



GEODYSSEY

# VENEZUELA

Travel guide

Planning your trip

Where to stay

Private guided touring

Wildlife experiences

Beach holidays

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Walking, trekking and  
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# VENEZUELA

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## Welcome

Venezuela is amazing. Nowhere else will you find its combination of Caribbean beaches, impressive Andean peaks, swathes of open plains with abundant wildlife, and even larger areas of deep rainforest. Add to that a few things that are completely unique, such as the 'Lost World' of the Gran Sabana, Angel Falls, and the Orinoco Delta—another world again, and you have something truly exceptional.

With large reserves of oil, Venezuela doesn't need to hype its attractions, so you won't find ads on the TV or in the newspaper urging you to go. And while Venezuela isn't expensive, it isn't cheap either, so you won't find it much on the backpacker routes. Venezuela has some great places to stay, but nothing that ranks in the top 10 for style-hungry journalists, so you won't read much about it in the glossy magazines. But it's there, and it's truly magnificent.

The extraordinary Hugo Chávez had a massive impact on Venezuela's political stage. Venezuelans are immensely proud of their democracy (the longest running in Latin America by many measures), noisy though the debate has been under his presidency. Ordinary life went on, of course, and as the body politic settles into a post-Chávez era, it goes on still.

We are the UK's leading specialists for travel in Venezuela, and this brochure aims to offer you a wide choice of travel and holiday ideas that brings out the best in this astounding country. We highlight the distinctive places to visit, the best opportunities to see wildlife, ways to gain insight into local cultures and communities, characterful hotels and beautiful beaches.

Working with our colleagues throughout Venezuela, we bring all this together in a well-organised trip that makes the best use of your precious time and the budget you decide on.

When you are deciding where to go for your next holiday you'll want to turn to someone who really knows the area you'd like to visit. For Venezuela now, as for the last twenty years, we hope you'll choose us.

*Gillian Howe*  
Managing Director

## Making a booking

**T**he Booking Information supplement that comes with this brochure covers dates, prices, and how to book.

It's good to know that when you book your holiday with Geodyssey you not only get the benefit of our in-depth knowledge of our destinations from over twenty years of making travel arrangements to Latin America, and our up-to-date knowledge of the best places, old and new. You also get our experience in designing holidays for different tastes and budgets, the confidence that your money is fully protected, and the reassurance that if anything goes wrong while you are

away you have a network of helpful, knowledgeable and resourceful people locally and back in the UK to support you. We're a phone call away when you are planning your trip, preparing to leave, or out in your destination.

When you get back we will send you a short questionnaire to make sure everything went well and to gather your comments on the places you visited. We will also ask what you think of us. More than 95% of our customers describe their overall level of satisfaction with their holiday as "Excellent" or "Good", with over 90% rating it as "Excellent". A staggering 99% rate the service that our office

provides as "Excellent".

### We protect ALL our customers

The air holiday packages in this brochure are ATOL protected by the Civil Aviation Authority. Our ATOL number is 5292. ATOL protection extends primarily to holiday arrangements that include air travel for customers who book and pay in the UK.

Geodyssey also provides equivalent financial protection for customers who do not buy flights from us and for customers who book and pay from outside the UK.

For more information please see the Booking Information supplement that comes with this brochure.

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## The Andes

*In Venezuela, the northernmost part of the great Andes chain takes on a more human dimension, with high farmlands and villages nestling beneath its dramatic peaks. The mountains descend rapidly to the Llanos plains in the east, and the extraordinary Lake Maracaibo in the west.*

The university town of Mérida is the centre of this region. It lies between two mountain sierras: the Sierra Nevada, which provides a spectacular backdrop of five snowcapped mountains behind the town, and the Sierra La Culata. Mérida is a friendly place, with plenty to see and do.

Landscapes around Mérida changes at every turn. There are lush cloud forests, with trees crowded with orchids and bromeliads, and flowering shrubs that attract a succession of hummingbirds. Turn a corner and you might be in a dry desert of cacti and scrub with solitary vultures wheeling in the sky. Climb the road north of town and small farms and fields soon give way to the dramatic high moorlands of the páramo, while little dirt tracks lead off to quiet valleys where stone-walled fields are still ploughed with oxen, and small streams trickle through eucalyptus groves alive with fuchsias and lupins.

Pretty Spanish-colonial style hamlets are scattered among the mountain valleys. Their cobbled streets and white-washed houses, with

terracotta tiled roofs, colourful window boxes and dark blue doors, are often very photogenic. In the villages' main squares be-hatted elderly citizens meet to discuss the issues of the day, their mules or donkeys tethered to a tree. The way of life in these villages has changed little for la gente—the people who live on the land; they sustain a well-mannered charm and a serious approach to life that stems from a long history of hardship and self-determination.

Wheat is a staple crop and you will still find circular threshing floors powered by trudging mules. The region is famous for good quality coffee, the majority of which is grown beneath shade trees in the traditional, songbird-friendly, way.

The countryside provides fresh fruit, flowers and vegetables in abundance and Mérida's covered market brings a feast for the senses with mounds of produce from strawberries to asparagus, avocado to papaya, gladioli, begonias, gentians and other native Andean flowers, jams and pickles, hams, smoked cheeses and dulces brillantados (crystallised guava chunks wrapped



in leaves), as well as pottery, weavings and other handicrafts. The old streets near the centre of the city contain many colonial houses in various states of repair, often built around a small courtyard.

Mérida claims two superlatives: Heladería Coromoto—a tiny shop that holds the world record for the most flavours of ice-cream (around 800 flavours at the last count, including many unlikely-sounding ingredients such as garlic, Guinness and trout), and the Teleférico de Mérida—the world’s highest and longest cable-car (see panel).

The selection of places to stay in the Andes is not a wide one. There is a growing number and variety of family-run guesthouses or ‘*posadas*’. There are style-conscious conversions of old Mérida town houses, besides a smattering of practical hotels for business people, and country properties ranging from spacious and moderately grand coffee haciendas dating from the nineteenth century, to modest but delightful and comfortable cottages hand-built by their proud owners.

### Walking in the Andes

For walkers, there is much to recommend. You may choose a quiet valley at moderate altitude to take day-walks along clear tracks between villages, with a great variety of scenery, flowers and birds.

Here the walking is easy, temperatures are moderate, there is much to see along the way, and there are homely guesthouses whose owners will be delighted to welcome you to their piece of heaven.



### Teleférico de Mérida

Teleférico de Mérida is the world’s highest and longest cable-car. From a small square in Mérida it climbs for nearly 8 miles to the summit of Pico Espejo, at an oxygen-starved 4,880m.

It’s no mean feat to run a cable car of this length and in these conditions, so the Teleférico de Mérida is often out of action, sometimes for years at a time.

When it’s running, it’s a fabulous ride, with great views all the way. The cable-car rises over lush tropical cloud forest which soon changes through several intermediate zones where silver-crowned trees are interspersed with slender tree-ferns and thickets of bamboo (typical habitat for Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, Crested Quetzal and Spectacled Bear), reaching the páramo at about 3,600m.

At the cable-car’s lofty height the only trees are the rare red-trunked coloradito—the highest growing tree species in the world. At these altitudes the notable plant is the yellow-flowering frailejón whose radial layers of furry silver leaves build slowly upwards leaving a fat dark stem. Mature specimens stand a few feet high and show how they got their name, which is Spanish for ‘little friar’. Remarkably, there are hummingbirds too: they adapt to the extreme night-time cold by entering a hibernation state every night. Above the páramo the vegetation gives way to bare rock and scree, before reaching perpetual snow. The cable car stops at several intermediate stations where you can get out, walk around and catch a later car (not something to risk at the end of the day!). There is a small café at the summit where you can sip a hot chocolate and watch Venezuelans enjoying the snow—often for the first time in their lives.



“Poor you” they say, “your coffee comes in jars and your food from far away. Have some of this coffee I roasted just now. My hens laid these eggs this morning—will you have some with this bread my wife baked from the flour we ground yesterday?”

For the serious trekker, there are magnificent highlands among Mérida’s sierras, where rocky trails lead to mirror-smooth glacial lakes and through barren passes to hidden valleys where century-old giant frailejón plants stand in clusters on frost-shattered screes beneath deep blue skies. Experienced mountain guides are essential. Packs can be carried by mules if you wish.

### Down to the Llanos

The Llanos plains (see p10) lie to the east of the Andes sierras. To reach them by road you first ascend to a pass at 3,900m, where high moors are presided over by a monastery-style hotel much beloved by Venezuelans, before descending the eastern slopes of the Andes to reach Barinas at just 300m. The flatland plains of the Llanos stretch into the distance from here, with the sea still 750 miles away.

Or you can walk. Starting at a cool 3,000m you take ancient paths and village trails that lead gently through ever-changing landscapes emerging 2,600m lower, and 30 degrees warmer, where the land goes on forever. See p35.



### Natural sugars

Village streams in the Andes are harnessed to power rickety little *trapiche* mills.

Farmers bring stout sticks of sugar cane on the backs of ancient pickup trucks, or strapped to plodding mules. The water surges, the grinding gears turn, and the miller feeds the sticks through his machine. Juice comes out of one end, and crushed sticks out of the other to be chucked on a large pile.

A fire is lit beneath great metal vats of juice, fuelled by last weeks sticks. The liquor steams and bubbles, and boils down to a sticky brown syrup.

The miller pours the goo into wooden moulds, waits for it to cool, and voilà! – sticky bricks of brown sugar, ready to sell.

As evidence of organic authenticity, the blocks come complete with the occasional encapsulated honey bee from the many that congregate around the millers as they toil at their steaming work.



# Coro

*A step back into Venezuela's colonial past, between desert dunes and cloud-forested limestone hills.*



Spain's first city in South America, Coro was founded in 1527. Its cathedral dates from 1583 with other principal buildings from the 18th century when Coro found wealth from trade. Its well-kept city centre (a UNESCO site), contains a succession of beautifully restored and maintained houses on cobblestone streets, with handsome plazas and fine churches.

Coro's name comes from the Arawak word for wind and a dry east wind blows steady and warm along the mainland coast for much of the year, sweeping sand into enormous shifting dunes that march westwards, grain by grain, creating a large area just out of town that echoes the Arabian desert. The dunes are especially impressive in the cool of the afternoon when the rich sidelight brings intense colours and contrasts.

Inspired by this dramatic, rather severe, landscape, several artists have made this area their home. Some keep open house, more or less, so you can visit their studios, share a cup of coffee or something stronger, and perhaps buy. Coro's Museum of Contemporary Art promotes their work and also shows items from its Caracas parent's collection.

The Coro museum is housed in a beautifully restored 19th century house built by Jewish merchants, many of whom fled to the Dutch islands from the Spanish inquisition and were then attracted to Coro by trade and the new

Venezuela's promise of freedom of worship. To complete a very varied picture, there is a wonderful botanic garden just outside Coro specialising in xerophytic plants from the region and around the world.

## Paraguaná

The sands form an isthmus between the mainland and the Paraguaná peninsula. Paraguaná offers world-class windsurfing, miles of empty and rather desolate beach, a handful of good quality posadas, some interesting local handicrafts and tradition-inspired painters, and, for ornithologists, the Yellow Shouldered Parrot.

## Sierra de San Luis

Inland the landscape changes rapidly as you ascend into a chain of limestone hills: the Sierra de San Luis.

Coming from dry scrub and sand dunes, it is astonishing how the scenery changes, culminating in rich cool cloud forest—all in less than an hour's drive, with expansive views over the coast along the way. There are good walks in these hills, with stops to explore caverns with massive stalactites and stalagmites, to peer down 300m sink holes, or swim below tumbling waterfalls.

Coffee grown here once laid claim to being the best in the world; a local initiative is intent on restoring that reputation by reintroducing traditional methods.



## La Vela

Francisco de Miranda was one of the most flamboyant figures in Latin American history. He commanded Spanish troops in the American War of Independence, was a lover of Catherine the Great of Russia, and served as a general in revolutionary France. In 1806 he landed at La Vela, in a thwarted invasion (partly backed by Britain); a precursor to Bolívar.

Today's residents of La Vela are particularly proud of their colourfully painted houses in the old style. If you pause to look you are quite likely to be invited in to admire the inner courtyards and other hallmarks of the colonial and early republican periods.



## Taime Taime

At Taime Taime, archaeologists uncovered a prehistoric watering hole scattered with the bones of long extinct animals (including mastodon, giant sloth and giant armadillo). Arrow cuts in the bones indicate that this was a place prehistoric man killed and butchered his prey.

The scene is presented under a dramatic tensioned fabric pavilion that was Venezuela's stand at the Seville Expo.





## Lake Maracaibo

*The northern part of South America's largest lake is given over to the oil fields that put Venezuela among the world's largest producers. Down in the remote south the lake seeps into wetlands, skirted by fishing communities of cabins built on stilts over the water.*

### Catatumbo Lightning

Ringed by mountains on three sides, Lake Maracaibo is a hot and steamy place.

In the heat of the day the largest of its southern swamps, the *Ciénega de Catatumbo*, gives off huge quantities of natural methane which rise into the atmosphere in the hot and humid air.

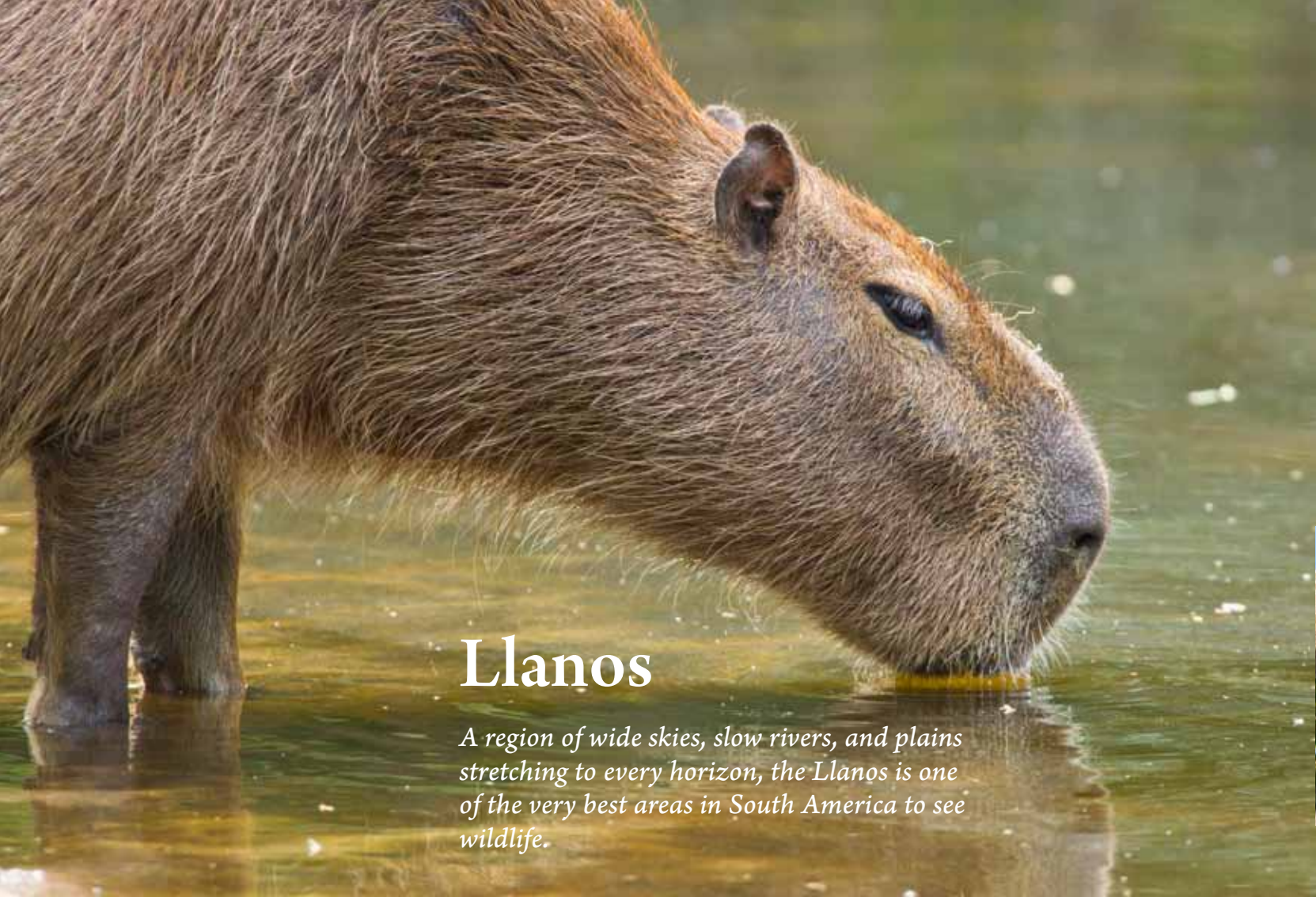
Night-time cooling sets up a vertical circulation of air where the Catatumbo river joins the lake, building up static electricity. The result: ideal conditions for lightning.

Catatumbo Lightning is so localised, so frequent and so intense that it is used as a navigational aid.

It occurs on 140-160 nights in the year- and can last for 10 hours with up to 280 flashes in the most intense storms. It is estimated to be the world's largest source of tropospheric ozone.

To see Catatumbo Lightning for yourself turn to p36.





# Llanos

*A region of wide skies, slow rivers, and plains stretching to every horizon, the Llanos is one of the very best areas in South America to see wildlife.*



The Llanos is the geographical and spiritual centre of Venezuela and holds a special place in the heart of even the most urbane Caraqueño. It is home to hard-working cowboys who have raised cattle here on horseback for a dozen generations.

In the dry season the plains of the low Llanos are baked dry and dusty, but when the rains return to the Andes the meandering rivers spill over to flood and regenerate the land. The annual pattern of flood and drought creates a special ecology which makes this one of the great wildlife areas of South America.

