

CARACAS: FROM THE CAR: Mike Spitz

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In 2013, I visited Venezuela for the first time with my girlfriend. She grew up in Caracas and recently relocated after losing her job. Like many others in a minority that opposed Hugo Chavez and his government, she had to leave her own country to find better opportunities and establish a new life.

When we arrived, she warned me not to wear or carry any valuables that would be visible, especially the small 1972 Canon rangefinder that I brought. I was told to leave my film camera in her family's apartment, not to wear my watch, not to carry money, and to keep the car windows rolled up all the way when driving. Maybe, maybe if I was lucky, I could snap a few quick shots with my point and shoot digital canon, depending on where we were going that day. Though I understood her concerns, I suddenly felt limited artistically. I came this far to a country that in the coming months would erupt with demonstrations and violence. This was relatively peaceful time, in comparison to what was about to occur. I wanted to do my best to get some great shots because I may never be here again.

How was I going to take any artistic photos if I could not use my film camera and have the freedom and time to compose a shot? Could I at least tighten the strap and keep it close to my chest? I lived in New York City, and I knew how to look tough so nobody messes with me. The answer was always "no, it's not safe". I gave in. I did not want to put myself or anyone else in danger. Even though I did not notice or sense any danger around me, she and her family were rightfully vigilant. So I had to work within these limitations, shelving my film camera and shooting with a 12 megapixel point and shoot digital camera. Orson Welles was right: "The absence of limitations is the enemy of art".

Taken through closed car windows, windshields, and from close to my pants pockets where I would hide my camera, I aimed to capture Caracas and the outskirts without getting harassed, robbed or worse. The photos in this series are filtered through a socially conscious yet privileged and naïve American perspective, totally alien to the daily social and political tensions in which I found myself suddenly immersed. It was known to locals that this was a quagmire of political corruption, kidnappings, motorists holding drivers at gunpoint to steal their money or valuables, clogged freeways, aggressive drivers, terrible pollution, broken down buildings, hillside barrios cluttered with overcrowded living conditions, and gas that costs next to nothing. Fear, anxiety, and anger were in people's eyes and hearts, with uncertainty about the future and a general sense of lawlessness where violence could erupt at any moment. Though I tried to show some of this urban insanity, these images capture more a humanity and solitude from the surrounding chaos - a calm before the storm.

Caracas is a mixture of breathtaking beauty and urban plight, with serious everyday dangers; it is not a tourist destination. Nobody says “We’re vacationing in Caracas this year.” I was likely the only American in town. Sometimes I did not know what I was taking a picture of - what a sign or mural meant, why a building was falling apart, or what a particular part of town used to be like and how it and why it fell into despair. Despite the dangers, it was an uplifting and eye opening cultural experience, not to mention the amazing food, kindness, hospitality, and warmth of the Venezuelans. This series is about an outsider’s unique perspective of a special place, one that the average traveler is not familiar with and may never have the fortune of experiencing if things don’t change for the better.