My Trip to Colombia

On October 2, 2016, four days before I began typing these words, the people of Colombia went to the polls to determine the fate of a peace accord negotiated between the government and the country's largest rebel group, FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Since 1964, the Marxist-Leninist guerilla movement has been locked in a continuous battle with the government, funding their activities through illegal mining, extortion, robberies, kidnapping for ransom and the protection and distribution of illegal drugs. The violence perpetuated by the insurgents has often been met with even greater violence by government forces and right-wing paramilitary squads, creating a worsening spiral throughout the country. During the past 52 years, this internal conflict has resulted in more than 220,000 deaths; the vast majority of these victims have been civilians.

In 2012, the administration of President Juan Manual Santos undertook four years of negotiations with FARC's leadership to end the conflict, culminating in a ceasefire accord signed in Havana on June 23, 2016. Because this peace treaty had many contentious provisions – especially regarding amnesty for crimes committed by the guerillas and their immediate participation in general elections with guaranteed seats in congress for the next ten years – President Santos decided to declare a referendum, allowing the people to have the final say on the accord. And while many in Colombia voiced concerns and even outrage over the accord's generous amnesty terms, the national consensus was that, after more than half a century of violence, weary Colombians were more than ready to embrace peace and begin building a new society.

During my 11-day tour of Colombia, guerillas were laying down their arms and their leaders were going around the country apologizing for atrocities committed by their rank-and-file, all in anticipation of the expected approval of the accord by the voters. But four days ago the citizens of Colombia *rejected* the peace agreement by a very slim margin, a vote that has shocked the world. In fact, so confident the outcome of the referendum was going to be a resounding 'yes', a stunned President Santos admitted

there was no Plan B. As all sides scrambled to save face and keep the peace process alive, the international community scratched its collective head and asked: *What now, Colombia*?

The outcome of the referendum pretty much summed up my own ambivalent feelings towards the country prior to my visit. I didn't know what to expect before I went…*and was completely surprised by what I found*. The country was certainly 'exotic' enough to pique my interest, and recent travel reviews all suggested the major cities were now safe to visit. Colombian friends at work (and others who had traveled to the country in recent years) told me the country had changed remarkably. *Okay*, I thought, *I'll give it a try*. I booked the tour through Gate 1 Travel after getting a phenomenal deal on an 11-day package. But in the back of my mind I still couldn't shake those stereotypical buzzwords; you know, cocaine cartels, Pablo Escobar, communist insurgents, kidnappings, bombings. I'll admit I was more than a tad concerned. As my departure date approached my thoughts seemed mired in some kind of yesteryear newsreel. It didn't help that the travel alerts issued by the State Department on Colombia contained a lengthy section on safety, which, if taken at face value, was enough to make even the most hardened world traveler wary. I Googled 'how safe is Colombia?' and found online postings not just about the insurgency but also scary tales of tourists being robbed in taxis or drugged in clubs or restaurants. So, not unlike the prevailing mood following the recent referendum results, I left for my tour thinking: *What now, Colombia*?

As usual, though…(and I say this in almost all my journals)…my worries were for naught. The tour included stays in Bogotá, Manizales, Medellin and Cartagena (and visits to about half a dozen other cities or small towns) and not *once* did our group encounter any safety issues. The former cartels are long gone, and with the end of the country's largest insurgency in sight (regardless of the referendum vote) the peace and order situation has never been better. The big cities were absolutely amazing; lively, robust, clean and innovative. The Colombian people were very friendly everywhere we went. The food was outstanding, not to mention the portions! The current exchange rate favored the US dollar, making the cost of most items very reasonable. I left in September when the weather is mostly cool and comfortable, if a little rainy, averaging between 50 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit. The only exception was Cartagena, a beach resort area that is actually hotter than Miami year round. All in all, I had a truly wonderful experience.

So, let me take you on this journey with me. It began on Friday, September 9th, 2016. I took a taxi to Miami International Airport…

DAY ONE

My Avianca flight left Miami on time at 9:45am. I suffer from claustrophobia, and to reduce my anxiety I called Avianca three days before my departure and was able to secure an aisles seat for each leg of my journey (in addition to the international round-trip, there were three in-country flights). The trip from Miami to Bogotá lasted only three and a half hours. The plane was a smaller Airbus model but the coach section had comfortable seats and plenty of legroom for a tall guy like me. To kill time I watched several rerun episodes of The Big Bang Theory on my personal video monitor. After breakfast was served I nodded off and didn't wake until we were forty minutes outside the capital of Colombia.

