

# Pedalling about Venezuela

## Information for cycle tourists



Laura and Patrick Mottram, Pedalling About – [www.pedallingabout.com](http://www.pedallingabout.com)

April 2012

## Introduction

We cycled around Venezuela in early 2012. Below are details of the route we took as well as other information cyclists planning a trip may find useful. If there's anything else you'd like to know please email us at [pedallingabout@hotmail.com](mailto:pedallingabout@hotmail.com).

Venezuela is a fascinating and complex country to cycle through. We rode from the Andes in the west, across the central plains to the lost world of table-top mountains and huge plains of the Gran Sabana. At times the scenery was breath-taking and we thought the Gran Sabana was one of the best places we have cycled. The people were fantastic: friendly, inquisitive and helpful.

However, it wasn't the most straightforward country to cycle through. Getting hold of cash is complicated and Venezuela isn't a cheap country. There is also a real issue about security.

## Our route



You can [view the live google map of our route](#) online.

	Distance (km)	Accommodation	Price (BSF)
Colombian border	-	-	-
San Cristobal	40	Hotel	250
Abejales	111	Posada	150
Socopo	112	Posada	100
Barinas	84	Couchsurfing	0
Guanare	76	Invited to stay with family in town	0
Acarigua	93	Hotel in centre	55
Tinaco	96	Posada	100
Valencia	83	Couchsurfing	0
Villa de Cura	77	Posada	200
San Juan de los Morros	35	Hotel	230
Valle de la Pescua	120	Hotel above garage	140
Zaraza	95	Hotel in centre	180
Aragua de Barcelona	65	Hotel in lady's backyard	60
El Tigre	120	Hotel on main road	170
Ciudad Bolivar	135	Posada Don Carlos in old centre	150
Ciudad Guyana	107	Warmshowers, Gabriel	0
Upata	62	Invited to stay with cyclist in town	0
El Callao	125	Hotel in plaza	140
El Dorado	108	Camping - Warmshowers, Gerard	0
San Isidro (km 88)	84	Hotel opposite petrol station	130
Km 157	70	Wild camping - next to bridge over river	0
San Francisco de Yuruani	97	Posada	200
Santa Elena de Uairen	68	Camping - casa de ciclistas, Andreas	0
Brazilian border	15	-	-

## General Information

### Political situation

Venezuela is run by the socialist government of President Hugo Chavez. Support within the country swings from strong commitment to his politics, mainly from the poorer sections of society, to dislike from more affluent groups. Internationally Chavez is often referred to as a dictator.

Most people we met in Venezuela were anti-Chavez. However, people were reluctant to openly criticise the government because of feared retribution. For example, whilst we were in the country national elections for an opposition presidential candidate took place. Many opposition supporters chose not to take part though as their names would have been listed on the electoral sheets and they feared this would have made problems for them such as getting credit at national banks.

Presidential elections are set to take place in late 2012. It seems likely that Chavez will remain in power, although there are significant concerns about the health of the President who has travelled several times to Cuba for cancer treatment. It's advisable not to get involved in a deep public conversation on the subject.

### Money

Getting cash is a complicated process in Venezuela. The national currency is Bolivars Fuerte (BsF), which is fixed by Chavez against the US dollar at an artificially high rate. The official rate is approximately 4.3BsF to \$1 (US). If you exchange dollars at an official cambio office or bank or withdraw money from an ATM this is the rate you will get.

#### *The black market*

However, it's prohibitively expensive for a budget traveller to survive in Venezuela using the official rate, and you will end up looking to use the black market or the *parallel dollar* as it is known. For example, a set lunch which costs 50BsF will be \$11.50 at the official rate or \$5.90 at the black market rate.

Whilst we were travelling in Venezuela the black market rate was about 8.5BsF to \$1. Exchanging money we could get between 8 and 8.5 to the dollar.

However, the black market is illegal and you should be careful about where and who you change money with. For example, we were approached at Caracas airport within the terminal building but have heard that this is a sting for tourists and you may find yourself arrested by lurking police.

