

PETER'S NOTES: Peninsula de Paria.

Manacal - Cerro Humo - Santa Isabel.

Cerro Humo is the highest peak at 1265m in the Paria Peninsula, on the south western edge of the Parque Nacional de la Peninsula de Paria. In this area, there is much endemic flora and fauna, some of which is in the national park, but there remains areas of primary forest outside the park which is under threat from cultivation. This inspired the two month project in which I took part (Cambridge Columbus Botanical Study Venezuela 1990) and learnt the following information.

The villages described in the mountains are not set up for tourism in any way - you can stay there because of the Venezuelan generosity. They are not rich, and they see you, as a gringo, with lots of money, so you have to be a little careful, but it is most likely to result in them asking for presents. Santa Isabel is a little more set up for tourists, where Mayra has been putting them up and feeding them for a while.

There is some good hiking around Cerro Humo, using Manacal as a base. To get to Manacal, take a por puesto from Plaza Colon in Carúpano for Río Grande de Irapa, on the way to Guiria. See if the driver knows the road to Manacal (first left before Río Grande Arriba) - it would be best to describe it as Manacal, arriba de Río Grande, so that it is not confused with another Manacal beyond Irapa. You want to be dropped off at the bottom of the road, as only 4WD vehicles can make it to the village.

From here, you have three choices:- (1) Walk up; it takes 2-3 hours and involves a climb of nearly 800m. Don't be afraid to ask for water on the way - you need it. (2) Hitch; this will probably involve paying a 4WD that's going a little up the hill to go all the way - don't expect to pay more than 500Bs. (3) Wait; each day, a vehicle is likely to be going up to the top and will take you up for nothing. It might be best to walk a little along the road to a small shop (before the tarmac runs out).

Manacal

Once you arrive in Manacal, ask for the house of the comisario (Spanish only, up here) - a Sr. Juan Bravo - in the centre of the village on the left below the church. He's likely to be in the fields during the day, so you'll have to wait if he's not there until he comes back. Introduce yourself to him, and tell him what you want to do - he'll be able to tell you what house you might be able to stay in, or perhaps the school. It would be best to have your own hammock, though a Karriwat would also do. The nights are cold, so a good sleeping bag is a very good idea, but you will be able to beg for blankets without trouble. For food, it is best if you have some food and ask someone to cook it - have enough to feed them as well. You can get food in the village, opposite the comisario's, but it's limited to basics - sardines, pasta, sugar, wheat flour, cornflour, etc., so bring your own if you want anything more. No alcohol is sold here either, and the only fresco is Malta Caracas (very sweet). If you're sick of normal arepas, the folk make great wheat arepas - arepa del harina de trigo. Whoever you eat with, they'll most probably supply the staple which will be ocumo, chino, mapuey, ñame or yuca - all types of root veg. Mayonaisse goes down very well. Water is fine for drinking - if you stay any length, ask to be shown where to get it - a stream about 15 minutes below the village. Rainwater is only used for washing. The majority of houses have electricity for lighting.

For many things like cooking a meal, or supplying the root veg., or staying in someone's house, the people may well not charge you, so go armed with lots of little presents - a bottle of rum is not really thought of as a present - it's quite normal for someone to have a bottle and to pass it around, but brandy or whiskey would go down well!

What to do in Manacal

Manacal is a small village, spread out alongside a trac on the top of a ridge - about 1 km from end to end. Just staying in Manacal is an experience in itself. Of the 30 families, 25 are evangelicals, and the other 5 families think they're mad. On the whole, it's these 5 families who will probably be able to help you most with guiding. If you want to spend a day in the village, it's worth while. Ask to go with someone to their conuco (field) one day and see how hard these guys work. In the evening, you will probably be swarmed by locals who haven't got much else to do and you are of great interest. They might break into spontaneous song (quite normal - not just for you) or drink a few bottles of rum (if you don't want any, "lo paso" is the phrase), or play a very complicated card game called Truko.

