

Organized Nomad

"You're still searching – but in an organized way. You could be called an organized nomad." - Existential Universe Mapper (EUM) profile

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Colombia's Beauty Mania: Vignettes from the Curve-lines

Colombia is extraordinarily proud of its women. Before I arrived, every person who had been here (and several who hadn't), whether male or female, would emit a quiet whistle and say "Colombia! Oh boy, the women there!" What's the best way to learn Spanish? According to more than a couple of friends, get a Colombian girlfriend and in no time you'll be fluent. While in Colombia, I get asked all the time, by expat friends, Colombian friends, colleagues, waiters, taxi drivers: "What do you think of our women?" It's almost routine when you make polite conversation with a new acquaintance: "What's your name? What brings you to Colombia? How do you like our women?" While travelling elsewhere in South America, other travellers often ask, "So, is it true about Colombian women being the most beautiful?"

Yet this lofty reputation comes at a price. Colombian women in a less demanding society such as the US often talk about the immense pressure placed on women to look beautiful in Colombia. When the [mayor of Medellin spoke at my university in April](#), he mentioned that one of his policies has been to stop funding beauty pageants and replace them with talent shows, to encourage women to develop other aspects of their personalities. This is a radical shift because beauty pageants are a major feature of Colombia's cultural landscape. In her terrific book on recent Colombian history, [More Terrible than Death](#), Robin Kirk writes that there appears to be little excuse to hold a beauty pageant. In other words, not only do you have Miss Colombia, but you also have everything from Miss Coffee to Miss Banana. And at these beauty pageants, the camera zooms in to extreme close-up on various parts of the female anatomy, where commentators discuss with brutal honesty how this crown-hopeful has too much cellulite or how that one's boob-job went awry. Like examining horses at a fair.

But why so many beauty pageants? Many believe they stem from the days when the drug cartels controlled Colombian society, and that it is the drug lords who not only funded the profusion of beauty pageants but also encouraged and facilitated the massive amounts of plastic surgery that take place in Colombia, particularly in the former cocaine capitals of Medellin and Cali. One friend, LC, after a trip to the Caribbean town of Cartagena, commented "On the beach, it seemed like the only real boobs were mine." Another friend, PR, remarked wryly, "Who would have thought there would be a direct line from little white powder to the elimination of ugliness?"

But plastic surgery doesn't extend only to what I had previously considered the usual places: breasts, lips, nose, face-lift etc. In Colombia, I discovered the existence of the

butt-implant, a sight both equally silly and unmistakable when you see it. This might appear to contradict an assumption of plastic surgery: that you don't want people to know you had it. In Colombia, however, women wear their surgical enhancements with pride. Yet, surgery isn't all. I've also been astonished at the number of adults in Colombia who wear braces. At a party at the house of a US foreign service officer, I counted at least 25% of the adults wearing braces. And this isn't just limited to Colombians: it appears that expats are taking advantage of the omnipresence of braces in Colombia to get their own teeth improved, something I daresay they wouldn't risk doing back home.

There are, of course, other theories besides drug-power for why beauty is so much in fashion. A Colombian friend, AH, attributes it to the recent success of Colombia's economy, which has given a lot more people more money to spend on beautification. But the same hasn't happened in India or Korea or other recent locations of explosive economic growth. Another Colombian, EE, thinks that the weather has something to do with it because you see plastic surgery much more in the warmer climates of Medellin and Cali than in mountainous, chilly Bogota. "If you're going to wear less because of the heat, it may as well be worth showing off." But this too doesn't hold when compared to other hot parts of the world.

Surely there are many interconnecting reasons for the obsession with beauty here, but the one that makes most sense to me is the gender ratio. Colombia has many more women than men, largely due to the five-decade long civil conflict in the country, and hence, there is a lot more 'competition' for available men than in other parts of the world. This in turn means that women have to go to greater lengths to capture a man's attention. (A related common complaint amongst Colombian women is that there is almost no assumption of fidelity when it comes to Colombian men. My elderly Spanish professor once lamented that each man has, on average, seven girlfriends at a time. Even if this is a gross exaggeration, there is likely to be some fire underneath that smoke).

Personally, I don't believe that young Colombian women are more beautiful than young women in other parts of the world. What I have noticed, however, is that *older* Colombian women look better (and younger) than their counterparts anywhere else I've travelled. The number of women who look 18 when they are 35, or 25 when they are 50, is astounding. And *everyone* dresses to kill.

It can't be easy, however. To quote my friend SS "[I know a] Venezuelan who is absolutely stunning - I am not exaggerating, the woman is gorgeous, shapely, 5'10", slim, dirty blond. Even women can't stop staring at her when she's in the room. Her husband is Colombian and she's always talking about how she doesn't feel pretty enough, skinny enough, feminine enough, etc when she's in Colombia. And her mother-in-law is always pinching her, telling her to lose weight or clean herself up. And if you could only see her in person, you'd realize how absurd it is, she is near supermodel material. Scary what that kind of mentality does to a woman's self-esteem."

Posted by Organized Nomad

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