Venezuela: History Overview, Political And Economic Development

Venezuela's full name is actually the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Its shaped like an upside-down triangle with 352,143 square miles, making it about twice the size of California. "The country has a coastline 1,740 miles long and is bounded by the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean" (Shields).

Venezuela is located between Colombia and Guyana. The country has many varying landscapes such as the white sand beaches and clear water along the Caribbean coastline, the Orinoco River and its glistening waterfalls, the towering Andes mountains, swampy grasslands in central Venezuela, and the dense rain forests. Venezuela has four distinct regions: the northern mountains along the Colombian border, the Maracaibo Lowlands in the northwest, the Orinoco River plains in central Venezuela, and the Guiana Highlands in the southeast (Shields).

In Venezuela, the world's highest waterfall flows. It has a staggering height of 3,212 feet and a plunge of 2,648 feet. Its named after an American pilot Jimmie Angel whose plane crashed in the area in 1937. He and his passengers survived, but they had to trek eleven days through jungle and down cliffs before reaching a village. Even now there is no road that leads to the fall in Canaima National Park, so the only way to see it is by a 24 hour journey by plane or boat (Willis).

Even though Venezuela exists in the Tropics, its wheather and temperature varies from humid to alpine (really cold). The elevation and direction of the wind usually determine the climate.

Venezuela only has 2 seasons, and they are recognized by the amount of rainfall instead of temperature. The majrity of Venezuela undergoes a wet and rainy season (May through November), which is their winter. The dry season between December and April is their summer (Shields).

The first Venezuelans lived in the region between 13,000 and 6,000 bc. These people were from the Carib and Arawak Amerindian tribes that lived in Guyana. They were farmers, hunters, fishermen and warriors.

Christopher Columbus found Venezuela on his third voyage on August 1, 1498. Christopher Columbus considered Venezuela a paradise. Thinking he had landed on an island he called the territory Isla de Garcia. When he saw the freshwater rivers and the pearls in them he believed he'd found the biblical Garden of Eden.

A second expedition followed one year later led by Alonso de Ojeda, a Spaniard, and Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian. The natives houses were suspended in air using wooden poles to stay above the many rivers and canals. This reminded Vespucci of Venice, so he renamed the territory Venezuela - or, "Little Venice".

As the Spaniards colonized Venezuela, they enslaved the indiginous people and traded them in Panama and the Caribbean islands. The natives fought back, but with no strong leader to unite

them, their villages and cultures disappear at the hands of their conquerors. Many of them died under the harsh treatment of their masters and the Spanish settlers had to look elsewhere for their laborers. They began importing African slaves to fulfil their needs instead.

Simon Bolivar was born to one of the wealthiest families in Venezuela in 1783. He was orphaned at age 9, so relatives took him to Europe with them. As a young man, he announced his ambition and passion to liberate and unite all of Latin America from Spanish rule. He gathered an army in 1816 and vowed to force Spanish dictators out of his beloved Venezuela. He led his army over the Andes and captured Caracas, the capital. In the city he was proclaimed “El Liberatador” (the Liberator) and placed at the head of Venezuela’s Second Republic. After that he went on to free the rest of Latin America from the Spanish throne.

In 1829, Jose Antonio Paez came to power in Venezuela and sent Bolivar into exile. After Paez, the Monagas brothers ruled. They were forced from power as a time of chaos settled into Venezuela, and caudillos (strong local leaders) fought each other for power in what is called the Federal War.

Antonio Guzman Blanco became dictator in 1870. He was tyrannical and used his power to amass a fortune for himself. However, under his leadership Venezuela built railroads and underwent huge educational reforms. For many more years, Venezuela was under dictatorship after dictatorship. Their democracy didn’t begin until 1959, under President Romulo Betancourt.

Venezuela possesses enormous natural resources (Shields). Their first big export was the cocoa bean that they sold to Europe. Then coffee surpassed cocoa exports in the 1800s. The coffee boom in the 1830s made Venezuela the 3rd largest coffee exporter in the world.

The first drilling for petroleum was in 1917. By the 1920s, coffee’s reign had ended. Oil profits made Venezuela Latin America’s wealthiest state. In 1928, Venezuela became the world’s leading exporter of oil and 2nd in total petroleum production. In the 1930s oil represented over 90% of all total exports in Venezuela. Venezuela became one of the founding members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960. Venezuela remained the world’s leading oil exporter until 1970, the peak of their oil production.

Oil prices quadrupled in 1973, which led to the largest spending spree in all of Venezuelan history. The government spent more money from 1974 to 1979 than it had from 1830 to 1973. Hundreds of thousands of government jobs suddenly became available. Many new companies were created in all sorts of different fields such as mining and petrochemicals. Fortunes were made overnight (Shields). But it wouldn’t last. Tax revenues could not equal the amount of government spending, especially after oil prices dropped by 50% in 1986. Venezuela stumbled into an economic crisis. The government was forced to lay off workers, close businesses, and reduce public services (Shields).

