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### LIVING

# Caracas, the vibrant capital city of Venezuela, is a worthy destination for U.S. travelers

Go for the great food at restaurants like Casa 22 and Chacao Bistro, a happening arts scene, and neighborhoods like Los Palos Grandes, Las Mercedes and Altamira

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Caracas, Venezuela: City life amid the mountains.

Just a five-hour flight from New York, Caracas has near-perfect weather, plenty of culture, and terrific food.

So when the chance came to visit Venezuela's capital — at the invitation of Caraqueños I'd befriended in New York — I jumped.

But many American travelers might be wary of visiting the city. Citing "serious" crime, the U.S. State Department cautions Americans about visiting Venezuela. And coverage of Hugo Chavez's death — and subsequent elections — depicted Caracas as a dangerous place.

But I was curious to see for myself whether a city once dubbed the Paris of South America lived down to its new reputation as the continent's biggest basket case.

The reality, it turns out, is more complicated.

While hardships are all around, this remains a vibrantly Latin city where terrific art, food, and even fashion — not to mention superb coffee — pop up in surprising places. There's a percolating cultural scene, and a smart

young generation of artists and designers reshaping their hometown.



The scene at Casa 22, a popular restaurant in Caracas

New Yorkers probably won't start booking pleasure trips en masse. But some 600,000 foreigners visited Venezuela last year, about half of them as tourists, according to the World Bank.

If you're one of those adventuresome travelers, it's best to situate yourself in Chacao, one of five municipalities that make up metro Caracas. I didn't feel threatened for a second on Caracas streets. And locals couldn't have been warmer, especially when they found out I was that rare animal, a foreign tourist.

I normally recommend indie hotels, but stick with brand names here. The lavish but generic Renaissance Caracas offers an ideal home base in La Castellana, a relatively upscale district of restaurants, consulates, and office buildings. I spent much of my time in the adjacent Los Palos Grandes, Las Mercedes, and Altamira neighborhoods, easier to navigate — and more attractive — than rundown, grungy downtown.

From dives to glossy bistros, there's a wide range of places to eat in this swath of the sprawling city. For breakfast, I grew fond of Lonchy's, an outdoor diner in an open-air mall near the Renaissance. There's no better introduction to Caracas than sipping strong coffee and digging into a delicious arepa with cheese (\$6) while watching locals rush about their daily business.

Buzzier eateries like the South Beach-esque Chacao Bistro draw smartly dressed locals with careful, creative presentations that make great use of terrific local meats, cheeses, and produce. Torre de panquecas — "tower of pancakes" — is a hugely popular brunch favorite.

At Mokambo Caffè, where the outdoor patio draws label-clad locals, arugula-and-mushroom salad came with subtle, rich bufala mozzarella. Pristine grilled tuna with fava beans and asparagus arrived perfectly medium rare, as ordered.



Monument to Teresa Carreño, Venezuelan pianist, in downtown Caracas. A national theater downtown is also named after her.

A doorway connects Mokambo with fabulous Madame Blac, a rambling madwoman's-attic of a shop whose imported bric-a-brac is actually carefully curated — and painfully priced. A caramel-colored vintage leather sofa from Argentina clocked in at about \$25,000. Artisan chocolate from local purveyor San Jose makes a more accessible indulgence.

Tiny Aprilis is Madame Blac's inverse, a tiny boutique where everything comes from Caracas designers. My most treasured souvenir was the store's own "I (Heart) LPG" (Los Palos Grandes, a district in Chacao) t-shirts modeled after the Big Apple's own logo. I also picked up Artesano's sensuous handmade cinnamon soap. I wish I'd bought a crateful.

Arts flourish in challenging times, and a scrappy DIY culture is emerging in Caracas. Its hub is hypercool Lugar Comun, an artist-run bookstore, gallery, and hangout for the city's literati. Along with a very tart Bart Simpson-themed cartoon by illustrator-of-the-moment Luis Itanare, I picked up Caracas Grafica, a fascinating brick of a paperback about Caraqueño street art. On the night I dropped in, the loft-like space was hosting a panel on the future of publishing in Venezuela, with four Caracas literary lions battling it out before a rapt audience.

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For more common purchases, there's gargantuan Centro Sambil, which reigns as South America's largest shopping center. If you always include a mall in your travel plans, you're in for a treat. The five-story behemoth, a quick cab ride from the Renaissance, serves as a glittery reminder that Caracas remains a moneyed city.

And despite leftist posturings, Caraqueños can outshop the most voracious New Yorkers. You'll find international brands like A|X, Polo, and Hilfiger, along with much more interesting local chainlets like Neutroni, with color-splashed men's and women's apparel, and Indiani, whose stylish t-shirts sport cheeky Venezuelan slang. Sambil's also invaluable for people-watching, with tweens, massive extended families, and wealthy couples — bodyguards in tow — all cruising merchandise and each other.



Lugar Comun is a well-known bookstore in Caracas.

About that coffee? Venezuela grows its own, and it kicks the pants off much of the supposedly artisan product I taste in New York. I picked up a couple bags of Coupa Café beans from Arabica, a friendly café in Los Palos Grandes whose patio is one of the city's fiercest see-and-be-seen spots.

Back home in Manhattan, the exquisite coffee evoked the Caracas I experienced — a challenging, complicated city whose spirit, *sabor*, and love of life left the most lasting impressions.

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**If you go**

**Fly:**

American Airlines offers nonstop service from JFK to Caracas' Simon Bolivar Airport from about \$1,400 roundtrip. [aa.com](http://aa.com).



House-made arepas with reina pepiada filling at the Chacao Bistro in Caracas.

**Stay:**

Despite high prices, the glitzy Renaissance Caracas La Castellana (Av Eugenio Mendoza, 58 212-9084222, marriott.com) rules with foreign visitors. Rooms are generic, and service inconsistent. But it's a safe, well-located choice in a city with limited options. From \$390.

Chacao's The Hotel (Calle Mohedano, 58 212 - 951.32.75, thehotel.com.ve) is the closest to a boutique luxury property here. The mostly white décor's a bit 1997, but The Restaurant in-house is terrific, and service attentive. From \$168.

**Visit:**

To navigate around Caracas, use reliable, branded taxis only from companies like Taxi Laser or Movil Enlace. Caracas' subway (about 15 cents) is clean, efficient, and cheap, but even locals sometimes find it daunting to navigate.

Centro de Arte Los Galpones (Octava Transversal at Avenida Ávila, Los Chorros, centrodeartelosgalpones.com), a whitewashed complex of former warehouses beautifully reconceived as a cluster of galleries and chic artisan shops. It's about 20 minutes from Chacao by cab, and a must-see.

In the suburb of El Hatillo, about half an hour outside Caracas, charming casitas that for years housed the town's handicrafts businesses are getting transformed into white-hot restaurants. Among the best: La Casa 22 (Casa No. 22, Calle Sucre, 58-212-435-6722, no website), where former set designer Dagoberto Gonzalez switches up the phantasmagorical decor every month.

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