

# OVER THE VENEZUELAN ANDES

ED LAYTON, '24

*Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of articles by Mr. Layton relating his experiences in Venezuela. The first appeared in the December, 1940, issue.*

During my stay in Venezuela it was my good fortune to visit the Andean mountain country. For company I had a Venezuelan-Englishman educated in the U. S., Albert Carstens, whose knowledge of the language and customs contributed largely to the success of the trip.

Leaving Maracaibo just before noon by amphibian plane, we flew almost directly south and in a little less than two hours landed at a little airport in a mountain valley some 25 miles from the city of San Cristobal. A car was waiting to take us into town, and after an overnight stop there we traveled roughly northeast over the Trans-Andean Highway for two days by station-wagon and bus to Mototan, making overnight stops at Merida and Valera en route. A modern gasoline-propelled rail car at Mototan carried us to the lake port of La Ceiba where we caught a diesel passenger boat to Maracaibo.

The Andean mountain country is entirely different from the low, hot, humid territory bordering Lake Maracaibo. The climate is invigorating, the cities and towns are clean and attractive; even the people are much different. Averaging lighter in color than the lake-country peons, they are mainly Indian and Spanish-Indian. Their craftsmanship is apparent in the attractive wrought iron balconies and ornate doors of the houses, the hand-made furniture displayed in the shops, and the saddleries with their nicely done leatherwork. They are much more courteous and helpful toward foreigners and do not seem to resent their presence as is the case in other localities.

Lacking accurate information, I judge the elevations of San Cristobal and Merida at about 5000 feet. Both attractive cities, they are ringed with mountains which are obscured by clouds morning and evening. In December the weather was pleasantly warm during the day, but a coat was required after sundown.

Most of the hotels along the route of the Trans-Andean Highway were built some twenty years ago, soon after the highway was completed. Although travel has increased tremendously, hotel accommodations have not been expanded, and consequently rooms are hard to locate. In San Cristobal we put up at a rather obscure, side-street hostelry which was typical of the smaller places. With its front wall against the sidewalk, the front door led through a hallway to the large central patio, the middle of which was open to the sky, and which served as lobby, dining hall, and what-have-you. The guests' sleeping

rooms occupied the four patio walls, with kitchen and living quarters for the staff further back.

Our sleeping room was some ten feet wide by fifteen feet deep with a fourteen-foot ceiling. The ten-foot-high narrow doorway, equipped with the usual double doors, opened on the patio, as did the single window. Furniture consisted of two steel single cots with thin mattresses, a dresser, a tiny cracked mirror, porcelain washbowl and pitcher set, and a thunder-mug. The single 20-watt electric lamp high in the air was usable only at night, since the power lines in these mountain towns are energized only during the evening and early morning.

## VENEZUELAN PLUMBING

With no plumbing in the individual rooms, there were four modern lavatory fixtures at various points on the inner wall of the patio, so that while we were eating breakfast next morning, other guests were washing and shaving virtually in the "dining room". A single toilet and bath room was available for all the guests. About 10x15 feet, it was floored with glazed tile and equipped with lavatory, shower and modern flush toilet. The typically Venezuelan toilet paper disposal system was included, which consists of a box or paper carton on the floor beside the "growler" into which the used toilet paper is dropped. This system had its origin in the older days when the sewer piping as first installed was much too small and would clog with paper. Since its replacement with new and larger piping, signs have been posted in most of the hotels requesting that toilet paper be thrown into the hoppers, but the force of years of habit is apparently too strong, and the box is always well occupied. Or, in the event that no box is provided, they throw it on the floor.

The food served to us at San Cristobal, although typically Venezuelan, was better than the average obtained during the remainder of the trip. Dinner consisted of soup, sliced tomato



Right: *The author in front of San Cristobal's uncompleted Cathedral.*



Left: *Typical Andean farming area on steep alluvial slope.*

salad, fried chicken, a green vegetable, the ever-present boiled white rice, white bread and butter, fresh milk or coffee, and some sort of pudding which I didn't eat. The butter, as was the case throughout the mountain region, was unsalted, but could hardly be termed "sweet," since if not entirely rancid, it was fairly ripe. The tomatoes were bright red, as they should be, and with good flavor. Because the native tomatoes served frequently at the company mess halls in the oil fields were never red, but only green to pink, I showed such pleasure at the sight of the bright red fruit that the proprietress shortly showed up with a whole platterful. We really put them away.