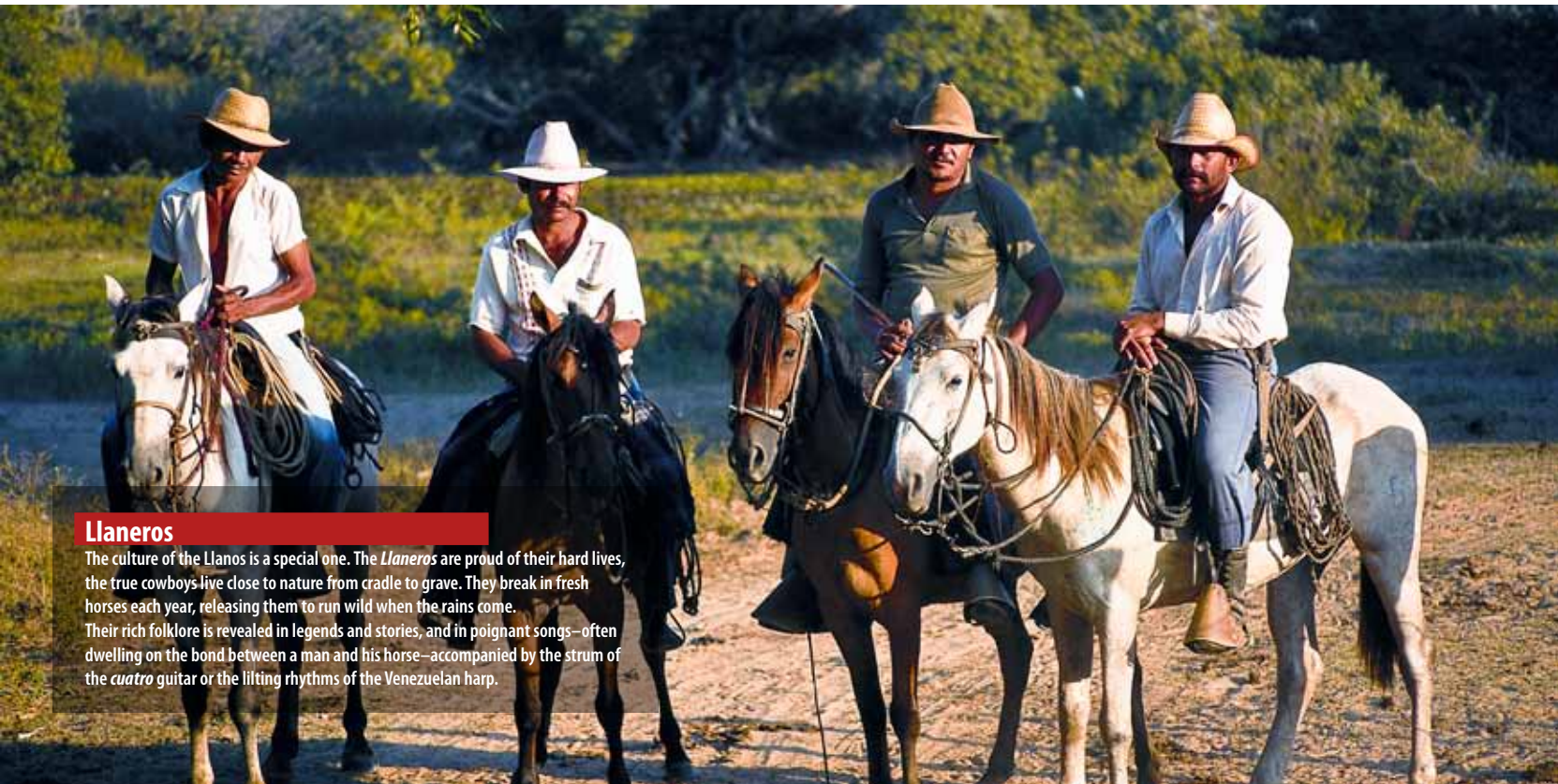
There are huge numbers of birds, with as many different species as Britain and the USA put together: bright red scarlet ibis, roseate spoonbills, elegant sunbitterns, prehistoric hoatzin and many many more. Animals typical of the region include giant and collared anteater, several armadillo species, anaconda (many over 30ft in length), deer, giant otter, spectacled caiman, Orinoco crocodile, howler monkey, jaguar, puma and ocelot. An 'extraordinary richness of wildlife' to quote Sir David Attenborough.

Many people's favourite is the capybara, the world's largest rodent, which can be seen in great numbers in protected areas. There

are freshwater dolphin in the rivers, arrau turtle, small numbers of manatee and, of course, large numbers of piranha fish.

Special conservation ranches are the best places to see the wildlife of the Llanos. A typical day starts with a morning safari, by boat or vehicle with a local tracker-guide, returning for lunch and a siesta at the ranch, followed by a mid-afternoon safari, then drinks and dinner. Night safaris are provided on some days. Rooms are to comfortable standards.

The drier season (October to April) is probably the best time to visit. At this time the increasing drought drives animals and birds together in great numbers around the few remaining sources of water. Even so, we have been very impressed with the numbers of animals and birds we have seen in the wetter months, when they are dispersed but more active. An 8ft long giant anteater looks pretty impressive going about its business even under a cloudy sky!



## Llaneros

The culture of the Llanos is a special one. The *Llaneros* are proud of their hard lives, the true cowboys live close to nature from cradle to grave. They break in fresh horses each year, releasing them to run wild when the rains come. Their rich folklore is revealed in legends and stories, and in poignant songs—often dwelling on the bond between a man and his horse—accompanied by the strum of the *cuatro* guitar or the lilting rhythms of the Venezuelan harp.





# Canaima and Angel Falls

*The world's tallest waterfall plunges into a remote rainforested canyon.*

**L**ocked away in a rainforested canyon to the northwest of the Gran Sabana, Angel Falls is the world's tallest waterfall: twice the height of the Empire State Building, three times higher than the Eiffel Tower and four times Canary Wharf. The waters drop almost one kilometre, tumbling and billowing out of the sky before they meet the forest floor.

Angel Falls is so isolated that despite a first report in 1910 it was not finally known to the outside world until 1935 when it was seen by bush pilot Jimmy Angel, the far from celestial being after whom the falls are named. Angel only confirmed the falls' location in 1937 when he crash-landed nearby on a search for gold.

Auyán-tepui, the mountain from which Angel Falls plummets, is the largest in area of the hundreds of tepuis scattered over the Gran Sabana and the Orinoco rainforests. The falls pour into the side of a deep canyon that splits the mountain almost in two. At the canyon's bottom runs the Río Churún, a pleasant fast-running river which winds around rocks and boulders through the forest of the canyon floor, between the mountain's massive orange, red and mauve walls; here sparkling with quartz in the sunlight, there lowering broodily in the gloom of the shadows.

An exciting way to see Angel Falls is to travel up this river by dugout when its waters are high enough, mooring opposite the face of the falls, which are an hour and a half's

walk away on a jungle trail. You can stop at a lookout point in front of the falls, or continue to their base for an exhilarating dip in the pool below the cascade, billowing and tumbling over itself from an impossible height above you. Wildlife is never far away: we've been lucky enough to see a sloth swimming across the river (slowly).

To reach the falls you generally fly to the tourist village of Canaima where there is a small selection of lodges. Canaima's location is seriously beautiful: to the side of a lagoon fed by two sets of handsome waterfalls, with a backdrop of two fine tepuis. A boat trip around the lagoon is very worthwhile, with the option of walking behind one of the waterfalls – an impressively deafening experience. River trips to the foot of Angel Falls start nearby.

From Canaima you can also take scenic flights to see Angel Falls from the air. If the jungle adventure to reach the foot of the falls is not for you, then this is an excellent way to experience their sheer scale and the romance of their remote location.

To the east more tepuis stand like sentries across the landscape, but the next village of any size is far-away Kavanayén perched on the edge of an escarpment overlooking the forest. If you are looking for a real jungle expedition we occasionally run a 6-day trek across this uninhabited forest with guides from the Pemón community – ask us for details.



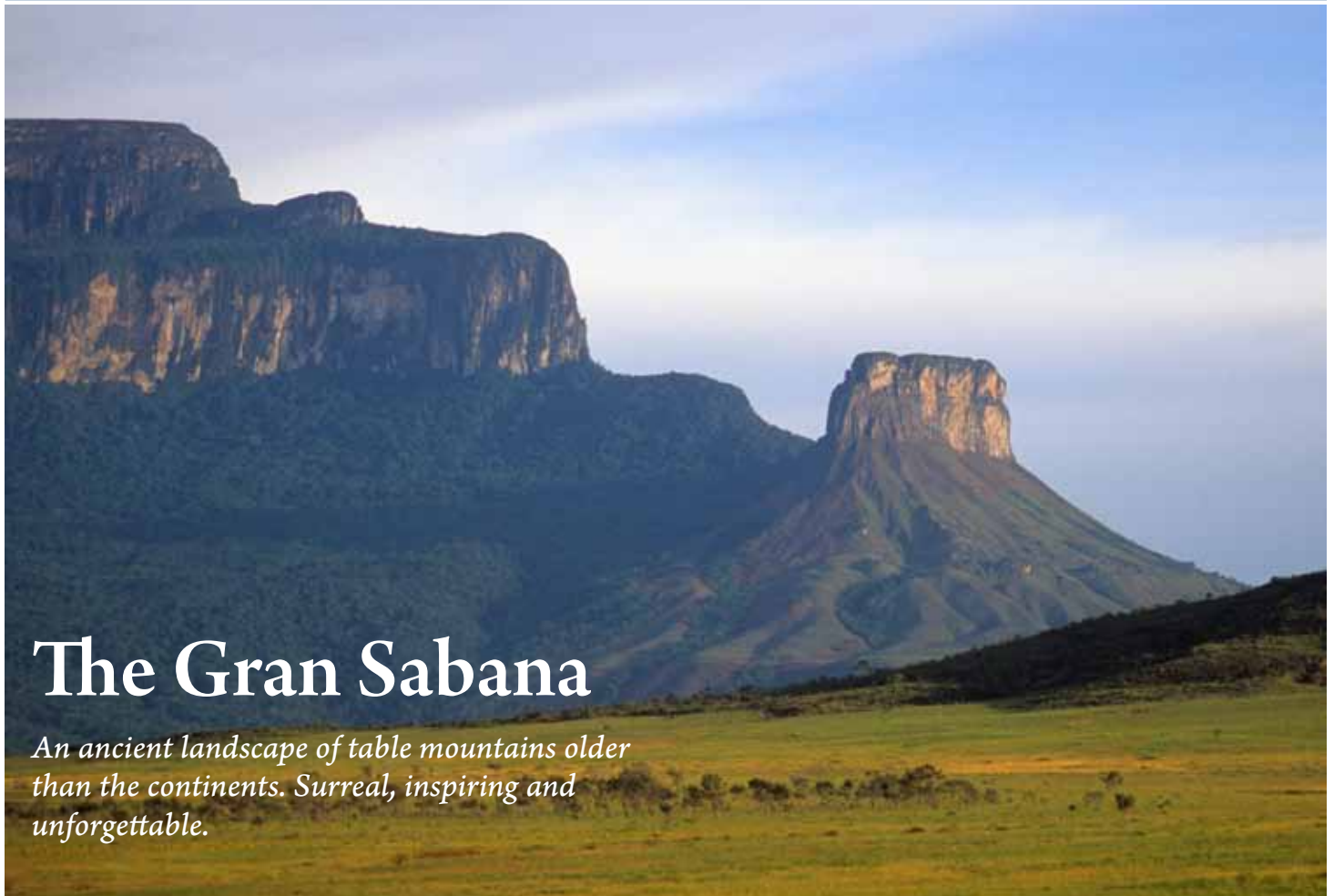
## Jimmy Angel

Jimmy Angel's story is an entertaining one. A Canadian air-force pilot of the First World War, he was in a bar in Panama when he met geologist and explorer J.R. McCracken. McCracken contracted him to fly to the Gran Sabana, landing on the summit of a tepui.

Here McCracken settled down to a day's serious gold-panning, extracting a sack of nuggets so heavy that Angel was worried the plane could not take off. When it was time to leave, the plane waddled as best it could over the sheer edge of the tepui then dived alarmingly before Angel could level it out. He coaxed it back to Caracas, where McCracken settled the second half of Angel's hefty \$3,000 fee.

Clearly no fool, McCracken did not give Angel a map but simply directed him as they flew. Angel later scoured the area on his own account, but though he found the falls that bear his name, he never located McCracken's lode again.





# The Gran Sabana

*An ancient landscape of table mountains older than the continents. Surreal, inspiring and unforgettable.*

The Gran Sabana is a land of romantic and spectacular table mountains. Some of the oldest land forms on earth, they were created long before the continents drifted apart.

Now they stand as sentinels—witnesses of the world’s beginnings—lands lost in time. Wide sweeps of open savannah, scattered with elegant stands of moriche palms, are typical of the Gran Sabana’s higher areas. Immense skies give the feeling of being on the roof of the world. Dramatic views of the scattered table mountains add to the sense of great distance and of separateness from ordinary realities.

To see these mountains at dawn or in the evening casts a special spell: the changes of light and the movement of mists around their summits accentuate their remoteness and their age.

The tallest is Mount Roraima, whose massive summit is another world again—one of weirdly eroded rock formations, strange plants, valleys carpeted with crystals, and endless labyrinths. Its walls are so sheer and high that repeated Victorian expeditions claimed it was unscalable. Reports of its first ascent inspired Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s adventure yarn ‘The Lost World’—a name that has since been applied to the Gran Sabana as a whole, as well as to Roraima itself. It is a fitting description of this ancient and surreal landscape.

Rivers spilling over the edges of escarpments

and table mountains create dramatic waterfalls. The most famous is Angel Falls, the tallest waterfall in the world—see p13. There are many other waterfalls of every imaginable type, from wide thundering falls like Chinak-Merú and Kamá Falls to gentle cascades like Jaspé Falls—where sheets of clear water tumble over the rich reds and bright oranges of a river bed made from solid jasper, a semiprecious stone. This land is the home of the Pemón people, who are farmers, hunters and fishermen. They live in small communities, notable for their practical egalitarianism and tolerance. Their word for mountain is tepui, by which the Gran Sabana’s table mountains are commonly known.

The summits of the tepuis contain many endemic species that have evolved in isolation and are found on perhaps one mountain only. In the grasslands animals are sparse: there are giant anteaters and other mammals but they avoid being seen. Much of the rest of the region is covered by primary rainforest, a secret world where vision is restricted to a few tens of feet and where the lives of thousands of different species are interleaved in complex ecological webs.

Most people come to the Gran Sabana just to see Angel Falls and the nearby village of Canaima. Angel Falls is a truly spectacular sight, and Canaima has a very beautiful setting, but these are just tastes of the region. To the



south and east there are places where table mountains surround you on all horizons, where pristine rivers meander through gentle valleys between dramatic escarpments, where huge waterfalls roar and tumble into empty chasms.

The Gran Sabana is a special region for us and it is where our love of Venezuela began, over twenty years ago. We are able to offer some very special trips throughout the area. These include on- and off-road tours by 4WD vehicles, river journeys to the foot of Angel Falls or along the remote rivers that wind through the biggest concentrations of tepuis, short day walks, longer treks to the summit of Mount Roraima, and mini-adventures in seldom visited areas.

The essential character of the Gran Sabana remains the same throughout the year. Its weather is not predictable: there can be long dry spells in the supposedly wetter May-August period, and the mountains can create local rain at any time. The drier season usually starts by October, by March the land is often parched and dusty. When the chance of rain increases in April or May, the grasslands revive and the rivers rise again to feed the waterfalls.

The Gran Sabana is so far from Venezuela's cities that there are few visitors for most of the year. The exceptions are at Christmas, Carnival and Easter, when most Venezuelans flock to the beach but some take advantage of the public holidays to explore a part of their country that most of their neighbours will never have experienced—though even at those times few venture far from the only black-top road that runs through the area.

Mount Roraima is starting to become known among the trekking cognoscenti (justifiably so), and one will usually find one or two other groups on the mountain, with more at Christmas and Easter.

Since 1962 almost the whole area of the Gran Sabana has been protected as a national park, covering nearly 12,000 square miles. It is an important area of endemism, with over 300 endemic species of plant identified so far. Beyond the boundaries of the park there are areas of forest under threat from gold and diamond mining, and there is some wildcat mining by garimperos within the park itself. The few visitors who venture into the heart of the region bring an alternative source of income for hard-pressed villagers, and can play a greater role in helping to support the protection of this delicate and enchanted land.







# Ciudad Bolívar and Puerto Ordaz

*An hour apart and a world of difference. Ciudad Bolívar's sleepy colonial atmosphere contrasts with the commercial bustle of Puerto Ordaz.*

Full 400km from the sea, Ciudad Bolívar is the highest navigable point on the Orinoco. It was an important town in colonial times, a small Manaus, trading the agricultural riches of the Llanos directly with Europe and looking more to foreign capitals than Caracas.

The city was then called Angostura, meaning 'narrows', as here the Orinoco is funnelled through a deep channel just a mile wide. The bitters for pink gin were invented here before production moved to Trinidad. A modestly grand cathedral was built, and city streets of fine houses leading down to an evocative waterfront.

Simón Bolívar paused here after a series of defeats in the campaign for Venezuela's independence. He re-focused on the idea of ejecting the Spanish not just from Venezuela but from all of South America, and uniting the colonies in a grand federation. Those he hoped to rally to his cause assembled here at the 'Congress of Angostura' in 1819, were won over and appointed him President of the putative federation. At a celebratory banquet Bolívar leapt on the table and cried "Thus, as I cross this table from one end to the other shall I march from the Atlantic to the Pacific and Panama to Cape Horn until the last Spaniard is expelled!"

Bolívar was then 35. By the time of his death at the age of just 47 he had liberated Venezuela, Colombia, and modern day Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, and presided

over territories of 3 million square miles—larger than the Roman Empire at its zenith. Arrogant and determined but selfless in his objectives, Bolívar led by inspirational oratory and physical example: in the course of his gargantuan achievement he travelled 20,000 miles on horseback, crossing and re-crossing some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth, and fought around 300 battles and skirmishes, marked by decisive generalship and speed of manoeuvre. The campaign began with unconscionable cruelty and slaughter on both sides, and finished with a disillusioned Bolívar, wearied to death and trapped in a labyrinth of intrigues, idealisms, petty rivalries, the leftover emotions of a string of affairs, and the abiding memory of his wife and true love who died when he was 20.

## PUERTO ORDAZ

Nearby Puerto Ordaz is Ciudad Bolívar's modern equivalent: the commercial heart of eastern Venezuela. Puerto Ordaz is well worth a visit, principally to see the massive cataracts of the Río Caroní as it descends in a swirling maelstrom half a mile wide bringing black waters from the Gran Sabana to join the Orinoco's brown waters from the Andes and the Amazon.

Here Sir Walter Raleigh's expedition of 1595 came to a halt, though his scout Berio reported that beyond them to the south lay mountains of crystal, high waterfalls and doubtless the gold of the El Dorado legend.

Driving south today towards the Gran Sabana, farmland gives way to tropical rainforest in which there are gold mining concessions where international companies fulfil Berio's promise, and trading posts where hard-working private miners exchange nuggets for the family groceries or the fleeting pleasures of hard liquor and loose women. Not for nothing does a small town on the road bear the name 'El Dorado' to this day.



## The Kineticists

In a typically Venezuelan juxtaposition, Ciudad Bolívar brings together not just the echoes of its vivid past, but also one of the most important small contemporary art collections in Latin America: the Jesús Soto Museum, dedicated to the principal figure of kinetic art who was born here.

With its origins in 1950s Paris, but inspired by the vibrating intensity of light in his home town, Soto's wide-ranging work inspired a group of other Venezuelan artists.

Their art has visual parallels with that of Bridget Riley, for example, but its social aesthetic finds Soto's sculptures on the Caracas metro and suspended in airport halls over geometric floors designed by Cruz-Diez, and the communal art of the Paria village of Chacaracual by Juvenal Ravelo, rather than restricted to the society of galleries and museums.



# Orinoco Delta

*A secluded and timeless world, home of the Warao people for 6,000 years.*

Almost the whole length of the Orinoco, one of the great rivers of the world, lies within Venezuela. It rises in tropical rainforests that continue to the Amazon to form the planet's largest area of rainforest, and it ends at the Atlantic in the only neotropical delta, the most extensive anywhere in the tropics. Here the Orinoco's final journey to the ocean is through a maze of narrow creeks and channels that seep between thousands of low islands of palm forest and mangrove.

The central area of the Delta, about the size of Wales, is home to the 20,000 strong Warao people. Their world is as remote and timeless as the hidden world of the rainforest in which the river began. The history of the Warao dates back perhaps 6,000 years and maybe much longer. Once more widely scattered, they have remained secluded in the labyrinth of the Delta for centuries, weathering Arawak and Carib conquests of the West Indies, and the arrival of the Europeans. Their way of life is well adapted to their unusual environment and their culture is counted as one of the most long-lived and successful in South America. Although many hundreds of miles apart, the Warao people who live in the Delta find many cultural echoes with the indigenous communities of the rainforests of the upper Orinoco.

In their view they inhabit the centre of a world that is a flat disk, surrounded by water. The disk is rather thin, which explains why the land is permanently sodden.

The Warao's name means 'boat people' and the skill they regard most highly is the making of

canoes, to which boys and young men are trained for many years in both craft and spiritual aspects. All are made from single trees and they vary in size from tiny ones a few feet long, to giants capable of carrying 50 people. Hollowed out to leave just an inch of wood, the average canoe for a man is strong, stable and manoeuvrable, but longer craft with several crew are needed for large rivers or the sea. Everybody gets about by canoe—children paddling tiny craft before they can walk.

