

Important Names & Addresses

In the United States

Learning Abroad Center

Study, Work, Intern, Volunteer, & Travel Services

University of Minnesota

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In case of emergency, contact the Learning Abroad Center at 612.626.9000 at any time. If it is after business hours, there will be a recording giving you a number to call. The Learning Abroad Center has someone on call to deal with emergencies and can contact the on-site director if needed.

In Venezuela

VENUSA College

49-49 Avenida Urdaneta

Edificio Guilam

Mérida, Venezuela

Phone: 58.274.263.7631

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www.VENUSAcollge.org

Marinela Nava—Onsite Coordinator

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Please make copies of this page to give to family and friends.

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The University of Minnesota is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to its programs, facilities and employment, without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status or sexual orientation.

Program Calendar

Fall Semester 2007

August 20	Arrival, first night of housing
August 21	Orientation
August 22	First day of classes
December 3	Departure

Spring Semester 2008

January 21	Arrival, first night of housing
January 22	Orientation
January 23	First day of classes
May 5	Departure

Summer Session I 2008

May 30	Arrival, first night of housing
May 31	Orientation
June 2	First day of classes
July 11	Departure

Summer Session II 2008

July 11	Arrival, first night of housing
July 12	Orientation
July 14	First day of classes
August 22	Departure

Introduction

Study Abroad in Venezuela will provide you with the opportunity to experience the culture of Venezuela while learning in an academic setting. Classes with other US students are specifically designed to help you get the most out of your experience in another culture. They will take place at VENUSA, not on the Universidad de Los Andes campus, which allows for an uninterrupted semester or summer term, regardless of the political situation at the university. The Mérida curriculum includes beginning, intermediate, and advanced Spanish language; Latin American studies; culture and history; and Caribbean and Spanish-American literature. Living with a family will greatly enhance your experience while abroad, and the cultural and social activities organized by the program help you to experience the city and surrounding areas and socialize with Venezuelan students.

There are many similarities between Venezuela and the

US, but in many ways Venezuelan society is not like our own. Although some differences may seem obvious, it is important to prepare yourself for your upcoming experience by reading the enclosed information carefully and by preparing for unexpected differences in the new culture. While the program can provide support for you on-site, the ultimate success of your experience abroad depends on your ability and commitment to make the most of your time abroad and to successfully adjust to the differences you will encounter.

While you will receive much information directly from VENUSA, this guide is intended to acquaint you with certain customs and aspects of Venezuelan life. It also addresses academic issues and considerations, which will be useful before, during, and after your stay in Mérida. This handbook is not comprehensive; you are encouraged to read other sources of information available concerning Venezuela and Mérida to prepare for study abroad.

To encourage and guide you, the Learning Abroad Center provides a full range of services from preliminary program advising to assistance with re-entry. As you read through this guide, do not hesitate to contact the Learning Abroad Center at the University of Minnesota or your study abroad adviser with any questions you may have.

¡Buena Suerte!

Preparation & Planning

Documentation

A valid passport is required to enter Venezuela and to re-enter the US. Your passport will be checked when you board your flight to and from Venezuela. If you have a passport, be sure that it will remain valid for the full length of your stay abroad. If not, renew it before you depart for Venezuela.

A student visa is also required. You need a passport in order to receive a visa. You should have received information on this procedure from VENUSA or the Learning Abroad Center. If you have not received this information, contact the Learning Abroad Center immediately. If you would like more information on

visas, check these websites:
traveldocs.com/ve/index.htm
www.embavenez-us.org

The first week that you are in Mérida you will be provided with a laminated copy of your passport. You should also keep a photocopy of all other valuable documents, including credit cards and airline tickets, with you in a location separate from the original documents. It is also recommended that you leave a set of copies with an emergency contact person in the US. Having copies of these available in case of an emergency (i.e. loss of your passport, airline ticket or traveler's checks) can reduce a crisis situation to an annoying situation.

Your passport and visa are very valuable documents. Do not lose them. You cannot leave Venezuela without them!

Customs

You will probably want to buy souvenirs for yourself and gifts to bring back home. You are allowed to bring up to \$400 worth of items purchased in Venezuela back to the US without paying duty.

Small gifts under \$50 in value may be mailed to friends duty-free, but only one package per address is allowed. All packages mailed to you are subject to duty. You are advised not to send packages into Venezuela; duty on such packages may exceed the value of their contents.

Please note that when you leave Venezuela you will be required to pay an airport/departure tax of \$40–\$50 before your return to the US.

Health & Safety

All participants were required to complete the Health Information sheet located in your confirmation materials. This information is used to advise the on-site director and the Learning Abroad Center and assist in making any necessary preparations. If there is any further information regarding your health that you would like to share with the program staff, please contact the Learning Abroad Center.

Be sure to bring all necessary prescription medications with you. You should carry a sufficient supply of prescription medications to last for the duration of your

stay abroad, and carry a list of the generic names of all of your prescription medication. If you are bringing a large quantity of medication with you, you should also have a statement from your physician explaining the purpose of the medication and all medication should be kept in their original bottles.

