

# Venezuela's Puerto la Cruz

## A TOURIST PLAYGROUND

> by Habeeb Salloum

My newly found friend turned to me as we poured out of the plane at Barcelona airport, the gateway to Puerto La Cruz - one of Venezuela's top resorts. "I can't believe it! In a few hours, greenery and heat have replaced cold and snow." I was not listening. The soothing fresh midday breeze seemed to intoxicate me but, deep down, I felt somewhat anxious. "I wish we were on the beach. By the time we finish with the airport and check into our room, the day will be over." I was thinking of other airports and hotels where much vacation time is spent in bureaucratic formalities.

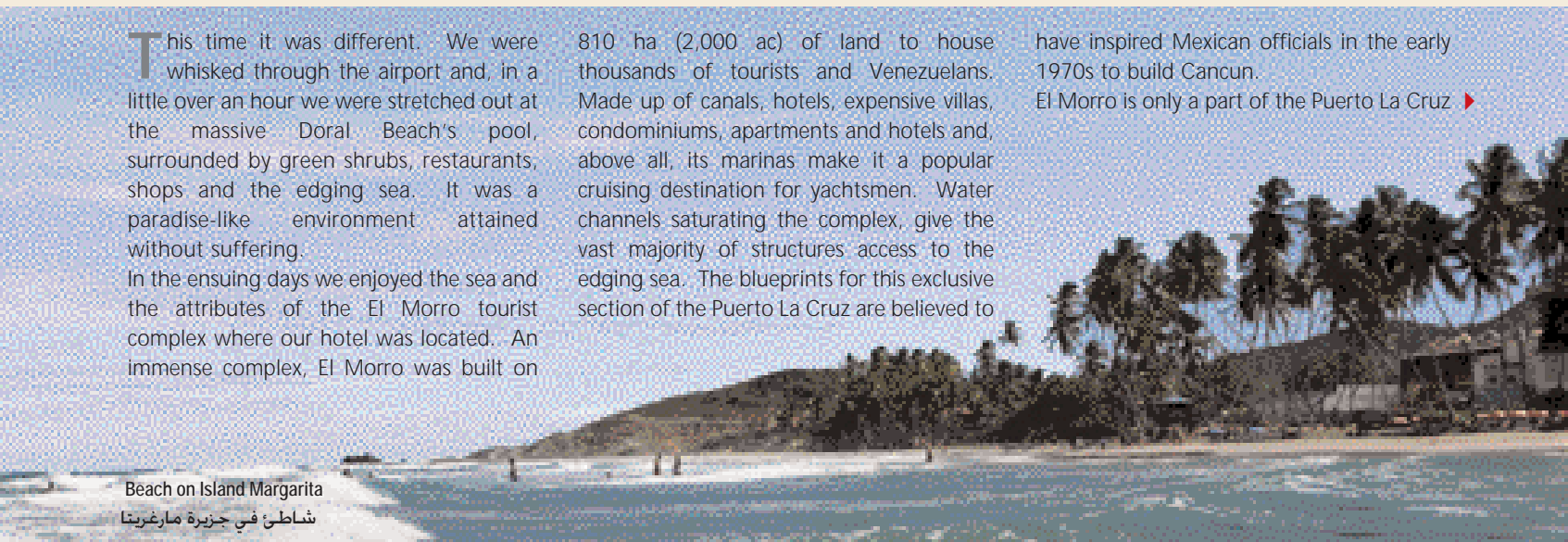
This time it was different. We were whisked through the airport and, in a little over an hour we were stretched out at the massive Doral Beach's pool, surrounded by green shrubs, restaurants, shops and the edging sea. It was a paradise-like environment attained without suffering.

In the ensuing days we enjoyed the sea and the attributes of the El Morro tourist complex where our hotel was located. An immense complex, El Morro was built on

810 ha (2,000 ac) of land to house thousands of tourists and Venezuelans. Made up of canals, hotels, expensive villas, condominiums, apartments and hotels and, above all, its marinas make it a popular cruising destination for yachtsmen. Water channels saturating the complex, give the vast majority of structures access to the edging sea. The blueprints for this exclusive section of the Puerto La Cruz are believed to

have inspired Mexican officials in the early 1970s to build Cancun.

El Morro is only a part of the Puerto La Cruz ▶



Beach on Island Margarita  
شاطئ في جزيرة مارغريتا

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Mochima National Park

متنزه موشیما الوطني



Mochima National Park

متنزه موشیما الوطني

resort area – Venezuela’s favourite vacation place. In 1936 it was a sleepy town of less than 2,000 that has grown to a city of 250,000. Located on the coast of the state of Anzoátegui, well known for its beautiful 100 km coastline of beaches, the resort town is a magnet, attracting many beach lovers. With neighbouring Barcelona - 10 km away - and the suburbs of Guanta and Lecheria the population adds up to almost half a million.

