

Medellintravelguide's Weblog

Everything you need to know before you visit Medellin Colombia - Dec 19, 2007

Medellin Colombia- Culture Gram

No matter where you travel in the world, you will find different local customs that are good to know about before you travel there. Here are just a few and we will add to them from time to time.

Just as in many Latin countries, the Paisas are frequently late. They may tell you 7:00PM but do not expect to see them until 7:30-7:45. No matter how much you complain, you will not change their culture so just get used to it. It can be very frustrating to a westerner. To the locals, it is no importa!

In a business meeting, do not be surprised if the first 15-30 minutes involves talking about family, sports, events in the city and other small talk before business subjects are discussed.

Generally avoid discussing politics or the present civil war in public, except with well known acquaintances or relatives that have your trust and confidence. In general, nobody will react with violence to different opinions, but the hearts of Colombians suffer great pain remembering all the victims of the political and narcotics wars of the past and current conflict.

Accordingly, do not approach these subjects in your first conversation with a Colombian. Even if you want to demonstrate that you are informed and knowledgeable about the country's main issues, most Colombians will find it rude if your first association of the country is with drugs, war, or corruption (they are clearly aware of their country's bad reputation. Most likely they will answer with "Colombia has many more wonderful things besides that".

Always say "please" ("Por favor" or "Hagame el favor") and "thank you" ("muchas gracias") for anything, to anyone. Colombians tend to be very polite and formal, and explicitly good manners win the approval of those around you. When you meet someone for the first time express (con mucho gusto) or (mucho gusto en conocerte). If they say this to you first respond (igualmente)=same here! If they enter your home or apartment you should expect to offer something to drink or eat. If you visit them in their home, expect to be offered a meal.

Despite being a formal people, Colombians tend to speak their minds and opinions quite freely. They are also not shy of asking questions about health, salary or social status. These topics could seem offensive to some or considered personal information. Always downplay your wealth (if you are wealthy) and that you have to work for a living.

Like many Americans, Colombians dislike arguing. If you get involved in an argument with a Colombian person, keep yourself cool and express yourself with calm and reason. Colombians admire people with such composure. In many cases just brush it off with a "no importa" and move on with having fun.

Most Colombians are laid back regarding race issues, since white or creole persons blend naturally with natives and Afro-Colombians in everyday life (education, living, politics, marriage). So the word “negro” can be used regardless of who’s saying it, or who is being referred to in this way. You can hear expressions like “negrito” or “mi negro” in a restaurant or on the street. You could hear someone calling “negra” or gorda (fat) to a woman, regardless of the race of the person or her physical size. And in general, Afro-Colombians don’t find it offensive, as they are simply variations on the Spanish word for “black”. But remember, even if you’re not a tourist, when you use the word “Negro”, try not to imply any rude tones or use the word in a derogatory way, because that will mean that you’re using it in a racist way.

Differences between British persons, white U.S citizens or northern Europeans are not perceived by most Colombians. Hence, you can expect to be called “gringo” even if you are, Russian, German or Australian. Don’t let this offend you as a non Spanish speaking visitor.

The same statement could be made regarding Asian visitors. Due to the fact that the most common and familiar Asian ethnicity in Colombia is Chinese, even though there are few Chinese travelers in Colombia. Often times, visitors from the Pacific Rim and the Far East such as Korea, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia and others, are considered the same race. Hence, the expression “Chino” for males and “China” for women (Chinese in either case) to all people coming from an Asian country, is frequently heard. If this is your case, trying to point out your nationality and cultural background will be difficult. Just pass by this perception and avoid uncomfortable situations. This will allow you get in touch with the warmth and friendliness of Colombian people. (Many times the Colombians refer to children as chinos, in a casual sense.)

Colombians have a very unusual and interesting mannerism of pointing to objects with their mouths. It is because pointing to a person with a finger is considered a rude gesture.

Colombians (man to woman and woman to man) generally greet each other by kissing each other on the cheek once. It’s actually not real kissing but more like just touching the other person’s cheek with your cheek, usually the right one. Depending on the degree of familiarity this may be accompanied by a hug or just a pat on the back. Depending on the occasion this kind of greeting is also used when two people are introduced. The alternative on more formal occasions is a hand shake. Men shake each others hands and a pat on the back or shoulder is not uncommon.