Strolling through the village at different times of the day paints a very different picture. At day break, just before everyone is up, the mainstreet is deserted. On front porches, the family's collection of animals sleeps - pigs, chickens, dogs, goats etc. After everyone has got up, the street is full of people, many waiting for the daily carro which goes down to Irapa - you can go too if you want (ask the comisario). In the middle of the day, only wives and daughters are left, washing and cooking, while the husbands and sons work the fields. By the evening, everyone's back in town, and once it's night, the light outside the church flashes in the mist (instead of a bell) - there is a 2 hour service every night.

Sunday is rather different, as nobody works in the fields. At the end of the road is a large flat cleared area (where you could camp if you were stuck for anywhere else), which is the scene for the weekly baseball game, and they'll be only too happy for you to join in.

Seasons: wet and dry like most of Venezuela, but the wet season is wetter, and the dry season is not so dry. Often, the village is shrouded in mist when it is above cloud level.

HIKING. -(Hilary - Maps in exped report - last page, or others.)

1) Paria is very wet, and the nights are cold. Suitable kit is recommended - you only need to walk in a shirt, but you need a sweater for the evening, and a good sleeping bag if you don't want to rely on begging for blankets. A good water/wind proof is also a good idea. The paths are muddy and slippery so walking boots are needed - you can try walking in trainers but you'll spend most of the time on your arse. When it does rain, look out for the fresh water crabs which scuttle along the paths (they taste good too!)

2) There are mosquitos and other biting insects in the forest, so it's a good idea to use insect repellent, though I preferred just to walk well covered up in long sleeves and trousers (army surplus lightweights). Cases of Malaria have been reported in the region.

3) Poisonous snakes are also found in Paria. Having a guide overcomes this problem to a certain extent, but high boots or gaiters also help. Always look where you walk, stamp your feet as you walk to help scare the snakes away. Bites are not common, but the threat is not to be taken too lightly - talk to Pedro Bravo in Manacal about his experiences after a bite.

If bitten, keeping the patient calm is the most important thing of all (I know it's difficult) and getting him to Carúpano hospital. Don't apply a ligature or try to suck the wound - it will only make it worse. People might talk to you about carrying antivenom, but forget about it unless you're a qualified doctor (the antivenom is potentially more dangerous than the venom)

4) For the hikes, you definitely need a guide. In Manacal, Sipriano knows all the routes well.

He drinks a lot of rum on the way, sings a lot, and probably takes his donkey for a feed. He also has a tendency to put his machete into most trees, and cut a lot of vegetation, just for fun. He is a good guide though, and should cost about 500Bs. per day. Another possible guide is Jesús Juan., or ask the comisario.

Time is a bit of an abstract concept up here, so you're never really sure when the guide will turn up - it might be best to go and get him.

MANACAL - ROMA

About 2 hours one way. A well trodden path drops steeply along a ridge out of Manacal, levelling out by a coffee hacienda. After about 1/2 hour from Manacal, the branches to the right, dropping down into the Cispero valley. Before the path drops, you might be able to catch a glimpse of Roma, and another village called Las Melenas. Dropping through coffee and cocoa haciendas, you pass a couple of houses on the way, and you might be given some fruit - depending on the season. After crossing the river, it's a very steep climb up to Roma. The village is much like Manacal in that it is situated along a ridge, but there is no road or electricity to Roma - there is a waterpipe that runs the length of the village.

The path from Manacal arrives about 2/3rd's of the way up the village. If it's clear, there are fantastic views from the house at the very top (in a cleared area) of both the valleys and the Gulf of Paria to the south. Walking through the village, you might get offered or can ask for/buy fruit or coffee or hot chocolate, or even lunch. There is a pretty church, and look out for the coffee bean driers. You will probably be able to stay here as well - either in your own hammock/tent, or borrowing something. Again, ask the village comisario.

You can walk from Roma to Las Melenas, and it's about another 2 hours.

MANACAL - CERRO HUMO

Starts the same as Roma, but stays on the ridge. Soon after the turning for Roma, you come to a cleared area - wait until you get to a stone at the top to rest for the best views - Roma and Las Melenas to the right, and the valley of the Río Cumaná to the left (nothing to do with the town). Look out for the rectangular shapes on the opposite hills - these are areas of forest that have been cleared to form a conuco for growing root vegetables or maize - the path to Roma goes along a couple of conucos. If it is clear when walking to Roma, it would be worth taking a small detour to this point.

