

## Report: Team Ven 2008 - The Cliffs of Venezuela

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It's the night of 25<sup>th</sup> May 2008 and 'Team Ven' has assembled at the house of team leader Fadzli Anuar for the purposes of implementing final preparations for an expedition which will finally lead us to the unique landscape of Mt. Roraima which has already been so vividly depicted in Sir Arthur Doyle's 'Lost World'. After thoroughly checking essential apparatus and our bags we were swiftly on our way to Heathrow ready for the eleven hour morning flight to Caracas.



Upon arrival in the Venezuelan capital, the reports of elevated levels of crime plus the political unrest under the rule of Hugo Chavez we had read about back in London were most prominent in our minds, not to mention the feeling of entering a foreign country where one cannot speak the language. However, these sentiments rapidly deteriorated as we discovered the caraquenian people were enthusiastic to help, the most

enthusiastic being Jhonny, a smiley five foot eleven businessman who helped to convert our money, provide some advice for our, and personally transport us to the bus station situated in the outskirts of the capital.

The 25-hour bus journey which took us to San Francisco de Yuruani were of luxurious comfort with reclining seats and ample leg room and could be described as almost perfect were it not for the unnecessarily cold setting of the air conditioning, which made the twenty-three hour journey south of the country a quite cold for those not wearing at least 3 layers of clothing. Mid-way, we transited at Ciudad Bolivar for 2 hours, taking the opportunity to exchange our larger denominations for smaller, it was an intimidating chore with prying eyes around, but luckily several locals offered us advice and kept us company to ensure our safety at the station. We set off in one piece.

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Arriving at our destination late night, the humidity hits hardest as you leave the sub-zero temperatures of the bus. We rapidly realised that the willingness of the natives to help others extended to the south of the country, as we walked up the 'main road' of the indigenous village we passed two young men sitting near a tree enjoying some alcohol who we came to know as Isbel, 21, and Willie, 15, our guide and porter respectively for our team. The team camped in Isbel's yard for night.

The morning after the night before we loaded our bags for a rough ride to Paraitepui, a Pemon village and starting point for the Roraima check. After numerous hours sitting down on planes and luxury coaches over the last few days Team Ven now embarked on foot, aiming for a minimum of twenty kilometres a day with backpacks weighing in excess of seventeen kilograms accompanied by the unwelcome heat and humidity. The first branch of the trek was arguably the hardest after spending such a long time of inactivity, a monotonous trek through the hilly open savannahs, which had been subject to periodical fires in the past.



The team arrived at camp Tok in total darkness, our head torches being the only safeguard against false stepping on the undomesticated road to the camp site residing at one thousand and fifty metres above sea level.

Unsurprisingly the team was able to sleep well regardless of the sound of the surrounding locale after a long first day.

The next morning consisted of a half hour walk to the Tek river which just about covered the calves of the legs when reaching its highest depth, the mild cold water current soon dried off as the team began making more perpendicular progress up



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the Talus slopes, reaching the military base camp, named due to the army units that were based there during period of territorial disputes between Venezuela and its neighbouring countries. The Roraima trek was put on hold for a day, the reason being a member of the team alas came down with fever/food poisoning, but the skills of the team “doctor”, Noam, along with some will power ensured we were back on track the subsequent day.



It was the third day of trekking when we reached the base camp sitting at one thousand eight hundred and seventy metres above sea level, here we truly in the shadow of the mountain having an extraordinary view of Roraima in its entirety, which had been robbed from us by cloud cover since day one. Seeing the mountain from the camp, erased memories of previous hardships of the trek as we all new that time the next day we'd be on top.



