

# The Andean challenge

■ Merida, Venezuela, offers plenty of mountainous adventure for the athletically inclined, from hiking and biking to paragliding.

By BRIDGET McQUATE

**G**iant Andean ranges and two rivers with huge chasms on either side have given Merida, Venezuela, its unusual shape: long, narrow and hemmed in by dramatic displays of nature. Like a woman in a corset, the city has expanded into every available space.

As the one-hour flight from Caracas approached Merida, I could only hold my breath and watch the plane navigate a U-turn within the bowl of massive mountain walls as it targeted the tiny airstrip in the middle of town. My friend and I had come to use Merida as a base for exploring the Andes, by riding the highest and longest cable car in the world, hiking, biking and whatever else might be available and non-life-threatening.

Because Merida's width is an average of only five blocks, it seems much smaller than a city of 300,000 people. Founded in 1558 and home to the large University of the Andes since 1785, Merida is tranquil yet bustling, traditional yet young and fashionable, formal yet friendly.

We came to feel embarrassingly like queens in Merida, as everyone working in hotels, restaurants and stores responded to our requests by saying, "A su orden" (at your service).

## Plaza Bolivar and hero worship

Simon Bolivar, "the Abraham Lincoln of South America," was born into a wealthy Venezuelan family in 1783 and went on to lead the fight for independence from Spain, not only for Venezuela but also for Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. Bolivar, along with his army, passed through Merida twice during his 12 years of struggle.

Like many other cities in Venezuela, Merida honors the father of its independence by naming the main square Plaza Bolivar. Here, the hero is caught in bronze, salying forth on a horse above flowering trees and gurgling fountains with a backdrop of a white colonial cathedral and a distant, sky-high mountain face.

The only thing obviously out of whack with this traditional South American setting is the large number of American cars from the 1970s driving by the square — Novas, Dusters, Mavericks, Pintos, Impalas, Malibus, El



The *Paramo* tour from Merida ends with a dip in a thermal hot spring for these visitors.

Caminos and Camaros — most of them jacked up and riding slowly on an apparent cruising circuit.

As we watched this parade, we were visited by passing college students, professors and other travelers who were eager to chat about where we had been and where we were going, and then to relate some tales of their own. We discovered from them that we were staying at one of the town's few "luxury" hotels, which, at \$33 a night between two people, was luxury at the right price.

## Scaling the mountains without breaking a sweat

Merida's cable car, or Teleferico, travels 8 miles, to a height of 15,629 feet. As the car glides smoothly about 20 feet above the trees and vegetation, the mountains go through many moods, from lush cloud forest to scrubby terrain to barren rockiness at the end of the line.

About halfway up, the highest peak (Pico Bolivar) becomes visible, with its jagged edges and mantle of snow. At the top, mules can be rented for exploring the area; two small lagoons lie just down the hill.

The Teleferico ride turned out to be an international gathering. From among the 20 people in our cable car, we met three young salesmen from Venice, several Germans and two young men from the United States.

On the way down, the car plunged suddenly downward after passing over each tower. As stomachs somersaulted, all the passengers started a spontaneous "whoa!" after each plummet.

Tour agency row is near the cable car station in the city. About 10 agencies line the street, displaying photos of the Andean adventures that each offers.

Options we turned down included mountain climbing, paragliding and fishing. Another popular tour is a four-day trip from Merida to Los Llanos (the plains), where wild animals such as

anteaters, anacondas, capybaras (like giant rats with snub noses), freshwater dolphins and crocodiles can be found — and sometimes handled.

Instead, we decided on a hiking and horseback tour to Laguna Negra and a mountain bike tour through the mountains to the village of Jaji (pronounced hah-HEE). Arranged just a day in advance, the trips cost \$35 and \$55 a day, respectively.

## The *Paramo* Tour

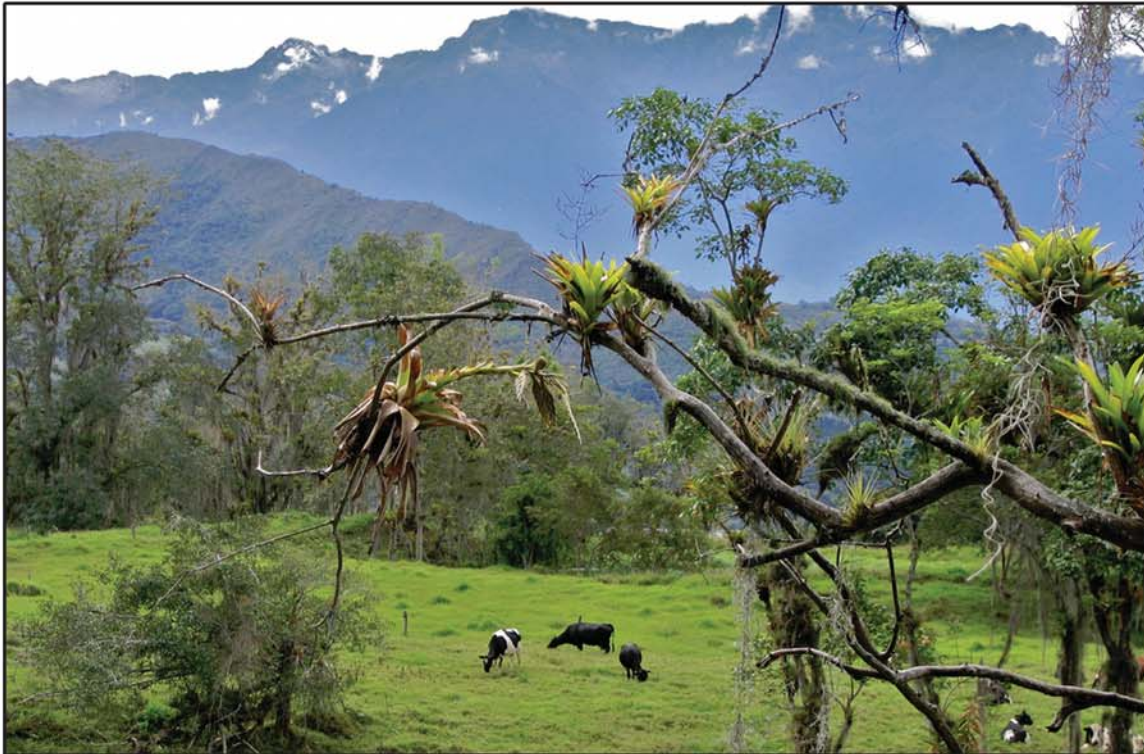
To begin the first tour, we met our guide/driver, Pedro, and a young British couple at the agency. The *paramo* where we would spend the day means "flat, barren land" in Spanish. After we had wound upward through the mountains for an hour, the vegetation changed drastically from lush to beige scrubbiness.

