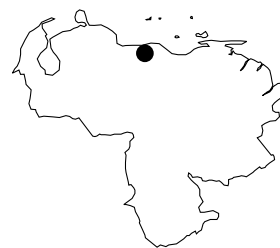


Caracas



CARACAS

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Its spectacular setting in a valley amid rolling hills, striking modern architecture, and a spider's web of motorways makes Caracas unique among South American capitals. Fast-paced, progressive and cosmopolitan, it is a cocktail of all things Latin American, with a dash of the Caribbean and an aftertaste of Miami. In a race toward modernity, this love-it-or-hate-it city has almost 440 years of history buried beneath its glass-and-concrete monuments to oil-fueled affluence.

The center of Venezuela's political and economic life, Caracas is also the cultural capital, boasting a vibrant arts scene. Its acclaimed Museo de Artes Contemporáneo is perhaps the best on the continent, and you'll see numerous sculptures, mosaics and murals gracing the streets. The bright lights of Caracas' stylish nightlife also provide myriad opportunities for clubbers, bar-hoppers and live salsa aficionados to mingle with the city's famously die-hard party crowd, and there is an abundance of upmarket restaurants in gastronomic hubs like Las Mercedes, where every international gourmet can indulge.

Of course, while Caracas enjoys every modern convenience, it also suffers visibly from third-world problems. Vast expanses of haphazardly built shantytowns creep up the surrounding hillsides, a constant reminder of the city's contrast between wealth and poverty, and political divisions and strikes have rocked the capital particularly hard over recent years.

Caracas' northern edge abuts the steep, wooded slopes of Parque Nacional El Ávila, where miles of walking trails wind through scented forests. At an altitude of about 900m, the city enjoys an agreeable, sunny climate often described as 'eternal summer.'

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hike or catch the **teleférico** (cable car) to the summit of El Ávila (p94)
- Explore the bars and clubs of **Las Mercedes & La Castellana** (p85)
- Souvenir shop in the winding streets of **El Hatillo** (p73)
- Enjoy international art at the acclaimed **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo** (p67)
- Stroll around the green haven of **Parque del Este** (p71)
- Discover lost treasure at the small but perfect **Museo de Arte Colonial** (p67)
- Join the cuisine scene of **Las Mercedes** (p83), **Altamira** (p84) and **La Candelaria** (p82)
- Visit the tomb of national treasure, Simón Bolívar, in the **Panteón Nacional** (p66)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 0212

■ POPULATION: 5 MILLION

HISTORY

Caracas had a precarious beginning in 1560 when Francisco Fajardo of Isla de Margarita discovered the verdant valley – then inhabited by Toromaima Indians. He founded a settlement named San Francisco, but was soon driven out by natives. A year later the town was resurrected, but years of bitter struggle against Indian attacks followed.

In 1567, a decisive conquest of the valley was ordered and 136 men led by Diego de Losada overcame a brave Indian resistance before re-establishing the settlement once and for all on July 25. The new township was named Santiago de León de Caracas, ‘Caracas’ being the name of a decidedly less troublesome Indian group that inhabited the coastal cordillera.

In 1577, the governor chose the young town to be the third and final capital of Venezuela (after Coro and El Tocuyo). But from the beginning, the new capital was besieged by vicious pirate raids, plagues and natural disasters, including a devastating earthquake in 1641.

In 1728, a Basque trading company called the Real Compañía Guipuzcoana was based in La Guaira and given a monopoly over trade with Spain. Its later corruption aroused widespread anger among the colonists. In 1749, 800 men marched on Caracas to protest against the company’s oppressive tactics, a riot that many believe sowed the seeds of the independence movement. The company was eventually dissolved in 1785.

On March 28, 1750, Caracas became the birthplace of Francisco de Miranda, and on July 24, 1783, that of Simón Bolívar. The former was to pave the way to independence; the latter was to realize that aim. On April 19, 1810, a group of councilors and notable *caraqueños* (inhabitants of Caracas) denounced the Spanish governor and formed a Supreme Junta to replace the government. The political struggle raged until July 5, 1811, when congress declared the country’s independence.

On Maundy Thursday of 1812, an earthquake wrecked the town, killing some 10,000 people. The conservative clergy swiftly declared that it was a punishment from heaven for the rebellion, but the independence movement was not to be stopped. It eventually reached its aim nine years later, sealed by Bolívar’s victory at the battle of Carabobo on

June 24, 1821. Despite this, Spain stubbornly refused to recognize Venezuela’s sovereignty until 1845.

Caracas grew at a modest pace until the 1870s, when an extensive modernization program was launched by General Guzmán Blanco, known as ‘El Modernizador.’ His rule saw a swathe of new monumental buildings totally transform the character of the city center.

Then came the oil boom, and things began to change at breakneck speed. Oil money was pumped into modernization, transforming the bucolic colonial town into a vast concrete sprawl. Colonial buildings were demolished and their place taken by modern commercial centers and steel-and-glass towers.

Spurred on by the illusory dream of wealth, thousands of rural dwellers rushed into Caracas, but the majority never saw their share of the city’s prosperity, leading a hand-to-mouth existence in *ranchos* (ramshackle huts) that covered the hills around the central districts. Over the last 50 years, the city’s population has shot up from around 400,000 to over five million.

ORIENTATION

Nestled in a long and narrow valley, the city spreads at least 20km from east to west. To the north looms the steep, verdant wall of Parque Nacional El Ávila, refreshingly free of human dwellings. To the south, by contrast, the city is devouring the hillsides, with modern *urbanizaciones* (suburbs) and derelict *barrios* (shantytowns) invading every reasonably flat piece of land.

The valley itself is a dense urban fabric, with forests of skyscrapers sticking out of a mass of low-rise buildings like needles through patchwork. The area from El Silencio to Chacao is the central downtown area, packed with commercial centers, offices and hotels. The metro’s main line (No 1) goes right along this axis, making many of Caracas’ attractions readily accessible.

The historic quarter (called the ‘Center’ in this chapter) is at the west end of the greater downtown area and is recognizable on the map by the colonial chessboard layout of the streets. About 1.5km to the east is Parque Central, noted for its museums and theaters. Another 2km east is Sabana Grande, centered on a busy pedestrian mall