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# I. THE COUNTRY

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## Area and Geography

Crowning the northern tip of South America, Venezuela covers 916 445 km<sup>2</sup>, about the size of the province of Ontario. It is bordered by the Caribbean to the north, Brazil to the south, Colombia to the west, and Guyana to the east. (Land borders with Guyana and Colombia and some maritime boundaries with Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago are contested.) Venezuela is made up of four contrasting regions, plains, jungle, mountains and the coast. The coast and those inland regions accessible by water are the most developed areas.

## Climate

The Venezuelan climate varies with elevation — from tropical in the low-lying coastal regions to temperate in the highlands. In the hot zones below an altitude of 900 m the temperature ranges from 24°C to 36°C; in the moderate zones between 900 m and 200 m it varies from 16°C to 23°C; and in the cold zones over 2 000 m the temperature is often below 10°C. Venezuela does not experience the four seasons of the temperate zones but has a rainy season from June to November followed by a dry season from December to May.

## History

Discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1498, Venezuela was explored by the Spanish conqueror Alonso de Ojeda of Spain. Spain ruled the Venezuelan area until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when rebellions culminated in the signing of the Venezuelan Declaration of Independence in 1810. The hero of the Independence Movement was Simon Bolivar who remains an important historical figure throughout South America.

From 1824 to 1830, Venezuela formed part of Gran Colombia, a political unit designed by Bolivar to further the cause of Hispanic American independence from Spain, but this grand experiment was not a success. Regional rivalry and political struggles led to the collapse of Gran Colombia and on January 13, 1830, Venezuela became an independent republic.