

Rappelling Waterfalls in the Andes

Last December, my friend and I ventured to Venezuela for a crazy adventure. We flew to the capital and embarked upon our journey with two scalped tickets for a hidden bus en route to the mountain city of Merida. We made contact with a local tour agency to arrange a trip to Los Llanos for 4 extreme days of Anaconda catching, Jeep safaris, horseback cattle driving, mountain donkey riding, whitewater kayaking, and snorkeling with and then fishing for schools of Piranhas. Upon surviving these activities and an encounter with furious Venezuelans with a machete and a loaded pistol sized 12-gauge shotgun, we returned to the mountain town for a unique rappelling experience!



My friend, a Welshman, two local Venezuelans, and I traveled to the tops of the Andes mountains to the source of the river and its amazing waterfalls. Suited with ropes, harnesses, carabiners, and wetsuits, we began to hike down the river-flow and down the mountain. Walking through the water, we became very chilled from the high altitude mountain water shaded by thick jungle canopy. We continued hiking, jumping, and sliding down the small drop-offs. Sliding down these drop-offs is somewhat similar to a waterpark, except that these are natural and the outcome may be unknown. A couple of times, I found some robust jungle vines hanging near the water to use like Tarzan to assist in maneuvering down the river.

When we reached drop-offs of longer lengths such as 150 feet, we tied rope to the slippery rocks and rappelled down the waterfall. The first footsteps are the toughest as the rocks are slippery and the water is rushing over and bouncing off your head (fortunately we had helmets). We were informed to look either down or straight. If we were to look up at the water, then the tremendous force would hold our head back, either inducing drowning and/or a broken neck. At one cliff with a freefall hang, the experienced Venezuelan told us to be extra cautious as it is extremely slippery and one slip could cause serious damage from crashing into the rock and losing control from the force of the water. Immediately after this verbal lesson, the Venezuelan demonstrated correct technique, but slipped. Fortunately he regained control. Now it was our turn to begin the rappel without slipping and losing control at the freefall hang with the waterfall rushing over our head. Fortunately, everyone survived. Upon completing the initial descent, we rappelled down the Andes mountain either through and underneath or beside the waterfall, ending into a nearly freezing pool of water. These rappels were repeated at various instances while traversing down the mountain and stumbling upon breathtaking jungle waterfalls.



At times the waterfall drop-off was not as steep and therefore we slid or jumped down the rocks. At one point, we ended up at the top of a rock with a 15 foot mandatory jump into a square pool of water about 4 feet by 4 feet square. On all sides was a rock wall or one foot shallow water. Additionally, I did not know the depth of the square pool of water to jump into. I simply knew that the Venezuelan jumped and survived. The only path was this jump as there was no other way down and it would be impossible to go back up. After jumping and successfully landing into the square area, I became fully submerged and was happily surprised that the area was deep enough to not hit the bottom with the force of the 15 foot jump.



This insanely fun activity, known as canyoning or canyoneering is one of the most amazing experiences in which I have participated.