

Margarita Island: A Bit of Boston in Venezuela

by Randy Ross

Note: This article is the second excerpt that **Whats Up** has run about one local man's travels around the world.

Travel Log First Leg: Insecurity

At 5 a.m. in Boston's Logan airport I encounter my first disgruntled airport employee. My backpack is passing through the X-ray scanner for carry-on baggage when the woman behind the machine indicates that something's amiss. I have several small tubes of liquid packed in a clear plastic bag, and that's okay. But a few other tubes are floating around loose in my pack. She summons the bag expert.

He is wearing a name tag; clearly, he is a very important man. He huffs, sighs, and shows me a regulation-sized plastic bag into which all my tubes must fit. For emphasis, he waves the little bag in my face. Then he rummages through my pack to locate all the tubes. While mumbling to himself and shaking his head, he carefully places each tube into the regulation bag. They fit, and I'm on my way to Venezuela's Margarita Island.

Nine hours later, I arrive at the airport. When I go outside, the first thing I notice is the equatorial sun, which is so overpowering I feel as if I'm witnessing a non-stop thermonuclear event. I ask a cab driver the price for a ride to my hotel. I've read that the price should be 25,000 bolivars, or about \$12. The driver says "treinta." Whatever that means; it sounds a little high. I say "\$10 U.S." and we have a deal.

I hop in the cab, and we head to the small beach town of El Yaque, an internationally known windsurfing spot. From the narrow, winding road, I can see miles of green: lush scrub, huge palms, and small mountains. As we pull into El Yaque, small stores start to appear, behind them an empty green field strewn with trash and a huge sign for vacation real estate. On the other side of the road, we pass a line of low-rise beachside hotels and tiki bars.

My stucco-white hotel is at the end of a dirt road. My room has a nicely tiled bathroom, a safe, a balcony, and a queen-sized bed with a mosquito net. I ask the manager if I will need the mosquito net. He says there are no mosquitoes at this time of year. Apparently, he is mistaken. I go for a short walk and get assaulted by mosquitoes. I await the onset of dengue fever.

First Day

At breakfast the next day, I notice that the buffet spread is quite generous, but the crowd is a little thin. The only other diners are a young Russian couple whom I'll call Fyodor and Svetlana. He says there are less than 10 guests staying at the hotel. The good news: There will be no wild, noisy parties. The bad news: There will be no wild, noisy parties.

After breakfast, I walk to the beach. The sand is warm, powdery, and interrupted only by the occasional column of mile-high, swaying palm trees. The water is a Caribbean blue green. I catch a whiff of coconut suntan oil and margarita mix. Groups of people are drinking and wearing skimpy bathing suits. For a single guy like me, this looks good.

Until now, my windsurfing has been limited mainly to the Charles River, which few people would confuse with a Caribbean paradise.

But all is not as it seems. Upon closer inspection, most of the people are married and have several unruly kids running around throwing sand at each other. The parents have drunk themselves numb, and it is only 11 a.m.

I go to the windsurfing center, and I'm flattered because the staff knows my name. They are waiting for me. But my swelled head is quickly deflated when I learn that I'm going to be one of the only customers for the next two weeks. Then I experience a spasm of panic: Between the empty hotel, the empty windsurfing center, and the beach full of families this could be a lonely two weeks.