We were able to change money through our Couchsurfing and Warmshower hosts, who generally knew people who wanted to buy dollars. Also, posadas in the larger cities which catered for tourists were often willing to exchange dollars or organise an electronic money transfer between European banks. The money transfer was the best way we found to handle the situation without having to carry huge wads of cash.

In smaller towns and villages it was more difficult to change dollars. We found the best people to change with were local businessmen usually either of Arab or Chinese descent as they were the ones most interested in sending money abroad.

It's not advisable to discuss money changing in public as it is illegal and we found locals were often worried about being overheard and reported.

### *Exchanging money at the borders*

We were able to easily change our leftover Colombian Pesos into Bolivars on the Colombian side of the border at the equivalent rate of 8.5. In hindsight, we wished we'd changed more money in Colombia as it was much easier than organising it in Venezuela.

Similarly you get a decent rate at the crossing with Brazil and we changed with money changers in the Plaza Bolivar in Santa Elena.

### *Costs*

Venezuela isn't a cheap place to visit, even operating at the black market rate. Because of the focus on oil production and nationalisation there is very little other industry in the country and consequently many products are imported from abroad.

## **Getting in and out of Venezuela**

We entered from Colombia through Cucuta. The border crossing was straightforward and without hassle. On both sides of the border the offices are outside so you can always see your bike. We were worried that it would be problematic as the guidebooks talk about needing to get a tourist card before you get to the border. We decided to chance it and in the end there was a healthy supply of cards next to the immigration office.

The guidebooks also talk about an exit tax when leaving Venezuela by air. However, when we flew out of Caracas airport for a brief trip to the Caribbean we discovered the tax is now included in the price of the airline ticket and you no longer need to pay it in person as you leave.

We left Venezuela from Santa Elena into Brazil. The crossing was straightforward, although you should note that the office closes for a couple of hours for lunch. We were told we needed to visit two Brazilian immigration offices, but we only saw one.

## **Security**

Security is a real concern in Venezuela, with Caracas known as one of the most dangerous cities in the world. Apparently the security situation is the worst it has ever been in the country. However, we had no problems, only that we found the constant warnings from locals exhausting.

Caracas, the capital, has a particularly bad reputation for violent crime and we chose not to visit the city at all. From what we heard, the area from Valencia up to Caracas and around has the biggest problems. However, we found that in virtually every town we stayed the threat of crime was so significant that as soon as it got dark the streets were deserted. What this will mainly mean for you is that you need to think about food before nightfall.

We were constantly warned about being robbed on the highways or in the towns. At one point a soldier tried to lift our bikes into his pickup to whisk us to safety as he said the area was full of 'bad people', a phrase we heard a lot. However, everybody we met in Venezuela was friendly, helpful and welcoming.

We did heed the warnings and took extra precautions. Because of the problems with accessing money we were carrying more than we normally would, but we hid it across our bags. We also chose to stay in hotels until we got to the Gran Sabana area which is generally considered safe.

### *Police checkpoints*

Wherever you cycle in Venezuela you will come across a police or army checkpoint about once a day. We were warned by locals that the police would make hassle for us and possibly demand bribes. Initially we adopted an approach whereby we put our ipods in and sunglasses on and cycled through as fast as we could whilst waving. However, we stopped at one for a drink and discovered the police to be simply intrigued by our bikes as cycle tourists aren't a common sight. After that we always stopped if people gestured at us, with no problems at all.

## **Food and supplies**

### *Food*

For cyclists heading out of the Andes, Venezuela will be a welcome relief in regards to a change in roadside food available. It is also much better for vegetarians than other South American countries.

The main breakfast foods are empanadas (fried pastries filled with cheese, chicken or meat) and arepas (flatish breads made from corn, stuffed with a variety of fillings. Perico is the traditional breakfast stuffing, of scrambled eggs with onion and tomato). Both these snacks are relatively cheap and travel well enough to snack on throughout the day.