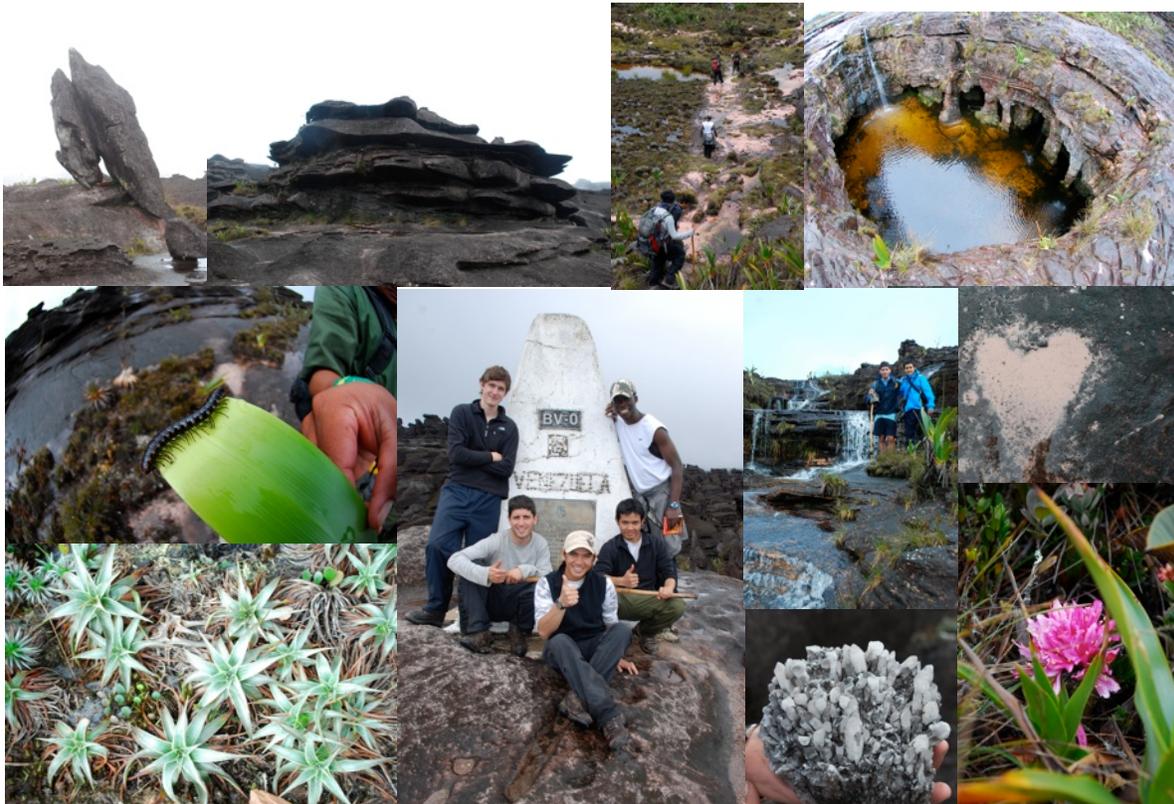
The last three days of hard trekking left the team in good condition to ascend on the ramp a steep climb one thousand metres to the top, where we began to experience the mountains micro-climate, weathering frequent exchanges between the hot sun and the wet rainfall, but at least the humidity became less of an issue at this altitude. The ramp leads us through thick jungle obstructing the view below as well as above, through water falls which we made spectacular viewing from the bottom. The early start ensured we finally reached the top well before dark, creating a memorable mile stone in each member of the team. Team Ven had reached its primary objective.

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Whilst on top, the choices of sight seeing included the Jacuzzi, cold little water pools filled with quartz crystals, the window, a formation of rocks shaped like a window allowing viewers to see all the way down to the bottom on a clear day. We also trekked down to the triple point where we literally stood in Guyana, Brazil and Venezuela

simultaneously.



On the morning of the fourth day on top we began our decent, satisfied we made most of our time on top of a unique landscape that most people have only experienced through words and pictures. The decent warranted rapidly building momentum which allowed us to go all the way back to camp Tok in the evening due to the vast majority of the track being a comfortable downhill walk. After a well deserved nights rest at Tok, we took the final road back to Paraitepui; from

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there the sight of a four wheel drive was most welcome as we drove twenty-seven kilometres back to San Francisco for the victory meal.

It was a mixture of relief and sadness, when we hopped on a bus heading towards Santa Elena. Relieved because we finally managed to find someone to give us a lift. 15 Bolivars per person was a reasonable price compared to a total of 200 bolivars offered by a truck driver in San Francisco. Albeit that, we also felt sad leaving San Francisco. After all, it was the town where we first met Isabel (by chance), pitched our tent for the first time in Venezuela, and also where we started and ended our trek.

