

St. **SOME** *TIMES*

DECEMBER 2009

VOL 98

*Scuba Santa*

I dressed up like Santa Claus for the Christmas dive. I waited in a huge cave at the surface and dropped down in a beam of light as the student divers were ascending. Once out of the cave, I checked the naughty list and gave all the divers Santa hats. It's not easy diving with a Santa suit, extra white hair and a bag of goodies. I am still training the Reindeer. They didn't pass the open water written test.

Next Vol ... Curacao

This volume was written on December 21 and 22. I leave for my Caribbean Christmas tomorrow. There will be a special volume for the holidays.

* *Vacation Dec 17-Jan11* *

DECEMBER FOR CIPLC

We had a busy time at CIPLC, just like any other school. There were Christmas concerts, grades due for teachers, big projects, collections for orphanages, contests for classroom door decorations (1st grade bottom right) and lots of cookies being made.

Sometimes it is hard to get into the Christmas spirit when you are so busy, so I plan time to go into elementary classrooms.

As expat teachers, we had a few extra surprises in December. The first two pages explain a little about the art of getting out of

Venezuela during the months of December and January, our Visa problems, new teachers hired, and a few Christmas events for the teachers. Most of this hits on my road trip.

*Just to make you a bit Jealous....*

Sometimes, the hardships of living in Venezuela all add up and make you a bit gloomy. Then I sit back and realize that while you might be freezing in some snowy area, I am writing this while I sit by my pool in a pair of shorts. The sun is getting higher so I have to finish writing this in the air conditioning.

Visa Problems

Life is not all a box of chocolates here in Venezuela. Sometimes the “hits” come at really bad times. The Visa issue has always been around, but this was the worst time yet.

In a nutshell, when you arrive in Venezuela, you receive a tourist Visa that is good for three months. The government has a very slow process for issuing visas so the school sends our passports right away. If we give up our passports right away, it makes other issues like banking and telephone even more extended (without the original passport it is near impossible to get other documents issued). So anyway, the government sent back our passports in October without the visa being processed. We had to leave the country and re-enter at the school’s expense.

When we returned in October, the school sent our passports to the government in Caracas again. As of the first week of December, no one had received theirs back. A phone call to the Venezuelan Embassy uncovered some terrible news: most of our passports are in the visa process, but won’t be done until after January.

Can you imagine the uproar? You cannot tell an American they cannot leave the country. That is the number one conversation which will end in bloodstains! The Venezuelan paper pushers were telling the expat staff their

passports were in a visa process and they couldn’t leave the country for our 4-week holiday!

Matt Steps In

Mike, our superintendent, was in the states for a conference and a recruiting weekend. What timing. It wasn’t his fault, but most of his current expat staff was facing an explosive, emotional state of mutiny.

Matt, third grade teacher, offered to take point on the situation and Mike agreed. Matt got on the phone with our Embassy, the oil company reps, and the Venezuelan Embassy. And got lied to time and time again by the Venezuelans. He worked very hard to keep all of the teachers in the loop. Emails were flying, rumors started to grow, and emotions erupted- all as we were heading into Christmas season. Interesting.

To Pull or not to Pull?

That was the question. Basically, in order to get out passports back - visa or no visa - we had to do something. We had tried the waiting game. No matter what any individual said to the VZ embassy, the passports just kept sitting in a pile for “processing”. (Mine was one of three that came back early because, even after three months, the visa hadn’t been started)

The final option was to request all of the remaining passports to be pulled from the process pile. We had a small meeting (without the Super there) about our options.

Matt cleared up a lot of our questions and explained about pulling our passports: if the school requests passports to be pulled from the ongoing visa process, the school might get black listed by the visa department. Don’t forget, the whole reason the passports are in Caracas is to save us money on renewing our visas every three months by exit and re-entry into the country.

Pulled, but...

At the last minute, there was universal agreement to pull the passports. We will have to find out later whether the school is blacklisted. The bottom line is freedom, at whatever cost. Teachers are all heading out of the country. Most are going back to the states and a few are going other places.

