

El Presidente

While eating breakfast in Belem, Brazil, I sat next to a British man with wild, blond hair and wild stories. We talked about our travels which is the usual conversation at most breakfasts at tourist hotels. I told Ed I was heading to the Guyanas and then over to Venezuela followed by Columbia and Ecuador. He had come in the opposite direction, so we exchanged notes. His notes for President Hugo Chavez's Venezuela were not good.

Ed told me about his time in the capital, Caracas. He was staying in a cheap hotel, although budget accommodation in Caracas is nonexistent. This hotel was about \$35, which for budget travelers in South America is expensive. He left his hotel and was whisked away into a room in a small building by several police officers. He was strip searched and basically robbed by the police, who took all his money, credit cards and his passport. Ed spoke a little Spanish and could tell that there was a debate between two of the police officers on whether to return his credit cards and passport. Eventually, they returned those items to Ed which was a major relief.

After being robbed by the police, Ed regrouped by getting more money out of an ATM and then eating a good meal at the hotel. Due to the police robbers, Ed decided to just have a beer at the hotel and then go to sleep. The next morning, he woke up refreshed and had nearly forgotten the unpleasant police from the day before. Unfortunately, the police remembered him and were waiting outside his hotel. When he left the hotel, the police once again whisked him away into a room, once again strip searched him, once again robbed him and once again returned his credit cards in anticipation of robbing him again. Ed was stuck; there was no way to get away from the crooked police. Ed went back into the hotel and talked to the manager who was fortunately an honest man. He called an honest taxi driver and the manager slipped Ed out the backdoor of the hotel, into the waiting taxi and thus Ed escaped Caracas and their police.

Based on Ed's report, and others who had visited Caracas, I decided to minimize my time in the capital. My flight from Tobago arrived in Caracas and I immediately boarded an airport bus, got off at the appropriate metro stop, ran past several police officers into the metro, which seemed safe, and then got off near the stop for Terminal La Bandera. I bought a donut before getting on an outbound bus. That was my experience in Caracas.

The bus from Caracas led to the city of Maracay, which is duller than Caracas for better or for worse. Maracay is more relaxed, has more greenery and is safer. There was a Plaza Bolivar with the usual statues but also trees with rather large lizards in them. An American I met, Brad, joked that he spent hundreds of dollars on a safari and didn't see one lizard; now, in the middle of the city, he saw a large one. There is also a governor's palace, opera house and churches to visit. However, nothing real stands out and it doesn't have the excitement of Caracas.

Near Maracay is the Henri Pittier Park, accessed through a curvy, hilly bus ride. People on the bus swayed back and forth as the aggressive bus driver took the corners. The little girl next to me fell on my lap a couple times as she was more interested in dancing to the radio's music than in bracing herself.

The park itself is decent; it has some trails for hiking. Visitors must register at the deteriorating building with broken down windows at the park's entrance. Then, they must check in with a second person who asks for a park itinerary and opens a wooden door to the trails.

There are several large trees and pretty butterflies with opaque wings in the park. The treks are fairly easy with no big hills and the trails are clearly marked.

Coro is a welcoming colonial city and in 1993 its center was declared a UNESCO cite. There are several nice plazas, churches and cobblestone streets to visit. It was the city's birthday when I was there, thus there was a large festival which made it difficult to get a place to stay. I checked several hotels but none had vacancy, so I was ready to move on. Fortunately, I met an Israeli who knew a place, La Casa de los Pajaros, where guests could sling a hammock in their courtyard. The owner and his family were helpful and so were the bikers who stayed there for the festival.



Most of the festivities took place near the Parque Nacional Medanos de Coro on the outskirts of the city. The park is actually a desert and one can wonder the sands along with goats, dune buggies and 4 by 4's. Next to the park are the festival grounds that had a variety of activities. The festival included concerts with the first day being more traditional country music with accordions and the next day being a boy band/rap concert. There was also a horse contest as this is cowboy country. For sustenance, festival goers could sample different foods on a stick and a lot of meat.

The rodeo is the activity at the Coro festival that was my personal favorite. It's different than a rodeo found in America. The one and only activity is four cowboys on horses chasing a bull in an enclosed, dirt area that looks like a rectangular track. One of the cowboys grabs the bull's tail and eventually drags him down and then this process is repeated over and over and over. Spectators in the stands dangle their legs onto the rodeo area. Early in the night, people kick their feet up so they don't get hit by the bulls or horses. Later, as people drink more and get braver, they kick the bull as it comes past. Then a couple drunks will jump down on the rodeo ground and dodge the animals. By the end of the night, a large percentage of the crowd is on the grounds dodging bulls and horses. So you don't need to go to Pamplona to run with the bulls.

To the north of Coro is another park that has an old Spanish road. The trip was recommended by the casa owner and he told us directions for the bus, when to get off the bus and to then ask for Simon. Simon's an unofficial tour guide and his house is the last one on the left off the road leading from the bus stop. Even as we started walking in that direction, people were pointing in the direction of Simon's house as they recognized that we were tourists. At the end of the road, a man told us Simon was having a cup of coffee at Maria's house and that we could wait for Simon at his house. This is the type of folksy place this area is like.

Simon did give us an informative trip through the park, on the Spanish road and through the caves. The countryside had lush vegetation, coffee plants and pretty flowers. The Spanish road was visible in places as there were rocks that protruded through the grass. The still functioning bridges were 400 years old and were a combination of mud, stone and sand. The caves had a lot of tight spots, but Simon looked after us and I learned much about caves.



Throughout Venezuela, there is likely some poster or someone discussing “El Presidente”, Hugo Chavez. Posters are displayed seemingly every other block with Chavez’s



likeness. Even in the indigenous areas, there are posters with Chavez wearing indigenous clothes. The fiery slogans on the posters include “We are with you”, “Together we can” and my personal favorite, “Capitalism kills 3000 children a day.” This propaganda resonates with some people, especially the poor, as his popularity remains over 50%, but is declining of late. Enormous oil deposits which leads to gasoline prices of seven cents a gallon probably has a positive effect on Chavez’s popularity.

Similar too many other countries, the leader dominates life in Venezuela. There is a real cult of personality surrounding President Chavez, and his denouncement of the west has affected tourism. Many tourists pass on Venezuela because of this as well as her violence and corruption. Those who travel to Venezuela will find the people to be distant though not outwardly rude (except at the rodeo, everyone there was friendly after a few drinks). However, leaders come and go and when Chavez moves on Venezuela will as well. It will be interesting to see the direction the country will take as it has much to offer.