The bus that we hitched was heading towards Boa Vista. The bus was air-conditioned and the driver played Brazilian music loudly. It contrasted to the hot and quiet main street of San Francisco, where we had stood for about an hour trying to find transport. Anyway, despite the loudness, most of us managed to get a nap during the one and a half journey to Santa Elena coach station. We got off at Santa Elena coach station about 4 pm, and quickly found out that there wasn't any direct bus to Puerto Del Cruz. Therefore, we took the 5.30 'bus-cama' by Express Occidente to Ciudad Bolivar instead, where we will get a connecting bus. FA and NA managed to change money at a black market rate of 3.9 B/US with a guy at the station, the best we had seen on the trip. The journey to Puerto la Cruz took almost 23hours, passing through a whole lot of military checkpoints. The checks are more stringent, most probably because most people travelling north have been to Brazil. Once, we had to present all the contents of our rucksacks, which meant taking out our dirty & muddy clothes.

At approximately 7am, we arrived in Ciudad Bolivar. It was a familiar sight, as we had stopped here on our way to San Francisco. We waited for about 2 hours before hopping onto our bus to Puerto Del Cruz. The wait allowed us to observe the busy station early in the morning. Ciudad Bolivar is the bus hub in mid Venezuela. There are no ticket counters. Bus operators shouted their destinations, and passengers bought their tickets from the operators next to the buses. The journey to Puerto Del Cruz took 7 hours. Puerto Del Cruz is reasonably big and busy town. There were a lot of big American cars, buzzing shop lots and roadside markets. Once arrived at the bus station, we took a taxi to the ferry station. The car, an old Cadillac could fit all of us including our equipment and gear. It took us about 20 minutes to arrive at the Jetty, costing 40 bolivars.

Conferry is the only ferry operator that provides ferry trips to Margarita Island. The ticket costs 26 bolivars each, a decent price for a 4 hours ferry trip, considering the monopoly business of Conferry. It should be noted that passports have to be produced in order to purchase a ticket. It was then that Michael realised he had lost his passport. The team split up; Noam and Michael rushed to the bus station to search while the rest guard the bags. We were lucky to retrieve Michael's passport. The bus driver had found the passport and sent it to

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Occidente's head office, about 30 miles away from the jetty. It was good to know that the operator was kind enough to keep valuable and important possessions.

Anyway, the ferry left the docks at 4pm. On board, there were 3 levels. The first one is for vehicles, and the other two upper floors are for passengers. The team interacted with a few locals on the ferry. They were very friendly, sharing thoughts and taught us a few local slangs. For instance, 'Te pinga' means 'that's cool' in Venezuela. After arriving at the jetty, we took a taxi to the car rental centre by Margarita airport. It was quite hard to get a rental company that accepts drivers below 25. Only NA was 25, but he did not bring his drivers license. We finally rented a car from Carimar Rentals for 120 BsF per day. Renting a car was best way to travel around the island searching for climbing potential and also accommodation.

We slept in Playa el Agua for the first 3 nights at Posada Nathalie. We had a great stay at Natalie's. It cost us 180 bolivars per night for a self catered, 5-bed apartment for 2 days. It was a great deal, considering its location on one of the famous beaches in Margarita. Playa el Agua, located north east of Margarita is a typical sandy beach, which was quite touristy even during low season. There are a few Internet cafes, a laundrette, and ample restaurants on this beach. During weekends, locals also flock this strip of sand.



On the 3rd day, we hired some fishermen from Punto Negro to take us to Los Frailes. It took 20 minutes on choppy waters to arrive at the group of islands. The islands were barren and mostly dotted with cacti. There were no ideal cliffs by the water that would allow deep water soloing. The north part of the islets faces the open ocean and had stronger waves. Although the cliffs are high and vertical, the rough waters underneath made it too dangerous for deep-water-soloing.



During the final 3 days, we checked into El Yaque Motion, which was just by the beach of Playa el Yaque. El Yaque beach is very famous for its strong winds, shallow and non-choppy water, which makes it one of the best places to windsurf and kite boarding. A lot of great water-sports champions came from this beach. However, sadly to say, there was no ideal area around the beach for deep water soloing.

Due to budget constraints, we could not explore the whole coast of Margarita nor check out Coche Island. On the 15th of June, we flew Venezolana from Margarita

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airport to Caracas, before boarding on Air France to London. The domestic flight was about 30minutes. The trip of a lifetime came to an end!

### Team Ven 2008 Report: Climbing

One of the main aims of the expedition was to explore climbing opportunities in Venezuela. This focused on the two contrasting locations of Mt Roraima and Isla de Margarita and the two very different climbing disciplines of bouldering and deep water solo.