Warao houses are usually built on tall stilts to cope with constantly changing water levels, and to take advantage of the cooling trade winds. Each house is connected to its neighbour by a raised walkway, to form little family communities or villages of up to a thousand or more inhabitants. Everyone is an expert at fishing, and the moriche palm provides food, wine, boats, rope and hammocks. Other crops include plantains, sugar cane, maize, rice and yucca. Chickens and ducks are kept, but no other food animals are required, given the constant supply of a variety of good fish. Music for dancing is provided by the violin, which has become fully absorbed into Warao culture, with many talented exponents.

The Delta's birds and animals, though made shy by hunting, are generally easier to see than those of the rainforest: macaws, parrots, toucans, hoatzin, the horned screamer, many species of waterbirds, howler and capuchin monkeys, giant river otter, fresh water dolphin, caiman, turtle, piranha and four-eyed fish can usually be seen in a trip of a few days.

There are lodges close to the land-side edge of



the Delta which provide an introduction to the region, its people and its fauna and flora—with a taste of adventure too. Close to the ocean at San Francisco de Guayo, it is possible to stay in a locally-owned guesthouse on the fringes of a large Warao village—a wonderful place for relaxation and reflection in the simplest style.

### ORINOCO RAINFORESTS

**D**ense rainforests fill most of Venezuela south of the Orinoco and west of the Gran Sabana.

Viewed from above, the forest possesses a benign and powerful force. At dawn its breath rises in delicate ribbons of mist. Down amid the tangled darkness and humidity of the forest floor the jungle seems confusing and hard to comprehend, but all around you there are opportunities to learn about the patterns that make this most complex ecosystem work: bringing sense to the apparent chaos.

Most forest creatures will be aware of your presence and will keep well out of sight or high in the canopy. It is more likely to be the small things—the tree frogs, deep iridescent blue morpho butterflies, columns of leaf-cutter ants and plants' often cunning and intricate defence mechanisms—which will keep you spellbound.

The most convenient opportunities to gain some insight into this remarkable habitat are from the TransAmazonica highway en route from Puerto Ordaz to the Gran Sabana, an area also partly subjected to the predations of gold and diamond mining.

The Caura river rises in the deep south and runs through the centre of the forests to join the Orinoco upriver from Ciudad Bolívar. It flows through the homelands of the Ye'kwana people who fish and farm shifting plots along the river banks, and it is an important communication route between them and their cousins further south. You can make the same journey as far as Pará Falls, a powerful horseshoe of thundering waterfalls deep in the forest, see p37.

In the upper Orinoco, near Puerto Ayacucho, narrow rivers are overhung with trees and lianas reflecting in the glassy waters. A scattering of *tepuis* (table mountains mostly found in the Gran Sabana) stand above the forest. The Cuao and Autana rivers pass either side of Cerro Autana, a tall stump-like tepui that represents the Tree of Life to the Piaroa. Travel in this border region is frequently subject to restrictions.





# Paria

*A lush paradise of mountains, palm trees, beaches and chocolate.*

The Paria peninsula is one of Venezuela's hidden gems—a lush green landscape of small hills, farms and isolated hamlets that give way to luxuriant cloud forests as the peninsula grows more mountainous and reaches out like a finger towards the island of Trinidad a few miles off the coast.

On Paria's northern coast, palm forested hills come down to the sea and create a succession of idyllic beaches that are some of the most beautiful in the whole Caribbean. Sheltered by headlands, the best beaches are long bays of warm yellow sand, backed by groves of coconut palm.

Christopher Columbus first landed on the American continent here, and it could be said that not much has happened in Paria since then. The pace of life is relaxed and friendly, everyone has time to stop and chat, and there is a profound sense of harmony and wellbeing. Tropical fruits abound and the area's small farms produce cacao for the finest chocolate in the world.

The lively little town of Carúpano (whose small claims to fame include rum distilleries and the telegraph office of the first transatlantic cable to reach South America) is worth a visit. Its narrow shopping streets lead to the convivial Plaza Colón, where everyone stops to sit and talk under the trees.

It is reckoned to be one of the best places in Venezuela to celebrate Carnival.

The fishing village of Río Caribe is starting to attract a stylish set who are restoring the fine old houses set back from the sea front that were built when Río Caribe was a successful cacao port. Be sure to visit in the morning when the fishermen fuss over their brightly coloured boats and local ladies carefully select the best fish laid out for them at the market stalls, while pelicans waddling at their feet vie for scraps.

A few miles from Río Caribe, the village of Chacaracual has wholeheartedly adopted the art of Juvenal Ravelo. Nearly every house, shop, garage, railing and garden wall fronting the little road through the village bears his 'chromatic modulation' designs. Locally born, Ravelo was among the Paris kineticists and studied sociology at the Sorbonne in the 60s. He has had several international exhibitions but retains a strong public art ethos. His striking geometric repeating designs can also be found on urban highways around Caracas.

On the edge of Chacaracual is Hacienda Bukare, a cacao estate that roasts its organic cacao and refines it into delicious artisanal chocolate and rich truffles.

There are wildlife viewing opportunities at Finca Vuelta Larga—a water buffalo farm that is run with conservation in mind: if you won't

be going to the Llanos then a visit here is a must. Capybara, caiman, and several monkey species are usually seen, ant-eaters are present and jaguar is a remote possibility. The bird life here is very good, with 250 species listed.

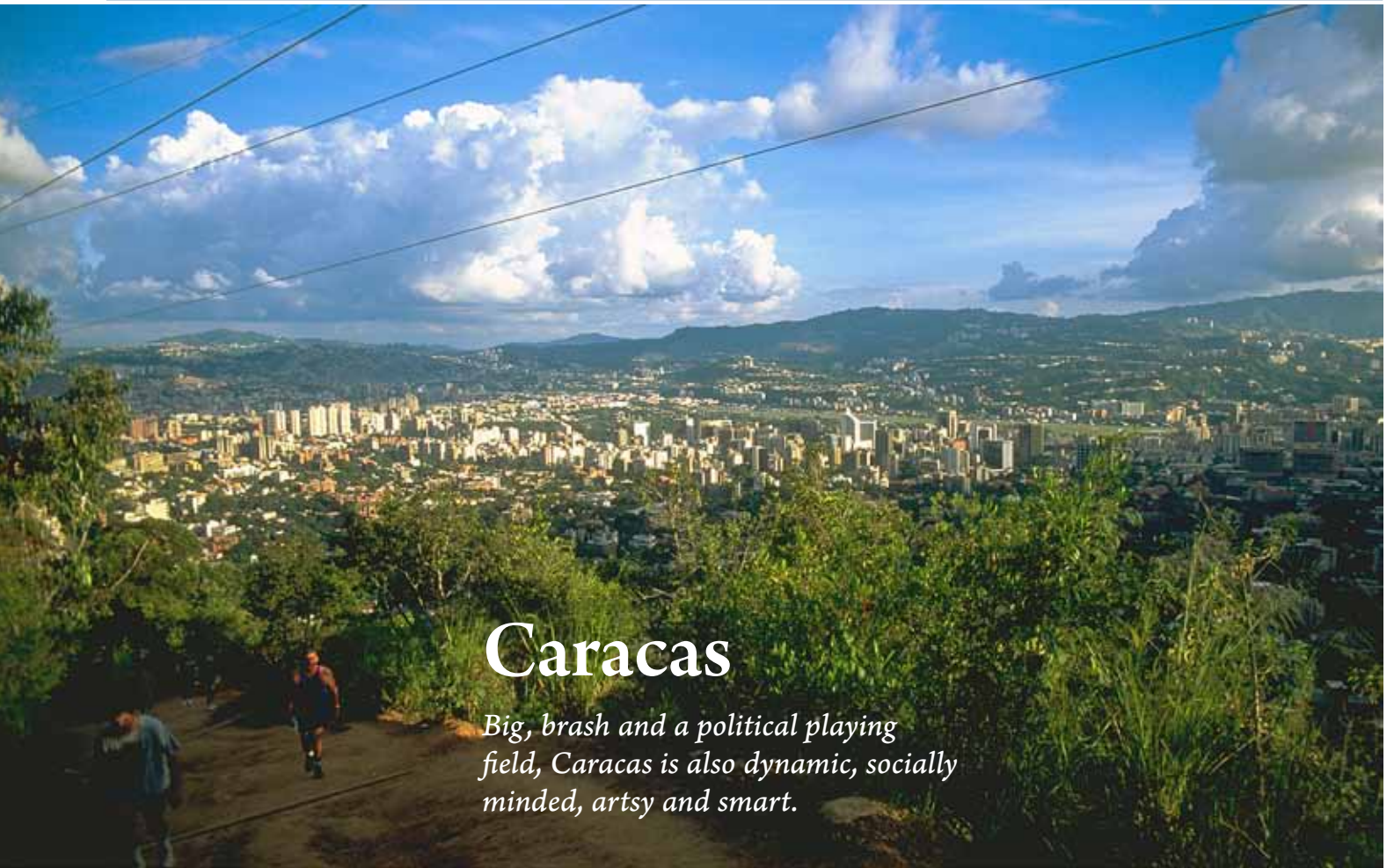
The region is generally good for bird watching, with the cloud forests of Cerro Humo and Caripe's Guácharo Cave, with its large oilbird colony, being special attractions.

The little town of Caripe makes a very pleasant stop if you are touring the area or driving up from Puerto Ordaz.

There are many local surprises, including some thermal mud-springs. Daub your skin thoroughly with the mud as it bubbles out of little pits in the ground in an open meadow, let it cool and harden, then soak yourself in a succession of small pools, heated by the springs. Surprisingly cleansing and invigorating, and pleasing to be doing all this in a field rather than a health club!

To the west, beyond Cumaná, lies the marine national park of Mochima, a gorgeous bay peppered with rocky islands and islets. Whales come to play with their calves in its deep sheltered waters.





# Caracas

*Big, brash and a political playing field, Caracas is also dynamic, socially minded, artsy and smart.*



Caracas is a modern capital with some impressive architecture, multi-lane urban highways, a state-of-the-art metro system, parks, gardens, museums and art galleries, a plentiful supply of restaurants and bars, shopping malls, prosperous suburbs, and well-to-do apartment blocks. Like other major capitals there are also many people struggling to survive on the city's sprawling edge, and there is dirt, noise, traffic jams and pollution.

As city people ourselves we always enjoy spending time in Caracas. It would be a shame not to see the city if you want to understand the country better, in particular the efforts to use the country's oil wealth for the benefit of its citizens and the Cubanisation of its politics.

There is a small photogenic historic quarter with prestigious government buildings. Bolívar is an especially significant figure here, with a large plaza in his name near the house where he was born—worth a visit. There is a well manicured Botanical Garden right in the centre of the city, and UNESCO-listed architecture at the city campus of the University of Venezuela. The Museum of Colonial Art is housed in a lovely old Spanish style residence. The Museum of Contemporary Art houses a very impressive collection of work. Museums are closed on Mondays.

The city lies in a long valley between two ranges of mountains. In the mid-1950s a cable car was built to the top of Mt Avila, to the north, and

it re-opened a few years ago with fabulous views across the city on one side, and the Caribbean to the other. At the summit, incongruous attractions for the city's escapees include an ice rink, strawberry and cream kiosks and the stunning Humboldt Hotel (Sanabria, 1956).

Back in the centre there are shopping streets and malls, and pavement cafes where passers-by pause for a game of chess. For a slice of middle-class life join the Lycra'd joggers on the lower trails of Avila National Park or visit the boutiques, galleries and small restaurants in the colonial-style suburb of El Hatillo.

As in any major city, but more so, it pays to be generally street-wise. Always take a licensed taxi to and from your destination if you are out after dark. Do not wear expensive jewellery or watches, do not carry large amounts of cash or use street ATMs. Heed current Foreign Office advice. Shanty areas of the city are no-go areas for outsiders.

There is no need to go into Caracas if you are just passing through at the airport, which is on the other side of Mt Avila, down by the sea. The small seaside town of Macuto is a lot quieter and much more convenient.

# Planning your trip to Venezuela



## The best of Venezuela

Since launching Geodyssey in 1993 we have always prided ourselves on creating travel ideas that are individually adapted to each country we offer. Each of our destinations is very different, and each has its own ways to discover and enjoy it.

Venezuela was our first destination and it remains very special for us. There is so much to see and do there, and so much that is completely unique. We love it.

To get the most from a trip to Venezuela the best options are:

- **Private guided touring** Travelling with your own local guide in each region adds a lot to the experience of Venezuela and makes sure that things go as they should. You'll have a rich experience with lots to see and do each day. **page 26-31**
- **Small group touring holidays** On our 'Venezuela Odyssey' holiday you join a group of like-minded travellers on a convivial fully-escorted trip around the country. **page 32-33**
- **Active Venezuela** A walking holiday is a great way to explore the Andes, take in some fabulous scenery, relax and get fit. For something adventurous the Gran Sabana is unbeatable. **page 34-37 and 39**
- **Small group adventure trips** Our classic 'Trek to the Lost World' is a truly remarkable expedition trek to one of the world's most evocative places. **page 38-39**
- **Beaches** With the best weather in South America and more Caribbean coast than all the Caribbean islands put together, Venezuela has a lot to offer. The best beaches are really outstanding. **page 40-43**
- **Birdwatching** Venezuela is a wonderful birdwatching destination, with a huge number of species (including many 'spectaculars'), fabulous scenery and excellent guides. **page 44-47**

## The right design for you

Our specialists have carefully designed each sample holiday in this brochure to be the best of its type. You can choose with confidence one of those itineraries 'off-the-peg', just as it stands. We can also design something just for you on a fully 'tailor-made' basis.

Our specialists are available to advise you. There is plenty in this brochure to help you plan your trip before you contact us, but if you are in a hurry please at least just browse these pages to get the flavour of what's possible before you call!

### Off-the-peg holidays

**Choose a holiday design straight off-the-peg for the best possible value.**

The designs shown in this brochure have been specially created to focus on highlights that most of us with a real interest in Venezuela will want to see and experience.

By choosing one of these carefully crafted designs 'off the peg', ie exactly as it is described, you have the advantages of a private trip (not in a group) to start on any date, with a thoughtfully designed itinerary, at a very competitive price. There is often a choice of hotel selections at different budgets.

While an 'off-the-peg' design cannot be changed without increasing the price, you can easily add extra days at the start or end of the holiday.

The letters "B", "L" and "D" (for breakfast, lunch and dinner) indicate the meals that are included in the prices in the Booking Information insert.

### How to book your holiday 'off-the-peg'

To book your holiday 'off-the-peg', select your favourite holiday design from this brochure, check our current Booking Information supplement for prices and latest details, then contact us with the dates you'd like to travel.

We will answer any questions you have, update you on any changes in the itinerary since this brochure went to press, go through any hotel choices etc with you, and discuss flight options. You can book your flights independently or through us.

When you send in your signed booking form and payment our specialists will make the reservations. If a hotel etc in the design happens not to have availability for your dates we will suggest a suitable alternative at similar cost.

### Tailor-made holidays

**Use our tailor-made service to see Venezuela exactly the way you want.**

On a fully tailor-made holiday your entire trip is designed day-by-day to suit you. Our specialists have lots of ideas and some great suggestions. They know what's available and they really understand how the country works.

A tailor-made holiday allows you choose the way you travel, the type of hotels you prefer, and the things you like to do. You can choose whether to have a private guide for all or any part of your trip. You can build in a special interest (such as walking, crafts, local cultures, wildlife, or bird watching) for most of your time, or just a day or two. It's up to you.

### How to book a tailor-made holiday

First look through the holiday designs in this brochure and pick the ideas that appeal to you the most, perhaps from different designs.

Then call us with your choices and questions and we will discuss them with you and prepare a full written proposal. We can modify this as often as necessary to create your perfect trip. Meals can be included or left for you to decide as you go along.

### There's no commitment until you are ready

When you are happy with a proposal, send us your booking form and payment and we will put everything in place. There is no commitment until you send us your booking form.

A tailor-made service naturally adds a little to the overall cost of a holiday, but you're making sure that you get the most from your valuable holiday time and from the rest of your holiday budget.

## Practicalities

### When to visit Venezuela

**Most areas of Venezuela enjoy good weather for large parts of the year.**

Venezuela's dry season (usually late October to late April) is characterised by fine clear days with little rain and it is a good time to escape northern winters. Weather conditions in these months are consistently very good in most years.

The wetter season (May-September) still has plenty of sun, is not very wet, and much of the rain falls conveniently at night. It is Venezuela's season of abundance: landscapes are green and fresh, and waterfalls are at their most spectacular.

Los Roques, Margarita and Coro are very dry and sunny and you are virtually guaranteed good weather there at any time of year.

Temperatures are nearly constant all year round, with most areas in pleasantly hot (28-32C) in the day (think of the best Mediterranean weather), but not as baking hot as southern Europe can be in July and August. It is cooler in the Andes, with the Merida valley typically a very pleasant 20-25C in the day, sometimes falling to a nippy 5C at night.

Venezuela is comfortably outside the hurricane zone.

### Hotel grades

We use the following to indicate relative prices:

- **MID-RANGE** A good standard option which we think is comfortable and pleasant but with few frills and at a price to suit the cost-conscious traveller. Guest bedrooms all have private bathrooms, of course.
- **UPPER RANGE** A notch or two up, with prices to match
- **TOP RANGE** At the top end of what's available. A special place to stay, but at the top of the market price-wise.

In remote areas in the Gran Sabana, remote parts of the Andes, or Lake Maracaibo, the best available accommodation can be very basic.

It is not uncommon in the Llanos, the Gran Sabana or the Orinoco Delta for bathrooms to be plumbed with cold water only - not as bad as it may sound given the heat.

### Food

As you travel around Venezuela you will find that standards in the cities are pretty good, though seldom very special. You will eat well, but usually not remarkably so.

In the country you can expect hearty fare, nothing too elaborate, usually a selection of local recipes and 'international favourites' - steaks, pasta, pizzas and so on. Soups are especially good. Vegetarians will get by some of the time, and be in heaven with the variety of tropical fruit and veg at others.

Several everyday Andean recipes are very good and worth noting and trying at home when you get back.

Out in the wilderness areas of the Gran Sabana or the Orinoco rainforests you may find yourself dependent on your guide's catering abilities, which may not be much above 'fodder' in these circumstances.

'Batida' drinks of tropical fruits whizzed in a blender, are a great local favourite, along with fizzy drinks. With excellent ice-cold local beer, good local rum and wine from Chile and Argentina, you'll get along very nicely for liquid refreshments too.

### Guides

The best person to introduce you to a country is a local, so our guides are Venezuelan. They can turn a successful trip into a truly memorable one with fresh insights, which a foreign guide would struggle to match.

Guides have become an essential for getting about in Venezuela these days; the risk is too high of missing flights, taking a wrong turn, or just not knowing about the interesting things in a locality.

Our guides are typically well-educated, fluent English speakers, experienced, naturally hospitable and easy to get along with. Almost all of them we have personally known well for several years through our many visits to the country. They know how to make things work locally, to help put things back on the rails if something needs to be changed at the last minute, and to search out the things that interest you the most.

### Take the family

Travelling about in mainland Venezuela is a challenge for families, but if yours loves adventure and expanded horizons then you will enjoy it immensely.

A holiday at the beach is much less demanding of course, and Venezuela's choice of amazing beaches and great winter weather is hard to beat. You could certainly spend the whole time at the beach, but there is no reason why you shouldn't consider mixing in a short side-trip to Canaima and Angel Falls, or into the Orinoco Delta.

Much will depend on the age of your children and your family's interests - talk to our experts to create the perfect trip for all of you.

### Connections

If you have time and would like to combine your trip to Venezuela with a visit to another country in Latin America, then please call us to discuss your options.

Much depends on which airline is offering efficient connections at reasonable fares.

### Arriving and leaving

We usually recommend flying to Venezuela from the UK on one of the European carriers. Most international flights from Europe arrive in the mid-afternoon, usually too late to travel onwards the same day.

