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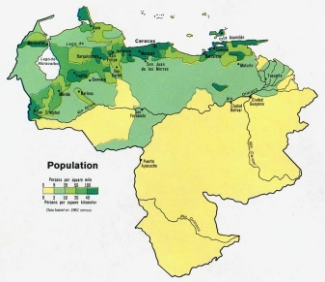
VENEZUELA G110



Venezuela is a country on the northern coast of South America. It is the sixth largest country in South America. It has a population of 27.7 million (UN, 2007).

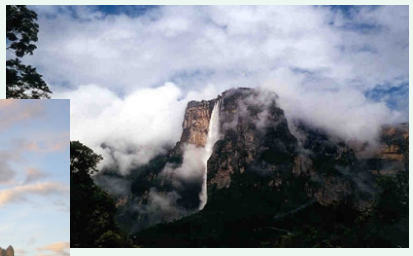
It is a very varied country. There are the snow capped peaks of the Andes in the west and steamy Amazonian jungles in the south; in the east there is the beautiful Gran Sabana plateau, with its strange flat-topped mountains, while the northern Caribbean coast has miles of white-sand beaches fringed with coconut palms.

Because of its proximity to the equator, Venezuela experiences few climatic variations. There are only two seasons: dry and wet. The dry season lasts from December to April, the wet one from May to November. The average temperature is about 27°C, but cooler temperatures are common in the Andean regions.

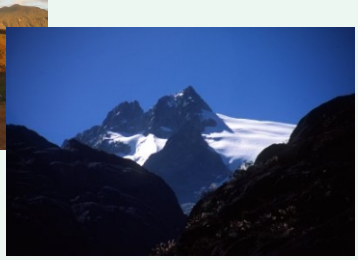


Venezuela has some of the world's largest proven oil deposits as well as huge quantities of coal, iron ore, bauxite and gold. Yet most Venezuelans live in poverty, many of them in shanty towns, some of which sprawl over the hillsides around the capital, Caracas. Most of the population lives in the north of the country (left).









***Venezuelan scenes**. Top left: Choroni Beach, near Maracay. Top right: Angel Falls, the highest waterfall in the world. Centre: Mount Roraima on the border between Venezuela, Brazil and Guyana. Bottom Right: Mount Humbolt in the Andes.*

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Dancing Devil Mask from Yare



Every year on the Feast of Corpus Christi, sacred brotherhoods in fourteen Venezuelan towns and villages act out a centuries old folk tradition of devil dancing. The most famous devil dance takes place in the city of San Francisco de Paula de Yare, which is located about 70 kilometres (43 miles) south of Caracas.



Most Venezuelans are Roman Catholic. The Feast of Corpus Christi is a festival which celebrates Roman Catholic teaching that the bread and wine used at Communion become the body and blood of Jesus.

The Dancing Devils of Yare (Diablos Danzantes del Yare) trace their origins back to the eighteenth century. Their celebrations begin on the day before Corpus Christi with *fulías* (competitive singing in which performers try to outwit each other through improvised verses) and prayers, which continue until dawn. The next day the people, disguised as devils, perform dances around the principal square of the town. They also parade through the streets, dressed in their red costumes and their masks.

The parade takes them to the front of the church. When mass is ended, the bread and wine is placed at the church's entrance and a symbolic fight begins between the devils and the guardians of the church. Finally, the devils surrender and kneel in front of the Eucharist to show submission.



The dancing devils wear red shirts, trousers and stockings, a mask depicting a devil, and canvas sandals. They carry a cross made out of blessed palm leafs, a rosary, and a medallion with the image of Christ. They also carry in one hand a devil-shaped maraca and in the other a whip.

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Alpargatas



Alpargatas are Spanish flat soled sandals that have a canvas or cotton fabric upper. In France such shoes are referred to as espadrilles. This pair has a leather sole, but the soles are also often made from rope or rubber material moulded to look like rope. Such shoes are widely used in South America and the West Indies. In recent years they have become popular with tourists.

Palm Container



It is not known for sure, but this container may have been made from the moriche palm (*Mauritia flexuosa)*, which is abundant in the eastern plains of Venezuela. Other common English names for this tree include mauritia palm and aguaje palm. The moriche palm is widely used by indigenous peoples to construct the walls and roofs of houses (below right), as well as providing them with fruit, juices and a sweet pulp that can be made into a type of bread. Some cultivate a thumb-sized beetle grub, the moriche worm, which is eaten. In many local languages this palm is known as the 'tree of life'.







The moriche palm can reach up to 35 metres in height. The large leaves form a rounded crown. The flowers are yellowish, and appear from December to April. The fruit, which grows from December to June, is a chestnut colour and is covered with shiny scales. The yellow flesh covers a hard oval nut. The seeds float, and this is the means by which the palm tree propagates.

