

Colombia: An Emerging Travel Destination

By Matthew Brown
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When I'm asked about my recent trip to Colombia, I begin with an image from the Andean slopes high above Medellín, in Santo Domingo Savio, a barrio marked by ramshackle tin-roof houses and narrow, serpentine streets. It was there, as fingers of afternoon sunlight stretched through the clouds, that a sloe-eyed boy with a toothy smile wondered why I'd come to his country.

At the time, I was encircled by a gaggle of youths, all bubbling with unbridled energy. Their curiosity and warmth had eclipsed whatever shyness they'd initially felt -- they proudly told me about their school, their *fútbol* games, their public library-in-progress; they wanted to hear about the airplane on which I'd flown from the United States, and about whether it was a long journey. As they marveled at my imperfect Spanish, it occurred to me that they had possibly never spoken with a gringo before.

So why, I was asked again, had I come to Colombia? Looking at the boy's cherubic face, with Medellín spread across the Aburrá Valley below, I realized that I'd wanted to experience moments exactly like this one. "*Para conocer a la gente colombiana*," I said. To know the Colombian people, is what I meant.

Before I'd arrived, my sense of the country had come from the fragmentary reporting of U.S.-based newspapers and magazines, which invariably depicted a nation in conflict with itself. In print, Colombia seemed reduced to little more than narco-traffickers, guerrillas and paramilitaries. But it became clear to me during my trip that South America's fourth-largest country offered many stories besides those that had generated international headlines. Stories found, for example, not only among the endearing children in Santo Domingo Savio but also among the striking, stylish women in the upscale bars and restaurants of Medellín's Zona Rosa; stories found in the colonial architecture of Old Town Cartagena as well as in the vibrant, contemporary work of Colombia's artists, writers, musicians. All this, not to mention a nightlife as festive as any in Latin America, plus a breathtaking natural landscape, which includes everything from towering Andean peaks to sun-drenched Caribbean beaches.

It's a seductive combination that's luring an increasing number of travelers. *The Economist* recently reported that Colombian tourism officials expected 1.5 million foreign visitors in 2006 (final tallies were still pending at press time), an impressive 50 per cent increase from

the previous year. The cruise line Royal Caribbean International will resume port calls to Cartagena in April. Not coincidentally, the Colombian government says that the number of kidnappings has plummeted 85 percent since 2002. Which isn't to imply that all is well: Certain rural regions of the country are still "no-go zones," owing to the presence of leftist insurgents or right-wing narcoterrorist groups, and decades of internecine fighting have displaced numerous *campesinos*. However, with regard to safety, most travelers who take reasonable precautions won't notice a difference between, say, Bogotá or Medellín and other major cities in the region like Quito, Ecuador, or Lima, Peru.

Medellín: Where the Paisas Are

The capital of the Antioquia Department, Medellín has a handful of nicknames, two of which seem most appropriate: the City of Eternal Spring (its average annual temperature is an idyllic 22°C/72°F) and the City of Flowers (its **Feria de las Flores** is perhaps the world's largest horticulture-cum-folkloric festival). Home to more than 3 million residents, Medellín has a sleek, efficient **Metro** (www.metrodemedellin.org.co), whose cable-car extension rises up to Santo Domingo Savio, where the magnificent vista is an attraction not to be missed.

Colombia's most famous visual artist, Fernando Botero, hails from Medellín, and the **eponymous square**, in the city center, contains some 20 of his fascinating, corpulent sculptures -- including *Woman*, *Adam* and *Cat*. The square abuts the **Museo de Antioquia** (www.museodeantioquia.org), a repository of Botero's neo-figurative paintings. Though Botero has lived abroad for much of his life, his work maintains an undeniable Colombian sensibility. I was enamored of *The House of Amanda Ramírez*, with its bizarre carnality, and of the haunting *Death of Pablo Escobar*, in which the infamous drug kingpin is riddled with bullets as he stands on one of Medellín's rooftops. (Escobar was, in fact, killed in 1993 by the Colombian National Police.)

The museum's open-air cafe, which overlooks the square, is the perfect spot to sip a *tinto* (coffee) and watch the bustle of downtown: hawkers selling watches, old men opining on the day's news, and young women kissing their *novios*. And to me, the real allure of Medellín -- and reason enough to visit -- is the locals, who are called *paisas*. They're known for their work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit, but that doesn't diminish their remarkable hospitality and palpable *joie de vivre*, which is particularly evident after sundown. The *rumba* (nightlife) goes full tilt Thursday through Saturday.

"What Am I Without Aguardiente?"

I had been in Medellín only a few hours when I was given my first taste of *aguardiente*, an anise-flavored alcohol of about 60 proof. Since the 17th century, when the King of Spain tried to ban it, the clear, sweet drink has been the country's patriotic booze. "What am I without *aguardiente*?" a Colombian emigrant once wrote. "I'm a nation without people, a tree without roots."

Indeed, it's hard to overstate the importance of the liquor, which is consumed everywhere

from rustic bars to high-end *discotecas*. There's a wonderful, communal spirit to the tipping of *aguardiente*: Bottles are placed in the middle of tables, shot glasses filled and hoisted in unison -- often accompanied by toasts to life's eternal verities. For a traveler, *aguardiente* can be a conduit into the soul of the country. In a few days' time, while sharing the drink with Colombians, I forged friendships and discussed the nation's complex political situation; I learned about Medellín's renowned **Poetry Festival** (www.festivaldepoesiademedellin.org) and about the fascinating buccaneer past of Cartagena. And, of course, I danced.