Caracas airport is a long drive from the city itself (the airport is next to the sea on a coastal strip backed by mountains, Caracas is in a valley on the other side of the mountains, linked by a highway that's often choked with traffic). Given the journey, the traffic and the mental onslaught of a busy Latin American city after a long flight, it would be foolhardy to try to stay in Caracas itself.

Instead by far the best option for most people is to drive 30 min from the airport in the other direction - along the coast to the seaside town of Macuto, where there is a small selection of reasonable hotels.

International flights back to Europe generally leave Venezuela in the late afternoon and fly overnight. Where appropriate we include check-in assistance at the airport just in case there are any last minute problems for our local staff to help solve.

Most international flights on US carriers leave earlier in the day, usually too early to connect safely with incoming domestic flights from around Venezuela - so your final night would have to be at a hotel within reach of the airport.

## We know Venezuela

(after twenty years it's time to blow our own trumpet!)

**G**eodyssey's in-depth knowledge of our destinations is legendary. Our Venezuela specialists have travelled the length and breadth of the country over a long period. We go back again and again, researching ideas, checking hotels, meeting guides and testing routes.

Our knowledge is kept up-to-date by working with Venezuela every day, by contact with our local partners around the country, and by the feedback we receive from our clients when they get back.

We have lots of practical experience in designing trips that really work well for different customers with different tastes and budgets. That's what we enjoy best of all.

Our experts are a helpful bunch, so when you are ready just give them a call and talk things through. Their expertise is yours when you want it.

### We are trusted by demanding clients

We plan trips to Venezuela every day of the week for our clients.

They are a great bunch of people: school teachers, doctors, cabinet ministers, business people, retirees, honeymooners, young professionals in couples and groups, birdwatchers, walkers, wildlife photographers, and many more. They are all demanding in their different ways.

At the end of their trip they generally award us very high ratings (98% rate our specialists as 'Excellent'), so we must be getting most things right.

Conde Nast Traveler magazine once expressed it well when they included Geodyssey in their Special Agent list:

"This list represents those who have impressed me the most with their knowledge of specific destinations and types of travel. They also possess a certain degree of frankness, friendliness, taste, the willingness to work with a range of customers and budgets, and an understanding of the types of experiences that Conde Nast Traveler readers want."

### You can do anything

Because we know a lot about Venezuela we offer lots and lots of choice.

Whether it's a relaxing break you are after, a see-it-all touring holiday, something with a wildlife focus, expert bird watching, activities from day walks to serious trekking, scuba diving and more, we've got the experience to hand to design it properly and make sure it works for you.

So if you have something special in mind, there's a very good chance that we already have experience of designing something similar. Go on, try us.

### When things go wrong

It's good to know that when you are on your holiday you have got the support, knowledge and back-up you need locally and from here in London.

Heaven forbid that anything should go wrong, but if it does we're here to help fix it for you.



## Where to stay

Mainstream hotels in Venezuela tend to be fairly uninspiring (just as anywhere in the world). Wherever possible we search out characterful family-run 'posadas' (guesthouses) run with a passion in a great location. You will find that remote lodges and overnight stops in remote areas can be fairly rustic, but though your room may have no more than a bed, a chair, and a light bulb (and private bathroom), what is outside the window will make your stay amazing.

Here is a small selection from the hundred or so we use. For beach examples see p43.



**Hotel Ole Caribe** UPPER-RANGE

Macuto, near Caracas airport

Half an hour's drive from Caracas airport, the coastal town of Macuto is an ideal place to stay for one night when you first arrive in Venezuela. All the hotels here are rather characterless. Ole Caribe is the best of the four star options: it's practical, it looks out over the Caribbean and it has a swimming pool. Standard rooms have a queen-sized double or two single beds, superiors have two doubles, suites have kings. All rooms are en suite with satellite TV, a/c, mini-bar, hair-dryer, and a security box. The hotel's cafe-bar and restaurant are both open in the evening for dinner.



**Casa Sol** MID-RANGE

Mérida, Andes, Western Venezuela

Our favourite posada in downtown Mérida since the day it opened. Set in the heart of the city's older quarter, Posada Casa del Sol is a beautifully restored and stylishly designed colonial house with 17 spacious and uniquely decorated guest rooms. The public areas are decorated with modern pieces created by local artists and artisans, with an internal courtyard garden where breakfast is served. Rooms are comfortably furnished and have private bathrooms, safes, laptop internet connections and TVs.



**Casa Grande de Angostura** UPPER RANGE

Ciudad Bolívar, Eastern Venezuela

A popular choice for visitors to Ciudad Bolívar, Casa Grande is an upper-range hotel with good facilities and a convenient location in the historic quarter of the city. It is set in a restored two-storey colonial house furnished with antiques. There are 15 large guest rooms, all with private bathrooms, fans, air conditioning, fridges, phones and a safety deposit box at the desk. A pool and jacuzzi in the hotel have views of the Angostura Bridge across the Orinoco River.



**Estancia La Bravera** UPPER RANGE

Sierra La Culata, Andes

This is a delightful cloud forest lodge run by a family who are committed to conserving their local habitat. It is situated at 2,360m just below the Páramo del Tambor in the Sierra La Culata, with trails leading through cloud forest onto the moor. Rooms are set in little houses among well-tended gardens, with hummingbirds zipping between the flowers and feeders. Guests stay on a full-board basis, eating at the lodge's lovely restaurant. All rooms have private bathroom with hot water. Amiable and attentive hosts. Always given excellent reviews.



**Waku Lodge** UPPER RANGE

Canaima, Eastern Venezuela

Set on the shores beside the Canaima Lagoon, Waku Lodge is one of the nicest lodges from which to explore Canaima and Angel Falls. The lodge has a premium lakeside location on Canaima Lagoon itself, with a lovely view across the water to Hacha Falls and the table mountains beyond. It has 15 nicely decorated rooms all with private bathrooms (hot water), fans and a porch with seating and hammocks. Waku Lodge often scores highly for its food. Various excursions are offered locally.



**Parakaupa Lodge** MID-RANGE

Canaima, Eastern Venezuela

Parakaupa Lodge is a small lodge set on slightly higher ground a short distance away from Canaima Lagoon, with a view down to the lagoon and waterfalls from the edge of the property. The lodge has a pleasant dining room, bar and communal areas. Standard rooms are simple but pleasant and serviceable - all have a private coldwater bathroom, ceiling fan, ice maker and mineral water. Suites are slightly larger, with a terrace and hot water. Various excursions are offered locally.



**Orinoco Delta Lodge** MID-RANGE

Orinoco Delta, Eastern Venezuela

Orinoco Delta Lodge is set on the banks of Caño Guamal in the Orinoco Delta, with access by boat. Its 37 cabins are built in the local palm-thatched style, with wooden walls some of which are half-height to help the room stay cool (but screened against insects). Rooms have private bathrooms with cold water only.

You stay on a full board basis which includes daily excursions with the lodge's resident guides, shared with other guests. The Lodge helped set up and now helps run a school for local Warao children.



**Hato El Cedral** MID-RANGE

Llanos, Western Venezuela

Hato Cedral is a long-established wildlife lodge in a very large working cattle ranch 3h by road from Barinas. Now owned by the Venezuela government, the lodge offers the best wildlife experience in the Llanos. Guests join the lodge's resident English-speaking naturalist guides on morning and afternoon safaris to a variety of different sites. Visitors stay on a full board basis with fixed meal times. Rooms are simple but comfortable rooms (2 queen beds) with a/c and private bathrooms. There is a small swimming pool (sometimes out of use).

### Worth a mention

**Finca Vuelta Larga** Paria/Orinoco Delta MID/UPPER RANGE

Admirable working water buffalo ranch that offers a wonderful wildlife experience, much like the Llanos but on a smaller scale. The Finca is run on sustainable principles and is active in wildlife conservation. Guests join twice-daily wildlife excursions led by knowledgeable local guides. Good for birdwatchers too.

**Hato Cristero** Llanos UPPER RANGE

A traditional, family run ranch on higher land close to Barinas. Good accommodation and a range of activities, particularly for the llanero way of life, plus some of the main animals and birds. A good all-round choice, but does not have the wildlife spectacle of the low Llanos.

**La Cumbre** Ciudad Bolívar MID-RANGE

Hill-top setting looking to Ciudad Bolívar and the Orinoco. Unusual modern architecture, 24 good-sized bedrooms have views, hammock, and private bathrooms. Bar, restaurant, swimming pool. Locals come for live music most weekends. Many steps, so not suited to the less agile.

**Posada Kamoiran** Gran Sabana, Eastern Venezuela

A 'best available in the region' choice usefully situated. Stone built lodge beside Kamoiran rapids, simple clean spartan rooms with private cold water bathroom. Popular restaurant (can be noisy in the evening). Owned by a very well-regarded Pemón lady - a former mayor of the region.



## Natural Venezuela

Our 'grand tour' of Venezuela, featuring all the classic highlights and many little-known gems, with the accent on wildlife, magnificent landscapes and relatively comfortable travelling. In each region local guides are with you to show you around and help everything run smoothly.

### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport and driven (normally 30 min) to your functional 4\* hotel overlooking the Caribbean in the relaxed seaside town of Macuto. The hotel has a choice of restaurants and a small swimming pool.

### Estancia Bravera

**Day 2** LD Early next morning you are collected from your hotel and driven back to the airport for your short onwards flight to the Venezuelan Andes. Landing at El Vigia you are met by your English-speaking local guide and driven to Estancia La Bravera—a small lodge in a beautiful setting, tucked away in a sheltered spot just below the open páramo.

Guest chalets are set in beautiful gardens, mostly of native plants. Hummingbirds zip busily to and fro at their nectar feeders by the restaurant. Behind the lodge a short trail through cloud forest leads you on to the open páramo with fine views all around.

The hacienda's peaceful welcoming atmosphere make this a special place to stay and relax after your long journey.

### Andean life

**Day 3** BL After a morning to enjoy La Bravera your guide drives you through mountain villages to Jaji, with its classic colonial layout around the main square, then to Hacienda El Carmen—a former coffee hacienda with a quirky museum.

You arrive in Mérida towards the end of the afternoon to stay for two nights at a stylish renovated town house in the lively historic quarter.

Your hotel has a small patio garden and decor showing the work of local contemporary artists.

### Mérida

**Day 4** BL Your guide comes to your hotel to take you on walking tour of Mérida to see its main sights including the Plaza Bolívar, the Cathedral and the covered market. You

could stop by the *Heladería Coromoto* ice-cream parlour which features in the Guinness Book of Records with the most flavours in the world.

If the cable car is operating you could instead take a ride on it this morning (tickets at extra cost locally). Or you could walk part of the Humboldt Trail. In either case you would then explore the sights of Mérida with your guide later in the day as time permits.

### Páramos villages and Sierra Nevada NP

**Day 5** BLD Today you can mix touring with a little walking as you travel along the Transandean Highway through traditional villages and impressive scenery of the high páramos, a treeless habitat of frost-shattered rocks, grasses, lichens, gorse and frailejones.

In the villages explore the streets of traditional houses, and step into small churches—including a stone chapel created by sculptor Juan Félix Sánchez.

To earn extra money children sell flowers by the road or hold up fat Mucuchíes puppies for sale—a local breed of giant-size mountain dog.

Visit Mucubají Lagoon at 3,600m (3,500m) from where you might choose to stretch your legs and walk over the moors to reach the more distant Black Lagoon (Laguna Negra). It's about an hour's walk in each direction. You could hire a mule to ride there if you prefer.

Stay 2 nights at a comfortable altitude in the Santo Domingo Valley.

### Sierra La Culata and Andean Cock of the Rock

**Day 6** BLD Today you explore the stunning frost shattered landscapes of the Sierra La Culata National Park with its desert paramo vegetation. There is a small Condor reintroduction centre in the area.

You may choose to start the day early with a side trip to the lek site of the Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, where hopeful male

performers spend much of their day waiting for an audience. When a female arrives each performs his best dance, hoping to be chosen for a nice time in the bushes. It is short walk and a scramble down a ravine to overlook the lekking area but the sight is unforgettable wildlife spectacle. Our current record is 50 males displaying at once.

### Llanos wildlife ranch

**Day 7** BLD With a fairly early start you drive down the flank of the Andes to descend to the Llanos plains, reaching the wildlife ranch of Hato El Cedral in time for a late lunch.

During your time at Hato El Cedral you go out and about on wildlife viewing safaris by boat and vehicle with the ranch's resident naturalist guides and the other guests. There are two safaris each day, in the morning and the late afternoon, so on this first day you will be able to join the later safari.

Among many sightings you are likely to see large numbers of capybara, caiman, giant river otter, anaconda, piranhas, giant anteater, scarlet ibis, roseate spoonbill, large jabiru stork, hoatzin, armadillo, several species of monkey, deer, and orinoco crocodile up to 18ft long.

The lodge has a small swimming pool, though it is not always in use; guest rooms are air-conditioned, but otherwise the accommodation is only basic.

**Day 8** BLD Full day of safaris at Hato El Cedral

**Day 9** BLD After a morning safari at Hato El Cedral, you are driven (3h) to the city of Barinas where you overnight in readiness for your early morning flight next day.

### Choroní and Henri Pittier National Park

**Day 10** B After breakfast you are collected from your hotel for the morning flight to Caracas and onwards by road to Choroní on the mainland Caribbean coast. It's a 4 hour drive, with the final 2 hours through the beautiful Henri Pittier National Park, a coastal cloud forest.



At Choroni you stay for 3 nights on a B&B basis at a characterful posada between the little seaside village of Puerto Colombia and the small town of Choroni.

**Day 11-12 B** Two free days to relax by the Caribbean and explore the national park.

The posada can arrange transport down to the seafront and the local beach, and short boat trips to quiet beaches along the coast.

There are local excursions into the cool of the cloud forest, with streams and waterfalls.

### Canaima and Angel Falls

**Day 13 B** Return by road to Caracas airport and your afternoon flight to Puerto Ordaz where you are met and transferred to your hotel.

**Day 14 BLD** Pack lightly, leaving non-essentials at the hotel, for your flight south to the landing strip at Canaima.

You are met on arrival and driven to a local guest house to settle in. In the afternoon you take a boat ride on Canaima Lagoon below Hacha Falls and stopping to walk behind Sapo Falls from one side to the other as the waters roar down beside you. There will be some free time to explore Canaima's stunning setting.

**Day 15 BLD** A free day at Canaima, with a choice of excursions largely depending on river levels and flying conditions.

### **Sightseeing flights**

Throughout the year, but depending on that day's flying conditions, it is almost always possible to take the spectacular sightseeing flight over Angel Falls, either returning directly to Canaima, or landing for a time to visit the Pemón community of Kavac where you can take a guided walk that includes wading up a narrow gorge to a pool where a small waterfall pours from an opening high above, which makes a fairly full and quite adventurous day.

### **River trips**

Another year-round option is a full day river trip as far as Orchid Island close to the start of Devil's Canyon, with dramatic views of Auyán-tepui and some of the smaller table mountains, but out of sight of the falls themselves.

Only if water levels are high enough is it possible for boats to enter the canyon to reach the foot of Angel Falls by river.

This exciting and fairly rugged journey can be done with reasonable reliability between May and October, and often until December.

It is an hour's walk from the river to a look-out point in front of the falls, and another 15min or so to swim in a pool beneath them.

In these months you can make the round trip by river in a single very long day, leaving at dawn or even before, and arriving back late, sometimes after dusk.

Alternatively, it may be possible to spread the river trip to Angel Falls over 2 days, staying overnight at the jungle hammock camp close to the falls and returning to Canaima in time for the afternoon flight. For this trip we would need to put your name down in advance, to await final confirmation once the minimum number has been reached.

All the other trips are normally available for you to book locally at extra cost when you arrive in Canaima.

Conditions on river trips are generally fairly basic.

### Ciudad Bolívar

**Day 16 BD** After a morning at Canaima, take the afternoon flight to the historic city of Ciudad Bolívar.

Your local guide meets you and takes you for a short tour of some of the principal sights of the small historic quarter before dusk.

Stay overnight at a small hotel in the town.

### Orinoco Delta

**Day 17 BLD** You are collected from your hotel and driven to a dock at the edge of the Orinoco Delta.

Here you are picked up by boat for Orinoco Delta Lodge, which lies on a tributary of the Caño Manamo and offers individual thatched cabins with private bathrooms (cold water only).

You should arrive at the lodge in time for an afternoon excursion to explore the life of the delta.

**Day 18 BLD** A full day of trips to explore the other-world of the Delta with its unique ecosystem, with unusual flora and wildlife such as freshwater dolphin, monkeys, turtles, hoatzin and parrots, and the secluded civilisation of the Warao people.

The Warao's history in the Delta dates back thousands of years. They live in stilt villages, travel by dugout, and are master weavers of the moriche palm.

### Departure

**Day 19 B** This morning you say goodbye to the Delta, returning by boat to the dock and then by road to Puerto Ordaz for a flight to Caracas where you are met and assisted to catch your chosen international flight home in the late afternoon or evening.

If you have more time you could continue onwards to Margarita, for example.



## Two adventures and a beach

An exciting combination of the table mountains and waterfalls of Canaima national park and a trip into the world of the Orinoco Delta, followed by well-earned relaxation at a beautiful Caribbean beach. All in barely two weeks!

### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport and driven (normally 30 min) to your functional 4\* hotel overlooking the Caribbean in the relaxed seaside town of Macuto. The hotel has a choice of restaurants and a small swimming pool.

### Canaima and Angel Falls

**Day 2** LD Early morning fly from Caracas to Puerto Ordaz with airport assistance to change planes and fly onwards to Canaima, land-locked in the heart of the Gran Sabana and only accessible by air.

At the landing strip at Canaima you are met on arrival and transferred to a nearby lodge where you stay for 3 nights on a full board basis

Later in the afternoon you take a boat ride on Canaima Lagoon below the beautiful Hacha Falls, landing at the other end of the lagoon to walk behind mighty Sapo Falls (take a swimming costume, and be prepared to get wet!)

**Day 3-4** BLD Two free days at Canaima. There is a choice of excursions locally, largely depending on river levels and flying conditions.

### **Sightseeing flights**

Throughout the year, but depending on that day's flying conditions, it is almost always possible to take the spectacular sightseeing flight over Angel Falls, either returning directly to Canaima, or landing for a time to visit Kavac and making a fairly full day of it.

### **River trips**

Another year-round option is a full day river trip as far as Orchid Island near the start of Devil's Canyon, with dramatic views of Auyán-tepui and some of the smaller table mountains, but out of sight of the falls themselves.

Only if water levels are high enough is it possible for boats to enter the canyon to reach the foot of Angel Falls by river. This exciting and fairly rugged journey can be done with reasonable reliability between May and October, and often until December. It is an hour's walk from the river to a look-out point in front of the falls, and another 15min or so to swim in a pool beneath them.

In these months you can make the round trip by river in a single very long day, leaving at dawn or even before, and

arriving back late, sometimes after dusk.

Alternatively, it may be possible to spread the river trip to Angel Falls over your two free days, staying overnight at the jungle hammock camp close to the falls and returning to Canaima in time for the afternoon flight. For this trip we would need to put your name down in advance, to await final confirmation once the minimum number has been reached.

All the other trips are normally available for you to book locally when you arrive in Canaima.

Conditions on river trips are generally fairly basic.

### Puerto Ordaz

**Day 5** B You catch the late morning flight from Canaima to Puerto Ordaz, where you are met on arrival and driven to a hotel in the city for a positioning night.

Your guide will take you around Puerto Ordaz. You might aim to start with a visit to the La Llovizna falls, and the cataracts on the Caroní river beside Cachamay Park which closes mid-afternoon and is not open on Mondays.

### Orinoco Delta

**Day 6** BLD You are collected from your hotel and driven (3h) to a small dock on the edge of the Orinoco Delta. Here you are picked up by boat which brings you down a tributary of the Caño Manamo river arriving at Orinoco Delta Lodge, your base for three nights in the secluded world of the Delta. Accommodation is in simple individual thatched cabins with private bathrooms (cold water only).

