

Sunbaked Margarita: Venezuela's lovely touch of the Mediterranean

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dates back to the 16th century. These venerable structures gaze down upon a traditional Spanish plaza, the center of town, shaded from the hot sun by towering old trees. La Asuncion is the island's official capital, although its population — about 12,000 — is only a fraction of Porlamar's, the principal coastal city. The founders of La Asuncion built the town in the high hills a dozen miles from the sea — as protection from pirate raids.

Margarita also seems much too polished, too cosmopolitan to fit the easy-going, weather-worn Caribbean image. Its small cities and villages are more modern and look more prosperous than those on many of the other islands, and there is an urban bustle to the commerce. The dry, mild climate is energizing, putting a zip into the step of locals and tourists alike.

My memories of the Mediterranean are of pleasant, inexpensive hotels and tasty, budget-priced meals — which is exactly what is to be found in Margarita. Indeed, the island may well be the best deal in the Caribbean.

If you have dreamed of stretching an all-too-short one-week island vacation into two leisurely weeks or maybe even an entire month, Margarita may be just the place where you actually can afford to do it. A nice room in a small, modern hotel a few blocks from a beach goes for under \$25 a day for two people.

For most Americans, the island may seem remote and undiscovered — at the far end of the lengthy chain of islands that reaches from Florida south to the South American continent. But for a long time, it has been popular as a weekend escape for well-to-do residents of Caracas, the sophisticated Venezuelan capital. The jet flight from Caracas takes only about 35 minutes, and planes shuttle back and forth almost hourly.

To accommodate the weekenders, fine restaurants and fashionable boutiques have opened that reflect the high standards of the capital. You can sample the native black-bean-and-rice dishes of Venezuela, but you also will find good French, Italian and Oriental restaurants. Grilled steak and fresh fish are menu staples. A complete dinner with wine (appetizer to dessert and coffee) is about \$15 per person in the best restaurants — the kind where the waiters dress far more formally than do the patrons.

A big lure for Venezuelans is Margarita's special status as a domestic tax-free haven. Imported luxury goods, such as whiskey, perfume, chocolates, designer clothing and household appliances, are exempt from the high import taxes charged for the same items on the mainland. Well-stocked stores line the streets of Porlamar, and bargain-hunting is as important as sunning on the sand.

American shoppers, too, may be able to spot good bargains.

But the best buys for foreign visitors are Venezuelan-crafted items, such as handmade dress shoes and other leather goods. Native cottons — warm-weather shirts, slacks and skirts — are very inexpensive and fully as fashionable as any you will find at home.

Margarita's tourist facilities are mostly low-key, and for me that is one of its big attractions. The island is not the place to go looking for fancy resorts featuring golf, tennis and organized water sports or exclusive enclaves that isolate you from the life of the community. Margarita favors the self-reliant traveler looking for a cultural adventure, someone who wants to blend into the community, not be shielded from it.

As on the islands of Greece, most of the hotels are small with clean and compact rooms, and they tend to be located in the heart of town, often without a sea view. To get to the beaches, all of which are public, you must — like the islanders themselves — hike, drive, bicycle or catch one of the frequent, and very inexpensive, beach-bound buses. Many of your fellow hotel guests are apt to be Venezuelans, on vacation or Europeans who know a bargain when they see it.

And this final Mediterranean comparison: Inviting sidewalk cafes grace Porlamar's major shopping streets. On Calle Patino, the Cafe de Paris serves cool drinks and ice-cream concoctions at tables set under colorful umbrellas. You can settle in with the townfolk at the close of day for an enjoyable spell of people watching before heading off to

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dinner at the late (typically Spanish) dining hour of 9 or 9:30.

One reason that few Americans have vacationed on Margarita is that until recent years it was, ironically, one of the most expensive destinations in the Caribbean. Venezuela is a major oil producer, and until the decline of oil prices in the mid-1980s, a boom economy kept prices sky high. Since then, however, the value of the Venezuelan bolivar has plummeted in relation to the U.S. dollar. Meanwhile, the government has imposed price controls, so that the cost of goods and services has not risen greatly.