After the viewpoint, you head back into forest and continue to climb. The path rapidly moves into primary cloud forest, with abundant epiphytes (cup-shaped plants growing on tree branches), tree ferns, palms, but watch out for the spiny palms. The older trees have fantastic systems of buttress roots. The path reaches a high point of 1000m where a tree has an E and a K engraved on it. The E stands for Entrada - entrance to Cerro Humo. The K is for the path to Santa Isabel. The path to Humo drops before a final ascent to the peak. The actual top is a cleared plateau with a surveying point, though trees tend to obscure the view, if cloud don't. Takes about 3 hours one way. Again, the return trip is the same, unless you want to continue to Santa Isabel the same day.

MANACAL - SANTA ISABEL

At the tree marked K above, the path to Santa Isabel turns left, and is a steady drop of 1000m to the village by the sea. The path crosses some beautiful rivers as you pass through primary forest - changing from cloud forest to a more littoral type of forest (and cultivation) near the coast. The whole walk is about 6 hours.

SANTA ISABEL

About 1/2 hour before you reach the vilage, you come to the Rio Santa Isabel, which you need to wade through to complete the trip. You can try to take your boots off to keep them dry, but the stones aren't easy to walk on. The river is idyllic - with pools just large enough for swimming, just cool enough to be refreshing, and shaded by the forest. Before the mouth of the river, the women of the vilage wash clothes and dishes, and you can just see the rollers coming in from the sea into the river's mouth.

The vilage is above the river - a more densely populated vilage than Manacal, and larger. There is a paved main street, normally covered in fishing nets, with fishermen repairing holes. At the far end of the street are steps down to a beach and the sea where you can swim. The sea tends to be quite rough, and look out for urchins on the rocks. Snorkelling isn't too great as there's too much silt stirred up. It's really best just to stick to the river. This is also where boats come to unload their cargo - the only means of transport to and from santa Isabel. The path continues and you can drop down into the next cove, with a long, deserted sandy beach.

To stay, ask for Mayra's house, on the left about 1/4 of the way along the street. She will give you a bed/hammock (80Bs.) and feed you (80Bs. per meal), and her house has a fantastic view of the sea and a small island. If you plan to stay more than one day, she can arrange for boats to bring you food and drink.

To leave, you can either walk back to Manacal (it's up 1000m though this time) or take the boat to the next port - Unare, which is at the end of a road along the north coast of the peninsula (price negotiable). Sometimes (rarely), the sea is too rough, and you could try walking along the coastal path. When the boat runs, you get fantastic views of the forest coming right down to the beach. There are some beautiful beaches, and you could arrange for a boat to drop you off on one for a day or so. From Unare, por puestos go to Rio Caribe or Carúpano - just ask around. You can stay or eat in Unare too. You could also arrive in santa Isabel by this route if you don't fancy the walk.

Puipuy.

To stay on the most perfect beach I have ever seen, go to Puipuy on the way from Santa Isabel to Rio Caribe - ask people how to get there, and the trip will probably involve a mixture of hitching, por puestos and walking - but it's worth it once you're there.

Puipuy beach is about 1 km of soft golden sand, bordered by palm trees, with the sea crashing in continuously. The road enters the beach at one end, and there is a small vilage at the other end with a beer shop (shuts early), a soft drink shop, and a couple of general stores. You can either camp or sling hammocks between the palm trees - you take the risk though that a coconut might land on your head in the night, but if it misses it tastes very good! You could also try asking to stay with someone.

The sea is a little rough, but the surf is great. If you don't happen to be carrying your surfboard around Venezuela with you on the back of your rucksack, the waves are good enough for bodysurfing. Take a bit of care as there are some strange currents about.

The beach is a few kms east of Medina - a similar beach which has been developed, and you have to pay a fortune to stay in one of their cottages. If you can't get to Puipuy easily, try Medina. They might try to stop you from camping, but I've heard that they have no right to. They might also try to send you to another beach a little before Medina by a shack, but it's pretty grotty.