We touched down at El Dorado International Airport at 12:45pm (Colombia is only one hour behind Eastern Standard Time). El Dorado is a superbly run airport, situated about 15 kilometers west of the city center, handling nearly 50% of all flight traffic in Colombia. It was recently voted the Best Airport in South America and when I got off the plane I immediately understood the accolades. Immigration was a breeze. When I arrived at the luggage carousel I couldn't believe my eyes…*my suitcase was already there*! In all my years of international travel this was the first time I didn't have to wait for my luggage.

Before heading for the exit I decided to stop at one of the many moneychanger booths in the terminal building to convert $200 into Colombian pesos. Oddly, banks in Colombia do not change foreign currency; it has to be done by an official moneychanger (or you could simply make a withdrawal at an ATM; your dollars are automatically converted into pesos). Before leaving the States I Googled the official

exchange rate; it was roughly 2,890 pesos for 1 U.S. dollar. I often joke that despite being a mailman I have a terrible sense of direction. But in reality, my math skills are worse than my directional skills. When the exchange agent handed me a wad of bank notes totaling nearly 600,000 pesos I was certain he'd made a mistake. How could $200 be this much money in Colombia? And then I thought about the additional $600 in my pocket and suddenly realized I was an instant millionaire!

With luggage in tow, and a wallet brimming with cash, I headed towards the exit and found our tour director, John Alexander Murcia Parra (um, John for short), holding up a Gate 1 sign. He checked my name off his list and welcomed me to Colombia, asking me to wait with a group of other tour members off to the side. I met a couple from San Francisco, Karen and Jack Woy, retired educators. We made small talk while other tour members (who were arriving on this same flight) staggered into view. Afterwards, John told me there were only 23 total members on our tour, a very good size for such a budget trip. When our immediate group was fully assembled – there were a few arriving later that evening – John led us outside the terminal building where a large white tour bus took us to our hotel in the north-central part of the city.

Bogotá is divided into twenty localities (or districts), each of these neighborhoods with their own unique characteristics. Officially known as Bogotá, DC (the Capital District), the city serves as the nation's capital and as such must be independent of any of the country's 32 *departments* (which are the equivalent of states or provinces). Although, geographically speaking, Bogotá actually lies within the boundaries of the Cundinamarca department in the central part of the country. The city is nestled on a high plateau (the *Altiplano Cundiboyacense*) in the Andes Mountains roughly 8660 feet above sea level, along the southeastern part of what is referred to as the Bogotá *savanna*. To the south of the city, in the high alpine regions, is the world's largest *paramo* ecosystem. The Eastern Cordillera of the Andes, from north to south, form the Guadalupe and Monserrate Mountains just east of the city's center, a natural barrier that limits Bogotá's growth potential. The western part of the city is bordered by the Bogotá River, which flows across the savanna forming the Tequendama Falls some 32 kilometers to the southwest. The area around the Tequendama Falls contains an archaeological site dating back to 11,000 BC (believed to be one of the first human settlements in Colombia). The cumulative effect of Bogotá's geographical surroundings makes for a beautiful backdrop as you drive into

and around the city. And because of the high altitude the weather is usually constant and quite comfortable year round (with a mean temperature of only 56 degrees Fahrenheit).

During a typical work week (which runs from Monday to Saturday afternoon for most residents) traffic is usually heavy and traversing the different localities of Bogotá can be quite cumbersome. It took us roughly 35 minutes to reach our hotel – the NH Bogotá Metrotel Royal – situated near the financial and business center of the city. Along the way we got our first glimpses of this exciting metropolis, the second-highest capital in South America. The streets were very clean and seemed well maintained. We passed one side of the enormous Simon Bolivar Metropolitan Park in the Teusaquillo district. Located in the middle of Bogotá, this park is spread out over extended greenspaces totaling more than 970 acres (larger than New York's Central Park) with a large lake and a concert area capable of accommodating more than 140,000 spectators who gather for rock festivals, sporting events and the annual Simon Bolivar rallies marking South America's independence from Spain. One thing I did not witness on our way to the hotel was urban blight. If there were poor, rundown neighborhoods (and there were, to be sure) we didn't see any on our short drive. The city looked quite modern and inviting, with bustling crowds and traffic everywhere. From my first impressions I knew I would enjoy my stay here.

