

My trip to Venezuela (24th December 2010 to 15th January 2011)

Information and travel stories on Venezuela seem to be bit scarce and so I decided to write my experience and post it on internet for potential future travellers.

I went to Venezuela recently, a sunny destination to break the long European winter. Most of us know the extreme winter weather during December 2010 in the UK. It was good to escape to a warmer place, for a brief period at least. I had booked Air-Europa flights via Madrid. Apart from the 2hours delay, my arrival in Caracas went smooth. I read many reports of complicated and difficult immigration & customs procedure. But I had no problems, got my passport stamped, baggage was screened and was waived good bye from the customs without exchanging a single word!

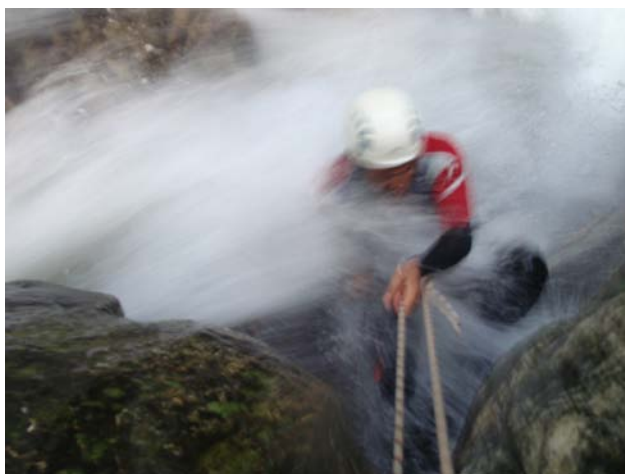
Again, there are several scary stories on the internet about the taxi drive from airport to Caracas city. I had previously organised accommodation through Nelson Agelvis, an Education Consultant in Caracas who rents out his parent's flat for tourists. He speaks fluent English and it's very easy to organise accommodation and airport transfer via Email. His website is <http://www.agelvis.com/Nelsplace/Nelsplace.html>. Unlike commercial companies, Nelson has genuine interests in tourists. He gave a brief tour of Caracas on his own vehicle for me and three other guests, at no extra cost. It was interesting to know everything about Venezuela in few hours first-hand from a local person in English, including Chavez's Social Revolution, which is also obvious through the posters around the country! Nelson's service is really worth lot more than what you pay for. I highly recommend Nelson, should anyone wish to organise a trip to Caracas.

I prefer mountains to cities, museums or beaches, so I went straight to the city of Merida a city on the Andes Mountains at approximately 1630 metres altitude. The overnight bus to Merida takes about 12-14 hours from Caracas. Bus tickets are cheaper because of the insanely cheaper fuel: 100 litres cost approximately 7.5 BsF (local currency) equivalent to one US Dollar, yes, one hundred litres cost just one US Dollar! A luxury rest of the world can't afford – luckily for a sustainable planet. The air conditioning in the bus is turned so high that I had to use my down jacket and hood to keep myself warm. This is fairly common it seems - even local people come prepared, despite the 30+ °C temperature outside.

Merida city is in a beautiful valley between the two mountain ranges (Sierra de La Culata and Sierra Nevada) in the High Andes. I stayed near Las Heroínas in Calle 24, where all the tourist agencies are located. Merida is a good base for several adventure activities. I abandoned my original plan to climb the tallest mountain in Venezuela (Pico Bolívar – 5007metres) so that my dollars can be used for a variety of adventure activities instead of just one big expedition. I organised all my trips through the tour agency called Yagrumo <http://www.posadayagrumo.com>. Paul (Scottish) and Ken (French) who work in this agency were very friendly and helpful. This tour agency is highly recommended. They are happy to provide information even if you don't use their services!

Canyoning (29th Dec) in Rio Santa Catalina

A full day activity, there were 3 Swedes and a family of 5 Venezuelans in my group. It was great fun, rappelling down waterfalls was awesome, but jumping into pools was something I dreaded! I have an extraordinary capacity to panic and drown in 3 feet of water, since I can't swim. But I braved a couple of jumps. The water was not cold unless you stay in it for too long. It was my first experience of Canyoning - definitely worth the cost.



Paragliding (30th Dec)

One of the best sites for paragliding in South America is near Merida and again it is my first experience. After being in the air, I wish I have wings to fly often! Some pictures and videos included in the link below. This was approximately 55 dollars for about 30 minutes flying – almost same as Ryanair but environment friendly! How nice to just fly without having to worry about packing the toiletries in a clear transparent bag...



Pan de Azucar (31st Dec to 2nd January) hiking trip:

I went on a three day hiking trip with an Estonian family organised by Yagrumo tours. From Merida, we drove to La Culata (3000metres), where the hiking begins (My critic's should note that I carried my own stuff and did not use a porter this time). The first night we camped at 4200metres. Going straight from 1630metres to 4200 metres without any acclimatization in one day is a recipe for altitude sickness. I did not sleep that night at all, felt nauseous and had headache most of the night and this is on the New years eve! The next day, some members of our team left at 5am to summit the 4800metres mountain, but I was in a poor condition so I was glad to miss it (without acclimatization it is not a good idea to go from 1630metres to 4800 metres within a period of 36 hours – I should have checked the itinerary). The second day is another 8

hour walk via a pass at 4500metres down to Las Aguas Termales at 3200metres. As soon as I got below 4000metres I started feeling better. I should have better acclimatized before going on this hiking trip. The highlight of this trip is the camping site Las Aguas Termales on the second day which is next to a hot water stream from the mountain and there is a pool to swim. This made the 8 hour gruelling day worth it - naturally heated water at the end of a sweaty day and with awesome views – this pool will have an expensive entry ticket if it had been in Europe! (example: Blue lagoon in Reykjavik, Iceland) thank to Chavez, it is free to swim there, the pool is only 4ft deep, safe to explore my swimming skills.

