

# THE PRICE OF

**Aesthetic surgery in Venezuela is a fast-growing industry – and there's a surgeon to suit every pocketbook.**

By Yvonne Milosevic ■



Ask anyone to name Venezuela's most important natural resources, and sure enough, you'll find that oil and beautiful women top the list. With five Miss World titles, four Miss Universes, and countless other coronations, this Caribbean nation has racked up more international beauty prizes than any other country for the past 50 years.

Upholding that kind of reputation isn't easy – which may explain why more and more people see plastic surgery as a way to reshape their bodies if Mother Nature has been less than generous.

Although no national statistics exist, experts estimate the percentage of plastic surgeries in Venezuela mirrors those of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS). In February, an ASAPS study showed that cosmetic procedures increased 304% from 1997 to 2001, and grew 48% from 2000-2001.

"Many women feel they need some kind of operation to make themselves 'perfect' to boost their self-esteem," says Mónica, a 34-year-old advertising coordinator in Caracas. "Even within one's own social group, no one wants to be the fat friend or the ugly friend." Five years ago, when Mónica needed nasal surgery to clear up a persistent respiratory problem, she decided to take advantage of the situation and had a plastic surgeon shave the bump off her bridge and narrow her nostrils. Mónica's friends called her crazy at first, but grudgingly agreed she did look better after the operation.

#### WHAT WOMEN WANT

The most sought-after surgical procedures for Venezuelan women – liposuction and breast implants – account for 70% to 80% of Dr. Orlando Rodríguez' business at the Centro Quirúrgico Cosmoactive in Bello Monte. But why the boom in requests for bigger breasts? "Ten years ago, Latin women didn't care much about the size of their breasts," the surgeon explains. "They worried more about their derrieres – which they wanted prominent, high, and good-looking. The breast-implant boom comes from the in-fluence of North American culture. Americans give breasts a lot of importance; we see that in movies, on TV."

Childbirth and nursing can wreak havoc on a woman's body, as 26-year-old Ninaska knows only too well. Naturally small-busted, she found that her breasts had

# PERFECTION

sagged and become even smaller following months of breast-feeding. So she decided to get breast implants and went in for a mammoplasty on February 22. Though she's still recovering, Ninaska is pleased with what she sees in the mirror these days. "It really helped my self-esteem," she says.

When asked why Venezuelan women worry so much about their looks, Ninaska says it's because of fierce competition to stand out in the crowd. "Men have the luxury of choosing between many beautiful, intelligent and hardworking women. Since they have so many options, they can demand that women try to make themselves even more beautiful." She calls the emphasis on looks remarkably one-sided. "But we haven't demanded that men put out the same effort," she admits.

Dr. Manuel Egea of Unidad Quirúrgica Centro 1 in San Bernardino has labored in this field for nearly 16 years, and calls it "the perfect mix of art, humanism and surgery." It's also big business.

While Egea enjoys performing all types of aesthetic procedures, many patients see him expressly for his pioneering work in transaxillary (through the underarm) breast implants. He began experimenting with this surgical technique 15 years ago, when most implants were inserted through the lower edge of the areola or underneath the breast. Many women have since opted for this procedure because it does not affect nipple sensitivity and leaves imperceptible scarring.

The mercurial canons of beauty make it hard to predict what people will consider attractive 20 years from now. Society worshipped the voluptuous good looks of Marilyn Monroe in the 50s, the malnourished allure of Twiggy a decade later, the Amazonian super models of the 80s and the heroin-chic waifs of the '90s.

But Egea refuses to get caught up in fads. "I don't like trendy procedures," he says. "I observe each patient and try to bring out her true essence."

#### MAN IN THE MIRROR

Last year, men made up 12% of all cosmetic surgery cases in the United States, but in Venezuela, that figure was more like 5% to 8%. Rodríguez says that's an improvement over ten years ago, when just 2% of his patients were men. Now company managers, bankers, politicians, artists and entrepreneurs come in for im-



#### Psychology of Beauty

Daniel Benveniste, Ph.D., an American psychotherapist now working in Caracas, says, "I think the emphasis on beauty in the U.S. is different from Venezuela. In the United States, it seems to have more to do with the image of woman as a product and as an object ... In Venezuela, however, I think the emphasis on beauty is a lot more erotic, playful, related, and includes a woman's own desire."

plants to diminish wrinkles, face lifts, depilation and hair implants.