Since the early 1990s, the country has been trying to make its economy healthier in two ways: by reducing Venezuela’s debts in foreign countries and by removing price controls (Shields).

The economy in modern-day Venezuela still heavily relies on oil. They’ve also tapped into huge natural gas reserves. Minerals such as diamonds, gold, silver, platinum, and copper are commercially mined. Their main crops include coffee, sugarcane, rice, and fruits such as bananas, plantains, and oranges. Even though one third of Venezuela is covered with forests,

the timber industry is a small one because not many good roads lead into the deep forests. Commercial fisheries primarily catch shrimp, tuna and sardines.

One of the goals of the Venezuelan government is to increase manufacturing in the country. The leading manufacturers of Venezuela are steel, aluminum, fertilizer, cement, tires, motor vehicles, processed foods, beverages, and clothing.

Most Venezuelans live more comfortably than their neighboring countries. The GDP per capita, a measure of average annual income of individuals, is $12,200 ranking 87th in the world (which is much higher than nearby Brazil, Colombia, and Guyana).

Venezuelans like to say they are a cafe con leche (coffee with milk) society.

68% of the population is mixed European Native American, 21% is European, 9% is African American and 2% is unmixed Native American. 87% of the population lives in urban areas, while 5% live in the other half of Venezuela south of the Orinoco River. 2% of the population is indigenous; that 2% including 27 different languages and cultures, among which are the Yanomami who live in the Amazon region, and the Bare who live in the mountainous northwest region.

Venezuelans also like to say racism is not a problem in their country, but in fact most black Venezuelans have poorly paid jobs and live in poverty. And the indiginous people are the poorest of the people groups. Most of the country’s power and wealth lies in the hands of the white minority. Although Caracas is one of the most modern cities in the world, it doesn’t produce enough low cost food like beans and rice to feed their poor.

Education in Venezuela is free for children from 6 to 15, and the adult literacy rate is 93%, which is high for Latin America. In the mid 1990s 500,000 students enrolled in colleges and universities like the Central University of Venezuela, and Andres Bello Catholic University, which are both located in Caracas.

Although there is no official religion in Venezuela, the majority of the people are Roman Cathlolic, but only a few attend mass regularly. Protestantism is also a common religion in Venezuela.

Christian holidays are widely celebrated in Venezuela. The festivities are not solely religious; sometimes they feature parades, carnivals, and dancing. Here are the major religious holidays in Venezuela:

- Epiphany January 6
- Holy Thursday Spring
- Good Friday Spring
- Easter Spring
- Ascension Late Spring
- Corpus Christi Early Summer
- Assumption August 15
- All Saint’s Day November 1
- Immaculate Conception December 8
- Christmas December 25

(Willis)

Beauty pageants are a big deal in Venezuela. Caracas is home to a beauty pageant school were young women learn pageant secrets, how to conduct themselves on stage, and the like. This expensive training lasts for a couple of months. In the past three decades, more women crowned Miss Venezuela have gone on to win international titles than representatives from any other country. These include six Miss Universe, six Miss World, and six Miss International crowns.

The most popular and traditional Venezuelan music is joropo. It’s fast paced and led by an arapa llanra, or plains harp. Joropo music has a traditional dance that accompanies it, also known as joropo. Venezuelans tend to enjoy salsa music like the rest of Latin America, but additionally they have their own unique rustic folk and urban pop. Popular instruments include maracas, and cuatro, which is like a small guitar.

Probably the most popular food in Venezuela would be Arepas - a thick cornmeal pancake the size of a fist. Inexpensive and filling, they can be sliced open and filled with all sorts of food. Usually, for breakfast they’re filled with perico - scrambled eggs, tomatoes and onions. Sometimes they’re spread with natilla - light cream cheese. In the evenings they’re filled with the national dish pabellion criollo - shredded beef spiced with onions, green peppers, tomato, coriander, garlic, rice, fried plantain, and black beans. Popular fruit in Venezuela would include lechosa (a type of papaya), mangoes, guava, oranges, pears, breadfruit, coconuts, lemons, and avocado.

Venezuela’s national sport is baseball, which was introduced to Venezuela by American oil workers in the 1920s. Some Venezuelans have even played for major leagues in the United States. Basketball is also popular in Venezuela, with teams in every town and city. Surprisingly, futbol (soccer), a favorite sport in most of Latin America, is not as popular in Venezuela.

Nothing in Venezuelan life showcases the difference between rich and poor than housing does (Willis). The wealthy live in grand houses in gated communities on the outskirts of cities. The middle-class generally live in high-rise apartments in the cities. The majority of poor Venezuelans live in ranchos, houses they built themselves out of corrugated steel, cement, or clay.

Venezuela experience serious flooding in 2010 and 2011. More than 130,000 people were left homeless. Many of them moved to Caracas, a city that already had a large homeless population. In response, the government began what is called the Great Housing Mission. This program was designed to build 200,000 homes at the cost of $16 billion. It continues to provide housing for the poor today.