

Almost Heaven.

In a world way, way south of the border, the patient traveler discovers a world of quiet gentility.

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Welcome to Heaven. A land of abundant natural resources. Friendly, non-stressed people. Clear, spacious skies. Amazing cultural, topographical and recreational diversity.

Welcome to Venezuela.

Really? *Venezuela*?

OK. That's a fair enough reaction to a description of a country that many people can't locate on a map. It seems just a little too good to be true.

But try telling that to my newest friends, whom I am joining for lunch today on the outskirts of Caracas,

capital of Venezuela. We're in a restaurant built like a gigantic bamboo hut, complete with a thatched roof and cane legged tables. I'm not too sure what we've been served and I have to ask if it's an appetizer or the main meal. Hey! I'm just a *gringo* with barely enough Spanish to get me into serious trouble.

The place is called *El Arroyo* and they have indeed served up a wonderful appetizer for our group. There's a white cheese called *Casa de Mano*, Yucca, strips of grilled meats and some green bug-like stuff that I look on with a degree of suspicion. It's a suspicion that, as it

turns out, is totally unfounded: the insect dip is called *Wasacaca* and it's delicious!

Our lunch is served up: grilled beef and goose, cheeses and a rough corn meal staple called *arepas* that quickly becomes my favorite Venezuelan menu item. The *wasacaca* happens to be made from fresh avocado. I catch the attention of our waitress with, "*dos cervasas, por favor*," and she brings back a couple of cold *Polar* beers to wash down our repast.

The lunch is unhurried, like everything else seems to be in this country. I kick back in my seat and



take the opportunity to gaze out over the lush, tropical valley outside *El Arroyo*. Caracas is built right into this rough and hilly terrain.

It's amazing. I've never seen anything quite like it before: a modern looking city, very cleanly designed and planned, intertwined with the jungle trees and vegetation in and around the city. The tops of some of the buildings look like someone has just chopped out an acre of jungle foliage and plopped it right down onto the roof.

The temperature is moderate, short sleeve weather, not hot and for some reason, the colors seem to be more vibrant, more intense here. Maybe it's the *Polar* beers, but I think that the light has a lot to do with it. It's green everywhere and the brilliant blue sky with its picturesque, puffy clouds seems to bathe the whole city in the softest, warmest and most diffused light possible. There's not a harsh shadow in sight. This valley metropolis is just scooped right out of the mountain jungle: today is downright pleasant and you feel good simply being here.

Caracas has a lot to offer after the sun goes down as well. The discotheques, fresh seafood and the Venezuelan people themselves make for a good introduction to this culture.

By American standards, people eat a late dinner here. We spent our evenings at a variety of different restaurants, ordering meals after 10.30 much of the time. The atmosphere was almost always familial with lots of kids and families eating dinner at that time and plenty of energy and festivity to go round.

Eating is a big part of the culture here. People eat constantly, meal after meal after meal—so much that you'd expect to see a lot of fat people here, but that's simply not the case. Although I consider myself a big eater, my Venezuelan friends can't believe how little I consume at mealtime!

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crooked taxi drivers at the airport, but in complete honesty, I don't think I met a nicer group of people than Venezuela's professional drivers. The fare was negotiated in advance, the drivers recommended places to eat, waited for us to finish our repast, took us on tours, recited history and city facts. Maybe I was lucky, but the drivers were like walking tourist bureaus, very proud of their city and their country and tried to show it off to its best advantage.

Site of a devastating earthquake

in 1967, Caracas was rebuilt with some of the most advanced disaster-proof architecture in the world. The result is a cleanly designed series of deeply rooted buildings that are spread uniformly and randomly throughout the city. Starkly designed buildings don't come across nearly as angular as they might have otherwise. The inclusion of vegetation and foliage as an architectural and landscape element softens the city considerably. There's a definite organic feeling to Caracas.