We stopped in a tiny town where the main attraction was a church made of stones piled atop one another. A vendor sold us a shot of *calentao*, a drink made of eucalyptus and anis intended to ward off the mountain chill. The drink gave off a pleasing warmth all the way down.

The hiking tour began next to a lake surrounded by sloping mountains and distant angular peaks. The *paramo* terrain is an exercise in the extremes of green. The brownish green of scrub brush clings tenaciously to the mountainsides like a five o'clock shadow, as the vibrant, perky green of the pine trees covers the foothills.

A one-hour hike down a dirt road (the promised horses didn't show up) brought us to Laguna Negra (Black Lagoon), which on closer inspection is clear blue with a dark underbelly of bottom vegetation.

At our final destination of the day, the promise of bathing in a natural hot spring kept us trudging up yet another mountain, through rocky, beige fields of grazing cows and higher onto tiny trails carved into the mountain's impossible steepness. I felt I was teetering on the



Photos by BRIDGET McQUATE

A mountain-bike tour through the Andes takes riders past isolated farms and moss-covered trees.



edge of the world.

At the sight of the steaming turquoise pool, we stripped down to bathing suits and waded into the water that flowed from the cliff face. Pedro tore off a handful of eucalyptus leaves, crushed them between his hands and breathed them in like a nectar as he floated on his back. We copied him but failed to achieve the level of relaxation that he seemed to have reached.

### Facing the Andes, and ourselves

Tackling the mountains the next day on rented mountain bikes, my friend and I sadly realized that our (almost) daily aerobic sessions were child's play compared to this. The biggest obstacle to performing any Andean activity is that residents of more normal altitudes cannot breathe easily at such heights.

We were driven up to a more forested part of the mountains by our guide, Rodrigo. He was from Chile but had fallen in love with Merida when he came to attend the University of the Andes several years ago.

Before we set out on the 16-mile bike

### If you go

■ **Getting there:** Many U.S. airlines fly into Simon Bolivar International Airport in Caracas. Any U.S. travel agency can reserve the one-hour flight from Caracas to Merida. The Merida flight leaves from the national terminal of the airport, right next to the international terminal, and costs less than \$100 each way.

■ **Staying there:** Merida has many hotels, most of which are inexpensive *posadas* ranging from less than \$10 to about \$20 for doubles. The nicer hotels are the Hotel Chama and Hotel Mintoy. The Mintoy is right next to all the tour agencies and the cable car station

on the Parque Heroinas and has excellent service, English-speaking clerks, a travel agency and a restaurant/bar.

■ **Tours:** The Laguna Negra tour, as well as mountain trekking expeditions and tours to Los Llanos, can be arranged through Yana Pacha tours on the Parque Heroinas. The mountain bike tour, as well as many other types of tours, are run through NATourA, also on the Parque Heroinas.

The best way to find a tour is to visit the agencies to see what they offer for what price. Most people in the agencies speak English. Many tour guides do not, so ask ahead if you need an English-speaking guide.

ride, Rodrigo fitted us with helmets, adjusted our seats and made sure we were properly slathered with sunscreen. He was a serious cyclist and had the Spandex shorts, massive thighs and scars to prove it. When the incline started immediately, I was soon gasping for air, grabbing at my shorts and money belt to make more space for breathing. But it was my lungs that were too small.

The paved road turned into dirt and rocks as the landscape unfolded in rolling green hills dotted with an occasional house, pond or tiny chapel. Cows grazed on slopes under the constant cloud play beneath a powder blue sky. On the way up, we rested and walked a lot, huffing, puffing and sweating.

For our guide, this trip was baby level, but he remained encouraging, giving instruction and offering Gatorade and bananas. Finally at the top, we rested in front of a small white house,

behind which was a blackberry vineyard. The young farmer invited us into his sparsely furnished home, where his wife poured frothy blackberry juice that helped to revive us.

The way down proved equally challenging, with steep and rocky downgrades to bounce over, tire ruts to avoid and streams to ford. At points, my head shook so violently that I could no longer see the road.

Civilization returned as we approached Jaji, a spruced-up colonial town of white buildings, terra cotta roofs and cobblestone streets centered around a Plaza Bolivar and a colonial church.

We ate the cheese sandwiches and fruit that Rodrigo supplied before wandering exhaustedly about the village, marvelling that we had made it through another day of the Andean challenge.

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