After you arrive, eat and drink lightly for several days until your system has had a chance to adjust to changes in climate and food. Adjusting to a new diet often causes mild intestinal upsets or diarrhea. If this occurs, let a staff member know. In the event you become ill, notify the on-site staff, who will assist in finding you the appropriate medical care. They are accustomed to dealing with students with similar problems; so don't be afraid to ask for help. Venezuelan doctors have a very good reputation. In the event of an emergency, or if you are too ill to get out of bed, a doctor will be able to make a house call.

No special vaccinations are required to enter Venezuela or re-enter the US. However, for travelers who intend to spend extensive time in certain remote parts of the country, specific vaccinations may be recommended. Check out the Center for Disease Control web site www.cdc.gov for more information on vaccinations. The Minnesota State Department of Health recommends diphtheria and tetanus booster for all persons who last received them ten or more years ago, regardless of whether you plan to leave the US.

Venezuela is a modern, semi-industrialized nation and food in restaurants and homestays in Mérida and other cities is perfectly safe to eat. You should not eat food sold from street vendors. North Americans should be sure that the water they are drinking is either bottled or has been boiled. If you notice that your homestay family is serving water directly from the tap, you should either politely tell someone that you need boiled water or ask someone in VENUSA to talk with the family. Although VENUSA tells families that it is necessary to boil water, they sometimes forget, as it is not necessary for Venezuelans who are accustomed to the water.

For treatment of minor illnesses and accidents there are numerous private clinics throughout the city of Mérida. A large hospital, which is part of the medical school of the Universidad de Los Andes, is also available in case of major illness or accident. Facilities are modern.

If you take prescription drugs in the US, be sure to

bring a sufficient supply with you to Venezuela. All prescriptions should be labeled with your name, the doctor's name, and the name of the drug. If you wear prescription lenses, you should bring an extra pair of glasses or contacts with you in case of emergency.

Safety

As in most cities, safety should always be a concern for students. During the on-site orientation, the staff at VENUSA will give you a rundown of the city and advise you on where and where not to go.

Please be advised that petty theft is very common in Mérida and Venezuela. Many past participants have had digital cameras stolen. If you go out at night, leave your digital camera at home and bring a disposal one with you. iPods are also a hot commodity in Venezuela. Use caution when walking around with expensive items in hand. Always carry your laptop in your backpack.

The Learning Abroad Center strongly discourages students from traveling to Caracas. Recently, political unrest in the area of Caracas, Venezuela, has been reported in the US media and elsewhere. Venezuela has a long tradition of active political participation; the current activity is not unusual. Most of the political activity is centered around Caracas; our program is located in the middle of the mountains, a 10-12 hour bus ride away. Students report feeling safe and comfortable in Venezuela and in the city of Mérida, in particular. In addition, we are in contact with our on-site Venezuelan partners, the Venezuelan Consulate, and the US State Department to ensure a safe experience for students. The political climate in Venezuela has not interfered with our study abroad program and we do not anticipate any problems in the near future. The tensions that appear on the political level between Venezuela and the United States are not felt by the students in their daily lives.

Drug Use

The Learning Abroad Center has a very strong "No Tolerance" policy on drug use on any Learning Abroad Center program. If you use drugs while in Venezuela, you will be expelled from the program, all credit will be lost, and there will be no refund of any kind. It is extremely dangerous for an American in Venezuela to be caught with drugs. If you are at a party where drugs are being used, you should leave immediately. If the police arrive, more than likely the only people to be arrested will be the Americans and there will be nothing the

Learning Abroad Center can do to help you. Students who say, "I know my rights" are sadly mistaken. You leave all of your rights as a US citizen when you cross the border and you are subject to the laws and "rights" of Venezuela.

Health Insurance

The University of Minnesota has contracted with CISI (Cultural Insurance Services International) to provide international health insurance as part of your program fee during your stay in Venezuela. Enclosed in your orientation packet is a letter outlining your insurance coverage and your insurance card.

Hospitals and clinics may not, however, accept an American insurance form or card as coverage; you should be prepared to pay for services upon receipt and to be reimbursed when you return to the US.

While you are provided with comprehensive international health insurance, it is recommended that you retain health insurance in the US during your time abroad. This will cover you before you leave on the program and, should you have an accident overseas that requires long-term care, you will have US insurance upon your return to cover these expenses. It may become difficult or extremely expensive to purchase a health plan upon return if you have a pre-existing condition.

If you have any questions or need additional information about CISI insurance coverage, contact the Learning Abroad Center.

Relationships

For many of you, your stay in Venezuela will be your first time out of the US. Some of you may have the opportunity to make some very good Venezuelan friends. Venezuelans are typically hospitable, open, willing to talk, and not shy about striking up a conversation with a stranger. You are unlikely to ever be alone or feel isolated, especially if you can speak a little Spanish. Nevertheless, keep a few words of caution in mind. Meet people in public places during the day, preferably with a friend or two of yours. Do not give out your host family's phone number or address freely, as this can lead to problems for not only you but your host family as well. Agree to meet the person at a specific time and place.

