

# TRAVEL REPORTS - AMERICA

## Trinidad and Suriname

As usual, my visits in either country were much too short. But I only had 10 days and I really did want to go to both of them, so I divided my time equally among them.

Even though the Servas person I wanted to visit in Trinidad happened to be in New York at the time, she invited me to her house in Diego Martin where she shares her home with her daughter and family. They were very gracious to welcome me, even though not official Servas hosts! Transportation, public as well as private, was easily arranged and I was off to explore the city as well as the country side. My next host was equally generous to the point of actually taking me to special places like the famous Maracas beach and the Caroni Swamp Sanctuary. How much I would have liked to spend more time with these wonderful people and their beautiful country.

A one-hour flight took me to Surinam, a country I had wanted to visit ever since I met Henna Blanker at the Thailand conference. At that time, she was the only representative of her country. Many of us were really impressed when we met not just one but FIVE Surinamese at the conference in Spain this summer! Thanks mainly to Henna's efforts, Servas is alive and active in Surinam with almost 30 hosts. It was quite humbling on the day of my arrival to be treated to a brunch by a group of 20 Servas members and sympathizers. They treated me like an important person, and when I wanted to reciprocate later on, I was told: You should not do that, you are our guest. One of the guests at the brunch was a nurse from the Netherlands who spent her sabbatical in Surinam and was reluctant to go back home. Easy to see why: I was told that it never gets cold enough to wear a jacket, even in the rainy season! To me, the wooden buildings and tree-lined streets in Paramaribo seemed very charming. I feasted on the sight of tropical flowers everywhere, even in the "interior" which I was fortunate to visit at least on day trips. Surinamese are rightfully proud of their independence and there seems to be an overall harmony among the people of so many different backgrounds. Of course there are problems and some of the natural resources are still exploited by foreigners. My biggest problem was that the stores close at 4:30 pm and I had too little time to do any shopping!

There is no Eiffel tower in Surinam, no Taj Mahal, not even a pyramid or two. But if you want to meet people who are friendly and hospitable and who live the Servas spirit: Go, visit Surinam.

*Helga Smith, New York, USA*

## Brazil

From February till the end of June my friend and I travelled around the world. A friends told me about her earlier travels and Servas. It sounded interesting to me to meet the people of the country you visit instead of "just" being with foreigners, which is often the people you meet when you stay at hostels.

In South America we travelled in Chile, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil but it was only in the last we used Servas. In Chile there was not any hosts, and it was difficult to plan a visit in Peru and Bolivia because the hosts acquired notice a long time in advance.

In Brazil we went to the Pantanal, Foz do Iguacu, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. It was only in São Paulo we stayed with a Servas host. It was very nice to "know" a person when you arrive to a huge city like Sao Paulo and have a place to go... We had some wonderful days in our host's company and he gave us good advice of what to see and where to go. A good thing is that a local person (if you can say that word about Sao Paulo!?) can show you "real" places that you never would have been able to know about yourself as a tourist. For example he took us to a small public concert which was very good, but which we never would have seen, if it was not because we were with him. He also invited us to see him act in a play and even though it was in Portuguese we thought it was very funny. My friend who is very interested in theatre found it was amazing to see what it is like in Brazil. Our host also arranged for us to meet with a new Servas day host. So one day she picked us up and took us to a museum and afterwards we had dinner at her place with her family and talked all night. I think it is amazing when people open the doors to their house and show great hospitality like that. There is no better way to learn about a culture. But she also enjoyed talking to us and learning about our culture so in that way we got a really good friend.

Today I have been placing the pictures from the trip in my album and there are so many nice persons figuring on them - Many of them thanks to Servas. The organization added another aspect to our trip which - looking back right now - seems to be the best: We have made wonderful friendships and got understanding for the different cultures around the world - A very important thing these days.

*Helene Mark, Denmark*

## Servas, a way of seeing through

Throughout this trip I arranged through Servas to meet Peruvian hosts, one family in the capital Lima, another high in the mountains, a third in the valleys. These experiences helped explain what I was seeing through my western perspective and gave me a glimpse of the 'real' Peru. One host with tears in his eyes explained his wife was ill and had left him, before telling us excitedly about his home, the valley he lived in, the cacti he grew in his garden, the joy his children gave him, the work he did. This man was an architect, but said the pay was poor and when he had lived in Europe for a time he had a wealthier life style.

## local eyes? - Peru

*Val Yellow, England*

We visited another host when Art was feeling unwell. We discovered our host was a doctor. He treated Art straightaway and explained what to do while travelling to keep well. He showed us his home while telling us he was developing a Tourist Guide business. He explained that being a doctor did not pay enough and he needed other work. The last host took us to his family engineering factory in the capital. On seeing the place, Art exclaimed it looked exactly the same as one he had trained in as an engineer 40 years ago (before health and safety). We were experiencing a different world that was sort of familiar.