

The Jewish Traveler

CARACAS, VENEZUELA

By Joel Goldman

As you may know, I tend to define cities with characteristics often used to measure people. They have their good and their bad sides, their pragmatic and not so pragmatic ways, as well as a fervor for the cultural and a delight in the tawdry.

I find that Caracas, the dynamic capital of Venezuela, challenges such taking of a place's measure. I have had an on-going ambivalent affair with

later Venezuela Customs, after much apologizing, drove me back to the airport to catch another flight. That flight was delayed due to faulty runway lights, and I was fined again because my temporary twenty four hour extended visa expired. Traffic tie-ups in Caracas defy description, but I have never once seen a sight nor met a person that did not make the waiting worthwhile.

saw Venezuela as a comfortable and casual country to live in, though often plagued with governments inclined to dictatorships and instability.

Jews joined the cultural mix of Caracas, becoming prominent in the commercial and construction fields. They also provided ethical stability to a nation having an illegitimate birth-rate of more than 55%. I recall a friend of mine once saying of the Caracas Jews, "Oh, they give much needed stability to our frenetic life style."

After the Spanish Inquisition, Jews fled Spain for the more friendly atmosphere of the Caribbean colonies and Venezuela. Also, because Venezuela, in particular, had far fewer natural resources than other Spanish-dominated lands, the Spaniards allowed Venezuela to govern itself with minimal interference. The Jews found it was easier, therefore, to go about their commercial pursuits and follow their religious practices. In Caracas as compared to La Paz or Lima. Present day Jewish Caraquenos (all people from Caracas are called Caraquenos) enjoy a very high living standard. More than seventeen synagogues exist in the city, and are Orthodox by U. S. standards. However, very few Jews keep kosher, and only a small percent attend temple on a regular basis. And, perhaps not surprising due to Venezuela's Spanish influence, Sephardic Jews seem to fit into the capital's secular life more easily



An example of Spanish architecture



Simon Bolivar

this gentle yet chaotic city for many years. Wonderful friendships have been made, but I also have been forced out of a hotel room at 3 in the morning because of a nasty riot started when Venezuela's soccer team lost to Ecuador. I was placed under house arrest because my passport lacked a \$6 business tax stamp and twenty four hours

Caracas is a sprawling place. The center of the city occupies a wide expanse of a valley floor, and the residential areas, as well as the infamous slums of Caracas, make their way up the Avila mountain range encircling the capital.

The population consists mainly of mestizos, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. They

than the Ashkenazi.

The Caracas Hilton, a tall busy place attractive to business travelers, is also the physical nucleus of Caracas's cultural life. The area, known as Parque Central, consists of up-scale shops and numerous museums and theaters. It is interesting to note that many of these cultural buildings bear the names of Jewish families who contribute much financially to the city's cultural endeavors.

The main Sephardic temple, Tiferet Yisrael is located on Avenida Mariperez in the Los Caobos area. The foundation of this grand structure was laid in the mid-1950's.

Stained glass windows abound in the interior, and a magnificent cylinder rises over the ark. It reaches toward the sky as would a ray of light.

The main Ashkenazi Synagogue occupies the top floor of the Union Israelita Center on the Avenida Marques del Toro. The structure is unmarked, and it is advisable to ascertain the exact building location by calling 51-52-53.

Because of Venezuela's pleasant year-round climate, the Ashkenazi Synagogue features

cinder-block grill-work type walls, opening directly to the outside. Fresh air continuously circulates through the synagogue and pleasant breezes flow through the building.

The Nuevo Mundo Israelita is published weekly by the Jewish community and kosher foods are available in various delis throughout Caracas.

For restrictive economic reasons, Caracas appears less and less on cruise ship itineraries. It's a rather unhappy situation because the vibrant culture, lush vegetation and friendly personalities of the Caraquenos make the city a unique travel experience. History abounds, and there is no lack of edifices and museums paying tribute to Venezuela's famous liberator, Simon Bolivar.

Venezuelans, and Caraquenos in particular, have suffered through difficult times before. They have managed to always emerge stronger and more hopeful, and knowing the land and its people as I do, this gem of a nation will once again become a much anticipated stop for numerous travelers. ✪

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Israel a City/State?

In anticipation of a rapidly growing population that some say could make much of Israel look like a city/state with virtually no open space, a government-sponsored planning team is working on the "Israel 2020" master plan for development over the next three decades. Here are some surprising facts about Israel now and tomorrow, provided by Prof. Adam Mazor of the Faculty of Architecture at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology who heads the "Israel 2020" team.

Without the sparsely populated Negev desert to the south of Beersheba, Israel is the most crowded country in the developed world — 50 percent more crowded than the Netherlands and Japan, the countries with the most people per square mile. Even when including the Negev, Israel is the fourth most populated in the

developed world after the Netherlands, Japan and Belgium.

The Negev Desert constitutes 60% of the land, but is inhabited by only 7% of the population.

The growth rate of the Israeli population — about 3 percent annually — exceeds that of all developed countries, a result of both natural growth and immigration.

Israel's population has multiplied seven-fold since the establishment of the state in 1948. Today it has 5.6 million people; by the year 2020 it will have more than 8 million.

Israel has to triple its housing stock in order to handle the expected population increase by 2020. Some experts believe that Israel may resemble a city/state by the next generation. ✪

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