Americans in Venezuela are easy to identify. We look and dress differently from Venezuelans, speak loudly in

groups, carry backpacks, wear tennis shoes, and have an accent. Consequently, an occasion might arise where someone wants to become friends with you in order to obtain your money or your passport. This has happened in the past, and is a serious problem. Use common sense and be cautious.

Entering into a relationship overseas should be approached with the same precautions as at home. The idea of a Latin romance can be tempting, but you should consider any relationship carefully, particularly when you are overseas. There are different cultural values and rules regarding dating and relationships. Proceed cautiously, realizing that you are only in the country for a short period of time. If you do enter into a long-term relationship, you should also see how the relationship functions in the US, where you are at home and no longer acting as a guest.

Many female participants are flattered by the masculine attention that they receive in a Hispanic culture. However, any individual should proceed with caution and only enter into a close relationship after knowing the partner for a sustained period of time. US women are often stereotyped as being an easy sexual partner, and each year women find themselves in difficult situations because they were not cautious. Do NOT go to the home or apartment of someone you do not know well, especially if there is drinking involved. The concept of date rape is almost unheard of in Venezuela and the general feeling is that if a female goes home with a man, she is willing to sleep with him, regardless of her saying “no.” Avoid these types of situations. Most problems are alcohol related, so be extremely careful when drinking in Venezuela. There have also been reports in many bars of drinks being drugged, so it would be a good idea to ask to have your drink opened while you are watching and do not accept a drink brought to your table and paid for by “an admirer.”

Please be aware that in any type of relationship, whether heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual, you could end up with a sexually transmitted disease, AIDS, and/or pregnancy. This is not meant as a scare tactic, but rather for you to realize that it can and has happened. Be sure that you know the person very well before developing a more intimate relationship and always demand that you both take necessary precautions.

Money Matters

The monetary unit in Venezuela is the bolívar; the exchange rate in November 2007 was approximately 2150 bolívares to the US dollar. Check out www.oanda.com/convert/classic for the latest information on exchange rates.

It is very difficult to obtain Venezuelan bolívares in the US so the Learning Abroad Center suggests that you bring about \$200 US to have money on hand, in 10's and 20's. When you arrive, you can use a debit card to withdraw bolívares from the ATMs in the airport.

An easy, safe, and cheap way to deal with finances in Venezuela would be to bring or have access to:

- **US \$200 in cash**
- **A debit card for regular use**
- **\$200 dollars in traveler's checks**
- **A credit card for larger purchases and in case of emergency**

Personal spending habits vary too greatly to state exactly how much it will cost to live in Venezuela. The amount you spend will be determined by your lifestyle and budget. In general, you should find that the cost of living is lower in Venezuela than in the US. Past participants suggest that you bring \$1,000–\$3,000 per semester and \$500–\$1,500 per summer session.

Traveler's Checks

Traveler's checks can be very difficult, as most banks will not exchange them and those that will often have long lines and odd hours. If you choose to bring traveler's checks, the airport in Mérida is the best place to exchange money. The airport and banks will give you the best exchange rate. Banks are normally open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 11:30 am and 2:00 to 4:30 pm. Cashing a personal check issued by a US bank is virtually impossible in Venezuela.

Debit Cards & Credit Cards

For most students, a debit card is a very convenient way of obtaining money, as you don't need to worry about banking hours or exchange rates. Make sure you have a four-digit PIN number and verify that your magnetic strip is working, and that it works on the CIRRUS or PLUS systems. ATMs are easily accessible throughout Mérida and Venezuela.

It is also wise to bring a Visa or MasterCard. A credit

card is the easiest and fastest way to get extra cash in emergencies. You may not want to use this often because of fees and interest. Be sure to obtain and memorize your PIN before leaving the USA and verify that your credit card works on the CIRRUS or PLUS system.

Safeguarding Your Money

Be careful with your money, especially in bus and train stations and when riding public transportation. A money belt worn inside your clothing or a pouch worn around your neck is recommended for safekeeping. In public places, purses should be tucked up under your arm or carried in front of your hip, and wallets should be carried in your front pocket. You may want to carry an extra copy of your picture identification and traveler's checks in this manner as well.

Arrival & Group Flight

There will be a group flight arranged through VENUSA. The Learning Abroad Center recommends that all students fly all the way to Mérida with the group. A representative from VENUSA will meet the group in Caracas and fly with them to Mérida. Contact VENUSA directly for more information on the group flight

From most parts of the US, flying to Mérida requires two days. The most convenient and safest way to make this trip is to stay overnight in Miami the first night and fly to Caracas and then on to Mérida the next day. You can book your hotel room in Miami through VENUSA. This tends to be cheaper than booking your own flight arrangements as there will be other VENUSA students staying at the hotel and you can request one of them as a roommate and therefore split the cost of the room. There is also an airport shuttle bus that takes guests back and forth to the airport for free.

