

the jungles of Venezuela. I know I wasn't afraid; it simply was not a country that I had ever thought about before. In the US, the only "news" we get about Venezuela is something bad. We are told it's dangerous and that the government is to be feared and so people cross it off their lists of tourist destinations and opt for Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic. And if we never go, we never know the truth. (Much like interracial dating. See the parallels here?)

I went on the trip because I needed to get the hell out of NYC for a while. As a writer on all things cultural, it was definitely going to be a worthwhile experience. What I found there exceeded any expectations.

We landed in Caracas, planning to stay overnight. We stopped for lunch at a restaurant and suddenly I felt like a controversial leader at a political rally. I got out of the van and a friend shouted, "You are making yourself a target!" He commanded the rest of the group to swarm around me. (Nice! My own personal secret service.) Turns out I was not supposed to bring a purse in public—especially not a big, shiny, silver, expensive-looking one. Our tour guide bribed the restaurant's security guard to watch our car, which is a necessity if you want it to be there when you get back. And later, my hotel room had a special quality not shared by the guys I was traveling with: a hole in the wall next to the lock. You know, so I could reach in just in case I lost my keys? Right? When that problem was rectified (so to speak) it was time to rest before heading to la selva (the jungle). I was with a bunch of guys, only one of which I new. They all seemed nice enough, but that night an uneasy feeling settled in. I was regretting coming and felt the impetus to run, but where? What was I doing out in the middle of nowhere in South America with total strangers?

The place. Getting to the jungle took four planes, including a four-seater that required one of us to ride up front with the pilot. The view from the plane was beautiful, but nothing compared to the view when we landed. We got out of the plane, looked up, and saw this (see photo 1). These beautiful perma-green mountains with a ring of fog that made you feel like you had just stepped into an Indiana Jones movie. The first thing I noticed about the Venezuelan jungle was that it was more like plains than jungle, just miles of nothing but flat land and tall grass. Later I learned that in this wondrous place, all on the same day, we could walk through the savanna, hike through the forest, and walk through jungles with the tallest, most beautiful waterfalls in the world (Not an exaggeration, the tallest waterfall in the world, Angel falls is in Venezuela). And after seeing several waterfalls, you would think they would get tiresome. No. Every one was completely different from the next. And everywhere we went the rivers ran pink, dyed by the tannins in leaves of the trees.

The people. The Canaima National Park is the property of the Pemon, the local Indian tribe, some of the last Indians in the world that still live their traditional lifestyle and govern themselves. The Pemon tended the thatched-roof hotels, cooked our food, and guided us through this diverse landscape. Supplies come only by plane. The land is overhunted, so very few local food sources are available. (We did eat some traditional foods, including termites and this giant maggot; see photo 2.) The Pemon have one small hospital and all 200+ indigenous people share one beat-up truck. Everyone speaks Spanish and Pemon, but because of the diversity (and because interesting people find themselves in the middle of nowhere in Venezuela, or as my father would say, "Bum Fuck Egypt"), several Pemon also speak English, German, or Japanese, among other languages. The Pemon have very modest homes, have to import most of their food, and rely chiefly on tourism and nonprofit aid (<http://www.angelconservation.org/>) to maintain their traditional lifestyle. However, they seemed to have relatively little of that modern invention that most of us are slave to: stress. The days come; the days go. Children are born, play, and grow. They have concerns, conflicts, and needs, but those things don't seem to weigh on them like they do people I've met elsewhere. They seem as close to being at peace as I have ever seen.

As most of you know, I lost my job in the Wall Street crash of 2008 and instead of going back to being a corporate tool, I wrote *I Got the Fever*. The person I was before the crash would have never gone to Venezuela. I was not into rustic vacations with any of the following: vicious prehistoric mosquitoes (*puri puri*), hammocks for beds, pants that zip at the knee (impossible to be a diva in la selva), and lack of *agua caliente* (hot water)! The person I was before would not have ventured to this magical place. And the truth is I the "old me" was not the only American afraid to visit Venezuela; there were no other Americans there with us. Although my friend was a little overzealous in creating my restaurant security posse in Caracas, like with a lot of places, you must travel Venezuela with someone who knows the area. And yes, even Venezuelans do not feel safe in the country's cities, but in Canaima National Park, I felt safer and freer than anywhere else I've been. Venezuela reminded me of what I already knew: Things that are different, hard, or risky are the things that make a real difference in who you are and how you lead your life. So I implore you not to be afraid! Wherever it may be, whoever it may be with, don't miss the chance to see your own paradise.

If you think Venezuela might be your paradise, check it out (<http://www.angel-ecotours.com/>). Learn about or help the Pemon (<http://www.angelconservation.org/>). Or, if you just need to relax on the beach (like we did post-jungle), check out the beach house we rented on the



Caribbean Sea (http://www.angei-ecotours.com/coral_lagoon/). Fabuiose!



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