For lunch, you will find the set menu 'almuerzo' or 'menu ejecutivo' is most popular. This is normally a soup followed by a huge plate of meat with rice, salad, yuca, beans and/or plantain. The cachapa was one of our favourite dishes. It is a huge pancake made from corn, normally served with a slab of cheese the size of plate and smothered in butter. It is delicious and great cycling fuel, although probably not so good for the heart.

With lunch being the main meal of the day, there is little emphasis on dinner. In the bigger towns you can usually find somewhere serving pizza, burgers or Chinese food and there is obviously much more choice in the large cities. However, many places close early across Venezuela because of the security situation and it's wise to work out a dinner option before nightfall.

As you get closer to Brazil all-you-can-eat buffets make an appearance. These are good places for vegetarians as they have big salad bars and you can usually get a discount if you're not eating meat.

- Set lunch – 40BsF
- Cachapa with cheese – 30BsF
- Stuffed arepa – 20BsF
- Empanadas – 10BsF

## *Drink*

Tap water in Venezuela isn't potable and everybody either buys bottled water or uses a filter. Bottled water is expensive. Normally hotels and restaurants will fill up your water bottles for you if you ask.

Soft drinks/sodas are popular throughout the country and are known as 'refrescos'. You get all the usual suspects from Coca-Cola and Pepsi and the only particularly Venezuelan choice is 'Maltin' a malt, energy drink from the Polar company. You will find some excellent fruit juices and there is a delicious, refreshing drink called 'papelón y limón'.

Coffee is part of daily life in Venezuela and is served black and sweet in thimble-sized cups, which you will see strewn along the roads.

Venezuelans take their beer cold and small so that it doesn't get warm before they finish drinking it. Consequently they get through lots of cans and it's common to see people sat at a table overflowing with empties. Polar is the most popular brand, with Polar Pilsen being the most similar to a European style beer in flavour. Solera is another decent brand.

- Refresco (small bottle) – 10BsF
- Refresco (1.5ltr) – 16BsF
- Juice (glass) – 10BsF
- Bottle of beer – 7BsF
- Water (1.5ltr) – 12BsF

## *Supermarkets*

You will find supermarkets in cities and towns. They are generally well-stocked and you will have no problem finding the usual cyclist staples of porridge, pasta, etc. Tomato pasta sauces are harder to come by, but we did find some good dry packets which we mixed with water. Snacks like biscuits and crisps can be found in nearly every village shop you pass.

Some items are harder to come by. For example, there is a chronic shortage of milk in the country, as Chavez nationalised many of the large dairy farms and production has now dropped off drastically. We found fresh milk just twice whilst we were there and got good-naturedly laughed at several times enquiring in shops. You can generally find powdered milk in the large supermarkets in the bigger cities. Vegetables aren't a common part of the daily diet, so if you see them it's well worth picking them up.

All villages have at least one small shop where you can pick up supplies and you will find stalls along the main highways. However, for example in Los Llanos and the Gran Sabana, you can cycle long distances without finding anywhere to resupply or find lunch, even if there is something marked on the map, so it's worth carrying back-up supplies.

## *Gas*

Venezuela is a country run off the oil under its soil. At 4p per litre, if you fill up your fuel bottles in the country you won't get charged for the transaction as it's too small to count. However, you will

need to find a gas station that has fuel and doesn't have a huge queue of trucks and cars waiting. Supply to the stations can be sporadic, so it's best not to assume that you can just arrive and fill up.

## Accommodation

Accommodation in Venezuela is of a similar standard to the rest of South America, but costs more. We principally stayed in posadas or hotels because of the uneasy security situation in the country. The average cost of a double room per night was 150BsF. Wifi was usually available in the big towns.

We used the [Couchsurfing](#) and [Warmshowers](#) networks several times and each time stayed with lovely hosts. International tourists aren't so common in Venezuela, so we were made to feel very welcome. The Warmshowers network in the country was excellent and it's well worth getting in touch. We also stayed at a [Casa de Ciclistas in Santa Elena](#) run by a German-Venezuelan called Andreas who was friendly and helpful.