The "newness" of the buildings also belies the antiquity of this city. It looks only a few decades old, not the hundreds of years in age since Caracas was originally founded. If one digs into the neighborhoods and outlying communities far enough, ages old adobe buildings and communities can still be found.

Another of my many new friends, anxious to show off "her" city, took us into one of the older neighborhoods one evening. The tiny side

streets that we had to negotiate were filled with cars and parking was a chore. After several minutes of waiting in traffic lines, we finally found a spot within a couple of blocks of our destination. My friend, Carmen Lilliana, was taking us to one of her favorite restaurants: a pizza joint.

The neighborhood was full of old style adobe and brick buildings circling a one block square park. People milled around everywhere in a friendly and festive atmosphere,

street vendors hawking all kinds of hand made goods. Although there was a long waiting line at the restaurant, my Venezuelan friend knew exactly how to call the play — and by introducing me as an "American military attaché" (read: CIA), we were able to get in immediately!

Out on the street I saw a scene that looked as though it had been scripted for a movie. A young man sat on a wide tube, his arms wrapped around his paramour, who sat pouting on his lap, seemingly oblivious to his words of love. In fact she seemed to be wholly ignoring him.

Men/women relationships are different here: it's not unusual to see displays of possessiveness by either sex. A jealous man is not regarded as acting childishly, but rather, as demonstrating love for his partner. Likewise, on a number of occasions I noted women feeding their husbands at the dinner table. Oddly enough, it doesn't seem to act as a set back to any "equality" issues here: June Cleaver is viewed as a foolish woman by both sexes and people seem to be comfortable with the separate and distinct gender roles that Venezuelan society has established for each.

In the same sense, the kinds of racial issues encountered on American streets every day seem to be nonexistent here. The genetic backgrounds of most of the people are pretty jumbled in the first place and I didn't once see an example of racial discrimination or bias. People aren't viewed as black or white or brown, they're either Venezuelan or they're not. But the dividing line for discrimination is nationality. I heard many different epithets for non-Venezuelan people regardless of their skin color!

The mountains here are big and old. Deceptive at first glance because time has rounded off the edges, these hills might not be the Rockies, but they are big! The mountains tend to define a part of the people here as well: there are Land Cruisers, Blazers and Jeeps everywhere. In fact, the four-wheel drive vehicle tends to dominate the roadways here.

To get to my ocean side hotel in Morrocoy, I took a bus through the mountains to Valencia and from there a taxi on to Tucacas. A word of advice: reserve your rooms in advance! I had to visit more than a dozen hotels, hostels and posadas before managing to find an available room at Coral Reef Hotel.

Morrocoy and Caracas are different as night and day. Caracas is a booming metropolis surrounded by mountains and jungle foliage. Morrocoy is a small village on the coast with dirt roads, vendor stalls, chickens, tiny *posadas*, and big hotels. Palm trees dot the landscape and coconuts are everywhere. Caracas has moderate temperatures, Morrocoy is hot. Even at night I sweat here.

The Coral Reef Hotel is one heck of a bargain for an American tourist though. For under a hundred bucks a night, I got a fabulous tiled floor room, all of my meals, everything that I could drink, pools, spas, service to die for, entertainment and island tours all in a tropical paradise.

Days were spent pool side or on one of the beautiful island beaches, reachable by chartered boat for around fifteen dollars round-trip. These islands are truly extraordinary, with bright and clean sand beaches. The beautiful people apparently can't afford real bathing suits, so they wear strings instead.

Vendors with Styrofoam coolers on their shoulders roam the beach: the tinkle of a tiny bell means that they're carrying ice cream and popsicles. No bell indicates that they're hauling nearly anything else: I saw lobster, seafood mix, fresh oysters, calamari, clams, and ice cold *cervasas* among other things.

The last night, after dining outside on the terrace, I wandered off, the music of drums, guitars and flutes in the distance. Some of the people I met visited casinos or took late night dips in the pool. I stole a lounge chair and sat by the water, a cool rum drink in one paw and a hand rolled Cuban cigar in the other. ■