jaguars, ocelots, anteaters, honey-bears, capybaras and crocodiles, in an environment still relatively undisturbed by man.



Burrowing owl



The Andes

Coming from the heat of the plains or tropical humidity and exuberance of the rainforest, it seems all the more incredible to find permanent snow only 10 degrees from the Equator, but in the Sierra Nevada de Mérida there are five peaks of around 5,000 metres. The cable car from Mérida climbs 12,000 feet over more than 12 kilometres, in four stages, and is the highest and longest in the world. The scenery has not changed much since the original Indians cleared the fields of stones to make the walls and their dwellings. Today the local farmers grow mainly wheat and potatoes in these arid conditions, and brown and rainbow trout have been introduced with great success. The most typical plant of the páramo, or steppe, is the *frailejón* (possibly named after the shape of a monk's habit): the Sierra Nevada has 45 of the 300 species known to exist. The only uses for it are as a wrapping for butter or cheese, to stuff mattresses, or perhaps as a substitute for firewood! The most common here, the October *frailejón*, flowers in that month. Other lovely flowers often seen are blue lupins and alpine forget-me-nots. There are many small Andean villages only accessible on foot or by mule, seemingly hanging on the mountainsides.



Orinoco crocodile



HATO EL CEDRAL



A 55,000 hectare ranch near Mantecal, in the low Llanos, bordered by the Arauca and Apure rivers. Home to over 250 species of birds which are easily spotted in the open savanna and along river banks. All rooms have private bathrooms, air conditioning and there is a small pool. Twice-daily boat or vehicle tours to see the wildlife.

HOTEL LOS FRAILES



Striking and unusual hotel on the edge of an Andean valley at 9,000 feet, built in the style of a 1642 monastery. Cobalt-blue lakes surrounded by pine forests are within walking distance. Horses available.



Venezuela Itineraries

ANDES, LLANOS AND THE COAST



A good overview of this diverse country, staying in lovely small inns with an emphasis on nature and wildlife.

Caracas

Day 1: Spend the first night at the comfortable Eduard's Hotel, close to the airport.

The Andes

Days 2-6: Fly to Mérida, pick up a hire car and drive to Posada Las Sevillanas, a charming family-run inn, where you have 3 nights. Set at the head of the Pedregosa valley above the town of Mérida there are excellent walks from the posada which reach all the way to the páramo. After a very scenic drive north spend 2 nights at the pretty Hotel Los Frailes (see page 69).

The Llanos

Days 7-9: Drive east down the Andes to Barinas and hand back hire car at the airport. Met for a 3 hour drive across the plains, and 3 nights at Hato Cedral. This is a 55,000 hectare ranch with plenty of wildlife (see page 69).

Margarita Island

Days 10-14: Return to Barinas for a flight to Porlamar, via Caracas. Spend 4 nights at Casa Chiara, an oasis of peace and tranquillity just north of the town Juan Griego (see page 67). Fly back to Caracas for onward connections.



Hotel Los Frailes



Giant anteater



Spectacled caiman



Casa Chiara

ORINOCO DELTA, CANAIMA, RIO CAURA AND LOS ROQUES



An adventurous mix of jungle and beaches, from the steamy Delta and tannin-stained waters of the Caura to the white sand of the Los Roques archipelago.

The Orinoco Delta

Days 1-3: Spend the first night at the Hotel Puerto Viejo near Caracas airport. Fly to Maturín and travel by road and river for a 2 night stay at the Orinoco Delta Lodge. The 25,000 square kilometres that form the delta are inhabited by the Warao Indians who live in stilt houses (*palafitos*) on the banks of the many channels. Excursions include trips into the jungle, through the mangroves, and visits to Indian communities.

The Gran Sabana

Days 4-5: Continue to Puerto Ordaz, by boat and road. Fly south to Canaima and stay 2 nights at Waku Lodge, on the banks of a beautiful lagoon

with multiple waterfalls (see page 68). Excursions to Sapo Falls or a fly-past of the Angel Falls (highest in the world) can be organised locally.

Ciudad Bolívar

Day 6: Fly to Ciudad Bolivar and the pretty Posada Angostura, in the colonial centre of the city.