As one of my new *paisa* friends told me, "Here, people get to know each other dancing." And believe me, there's a lot communicated -- with perhaps some help from the *aguardiente* -- via the sensual steps and infectious rhythms of salsa, meringue, and *cumbia*, which descended from both Colombia's Amerindians and its African slaves. Also widely heard is the Latin pop of such international stars as Shakira (who comes from the north coast) and Juanes (a native of Medellín).

To truly get a sense of Colombia, I think a traveler has to spend at least one night getting swept up in the *rumba* scene. Though it's advisable not to make any significant plans for the next morning.

Caribbean Cartagena

A tropical seaside town whose colonial center -- comprising cobblestone streets, charming squares and baroque facades -- is a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#). A place with a history linked to pirates, the Inquisition, and pilfered gold, it's a *mise-en-scène* that wouldn't be out of place in a movie adaptation of a Gabriel García Márquez novel. This is Cartagena de Indias.

Old Town, the principal attraction, is best seen on foot. I was delighted by the broad colonial arches and the intricate balconies decked with flowering bougainvillea. A visitor can wander here for hours, without an itinerary -- but don't miss the **Palacio de la Inquisición** (e-mail museodecartagena@hotmail.com), which contains an excellent museum displaying, among other things, devices used by the Inquisitors to torture those accused of heresy. Also be sure to see the **Convento de la Popa**, a convent which overlooks the city.

Some of my affection for Cartagena is attributable to its prominence in the life and work of García Márquez, one of my literary heroes. As I'd learned in his memoir, *Living to Tell the Tale*, Colombia's Nobel Laureate got his professional start writing for a newspaper in the Old Town. The city later served as a model for the setting of his book *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, as well as the film based on his novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* was recently shot in Cartagena.

Tienes que Regresar (You Have to Come Back)

I had only been home in the States for a few days when I received e-mails from two

Colombians whom I'd befriended during my trip. They couldn't have been more different from one another -- one was a pensive *costeño* from Cartagena, the other an exuberant *paisa* from Medellín -- but both said they hoped I would return soon. After all, I'd spent only a brief time in the country, and there was more to see, more to do. And surely, I thought, there were plenty more warm, amicable Colombians to meet.

*Note: This trip was sponsored by **American Airlines** (www.aa.com), as well as by the **Medellín Convention & Visitors Bureau** (www.medellinconventionbureau.com), **Proexport Colombia** (www.proexport.com.co), **Gobernación de Antioquia** (www.gobant.gov.co), **Alcaldía de Medellín** (www.medellin.gov.co/alcaldia/index.jsp), and **Colombia es Pasión** (www.colombiaespasion.com).*

General Information

Many travelers, including nationals of the United States, most Western European countries, and Australia, do not need a visa to visit Colombia for up to 60 days. For complete entry/exit requirements, as well as general information and safety tips on the country, see the **U.S. Department of State Consular Information Sheet** (http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1090.html). When you're in Colombia, it will be helpful to have a copy of *Frommer's South America*.

Getting There

Colombia is one of South America's most accessible destinations -- it's only a three-hour flight from Miami or 6 hours from New York City. From its Miami hub, **American Airlines** flies to Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali; **Avianca** (www.avianca.com) has direct flights to Colombia from New York and Miami. Other airlines offering service to the country include **Air France** (www.airfrance.com), **British Airways**, (www.britishairways.com), **Continental** (www.continental.com), and **Copa** (www.copaair.com).

Author's Tips

- Be sure to taste the **native dish of Antioquia**, *bandeja paisa*, which generally includes beans, rice, fried egg, pork loin, avocado, tomato, and chorizo.
- For a great **English-speaking guide** in Medellín, contact Rowan Smit Vergara (e-mail rowansmit@yahoo.com).
- If you want to sample **Medellín's rumba** on a Wednesday night, check out B-Lounge (Cr 35 10-38). Other bars and *discotecas* are listed [here](#).
- Medellín's **InterContinental** is a comfortable, upscale hotel in the El Poblado neighborhood. Other **accommodations options** can be found [here](#). For some lodging choices in Cartagena, [click here](#). (Old Town is where you want to stay.)
- The best restaurant in Cartagena is **Club de Pesca** (www.clubdepesca.com). If you go, try the delicious *cazuela de mariscos boquilla* (seafood chowder with a dash of coconut milk).
- The vast majority of travelers to Colombia don't encounter any threats to their

safety. However, one should never walk alone at night (take taxis), and, in general, **avoid intercity buses after sundown**. Flying is, of course, the easiest and safest way to travel between major Colombian cities.

- You don't have to speak Spanish to get around in Colombia -- many Colombians, especially in the tourism industry, know some English. But the better your Spanish skills are, the more you'll get out of your trip. Study before you go or consider taking a class while you're there.
- Colombians were recently named the "second happiest people on earth" in the New Economics Foundation's **Happy Planet Index** (www.happyplanetindex.org).

Useful Websites

- <http://poorbuthappy.com/colombia> (message boards, travel advice, and safety tips for foreign visitors to Colombia)
- www.realtravel.com (photos, hotel reviews, and blogs)
- www.cartagenainfo.net (packed with info about Cartagena, including maps, recommended accommodations, and schools that offer Spanish classes)
- www.medellininfo.com (everything Medellín: neighborhood descriptions, maps, airport information, and the like)

For more on the author's trip to Colombia, check out the [Frommers.com Podcast](#).

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Note: This information was accurate when it was published, but can change without notice. Please be sure to confirm all rates and details directly with the companies in question before planning your trip.

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