You should arrive at the lodge in good time for lunch, followed by the lodge's afternoon excursion (shared with other guests) to explore the Delta.

This afternoon and for the next two days you venture into the Delta on the lodge's own excursions. You'll see a lot. There is a mix of unusual flora adapted to the Delta's special conditions, and wildlife such as freshwater dolphin, monkeys, turtles, hoatzin, eagles, herons, kingfishers and parrots.

To most people the most impactful experience of all will be to meet and learn from the Warao people who have lived in the Delta for several thousand years. They live sociable lives in stilt villages, get around by dugout before they can walk, are master weavers of moriche palm, and much more.

It is possible to spend one night at the Lodge's remote hammock camp deep in the heart of the Orinoco Delta, but you will need to let us know in advance if you would like to do this.

**Day 7-8** BLD Two full days exploring the Delta

### Beach

**Day 9** B The lodge will take you by boat back to the dock, where your driver meets you and returns you by road to Puerto Ordaz, dropping you at the airport for your flight to Caracas.

You are met at Caracas airport for your onwards journey to the beach of your choice from the options on p42:

- Beach time on Los Roques
- Beach time on Margarita
- Beach time at Choroní

**Day 10-14** Five full days at the beach of your choice

**Day 15** B Return to Caracas airport in good time for your chosen international flight to the UK via Europe in the late afternoon or evening.





## Gran Sabana Discovery

A memorable adventure in magnificent landscapes of surreal table mountains in Venezuela's 'Lost World', with your own private guide and 4WD, and then to Canaima to see Angel Falls.

### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport and driven (normally 30 min) to your functional 4\* hotel overlooking the Caribbean in the relaxed seaside town of Macuto. The hotel has a choice of restaurants and a small swimming pool.

### Gran Sabana

**Day 2** LD A morning flight from Caracas to Puerto Ordaz in eastern Venezuela where you meet your experienced English-speaking local guide with 4WD vehicle.

Driving south from Puerto Ordaz, you pass through ranchland then into rainforest. There is a gold and diamond mining region where you can stop to see the mining and then perhaps walk in untouched rainforest in contrast.

You then drive up the steep escarpment of La Escalera for dramatic views back over rainforests stretching to the horizon. At the top you emerge on the Gran Sabana and your first views of the table mountains.

You stay the night at a tourist lodge beside Kamoiran rapids.

**Day 3** BLD Today you turn on to a dirt road to visit Chinakmerú—a very impressive tall 'curtain' waterfall with great views from the top across the savannah. You can walk down to the base of the falls.

Continue off-road to a remote lodge at Kavanayén in the heart of the northern Gran Sabana, your base for 2 nights.

**Day 4** BLD Take a day to explore the area around Kavanayén. This Pemón village is in a breathtaking setting overlooking the rainforest and ringed by tepuis. A rough track leads to little Karuay Falls, you might drive part-way then walk on to Hueso Falls for a swim.

**Day 5** BLD Driving south next day there are wonderful views of tepuis from the road. You stop to see Kawi and Kamá Falls and perhaps take a dip at Suruape cataract, then pass Mount Roraima (in the distance but still impressive) and continue to Santa Elena de Uairén—a bustling small border town, your base for 2 nights.

**Day 6** BLD From here you can visit the memorable Jaspé Falls, Aguas Frías and Puerta del Cielo, where clear streams run over beds of semi-precious stone in reds and oranges. There



is also the opportunity to shop in the Brazilian frontier post of Villa Pacaraima, border guards permitting.

### Canaima and Angel Falls

**Day 7** BLD Say farewell to your guide and board the spectacular flight over the heart of the Gran Sabana tablelands to Canaima.

At the landing strip at Canaima you are met on arrival and transferred to a nearby lodge where you stay for 2 nights on a full board basis

Later in the afternoon you take a boat ride on Canaima Lagoon below the beautiful Hacha Falls, landing at the other end of the lagoon to walk behind mighty Sapó Falls (take a swimming costume, and be prepared to get wet!)

**Day 8** BLD Free day based at Canaima. Optional excursions available here include river trips and sightseeing flights over the Angel Falls - see Day 15 of 'Natural Venezuela (p27) for details.

### Return to Caracas

**Day 9** B You take the morning flight to Puerto Ordaz where you are met and assisted to check-in for your onwards flight to Caracas, arriving in the mid afternoon.

You are met on arrival at Caracas airport and driven back to your hotel at Macuto.

**Day 10** B You are collected from your hotel and driven back to Caracas airport for your chosen onwards flight.

## The World of the Delta

Side-step into the secluded natural world of the Orinoco Delta. Combine this with one of our other trips, or with time at the beach.

### Orinoco Delta

**Day 1** D This morning you are collected from your hotel in Puerto Ordaz\* and driven (2h) to a small dock on the edge of the Orinoco Delta.

Here you are picked up by boat which brings you down a tributary of the Caño Manamo river arriving at Orinoco Delta Lodge, your base for 3 nights in the secluded world of the Delta. Accommodation is in simple individual thatched cabins, partly open-sided and fully screened, with private bathrooms. You should arrive at the lodge in time for a late lunch.

This afternoon and over the next two days you venture into the Delta on the lodge's own excursions which are shared with their other guests.

You'll see a lot. There is a mix of unusual flora adapted to the Delta's special conditions, and wildlife such as freshwater dolphin, monkeys, turtles, hoatzin, eagles, herons, kingfishers and parrots.

To most people the most impactful experience of all will be to meet and learn from the Warao people who have lived in the Delta for several thousand years. They live sociable lives in stilt villages, get around by dugout before they can walk, are master weavers of moriche palm, and much more.

It is possible to spend one night at the Lodge's remote hammock camp deep in the heart of the Orinoco Delta, but you will need to let us know in advance if you would like to do this.

**Day 2-3** BLD Two full days exploring the Delta

**Day 4** B The lodge will take you by boat back to the dock, where your driver meets you and returns you by road to Puerto Ordaz, Ciudad Bolívar or Maturín where this side-trip ends.

*Good ways to continue your trip would be to add either 'Gran Sabana Discovery' (via Puerto Ordaz) or 'The Natural Life' (via Maturín).*

*Puerto Ordaz and Maturín have afternoon flights to Caracas from where you could catch later international flights, or travel onwards to the beach at Los Roques, Margarita or Choroní (a stopover at Macuto may be necessary).*

*\*Pick-ups from Ciudad Bolívar or Maturín can be arranged at similar cost.*



## The Natural Life

The Paria peninsula in northeast Venezuela is probably our favourite place in the whole of South America. It is relaxed, beautiful and quietly natural, with plenty to see. Don't tell anyone.

### Caripe and Humboldt's Cave

**Day 1 BLD** Your experienced English-speaking local guide, who will be supporting you throughout the trip, collects you from the town of Puerto Ordaz\* in eastern Venezuela and drives you north to the pretty hill town of Caripe.

Just outside Caripe is the extraordinary Humboldt's Cave (the *Cueva del Guácharo*), whose gigantic entrance cavern leads into a cave system that goes deep beneath the limestone hills.

You visit the outside of the cave in the evening to watch the exodus of the thousands of oil birds that roost here during the day, as they emerge in waves in such numbers that they darken the sky—a memorable wildlife spectacle. They are the only birds to fly by echo-location, emitting audible clicks to navigate at night and in the darkness of their underground home.

### Wildlife and water buffaloes

**Day 2 BD** Your morning in Caripe includes a return to Humboldt's Cave to see inside. You explore the first cavern, as big as a cathedral, and venture a little deeper to see oilbirds quietly snoozing on their ledges in their hundreds, trying to shut out the unsociable shrieks of a handful of their insomniac colleagues.

In the afternoon you are driven down to Finca Vuelta Larga, a large working water buffalo ranch on the Paria Peninsula where you stay for 2 nights. Finca Vuelta Larga offers a wonderful wildlife experience, much like the Llanos but on a smaller scale. The Finca is run on sustainable principles, is active in wildlife conservation, and warmly welcomes visitors. Its land covers 600ha, rising from the wetlands and mangroves of the Orinoco Delta in Turuepano NP, towards the low mountains of the Paria Peninsula.

**Day 3 BLD** A full day based at Finca Vuelta Larga. The varied habitats are great for notable water birds such as anhinga, hoatzin, horned screamer and scarlet ibis. Howler monkeys, caiman and capybara can all be seen here too.

### Mud baths and coconuts

**Day 4 BLD** A short drive from the Finca to visit Hacienda Aguasana ('healthy water') where 17 small geo-thermal pools at different temperatures are set around what is basically a field. Some pools contain mineral-rich sulphurous water, others bubble with a thick gloopy grey mud, with vaunted health and beauty benefits. It's a lot of fun. A little further on is a small hotel set around an old coconut plantation by a tiny beach—your base for 2 nights.

### The perfect beach

**Day 5 BD** Although the beach at your hotel is nice enough (and there's a nicer one just over a small headland), there's an unmissably gorgeous beach just along the coast. Playa Medina



is a wide sandy gently-sloping beach in a perfect bay backed by coconut palms—much photographed and just as good as it looks. You stay for the day: swimming, sun-bathing and lounging under the palm trees. Any longer would be unfair on the rest of us.

### The best chocolate

**Day 6 BL** The best cacao in the world is grown on the Paria Peninsula. Your guide takes you to a small plantation in the hills to see the process of cacao cultivation and chocolate production. Be sure to eat lots: the current Miss Venezuela (daughter of our friend and first guide in Venezuela, Billy

Esser) grew up here on 'a chocolate farm in paradise'. A diet rich in the finest organic chocolate seems to have done her no harm at all.

The country road winds gently down to the small colonial port of Rio Caribe, once made rich from the trade in fine cacao, where you stop for lunch and investigate the day's catch by the small jetty. Further along the coast you arrive at the very historic city of Cumaná, the first European settlement in mainland America. You stay in a characterful posada near the small cathedral.

### Aegean Venezuela

**Day 7 BLD** Just beyond Cumaná is Mochima National Park, which protects a magnificent series of islands and bays, formed, like the Greek islands, from sunken mountains. You take a ride in an open boat to uninhabited rocky islets with small beaches of golden sand. The water here can be very deep and in some seasons whales can be seen with their calves. You stay at a small hotel perched on a bluff above the village of Mochima for 2 nights.

**Day 8 BLD** You return to the bays and islands of Mochima for the day with a cool box of refreshments, sun umbrella and beach chairs. There are usually snorkels and fins to rent, and certified divers may be able to book themselves a dive or two at the local dive shack.

### Caracas

**Day 9 B** Time to make your way home. Your guide says goodbye at Cumaná airport and helps you check-in for your flight to Caracas arriving in the early afternoon, in good time for international flights to the UK via Europe late in the day. If you can spend longer in Venezuela you could extend your stay with time at the beach on Los Roques or Margarita, or at Choroni, or perhaps travel west to visit the Andes.

*\* Puerto Ordaz connects well with Caracas and with Canaima and Angel Falls. Pick-ups from Ciudad Bolivar or the Orinoco Delta can be arranged at similar cost.*



## West Coast Discovery

A cabinet of curiosities, with quirky surprises at every turn. This private guided trip will first have you intrigued and entertained in Coro and its surroundings, and then beguiled and at ease on the beautiful Caribbean beaches of Morrocoy and Choroni.

### Caracas

**Day 1** LD You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport and driven (normally 30 min) to your functional 4\* hotel overlooking the Caribbean in the relaxed seaside town of Macuto. The hotel has a choice of restaurants and a small swimming pool.

### Paraguán Peninsula & Dunes

**Day 2** LD Early morning flight to the Coro area in western Venezuela, where you are met on arrival by your English speaking local guide for an extraordinary day exploring the arid Paraguán Peninsula, reached by a narrow isthmus of shifting sands.

Paraguán's natural landscape is scrubby and dry to the point of desert, although an aqueduct brings some water for limited farming. It's a hard life. There is a scattering of small villages, artisans make rocking chairs from cactus wood, and adobe mud bricks bake dry in the sun. The peninsula is home to the world's smallest lizard, *Lepidoblepharis montecanoensis* which, at less than 30mm long, is half the size of its name.

There are salt flats where flamingos and scarlet ibis are seen and, in the middle of the peninsula, stands a nearly conical hill 830m high, decked in cloudforest. But tucked away in its southwest corner the peninsula marches to a different beat in the world's second largest oil refinery.

Returning to the mainland you stop outside Coro at the remarkable *Medanos de Coro*, an extensive area of shifting sand dunes up to 35m tall.

After a day of surprises you stay for 4 nights at a mid-range, beachside guesthouse along the coast, set in a coconut plantation.

### Coro

**Day 3** BLD More curiosities and surprises today when this morning you visit the photogenic streets of historic Coro, a

UNESCO World Heritage site with several small museums and historic churches, and a very good contemporary art gallery. After lunch you call at the Botanical Garden, which has an extensive collection of xerophytic plants, and visit the artist community of Tara Tara, also stopping to see the nearby archaeological museum and the excavation site of Taima Taima—see p8 for more on these.

You could take a walk with your guide in this fascinating arid landscape, perhaps to see petroglyphs, or to a lighthouse. You could also visit talented artists, potters, stone carvers, and weavers in studios in the village.

**Day 4** BD A free day for relaxation by the lodge's swimming pool or at the beach.



### Sierra de San Luis

**Day 5** BLD A completely different day, exploring the Sierra San Luis mountains. Driving with your guide into the hills, the air starts to feel fresher and the vegetation becomes lush with ferns, palms, orchids and impatiens.

Oranges and organic coffee are grown here, and you may see coffee beans drying in the sun beside the road (and sometimes on it).

Take a walk along a part of an attractive Spanish 'royal road' through forest to limestone caves. You can scramble into

a large cavern where there are impressive stalactites and stalagmites. At the *Haitón de Guarataro* an innocuous-looking hole in the ground goes down 305m (making it as deep as the Shard is high). Best not to get too close.

### Morrocoy

**Day 6** BLD Driving further along the coast you arrive at a posada with hilltop views across the mangrove-fringed lagoons and coral islands of the popular Morrocoy marine national park.

After lunch take a boat to low coral islands where soft white sands meet calm blue-green water. Return to the posada for some wonderful home cooking in the evening.

**Day 7** BD Free day in the Morrocoy area. The posada can arrange another boat trip to the islands if you wish, at an additional cost locally.

### Choroni

**Day 8** B Today you drive through the beautiful coastal cloud forest of the Henri Pittier NP, to Choroni.

At Choroni you stay for 3 nights at an attractive mid-range posada with pool, in a country setting between the small town of Choroni and the fishing village of Puerto Colombia. There are beaches in walking distance and boats to beaches only accessible from the sea.

Excursions available locally at extra cost include walks in the forest and a trip by boat and on foot to a chocolate farm.

Choroni is sleepy and quiet during the week, and lively with Venezuelans at weekends and national holidays.

**Day 9-10** B Two free days at Choroni.

### Caracas

**Day 11** B You are collected in the morning from your posada in Choroni for the drive to Caracas airport (4h) in time for your chosen onwards flight.



## Venezuela Odyssey

Our small group holiday to Venezuela visits many of its classic highlights. There are great wildlife experiences, magnificent scenery, and we visit picturesque towns and villages that give insights into everyday life beyond the cities. We see the spectacular Angel Falls and journey into the secluded world of the Orinoco Delta.

### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport on the international flight of your choice, and driven to the relaxed seaside town of Macuto to stay at a 4\* hotel which has a small pool. In the evening we meet together for a welcome cocktail overlooking the Caribbean.

### The Andes

**Day 2** LD This morning we take the early commuter flight (with breakfast at the airport or on the plane), to the town of El Vigía just west of the Andes. We are met by our local guide and driver who take us up into the mountains to the town of Mérida, set beneath the snow-capped peaks of the 'Five White Eagles'.

Our route passes through the lush coffee-growing region to the south of Mérida, where we stop to explore the village of Jaji. Founded in 1558, Jaji is laid out according to colonial regulations with church, public buildings and the best private residences fronting the plaza, now restored. We also visit a coffee hacienda dating from colonial times, with a quirky small museum. In Mérida, our base for the next 2 nights is one of our favourite posadas in Venezuela, a stylishly converted town house in the colonial streets of the old part of the city.

### Mérida

**Day 3** BLD Today our guide takes us on a walking tour of Mérida seeing its main sights including the Plaza Bolívar, the Cathedral and the covered market. We might stop at the ice-cream parlour *Heladería Coromoto* which boasts the world's largest selection of flavours, as confirmed by the Guinness Book of Records. There's some free time for you to explore the city by yourself before we meet for dinner at a lively local restaurant.

If the Teleférico de Mérida, the city's famous cable car, is in operation those who wish could buy tickets locally for today and rejoin the group on their descent.

### Páramos villages and mountain lakes

**Day 4** BLD Today we tour the traditional villages and impressive scenery of the páramos region north of Mérida. We explore streets of traditional houses, and step into small churches—including a stone chapel created by sculptor Juan Félix Sánchez.

To earn extra money children sell flowers by the road or hold up fat Mucuchies puppies for sale—a local breed of giant-size mountain dog.

The road passes Laguna Mucubají, a mountain lake, where we stop to take in the view and to learn a little about the Sierra Nevada and the high altitude vegetation of the paramo moorlands. If the weather is favourable and the group is responding well to the altitude, we can choose to follow an easy trail (an hour's walk on foot or horseback in each direction) which leads to the Laguna Negra (the 'Black Lagoon'). The surface of the Laguna Negra often forms such a perfect mirror that it disappears into a reflection of the mountainside behind it.

Our journey continues past the 'Los Frailes' mountain lodge, built to resemble a monastery, where we may stop for a coffee or hot chocolate, then down to stay at a more comfortable altitude at a good quality lodge in traditional Andean style buildings, where we also have our dinner.

### The Llanos

**Day 5** BLD With an early start we descend the slopes of the Andes by a scenic road to enter the flatlands of the Llanos, and arrive in time for a late lunch at Hato Cedral, a wildlife conservation ranch that was nationalised under Chávez but still welcomes visitors. The lodge provides simple but adequate accommodation, air-conditioned rooms, and even a small swimming pool (not always in service).

Around the ranch and on safari by vehicle and boat over the next two days we experience one of the most impressive arrays of easily-viewable wildlife in the South America





continent. The ranch has a species list of 349 birds, 86 mammals, 24 reptiles, and 21 amphibians. We see countless capybara and caiman, and a good assortment of fresh-water dolphin, giant otter, capuchin and howler monkeys, iguanas, armadillo, giant anteater, anaconda, river turtles, orinoco crocodile, and more. The bird life is superb, with huge numbers of waterbirds in particular, from the enormous jabiru stork and the unmistakable scarlet ibis, to beautiful but more reclusive birds such as zigzag and agami herons, and the ungainly but extraordinary hoatzin. There are also macaws and parrots among a host of others.

**Day 6 BLD** A day of wildlife at Hato Cedral, with morning and afternoon safaris by boat or vehicle. It is usually possible to take a night drive to see some of the nocturnal mammals and birds.

#### Hato Cristero

**Day 7 BLD** A final morning safari at Hato Cedral before we travel to the Barinas area (a 3hr drive) to stay at Hato Cristero to be ready for our flight to Caracas tomorrow morning. Hato Cristero has strong connections with ranch life and the *llaneros* tradition, but has wildlife too. We arrive in time for a dusk safari which may produce some surprises.

#### Ciudad Bolívar

**Day 8 BD** A short drive to Barinas airport and then we fly via Caracas to Puerto Ordaz in eastern Venezuela.

We continue by road for an hour to the historic colonial city of Ciudad Bolívar, on the banks of the Orinoco, for a 3 night stay.