We arrived at the hotel around 1:30pm but our rooms were not yet ready (check-in wasn't until 3:00pm). While we waited in the lobby, John made photocopies of our passports to facilitate the check-in process throughout our trip and handed out tourist maps of the surrounding area, suggesting a few places we might want to go for lunch. This is when I met Missy Soete from Kentucky. She introduced herself as the only other person traveling solo besides me, and we agreed to pair up and take a jaunt around the area and have lunch in one of the restaurants recommended by our tour director.

We left our luggage with the concierge and headed east along *Calle 74* (74th Street) in front of the hotel, making our way to *Carrera 11* (the term *carrera* means 'race' – which I will explain later in this journal – but basically refers to a road or avenue). On the corner of Carrera 11 and Calle 74 stood the *Monasterio de la Visitacion de Santa Maria*, a closed convent with a tall clock steeple. We turned right and walked two blocks through a commercial district and reached the shopping mall center at *Avenida Chile*. John told us the third floor of this mall contained numerous moneychangers.

Missy needed to convert some dollars so we took the escalator to the third level and shopped around for the best rate possible. The exchange rates varied greatly; the highest we could find was 2,790 pesos to the dollar. I opted to change another $100 not knowing how much local currency I would need throughout my trip. As it turned out, the $300 I had already converted was more than enough. In fact, I still had 200,000 pesos leftover when the tour ended. *Colombia is a real bargain, folks*!

We decided to have lunch inside the very busy Crepes and Waffles located next to the mall, one of the restaurants John had recommended. Crepes and Waffles is actually a popular restaurant chain in Colombia, with more than 30 locations in Bogotá alone. Founded in 1980 by two university students who opened a rustic French-style *creperie* in the capital, the restaurant became so popular it grew into an international chain. Today, in addition to serving great veggie, meat and seafood crepes (along with delicious dessert ones), Crepes and Waffles is also famous for its humanitarian efforts; in Colombia, the restaurants hire mostly single women in financial need. I ordered the Arabian beef crepe (which came with a salad) and Missy had the goulash crepe (recommended by John). Lunch was great but the conversation was even better. An attractive woman, Missy was in her late forties but looked a lot younger. She had a degree in the mental health field and was also currently employed as a stewardess for a major American airline. I was glad to make her acquaintance. When one travels solo, as I often do, the first day of a tour can be a little awkward. I compare it to the first day at a new school when you're not familiar with anyone yet and are not sure whom you'll end up being friends with. So it was nice to have a companion to get around on that first day in Bogotá.

By 4:00pm we returned to the hotel. I collected my room card keys from the front desk and grabbed my luggage, which was still sitting in the lobby, and headed up to my room. Prior to the trip I checked my guidebook for suggestions on what to do in Bogotá, knowing I would have the first day free. I read there were more than 50 museums and dozens of art galleries in the city. Checking my guidebook's local map I discovered three small art galleries not far from the hotel in the trendy Zona Rosa district. My goal was to visit all three prior to nightfall. I had asked Missy if she wanted to accompany me. We agreed to meet in the lobby at 4:30pm. We set out heading east again along Calle 74 and when we reached Carrera 11 we made a left turn, following the avenue straight into the Zona Rosa district. A large portion of the sidewalk was used as a bicycle or skateboarding lane and I

nearly collided with several riders on our walk. The temperature was beginning to drop, but it still felt very comfortable.

The Zona Rosa extends from Calle 79 to Calle 85, and from Carrera 11 to Carerra 15. In the heart of this district is an area known as the ‘Zone T’, a long T-shaped pedestrian intersection where the streets are lined with high-end stores, malls and restaurants. This locality is quickly becoming the modern face of Bogotá, containing large upscale hotels, theaters, office and apartment buildings. The area has some of the city’s prime nightclubs and caters to the more affluent residents of the capital. You will find sidewalk cafes alongside haute cuisine restaurants, designer shops like Hugo Boss, Louis Vuitton, Massimo Dutti, Salvatore Ferragamo and Ralph Lauren, to name just a few. Because of its tourism draw and the upper classes it caters to, the Zona Rosa is very well policed and monitored. Street crime is virtually non-existent here and the area is safe to walk at all hours of the day and night.