Cycling across the country there were few opportunities to camp. There are no official campsites and much of the countryside is fenced-off farmland. We didn't ask to stay on any of the farms but our friend who cycled south through Los Llanos at the same time did, with no problems. We were cautious about camping behind restaurants or police checkpoints in some areas of the country, but in general people were friendly and it probably would have been fine.

Once we got towards the Gran Sabana the atmosphere felt much more secure and we enjoyed some fabulous wild camping (although we needed good mosquito repellent). From El Dorado south there were also lots of campamentos, campsites with bathrooms and lovely views.

## Maps

We used the Nelles map to Venezuela and the Guyanas at a scale of 1:2,500,000. Overall we were happy with the details the map showed, although it did miss off some of the smaller villages. We also had a local, tourist map which was given to us and it was good to be able to cross-check the two.

## Roads

Because oil is so cheap the car is king in Venezuela. Everybody drives and they have huge cars. We had been warned about the drivers here, but overall we found that they gave us plenty of room whenever they could. In the big cities, when the roads turned into major highways, it was less pleasant. We didn't cycle into Caracas, but having passed through on a bus, there is no way we would have cycled there. Cars used the hard shoulder as an extra lane and the driving was erratic.

The worst element of Venezuela's roads for us was the terrible smell from the roadkill and rubbish that is strewn everywhere. Also, we had to cycle past several roadside fires, either accidentally started or as a method of controlling the undergrowth.

Unlike other places in South America there is little road or roadside maintenance. You will often cycle through old toll stations which were closed down by Chavez a few years ago as part of the socialist agenda. Their closure has meant less income for road maintenance.

It's not possible to generalise about the condition of Venezuela's roads as they vary so much from state to state, so we've split this down into different sections of our route.

*Colombian border to San Cristobal* – From the border you have a climb up before you descend into San Cristobal. The road is windy and wasn't in great condition because of a number of landslides. Entering San Cristobal is pretty chaotic. The roads running through the centre of the town are six lanes wide and one-way.

*San Cristobal to Barinas* – Once you come down out of the mountains and onto the plains the road is in good condition. There is no hard shoulder, but traffic isn't too heavy. There's a few hilly sections, but generally it's flat although heading east you will be cycling into the wind.

*Barinas to Valencia* – After Barinas the road turns into a two-lane highway with a hard shoulder. The traffic was incredibly light so we enjoyed a good road to ourselves. It does go back to a single lane between San Carlos and Carabobo. The last 20km into Valencia is miserable, with no hard shoulder and heavy traffic. (We didn't cycle it, but from Valencia to Maracay the road is very busy and there is a longish tunnel. There is a hard shoulder but heavy lorries tend to use it as an extra slow lane).

*Valencia to San Juan de los Morros* – Leaving Valencia it's a lovely ride along the south side of Lago Valencia, it's a quiet generally flat road with some a couple of steep climbs. You head down to San Juan along a nice, winding road, although the traffic does pick up here. The road condition is fine.

*San Juan de los Morros to Valle de la Pesca* – At Dos Cominos you turned east and start battling a strong, prevailing wind. The road is narrow with no hard shoulder and up to El Sombrero the traffic isn't too heavy. Heading into Valle de la Pesca the road isn't fun to cycle on, the traffic increases and there are many trucks. There is no space for cyclists and the road is not in a good condition.

*Valle de la Pesca to Anaco* – There's more protection from the wind along this route, but it's a bit hillier. It was actually a really lovely stretch to cycle, although the road isn't in the best condition with some short, sandy sections and potholes. However, traffic is very light, the scenery is nice and people are very friendly as they don't expect to see tourists.