Only a few years ago, the exchange rate was four bolivars to the dollar. Today the rate is about 30 to 35 bolivars to the dollar, and a dollar buys a lot. It is hard to say how long the bargains will last, but right now a taxi ride from a hotel in Porlamar to almost any restaurant shouldn't cost more than \$1 or so. Car rental is about \$12 a day. A gallon of gas is about 16 cents. A bus ride to the beach is a matter of only a few cents.

One of Margarita's prettiest and most popular beaches is Playa El Agua, a wide and long stretch of golden sand on the island's north-eastern tip, about a 20-minute drive north of Porlamar. Local buses make the trip frequently. The day I visited the sea was a beautiful turquoise. A fairly stiff wind was blowing, and the surf was a bit strong — "fuerte," the locals said — but that didn't seem to keep anybody out of the warm water. You just had to keep an eye open for the wave that might send you tumbling. The tall palms that shade the beach dipped and swayed as if they were dancing to a bouncy Latin rhythm.

El Agua is distant from any urban center, so the setting is natural, which is part of its attraction. The crowds can be large on weekends, but during midweek you may have the beach much to yourself. For lunch, a string of beachside cafes — really kiosks surrounded by shaded tables — offer grilled fish or pabellon criollo, the Venezuelan national dish. It is a spicy blend of shredded beef with black beans, fried bananas and white rice, a hearty meal that is best accompanied by a cold Venezuelan beer. The public restrooms are clean, and vendors rent colorful awninglike umbrellas that give El Agua a festive look.

One day, at least, should be spent exploring the island. Travel companies offer a selection of bus tours, but you might consider renting a car and making the drive yourself. On little Margarita, there's no chance of getting lost. Tote along a swimsuit so you can break up the trip with a swim at one of the many beaches. The best drive is roughly counterclockwise around the eastern portion of the island, taking in the hill towns and the best beaches. If you have time, head over to the western portion of the island for another circle route, taking in the fishing villages and La Restinga lagoon, a watery parkland of mangrove forests and flocks of seabirds.

Any island itinerary should include the village of El Pilar, just north of Porlamar, principally for the Atrium Galeria, which specializes in Venezuelan artworks, including paintings, sculpture and graphics. Venezuela has a vibrant arts community, and many of the local works are quite sophisticated, as well as inexpensive. Beyond El Pilar is the town of Pampatar, which has a well-preserved 17th-century stone fortress that overlooks the sea.

To the west of El Agua beach, a new paved road along the rugged coastline has opened up easy access to a string of beaches hidden in small coves. The road winds high among rolling hills that tumble steeply into the sea, and the seascapes are excellent. There's a fine beach with calm waters on the bay near the village of Pedro Gonzalez.

Continue west to the attractive fishing village of Juan Griego, where a fleet of fishing boats fills the bay. On a hilltop above the town stands a small fort, Fortin

de la Galera. Its historical import may not intrigue foreign visitors, but the site provides a splendid overview of Juan Griego and its bay.

For the price of a few pennies, enterprising youngsters will recite the fort's history. The information is presented in rapid and very colloquial Spanish, and is of no use to an English speaker — except that the delivery bursts forth so earnestly that the price is well worth the show.

From Juan Griego, head south back toward Porlamar via the hill towns of Santa Ana and La Asuncion. Park the car and spend awhile strolling the quiet streets of both. There are a few historic buildings to take in, but the real pleasure is simply in absorbing the colonial-era flavor that lingers.

Though on the dry flatlands, Porlamar itself is an attractive little city, and one of Venezuela's fastest growing. A large — and very popular — public beach is within walking distance of most downtown hotels. The lovely old Hotel Bella Vista, one of Margarita's two largest hotels, fronts on the beach. Stop by for an afternoon drink or snack beside the courtyard swimming pool. You can still get a cup of coffee for not much more than a nickel, and a cold beer costs about 50 cents.