**Day 9 BL** Today we go on a walking tour of the city with its photogenic streets leading down to the Orinoco waterfront. After lunch you are free to explore the city some more, visit the Jesús Soto contemporary art gallery, or just relax at the hotel.

#### Canaima and Angel Falls overflight

**Day 10 BLD** From Ciudad Bolívar airport we take a morning flight to Canaima. Weather permitting, the plane crosses the top of the Auyán-tepui mountain and enters the canyon to

pass Angel Falls in both directions: a very memorable sight if conditions are good.

We land at Canaima in time for lunch, followed by a boat trip on the beautiful Canaima lagoon. Later there is time to relax by the shore with a view of Hacha Falls and a backdrop of impressive tepui table mountains, before our return by air to Ciudad Bolívar.

#### Orinoco Delta

**Day 11 BLD** This morning we are driven (3h) to a small dock on the edge of the Orinoco Delta. We are collected by boat and taken on a journey along rivers and small *caños* into this extraordinary world. The Warao, the indigenous people of the Delta, can be traced back 6,000 years. Their elaborate stilt villages are built to cope with huge changes in water levels each day, with boardwalks between the houses instead of streets. Everyone travels by dug-out boat, and the musical instrument of choice is the violin.

The Delta's wildlife includes parrots and macaws, howler monkey, freshwater dolphin and river turtles. We stay for two nights in a rustic but serviceable tourist lodge, with private facilities, well inside the Delta.

**Day 12 BLD** With the lodge as our base, we go on excursions to explore the Delta.

Tonight is our farewell dinner, a chance to relive the events of the holiday in the most remote of surroundings.

#### Departure

**Day 13 B** After breakfast we leave the lodge and make our way back by river, then by road to the town of Maturín, where we say goodbye to our guide and board our plane for Caracas. We are met at the airport and you are helped to check-in for your chosen overnight flight home.

If you have more time you could extend your stay, perhaps to relax by the beach at Choroni, Margarita or Los Roques, see p42.





# Active Venezuela

Venezuela offers some great opportunities to get off the beaten track amid spectacular scenery. You can choose simple day walks or short river journeys, longer treks, or challenging expeditions. Several of the examples given here are supported by, or visit, some very special local communities.

For these sample itineraries we chose a comfortable standard of accommodation where available. Elsewhere you might be staying in very simple conditions, or camping in tents or hammocks. We include private guides in each area, and airport transfers from hotel door to check-in desk in case of last minute problems.

See the Booking Information insert for prices and how these trips are graded.



## From the Andes to the plains

Follow an ancient pathway from the high Andes down to the Llanos plains, through valleys unconnected to the modern world. You mostly stay in village houses whose families have created basic but comfortable *mucuposadas* for walkers.

### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport and driven (normally 30 min) to your functional 4\* hotel overlooking the Caribbean in the relaxed seaside town of Macuto. The hotel has a choice of restaurants and a small swimming pool.

### Fly to the Andes

**Day 2 B** You are collected from your hotel and driven back to the airport for your early flight to the Andes region. You are met on arrival and driven to a characterful small hotel in the university city of Mérida. Your guide takes you on a walking tour of the city to see its main sights including the Plaza Bolívar and the Cathedral. You also visit the covered market where you can help to choose snacks for your trek.

### Andes descent

This is an easy 5-day trek, largely downhill of course, staying at remote Andean villages and walking through the whole succession of landscapes and scenery from high mountain *páramo* down to the plains on a path that predates the arrival of the Spanish. You walk for 4-5 hours each day, carrying only a day pack. After the first night you stay in well-established *mucuposadas* that are part of an excellent ecotourism programme that we have worked with since 2005.

### Mucuchíes to Los Morritos

**Day 3 BLD** This morning your guide collects you for the drive to the Andean village of Mucuchíes (2,980m), home of a famous local breed of amiable giant mountain dog. They can easily rest their paws on my husband's shoulders, and he's 6ft 3in!

You also meet your mule support. You'll only be carrying your day pack with whatever you need for that day's walk, while your overnight stuff goes ahead. Please pack lightly nonetheless. Today you will be walking for around 4 hours.

At Mucuchíes you leave the road and start walking, taking a small track to Gavidia village. When you reach the village you start a small ascent to Micarache (3,100m). The peaceful high

country you walk through is divided into tiny fields lined with stone walls, grassy hillsides, and small copses of tall trees.

Another couple of hours of walking and you arrive at Los Morritos (3,000m), 7km from Micarache. Camp here this evening by the stream, subsequent nights are in village *mucuposada* homestays.

### Los Morritos to El Carrizal

**Day 4 BLD** After breakfast you set out walking towards El Carrizal. Today's walk is around 4-5 hours and covers 9km with an overall drop of 1,600m.

Leaving behind the high plateau you enter a dense and rarely-visited cloud forest, walking through narrow valleys to get there. Occasionally a rickety suspension bridge crosses streams that feed into the Orinoco. It's a very evocative experience.

By now you are a very long way from the modern world. In the afternoon you arrive at the tiny Andean hamlet of El Carrizal (1,400m) whose population of 20 is completely isolated from civilisation, without roads or electricity.

The hamlet specialises in the production of coffee, avocados and oranges. Tonight you sleep in a *mucuposada* in the village.

### El Carrizal to San José

**Day 5 BLD** This morning you descend to another small village, Alto La Aguada, where you might pause for a while.

Some very pleasant country walking brings you to the small village of San José (1,000m) where you spend the night in one of the local houses. There are great views from San José of the plains below stretching to the town of Barinas in the distance. Today's walk is 4-5 hours, covering 9km and dropping 400m.

### San José to Santa Maria Canagua

**Day 6 BLD** Your final day's walking takes you down the slopes of the Sierra Nevada to just 400m above sea level, in the state of Barinas.

The mountain path comes to an end in the small village of Santa Maria de Canagua where you spend your final night in

a village lodge. Walking time today is 4-5 hrs, covering 9km, dropping 600m.

### Wildlife Hato in the Llanos

**Day 7 BLD** After breakfast, you descend to the village of Las Palmas (40 min) where you rejoin the modern world.

Your vehicle will be waiting to take you one hour by dirt road to Curbati then onwards on a black-top road via Barinas to Hato El Cedral for 2 nights. You should arrive at the ranch in time for lunch.

Around the ranch and on safari by vehicle and boat over today and tomorrow you will experience one of the most impressive arrays of easily-viewable wildlife in the South America continent from a species list of 349 birds, 86 mammals, 24 reptiles, and 21 amphibians.

You have a good chance to see countless capybara and caiman, and a good assortment of fresh-water dolphin, giant otter, capuchin and howler monkeys, iguanas, armadillo, giant anteater, anaconda, river turtles, orinoco crocodile, and more.

The bird life is superb, with huge numbers of waterbirds in particular, from the enormous jabiru stork and the unmissable scarlet ibis, to beautiful but more reclusive birds such as zigzag and agami herons, and the ungainly but extraordinary hoatzin. There are macaws and parrots among a host of others. It may be possible to take a night drive to see some of the nocturnal mammals and birds.

**Day 8 BLD** A full day of morning and afternoon safaris at Hato El Cedral, by vehicle or boat.

### Caracas

**Day 9** After a final morning's safari you are driven to Barinas airport (3h) for a late afternoon flight to Caracas. You are met and driven back to your first hotel in Macuto for a final night.

**Day 10 B** You are collected from your hotel and driven back to Caracas airport for your onwards flight, either back to the UK or to your next destination in Venezuela.



## Country walks in the Andes

A long week away from it all in the mountains. Country day walks (as short or as long as you like) among the colourful villages of the 'Pueblos del Sur' south of Mérida, a little touring, and then a 2-day hike in the dramatic Sierra La Culata.

### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport and driven (normally 30 min) to your functional mid-range small hotel overlooking the Caribbean in the relaxed seaside town of Macuto.

### Into the Tostos Valley

**Day 2** LD An early morning flight to El Vigia in the foothills of the Andes, where you are met by your experienced English-speaking local guide who will be looking after you throughout your time in the area. Ascending into the Andes, you are driven through varied countryside and take a winding road up to 2,300m (with panoramic views) to arrive at the remote village of San José and a delightful chalet-style rural *posada*—your base for 2 nights.

**Day 3** BLD Starting from San José, there is an easy trail along the hillside and into the peaceful heaven of the Tostos valley. You decide how far you would like to walk. Wild arum lilies border fresh mountain streams beneath sweet-smelling eucalyptus trees, as the trail meanders through lush meadows and skirts little fields where farmers still plough with oxen. In scattered hamlets corn is still ground by hand.

### La Mesa de Los Indios

**Day 4** BLD A leisurely start soaking up the peace of this place, and then continue exploring by road into the Chama valley. In the village of La Mesa de los Indios there is a charming *posada* in a traditional courtyarded village house where you are warmly welcomed for your stay tonight. If it's a Saturday you should definitely stroll to the square for a recital by the village's enthusiastic wind orchestra: a feature of life here for many years.

### A Walk in the Cloud Forest

**Day 5** BL There is a gorgeous area of cloud forest near the village and you devote the morning to walking trails through its trees festooned with bromeliads and orchids, you might pause by a waterfall and perhaps even bathe beneath it. In the afternoon you drive up to the university city of Mérida, with time to shop in the covered market for trail snacks for your trek in the Sierra de La Culata. Your hotel is well-positioned to explore a little of Mérida this evening, strolling by the cathedral and its main streets as you choose your restaurant for dinner.

### Village to Village

**Day 6** BLD The twin sierras of the Sierra Nevada and the Sierra La Culata flank Mérida on either side and ring the city with five high peaks. The road ascends steadily as you drive north between them, to enter the realm of open *páramo* moorlands, studded with distinctive *frailejónes*. You stop at the mountain lake of Laguna Mucubají and stretch your legs with a short walk to Laguna Negra, that when still becomes a perfect reflection of the hillside behind it. There is a notable Astronomic Observatory nearby which you could choose to visit as you explore the area with your guide.

Your destination is a *mucuposada* in the village of Mitibobó at 3,400m. These *mucuposadas* are family-run guest houses for community-based ecotourism; they form a little network of places to stay for walkers that supports local life. They are traditional houses, usually of adobe and stone, that have been fixed up to offer food and lodging in simple warm homely comfort.

For the coming 2 days you walk between *mucuposadas*, with a mule to carry your pack.

**Day 7** BLD A half day's walk through the beautiful landscape of the Sierra La Culata through an ever-changing scenery beneath dramatic peaks, passing little fields of wheat and potatoes to the Valle de El Banco, then walking out on to open *páramo*. Spend the night at a little *mucuposada* in La Toma Alta.

**Day 8** BLD A full day's walking takes you through a wide mountain landscape of glacial lakes, huge *frailejónes* and unusual endemic plants to a high point, the Alto de Muruzoque, at 4,264m. You descend to join a track that is an old 'royal road', and arrive at your final *mucuposada* in the little hamlet of Misintá, where you are the guest of the welcoming Doña Rosa.

**Day 9** BL A leisurely start in tune with the tranquillity of the high mountains and Doña Rosa's little garden. Around mid-morning you'll hear the sound of your 4WD approaching, to drive you back to paved road, then through Mérida and down to the airport at El Vigia for your afternoon flight to Caracas. You are met at the airport and driven to your mid-range hotel outside the city on the Caribbean coast.

*This itinerary connects readily with the 'Catatumbo Lightning' trip on this page.*

## Catatumbo Lightning

A short side-trip to experience one of the most impressive and consistent lightning displays on the planet - see p9.

*Available between April and December, the peak months for the displays.*

### Lake Maracaibo

**Day 1** LD You will be driven from Mérida (or the airport at El Vigia) to Puerto Concha on the southern shore of Lake Maracaibo, on the edge of the Juan Manuel wetland reserve which protects a large area of grassland, swamp, palm forest and mangrove that includes the delta of the Catatumbo river that is the epicentre of the lightning storms. At Puerto Oncha you are picked up by boat and taken first along a small river, with the chance to spot wildlife including red howler monkey, and then out across open water and into the Ologa lagoon, 20km from the Catatumbo delta, an optimal viewing distance.

You will be staying here for 2 nights in a rustic cabin built on stilts over the water. The climate is hot and humid so sleeping arrangements are simple: either a bunk bed in a dorm room with fan (or occasional a/c), or out on the deck in a hammock with mosquito netting.

Between April and December there are lightning strikes on 95% of nights. 70% of these start in the early evening as 'multiple lightning' storms with fork flashes recurring at the same point in the sky. There are dramatic major storms on about 40% of nights, usually after midnight. You might choose to stay up, or go to bed and be woken when the show begins.

### Exploring the Catatumbo Delta by boat

**Day 2** BLD During the day we explore the southern shore of the lake, the largest in South America, with a boat trip to the village of Congo Mirador and along rivers and small channels into the forest to explore and spot wildlife and birds. The stilted cabins reflecting in glassy waters under a huge sky are very photogenic. Tonight you have a second chance to see the lightning display.

**Day 3** B Boat trip in the lake and the channels of the National Park Ciénegas de Juan Manuel.

During the trip you have good chances of seeing river dolphin, caiman, howler monkeys, and a wide variety of water birds and others. Capuchin monkey, otters and ant-eaters are also seen. Jaguar are present in the reserve but rarely appear.

You return to Puerto Concha from where you are driven back to Mérida, or to El Vigia airport in time for evening flights back to Caracas.



## Gran Sabana mini-adventure

Off-the-beaten track with an experienced local guide in the surreal landscapes of the Gran Sabana, walking in amazing scenery, travelling by dug-out, and staying with families of the Pemón community whose land this is.

### South from Puerto Ordaz

**Day 1 LD** Your English-speaking local guide collects you from your hotel in Puerto Ordaz or the airport in a 4WD vehicle.

You drive south on the Transamazonica through a rainforest region with gold and diamond mining, staying the night at a local guesthouse.

### Trekking on the Gran Sabana

**Day 2 BLD** Drive up steep escarpment of La Escalera, you pause near the top for the view over the rainforest then emerge on to the vast landscapes of the Gran Sabana itself.

Turning off the road you drive on dirt tracks to Salto Kawi waterfall for the start of a two day trek. You could cool off with a swim in the pool below the falls before 4 hours' easy walking across open savannah to a small farm where a Pemón family are our hosts.

Camp nearby and sleep under an infinity of stars.

**Day 3 BLD** Set out trekking early in the morning to reach the little community of San José de Tuaukén, about 5 hours away, where 15 Pemón families live.

Today's trail is somewhat harder, over grassland and through forest, with some ups and downs.

Camp at Tuaukén and meet the locals—your arrival will cause some very good-natured excitement.

### Journey by dugout on the Apongua

**Day 4 BLD** Today you board a dugout canoe with a Pemón crew who will paddle you up the Apongua river for about 3 hours.

There is forest on both banks which from time to time gives way to views of the savannah. At one point you'll have to leave the boat and walk for 15 min where the Apongua flows through a hole!

After some further navigation you leave the dugout and trek for about 40min to a high point. You cross the river by canoe, then walk down to see the impressive Chinak-merú waterfall.

After relaxing (and swimming below the falls if you wish), a motorised dugout will ferry you from above the falls to the village of Puerto Iboribo. Here there will be a vehicle waiting to drive you to the mission village of Kavanayén where you stay overnight at a simple tourist lodge.

### Gran Sabana sights

**Day 5 BLD** A full day exploring the Gran Sabana by road visiting Kamá-merú, Yurauni Falls, San Francisco de Yurauni where the local community sells Pemón handicrafts, Jaspé Falls where a clear stream runs over a bed of semi precious stone, and some other viewpoints on the way.

Stay at a tourist lodge beside the rapids at Kamoirán.

**Day 6 BL** Return by road on the Transamazonica Highway to Puerto Ordaz where the trip ends.

*This itinerary starts and ends in Puerto Ordaz, which is readily accessible by air from Caracas, Margarita or Canaima (Angel Falls), or by road from Ciudad Bolívar (1h) the Orinoco Delta (2h) or the Paria peninsula (6h).*

*You would arrive back in Puerto Ordaz in time to catch the late afternoon flight to Caracas or to drive onwards to Ciudad Bolívar. Alternatively you would stay overnight in Puerto Ordaz if you are travelling onwards to the Orinoco Delta or to the Paria peninsula.*



## Rainforest river journey to Pará Falls

An adventurous river journey deep into remote Orinoco rainforest, to the most powerful waterfalls in Venezuela.

### Río Caura

**Day 1 LD** You are collected from your hotel in Ciudad Bolívar and driven with others (4hr) to La Trincheras on the River Caura where you stay at a simple lodge with private bathroom.

**Day 2 BLD** A full day's journey by motorised dugout up the powerful Caura river through dense rainforest protected as a forest reserve since 1964.

Depending on river conditions you reach El Playón towards the end of the afternoon. This is a wide sandy beach a short distance below Pará Falls. Opposite the camp the river emerges in a boiling maelstrom from the narrow throat into which it was channelled just below the horseshoe of Pará Falls itself.

You sleep in hammocks with mosquito nets in an open-sided thatched *churuata* shelter supported by the local community of Ye'kwana, a vigorous people who have traded widely with European incomers since the eighteenth century, having evicted the early Spanish presence from this area.

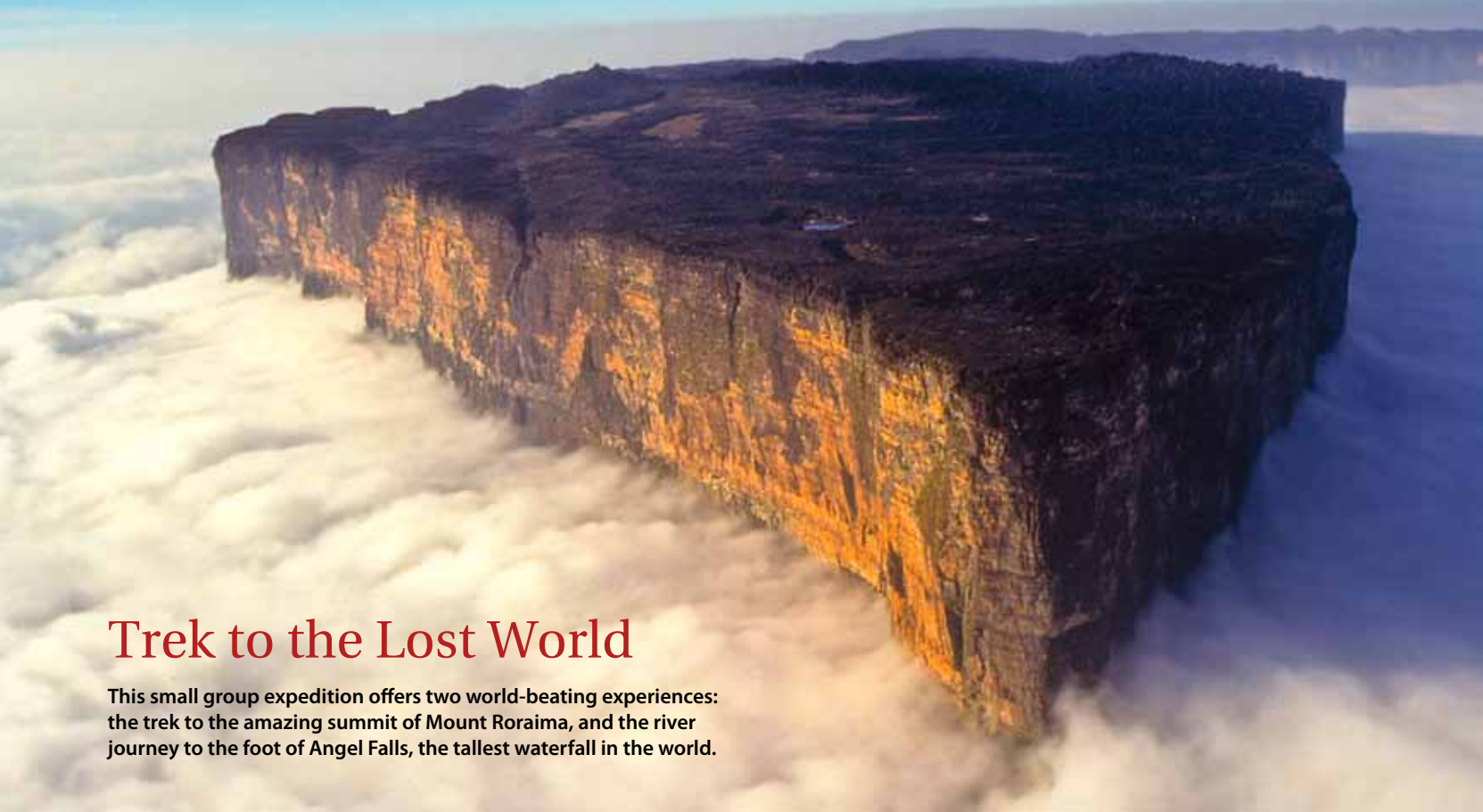
Respect and consideration, especially regarding photographs, are essential.

