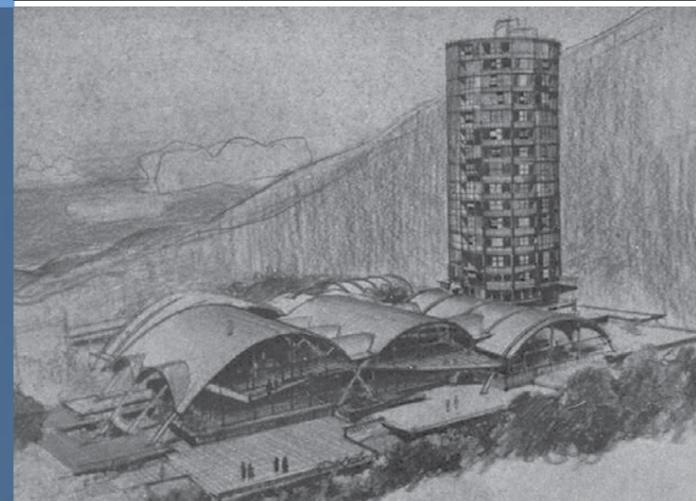


High hopes

HOTEL HUMBOLDT: A VENEZUELAN DICTATOR'S VALHALLA

The whims of dictators leave anything between minor footnotes and lasting scars on the societies that they dominate. The Hotel Humboldt in Caracas was one of Marcos Pérez Jiménez's pet projects and for a brief time the place to stay in Latin America. Decades of closure have not erased the building's symbolic presence and while rumours of its reopening remain just that, the hotel is a physical reminder of a painful past.

Text and images by Anneke Bokern



Clouds are swirling around the cylindrical tower. One moment it's visible, the next it's gone. It's like a fata morgana. A pretty run-down fata morgana, admittedly, with broken windowpanes and once-white paint peeling off its facade. The fact that I'm standing on a mountain ridge surrounded by rickety Venezuelan families, clad in woollen hats and mittens despite the balmy 20°C, doesn't make this situation any more realistic. Nor do the glimpses of a tiny oil-tanker on the Caribbean Sea, 2400 metres below me on the left, or of the high-rises of Caracas, 1400 metres below me on the right, that I catch whenever the clouds on either side break open for a moment. The smell of hot chocolate and riffs of Latin music float over from the aerial tramway station, a few hundred metres down the peak. It's a patriotic song, of course, praising the greatness of Venezuela and the Bolivarian revolution.

Greatness, or maybe rather megalomania is the keyword here. The cylindrical tower in front of me is Hotel Humboldt, a fantasy creation of dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Or at least it's what is left of it. The hotel itself has been closed for decades, having fallen from grace along with its creator. It stands on Pico de Ávila, one of the highest peaks of the 2700m-high mountain range that separates Caracas from the Caribbean Sea. One sunny morning in the 1950s, Pérez Jiménez must have woken up, yawned, looked out of his bedroom window and suddenly found the green mountains that rise behind Caracas a bit bland. Wouldn't it be great if there was a high-rise hotel on one of them, he must have thought. And being a true dictator, he built one.

ABSURDLY REMOTE

The city of Caracas is an avalanche of concrete tower blocks and sprawling slums that pours into a high valley behind the mountains, washes up its sides and gushes into the smaller side-valleys. In the north, however, the concrete wave is cut short at a height of exactly 1000 metres. That's where the motorway cota mil lies, forming a straight border between the city and the mountain forests, which have been a national park since 1958. Named after Alexander von Humboldt, the German naturalist and explorer who travelled and worked



extensively in Latin America, Hotel Humboldt sits 1400 metres above cota mil, visible from nearly every point in the city. Its absurdly remote position intrigued me from the first moment I saw it. I had to go up there.

So I boarded the aerial tramway, ceremoniously re-opened by president Hugo Chávez in 2007 after it had been shut down for 20 years. Originally, there was another aerial tramway on the other side of the mountains, which transported guests from the airport by the sea directly up to Hotel Humboldt, sparing them a long, rocky ride in a jeep on a dirt track. A smaller goods cable car carried their luggage up, and whenever they felt like it during their stay, they could hop on the city-side tramway and descend to Caracas for some shopping or cocktails. It must have been the epitome of tropical decadence and perfectly fit the cosmopolitan image of booming, oil-rich Venezuela in the Fifties. Today the seaside aerial tramway is still out of service – legend has it that a new rope was ordered once, but turned out to be just a few metres too short – and the city-side one isn't reserved for the rich and famous anymore, but is an attraction for Sunday afternoon family outings and school excursions. Richly plastered with Chavist propaganda, it carries the Caraqueños up to a small amusement park with an unlikely ice-skating rink. Walking over to Hotel Humboldt and experiencing a shudder at the thought of Pérez Jiménez' dictatorship is also part of the tour. When the guide mentions the military dictator's name, a distinguished-looking elderly lady spits on the ground.