Only 340 km east of Caracas, the country’s capital, and 45 km from Margarita, Venezuela’s tourist isle, Puerto La Cruz is an attractive coastal city hugging a large bay. It is a superb tourist oasis on the country’s Caribbean shore, brimming full of water sport facilities. Called by some, a tropical Eden, it has a perfect 28 C (82 F) average yearly temperature with enticing beaches edged by a warm sea. From November to March, these draw thousands of escapees from the cold northern lands - mostly Canadians.

Our first trip from Doral Beach was by taxi to the heart of town - 20 minutes away. The almost falling-apart auto let us off on Paseo Colon, the main avenue in the city. In the subsequent days, we were to find that taxis came in two types: legal and illegal. Most of the illegal ones were in the same condition as the one we took - ready for the scrap heap.

In town one night, I asked a Venezuelan, "How can I tell at night if the taxi is legal?" The man grinned, "Just look at the tires. If they are bare, it’s an illegal taxi."

We spent most of our time on the Paseo Colon - a long boardwalk-like boulevard along the waterfront. It is Puerto La Cruz’s Champs Elysées, edged on one side by a beach ending at the luxury Puerto La Cruz Gran Hotel; on the other side it is lined with most of the town’s top restaurants, souvenir shops and lower priced hotels. In the evenings, artisans sell their products amid those promenading on the boardwalk. If one bargains great buys can be made for some of Venezuela’s best handmade goods. Away from Paseo Colon the town has not much to offer except for Centro Comercial Plaza Mayor Mall, the largest mall in Puerto La Cruz area; and Calle Libertad, a fine shopping street. Here, we found that the best buy for gifts were Venezuelan made perfumes and gold jewellery - 18 carat sells at the same price as 10 carat in North America.

To the east of Puerto La Cruz is Mochima National Park - a world of islands and secluded tranquil beaches with crystal clear turquoise waters. Its many sparkling deep lagoons overshadowed by coconut palms are like sirens drawing endless tourists into their spell.

For those who would like to organize their own excursions, there are all types of boats for hire, on the marinas and beaches, at very reasonable prices. Puerto La Cruz is also the jumping off point for an amazing variety of trips. The most important are to: Angel Falls, for viewing the highest waterfalls in the world; Caracas, for shopping and sightseeing; Margarita Island, for duty free shopping and circuit of the island; and tours to coffee plantations and ranches.

On the other hand, if one is interested in history, a trip to nearby Barcelona, the capital of Anzáteque State, is a must. Well-preserved colonial architecture surrounds the Plaza’s Bolivar, Miranda and Boyaca - the original plaza built when the city was founded. The Cathedral, Iglesia El Carmen, and the Museo de Anzoátegui, the oldest building in the city as well as the La Casa Fuerte (strong house) a national historic monument that was initially built in the 17th century are worth stopovers. Exploring these monuments is usually included in the city tour, which is popular with many visitors.

History aside, most tourists come to Puerto La Cruz to dive, fish, surf water ski, and enjoy the beaches, especially the very accessible Mochima beaches. These gems of nearby sands and fine climate are ▶

drawing more and more travellers from the north and Europe.

## IF YOU GO

Facts to Know When Travelling to Puerto La Cruz Venezuela:

1. The best way to travel to Venezuela is to take one of the tour packages.
2. Visas are not needed for Canadian or U.S. citizens or most of the countries in Western Europe and numerous other countries in the world- only a passport valid for six months is necessary.
3. The best way to get around in Puerto La Cruz is by taxi. When taking a taxi, always make sure you use 'legal' taxis. They are usually marked with the name of the cab company. Cost of fare runs from US\$5. to \$15. Illegal taxis abound but they are usually beat up and often try to cheat strangers.
4. During the day Puerto La Cruz is safe, but at night only walk on Paseo Colon. Begging around tourist areas, robbery and other crimes are prevalent. Keep money in a money belt and cameras well hidden.
5. Water is drinkable only in luxury hotels. To be safe, drink only bottled water and do not use ice cubes.
6. There are many Internet cafes, particularly in places frequented by tourists. Rates run \$1 to \$4 per hour.
7. Venezuelan food such as arepas, hallaca, hervido, sancocho and Pabellón Criollo, the national dish, are delightful and inexpensive.
8. Change money at casas de cambio" (exchange houses). The Bolivar (Bs) is Venezuela's currency - 1 Bolivar, consists of 100 Centimos. Currently 1 US dollar = 2,144.00 Bolivars.
9. Autos are fairly expensive to rent – about US\$70. per day. Rent autos from international companies like Hertz, Avis and Budget. They always have better cars.
10. For accommodation, many of the lower priced hotels are to be found on or near Paseo Colon – cost from US\$10. to \$20. per night.
11. There is a Departure Tax of US\$48. However, the amount is always changing – check with a travel agent. ■



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