*Anaco to El Ciudad Bolivar* – From Anaco to El Tigre it was marked as a dual carriageway on our map, however, the road builders seemed to have stopped halfway and there was just a narrow road with a stony track on each side, which wasn't enjoyable to cycle on. From El Tigre to Ciudad Bolivar the road goes through the middle of nowhere and is in ok condition. It's wise to stock up on water and food as there is a big gap between facilities of any kind. Coming into Bolivar you have to cycle over a huge bridge spanning the Rio Orinocco.

*Ciudad Bolivar to Ciudad Guyana* – This dual carriageway road is in excellent condition. It's a bit hilly and windy but there is plenty of space for cyclists.

*Ciudad Guyana to El Dorado* – It's a quiet dual carriageway to Upata and then the road turns into a narrow, single-lane. There isn't much room for cyclists, but the traffic isn't too heavy. It's a constantly, undulating section but the road is in good condition.

*El Dorado to Santa Elena* – There is much more vegetation on the roads until you get into the Gran Sabana. Village names are replaced with km marks and from km 88 you start a steep 35km climb to

the army checkpoint at the start of the Gran Sabana. They'll fill you up on water here. The Gran Sabana is brilliant cycling along wide and hilly plains. The road is in excellent condition and there are plenty of camping opportunities.

*Santa Elena to Brazilian border* – The 15km stretch is fairly quiet and in good condition.

## **Bike maintenance**

We were lucky to have no problems with our bikes in Venezuela, but we don't imagine we would have had any problems fixing them as cycling is a popular sport in the country.

There is a bike mechanic in most small towns and the larger towns have specialised bike stores. Mountain biking is very popular in Merida and Ciudad Guyana and road biking is popular throughout the country.

## **Off the bike**

We took time off the bikes to visit a few of Venezuela's tourist spots and would recommend the following:

### *Angel Falls*

If you're at all tempted you should do it, we had a fabulous trip. We booked through our hostel in Ciudad Bolivar onto a three-day trip. We flew into Canaima with fabulous views of the forests below and then spent one night in Canaima village after exploring the lagoon and its waterfalls. The next morning we took a five hour boat trip up river (bring a waterproof jacket even in the dry season) and then had a one hour hike up to the base of Angel Falls. We were there in the dry season, but it was still spectacular and we got to swim in the pool at the base of the falls. Then we spent the night in the jungle camp before heading back the next morning by boat and plane.

### *Puerto Colombia/Choroni*

The drive up through the Henri-Pittier National Park is spectacular itself (you could cycle it, but it's incredibly steep and you have to come back up to get out!). Finally you leave the jungle onto the coast and arrive in Puerto Colombia with its beautiful sandy beaches. It's a nice place to hang out and chill for a few days.

### *Las Trincheras thermal springs*

You can get a bus from the centre of Valencia to the thermal springs. The complex is well-designed with several pools of different temperatures. There is a mud pool but you can also buy mud from the ticket hut, which is supposed to be even better. There are cafes on sight and lots of places to relax, so it's a great place to waste a day and revive the legs.

### *Gran Sabana*

Santa Elena was a really nice little town with a good vibe and great restaurants. The pizzeria operated by [Kamadac Tours](#) was amazing and well worth hitting on your arrival. Kamadac is

operated by Andreas who owns the Casa de Ciclistas there. He can help organise tours of the Gran Sabana and to climb the table-top mountain Roraima.

## **Other stuff**

*Language* – the official language is Spanish. You should have some knowledge of the language as very few people speak English or any other European language.

*Guide books* – we used the Lonely Planet guide to Venezuela as the general South America guidebooks didn't have enough information. We were quite impressed and would recommend it, especially if you can put it on a Kindle or other e-book reader to avoid the extra weight.

## **Other sites**

We found the following sites usual for planning a cycle tour in Venezuela:

- [Crazy guy on a bike](#)
- [World biking](#)

## **Other Pedalling About posts on Venezuela**

- [Getting to grips with Venezuela: San Cristobal to Valencia](#)
- [Eyes on the road: Valencia to Ciudad Bolivar](#)
- [Cycling the lost world: Ciudad Bolivar to Santa Elena](#)