You may take one carry-on bag and two large suitcases or backpacks on the group flight. If you do not have locks on your bag, have your bag wrapped in cellophane. This service is available in the Miami airport, near the SERVIVENSA check in-counter, for approximately \$10 per bag. If you do not wrap or lock your suitcase, you may have things stolen from your suitcase.

Mérida's location high in the Andes Mountains often

makes it difficult for planes to land due to the fog. Because of frequent heavy fog, you may be landing in the neighboring town of El Vigía. VENUSA will have a bus at El Vigía and will drive all participants to Mérida, which is about an hour drive. Upon arrival in Mérida, you will be taken to VENUSA where your host families will be waiting to take you "home." You will receive more information on the trip to Mérida from VENUSA.

Practical & Program Information

On-site Staff

Marinela Nava is the student coordinator in Mérida. She will help orient you when you arrive and is the person who you can turn to for any academic, housing, programmatic, or personal concerns.

VENUSA's classes are taught by experienced, qualified professors. The faculty are primarily Venezuelan, and most have international backgrounds. All professors teach at other institutions, including the Universidad de Los Andes.

Housing

The program cost includes room and board with a Venezuelan host family. Staying with a family can be the highlight of your trip to Venezuela. The housing coordinator makes a point of choosing families who display friendliness and helpfulness toward students. Your family will be just as interested in learning about you as you are in learning about them, and they will introduce you to their friends and relatives. This is a wonderful opportunity to get to know Venezuela and its people. Make the most of it!

Rules of the House

The rules of the house will be explained to you upon arrival by your host family. These will include meal times, laundry, how to lock up, and other items addressed below which vary from house to house. Always remember that you are in a home and not a hotel. Courtesy and common sense should be your guide. Always ask your hostess when you have a question.

Electricity

The electric current in Venezuela is similar to that found in the US (110 volts, 60-cycle alternating current, single phase), so you do not need to bring converters for your hair dryers, electric razors, etc. The outlets are also the same as in the US. It is not unusual for the electricity to go out in Venezuela. This is especially true when there is a lot of rain. Planned power outages and blackouts to save energy are common. It is a good idea to bring a flashlight with batteries to prepare for these circumstances.

Water

Because of the climate, many homes do not have a large quantity of hot water. Some families may use an electric water heater, which will not heat the large volume you are probably used to. Showers and baths, therefore, should be taken sparingly. Boiled drinking water will be provided by the family.

Linens

Sheets and towels will be provided and changed once a week. However, it might be a good idea to bring your own towel for traveling.

Laundry

You will need to make arrangements to do your laundry. You should be able to find a local laundromat with very reasonable rates. You may also want to wash some hand washables in your home. It is possible that your family will offer to wash your things. If this is the case, you are expected to buy your own laundry soap, available in most convenient stores throughout Mérida.

Keys

Your family will provide you with keys to the house. If you lose them, you will be charged for changing the locks and making extra keys. Please remember to return the keys when you depart.

Guests

It is recommended that you not take guests to your home, as it infringes on the family's privacy. However, each family varies, and your host family may encourage you to invite guests. Your best bet is to play it by ear and make sure you discuss any plans for inviting guests with your family ahead of time. Overnight guests are not permitted.

Absence

While you are living with your Venezuelan family, observe the same rules of courtesy that you would when visiting any home. If you will not be home for a meal, please let your host mother know (you will not be refunded for individual meals missed.) Be sure to inform your host family if you will not be returning home at night, as your family is concerned about your well-being and safety and may worry about you.

Communications

Mail

Your mailing address while in Venezuela is:

Your Name

VENUSA C.P.S.A.

Edificio Guilam #49-49

Avenida Urdaneta

Mérida, Venezuela

It takes anywhere from 10 to 30 days for airmail between the US and Venezuela. Mail that arrives after the end of the program will be returned to the sender, as the post office does not forward international mail. Many returned students suggest that you don't have packages sent to you in Venezuela. There will either be a high duty to be paid upon arrival or it may not arrive at all. Never send money or medication through the mail.

Telephone

Most people in Venezuela have cell phones. They have become the most affordable and popular way to make calls to the United States. VENUSA will soon be allowing students to rent Venezuelan cell phones for the duration of their study abroad. The cost will be less than \$100 per term for phone rental and minutes depending on your calling habits. Most Venezuelans text message as a text message costs much less than a phone call. In Venezuela, you pay to rent the phone and then buy minutes for your phone. You only pay for your outgoing calls so you can receive calls and texts even if you do not have minutes left on your phone. Cell phones are also handy when you are traveling, as they will work in most places throughout Venezuela and South America. Contact VENUSA for more information if you are interested in purchasing or renting a phone prior to departure. You may also get a phone when you arrive.

VENUSA has a public phone for your convenience.

Public telephones are located in pharmacies and on the street (phone booths are gray). To make a call, use a Venezuelan phone card available for purchase in any pharmacy or street kiosk.

