Opportunities and challenges for Venezuela's nascent international tourism

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Venezuela has strong potential to develop a tourism industry for international visitors. Its main opportunities lie in a rich natural and cultural offering, a wide gap relative to regional peers, and newly available investment channels. Its main obstacles are weak infrastructure, limited connectivity and the underdevelopment of its heritage offerings.

Venezuela offers a rare combination of attractions in a single trip: 2,000 km of Caribbean coastline outside the hurricane belt, ecotourism in the Orinoco Delta, the Llanos, Canaima and La Gran Sabana, Andean mountain activities, the Catatumbo Lightning, and UNESCO-protected colonial heritage. Security has also improved markedly over the last decade.

Official arrival figures are inconsistent and unverified, but Venezuela's attractiveness lies paradoxically in how it has clearly lagged behind countries with similar offerings, like the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Curaçao. The global travel boom and phenomena such as digital nomads have not reached the country.

Investment opportunities can be found both in the private and public sectors. The state owns dozens of hotels through Venetur, several already run privately under concessions, and the rest can be conceded or sold via the Centre for International Productive Investment. Four areas with high tourist potential sit underneath special economic zones, free zones, and free ports, presenting tax exemptions and reimbursements. International connectivity remains a major obstacle towards attracting international tourism, although it is recovering with the diaspora as its main driver.

The challenges are significant. Ageing hotels, power outages, daily water and electricity cuts outside the capital, and poor service raise costs and risk negative experiences. Few destinations outside Caracas have international flights, so most trips require multiple stopovers. Because neighbours offer comparable destinations, Venezuela must find an edge to compete, on aspects such as easy access or a high-value proposition.

Natural endowments

Venezuela counts on a broad diversity of climates and landscapes, which can combine various unique experiences in a single holiday trip. These endowments give the country a competitive advantage even above some of its competitors, which can only specialise in one of these aspects.

The country has the longest Caribbean coastline, which adds up to 2,800 kilometres after adding its Atlantic exit. It sits outside of the hurricane belt, making it ideal to visit year-round. Destinations include mass-market options such as Morrocoy, Puerto Cabello, Choroní, La Guaira, Barlovento, Lechería, and Margarita Island; and low-volume, high-value ones such as Los Roques Archipelago and Tortuga Island.



The Orinoco Delta, the Llanos wetland safaris, Canaima National Park, and La Gran Sabana offer opportunities for ecotourism, where visitors can have unique encounters with one of the world's most biodiverse countries. Venezuela has been recognised as exceptional for birdwatching, while it has natural reserves hosting capybaras, caimans, anacondas, tapirs, ocelots and other animals.

The Andean states have the *Teleférico de Mérida*, one of the world's longest and highest cable cars, plus hiking, paragliding, and other mountain activities. Near these Andean destinations lies Zulia's Lake Maracaibo, where the Guinness World Record-winning Catatumbo Lightning offers a reliable spectacle visible most months of the year directly from traditional stilt houses, complemented by daytime aquatic safaris in the nearby wetlands.

Appealing colonial-era sites include Coro and its port, which is protected by UNESCO, as well as historic cores in cities like Caracas and Puerto Cabello, and in Andean towns. Other draws are Indigenous heritage, local music, a strong baseball tradition, and cuisine. Venezuelan cacao and coffee also present niche opportunities for culinary tourism.

