

La Gomera

The Venezuelan Consul, David Nieves Banchs, made a recent visit to island capital San Sebastián as part of an innovative 'travelling consul' programme.

He was received by Cabildo chief Casimiro Curbelo at island council headquarters, where a, "... fruitful exchange of information about Gomeros resident in Venezuela and Venezuelans resident in La Gomera took place."

The main objective of the current programme is, "... to facilitate the legalisation, where possible, of Venezuelans resident on the island". The issue of birth, death and marriage certificates, inscriptions on the electoral register, general document legalisation and free, yearly passport extensions are among the services offered by this travelling consulate, temporarily sited at number 16, Calle Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe.

It would be reasonable to ask why a South American consulate should set itself up on the other side of the Atlantic on a distant island of twenty-two thousand souls. Why should there be Venezuelans needing help in La Gomera, and furthermore who are these 'Gomeros resident in Venezuela'? What is the connection?

The simple answer is: sea currents and wind.

If you had boarded a pre-sat.nav. sailing vessel in La Gomera and set off to seek your fortune, you would, if you were lucky have ended up safe and sound on the other side of the Atlantic, on the coast of Venezuela or somewhere just north of it. Even today with sat. nav, your first landfall would likely be there. The sea and wind contrive to make it so.

Gomeros resident in Venezuela are likely to be second, third or even fourth generation emigrants, who left in search of freedom from the restrictive feudal system still largely intact on the island until the middle of the last century. They were forced to leave secretly in small, 'illegal' boats and could be shot by the hated Guardia Civil for leaving without the proper permissions. Stories of small boats like the *Telémaco* are famous on the island. The excellent film *Guarapo*, by Canarian film makers, the Rios brothers, ends with the *Telémaco* sailing



HOMEWARD BOUND?

The Venezuela -La Gomera connection

By Barbara Belt



away from La Gomera. It portrays very powerfully the conditions that made such risky crossings so common.

Venezuela was thus a popular destination and there are numerous family links between areas like Maracay, Caracas and the Canary Islands. The Canarian press dubs Venezuela 'the eighth island'. It is of sufficient, relevant interest to warrant daily news reports.

Earlier Canarian immigrants, on finding themselves in a land of plenty where hard work

for reasonable wages, saving money, buying land and building houses were not just impossible dreams, did well for themselves. More than a few made considerable fortunes. Most prospered. Venezuela was the land of opportunity then. Rich in natural resources, with unlimited land and plentiful business opportunities, many Canarians never returned. Abandoned villages all over La Gomera bear witness to this mass emigration. Until the late nineteen seventies, all was well. The Gomeros from

seventies, becoming less isolated and less restricted politically, whilst the opposite is true of Venezuela. Even a cursory look at international news reveals president Hugo Chavez leading an impoverished, struggling country-albeit with much chest puffing and rhetoric.

It is a sad reflection on Chavez and company that this enormous, relatively underpopulated country, so rich in natural resources, is in such dire straits-especially when the rest of South America at last begins to enjoy something of an upward economic spiral. Power and water lines in the capital, Caracas, are apparently crumbling, unrepaired. Patients die waiting for urgent operations. Routine operations, treatment and medicines are often unavailable. Ninety per cent of doctors graduating in Venezuela get out as soon as they can. A monthly wage equivalent to three hundred and fifty euros offers no encouragement to stay and help shore up a failing health system. Spain and the U.S.A. are popular destinations.

Put this together with hard facts of daily life and you get a clear picture of exactly why the Canaries to Venezuela emigration route has now reversed. Venezuelans are fairly desperate to come, or come back to, the Canaries in this first decade of the twenty-first century.

When most of a population struggles and the rest are afraid of going into the streets, life is difficult. Crime rates have soared. Robbery and burglary are so common in

some areas that reinforced compounds patrolled by guard dogs are deemed necessary for the more affluent.

"I can't walk out of our house in Sant Rita alone," said twelve year old Bettina on a recent visit from Maracay with her parents to see family in La Gomera. "My older brother, or another man, has to come with me. We usually leave the house by car. It's safer that way. When we do go out, we have to dress down. Everyone has to. If you go out looking fashionable or affluent, you'll be robbed very quickly. Most people have what we call fashion (plastic) jewelry that they wear if they go out in the street. You can't wear the real stuff, gold or silver, or anything that even looks like it, unless you're going by car straight to a safe place. People are attacked and robbed just for their trainers if they look expensive."

Bettina's family went to Venezuela from La Gomera nearly sixty years ago and continue to live there, although they 'come home' as often as possible. Their thriving business keeps them attached to what is increasingly life in a bunker. Those who are less 'fortunate' want out and would love to come back to the Canaries, where their families came from. Therein lies a small tragedy.

You and I, in fact all foreign, European residents, have an automatic right to live in the Canary Islands-supposedly provided we are not criminals, but even then it seems we can positively thrive here, given the right friends and palms to grease. Criminal or not, we are Europeans. The descendants of Canarians who emigrated to Venezuela are not and therefore have no automatic right of residence. Hence the travelling consulate and its attempts to palliate the worst excesses of the incredible paper chase the Spanish authorities give these unfortunate returnees.

Venezuelan consul David Nieves Banchs, together with second consul Josbeth Ojeda, said they were, "... made welcome by the island Cabildos throughout our visit". Whilst Spanish policy on non-European nationals and their rights of residency must toe the Euro-line, Canarian feeling is very much with the Venezuelans.