When we reached Calle 81 we turned left and about halfway down the block found the first of the three art galleries, *El Museo Galeria*. Unfortunately, the gallery had closed the day before in order to change art exhibits. Undeterred, we walked one block further north to Calle 82 to visit the Bojanini Art Gallery located in a very upscale shopping mall called El Retiro. This gallery was more like a small shop featuring artwork and ceramic houseware items designed by Colombian artist Ana Cristina Bojanini Safdie, who uses bright colors and native themes and symbolism in her works. We strolled through the mall before exiting and heading west towards Carrera 15, passing some pricey designer stores in the process. On one corner we came across a very ironic setting: a two-story commercial building with a large religious store on the bottom floor…*and a sex shop and tattoo parlor just above it!* A curious nod to the undecided consumer if ever I saw one.

On Carrera 15 we found the Geba Art Gallery, but this one was also closed. *Drats*. We headed back to the hotel along Carrera 15 and decided to stop for a snack at an outdoor café. I had a traditional café con leche (coffee with boiled milk) and Missy sampled an arepa with cheese, chicken and guacamole prepared on an open grill. The sky was overcast and as night descended it began to drizzle. We hurriedly made it back to the hotel before 7:00pm and retired for the evening. When I reached my room I found it to be a bit warm. Because of the high elevation of the city, and the colder

temperatures, most of the older hotels in Bogotá do not have central air-conditioning. I was able to open some vents below the windows, allowing the cool night air to filter in. I busied myself setting aside the clothes I would be wearing over the next few days in Bogotá and tried to find a TV channel (among the hundreds listed) in English. I eventually located a CNN news program but was so exhausted from the day's travels I quickly fell asleep while watching it.

Day Two

I set my smartphone alarm clock for 4:30am. I am an early riser back home, so waking up at this hour is normal for me. I made several cups of instant coffee in my room using an immersion water heater, which I always bring with me along with a supply of instant coffee and creamer. I have a wicked caffeine addiction and need to consume my soothing Java Joe first thing in the morning. Luckily, the quality of the water in Bogotá was excellent. In fact, according to my guidebook the city's filtration system is probably the best in South America; it was actually safe to drink the tap water. And while I was a little hesitant at first, the tap water proved to be as good as they claimed. *At least in Bogotá*. I stuck to bottled water everywhere else.

I shaved, showered and wrote in my journal, periodically watching the CNN news broadcast on TV. At 7:00am I went downstairs to the hotel restaurant for a buffet breakfast. I sat with Karen and Jack that morning. At 8:00am our tour group met in the lobby and John escorted us to a small conference room on the second floor where we had an orientation meeting. This was the first time I met everybody. In addition to Karen, Jack, Missy and myself, the 11-day Classic Colombia Tour included:

Rhoda and Arthur Turkel, Teaneck, NJ; brothers Abdi and Ken Farhang from Sacramento and Long Beach, CA; Mirta and Alfonso Gonzalez, Oceanside, CA; Jie Zuao and Weimin Jiang, Atlanta, GA; Eva and Leo Kremer, Stamford, CT; Mary and Andrew Halstead, Pomona, NY; Laura Halstead, Jersey City, NJ; Cathryne and Penny Sundel from New York City,

NY; Mireya, Angel and Luis Ortiz, Santa Teresa, NM; and Annette Ortiz, Denver, CO. (Um, to the gang, if I inadvertently made a mistake with your personal information, please forgive me!). This was a fun bunch of seasoned travelers and we bonded quickly in our small group setting.

During the orientation meeting we took turns going around the room introducing ourselves and mentioning where we were from. Afterwards, John formally welcomed us to Colombia and spoke briefly about himself and how he became a tour guide. Originally, he was a pianist by training, with a degree in music. John had even studied his craft abroad, in Dusseldorf, Germany, and was employed by the Bogotá Ballet until a terrible car accident severed ligaments in his hand, ending his career as a musician. Looking for a new vocation, and fluent in English, he became interested in the groups of tourists who flocked to Zipaquira, his hometown, to visit the Salt Cathedral. He took on a job as a local guide, found out he had a knack for this sort of work, and eventually made his way up to tour director. John is currently studying for a second college degree in civil engineering. He has a wife, a trained psychologist, and two young daughters. John was an awesome tour director; a young, handsome, very personable individual, always smiling with a great disposition, and very knowledgeable about the sites we were visiting. The group really liked him, and the tour (which was fantastic) benefited greatly from his service.