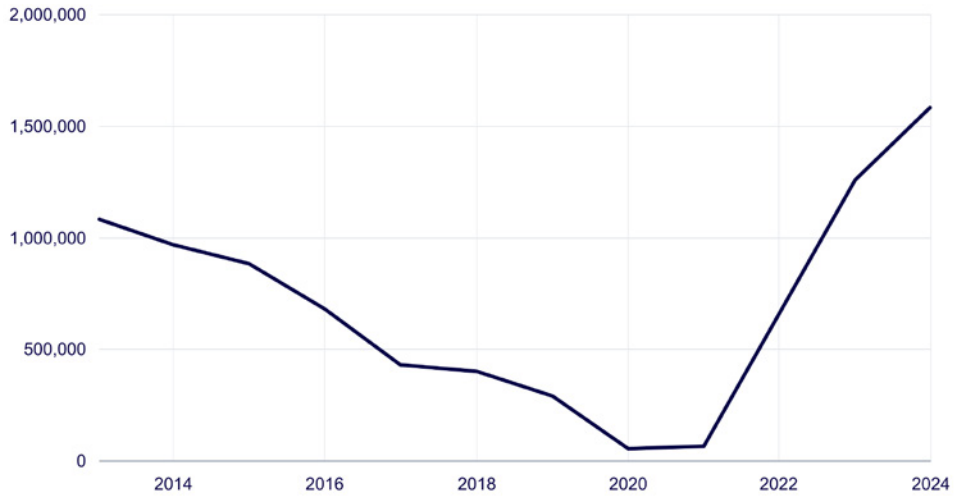
Other advantages include that security from violent crime has increased significantly over the last decade, turning Venezuela into one of the safest countries in the region, while it remains a key challenge in South America. The risk of foreign nationals being detained for political reasons or kidnapped by security forces has also fallen drastically in 2026, while it had become a major concern in the aftermath of the 2024 presidential election.

Murky data and opportunities to catch up

The data is unclear, since authorities have used different definitions. The Ministry of Tourism said that Venezuela received 419,872 foreign visitors in the first seven months of 2026, "surpassing the figures recorded during the same period in 2025." However, the Venezuelan government had hailed a record 3.4 million international tourists for the whole of 2025, which would "mark a 44% increase compared to 2024."

However, the Ministry previously reported almost 1.6 million in late 2024, putting the 2025 numbers under strain. While figures are unverified by independent institutions, it is also unclear to what extent they include foreign nationals, Venezuelans who live overseas, or arrivals from international flights in general. In 2024, the Ministry reported 1.26 million international arrivals for 2023, up from a trough of 292,000 in 2019, and above the previous peak of 1.08 million in 2013.

Venezuela's International Arrivals



International tourist arrivals in Venezuela by year, according to the Ministry of Tourism.

Yet the attractiveness of Venezuela lies not in the number of tourists it has received, but precisely in how it has lagged behind its neighbours as global tourism has boomed over the last two decades. Travel has become more accessible, while new cultural phenomena take hold, such as digital nomads. In Colombia, international tourist arrivals burst from 791,000 in 2004 to 7 million in 2024; in the Dominican Republic, they rose from 3.4 million to 8.5 million over the same period. Curaçao, across Venezuela's shores, received 452,000 visitors in 2004 and over 1 million in 2022.

The potential for Venezuela is therefore enormous. Margarita Island alone is twice the size of Curaçao, despite receiving only a fraction of international visitors—though the tourist industry has developed by servicing Venezuelans. Urban areas with airport connectivity and good infrastructure, like Caracas and Valencia, or near beach areas could draw in thousands of digital nomads just south of the U.S. East Coast, sharing the same time zone for half of the year.

State-owned assets open for investment

The Venezuelan state owns dozens of hotels and other forms of tourist lodgings, most of which were nationalised during the presidency of Hugo Chávez. The state-owned corporation Venezolana de Turismo, or Venetur, manages the network of hotels, being responsible for their administration, marketing, and operations. The same company also offers holiday packages including privately-owned hotels and other services within its network.

Many of these accommodations are operated by private companies through concessions, including the Hotel Humboldt, the Hotel Gran Cacique Maiquetía, and Campamento Canaima. The remaining lodgings are open to private investment either by concessions or sales, which can be attained by engaging the Centre for International Productive Investment (CIIP).

Special tax regimes

Four of the five special economic zones have designated areas for tourist activity. They are the island-state of Nueva Esparta, the peninsula of Paraguaná, Tortuga Island, and La Guaira. The four locations stretch across Venezuela's wide Caribbean coastline, and they offer tax reimbursements for operations whose revenues come primarily from exports. They are less attractive than other countries' SEZs, however, as they do not offer outright tax exemptions.