#### NO GUARD RAILS ON ROAD

The highway between San Cristobal and Merida was an almost continuous series of switchbacks. We zigged up one side of a mountain range and zagged down the other; followed a stream along a valley floor for a short distance; then repeated the climb and descent. The road was dirt or gravel, hard, and surprisingly smooth, and we frequently passed maintenance crews at work. We even saw a tractor or two pulling road machines. Over most of the route two cars can pass easily, but there are many narrow places and the many sharp turns must be taken slowly and carefully. There are no guard rails or road signs of any kind, unless the occasional roadside crosses are interpreted as warning signs.

Whenever a person dies by violence in Venezuela, it is customary to erect at least a cross and frequently a tiny shrine at the site of the tragedy; and this tradition applies to automobile accidents as well as to knifings, etc. Occasionally our driver would call our attention to a cross at the edge of the road where it skirted a cliff with the remark, "Juan went over there with a bus last month," or some similar observance calculated to set our minds at ease.

Our driver was apparently entirely capable—at least he got us to Merida. He should have been, since he drove a regular run between San Cristobal and Caracas, a four-day trip each way. But it was at least a couple of hours after we started before I was able to relax, since my impression was that he was taking all the hairpin bends, uphill or down, at a speed just barely short of the sliding point. In addition, he had never been told of the advantage in using second or low on down grades—all he used was brakes. So about every 50 miles we pulled up for a brake adjustment job, generally at a farmhouse or tiny village where we all drank coffee while waiting. Except at the ancient walled Spanish fortress town of La Grita, where he decided on a more or less complete brake overhaul. When we saw him taking off wheels and drums, we found a little hotel and had lunch. This conveyance, a '38 or '39 Dodge station

wagon, had two horns, the original equipment electric device and one of the inevitable rubber bulb contraptions. Since the electric horn was out of order during the first part of the day's run it was necessary to keep pumping the "hooter," which made driving largely a one-hand affair. However, we never quite hit anyone on the turns.

Arriving in Merida about 7:30 p.m., after thirteen hours on the road, we found both the "better" hotels full, but finally located accommodations in an obscure pension which offered a single room with four steel cots. Since there were four passengers, consisting of a minor government official, a stray American steel salesman, my partner and myself, and it was the last room, we all shared it. Not until we had been asleep for a short while did we discover that the beds were populated and the remainder of the night was anything but pleasant. The Venezuelan official, however, didn't seem to mind—he probably knew in advance what to expect.

The city of Merida, besides being the capital of the State of Merida, is also the cultural center of the Andean region, and boasts an institution of higher learning, the University of Merida, which offers courses in liberal arts, pharmacy, law and perhaps others. The main plaza, flanked by the University, the Cathedral, State government building and business houses, has a large equestrian statue of Simon Bolivar, the national hero.

#### CAESAR AIDS A BOTTLENECK

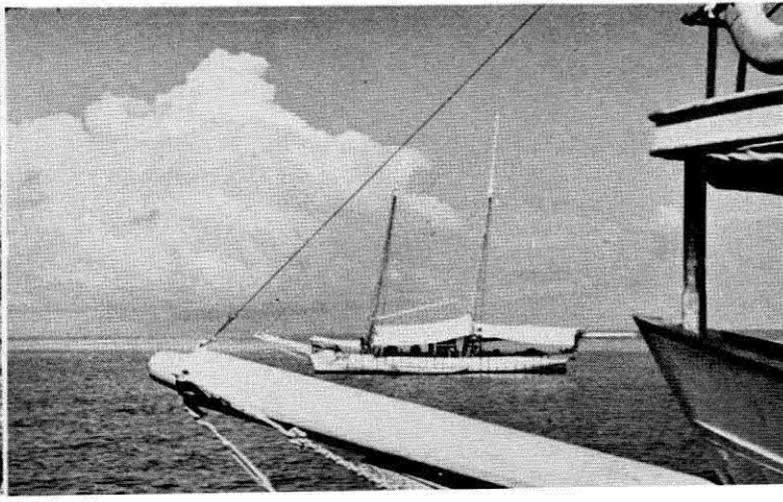
There is a story about these statues. Every town has at least one plaza, and at its center is a Bolivar memorial. The small villages have busts, while the larger places have full-length figures or imposing statues such as Merida's. But it seems that things were not always thus. As the time approached to celebrate the centennial of Bolivar's birth, a few years ago, many communities realized that they had neglected to acquire even a bust of the Libertador. Orders were immediately placed, I believe in Europe, and of course the statue-makers were swamped, since the time was short. Then one of the statue purveyors had a brilliant idea: Bolivar resembles Caesar. Captions on the many stock busts of Caesar were changed, the busts were shipped and erected in the plazas, the centennial was celebrated and everyone was satisfied.

