

tête-à-tête @ **10**

# Manuel Guzman

Malaysia and Venezuela established diplomatic ties in the latter part of the last century and the one thing they have in common is the petroleum industry. His Excellency Manuel Guzman, Venezuela's ambassador to Malaysia, says that although Malaysia and Venezuela are oceans apart, there are things about his country and experiences that may be familiar to many here.

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PICTURE BY HALIMATON SAADIAH SULAIMAN



## 1 WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF, AND DO YOU HAVE ANY REGRETS IN LIFE?

I was born and brought up in a place called Barcelona in Venezuela. I have three brothers and one sister, and I'm the eldest. I have four children between the ages of 6 and 34 (the youngest was born here). I don't have any regrets. I made mistakes, yes, and I don't want to repeat them. I also don't want to say that they didn't happen because they are what made me who I am.

If I could go back in time, I wouldn't do them. Like the time when I was about 14 years old and decided to run away for a while. I just disappeared from the house for two weeks. I didn't do anything bad. I just didn't come home. I wish I hadn't. My parents must have been so worried.

## 2 WHAT LIFESTYLE CHANGE ARE YOU GLAD YOU ADOPTED?

When I was 18 years old, I experimented with something that has now become a way of life. I grew up in the 70s — the hippie era. There were lots of things happening and we had all sorts of people visiting Venezuela. One of the groups that came was the Hare Krishna people who were vegetarian. I thought I'd try being vegetarian for three months. After three months, I felt so much better that I decided to carry on for a little longer. It has been 42 years since I first ceased to eat meat. At first, I was vegetarian for health reasons. Now, I don't eat meat for ethical reasons. I don't like killing animals for their meat.

## 3 WHAT IS AN IMPORTANT SKILL OR TOOL TO HAVE IN YOUR LINE OF WORK?

I was previously a journalist. And an ambassador and a journalist share similar tools. As a journalist, we need to interact with people regularly. This allows us to develop a sixth sense and capacity to read people. We learn to read between the lines. We also develop a polite way of getting information from others that they don't necessarily want to give. I find that I use these same tools in my work as an ambassador.

## 4 DESCRIBE YOUR TASTE IN MUSIC

I'd say it's eclectic but my music taste has definitely evolved as I'd gotten older. When I was young, I used to like Rolling Stones. Now, it's more jazz and some Caribbean and African music, like that of Ismael Lo. Of course, I like Jimi Hendrix too.

## 6 ARE YOU A RELIGIOUS PERSON?

I am fascinated by Buddhism. I learnt about Buddha from one of my favourite books — *Siddhartha* by Nobel prize-winning author, Hermann Hesse. The book was published in 1922. I'm not religious, but I like the story of Buddha. It was also told from a German point of view. Similar to *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky, all these characters are very complex and they have personal, moral and ethical conflicts.

## 5 DO YOU LIKE TO DANCE?

I love music and tied with that love is an interest in dance too. I do enjoy doing the salsa.

## 7 DO YOU LIKE TO TRAVEL?

One of my favourite cities in Asia to go on a holiday is Bangkok. However, I don't like to visit a place twice. Instead, I prefer to discover new places. I like to go to places where things haven't changed too much. I don't like to go to where there is a lot of modernisation or globalisation. I like places like Kathmandu in Nepal, Angkor Wat and Vietnam. The people still wear traditional clothes and the food is still ethnic. No fast food. We can get parathas, curries and momo on the roadside. Before I leave Asia, I'd like to visit Sri Lanka and Bhutan.

## 8

### HOW MANY HATS DO YOU WEAR?

I'm the Dean of Latin America and the Caribbean Ambassadors in Malaysia (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Uruguay and Venezuela), and the Deputy Dean of all the Ambassadors here.

We organise events on a regular basis and help each other. For example, about three years ago, in May 2012, the Latin American and Caribbean embassies in Malaysia organised a festival of food and culture at BB Park in Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur. There were several fundraising activities and, subsequently, on June 13, 2012, the money collected was donated to the Community Center Services for the Deaf.

## 9

### WHO'S THE ONE PERSON YOU WOULD HAVE LOVED TO MEET?

Nelson Mandela. He was a great example of a person who was committed to the fight for freedom. He spent 27 years in jail and when he was released, he didn't have any feeling of revenge. When he was President, the blacks came to power, but you know, they didn't deny the whites their rights, despite the whites being a minority. It was not an easy situation.

## 10

### WHAT'S YOUR APPROACH IN LIFE?

Well, it's not necessary to agree with everyone 100 per cent. We can all be different and still appreciate each other. To do this, we need tolerance. And with this tolerance is a strong commitment to freedom.