So don’t be afraid that the people are trying to sexually harass you or hit on you, and you’ll quickly learn to like this custom.

Regarding table manners, a lot of the more traditional elder Colombians hate it when a guest leaves uneaten food on a plate. If you leave food on a plate in a restaurant, the manager may approach you and ask if something is wrong with the food! This sometimes can be uncomfortable to visitors due to some of the more “exotic” local food that can be served. However, you can explain your lack of knowledge regarding certain foods and they will understand.

Colombians love to dance. It's part of their cultural history. As in other Central and South American countries, it's very common to hear and feel rhythmic music such as salsa, merengue, cumbia or reggaeton. Anyone will be glad to teach you how to dance, and they will not expect you to do it correctly, since they have been practicing every weekend for all their lives.

Colombian night life goes on mostly about dancing. Discos where people sit or stand are rare. In Medellin, the nightlife is very active Thursday through Saturday nights. Sundays are generally family days (although many clubs and discos are open on Sunday night) and Monday through Wednesdays are spent building up to the next weekend. You will see more locals in clubs around paydays, (usually the 1st and 15th of the month).

When dancing, despite what you might think of all the sensual movements of the men and women, people just enjoy music and dancing and it is not normally used for sexual encounters or as sexual signs. You could find salsa at childrens "piñata" parties, or even at parties for older people. North Americans and Europeans could find this odd or confusing because of their experience with salsa and Latin rhythms in their countries. A Colombian dancing innocently could be easily misinterpreted. In general, Colombian women and men are not "easy" just because of the way they dance. It is applied in the same way as in Brazil where an almost-naked "garota" dancing the samba during carnival is not inviting you to have sex with her but inviting you to enjoy, to be happy, to join to the celebration, to join the exuberant lack of inhibition and to be part of a free life (sort of a ritual thing imprinted in the Latin American culture).

Regarding religion, most Colombians are Catholic, and it's important to them to keep certain ceremonies and respect for all things related to religion. You can visit great architectural churches and even go inside, but taking pictures may be considered disrespectful. Ask first. Young people are more open to learning about other religions and debate on this subject.

Colombians are very conservative about homosexual issues, so it's uncommon to find a male couple holding hands or kissing in the street. Girls will walk together arm in arm but it is considered a sign of friendship and not a lesbian couple. There are many gays and lesbians as well as transvestites in Medellin and other large cities but it is not out in the open so much. As a general rule, socially "liberal" Colombians are roughly the equivalent of a socially "conservative" Western Europeans, so you can expect older Colombians to have quite stringent values.

Family is very important in the Colombian culture. Many Saturdays and most Sundays are regarded as family days where they get together, eat, drink, talk and socialize. The younger children receive a lot of attention but are taught respect for elders at a very early age.

Colombians use their hands to show the height of people and animals in a different way. Avoid using your hand with the palm facing down to describe the height of another person; it is used for animals and may be insulting. If you must describe the height of another person, use your hand with the palm facing inward or perpendicular to the street/sidewalk.

Many times you will see people with names like Rodrigo Garcia Ramirez but they go by Rodrigo Garcia. The last name is usually their mother's maiden name. Do not be surprised if your name is James Robert Williams if they call you James Robert. They also do not use nick names like

Bill for William, Bob for Robert, Dick for Richard etc. They may have family and close friend “pet names” but will use their full names when meeting a stranger.

Always remember, these people are not used to seeing a lot of tourists or foreigners. Do not take it offensively if you catch them staring at you. The best response is a smile and an hola, buenas días, buenas tardes or buenas noches. You will be surprised how quickly they warm to your visit to their city.

Please do not be the Ugly American in Medellin. A little patience, a lot of smiles, a willingness to try new things, an attempt to communicate with them in Spanish, an appreciation for their heritage and culture, joining them in their party nightlife atmosphere and respecting their customs will go a long way to making your visit more enjoyable.

Meeting the Family. If a Paisa girl takes you to meet her family and more than the immediate family (aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins etc) are present, you are as good as announcing your engagement. BEWARE!

In the US, when we are kidding someone we say, “I am just pulling your leg.” Here they say, “I am just pulling your hair.” (Yo estoy tomando su pelo).