### Bouldering on Mt Roraima



Bouldering is a style of rock climbing undertaken without a rope and normally limited to very short climbs so that a fall will not result in injury. The emphasis tends to be placed on power, strength, and dynamism. A boulder problem or route will involve individual or short sequences of hard moves, unlike traditional rock climbing or sport climbing, which generally demand more endurance over longer stretches of rock where the difficulty of individual moves are not as great.



A good bouldering location fulfills a number of criteria. Firstly the rock must be of high quality in that its surface is clean, edges not sharp and strength sufficient to ensure that holds do not break. A second important factor is the nature of the bodies of rock available.

Ideally these would be abundant and vary in shape and size, thus providing a great number and variety of problems. Finally the majority of these routes must be safe to climb, which is ensured by the quality of the landings beneath them and mainly dry conditions. Through exploring the summit of Mt Roraima we identified and assessed two potential areas for bouldering. These were the general Tepui rock and the campsite overhangs.



Mt Roraima is composed of quartzite and sandstone rock known as the Roraima Formation. The term 'general Tepui rock' describes all the characteristically dark and strangely shaped sandstone that is exposed on the flat summit, dominating

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the landscape. It was images of these unique and fantastic structures that first sparked the idea to explore the possibility of bouldering. On reaching the top the variety of the rocks shape and its abundance appeared to offer limitless potential for interesting problems, a mouthwatering prospect for any climber. Many of the most striking of these were named due to their shape, such as the Car, the Tortoise, the Horse and the Dog. However over the next three days it became clear that bouldering on Mt Roraima has one serious limitation. This is that it rains several times everyday. The result of this was that during our time there the rock never completely dried out and therefore the friction was poor making climbing

difficult.

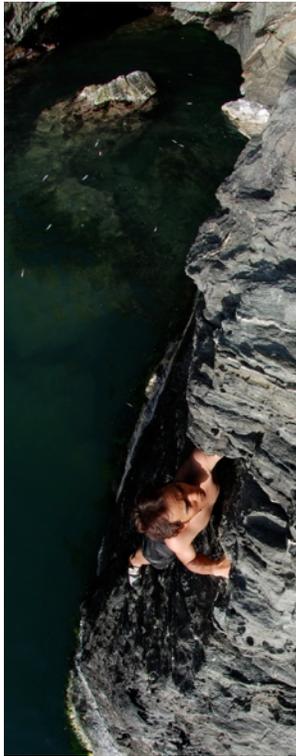
The reality of the weather lead us to concentrate on sheltered sites the obvious ones being the actual overhangs that shelter all the campsites, or “hotels”, on Mt Roraima. It was in the lower sections of these overhanging cliffs that we found the most enjoyable bouldering. The angle of the cliff base varied from vertical to near horizontal in sections where it was severely undercut. This meant that the nature of the bouldering varied greatly with hard strenuous problems as well as some off a lower difficulty. The only drawback was that the less weathered rock was weaker in places and the holds therefore more breakable and sometimes sharp. However by thoroughly checking a route before attempting it, this did not prove a serious problem. The climbing here made carrying a boulder mat all the way to the top very worthwhile.



Admittedly the bouldering on the campsite overhangs, although great fun, was really a consolation. The fact that the weather conditions greatly limited the possibility of climbing the amazing black boulders of Roraima was disappointing. However the potential is definitely there. If a luckier group than us did ever catch the summit on a dry day and with a boulder mat, the bouldering would be spectacular.

[Deep-water soloing on Isla de Margarita](#)

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Deep water soloing (DWS) is a form of solo climbing which is performed over water. The water is solely used to protect the climber against injury. It is viewed as a relatively new climbing discipline but actually ensures a similar climbing style to that of traditional and sport climbing due to the length of the routes.

The first requirement for deep-water solo is a large cliff above deep water. However the key is the gradient of the cliff. For the safest landings it should be at least vertical and preferably past vertical for at least the bottom section of the climb to ensure that a fall would result in the climber landing away from the base of the cliff in open water. The rock type is very important because of this factor. Both the main location for DWS in the UK (Portland) and in the world (Majorca) possess limestone cliffs. This is because a characteristic of limestone is that it is often eroded into caves or undercut. Both

scenarios provide safe spots for DWS. Isla de Margarita is a large island of approximately 1000 km squared in size and we hoped that there could be some Deep-water soloing to be found.



