

Notes on Roraima Trip, February 2000

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My Dearest Blind CC's,

The snow has stopped, and it's garbage time; 3:30 PM on a Friday in a Manhattan corporate headquarters; this time it happens to be BMG Music. My boss has already left for the weekend. My cube-mate, Seth, is blasting Incubus.*

Forgive me for not communicating since my return from my trip two weeks ago. Just about as soon as I got back, I picked up an insidious cough/sore throat combination that left me with only just enough energy to run up a tab at Blockbuster. I'm feeling better now, but still plenty cranky.

This note is the first installment of a post-mortem on my recent quickie; thirteen days in Venezuela. But don't expect me to be very comprehensive. I'm going to say what I feel needs to be said and let the holes and gaps just lie there.

This was the first trip I've made to South America or Central America. Before I left, I had a creeping anxiety about my lack of Spanish ability that I had a hard time reasoning away, and that anxiety turned out to be well-founded. I wasn't really uncomfortable in Laos, where I knew far less of the language than I did in Venezuela, because no one expected me to speak Lao. Furthermore, Laos isn't surrounded by Lao-speaking countries. Venezuela, a country where even the airline clerks in the Caracas airport have a hard time with English, is pretty much surrounded by a Spanish-speaking continent. (Portuguese is close enough.) It's not just that they don't speak English, it's that they don't even know how to deal with someone who doesn't speak Spanish. And pardon me for getting linguistical on you, but it's easier to pick up a less inflected language (like Chinese) on the run. Bus stations are not the best places to work out verb conjugations.

The language barrier really didn't prevent me from doing anything. It just contributed to my general alienation, the way the two wasted \$12 taxi rides my first nite did, and the six hours lying on the floor of the Caracas aeropuerto cafeteria staring up at the table bottom study in metal and chewed gum**, the one-hour flight to Puerto Ordaz, pronounced "port or da" -- a town which the ticket agents could not find on a map of Venezuela, tho they flew there seven times daily; the two subsequent 1 1/2 hour bus station waits; and best of all, the 10-hour bus ride through the Grand Sabana to Santa Elena de Uairen, near the Brazilian border.

Lucky for me, the bus captain, who will henceforth for me always personify the term "gordo", felt the need to stop at every conceivable empanada vendor along the route, so I had plenty of chances to stretch and void.

My favorite stop was a place named "Kilometer 88," or just "88"*** A town that deserves no name, a string of tin shack bars, empanada stands, flop houses and brothels that sprung up out of

necessity to service the young and hyper miners around there. Nothing in particular happened to me there, but I had a distinct feeling that if I were to miss the bus and stay the night in 88, I'd have enough material to churn out screenplays for the rest of my life, providing I managed to make it out in a coherent state.

The last three of those ten bus hours were especially tortured because my mind had ceased to operate correctly, due to stress and a lack of sleep. It was dark and there was nothing to look at and I couldn't read, so I could only stare at the revolving disco lights on the music system and repeatedly ask myself, "how much longer do you think it'll be?" To this day, I still marvel at my addled lucidity. I knew it was madness, I saw every ounce of the madness, but there was nothing I could do about it. In fact, it wasn't even that bad. It was kind of humorous.

We rolled into town just after midnight and a black Guayanan gold miner talked my ear off for ten minutes and walked me to a nice clean motel where I could stay for 6,000 Bolivars (ten bucks, US).

The question begging to be asked, of course, is "What is wrong with you? Why do you torture yourself like this?" Well, believe me, I asked it. I don't have the answer, but I have some ideas for answers.

More soon,

Kurt

* Blasting incubus? Love the concept. Can't say the same for the music.

** They were grinding the floors down that night, but not All night, so I was shaken awake roughly once every twenty minutes.

***pronounced "ochen tie ocho" of course.