A half-dozen blocks west of the Bella Vista is Plaza Bolivar, the city's commercial center. Busy pedestrian streets lined with neighborhood shops lead away from the plaza, and they are good places for people-watching. The more exclusive shops with luxury goods and the best sidewalk cafes are just outside the Bella Vista along Avenue Santiago Marino and Avenue 4 de Mayo.

Also just a few steps from the Plaza Bolivar is the very interesting Francisco Navarez Museum of Contemporary Art. The pieces in the Venezuelan collection, reflecting the country's sophistication, are political, philosophical and sexy.

I've made no mention of rum swizzles, limbo parties and scuba-diving excursions, the tourist-pleasing staples of many a Caribbean vacation. I suppose they can be found in Margarita, but they certainly weren't obvious. Margarita is a different Caribbean island, and its gift to the visitor is, well, more authentic. The island still caters primarily to vacationing Venezuelans. So on Margarita, you do as the locals do.

Getting there: Pan Am, Eastern and Viasa, the Venezuelan airline, fly to Caracas from New York City and Miami. There is connecting jet service aboard Avensa, another domestic airline, onward to Margarita. The Caracas-to-Margarita leg is about 35 minutes.

Pan Am currently is offering a round-trip fare of \$320 between Washington and Caracas via Miami; the connecting fare to Margarita is \$30. Viasa flies non-stop to Margarita from New York on Saturday only, with a non-stop return from Margarita also on Saturday only; the round-trip fare from New York is \$320.

The international and domestic terminals in Caracas are in separate buildings about 200 yards (two football fields) apart. Porters will race your luggage from one to the other to make connections.

Where to stay: Margarita has two major hotels, the newer five-star Margarita Concorde (500 rooms), just outside Porlamar, and the four-star Hotel Bella Vista (230 rooms), more conveniently located close to the restaurants and shopping areas of the city. The high-rise Concorde certainly is the livelier (perhaps the better word is noisier) of the two, filling up mostly with Americans and Canadians on low-cost package tours. The Bella Vista, aging gracefully, is genteelly subdued. It appears to attract more Venezuelans and has more of a Latin feel to it. A room for two at the Concorde is about \$85 a night; at the Bella Vista, it is about \$25 a night.

Both hotels are located on public beaches, but neither beach is especially appealing, except for crowd watching, because they are

so close to the city. Ultimately, beach enthusiasts will prefer to rent a car or climb aboard one of the local buses to get to the much lovelier and far less crowded beaches away from Porlamar.

As an alternative to the two big hotels, Porlamar offers several very nice downtown hotels. As in Europe, they may be spartanly furnished and located above a shop or a cafe. Unlike Europe, they all have modern bathrooms. You won't have a sea view and probably won't have a swimming pool, but the price is good.

A room for two at the quite respectable 85-room For You Hotel, just behind the Cafe de Paris, is about \$20 a night, including a continental breakfast. A short walk away is the 29-room Flamingo Hotel, where a room for two is \$16.

Most travel agents can offer a selection of hotel and air-fare packages.

Excursions: Round-trip air fare between Margarita and Caracas, Venezuela's beautifully scenic capital, is about \$30. Tour companies offer one-day excursions from Margarita, or you can venture on your own. Round-trip taxi fare from the Caracas airport to the city center should be under \$20.

Information: Embassy of Venezuela, Information and Cultural Service, 2437 California St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20008, 202-797-3800.

Pick up a copy of Mira!, Margarita's English-language tabloid newspaper. Published monthly, it is full of good information about sightseeing, dining, recreation and nightlife on the island. The latest issue generally is available at hotel desks.



TENNESSEE SCENES FROM PAST — It's 1779 again inside Historic Mansker's Station in Goodlettsville, Tenn., below, as on-site interpreters live pioneer style to show visitors what life was really like more than 200 years ago. Near the fort stand the Bowen-Campbell House (circa 1787) also open for tours, representing the transition that some settlers made from log cabin to estate living.



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