John went over the itinerary, telling us what to expect and preparing us for the days ahead. He mentioned a change in travel plans for our sixth day. Initially, we were to drive from Manizales to Medellin, a trip that would have taken roughly six to eight hours through the mountains. But on-going construction made passing this particular roadway during the day nearly impossible, so Gate 1 Travel booked a small charter flight to get us to Medellin. According to John this was a blessing since the flight only took 25 minutes and would allow us more time to spend in the city.

By 8:30am we assembled on the bus for our daylong tour of Bogotá. Joining us was a local guide named Diego who would be with us for the next couple of days. Our first stop that morning was the fascinating public marketplace known as *Paloquemao*, perhaps the most authentic cultural experience an outsider can undergo in the nation's capital. Our bus slowly made its way southeast from Calle 74, eventually turning south on Carrera 7 (traversing a diplomatic zone along the way). We followed this main avenue through the Chapinero-Zone G district, an area known for its restaurants,

bohemian cafes, bars, artistic centers and universities. Among the many schools located on Carrera 7 is the main campus of the famous *Pontificia Universidad Javeriana* (the Pontifical Xavierian University), the most prestigious private school in Colombia, founded in 1623 and administered by Catholic Jesuits, catering to the educational needs of the country's elite.

As we got closer to the market area we came across an unusual sight, a neighborhood with rows of brick, terraced Victorian-style homes. John told us that Colombia's liberator, Simon Bolivar, had employed the use of English soldiers in his fight against Spain. Following the war of independence, the Brits who settled in Bogotá in the 1800s introduced this style of architecture made famous during the reign of Queen Victoria. Supposedly, when early morning fog blankets the city this neighborhood resembles something out of a London urban scene.

We passed the *Museo Nacional* (the National Museum of Colombia) not far from the *Parque Central Bavaria* (the Bavaria Central Park), a beautiful neighborhood of upscale apartment complexes, turning left on Calle 19 close to the heart of the old Sante Fe district and continued up to Carrera 25 where the public market is situated. Our bus pulled up alongside one of the entrances leading into the *Plaza de Mercado de Paloquemao* (the Plaza of the Paloquemao Market). I have no idea how big this place was, but it was huge, more than a block long. The main market area is enclosed, but surrounding it are smaller outdoor markets and vendors. We began our tour by walking through the flower market located just outside what I assumed was the main entrance.

The name *Paloquemao* means 'burning stick or trunk' and refers to a fire that occurred here many years ago when a large tree burnt to the ground. The market originally opened in the 1940s and has been at its present location since 1967. From what I could tell, the basic construction appeared to be a series of interconnecting open warehouses divided into different sections: fruits, vegetables, aromatic herbs, flowers, meat and fish. You will also find many food vendors inside offering a unique sampling of the local cuisine. During the week the market is open from 5:00am until about 4:30pm, and on weekends from 5:00am until 2:00pm. But most of the action here is observed during the early morning hours, when the citizens of the city come here to do their daily shopping. Although there are other markets in Bogotá, this is by far the largest and most important one. It is a messy but lively and bustling glimpse into the lives and culture of Colombians living in the

capital. Everything the country has to offer – from the fertile Andes and jungles to the Caribbean and Pacific coasts – is for sale here. All five of your senses will come alive as you browse the many aisles and stands. Exotic fruits and vegetables compete in a medley of bright colors and textures. Distinct aromas waft through the air, an odd combination of flowers and herbs, fresh meat and fish, mixing with the smells of cooked foods. You'll hear the endless cacophony of sellers and buyers negotiating purchases. A truly unique cultural experience.

John took us on a brief tour of the outdoor flower market section of Paloquemao. It was Saturday morning and fresh consignments of flowers were being unloaded from trucks as we made our way through the vendors. Colombia is the leading exporter of flowers in South America and one can easily see why walking around this place. The contrasting colors made for quite an eyeful. Bright reds, purples, oranges and yellows. Aside from a large selection of different colored roses, they had several species of ornamental cabbages (grown for their beautiful flowers), large carnations, orchids of every stripe, a wonderful mix of crocuses, and some rather unique plants and shrubs. Oftentimes I had no idea what species I was looking at; I saw many varieties for the first time that day.