When we return, I will submit my passport to school again. They will send it in to the capital and try for a work visa again.

This is all just part of living in a foreign country. The most important part of any problem faced by an international teacher is whether the school (and administrator) backs them up. I felt like we were taken care of as much as possible by Mike. Yes, he was away recruiting, but there wasn’t much else he could have done even if he had been on campus. So we will see what happens next. Wish us all luck.



Caripe it Is!

This little apartment is where I stayed for a few nights in the mountain town of Caripe - northeastern Venezuela.

Chris, Amaurn, Noeli, Hector, Dion, and Brandon make up the Venezuelan half of the Irwin family. I had the pleasure of spending three action days with them- hiking, swimming, exploring, roadside shopping, eating, drinking, laughing, crying,

swearing, cussing, road-tripping, off-roading, destroying restaurants, BBQing, caving, and much more. All in three Venezuelan days.

I would have to say the best part of the trip was being part of the family. Uncle Goyo. All of us shared the small apartment and the tiny bathroom, which both served as our home base as we set out to explore the outdoors. I slept upstairs with Chris, Ama, and the boys, trying to curb my snoring at night. I slept unusually well in the crisp mountain atmosphere, considering my thoughts were on somewhere else.

Chris & Ama



Introducing: Chris and Amaurn Irvin. Chris is a Local Canadian married to locally born Ama. Chris is the Athletic director and Ama is our Pre-school teacher.

They both forgot their 10th anniversary but Chris mentioned it the day after, before Ama remembered. Hah! That was a close one for Chris.

Chris and Ama, who know me little outside of school, adopted me and took me on a trip through their country for three days. We peed on the side of the road together, shared stories, got all of my personal questions out of the way, and had a LOT of fun.

Hector & Noelise



Hector and Noelise are perfect in-laws for Chris. It was hard for me to understand their Spanish because they speak VERY fast. I always had interpreters on hand, but I still felt inadequate when they wanted to share a story with me or ask what I thought about Venezuela.

Noelise is a real spifire of a personality. Hector is always laughing and talks to everyone like they are an old friend he hasn't seen in a while. What a great pair. They remind me of my own Grandpa and Grandma Lemoine. If you ever meet them, ask them about Tres Leches! - my favorite story of theirs.

Brandon & Dion



Brandon and Dion became my surrogate nephews for Christmas. Brandon, who happens to be one of my students, is 5yrs old and has more energy than my nephew Colin has had for the past six years (put together). Dion, who follows his brother everywhere, rings in around 3 years old. They make a real handful.

Both boys were born here in Venezuela and get along perfect in a bilingual world. Everything they do is in both Spanish and English. The most interesting cultural aspect of hanging out with them is the Venezuelan tradition of keeping kids on the bottle (milk bottle) even past 5 yrs old.



Road Trip, Venezuelan Style

I have never stopped so many times on a road trip before. You can buy anything along the side of the road to eat or cook later. This was the way the Irvin family

does their road trips. And I loved it. We started off from Puerto la Cruz, went along the Northern coast to the East, and steered South into the mountains.

Both Chris and Hector drive trucks, so even the mild off-roading was easy going. I sat in the back with Dion and Brandon the whole way to Caripe. The boys are

just like Jeff and I used to be. Fighting the entire time - until they falling asleep from the car motion. Chris and Ama had to referee the whole time. Ahh, memories!

DRIVE

Stop to pee or
Buy at a
Roadside
stand

DRIVE

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DRIVE

Fresas y Crema

I love the homemade cream. Strawberries are grown in the mountains. Little stands line the roads. Yummy. Next time Em offers, I won't refuse fresas y crema.



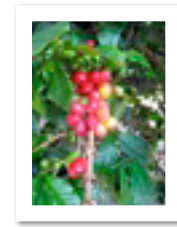
Vegetales

Vegetables are all over the place in the villages. We stopped for onions, carrots, corn, pumpkins, lettuce, and much more. Oh... the oranges!