Merida has a beautiful setting. It is built atop a long ridge, with a stream in the deep canyon on each side, and is completely surrounded by mountains whose tops are seldom visible through the clouds. The mountains, however, are not heavily timbered, and they are checker-boarded with cultivated fields, for the hardy mountain Indians have for generations farmed these rocky slopes almost as high as they can climb. The farmers carry on their operations in the age-old traditions of their for-

*Traditional all-wooden plow used by Andean Indians.*



*Freight boat at La Ceiba.*





*Downhill from Mucuchies toward Valera.*



*Threshing pit where oxen tramp out grain and wind blows chaff away.*

bears. The ox is the draft animal and beast of burden of the rural population, and is even frequently ridden to town. An occasional tough, wiry mountain pony is seen, and there are a few burros; but oxen do the plowing, threshing and other chores. The typical plow is all of wood and of ancient design. Harvested grain is thrown on the stone floor of a circular stone-walled threshing pit where the oxen are driven around on it until the grain is stamped out. Then on a windy day the farmer tosses the grain into the air so the chaff can be blown away.

The stony ground of the hillside farms may or may not be fertilized, but I understand that its productivity is poor. None of these farms is terraced, and since there is little or no evidence of serious erosion, the rainfall cannot be heavy. In some of the valleys, however, the soil appears rich enough, and it would seem that these areas could be developed into the vegetable gardens of Venezuela; but from what I could learn, the Indians raise only the traditional crops of corn, wheat, beans and a few tomatoes.

The typical farmhouse is stone-walled, dirt-floored, thatch-roofed, and has no chimney. Smoke from the wood or charcoal fire just seeps out through the roof. Cooking is done on an iron-topped, rock-sided stove built into one corner of a very dark kitchen.

#### SERAPES IMPORTED FROM ENGLAND

In this high country many mountain Indians carry or wear the typical Andean poncho-like blanket, or serape: dark blue or black on one side and brilliant scarlet on the other, and about half an inch thick. However, in Venezuela they are not hand-woven, but are imported from England and sell for some \$20.00 each. These mountains have been populated and farmed for generations; and unlike our Western mountains, it would seem impossible to find solitude, at least along the Highway. Around almost every turn there is a farm house, a tiny village, or someone walking or riding along.

Every town along the Trans-Andean has a central transportation office where passage may be engaged in private car, station wagon, bus, or even as passenger in a truck. Our station wagon having gone toward Caracas, in Merida we purchased bus tickets in the evening, gave our names and hotel, and were told we would be picked up at 6:00 a.m. the next morning. At 5:00 a.m. the bus driver woke us up and then left, presumably to arouse his other passengers. He was back before six, with no other passengers, and we climbed aboard, to spend

the next hour riding around with him attempting to pry his other fares out of bed, hurry their breakfast, or whatnot. After finally collecting them all and counting noses repeatedly to make sure, he took off for Valera.

Merida was no exception to the rule that every Andean town of any consequence has a government military checking station at its edge. A chain across the road stopped us, and a soldier leisurely examined the passenger list, with particular emphasis on identification of foreigners.

For a couple of hours or more out of Merida we climbed, via switchbacks, until we reached Mucuchies, a very small town. It had been growing colder as we climbed, and since the bus had no windows, we were more than glad to take advantage of a short stop and drink several cups of the most delicious coffee I ever tasted. Just beyond Mucuchies we crossed the top of the pass. Here the Eagle of the Andes, at 14,000 feet altitude, looks down on passing traffic, and of course the Americans always take his picture, much to the suppressed amusement of the native passengers. There was no snow, even in December, but a brisk wind made us wish for more clothes. Light snow occasionally falls at this altitude, but usually doesn't last long.

The rest of the trip to Valera, which was reached about 4:00 p.m., was all down hill. Following switchbacks at first, the road later took a winding course down a valley as the temperature climbed gradually. We passed plantations of platanos and coffee, coffee-drying yards, tobacco hung in bundles on front porches, and finally fields of sugar cane and a few cane mills.