We entered the indoor market of Paloquemao through the produce section. A statue of the marketplace's patron saint, *La Virgin del Carmen*, is encased in a glass booth inside the food court area near the entrance. Shoppers were sitting around enjoying empanadas, arepas or pastries made fresh daily by the local bakeries or pushcart vendors. Diego led us through the fruit and vegetable stands explaining the different varieties. I saw several types of avocados, from small round black-purplish ones to enormous green ones, and over-sized plantains, carrots, squash, beets, etc…everything piled high on top of wooden tables. Potatoes, green beans, nuts and citrus fruits were sold out of long sacks propped up along the aisles. We stopped at one fruit vendor to sample a pineapple guava (a small, egg-shaped green fruit with a sour guava flavor) and dragon fruit (the white fleshy inside, lined with tiny black edible seeds, tasted like a cross between a kiwi and a pear). Diego showed us the guanabana (soursop fruit) and explained its many health-inducing properties. Next to it was a box with mora gooseberries, a species indigenous to Colombia.

From the fruit and produce stalls we walked the crowded aisles through the meat section. Unlike many other markets in the Andes – where fresh

meat is butchered on the spot and must be sold daily – the meat section at Paloquemao is refrigerated. This is probably the cheapest place to buy a good cut of steak or pork in the country. We saw skilled butchers in bloodstained aprons carving away at slabs of fresh meat. Short, burly workers delivered hundred-pound pig carcasses by hoisting them over their shoulders. On one of the outside platforms adjacent to the meat market, John stopped to buy a plate of *lechona* from one of the food vendors. Made of roasted pig stuffed with rice and spices, *lechona* is a traditional Colombian dish that takes about 10 to 12 hours to prepare in an oven and is usually served during the holidays (although it is offered year-round in restaurants). John handed out plastic forks and we dug in, sampling the tender succulent pork and crunchy skin. A short walk further along the platform, John once again stopped to buy us another food sample. This time it was an enormous chicken tamale wrapped in a banana leaf. Using the same plastic forks we tore into the tamale like a pride of lions devouring a kill. *Delicious*.

We reentered the market area from the platform and found ourselves walking through the fish section. Here, you can find fresh fish and shellfish from both Colombian coasts, and trout from the lake regions. Food vendors called *cevicherias* prepare different types of ceviches, oysters on the half shell, and an unusual aphrodisiac drink (jokingly referred to as the 'mattress breaker') called *berraquillo*, a concoction made with crabmeat and borojo fruit (indigenous to the rainforest region) and liquidized with either cola, whiskey, chocolate, honey or milk. Not for the faint of heart. Our final stop inside Paloquemao was in the aromatic herbs section. Row after row of wooden stalls offered an exotic mix of medicinal plants, flowers and spices. We stopped at one stall where two female vendors plied natural remedies for just about everything that ails the physical *and* spiritual being. Herbs designed to heal, or to protect, or to induce love…you name it. They take this stuff seriously down here.

We made our way back to the entrance and boarded the bus. Our next stop was a visit to the *Museo del Oro*, the famous Gold Museum of Bogotá, located just off Carrera 7 near the historical center of the capital. It was a short drive to *Parque de Santander*, the small plaza in front of the museum dedicated to Francisco de Paula Santander, the first vice-president of independent Colombia, who eventually served two terms as president during the 1830s. A military general who was greatly influenced by the Enlightenment in Europe, Santander is regarded as one of the ideological founders of Colombia's Liberal Party, and a staunch defender of

constitutional law. His beliefs often led to strong disagreements with Simon Bolivar, the more famous independence leader (and first president of the republic) who didn't think twice about establishing a dictatorship when political turmoil arose over dubious reforms to the new constitution that would have strengthened Bolivar's hold on power. I find it ironic that Bolivar, who succeeded in becoming an absolute ruler (however briefly), is highly regarded in the region as the 'liberator' of South America, while Santander – a man who probably did more in those early years to ensure the survival of guaranteed constitutional rights and the universal rule of law – is not seen in the same vein. Perhaps this explains why South America has produced so many dictators over the years.

The entrance into the Gold Museum is located on the east side of the Santander Plaza. Inside the lobby are two bank vault doors leading into the actual museum. In 1934, Colombia's central bank (*Banco de la Republica*) began working with archaeologists to preserve the national patrimony represented by its incredible indigenous past. The bank opened its first exhibit – a gold piece known as the *Poporo Quimbaya* (a small receptacle with lid from around 300 AD) – more than 70 years ago and has been adding exhibits and administering these museums ever since (there are several gold museums throughout the country; I think the one in Bogotá is by far the largest and most impressive). Today, the Gold Museum contains more than 55,000 pieces of artifacts covering all the major Pre-Hispanic cultures of Colombia. It is a *fascinating* place, with stunning exhibits and one of the most popular museums in all of South America, receiving more than half a million visitors annually.

