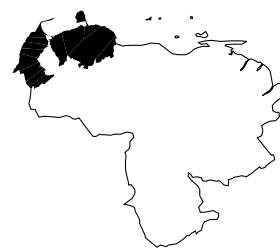


# The Northwest



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Venezuela's northwest is a tropical wonderland blessed with a stunning diversity of natural features – coral islands and beaches, rain forests and deserts, caves and waterfalls, and South America's largest lake. You can enjoy this variety at the region's nature reserves and 12 national parks. Culturally, the northwest combines the traditional with the contemporary, from the living Guajiro indigenous culture and splendid heritage of Coro to the slick modernity of Maracaibo.

On the northwest coast, Parque Nacional Morrocoy attracts visitors with its colorful reefs and powdery sands, and the peaceful city of Coro, a gem of colonial architecture. Further west along the coast, Maracaibo is perhaps not the top spot on travelers' lists, but it's a city with character and a great festival held in the name of the state's patron saint. The city's environs also have a lot to show visitors.

The inland portion of the northwest is less traveled, yet it's also noted for its natural beauty and cultural attractions. Here you can see charming colonial towns, buy some of Venezuela's finest crafts, sample the country's best wine and discover the holy shrines of the mysterious María Lionza cult.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy the sandy beaches and coral reefs of the **Parque Nacional Morrocoy** (p152)
- Stroll about the charming colonial streets of **Coro** (p139)
- Explore remote wonders of the **Península de Paraguaná** (p144)
- Join the crowds celebrating the Feria de la Chinita in **Maracaibo** (p167) in November
- Marvel at the unique lightning phenomenon of **Catatumbo** (p177)



# FALCÓN STATE

## CORO

☎ 0268 / pop 160,000

Set at the base of the Península de Paraguaná, Coro is the capital of Falcón state and a pleasant, peaceful city. Thanks to a large university, it has a noticeably cultured air. More importantly, Coro features some of the best colonial architecture in all of Venezuela and boasts a few good museums.

Since Coro's historic center was declared a national monument in the 1950s, a number of the old houses have been restored. The cobblestone Calle Zamora, where most of the historic mansions are located, is one of the loveliest colonial-style streets in the country. In 1993, Coro was included on Unesco's World Heritage list.

Once in Coro, it's worth visiting the arid Península de Paraguaná (p144) and the lush, mountainous Sierra de San Luis (p150), two interesting and completely different regions. You can explore them on your own or take a tour (see Tours, p143).

## Orientation

Coro's center, where you are likely to spend just about all your time in town, is small and compact, and pleasant for leisurely strolls about the streets. Conveniently, here

are all but one of the important sights and a lion's share of hotels and restaurants, and even the airport, which is rarely the case in the cities. Probably your only trip away from the center (and a recommended one) will be a visit to the Médanos de Coro.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Ambulance** (☎ 251-2409)

**Fire** (☎ 251-9923)

**Police** (☎ 251-9856)

### INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access in Coro is cheap: \$0.40 to \$0.80 an hour. Several facilities listed below are in the historic center and close at 8pm or earlier. If you need to use the Internet late in the evening, some of the following cybercafés, located away from the center, are open till late:

**ATC Micro Suply** (Calle Falcón)

**Centro de Navegación Internet** (cnr Av Manauare & Calle Zamora)

**Ciudad Bitácora** (cnr Calle Zamora & Calle Jansen; ☎ 7am-2am) The largest and fastest cybercafé in town, five blocks east of Av Manauare. Take a sweater – it's cold!

**El Triángulo Azul** (Castillo Don Leoncio; Av Manauare; ☎ 9am-midnight) Seven blocks south of Calle Falcón, near Banesco.

**L&D Sistemas** (Calle Zamora)

**P&P Connections** (Plaza Falcón)

## UPS & DOWNS OF VENEZUELA'S FIRST CAPITAL

Founded by Juan de Ampíes in 1527, Santa Ana de Coro is one of the oldest towns on the continent and the first capital of colonial Venezuela. In the same year, King Carlos I of Spain leased the city and the entire province to the Welsers of Germany to conquer, settle and exploit. The king was forced to sign the contract because he was heavily in debt to German banking firms for loans he had used to buy the title of Holy Roman Emperor Karl V (Charles V) in 1519. On the other hand, the Germans were eager to share in the reputedly fabulous riches of the newly discovered continent. The church was quick to follow, and in 1531 it established the Episcopal See in Coro, the first archdiocese founded in the New World.

Despite this promising start, Coro's development was bogged down from the beginning. The town was little more than a jumping-off point for expeditions in search of treasure, but El Dorado never materialized. In 1546 the contract with the Welsers was canceled and the administrative seat of the province moved to El Tocuyo, 200km to the south. The church was more patient, but finally relocated the archdiocese to Caracas in 1637.

Having suffered from looting and burning by pirates on various occasions throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, Coro struggled hard to survive and was revived only by contraband trade with Curaçao and Bonaire during the 18th century. Most of the historic buildings date from that time, and it's no surprise that their architectural detail is influenced by the Dutch baroque.