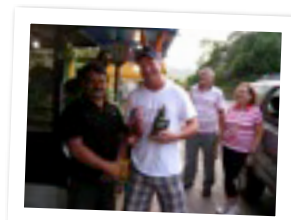
Moonshine

Yes! Rum added to local roots..... called Brujita de Caripe. I HAD to buy a nice bottle of that. The stand owner threw in a large Cacao for me.



Coffee

I bought Five kilos of freshly produced local coffee for around 10 dollars. We went directly to the coffee processing plant. Chris and Ama bought 15kilos of beans.



Cueva del Guácharo National Park



Visiting the Bats and Guácharos 1200 Meters into a Cave

Guacharos are oil birds found in caves of South America and made famous by the German explorer Alexander von Humboldt when he mapped out this 10km cave near the Venezuelan town of Caripe. Ama and I went on the tour. And that is a story in itself..

Imagine 20 people following one guide with a gas lantern. Now imagine the entire tour is in Spanish. Bats are everywhere. Guard rails or safety lights are nowhere to be found. The stone pathway is well made and sometimes rises up 20 ft from running water and drop offs. We went the entire 1200meters into the cave. About 500meters inside the cave is a small opening that cuts the flying species separated from the back of the cave. This is not a cave tour for the feint of heart or claustrophobic. It was amazing. We were in there for about two hours total. I recommend the tour if you don't mind a lack of safety standards.



Animals of all Types

Hiking into the wilderness of Venezuela allows for a lot of opportunities to see animals. The spider (upper left) was hugging a rock where we crossed the river. It looked very hairy and dangerous. I braved getting close enough for a photo and then high-tailed it away. (I think it tried to follow and eat me) The monster beetle (second from left) had landing lights. One just like it, but larger, tried to get Chris and I as we were reading outside one night.

The big headed ant (third from left) was moving a leaf along the hiking trail. There was an army of them covering the forest floor off of the trail. I couldn't believe how big its head and pincers were! These are the kind of ants that you see on specials about the Amazon! The monkey on the other hand, it was one of two monkeys caged for show at our little hacienda.

Parks?

This was my first park experience in Vene. There are a lot of little parks around. This is just the start. I was impressed with the upkeep of the trails and



the overall cleanliness. I hope this is the standard for Venezuela. It was very refreshing.

Wrong Shoes

I sure miss my Chacos. The tennis shoes I had on were ok, but hiking



through water and a forrest demands a better kind of footwear.

SuperMom

Not only did Ama keep up with Chris and protect me from deadly

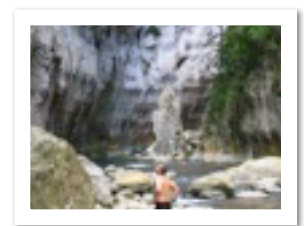
spiders, I watched as she carried each of her sons at river crossings. Most mothers I know would have stayed behind with their kids and waited for Chris and I to return. Not so. Ama is Super-Mom.



Setting the Pace

Chris set a good pace for us on the hikes.

Although, he kept telling us that we were halfway there and it would only be ten more minutes.



Hah!

TREKKING IN VENE



A Family that treks together...



...gets cold together! Hah.

You should have seen Ama and Chris transverse the river crossings and steep trails with their boys in tow. Actually, the hardest part was keeping Brandon from running ahead. He has so much energy! And these are not trails that are safe and maintained, like in the states. These are raw trails. No guardrails. Rustic. No emergency clinics near by. Tough family!

Thank You!



So this is where I sign off and say Thank You to the Irvins. It was so much fun to be a part of your family trip. Such hospitality is what keeps a person like me going. My family may be angry with me or missing me for the holidays (or both) but I know they are happy to know I am safe and exploring new parts of the world with family in mind. Someday, I will offer the same in kind to a single international teacher that is away from home for the holidays.