You may give your host family's number to friends and family in the US and have them call you. The only way that you will be able to make long distance phone calls from your host family's home is if you use a phone card. Long-distance, direct-dial calls are prohibited. If you use the host family's phone for long distance calls, grades will not be released until the phone bill is paid. Venezuelan phone bills are not itemized as in the US and you may be over-charged.

Email & Computer Access

VENUSA offers computer access to you on the program. The computer lab provides you with Internet and a study area. You are permitted to print class assignments only—Internet pages are not to be printed. Keep in mind that Internet services and connections in general are slower in Venezuela. In addition to the VENUSA computer lab, Internet service is offered at numerous local cyber cafes.

VENUSA has wireless Internet access throughout the school. Students are encouraged to bring laptops. Storage lockers are available at the school for your computer while you are at home or traveling. Bring your own lock. You will not have any Internet access in your homestays even if you bring your own laptop.

For ease in printing VENUSA also recommends that you bring a flash drive. Bring a USB cord if you plan to upload any digital photos.

Academics

Courses

VENUSA offers a wide variety of courses in several disciplines to suit a range of academic needs, including Spanish, literature, Latin American studies, international business, cross cultural communications, film criticism, and more. Most courses engage the city, people, and surroundings as a living laboratory. The course offerings will vary from term to term as they do in the US. Final course offerings will depend on student interest and are determined after arrival in Mérida. Although some courses are guaranteed, a minimum

enrollment of three participants is required for certain classes.

A language pre-requisite is not required for the program; however, most of the Latin American studies courses are only taught in Spanish. Students with less than two years of Spanish will have a course selection limited to intensive Spanish and courses taught in English. Students with two or more years of Spanish will be able to choose from all course offerings.

Students on the fall or spring semester program take 15 credits, generally five classes. Summer Session participants with less than two years of Spanish may take intensive Spanish for 10 credits. Summer Session participants with more than two years of Spanish will take two to three courses for a total of six to ten credits.

Registration

All University of Minnesota Twin Cities students will be responsible for registering themselves using the University of Minnesota on-line registration system. Students from the University of Minnesota Morris, Crookston, or Duluth will be registered on their home campus. If you are not a University of Minnesota Twin Cities student, please contact your study abroad office to verify you are enrolled for study abroad. Non-University of Minnesota students will be registered by the Learning Abroad Center and can disregard these instructions.

Prior to departure, you will receive all the necessary information for registration. Do not look for your class number to appear on the on-line class list. The numbers you need for registration can only be obtained from the Learning Abroad Center. If you register for a course that is listed on-line, you have registered for the wrong course and may be subject to tuition charges.

Register yourself as soon as you receive the emailed instructions. This ensures that you are guaranteed a spot in your study abroad program courses.

Complete your registration no later than two weeks prior to the start of the University of Minnesota term during which you will be studying abroad. Failure to complete registration may result in late registration fees and may delay or prevent financial aid disbursement. Contact helpingu@umn.edu or visit www.onestop.umn.edu with questions about financial

aid.

If you do not register for study abroad, your grades cannot be processed. Failure to register before departing for study abroad may result in no credit for your study abroad program.

Before Registration:

1. Meet with your academic adviser(s) and complete the Academic Planning for Study Abroad Form.
2. Check online for holds or required registration approvals that would prevent you from registering for classes and clear them before the registration date. Learning Abroad Center cannot remove holds on student accounts. To check for holds, go to www.onestop.umn.edu/onestop/Registration/Holds.html
3. On-line registration requires that you have Netscape or Internet Explorer 4.0 or higher, that you have registered at least once during the two previous terms, and that you have initiated your Internet account. If you have not initiated your Internet account, you will be prompted to do so when you enter the registration system.
4. On-line registration is available Monday-Saturday 6:30 am–2:00 am and Sunday 12:30 pm–2:00 am, after your queue time.

Drop/Add

You must speak with the on-site staff prior to dropping or adding a class. You will have two weeks from the beginning of the program to drop/add classes. After the second week you will receive a “W” on your transcript if you drop, and you will need the approval of on-site staff as well as the Learning Abroad Center in order to add. Summer session students will have one week from the beginning of the program to drop the course. After this period you will receive a “W” on your transcript. While dropping courses, keep in mind that you must take at least 13 credits.

Transcripts

One transcript will be issued at the end of the program to all non-University of Minnesota students. The transcript will be sent to the address indicated on the transcript request form that you handed in before the beginning of the program. Please note that it may take approximately eight weeks after the program ends for your grades to appear on a University of Minnesota transcript.

Extracurricular & Volunteer Activities

There will be opportunities for you to discover Venezuelan culture through extracurricular activities. Some examples of what may be offered are international meals, cooking classes, dances and tango lessons, parties and special events arranged with native Venezuelans, and sports activities.

Volunteering is an excellent way to come in contact with Venezuelans, and therefore utilize your Spanish and learn more about the culture. If you would like to volunteer, you will be able to do so at various locations. If you are interested in arranging a volunteer experience, contact Venusa prior to departure as volunteer possibilities can take a while to set up.