The first step was to rent a car. This meant we could cover as much of the island as possible. Our initial idea was to explore the rocky headlands. The first location south of Playa el Agua on the east coast of Margarita proved promising as several tall caves punctured the headland. The cave walls were naturally overhanging and as they were well flooded, the landing was good. We started to appreciate even more the clear water as any large rocks on the sea bed could be easily observed and avoided. The possibility of climbing was ruled out however due to the numerous crabs that scaled the cave walls laying down goo, making the rock far too dirty to climb. We then headed further



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north to Playa el Negro, a busy fishing bay. Here we scrambled round the headland and were rewarded with a clean vertical cliff of approximately 8 metres in height, with a deep and clear landing.



The route was fairly straight forward yet we experienced the exhilaration of climbing high without ropes for the first time. The jump back down provided further entertainment. Importantly at Playa el Negro we were able to organise a boat trip with one of the fishermen, which greatly widened and increased the efficiency of our search.

By renting the boat we were also enabled to view the islands offshore from the main island of Margarita. However first we spent time viewing larger portions of the Margarita coast and it became evident that the islands offshore could be our best hope. This was due to the fact that most of the cliffs on Margarita sloped inland and were therefore inappropriate for deep-water soloing. We decided to continue further offshore to the islands. From a distance these cliffs appeared white so it was hoped that they were composed of a different type of rock to the mainly dark mainland rock and might therefore provide some more promising conditions for climbing. However on arrival it was clear that we had been greatly mistaken. The rock was in fact the same as that which formed the cliffs on Margarita but had appeared white due to the large amount of sea birds that inhabited the islands, thus ruling out climbing.

Margarita did not prove to be a good deep-water soloing location yet the search was enjoyable and did give us some idea of what it meant to deep-water solo.

### Miscellaneous

We identified 3 vital points which were crucial and should be noted for any team planning a similar attempt in the future.

- Logistics – the average weight of each rucksack was approximately 28 kg. The porter and the guide carried approximately 28 and 15 kg respectively (it is a custom among the people in the village that the porter carries much heavier weight than the guide as it is a good way for training the porter to become a guide in the future). The heavy weight we carried, in addition to the long distance we walked every day, has helped us to appreciate our rucksacks and understand the importance of having a top quality bag. For example, one of the rucksacks was designed such that it is very wide at the bottom and narrow anywhere else. Consequently, the weight wasn't distributed evenly and caused an excess pressure on the lower back of one of the members of the team. Another example, one of the rucksacks, which was bought on EBAY, got torn after the third day of the track and caused inconvenience along the entire

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journey. We highly recommend purchasing a brand name bag from a reliable store. Moreover, it is important to buy the right rucksack which fits the size of the back and distribute the weight evenly.

- **First-Aid and Safety** – the cold and wet nights, the extreme heat during the days, the water and food we ate and drank and especially the track itself, were few of the risks we were exposed to. Even though we all arrived home safely, there were few minor injuries and illnesses. The most common events which required an immediate treatment and as a result slowed down the team were: dehydration, back-pains, stomach aches, head aches, sickness (mainly as a result of the Malaria pills) and exhaustion. Some of these events required a specific treatment and the team worked together to assist each other when a problem has occurred. For example, due to dehydration and stomach ache of one of the team members, we decided to split the original route of the second day into two days. Another example, the team helped out carrying equipment of one of the friends as he suffered from strong back pains and exhaustion. We were equipped with two first aid kits and a large variety of drugs, including pain killers, re-hydration packs, antibiotics and antihistamine. Unfortunately, even though sickness and stomach aches were the most frequent problems, we did not have with us the right medicine for treating these problems.
- **Team Building** – one of the most rewarding parts of our staying in Venezuela and of our track to Roraima in particular was the ability to improve ourselves both individually and as a group. In our penultimate day before coming back home we initiated a "Team-Building and Self-Improvement" seminar which consisted of three parts:
  - Part 1- a person in the group presented his role and responsibilities that he was assigned to by the team and needed to analyse his performance in terms of strengths and weaknesses.
  - Part 2- the group needed to give a constructive feedback to the person who talked about himself in part 1.
  - Part 3- the person who received the feedback had the opportunity to answer back and express his opinion.
  - We went through these 3 stages for every person in the team. We believe that this seminar was extremely valuable for us as we were able to learn from our mistakes and to strengthen the necessary skills which are required in these kinds of expeditions, including leadership, team work, initiation, self discipline, having a broad vision and thinking out of the box.

### Notes:

- More photos are publicly available on the facebook group "UCL Venezuela Expedition 2008"
- A breakdown of our budget spend is included as Appendix A.