"I would say that 60% of the men I see come in for liposuction. Young or old, no man wants to have love handles or pudgy pectorals," Rodríguez says.

Machismo may explain why Venezuelan men have yet to descend on the plastic surgeon's office in droves. Women may embrace surgery as a means of reshuffling the cards nature dealt them, but men still consider aesthetic intervention "unmanly." According to 29-year-old "Bruce", a former Mr. Venezuela contestant, "There's a cliché in Latin America that a real man doesn't do anything to enhance his looks. I say that's totally false. Men worry about peer approval and what other people will say more than they care about their true feelings or desires."

Organizers of the Mr. Venezuela pageant had a few suggestions on how to make Bruce's dark good looks more symmetrical, and offered to pay for a nose job, chin implant, and lower lip reduction. He took advantage of the pageant's proposal and couldn't be happier with the results.

#### NEW LOW PRICES

Cosmetic-surgery prices have dropped in recent years, and some clinics even offer financing programs and installment plans to attract budget-conscious patients. "It all depends on where you go," Rodríguez says, "There are expensive clinics, and then there are smaller ones that comply with all the expected norms but at a

much lower cost. Generally speaking, I would say there are plastic surgeons for everyone. Even in the most impoverished areas of Caracas, you'll find a plastic surgeon."

The most popular aesthetic surgeries in this country include rhinoplasty, liposuction, breast implants and face lifts — operations that cost

anywhere from Bs.600,000 to Bs. 4 million, depending on the procedure. Many Venezuelan surgeons would like to "internationalize" their services, but Latin American countries such as Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico lure away potential patients with their well-trained plastic surgeons and considerably lower prices.

Choosing a plastic surgeon is not an exact science, Egea says. "A woman gets all the information from the doctor's office, but she'll make the final decision after chatting with other moms at a birthday party."

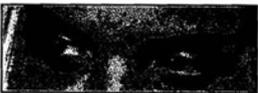
#### QUICK FIXES

Men and women in search of a more youthful appearance without a lot of down time can take advantage of a full menu of rapid "lunchtime" procedures.

Microdermabrasion involves spraying a stream of tiny, sand-like crystals over the skin to smooth lines, acne, stretch marks, scars and wrinkles, giving skin a softer, brighter appearance. Each session lasts between 30 and 50 minutes, and most patients require five to seven initial sessions followed up with maintenance as needed. The cost: between Bs.50,000 and Bs.75,000.

Botox injections work to inactivate facial muscles that produce wrinkles, causing lines to diminish or disappear. However, Botox can only eliminate wrinkles created by facial muscle contractions, not those caused by sun damage or aging. Each session lasts about 30 minutes, and must be repeated every six months or so to maintain the results. The cost: Bs.250,000 to Bs.400,000.

Chemical peels are topically applied acids that help rejuvenate the skin surface by creating an even and controlled shedding of several layers of skin cells. This allows new layers to emerge and gives a fresh appearance to the skin surface. Light and medium peels remove superficial wrinkles; deep peels treat more severe conditions. The complete treatment over numerous sessions lasts about 10 to 15 minutes. Cost varies greatly; light peelings range between Bs.30,000 to Bs.100,000, while medium and deep peelings cost from Bs.100,000 to Bs.300,000. **EV**



#### Most Popular Aesthetic Interventions in Venezuela

Rhinoplasty	1 to 2 hours	Bs.1-2 million
Liposuction	1 to 4 hours	Bs.600,000 to Bs.3 million
Eyelid Tuck	40 minutes to 2 hours	One eyelid, Bs.600,000; all four eyelids, more than Bs.2 million
Breast Implants	1 to 2 hours	Bs.1 million to 4.5 million
Facelift	3 to 4 hours	More than Bs.2 million