The museum contains three floors of exhibits, the rooms carefully designed in thematic fashion to showcase the evolution of Pre-Columbian gold and metal smithing techniques, and artifacts from the different tribal regions and the various ritual uses of the pieces on display. There are descriptions in both Spanish and English. We began our tour on the third floor and worked our way down. The third floor had what I thought were the most fascinating room exhibits. One section showed the various gold pieces used in a shaman ceremony, the other section, 'The Offering', is divided into three exhibits explaining how gold was used in rituals. Gold figurine offerings, called *tunjos*, were tossed into the *Laguna de Guatavita*, a small water-filled, forest ringed crater northeast of Bogotá, considered a sacred place by the ancient Muisca culture of Colombia. The sacrificial dumping of elaborate gold offerings into this 'lake' inspired the legends of El Dorado,

and spurred useless attempts to drain the crater to reveal its riches. One of the most famous gold artifacts in all of Colombia is on display here; the *Balsa Muisca* (the Muisca Raft), a miniature, sold gold, intricately carved ritual boat scene depicting the inaugural ceremony of the new *zipa* (ruler) surrounded by the various chieftains. Many of these exhibits inspire awe. But I suspect the use of special lighting heightened the affect. Some of the exhibit rooms were dimly lit and the shiny gold masks and idols made for a remarkable contrast.

On the second floor the exhibits were broken down by region. One section explained the process of early Muisca goldsmith techniques, including a description of other types of alloys used such as *tumbaga,* a name the Spaniards gave to a native alloy that combined gold, silver and copper to make a harder but more malleable precious metal. The ratio of gold-to-silver-to-copper of the *tumbaga* pieces varied greatly depending on the region and the purpose, and was often created by a smithing method known as the *lost wax technique*, a process by which a duplicate metal sculpture is cast from an original sculpture, allowing for some very intricate designing depending on the skill of the sculptor. Once the sculpture is cast, it was burned or cleaned with acids to remove the copper and silver, leaving only shiny gold. One of the exhibit rooms explains the *lost wax technique* in great detail. The use of *tumbaga* was widespread among the Pre-Columbian cultures of Central and South America. The second floor also had exhibits showcasing metalsmith tools and other artifacts such as pottery, stone, textile, shell and wood pieces from the various Pre-Hispanic peoples, such as the Calima, Zenu, Quimbaya, Muisca, Tolima and Uraba cultures. One of my favorite exhibits was the ‘chamber of chants’, a dark, circular, enclosed room that was automatically lit up section-by-section revealing gold artifacts on display within its plastic walls and floor, all the while ancient shaman ceremonial chanting reverberated across the room, slowly increasing in pitch. It was fun…and a little creepy, too.

After some free time to wander around the museum on our own, we gathered in front of the building for a walking tour of the historic quarter of Bogotá. Diego and John led us across *Parque Santander* – groups of skateboarding youths were careening across the small plaza practicing their jump moves – back to Carrera 7, which became a wide pedestrian walkway that led straight towards *Plaza de Bolivar*, the historic main square of the city. According to our guides, this was the original (first) street of colonial Bogotá. The word *carrera*, as I mentioned earlier, means ‘race’ in Spanish,

and in this particular case referred to *horse* racing. The early colonists were fond of conducting horse races throughout the city, and the wide streets that would normally be called avenues elsewhere were dubbed *carreras*. They were later numbered so that the citizens would know which *carrera* was having races that day. As time went by, the popular term stuck and today the city's layout contains *calles* (streets), traditional *avenidas* (avenues) and *carreras* (or roads). In addition, modernization and a sharp increase in the city's population and infrastructure has expanded the roadways here and led to unusual street creations like *ejes* (axis), *diagonals,* and my personal favorite, *transversals*. Luckily, though, most of these streets are numbered, so it's not really difficult to find your way around if you know how the numbers run. As for the area we were walking – in the historic city center – the streets, like all Spanish colonial towns, were set up in an easy-to-navigate grid pattern, radiating out from the main square.

