

“You’re only going there to perve at the girls” claimed a friend before myself and Nick embarked on a journey to do just that. The country itself has a lot to offer, though the majestic Angel Falls and the Caribbean waters are less synonymous with Venezuela than the impression this country’s girls have made in Miss World contests.

Dusky Venezuelan beauties glided gracefully across our TV screens for many years but a climate of political correctness made men feel somewhat guilty. “It’s all based on looks,” cried the party-poopers, “men aren’t interested in what they have to say.” The inevitable screams of “It’s degrading” soured the atmosphere. I’ll tell you what is degrading; getting caught by my mum at the age of fourteen, drooling over Miss Venezuela in the swimsuit parade.

Now, every schoolboy has a dream, and for most it’s either lifting the World Cup or scoring with the female equivalent. Having accepted the grim reality that I will never be a professional footballer, I hang up my boots and head for the carnival that is South America. Half expecting to be greeted by a local wearing just a sash, I arm myself with a Spanish speaking friend and a smile.

I had anticipated the heat, the traffic, and the slums of the Venezuelan capital but what I hadn’t expected in Caracas was the dress code. Virtually every woman, regardless of age, is wearing lycra. Most people would find this concept disturbing if wandering around a suburban shopping centre, but in a place where all females are curvaceous it appears to be a gift from God.

Indeed His Holiness doesn’t seem to mind the scantily clad parading through the ornate churches that pepper the city - the leggings and bra-top combo making a stylish catholic uniform. I throw an occasional glance at buildings like the impressive cathedral Casa Natal, but my head keeps turning to admire the true beauty of Venezuela. A stroll down the Plaza Bolivar is like walking onto the set of a Jennifer Lopez fitness video, and I am to spend the rest of the holiday nursing a strained neck.

“Most of them speak English over there” is the single most useless piece of information I have ever received. And it couldn’t be further from the truth, they don’t even speak Spanish. A strong accent makes it very difficult for even fluent Spanish speakers to understand, let alone an ignoramus who started reading a phrase book on the plane.

Picture a Spaniard with the most basic grasp of the English language asking directions in the centre of Glasgow and you may have some idea of how useless I feel. I am able to order a coffee but the retort from the waitress possibly inquiring how I would like it leaves me baffled. I resort to the internationally accepted shrug of the shoulders and she shows me a cold one.

But Nick is doing no better, and after various unsuccessful attempts at chatting up barmaids we head for the area known as Mercedes and the sanctity of a club with a

*Ladies Night.* The poster is in English but the first girl I attach myself to doesn't speak a word of it. I feel like I've landed on 'The Planet of the Apes' as I manage, through an impressive display of monkey language, to find out her name. Progress is painfully slow, and when she asks me a question in Spanish I panic and drag her onto the dancefloor.

She's way out of my league but over the next five minutes I have to get a lot closer to her than I doubt her father would like. The dancing is faster than a samba and hotter than a sauna, but the moves are very simple and easy to pick up. Unlike the girls, who after one dance pass me over to yet another beautiful friend who also finds it comical to be grooving with one of the two pasty Caucasians. Everyone wants to dance with us, but alas that is as far as it goes. And although we leave the club without our Miss Worlds, we do leave as heroes.

But all heroes have their weaknesses and with Nick it's his stomach. Having woken in a cold sweat, he sends me out on a mission to find a chemist who can cure his food poisoning. "Speak English?" I enquire to face of stone, "Does anyone speak English?". A vision of beauty wearing a long white coat appears from behind the counter. "Maybe I can help you?". It's an angel sent by The Lord himself, and she most certainly can help me. We chat for a few minutes about travel and culture, and only after it's been established that she does indeed have a boyfriend, do we actually get down to discussing Nick's unglamorous ailments. In the unlikely event of her being single, I would have avoided the topic completely, and probably let Nick die.

It's time to leave the capital and head for the coast. Hopefully there will be some tourists with whom I can have at least a basic chat. We arrive at a small village east of Puerto La Cruz by sunset to find all the accommodation has been taken. We drink to the idea of booking ahead next time as we contemplate the safety of the beach as a bedroom. A local hotelier offers to look after our bags and we conclude that the best course of action is to drink lots more rum...

I wake up shivering in wet underpants to the sound of pelicans. The concrete surface is cold and uncomfortable and standing up I realise that I am on a roof. It's all starting to make sense, I think. A young woman walks along the beach and calls to me; "Ola Mark". Why is she laughing, and how does she know my name? I begin to piece together the events of the previous night and wonder just exactly how many girls I attempted to drag into the sea with me.

Things become clearer when I stumble across Nick. He has spent the last half hour trying to find his clothes. Apparently it was my idea to go for a swim after becoming bored with the lack of conversation. Many people followed suit but he remembers two girls in particular who have agreed to meet up with us later today.

A few hours later, the two tanned bikini wearers sit down beside us. Nick engages in a slow dialogue then translates to me that their favourite colours are yellow and blue. Fascinating. I sit there like a complete pleb, occasionally doing an impression of a pelican for kicks. They find me hilarious and ask me to repeat it. I have been relegated from the

ranks of the charming and the witty, to the depths of the funny but dumb. Pelican on demand, they're not interested in what I have to say. I find this totally degrading.

Knowing that this is the extent of my flirting ability I leave Nick to bore the girls while I go for a run along the beach. My childhood dream of finding Miss World has been shattered but who cares, it was just a silly dream. Perhaps if I run a bit faster and try a few sit-ups I may still be able to make next year's World Cup. Now where did I hang up those football boots?