Some of the same areas also offer other forms of fiscal incentives, which remove import duties and other burdens. Nueva Esparta is a Free Port, while Paraguaná is covered by two types of Free Zones. In both cases, these measures were adopted to foster tourist arrivals, consumption, and investment in tourist infrastructure.



Recovering international connectivity

Flight connectivity was severed due to Venezuela's multi-faceted crisis of the last decade. However, after the pandemic and in 2026, there have been two important waves to recover direct routes to the rest of the world. The main driver has been a relatively new phenomenon: the Venezuelan diaspora, while international tourism can take advantage of the growing opportunities to travel to the country.

This year, airlines have started routes from major hubs like Miami and Doha, while many that left late last year have returned, including Air Europa, Iberia, Plus Ultra, Turkish Airlines, and TAP Air Portugal. Charters are continuing to link with Margarita Island, now from Poland and Argentina. Carriers JetBlue, United Airlines, and ITA Airways have expressed their intent to fly from Fort Lauderdale, Houston, and Rome. Others, such as Delta, Aeroméxico, and Arajet, are also reportedly exploring new routes with different Venezuelan cities.

Importantly, airlines have also started to look beyond Caracas. American Airlines has started a connection between Miami and Barcelona, Anzoátegui, which links to Lechería and Mochima National Park, along with Venezuelan carriers. Copa Airlines is now flying to Margarita Island, connecting it to its broad regional network. The two destinations, on the northeastern coast of Venezuela, are probably the two best-prepared for large inflows of international tourists.

The Ministry of Tourism said that, for the first seven months of 2026, 71.5% of air passengers entered the country via the International Airport of Maiquetia, near Caracas. A further 15.3% entered through Valencia, with the remainder split between Maracaibo, Barcelona, and Porlamar.

Challenges: Infrastructure and heritage

Prices in Venezuela can appear high to visitors, particularly when they are paired with ageing hotel facilities, intermittent power outages, and poor customer service, all of which are not uncommon, especially in areas which have not catered to international visitors over the last decade. However, price is rarely the deciding factor for visitors, when there are different segments to cater to. What matters most is perceived value: where the experience justifies the cost, higher costs are unlikely to deter visitors.

Meanwhile, many neighbouring countries can compete if it only comes down to natural endowments. Some also share Caribbean white sand beaches with crystalline waters, tropical rainforests full of wildlife, and even higher Andean peaks. Destinations must thus find other fronts where they can outcompete their peers, and there are two main battles to fight: infrastructure and heritage. That is, first, how many obstacles will visitors face to arrive, and how many difficulties will they experience? And secondly, what unique experiences are created by the locals?

The Dominican Republic, for instance, has invested in infrastructure. Visitors can reach Punta Cana with non-stop flights from distant cities like Boston, Chicago, Toronto, Montreal, Madrid, Paris, and Prague. The beach destination is only two hours away from the capital's international airport, yet the country decided to bet on easy access for international tourists.

Cuba, on the other hand, was able to grow to high levels of tourist arrivals—4.7 million in 2018—despite high costs, poor infrastructure, and sanctions hurdles. But it played on its strengths: a history that awakens curiosity, world-renowned music, and speciality products like cigars and rum.

International connectivity and public services leave much to be desired in Venezuela. Few destinations receive international flights besides Caracas, meaning that visitors must make at least one or two stopovers to reach the hotspots. Running water and electricity are turned off for hours every day in virtually the entire country outside the capital, which means that hotels need to invest in their own sources, driving costs up—or creating negative experiences for tourists.

Venezuela, focusing on the domestic tourist, has historically underdeveloped its heritage and historic sites in favour of aspiring towards modern architecture and shopping-mall culture. However, it could leverage what sets it apart with advantages such as its rich heritage with European, African and Indigenous components, its cacao tradition, or historic sites, which can be more appealing to foreign visitors.

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