Gourd Container



This container is made from the dried fruit of the calabash tree (*Crescentia cujete*), a small tree which is native to Central and South America, but which is now widely distributed in the tropics (left). In Venezuela it is called tapara, totumo, pate jícaro and jicara. The dry and empty calabash fruits can be used as containers and the pulp and foliage also serve as livestock feed.



This container was said to have been made to hold curare - the common name for various arrow poisons used by indigenous peoples in the region. Curare is made from a range of ingredients, depending on the locality. One common ingredient is derived from the bark of trees. The native peoples of Venezuela tend to use the bark of *Strychnos* plants.

The first European to see curare being used was Sir Walter Raleigh, who visited the Orinoco river in Venezuela in 1595. In 1805 Baron von Humboldt, the Prussian naturalist and explorer, visited the same area and watched *Strychnos* vine fibres being pounded into a yellow runny mush to which were added water. The substance was allowed to stand in order to evaporate the liquid. Adding the juice of another unidentified plant resulted in a black, sticky molasses type material and this was then smeared on arrows to hunt with.



All curare acts as a muscle relaxant and causes death by paralysing the respiratory system, resulting in the animal smothering to death. Often the prey is high up in the tree canopy - the muscle-relaxant effect of the poison prevents the animal from fleeing and releases their grip on the branch so that they fall to the ground. The muscle-relaxing effect begins almost immediately upon hitting the bloodstream, but death from respiratory arrest can take a few minutes for birds and small prey, and up to 20 minutes or longer for larger mammals.

Curare poison works only if it is injected into the blood. It can be swallowed without causing harm. This is important, as it allows any animal killed using it to be eaten. In the early 1940s curare began to be used as a muscle relaxant for surgery, although other drugs are used to do this today.

Above right: Hunting with a blow pipe and poisoned darts. Note that this hunter's dart pouch is very similar in size and shape to the palm container described on page 3.

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Ye'kuana Figure



This figure is believed to represent a goddess of the Ye'kuana people. The Ye'kuana, also called Yekuana, Yecuana, Dekuana, Maquiritare, Makiritare, So'to or Maiongong, are a Carib-speaking tropical rain forest tribe who live in the Caura River and Orinoco River regions of southern Venezuela. According to the 2001 census there are some 6,250 Ye'kuana in Venezuela and 430 in Brazil. Official statistics place the total indigenous population of Venezuela at around 535,000 people, or about 2.1% of the national population.



The name ye'kuana means 'people of the canoes'. The Ye'kuana are tropical forest dwellers and slash-and-burn horticulturists, living on produce from their gardens, fish and game, and - to a lesser extent - honey, wild fruits, nuts, insects, worms and frogs. In recent years they have become more settled. Their round houses reflect their understanding of the structure of the cosmos.



In Ye'kuana religion the main god is Wanadi, who is portrayed as absolute light. Unfortunately, Wanadi failed in his attempt to create a perfect world. Odosha, the Ye'kuana devil, destroyed his every deed and has since ruled, bringing in death and human suffering. The demons of Odosha have proliferated. Wanadi has left the earth in the hands of the Ye'kuana and it is up to them to fight against the demons. In order to defend themselves, the Ye'kuana use sacred body paint, collars, beads and sing sacred chants and songs called Aichudi and Ademi.



Left. A Ye'kuana girl preparing manioc (cassava), which is their staple food. Photograph taken in 1982.

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Piranha Fish



In Venezuelan rivers piranha fish are called caribes. There are many species, but all of them have a single row of sharp teeth in both jaws. The teeth are tightly packed and are used for rapid puncture and shearing.

Piranha fish are widely caught and eaten. In recent decades, dried specimens like this one have been sold as tourist souvenirs. This is because they have been given a reputation as fierce, man-eating fish. While it is true that piranhas occasionally bite and sometimes injure bathers, truly serious attacks are rare and the threat to humans has been largely exaggerated.

Some researchers believe that pirhanas form large groups not to hunt, but to defend themselves against other predators. Piranhas eat small fish, but they are in turn attacked by dolphins, caimans and larger fish. They have found that fish of reproductive age stay in the centre of the shoal for protection and the size of the shoal depends on the level of risk.

Cotton Boll



Cotton is grown in Venezuela, although it is not a major crop. The main cotton growing area is around Puerto Cabello, on the northern coast.

There is archaeological evidence from Peru, India and Mexico that cotton has been used for thousands of years. People in Asia and South America realised that the soft white fibres of the wild cotton plant could be useful and started to grow cotton as a crop around 3000 BC.



A cotton boll is the segmented pod containing 32 immature seeds embedded in cotton fibre. About 140 days after planting, the cotton boll will begin to naturally split open along the boll's segments and dry out, exposing the underlying locks of cotton segments. An average boll will contain nearly 500,000 cotton fibres and each plant may bear up to 100 bolls.