#### TRAFFIC OFFICERS NEEDED

Approaching Valera, an incident occurred which is typical of the average Venezuelan bus-driver. While traversing a narrow, relatively straight stretch of road cut into the side of a hill, with a stream bed below us, we met another vehicle, an old converted bus loaded heavily with burlap bags of something-or-other. Both buses had passed turn-outs while in sight of each other, but neither stopped until within a few feet of a collision, each in the middle of the road. Our driver, of course, went through his routine of playing on all his four horns; but when that did no good both drivers got out and stood in the road shouting and gesticulating at each other. Getting nowhere, each got back in and appeared to be preparing for a nap behind the wheel. Time seems to mean nothing to the Venezu-

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elan peon, and it began to look as though we were stuck there, within a few miles of Valera, at least until one driver weakened and backed up. Within a few minutes, however, another bus pulled up behinds ours and an Army officer disembarked to locate the trouble. He ordered the bus-truck backed up some 50 yards to the nearest turnout, which the driver finally did after much grumbling; and we proceeded on our way.

We found nothing notable in Valera. A low-country town, there was much negro blood evident, and for the most part it was hot, dirty and smelly as most of Maracaibo. We stayed at a hotel which had originally been German but was now Venezuelan in all but name. The food left considerable to be desired, but at least our sleep was undisturbed.

The next morning, early, we boarded another bus and after about 30 minutes arrived in Mototan, a small village which is the inland terminus of the German-owned narrow-gauge rail-

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of the probability factors which govern prediction by the use of tests.

But suppose the test is printed and distributed for use and some successful actor takes the test and fails. There is immediately raised a great hue and cry that the test is worthless. In a certain sense this criticism is true. The test is worthless if it is demanded that it measure with absolute precision in the individual case. If a subject comes to ask if he should become an actor and, having been given the test and failed it, is advised by his counselor to go into some other field, a serious error has been made. It is true that the probabilities are high that he will not be a successful actor; on the other hand, he may be one of those who may be a successful actor and still score low on the test.

The personality test, in other words, has its greatest value in dealing with the selection of personnel so that the probability of getting a group that largely conforms to the criteria implicit in the test is enhanced by the use of the test; it is, however, of doubtful value in ascribing with any high degree of certainty traits and characteristics to individuals within the group.

It is to be hoped that, as psychological techniques for the definition and measurement of human traits are perfected, the personality test will have increased utility in individual cases; until that time it should be used with care and with a full appreciation both of its limitations and of its potentialities.

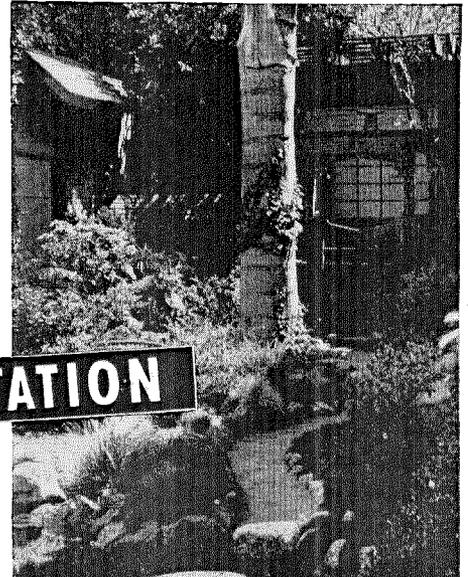
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way line to La Ceiba on Lake Maracaibo. The trip was made via modern and almost new gasoline passenger car, and since we had purchased first-class tickets, we were able to sit in the front section which occupied about a third of the car's length. The rear second-class section was jammed with peons, most of them bound for one of the several villages at which we stopped en route. The trip was down hill most of the way, we did much coasting, and at every stop the car was surrounded with ragged muchachos carrying trays of "dulces" — sweets — for sale. We confined our purchases to bottled Coca Cola, which appears to be available everywhere.

The run to La Ceiba took 2½ hours. The schedule called for the twin-screw diesel passenger boat "Trujillo" to be waiting for us for the trip to Maracaibo, and our railroad tickets included the boat trip, since the boat is owned and operated by the same German company. But the "Trujillo" wasn't there, and we could not learn when it was expected. So we whiled away the time as best we could, in spite of the extreme heat, the flies, dirt and smells. No oranges were available so we again fell back on warm Coca Cola and equally warm beer. About an hour and a half later the "Trujillo" showed up — in tow. She had broken down a few miles out, and we had visions of an enforced overnight stay in La Ceiba, with accommodations of the poorest sort imaginable. However, the breakdown apparently wasn't serious, for we were able to take off about half an hour later, just before noon.



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