The vast area beyond the falls is reserved for local communities and cannot be visited without special permission.

**Day 3 BLD** Trek through the rainforest on a very interesting narrow forest trail for about 2hr, emerging at a clearing with viewpoints across Pará Falls' spectacular horseshoe of 12 separate falls up to 689ft tall, reckoned to be the most powerful in Venezuela. There is plenty of time to explore the immediate area before returning to camp at El Playón. Second night in hammocks.

**Day 4 BLD** Travel downstream back to the lodge at Las Trincheras.

**Day 5 B** You are driven to Ciudad Bolívar, where the tour ends.



## Trek to the Lost World

This small group expedition offers two world-beating experiences: the trek to the amazing summit of Mount Roraima, and the river journey to the foot of Angel Falls, the tallest waterfall in the world.

**M**t Roraima's huge plateau is skirted by sheer walls that lift it high above the tropical savannah. Its walls are so immense that repeated Victorian expeditions reported that it was unscalable.

Darwinists proposed that Roraima might therefore retain 'relic species' cut off from evolution; perhaps dinosaurs might still exist there.

Reports of Roraima's ascent inspired Conan Doyle's classic adventure yarn 'The Lost World', whose heroes climb a fictional Roraima and discover a prehistoric land where they are swooped on by pterodactyls, chased by tyrannosauruses and captured by apemen.

Fantasy and reality meet on Roraima still. The weird rock formations that cover much of the summit can appear as bizarre creatures from another world, there are valleys carpeted

with gleaming crystals, and evolution has produced several species found only here.

Roraima is itself a monster. At 2,810m it is the tallest of the majestic *tepuis* that are scattered across the Gran Sabana. Its summit so huge that those who wander off the known routes have been lost for days (some permanently). Its name means 'Mother of all Waters' in the Pemón language as waters from its summit drain into three river basins: the Orinoco, the Amazon and the Essequibo.

The second highlight of this trip is Angel Falls. Depending on the season you journey on jungle rivers to stand near the foot of the tallest waterfall in the world, towering 1,000m into the sky (more than three times the height of the Shard in London) or see it from the air. Two awesome experiences in one!

### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport on the international flight of your choice, and driven to the seaside town of Macuto to stay at a 4\* hotel which has a small pool. In the evening we meet together for a welcome drink overlooking the Caribbean.

### Eastern Venezuela

**Day 2** LD Early this morning we are collected and driven back to the airport for a morning flight to Puerto Ordaz in eastern Venezuela. There will be an opportunity to grab some breakfast at the airport.

Our English speaking local trekking team will be on hand to meet us when we arrive. We head south in a 4WD vehicle on the Transamazonica highway. At first we're driving past ranches and farms, then we enter lush lowland rainforest below the great escarpment of 'La Escalera'. At the top we emerge on to the wide plateau of the Gran Sabana. Its wide sweep of open savannah is scattered with elegant stands of moriche palms, and crossed by rivers that cascade in cataracts and waterfalls over the hard rock of Guiana Shield sandstones.

We soon get our first views of the distant, mysterious, mist-shrouded *tepuis*—some of the oldest land forms on earth, from long before the continents drifted apart. Eroded over aeons, they stand as witnesses of the world's beginnings—'islands lost in time'.

We stay overnight at a simple lodge.

### Exploring the Gran Sabana

**Day 3** BLD Today we put our 4WD through its paces exploring the Gran Sabana, including some of the waterfalls on this southern section of the National Park including the rapids at Kamoiran, the massive Kamá Falls and the beautiful Jasper Falls. We stop for a dip at Soruape cataracts and perhaps try the local delicacy—fire-ant and termite sauce—with our lunch. We leave the black-top road and head on a rough track to the Pemón village of Paraitepui to meet our camp porters. From here there should be good views of Mt Roraima standing broodily in the distance. Overnight in the village (choose either the village guesthouse or spend your first night in a tent).

### Trek to the summit of Mount Roraima

**Day 4** BLD This morning we set out on the first day of the trek walking over rolling grassland towards Roraima. You will need





to ford the Tek river and later the Kukenan river. If there has been heavy rain on Roraima this may be deep enough that ropes are needed to cross it, but usually it can be waded quite easily.

**Day 5 BLD** Today we continue walking across the rising grassland towards the base of Mount Roraima. We camp in a meadow at the foot of the tepui, with fire flies as dusk falls and strap-leaved plants that reflect the moonlight.

#### Up

**Day 6 BLD** From this already somewhat elevated base we have a 1,700m ascent to the top. A diagonal scar along the Venezuelan face of the mountain takes you through ancient, primitive tree-ferns, up through the clouds and on to the top. It's almost like a staircase, steadily gaining altitude with every step, with the worst of the drop screened by vegetation. No ropes or climbing are involved.

#### Exploring the summit

**Day 7 BLD** A full day to explore Roraima's extraordinary summit. Weirdly-eroded rock formations loom through the mist, strange endemic plants (carnivorous sundews, pitcher plants and bladderworts), valleys carpeted with crystals, deep sink-holes, and endless labyrinths.

A triangulation point on the summit marks the boundaries of Venezuela, Guyana and Brazil.

Today and tomorrow are the toughest for knees and ankles: you need to step carefully all the time, from one block of rock to the next.

#### Down

**Day 8 BLD** There's time for more exploring at the top before we must descend the way we came and cover a good portion of the hike back.

#### Paraitepui village and Puerto Ordaz

**Day 9 BL** We complete our trek back to Paraitepui where we bid farewell to our camp porters and hello to our vehicle to drive us back to Puerto Ordaz (approx 8h) where we stay overnight.

#### Canaima

**Day 10 BLD** We transfer to the local airport for a flight to Canaima. In the afternoon we have a short boat ride on the

lagoon to visit Hacha Falls and to walk behind the Sapo Falls (take your swimming things and prepare to get very wet). We stay the night in a lodge in Canaima.

#### River expedition to the foot of Angel Falls

**Day 11 BLD** Start of a two day river expedition to the foot of Angel Falls. We join our boat above Hacha Falls, then navigate up the Cárreo by the side of Auyán-tepui to Orchid Island. From here we turn into Devil's Canyon, running up the Churún river as it tumbles a narrow course, with massive rock faces to either side. If water levels are low, we may need to jump out of the boat at some points to push it through.

Arriving at the camp opposite Angel Falls we make the moderate 1hr jungle trek to the look-out point right in front of the 1,000m drop of Angel Falls itself. There may be time to get closer and swim in a pool below the foot of the falls before we trek back to camp. We spend the night in hammocks in jungle shelters.

*The river expedition cannot run if there is too little water in the Churún. Instead we will take a sightseeing flight over Angel Falls, land at Kavac where a narrow canyon leads to a gorgeous pool under a waterfall, and return to spend a second night at Canaima. The river trip is very likely to be possible on June - November departures.*

#### Ciudad Bolívar

**Day 12 BD** From the jungle camp we return downriver to Canaima, a much speedier journey with the current in our favour. In the early afternoon we fly to historic Ciudad Bolívar on the banks of the Orinoco, where our guide shows us some of the sights of the historic quarter. We get together in the evening for a farewell dinner.

#### Caracas

**Day 13 B** An hour's drive to Puerto Ordaz where we say goodbye to our guide and catch the midday flight to Caracas.

We are met at Caracas airport and each person is helped to check-in for their international flight via Europe departing in the late afternoon or evening.

If you would like to extend your trip you could add time at the beach at Los Roques, Margarita or Choroní, all readily accessible from Caracas.

## Mt Roraima

Your own private trek to the summit of Mount Roraima on the dates of your choice, complete with an overflight of Angel Falls and time to relax at the beach.

#### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport and driven (normally 30 min) to your functional 4\* hotel overlooking the Caribbean in the relaxed seaside town of Macuto. The hotel has a choice of restaurants and a small swimming pool.

#### Mt Roraima

**Day 2-9** As for Days 2-9 of the 'Trek to the Lost World' small group trip but on a private guided basis.

#### Canaima and Angel Falls

**Day 10 BL** Transfer to the local airport for a day trip by plane to visit Canaima with a sightseeing flight over Angel Falls (weather permitting). Overnight in Puerto Ordaz.

#### Beach time

**Day 11 B** Transfer back to the airport for a flight to Caracas and an onwards journey to the beach area of your choice for 4 nights. Choose from the options on p42: -

- Beach time on Los Roques
- Beach time on Margarita
- Beach time at Choroní

**Day 12-13** Two full days at the beach of your choice

#### Depart

**Day 14 B** Return to Caracas airport in time for late afternoon international flights to the UK via Europe.



# Caribbean beaches

*No other South American country has such great beaches with such consistent good weather.*

And Venezuela has almost every kind of beach to choose from: small palm-fringed bays, long sweeps of soft sand, and the Caribbean's only coral archipelago—Los Roques.

Naturally, Venezuelans love the beach. Beaches anywhere near a major city, particularly Caracas, are likely to be lively

at week-ends and crowded in local holiday seasons between Christmas and New Year, at Carnival, and before Easter. But that leaves plenty for the rest of us.

Here and there are good places to stay: small hotels and up-market *posadas* that are comfortable and well-run, with good food and often nicely chic accommodation.

## So much sun

Los Roques and Margarita enjoy a high probability of fine weather at any time.

The mainland coast has good weather in the dry season, and a mix of sun and cloud between May and October, with some sharp bursts of rain—often at night.

Venezuela is well outside the hurricane zone but bad weather does come sometimes.

## LOS ROQUES

Los Roques is seriously beautiful. Over 50 coral islands are thrown like a necklace around a central lagoon. Each has powder-soft, white sand beaches, set in shallow emerald and turquoise waters.

Los Roques has better, more reliable, weather all through the year than the Mediterranean in high summer (and seldom too hot). The setting is impressively beautiful, the beaches are gorgeous and completely natural, and there are far fewer people.

Los Roques lies 85 miles from the mainland, a short 30 min flight from Caracas.

Gran Roque is the only inhabited island: a small fishing village with three sandy streets of cottages, a few tiny shops, a dive centre and a number of attractive *posadas*.

Most buildings are whitewashed with brightly painted doors and windows. Fishermen's colourful wooden boats are beached on the sand. There are no cars.

Days are typically sunny and hot with pleasant breezes. There is an almost total absence of both rain and insects.

Natural shade can be hard to find, so bring plenty of high factor sunscreen.

Tight controls protect the marine environment and the reefs are as free from exploitation as any in the Caribbean. There is great snorkelling off many of the beaches and good diving too.

Pelicans, frigate birds, brown boobies, scarlet ibis and herons can be seen. Turtles lay their eggs on the remoter beaches.

## Where to stay on Los Roques

There are no hotels in this marine national park. Instead you stay in small *posadas*. There are several we recommend. They tend to be among the ones that have recently been upgraded, often with Italian influence. Styles tend to be barefoot minimalist with a tropical twist.

A couple of beach bars have opened and several places to eat, though full board is the norm. Local fish and seafood are specialties, often prepared to high standards. For environmental reasons there are no swimming pools, and cooling is by sea breeze not a/c.

The *posadas* provide boat rides each day to different parts of the archipelago for sunbathing, swimming, snorkelling or diving. At most times of year you are likely to find a handful of other people on any beach near Gran Roque, but very few as you go further afield.



## MARGARITA ISLAND

The sun shines on Margarita an average of 9 hours a day almost all year. It is Venezuela's resort island, with a wide choice of hotels, bars, restaurants, shopping, water sports, and days spent at the beach.

Almost all Margarita's mainstream tourism takes place in the southern part of the main island, mostly around Porlamar, the principal town, and nearby Pampatar.

For a taste of other parts of the Venezuela there are day trips and longer excursions from Margarita to Canaima and Angel Falls, Los Roques, and the Orinoco Delta.

Nature enthusiasts should take the boat trip through the mangrove 'tunnels' of Restinga Lagoon on the isolated western part of the island.

### Where to stay on Margarita

It's easy to escape the busy part of the island, just choose the quieter northwest coast.

Near the small town of Juangriego there is a lovely sandy beach at Playa Caribe with just a few low-key beach bars and cafes—perfect for a relaxing few days. Juangriego itself has a small fishing harbour, shops, a few modest restaurants and sunsets over the bay.

The northeast coast has the loveliest beaches but is rather more commercialised (though less than the south of the island). At Playa El Agua hotels are low rise and a good selection of places to eat, from relaxed beach bars to seafront restaurants. The beach is long and wide but busy; there is a surf, so bathers are advised to stay in their depth.



## CHORONÍ

Tucked between the mountains and the sea, Choroní has been popular with a young Venezuelan set for many years.

Choroní itself is a pleasant little town back from the sea, with colourful streets a small church and a few local shops—well worth a stroll after a day at the beach. Its neighbour Puerto Colombia is a pastel-painted fishing village with a good local beach about a 400m walk from the seafront and small harbour. The surf can be rough for swimmers, but the beaches are otherwise very good for relaxing in the sun.

Peaceful midweek, the seafront becomes very lively at weekends when party-goers from Maracay and Caracas come for a day at the beach and an evening of partying. Everyone is welcome, but if you are staying in Puerto Colombia itself and you prefer your bed bring earplugs!

Monday is a day of clearing up before calm is restored for the week.

For a small consideration local boatmen will take you to quiet beaches accessible only from the sea, collecting you at a pre-arranged time. There are excursions into the mountains, where cool rivers tumble through the dense cloud forest of Henri Pittier NP.

The hillsides above Choroní produce very high quality cacao. In 1993 (around the time we first visited Choroní) Willy Harcourt-Cooze had the idea to buy a farm here, which evolved into the 'Willy's Wonky Chocolate Factory' project. You can visit a small cacao estate and see firsthand what's involved.

### Where to stay in Choroní

Puerto Colombia is generally the best choice (or even better, just outside it). Several houses in the village have been restored and made into guesthouses—with some chic new ones of excellent quality.



# Beach time

*Ideas for a few days at the beach to round off a trip to mainland Venezuela, including return transport from Caracas airport, by road or air.*



## Beach time on Los Roques

**Year-round sun, white coral sand and clear blue-green waters, in refined 'barefoot' style.**

You stay in what were once fishermen's cottages—now remodelled, often stylishly, to provide comfortable *posada*, or guest-house, accommodation.

Prices include flights from Caracas, full board and daily trips to nearby beaches with cool-box, deck chairs and a sunshade. Trips to more distant islands, scuba diving (for beginners or certified divers), bone-fishing or wind-surfing can be arranged locally at extra cost.

*For a short break on Los Roques after a trip on the mainland, your schedule would be:*

**Day 1** LD Early flight from Caracas to the island of Gran Roque in the Los Roques coral archipelago, where you are met and taken to your *posada* for 3 nights.

You arrive in time to change and head out by small motor launch to a beach on one of the islands near Gran Roque for swimming and sunbathing. In the mid/late afternoon the boat picks you up and returns you to Gran Roque.

**Day 2-3** BLD Two full days relaxing on Los Roques.

**Day 4** B A morning at the beach then catch the late afternoon flight back to Caracas. You would need the morning flight to catch most international flights leaving the same day.)



## La Cigala MID/UPPER RANGE

Gran Roque, Los Roques archipelago

*Posada La Cigala* is a good example of the simple stylish guest houses on Gran Roque, among the turquoise waters and white sandy beaches of the stunning Los Roques coral archipelago. Situated one sandy street from the shore *La Cigala* has a lovely relaxed beachcomber ambience.

Guests stay on a full board basis and are taken by boat each day to one of the nearby coral islands with a sun umbrella, picnic lunch and deck chairs. The *posada's* very caring and personable owners are often in residence and take pride in the *posada's* delicious Italian home cooking.



## Beach time on Margarita

**Year-round sun on a holiday island with great beaches.**

During your time on Margarita you might wish to investigate taking a day trip by air to Canaima and Angel Falls. This can only be booked locally and would be at additional cost.

*For a short break on Margarita after a trip on the mainland, your schedule would be:*

**Day 1** B Fly from Caracas to Margarita, where you are met and transferred to your hotel for 3 nights.

**Day 2-3** B Two full days free on Margarita.

**Day 4** B Transfer to back to the airport at Porlamar for your flight back to Caracas in time for international flights leaving in the late afternoon or evening.



## Casa Caracol UPPER RANGE

Margarita Island

One of our favourites, set in a quiet part of Margarita. Perfect as a civilised hide-away. A stylish hotel of 6 small houses in a walled garden of flowering tropical plants, around a lovely swimming pool. Each house has a galleried bedroom with living room and bathroom downstairs. All have a/c, ceiling fans, mini bar, telephone, TV and small private patio with hammock. A spacious palm-thatched *churuata* loggia holds a bar and restaurant for guests. We suggest half-board in high season, when there is a resident chef, and B&B at other times. It's a 7 min walk to the beach, where the hotel has a simple 'beach club' lunch bar and loos.



## Beach time at Choroní

**Sandy bays and coves below lushly forested mountains, 4 hours by road from Caracas.**

Excursions available locally at extra cost include walks in the forest and a trip by boat and on foot to a chocolate farm.

Choroní is sleepy and quiet during the week, and lively with Venezuelans at weekends and national holidays.

Being on the mainland, the best weather at Choroní is usually from early November to late April.

*For a short break at Choroní after a trip on the mainland, your schedule would be:*

**Day 1** You are collected by car direct from Caracas airport or Macuto (or the city centre if you prefer).

The drive to Choroní takes about 4 hours in all, ending with a spectacular trip down from the mountains to the sea through the cloud forests of Henri Pittier NP. This should be undertaken in daylight.

**Day 2-3** B Two full days free in Choroní.

**Day 4** B Return by road to Caracas airport in time for international flights leaving in the late afternoon or evening.



## Posada Casa de Las Garcia MID-RANGE

near Puerto Colombia, Choroní

A beautifully restored colonial cacao hacienda in a quiet country setting between the seafront village of Puerto Colombia and Choroní. It has a lovely flower-filled courtyard garden and a swimming pool. The 15 rooms have private bathrooms, a/c and ceiling fans. Puerto Colombia is a 15 min walk, where there are bars and restaurants and a broad local beach just beyond. Village fishermen offer to take you to beaches which can only be accessed from the sea. Candle-lit dinners can be served in the garden (arrange when you are there), otherwise we suggest B&B.

### Worth a mention

#### Posada Caracol Los Roques UPPER RANGE

Classy small 4 room *posada*, one of the few directly on the beach. Excellent Italian cooking served on beachside deck.

#### Ikin Margarita UPPER RANGE

Up and coming stylish modern beachfront hotel. Infinity swimming pool. Small spa. Restaurant specialising in Caribbean cooking.

#### Casa Grande & Spa Puerto Colombia, near Choroní MID-RANGE

Two colonial houses (one original, one recent with restaurant) in the middle of the village. Tasteful rooms, cool patios, usual facilities.