Los Llanos (2nd January to 6th January) trip: wild life safari and bird watchin

Los Llanos is in the plains of Barinas. This trip is almost like an African safari. I travelled with the Estonian family again. We stayed with a local family in the camp Rancho Grande and slept in the hammock every night! Our hosts were excellent, very down-to-earth and friendly. They prepared us excellent food and fresh fruit juice for every meal. We did horse riding (in the wild), caught Piranha, went on a river safari and land safari – sitting on top of the jeep on a bumpy dirt road was quite fun. Tarmos (10yr old) from Estonia was quite entertaining, even though he has started learning English only this year, his pop music knowledge put me on shame.

We saw Anteaters, Caiman, Anaconda, dolphins, iguanas, turtles and several birds (too many names to remember). Ken from Yagrumo tours was our guide. He had an excellent knowledge of the local animals and bird species. I am not into Ornithology, but the excellent shades of colours on those birds got me interested, overall a very relaxing and thoroughly enjoyable trip. One other thing - I was interested to examine my skills in milking cow.

Unlike the developed world, the cows in Los Llanos are milked manually, so I requested to milk a cow that belonged to our hosts. (I used to milk cows and buffaloes when I was growing up in India, from the animals our family owned). I guess the tour company might put this as an additional activity henceforth! Pictures of Acanonda, Caiman and Milking a Latin cow (!) included here, please check the link at the bottom for more pictures.



Road cycling (9th and 10th January, from Merida 1630metres to Laguna Mucubaji 3600metres)

I rented a mountain bike from a local shop (100BsF per day) and I also had to buy some cycling costumes since I was not really expecting to cycle during this trip. The road from Merida to Barinas goes via a pass Laguna Mucubaji at 3600metres, during the drive on my Los Llanos trip, a plan was hatched to cycle up this pass from Merida. It is indeed one of my long standing dreams to cycle this continent from top to bottom at some point in my life and I did not wanted to miss a good chance to taste the cycling in Andes mountains. The distance between Merida and the top of this pass is about 66kms, climbing all the way, although the distance was tempting to do this cycling over a single day, I was wary of the altitude sickness, so I decided to make this a two day activity. On the first day I cycled from Merida until Mucuchies at 3000 metres. The second day I went to the top and returned to Merida. The views at 3600metres while on the bike and the descent from such high altitude is something no cycling enthusiasts would want to miss. Personally, the sense of achievement of having cycled up one of the Andes mountains is something beyond words. I should also mention that I ate 2 kilograms of water-melon per day, fruit in its native land taste better. Is there any other better way to get both agua and sugar for the difficult climb? Needless to mention that I stopped at several places to rest, catch my breath and take pictures.



Catatumbo trip (11th and 12th January)

Finally, I went on a two day trip to a place called Catatumbo well known for its special lightning phenomenon. But unfortunately, we were not luckily enough, no lightning, but the boat trip involves some water safari - we spotted several birds, snake and Caiman. The trip also involves one hour speed boat drive in the Lake Maracaibo to reach the destination, the mouth of Catatumbo River where we stayed in a wooden hut on stilts. I have never been on a speed boat, besides this lake is massive. I was holding to my dear life whenever the boat hit the wave. I vowed not to go on a speed boat again until I learn to swim!



Cataumbo town – a complete town with church, school, houses – all on stilts!

In general Venezuelan's seem to like loud music - every shop, car, bus play music - so loud! I assumed Venezuela to be a poor nation but not quite (at least compared to Bolivia and Peru). They also seem to like fancy cars and Centro commercial's (shopping malls). Vegetarian food is not something easy to find, but plenty of tropical fruits and excellent coffee makes up for it. Almost every meal has a Plantain of some form – I enjoyed them. Except for fuel most things are expensive because of inflation and poor economy. Every local person I met seems to be unhappy with Chavez but nobody was willing to predict a change anytime soon. Despite all the political problems, Venezuelan's appeared to be happy people (it's a tourist impression though). Overall, Venezuela is an excellent holiday destination.

More pictures of

Canyoning

<http://picasaweb.google.com/balasundaram.bangaru/VenezuelaCanyoning?feat=directlink>

Paragliding

<http://picasaweb.google.com/balasundaram.bangaru/VenezuelaParagliding?feat=directlink>

Road cycling

<http://picasaweb.google.com/balasundaram.bangaru/VenezuelaRoadCyclingToLagunaMucubajiAt3600metres?feat=directlink>

Los Llanos trip

<http://picasaweb.google.com/balasundaram.bangaru/VenezuelaLosLlanosTrip?feat=directlink>

Pan de Azucar Hike

<http://picasaweb.google.com/balasundaram.bangaru/VenezuelaPanDeAzucar?feat=directlink>

Paragliding video link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcfKIgmuOso>