



Bountiful BOGOTÁ

GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK WITH THE
BEST OF THE COLOMBIAN CAPITAL.
WORDS & PHOTOS JUSTINE LOPEZ



When I was planning my recent trip to Colombia my intention was to visit the Caribbean city of Cartagena; Bogotá had not been part of the plan.

However, since most international flights pass through Colombia's capital city, I decided to take a detour to see what this sprawling metropolis had to offer.

Before my visit, I had heard relatively little about contemporary Bogotá. But stories of Pablo Escobar, drug cartels and the rampant violence that made international headlines in the 1980s and '90s still echoed in my mind. I had been told that the country had made a clean break from its tumultuous past, and that Bogotá was in fact the next big thing in South American travel.

Despite all of this, I couldn't help but feel a little on edge about my weeklong visit to the city as my plane touched down at Bogota international airport.

Outside of the airport I hailed a cab and headed toward La Candelaria, a colonial hamlet in the center of Bogotá that would serve as the base for the duration of my stay. Coasting through the city, I was immediately intrigued as I glimpsed expertly painted murals on freeway underpasses, street side stalls selling *empanadas* (meat-filled pastries) and perfectly preserved colonial buildings.

When I arrived at my hotel and stepped onto the balcony the view was remarkable. All I could see was an expansive sea of buildings nestled at the base of towering green mountains, creating a dramatic and unexpectedly beautiful setting for one of South America's largest cities.

Despite my initial apprehensions about visiting Bogotá, all it took was a quick stroll through La Candelaria to be charmed by the city, and by the end of my time there I couldn't believe Bogotá was still so marred by its unfortunate history. Much to my surprise Bogotá was chock full of culture, art and history, and there was no end of things to do in this wildly underrated city.

COLONIAL PAST

What most people don't realize is that Bogotá is a colonial city, founded by Spanish conquistadors in 1538. The district of La Candelaria serves as an impeccably preserved reminder of the city's colonial heritage.

Walking around town that legacy was palpable.



MUSEUM HOPPING

More than anything, Bogotá is a city of art, which is deeply rooted in the city's history and this is evident in every facet of modern day Bogotá. It seems almost impossible to visit Colombia's capital and not spend at least one afternoon museum hopping at some of the city's excellent museums.

Museo Botero is probably the most well-known museum in the city. Colombian native Fernando Botero is one of Latin America's most well-known living artists and is famed for his unique depictions of absurdly large figures. The Botero Museum is filled with some of his most famous paintings and sculptures, featuring everything from exaggeratedly plump women, to still lifes of comically enormous fruits to portraits of chubby families. It also houses world-class pieces from the likes of Dalí, Monet and Picasso.

The Museo del Oro (Gold Museum) is also highly touted. Not only does it display thousands of examples of pre-Hispanic gold work but it offers a lesson in Bogotá's history and the indigenous peoples who once inhabited the region.

DINING AT STREET STALLS & TRENDY EATERIES

Bogotá is a food lover's paradise. It is possible to graze on an array of delicious eats while exploring the city's streets. Some of the delicious street foods that I sampled were the handmade *arepas* (thick corn tortillas stuffed with meat or melted cheese), *buñuelos* (cheese fritters) and fried plantains. *Obleas*, thin wafers smeared with *arequipe* (caramel), are a Colombian favorite for dessert, as is hot chocolate, which is traditionally served with a hunk of white cheese.

While the street food was delicious I was also



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pleasantly surprised to find that Bogotá has a booming restaurant scene. For a touch of whimsy there is Andrés Carne de Res, an eclectically decorated and legendary steakhouse, while more health-conscious Bogotáños head to Quinua y Amoranto for vegetarian variations of local fare. Fusion restaurants like Wok blend the flavors of Colombia with Southeast Asian staples, including a delicious version of *nasi goreng*.

VIEW FINDING AT MONSERRATE

Part of what makes Bogotá such an alluring city is the fact that it sprawls along the base of a series of picturesque mountains. From La Candelaria it's possible to spot a white 17th century church that is located at the peak of



Monserrate. One of the most popular weekend activities among tourists and locals alike is to head to the top of Monserrate (by cable car or on foot) and take in the view.

In an effort to work off some of those filling Colombian meals, I opted to hike up the mountain. The base of Monserrate is located a quick jaunt from La Candelaria, and from there it's a steep 1,500 steps up to the church and lookout point.

Located at 2,640 meters above sea level, Bogotá is one of the highest cities in Latin America. While the thin air made the climb fairly tough, the panoramic views of the city – which sprawls as far as the eye can see – was well worth the effort.

TOURING COLORFUL STREET ART

Graffiti is everywhere in Bogotá, and at times it felt like I was in one big outdoor museum. In the past few years, the city

has become a hub for some world-renowned and incredibly talented artists. There is remarkable artwork located around every corner – massive murals adorn the sides of colonial buildings, sculptures are hidden in the most unlikely of places and trendy stencils decorate the city's walls.

During a tour of La Candelaria's street art, I learned that the prevalence of so much outstanding artwork is due in large part to the city's progressive attitude toward street art. In fact, in the past couple of years there has been a major push to regulate graffiti. Instead of being criminalized, I learned that street art is actually welcomed and encouraged in Bogotá.

Not only does it play a huge role in the city's contemporary art scene, but Bogotá's colorful street art ended up being one of the things I enjoyed most about this amazing and multifaceted city. ■

IF YOU GO ...

Getting there: There are no direct flights from Jakarta to Bogotá. However, Colombian airlines like Avianca and Copa offer numerous connections from Los Angeles and Mexico City, the primary gateways to South America.

Where to stay: To be close to nightlife, shopping and a vibrant restaurant scene, Zona Rosa and Zona T are prime choices. La Candelaria is close to museums and colonial architecture.

Staying safe: Though Bogotá has become increasingly safe in recent years it is always best to take taxis at night and use caution with valuables such as jewelry and electronics.

Popular tours: A tour can offer a great introduction to the city. The Bogotá Graffiti Tour (bogotagraffiti.com) and Bogotá Bike Tours (bogotabiketours.com) are both excellent – and unique – options.