Life in Venezuela

Geography & Climate

Located on the northern coast of South America, Venezuela is a large country with a population of approximately 25 million. The land is larger than that of California, Oregon, and Washington combined (over 352,000 square miles). It is divided into 20 states, the Federal District around Caracas, two territories, and 72 islands. Its borders are the Atlantic Ocean and Guyana on the east, Brazil to the south, Colombia in the west and the Caribbean to the north. The geography varies from the coastal region, to the Andean region of snow-capped peaks and temperate forests, to the tropical Maracaibo region, to the southern “Guyana Shield” and area of savanna and rain forest. The rain forests shelter Venezuela’s most exotic animals as well as some untouched tribes.

The coastal capital city of Caracas, with a population of almost four million, has a higher standard of living than any other Latin American city. Mérida is a much smaller city of approximately 300,000 people, built on a plateau at the base of the Andes Mountains.

Venezuela is quite demographically diverse, with about 58% of mixed race, 29% of European descent, 11% of African descent and 2% native Indians. Approximately 75,000 Americans currently live in Venezuela.

The climate varies little, with an average temperature around 80 degrees. While Mérida is only 8 degrees north of the equator, its tropical climate is moderated by its high elevation, so temperatures in Mérida average around 70 degrees year-round. The only seasonal variations are a rainy season and a dry season. It rains almost every evening during the rainy season. People of Mérida call their climate “eternal spring.”

History

By the late 1920s, Venezuela had become the world's largest oil exporter, but little of this newfound wealth made its way to the common people. With poverty rife and educational and health facilities in a deplorable state, a series of popular uprisings took place, culminating in the country's first democratic elections in 1947.

Despite subsequent political stability, Venezuela's political climate continued to be marred by corruption scandals and coup threats. The country's economy was hit hard by the 1988 drop in world oil prices and remained shaky. Then-president Caldera's unconstitutional crackdown on economic speculation and civic freedoms in 1994 incensed civil libertarians, but it took until early 1996 for popular opinion to swing against him. The government's tough measures were designed to bring Venezuela's rampant inflation and alarming currency slump under control, but the bloated public service resisted attempts to put it on a lo-cal diet.

In December 1998, Venezuelans signaled their impatience with the government's impotence, electing an army colonel, Hugo Chávez, to the presidency with the largest vote margin in 40 years. Chávez was re-elected by a comfortable margin again in 2000.

Chávez is a charismatic and extremely energetic populist who hosts his own television show, during which he takes calls from the public. He also travels all over the country and personally visits labor unions, indigenous communities and the country's poorest ghettos. Key national institutions, including the media, banks, the church, sections of the armed forces and the petrol industry, have defied Chávez's brand of socialism.

In April 2002, following widespread demonstrations, a coup by the US and Spain landed Chávez in detention.

Being a military man, he was back in power within three days after the interim government collapsed.

National politics continued to be shaky until Chávez won a 2004 referendum, followed by a 2006 re-election, consolidating his power through to 2012 at least. The opposition has remained feckless, while Chávez has reached out to other Leftist leaders in Bolivia, Argentina, Cuba, Uruguay, Chile and Brazil. He hopes to establish a Latin American political bloc to offer an alternative to US hegemony in the region. Regardless of his seeming lock on Venezuelan political power and regional influence, Chávez remains the continent's most controversial political figure both inside and outside of Venezuela.

In May 2007, Venezuela's largest independent public broadcaster, Radio Caracas Television, was effectively pulled off air after the government made the controversial decision not to renew its license. President Chávez immediately replaced it with the state-run TVes, claiming that RCTV was trying to undermine his government. Thousands of supporters of RCTV - Venezuela's most-watched station - have gathered in mass demonstrations in the streets of Caracas and around the nation claiming the government is stifling freedom of expression.

Meanwhile, it was reported that Chávez will provide almost US\$18 million to help Hollywood actor Danny Glover make a film about Toussaint Louverture, a hero figure of the Caribbean who led a slave uprising in the 18th century. Venezuela's Ministry of Culture will help fund production of the film in a bid to lift its international profile - Glover is one of a number of celebrity Chavez-supporters.

Meals

Venezuela has its own style and flavor of food with many regional specialties. Most traditional dishes have been adapted from Spanish foods with tangy sauces that are generally not as hot as Mexican cuisine. Typical Venezuelan dishes you can expect to find include *tequeños*, a small bite-size appetizer made of white cheese wrapped in dough and deep-fried; and *hallacas*, a kind of boiled tamale with ground corn, filled with beef or chicken, and wrapped in banana leaves. To eat an *hallaca*, just unwrap it and discard the leaves. Two dishes made with corn are *bolos de maiz*, spiced corn puffs (deep fried); and *arepas*, flat white corn flour

pancakes filled with butter, meat, or cheese. The Venezuelan national dish is called *pabellon criollo*. It is served in three separate dishes: black beans with white rice; shredded beef mixed with tomatoes, onions and green peppers; and fried *platanos* (plantains, or cooking bananas).