# Chill-outs & honeymoons

*Ideas for holidays where fabulous beaches, stylish accommodation, good food and great weather are the essential ingredients.*

## Pure beach

Two weeks in the sun, Venezuelan style. A boutique hide-away hotel on Margarita island and a stylish posada on the Los Roques coral archipelago.

### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport and driven (normally 30 min) to your functional 4\* hotel overlooking the Caribbean in the relaxed seaside town of Macuto. The hotel has a choice of restaurants and a small swimming pool.

### Margarita Island

**Day 2 B** You are collected in the morning from your hotel and driven to Caracas airport for your onwards flight to Porlamar on Margarita Island. You are met on arrival and driven to your boutique hotel on the quiet NE corner of the island for a 5 night stay.

Your hotel is described in 'Beach time on Margarita' opposite.

The rest of today is free for relaxing by the hotel's pool or down at the local beach.

**Day 3-6 B** Four full days free on Margarita.

See 'Beach time on Margarita' opposite for details.

### Los Roques coral archipelago

**Day 7 BD** You are collected from your hotel on Margarita and driven back to Porlamar airport for your flight to Caracas and onwards to Los Roques. When you arrive in Caracas there will be a representative to assist you to change planes, who can arrange to store luggage in excess of

the 10kg per person limit on Los Roques flights. You are met on arrival at Los Roques in the late afternoon and taken to your guest house for a stay of 6 nights on a full board basis.

**Day 8-12 BLD** Five full days free on Los Roques

See 'Beach time on Los Roques' opposite for details.

**Day 13 B** You return to Caracas either on the morning flight or the afternoon flight from Los Roques so as to be in time to catch your international flight home. You are met on arrival at Caracas and assisted to check in.

## Pure beach with a dash of adventure

Two weeks at the beach, with a twist. A boutique hide-away hotel on Margarita island, a stylish posada on the Los Roques coral archipelago, and a trip into the heart of Venezuela to see Canaima and Angel Falls.

### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport and driven (normally 30 min) to your functional 4\* hotel overlooking the Caribbean in the relaxed seaside town of Macuto. The hotel has a choice of restaurants and a small swimming pool.

### Margarita Island

**Day 2 B** You are collected in the morning from your hotel and driven to Caracas airport for your onwards flight to Porlamar on Margarita Island. You are met on arrival and driven to your boutique hotel on the quiet NE corner of the island for a 5 night stay.

The rest of today is free for relaxing by the hotel's pool or down at the local beach.

**Day 3-5 B** Free at your hotel on Margarita.

See 'Beach time on Margarita' opposite for details.

**Day 6 B** You are driven back to the airport for your flights to Caracas where you are assisted at the airport to catch your onwards flight to Puerto Ordaz in eastern Venezuela.

You are met on arrival at Puerto Ordaz airport and transferred to your hotel. You might store some luggage here as there is a weight restriction of just 10kg pp on your flight to Canaima tomorrow.

### Canaima and Angel Falls

**Day 7 BLD** You are collected from your hotel for your morning flight to Canaima, land-locked in the heart of the Gran Sabana and only accessible by air.

At the landing strip at Canaima you are met on arrival and transferred to a nearby lodge where you stay for 3 nights on a full board basis

Later in the afternoon you take a boat ride on Canaima Lagoon below the beautiful Hacha Falls, landing at the other end of the lagoon to walk behind mighty Sapo Falls (take a swimming costume, and be prepared to get wet!)

**Day 8-9 BLD** Two free days at Canaima. There is a choice of excursions that you can arrange locally at extra cost when you arrive, largely depending on river levels and flying conditions.

### **Sightseeing flights**

Throughout the year, but depending on that day's flying conditions, it is almost always possible to take the spectacular sightseeing flight over Angel Falls, either returning directly to Canaima, or landing for a time to visit Kavac and making a fairly full day of it.

### **River trips**

For a real adventure you could take a river trip by dug-out boat. Options depend on the season: see the information in Day 15 of 'Natural Venezuela' on p27.

**Day 10 B** In the morning transfer to the landing strip at Canaima for a flight back to Puerto Ordaz with assistance to change planes for your onwards flight to Caracas to overnight in Macuto as there are no flights to Los Roques late in the day. You will be met on arrival and driven to your hotel with the rest of the day free to relax by the hotel pool.

### Los Roques coral archipelago

**Day 11 BD** You are collected from your hotel for the morning flight from Caracas to the island of Gran Roque in the Los Roques coral archipelago. It will be possible to arrange to store luggage in excess of the 10kg per person limit on Los Roques flights, to await your return. You are met at Los Roques and taken to one of our favourite posadas for 4 nights on a full board basis.

You arrive in time to change and head out by small motor launch to a beach on one of the islands near Gran Roque for swimming and sunbathing. In the mid/late afternoon the boat picks you up and brings you back to Gran Roque.

**Day 12-14 BLD** Three full days free on the beautiful coral archipelago of Los Roques.

**Day 15 B** A morning at the beach then catch the late afternoon flight back to Caracas. You would need the morning flight to catch most international flights leaving the same day.)



# Birdwatching in Venezuela

*Venezuela offers some of the best birding experiences in South America, with a rich avifauna (1,360 species), a great many unusual endemics and spectaculars, a wide range of habitats, good accessibility, and an excellent field guide.*

## Planning your trip

Our travel specialists at Geodysey have arranged tailor-made birdwatching holidays to Venezuela since 1993. The range of birdwatching trips we can offer is very extensive, covering not just all the main sites on the mainland but also those of interest to the specialist.

Our knowledge of local birding conditions is kept up-to-date by the many birding trips we arrange each year, supplemented by regular contacts with the top birdwatching guides. This, and our day-in day-out involvement with all aspects of travel in Venezuela, makes us an ideal choice.

Whether you are travelling solo, as a couple, or with a group of fellow birders we provide all the backup and logistic support you need. We can provide English-speaking birdwatching guides if desired. These include very

competent local birding guides in most regions and the top Venezuelan specialist ornithologist guides.

We design itineraries to suit all levels - from newcomers to neotropical birding to seasoned hands out to boost their life lists with hard-to-find endemics, and in all styles - from dawn-to-dusk birders to those who prefer an easier time or like to combine their birding with sightseeing or general wildlife viewing.

We can also arrange birding days as part of general tours - an increasingly popular choice.



## The Birds of Venezuela

This is the classic coverage of Venezuela's birds, visiting 3 widely differing regions in the centre and west: the Andes, the seasonal wetland plains of the Llanos, and the coastal cloud forest of Henri Pittier National Park. The numerous highlights include Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, Mérida Sunangel, Bearded Helmetcrest, Torrent Duck, Andean Condor, Scarlet Ibis, Sungrebe, Sunbittern, Hoatzin, Burrowing Owls, Jabiru, Roseate Spoonbill, Handsome Fruiteater, Rufous-cheeked Tanager, White-tipped Quetzal, Collared Trogon, Wire-tailed Manakin plus many of Venezuela's 47 species of parrot and 97 humming-birds. Trip lists typically number 400 species—often many more.

### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Caracas airport and driven (normally 30 min) to your functional 4\* hotel overlooking the Caribbean in the relaxed seaside town of Macuto. The hotel has a choice of restaurants and a small swimming pool.

### Mérida and the Andes

**Day 2 BLD** Fly to the Andes where you meet your local English-speaking bird guide who will accompany throughout your time in the Andes. Drive to La Azulita area, picking up the commoner species en route and perhaps seeing Black-mandibled Toucan, Crested Oropendolas and the endemic Rose-headed Parakeet. Walk in secondary forest to a large waterfall for Emerald Toucanet, Black Phoebe, Blackburnian Warbler, and Southern Rough-winged Swallow. Stay at a delightful lodge at 2,360m on the edge of a band of cloud-forest below the Páramo del Tambo, with comfortable cabins in attractive gardens and a good selection of hummingbirds at the feeders.

**Day 3 BL** Today we explore varied habitats around La Azulita and La Carbonera for Long-billed Starthroat, Violet-fronted Brilliant, Bronzy Inca, Mérida Sunangel, Crested Quetzal, Scarlet-fronted Parakeet, Blue-headed and White-capped Parrot, Andean Guan, Barred Forest-falcon, Black-and-chestnut Eagle, Smooth-billed Ani, Squirrel Cuckoo, White-necked Jacobin, Venezuelan Wood-quail, Smoky Bush-tyrant, Venezuelan Tyrannulet, Collared Jay, Moustached Wren, Golden-fronted Greenlet, and Superciliaried and Oleaginous Hemispingus. Transfer to Mérida for 2 nights.

**Day 4 BL** Visit the Sierra Nevada NP to bird the lower section of the Pico Humboldt Trail. Here we expect the endemic White-fronted Redstart, Slaty Brush-finch, Golden-headed Quetzal, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Long-billed Gnatwren, Strong-

billed, Montane and Black-banded Woodcreepers, Rufous-shafted Woodstar, Chestnut-crowned Antpitta, Short-tailed, White-chinned and White-collared Swift, Broad-winged and White-rumped Hawk, Collared Inca, Golden-bellied Starfrontlet, Band-tailed and Ruddy Pigeon, Mountain Elaenia, Bank Swallow, Mountain Wren, Tropical Gnatcatcher, Capped Conebill, White-sided and Bluish Flower-piercer, Black-headed and Beryl-spangled Tanagers, Black-throated Mango, and Cinnamon Becard.

**Day 5 BLD** We bird the Transandean Highway onto the high páramos, a treeless habitat of frost-shattered rocks, grasses, lichens, gorse and frailejones: home to the near-endemic Bearded Helmetcrest, the endemic Páramo Wren, and Andean Siskin, Páramo Pipit, Andean Tit-Spintail, Ochre-Browed Thistle-tail and Streak-Backed Canastero. Stop at the Andean Condor sanctuary at Pico El Aguila and at Laguna Mucubají (3,500m). Look for Speckled and Blue-winged Teal, Torrent Duck, Andean Condor, Black-chested Buzzard Eagle, Anhinga, Speckled, Violet-chested and Steely-vented Hummingbirds, Eared and White-tipped Doves, Tropical Peewee, White-throated Tyrannulet, Brown-bellied Swallow, and Bar-winged Cinclodes. Stay 2 nights at Hotel Moruco; its gardens attract Blue-backed Conebill.

**Day 6 BLD** Today's highlight is a lek of the Andean Cock-of-the-Rock. It is a scramble down a ravine to overlook the lekking area but the sight is unforgettable. Our current record is 50 males displaying at once! On the trail you may find Golden-winged Manakin and Immaculate Antbird and at least hear the Ocellated Tapaculo.

**Day 7 BL** Bird at descending altitudes stopping at La Soledad and Río Barragan Bridge en route to Barinas and the lowland plains. Look for Plain-breasted Hawk, Black-crowned Night-heron, Lazuline Sabrewing, Golden-tailed Sapphire, Orange-throated Sunangel, Fork-tailed Woodnymph, Lyre-

tailed Night-jar, Torrent Tyrannulet, White-capped Dipper, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Cerulean Warbler, American Redstart, Masked Flower-piercer, Purple Honeycreeper, Lachrymose Mountain-Tanager, Silver-beaked and Bay-headed Tanagers, Streaked Flycatcher, Orange-fronted Yellow-Finch, Lineated Woodpecker, Orange-chinned and Yellow-headed Parrots, Stripe-backed Wren and White-vented Plumeteer. Say goodbye to your Andes bird guide this afternoon. Overnight in Barinas.

### Llanos

**Day 8 BLD** A morning's transfer into the Llanos—one of South America's great wildlife areas. Here you are guaranteed water birds in profusion plus Capybara, piranha and Spectacled Caiman, with good chances of Orinoco Crocodile, Anaconda, Freshwater Dolphin, Giant Anteater, armadillo, Giant River Otter and Red Howler Monkey. You arrive at Hato Cedral for lunch and the afternoon wildlife excursion (by boat or vehicle) led by the ranch's English speaking naturalist guide. Stay 3 nights. (Excursions are shared; private excursions can be arranged in advance at extra cost.)

**Days 9 & 10 BLD** Two busy days of general wildlife viewing on excursions around ranch with excellent chances of Scarlet, Bare-faced and Green Ibises, Roseate Spoonbill, Wattled Jacana, Orinoco Goose, Brazilian Duck, Maguari Stork, Jabiru, Whiting and Boat-billed Heron, Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, American Stilt, Large-billed Tern, Cattle and Great White Egret, Paraguayan Snipe, Double-striped Thick-knee, Amazon Kingfisher. Highlights include Hoatzin, endemic Yellow-knobbed Curassow, Sunbittern, Sungrebe and Horned Screamer. Plus Vermilion Flycatcher, King Vulture, White-tailed, Double-toothed and Snail Kite, Scarlet and Chestnut-fronted Macaws, White-tailed Hawk, Common and Ruddy Ground-doves, Scaled Dove, Great Potoo, Oriole Blackbird, Dickcissel, Crimson-crested Woodpecker,



Trinidad Euphonia, Pale-headed Jacamar, Great Horned Owl, Burrowing Owl, Nacunda Nighthawks, Band-tailed Nighthawk and the national bird, the Venezuelan Troupial.

#### Henri Pittier NP

**Day 11** **BD** Fly to Caracas and transfer to Maracay at the edge of Henri Pittier NP, arriving in time for late afternoon birding with a local English-speaking birdwatching guide and vehicle. 578 species of birds have been recorded here in habitats from deciduous and transition forest through cloud forest to desert scrub. Stay 3 nights at a 3\* lodge with garden on the outskirts of Maracay. (Or you might drive yourself in a hire car collected at Caracas airport, finding your own birds, or bird with a local driver and vehicle—ask for details.)

**Days 12 & 13** **BLD** Dawn birding from the Rancho Grande building with views over and into the cloud forest canopy. You have a good chance of seeing flocks of the endemic Blood-eared Parakeet, White-tipped and Vaux's Swift, Russet-backed Oropendola, Plain Antvireo, Buff-fronted, Guttulated and Montane Foliage-gleaners, Venezuelan and Yellow-bellied Bristle-tyrants and Red-billed Parrot. You may also see the endemic Rufous-cheeked Tanager and Handsome Fruiteater. At Portachuelo Pass you can see White-Tipped Quetzal and hear Venezuelan Wood-quail and Northern Helmeted Curassow. The pass is used by northern migrants and local species, such as Golden-tailed Sapphire, Ruby-topaz Hummingbird and Lilac-tailed Parrotlet, and many butterflies. The far side of the range may produce Black-backed Antshrikes, Lance-tailed Manakins, Glittering-throated Emerald, Red-eyed Vireo, Tropical Peewee, Blue-black Grosbeak, Rufous-and-white Wren, Wire-tailed Manakin, Red-rumped Woodpecker, Ferruginous Pygmy-owl and Great Antshrike.

**Day 14** **BL** A final dawn's birding at Rancho Grande before the drive back to Caracas for flights home.



## The Birds of Eastern Venezuela

This itinerary is an ideal supplement to the better-known birding sites in the centre and west of the country, or for special interests. Highlights include Harpy Eagle, Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock, Capuchinbird, an exceptionally wide range of forest and tepui species plus no less than 15 species of cotinga. It combines La Escalera at the edge of the Gran Sabana for tepui endemics, the Imataca lowland rainforest reserve for Harpy Eagle, Caño Colorado (várzea forest), Guácharo Cave (oil birds), and Paria's Cerro Humo for its endemics. You can choose to have a local English-speaking ornithologist guide to escort you throughout, or an English speaking driver who knows the key birding sites—you find your own birds.

#### Caracas

**Day 1** You are met at the airport and transferred to a seafront 3-4\* hotel in nearby Macuto.

#### La Escalera

**Day 2** **BLD** Fly to Puerto Ordaz and drive south to the La Escalera region below the Gran Sabana for 4 nights at Barquilla de Fresas, a birding lodge. There are Red-billed and Channel-billed Toucan in the garden.

**Days 3-5** **BLD** Three full days for birdwatching at La Escalera for Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock, Sapphire-rumped Parrotlet, Sharpbill, Spangled Cotinga, Ruddy Tody-flycatcher, Fiery-shouldered Parakeet, White-chinned Sapphire, Peacock Coquette, Velvet-browed Brilliant, White-tailed Goldenthrout, Red-banded Fruiteater, Scarlet-horned Manakin, Roraiman Antwren, Black Nunbird, Greater Flower-piercer, Guianan Red Cotinga, Dusky Purpletuft, Spotted Antpitta, Red-and-black Grosbeak, Orinoco Saltator, Crimson Topaz, Capuchinbird and Great Elaenia, and hear the ringing calls of White and Bearded Bellbirds. 23 of the 34 endemic pan-tepui birds can be found here. (Ask us about special birding trips to the tepuis themselves.)

#### Imataca Forest Reserve / Río Grande

**Day 6** **BLD** A final early morning at the very productive La Escalera before heading north to the Imataca Forest Reserve (Río Grande), a wet tropical lowland rainforest at the edge of the Orinoco Delta. Stay 3 nights at a simple guesthouse, in El Palmar with private bathrooms.

**Days 7 & 8** **BLD** Two full days for birding in the reserve, home to several spectaculars including Harpy Eagle, our main focus. You can also find Crested Eagle, Agami and Zigzag Herons, Red-fan Parrot, Grey-winged Trumpeter, Long-tailed Potoo, Golden-winged and Painted Parakeets, Paradise Jacamar, Waved Wood-pecker, Short-tailed Pygmy-tyrant, Rose-breasted Chat, Rufous-winged Antwren, White-bellied Antbird, Cinnamon Attila, Chestnut-rumped Woodcreeper, Musician Wren, and Rufous-tailed Foliage-gleaner.

**Day 9** **BL** A final morning's birding in the forest before driving north to Maturín. Stay 2 nights at a 3\* motel.

#### Caño Colorado

**Day 10** **BL** Early start to reach Caño Colorado for dawn. Spend the whole day birding this area on the edge of the Delta, for species characteristic of várzea forest, humid forest and woodland edge: Blue-and-yellow Macaw, Black Hawk-eagle, Green Oropendola, Black-dotted Piculet, Yellow-crowned Elaenia, Little Cuckoo, Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlet, Swallow-wing, Velvet-fronted Grackle, Jet Antbird, Greater Yellow-headed Vulture, Groove-billed Ani, Chestnut Woodpecker, Red-billed, Black-Mandibled and Channel-billed Toucans, White-chested and Blue-tailed Emerald, Steely-vented and Copper-rumped Hummingbird and Blue-chinned Sapphire. The road to Caño Colorado is impassable in the wet season (May–Oct), alternative sites are available.

**Day 11** **BLD** A second morning's birding Caño Colorado before driving to a lodge at Caripe, near Humboldt's Guácharo Cave to see the Oilbird exodus at dusk.

#### Oil birds and Caripe

**Day 12** **BLD** Explore inside the cave to see most Oil birds fast asleep on their ledges, while others shriek noisily. Bird the lush coffee and citrus plantations around Caripe for a wide range of possibles. Transfer to Finca Vuelta Larga for 3 nights.

#### Finca Vuelta Larga

**Days 13-14** **BLD** Finca Vuelta Larga is a super birding base with Orange-winged Parrots, Ruby-topaz Hummingbirds, Black-throated Mango, White-tailed Goldenthrout, Cream-coloured Woodpecker, Cinnamon Attila and Crimson-hooded Manakin with wading birds such as Anhinga, Horned Screamer, Black-crowned Night-heron and night excursions for Potoos.

From here you will also bird Cerro Humo on the Paria Peninsula which boasts four rare endemics: Scissor-tailed Hummingbird, White-throated Barbtail, Yellow-faced Redstart, Venezuelan Flower-piercer and the near endemic White-tailed Sabrewing.

**Day 15** **B** Fly to Caracas for flights home.

*This travel brochure is part of a series prepared by Geodyssey on some of our destinations in Latin America and the Caribbean.*

*For others in the series please call us or visit [www.geodyssey.co.uk](http://www.geodyssey.co.uk)*

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