The Caura river

Days 7-10: Driven west by jeep (4-5 hours) through the savanna to Las Trincheras for a night at the Rio Caura Lodge. Next morning depart in motorised *curiaras* (a large dug-out canoe) upriver for 130km (about 4-5 hours) to El Playón, below the spectacular Para Falls where you stay in a hammock camp for 2 nights. You can trek through the jungle to the top of the rapids for a wonderful view of the falls and swim in the dark waters of the Caura itself. Return to the Rio Caura Lodge for the final night.

Caracas

Day 11: Transfer to Ciudad Bolívar and fly to Caracas for a night in the Hotel Puerto Viejo.

Los Roques

Days 12-15: Fly to Los Roques for 3 nights in the pretty blue-and-white painted Posada Caracol (see page 67), a perfect base from which to take boat trips to different cayes. Fly back to Caracas for onward connections.



Warao houses in the Orinoco Delta



Sapo Falls, Canaima



Posada Angostura



Posada Caracol



ANGEL FALLS, CLOUD FOREST AND CARIBBEAN COAST



A visit to the highest waterfall in the world, combined with excellent birdwatching and the sandy beaches of the Caribbean.

Caracas

Day 1: Spend your first night at the comfortable Hotel Tamanaco Intercontinental, one of the city's top hotels in the commercial district of Chuao.

The Gran Sabana

Days 2-4: Fly to Canaima for 3 nights at Waku Lodge (see page 68). A short canoe trip around the lovely lagoon is included and many other optional excursions are available including the village of Kavac or a fly-past of the Angel Falls.

Choroní

Days 5-7: Fly back to Caracas and driven (3 hours) to Choroní, a lovely colonial village on the edge of the Henri Pittier National Park. Spend 3 nights at the Posada La Casa de las Garcia, a charming colonial house with 11 rooms around a courtyard, and beautiful gardens. Choroní is an excellent base for hikes in the park, and the beaches at Puerto Colombia are a short walk away.

Mochima National Park

Days 8-12: Driven back to Caracas for flight east to Barcelona and 4 nights at Villa Majagual (see page 67). When you leave you will be driven to the airport for a flight back to Caracas and onward connections.



Canaima



Mochima

THE GRAN SABANA, ANGEL FALLS RIVER TRIP AND PARIA PENINSULA



An adventure through the ancient landscapes of the Gran Sabana, including a beautiful river trip down the Carrao river and up to the Angel Falls.

Day 1: Fly from Caracas to Puerto Ordaz for a night at the comfortable Hotel Intercontinental Guayana.

The Gran Sabana

Days 2-4: Driven south into the Gran Sabana, a wonderful ancient geological region of waterfalls, enormous table-top mountains (*tepuis*), vast savannas and virgin jungle. You will drive through mining towns, hike to waterfalls, visit Indian villages and stay 3 nights in lodges full of local character.

Angel Falls river trip

Days 5-8: Fly north from the border town of Santa Elena to Kavac village, in the shadow of the mighty Auyán-tepui. Travel by motorised *curiara* (dug-out) on the Akanan river, which

flows into the larger tea-coloured Carrao. 4 nights are spent in netted hammocks on the river bank and you will glide downriver past dry savanna and rain forest before turning up the Churún river to Angel Falls. From Ratoncito island, you can trek through the jungle to a viewpoint below the falls.

Canaima

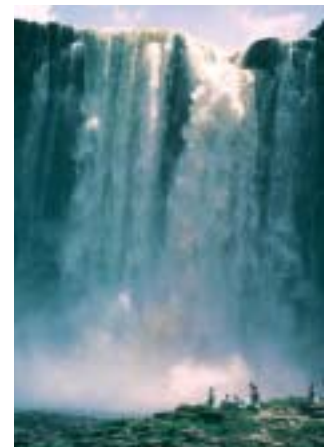
Days 9-10: Head downstream to Canaima for 2 nights at Waku Lodge, on the banks of the Canaima lagoon (see page 68).

The Paria peninsula

Days 11-14: Fly to Carupano (via Caracas). Driven to Rio Caribe village and stay 3 nights in the Posada Caribana, a pretty colonial house with 11 simple but comfortable rooms. Time to visit nearby beaches and explore the dramatic scenery and cloud forest of the peninsula. Fly back to Caracas for onward connections.



Carrao river



Apongua Falls



River trip



Playa Medina, Paria

See page 49 for another Venezuela itinerary