Lunch and dinner will be provided by your Venezuelan host family daily. A good rule of thumb regarding meals is to watch the way your family does things and follow suit; you will soon feel comfortable. It may be a good idea to take a small portion of food for the first serving to make sure it goes all the way around the table and to make sure you can eat what you take. If the head of the table is serving each person, wait until everyone is served before beginning to eat. Some families say grace before eating.

You should coordinate your meal schedule with your host family. For most Venezuelans, breakfast, or *desayuno*, is served between 8:00 and 10:00 and consists of toast and coffee. Lunch, or *almuerzo*, usually served between 12:00 and 1:00 pm, is the big meal of the day. Lunch normally consists of soup, salad, rice, a main course of meat or fish, and fruit for dessert. The evening meal, *la cena*, is late, often around 9:00 pm, and usually consists of sandwiches or something light.

Snacks, soft drinks, and beer are not expected to be provided by your host family and should be purchased on your own. You may be able to store breakfast foods at your house. There are also many *panaderías* or bakeries throughout the city, including at VENUSA, where you can buy a cheap breakfast.

Note: Venezuelans do not eat peanut butter, and it is very difficult to find peanut butter in any Venezuelan store. It is possible to find it, but it is often very expensive, and sometimes it has been on the shelf for a long time. If you think you might miss peanut butter, bring your own.

Entertainment

Mérida is known for its many parks, mountain peaks, and statues. The Andean Club in Mérida organizes different trips and excursions to the mountains and peaks around the city. The University in Mérida offers cultural activities and events for their students and the public. There is also the Colonial Art Museum, which is three blocks from Plaza Bolívar, as well as the

Archeological Museum on the main square. For poetry reading and art shows, there is the Museum of Modern Art. In addition, Mérida offers a significant variety of restaurants and is a famous center for bull fights. Movies in Mérida are inexpensive and provide a relaxing way to practice listening skills. Soccer is by far the most popular sport in Venezuela, and tickets, hotels, and travel are often sold out far in advance for major games (usually in Caracas).

Discos do not admit students under eighteen. There is no drinking age in Venezuela, and drinking alcoholic beverages in moderation is an accepted part of Venezuelan life. However, drinking excessively is severely criticized and there are rather harsh penalties for such things as drunk and disorderly behavior (in public, while driving, etc.). Be very careful if you choose to have a drink. Due to the high altitude, alcohol will affect you much more.

Alcohol

The Learning Abroad Center expects moderation and good judgment in the use of alcohol. Keep in mind that the consumption of alcohol may be more socially prevalent in other cultures, but excessive consumption is not appropriate. Drunkenness can seriously jeopardize student safety as well as damage relations with host families or communities. Monitor your approach to alcohol consumption; unfamiliar surroundings, high altitude, and the emotional strain of adjusting to another culture can sometimes cause alcohol to affect you differently. If excessive drinking becomes a problem in terms of a student's safety, class attendance, academic performance, or relations with hosts or other students, it could, if sufficiently serious, be grounds for expulsion from the program.

Language

Spanish is the language of Venezuela, but in some outlying areas ancient Indian languages are still spoken. You may be able to use English in the markets and airports, but communicating in English may be more of a challenge in bus terminals and train stations. Generally, non-native speakers are well received in Venezuela if they attempt to speak Spanish.

Useful Phrases

Yes	Sí
No	No

Good morning/day	Buenos días
How are you?	¿Como está usted?
My name is	Me llamo
Please	Por favor
Do you speak English?	¿Habla usted inglés?
You have been very kind	Ha sido muy amable
Thank you	Gracias
Too much	Demasiado
You're welcome	De nada
I beg your pardon	Perdón
Good-bye	Adiós/Chau
I don't understand	No entiendo
Friend	Chamo/a

Venezuelans are very patient with foreigners who try to speak their language. They appreciate an attempt at the language and would never correct your pronunciation or grammar unless you specifically asked them to, or if they cannot understand what you want to say. Always use the *usted* verb form when speaking with Venezuelans. The *tú* form is rarely used.

Lifestyles

Any anti-Americanism is impersonal and directed at the foreign policy of the US government. As an individual you will be judged as such, and how you act and react will determine your acceptance by the Venezuelans. Cultural differences can enrich our lives by confronting us with a different worldview and new approaches to solving problems, or they can lead to misunderstandings and irritation.

You may notice that the people of Venezuela use their social space differently than most people of the US. For example, while carrying on a conversation, it is common to stand a little closer. Handshaking, kisses on cheeks, and other physical contact are common between relatives, friends, and new acquaintances, regardless of age or sex. Handshaking may be done with the same person more than once a day. The *abrazo* is a hug exchanged between friends, both male and female, and signifies friendship, not passion. When meeting, greeting, or saying goodbye to anyone in Venezuela, always give a kiss on the cheek and say *buenos dias*, *buenas tardes*, or *buenas noches*, depending on the situation.

