

Bugs Bunny in Venezuela

Several years ago I stage managed a tour of Bugs Bunny and the Super Heroes in Venezuela where it's summer pretty much year round. This was a live action show like Barney on Tour or Sesame Street Live where dancers perform in these 100-pound costumes.

The show was part of an ill-fated money-laundering scheme by our producers, the Venezuelan drug cartel, but that's a story I'll tell on another night.

We mainly played bullrings and baseball stadiums, but in the town of Cumana we were booked into a boxing ring.

Our first night, just before the start of the show, one of the cast members came screaming from backstage, "We're being robbed, we're being robbed!" I ran to the dressing rooms to find a couple kids with knives rummaging through the cast's stuff. A bit of yelling and screaming cleared them out and the show went on.

The next day at the hotel the cast recounted the story to a local woman they had befriended at the pool. She listened intently and apologized for the behavior of her fellow Venezuelans. The cast was charmed and invited her and her family to the show.

We arrived at the boxing ring that night to find dozens soldiers with automatic weapons surrounding the place. Apparently, the woman from the pool was married to the Colonel who ran the state's security force and she had enlisted her husband to provide some protection for the cast.

After the performance she invited the cast to a party at her house. When I finished load out the show a few soldiers put me into the back of a patty wagon and I was given a military escort to their house.

The Martinez's lived in a modest neighborhood. The most unusual thing was the 12-foot walls and heavy security gates that concealed all the homes.

Several guards open the gates to the house. Inside the party was in full swing with over a hundred people. I was surprised to find Colonel Martinez barely in his thirties. He spoke little English and I even less Spanish, but with lots of gestures, hand signals and several glasses of his rum drinks we had a great conversation.

We got into a discussion about various guns and weapons when the Colonel's eyes lit up, he threw back his drink and ordered me to follow him.

He led me downstairs and opened the door to a room about half this size of this one, which contained his own private arms reserve. There were so many weapons in this room it would have made Saddam Hussien envious. There were automatic rifles of various caliber, rocket launchers, bazookas, land mines, pistols, machetes and crates and crates of ammunition. He pulled a shotgun from the wall, filled it with shells and dumped another box into his pocket. He stumbled back up the stairs and burst into the party. Everyone was silent. I could hear the collective gasp from the cast. Then the locals burst into laughter and returned to their animated conversations. I

followed Colonel Martinez out through the gates and into the street with several guards following us.

Trying to be casual about the whole thing, I asked one of the guards why there were so many huge speed bumps along the street. "They slow down the people that drive by the Colonel's house and throw grenades." Our conversation was interpreted by the explosion of the shotgun and the sound of shattering glass.

The area went dark and I turned to see smoke rising from remains of the streetlight overhead. The Colonel broke into the chorus of the Venezuelan National Anthem, walked up to the next streetlight, pumped the shotgun and handed it to me. I declined, but he insisted, acting as if I had insulted his mother. I took the gun, aimed, and plunged the area into darkness with the pull of the trigger. The Colonel sang out even louder. By the end of the block we had blown out every light and I had learned the chorus to the Venezuelan National Anthem.

The Colonel's target practice was so consistent that the light and power company arrived every Monday morning to make repairs.

At the end of the night, the Colonel gave me a small card with a telephone number on it and told me if for any reason we had trouble while in his country to call him.

The next stop on our tour took us fifty miles along the coastline. Our driver had the radio turned up full blast and was making sport of running over iguanas bathing in the summer sun along the side of the road.

We were crossing state lines, which in Venezuela, entailed a security checkpoint. After a short conversation with our driver, the guards ordered us out of the car. One of the younger cast members turned completely white and under his breath said, "Oh, no. . ." "What's wrong, Tommy?" I asked him. He began to shake violently, "I took some towels from the hotel."

The soldiers entertained themselves by opening each suitcase and emptying the contents into the trunk of the car.

Twenty minutes later, I was ready to put an end to the nonsense. I pulled the card from my pocket. "Colonel Martinez gave us this and said if we had any problems to call." Just the mention of the Colonel's name brought the guards to a halt.

The leader sized me up and, thinking he was calling my bluff, picked up the phone in the guard shack. The guards and our driver began snickering.

After a brief conversation, the leader slammed down the phone and came screaming from the shack as if there were a national emergency. The guards quickly repacked our luggage, opened the doors and stood at attention. Our driver nervously stamped out his cigarette, started the car and turned off the radio. I thanked them for their consideration and got in. For the rest of the trip our driver went out of his way to avoid even the smallest gecko. I smiled to myself and quietly hummed the chorus to Venezuelan national anthem.