NOT ONE FOR SMALL IDEAS

'I never thought that we were building a symbol,' Tomás José Sanabria, the architect of Hotel Humboldt, once told a Venezuelan newspaper. 'I just wanted to make the most of the immense opportunity I was given.' The architect, who was 35 years old at the time, got the commission to design the hotel directly from Pérez Jiménez. 'The first thing I did was hike up the mountain. It was the first time in my life, and it took me 10 hours. The city looked beautiful from up there.' He designed a five-star-hotel consisting of a 60m-high cylindrical tower for the guest rooms and a bunch of vaulted buildings around its base, housing restaurants, bars, ballroom and swimming pool. Not one for small ideas, Pérez Jiménez originally wanted 350 rooms. He only got 70, but these were probably the most spectacular ones in the country, offering incredible views of Caracas, the Caribbean and the mountains.





The 'hostaria de la cota 2000', as Pérez Jiménez liked to call it, was opened in 1956. In its short life, everyone who was anyone in Latin America stayed at Hotel Humboldt, from Fidel Castro to Celia Cruz and Tito Puente. But just two years later, the dictator was overthrown; the aerial tramway fell into disrepair and eventually broke down, resulting in the closure of the hotel in the 1960s. Today, the fog drifts through the rooms in the tower, like the ghosts that are said to haunt the deserted building. With their broken windows, the higher storeys are in a sorry state. The lobby and restaurants, by contrast, are perfectly preserved time capsules. They underwent a few modifications in the 1980s, when they were rented out for parties, but the hopeless tackiness of these additions – some fake rococo chairs and pink frilly curtains – only emphasises the modernity of the original interior. Little cup-chairs stand in front of a wall mosaic depicting tropical flowers, and wood panelling, brass chimneys and natural stone walls add a touch of chalet atmosphere. In the bar, one can still picture Celia Cruz singing on the rotating stage, while the young and beautiful of Caracas shook their hips. The huge indoor swimming pool, now empty, once was the first heated pool in South America; the kitchen sported Venezuela's first dishwasher; and the chef had his own elevator, taking him straight into the guest rooms in the tower, so dinner would never get cold. In between the vaulted buildings lies a curvaceous garden, designed by legendary Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx and still planted with hortensias – Pérez Jiménez' favourite flowers.

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR'S DOG

The copper trimmings on the elegant buttresses supporting the vaults of the buildings, though, recently had to be painted black as a disguise, because thieves had started stealing the expensive metal. Venezuela's 15 minutes of wealth are over, the country suffers from gigantic inflation, and the poor take what they can. That's probably one of the reasons why Chávez has donated six Mucuchíes watchdogs to the hotel, a breed from the Andes which is adapted to the mountain climate. It's not just a happy coincidence that Venezuelan national hero Simón Bolívar also owned a Mucuchíes dog, turning Chávez' donation into a patriotic act.

Chávez, who smiles from lots of bright-red propaganda wall paintings around the aerial tramway station promoting his Bolivarian revolution, is also responsible for the fact that the hotel is still empty. That may sound unfortunate, but things could be worse. The company that runs the amusement park holds a license for the



exploitation of the state-owned hotel and recently suggested turning it into a casino, which Chávez vetoed. Luckily, because otherwise the original interiors would probably be replaced by blinking one-armed bandits and bourgeois leather armchairs. It's probably the first and last time in his political career that Chávez agrees with Pérez Jiménez. For the casino-idea isn't new: After his hike up mount Ávila, the architect Sanabria proposed to Pérez Jiménez to include a casino in the hotel, which he considered the only way of making it profitable. 'Under my government, there are no casinos', the dictator reportedly answered.

Despite the occasional hopeful newspaper article announcing a re-opening, Hotel Humboldt is continuing its long hibernation, inhabited only by dogs and ghosts, and enveloped in fog. For some reason, however, someone switches on the lights every evening. On cloudless nights, I could see the hotel hovering in the black sky, high above the city, like the apparition of an architectural saint. Those were the moments when I really couldn't believe that Sanabria wasn't aware of building a symbol. #

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