Actions by some Venezuelan men may be irritating to some US women. Whistling, tongue-clicking, and other sounds or comments may be heard when a young woman

walks by. The best policy is to ignore such sounds or comments.

Political strikes are common in Venezuela, particularly at the Universidad de Los Andes in Mérida. Provisions have been made to ensure that your courses through the University of Minnesota/VENUSA will not be interrupted by strike activity. In general, this activity is non-violent in nature and does not target Americans in any way. If you encounter any strike activity, you should just turn around and walk the other way. This is the easiest and safest way to assure that you are not affected.

The Venezuelan sense of courtesy leads to some of the most frustrating experiences students have in Venezuela. Typically a Venezuelan will respond politely to any request for directions, even if he or she has not the slightest idea of the correct route, simply because it would be rude not to help a stranger.

Be prepared to wait for an appointment, and do not be surprised or insulted if you are stood up. The Venezuelan concept of time is vastly different from ours. Since Venezuelans do not want to refuse anyone, they will often agree to appointments they cannot keep. This disregard for schedules does not apply to your classes.

Venezuelans regard family relationships and friendships as a top priority. An individual's actions are often governed by the family's attitudes and reputation. To students accustomed to a great deal of personal freedom and privacy, this closeness and concern for family reputation can be claustrophobic. It is not uncommon for a family member to come into your room and help you unpack, carefully looking at each item in your suitcase. This is not considered rude, but rather as a sign of interest in you; our idea of "personal space" may be completely foreign to your host family.

Your Venezuelan hosts will not expect you to behave exactly as they do, but they will appreciate your attempts to communicate with them in their own language, as well as your interest in their country and culture. Find out as much as you can about Venezuelan history and current affairs before you go so that you can discuss issues intelligently.

The Venezuelan population is predominantly Catholic.

Travel

There are several ways you can choose to travel within Venezuela. Be sure to ask about the availability of student discounts before buying tickets. Local transportation is not included in the cost of the program; however, it is relatively inexpensive compared to the US.

Mini-buses are very popular among students, and the cost is approximately 25–30 cents. Mini-buses are usually plain, unmarked vans that are privately owned; van owners contract to service particular routes. You may also want to share a taxi with friends when going out, as this turns out to be rather inexpensive.

For travel over greater distances, you can choose bus, air travel, or make arrangements to hire a taxi with a group of students. Bus travel to Caracas from Mérida takes approximately 15 hours due to the mountainous terrain, while air travel takes less than an hour. Renting cars in Venezuela is strongly discouraged. The accident rate in Venezuela is very high, and after you have been there for a while you will understand why.

Appendix

Packing

Remember to pack light and to take clothing that needs minimum care. While Mérida does have spring-like weather year round, nights can be quite cool, and many homes may not be heated. Keep in mind that some of the tours that VENUSA plans may be to higher altitudes, and warm clothing for these trips is suggested. Students at the university dress similarly to students in the US, though possibly not as casual. Shorts are generally not considered appropriate to wear in public. Bring one semi-formal outfit for special events. Proper attire is required in the VENUSA building common areas.

Below is the minimum amount of clothing recommended for your stay in Venezuela; what you bring beyond this is limited to your ability to carry the extra luggage!

Clothing

- 7 pairs underwear
- 7 pairs socks
- 1 pair pajamas
- 1 swimsuit
- 2 pairs jeans or khakis
- 2 dressy shirts
- 3 casual, comfortable shirts
- 2 sweaters
- 1 dress
- 1 pair dressy shoes
- 1 raincoat/umbrella
- 1 skirt
- 1 pair comfortable walking shoes
- 1 pair slippers/house shoes

For Everybody

- Toothpaste & toothbrush
- Shaving kit
- Deodorant
- Comb
- Washcloth
- Bath towel
- Soap
- Shampoo
- Sun block
- Aspirin
- Prescription Medicine
- Extra pair eyeglasses/contacts
- Sewing kit

- Spanish/English dictionary
- Safety pins
- Small flashlight
- Insect repellent
- Fleece or light winter jacket
- Flash Drive
- USB Cord
- Pad Lock
- Peanut Butter
- Gifts for your host family

You may also want to bring your own supply of Pepto Bismol, Kaopectate, or something that your doctor suggests for stomach and gastrointestinal upset.

Women should be aware that feminine napkins are available in Venezuela, but if you are accustomed to a particular brand, you should bring an adequate supply with you. Tampons may not be available in Mérida.

Homestay Gifts

Bring a gift (or gifts) for your host family. A host family gift is a nice gesture to say thank you for hosting you. Think of it as a similar gesture you would do if you were invited to someone's house for dinner and you brought a bottle of wine or a bouquet of flowers. Sometimes it is hard think of an appropriate item. Below is a list of good options:

- Fancy soaps or lotions
- Baseball hats
- Necklaces or bracelets
- Clothing or items with a University logo
- Jams made from Minnesota berries
- Regional food to make a special dinner
- Local interest wall calendars
- CDs of American music
- Personal hand-made items
- Candy