To reach Bogotá's main plaza we continued walking southwest for roughly five city blocks. On the corner just across from *Parque de Santander*, where we started our short trek, stands the *Iglesias de San Francisco* (Church of St. Francis). This structure – built between 1557 and 1621 – is the oldest surviving church in Bogotá, and has undergone various alterations and reconstructions due to earthquake activity (the Catholic orders that have administered the building throughout the centuries added some changes, as well). Today, only the façade, tower and chancel date back to the original church, which is probably why we didn't go inside. Of note is the 17th century main altarpiece, touted as a gilded work of art. We crossed the wide *Avenida Jimenez* over tramline tracks abandoned in the late 1940s when buses were introduced in the city, and continued along Carrera 7 through several commercial blocks lined with shops and office buildings. The entire street was now one enormous pedestrian walkway and crowds were teeming everywhere: office workers, shoppers, people strolling about or sightseeing. We came upon several street entertainers, including one guy who stood on a crate, completely covered in silver paint, imitating the songs of Carlos Vives, a very popular Colombian singer.

On the wall of one building we saw a painting of Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a tribute to a very popular Liberal Party leader who – many historians believe—was on the verge of becoming the country's next president when he was assassinated here in 1948, sparking massive and violent riots in the capital known as *El Bogotazo*. Following Gaitan's murder, a renewed armed struggle between liberals and conservatives ensued, tearing the country apart

and claiming upwards of 200,000 lives over the next fifteen years, events that helped facilitate the formation of FARC in the 1960s. Ironically, Dr. Gaitan himself was a strong opponent of violence, and thought to end previous conflicts between the social classes through political and economic reforms.

Just before reaching Plaza de Bolivar, on the corner of Calle 11, stands a museum called *Museo de la Independencia – Casa del Florero* (the Independence Museum – House of the Vase). The building is a late 16th century colonial home with quite a story attached to it. In 1810, a *Creole* (this was a person born in the Americas but of Spanish descent) by the name of Antonio Morales asked the Spanish owner of the house for a decorative flower vase for the purpose of using it in the reception of a visiting dignitary. The owner, whose fierce Spanish loyalties were enflamed by Napoleon's recent invasion of Spain, refused and a tense argument commenced on the street. People gathered around and soon a fistfight broke out between the men and the vase was shattered in the process. When word of this 'brawl' spread, it actually spurred on a rebellion by local Creoles, making this fisticuffs an important footnote in the independence history of Colombia. One of the exhibits inside the museum is the actual broken vase that helped spark the independence movement.

After crossing Calle 11 we reached Plaza de Bolivar, the main historical square of Bogotá. Located in La Candelaria, the city's oldest colonial district, the square has changed remarkably over the last several hundred years. Gone are the colonial buildings that once lined the square. Today, only the *Capilla del Sagrario,* the small Baroque cathedral on the eastern side of the plaza, dates back to the 16th century. But if you wander around the streets near the plaza you will encounter numerous restored 300-year old colonial homes.

The Plaza de Bolivar is a large, paved-and-tiled open square. In the south section of the plaza is a statue of Simon Bolivar erected in 1846, the first public monument in the city. It is interesting to note that in neighboring Venezuela, where Bolivar was born, *every* town square is named after him. Surrounding the Plaza de Bolivar are the usual important buildings one sees in all former Spanish colonial cities. On the east side is the *Catedral Primada*, the official cathedral of Bogotá, adjacent to it is the smaller *Capilla del Sagrario*. The cathedral is the square's largest, most dominate structure, built in the early 1800s on the spot where three previous churches

stood. A unique feature of this cathedral is that it does not have the usually elaborate ornamentation seen in other big churches of the region. Inside is a chapel containing the tomb of Jimenez de Quesada, the founder of Bogotá. On the west side of the plaza is a French-style building called the *Edificio Lievano*, constructed between 1902 – 1905, which houses the mayor's office. On the southernmost end of the plaza, just beyond Bolivar's statue, is a neoclassical structure known as the *Capitolio Nacional*, seat of the nation's Congress. And on the north side of the plaza stands the more modern-looking *Palacio de Justicia*, home to the country's Supreme Court. The original building was destroyed during the riots following Gaitan's assassination in 1948. But the new Palace of Justice building didn't fare any better. In 1985, a smaller guerilla movement in the country known as the M-19 seized the building, taking hundreds of lawyers, judges and Supreme Court magistrates hostage. The government, fearful of creating a dangerous precedent, decided against meeting the demands of the guerillas and ordered the military to attack. The heavy-handed assault, which lasted for hours, set the palace aflame. More than a 100 people died, most of them hostages, including half of the Supreme Court justices. In 1989, the government ordered a new Palace of Justice to be built on the same site. Hopefully, this building will have better luck.

We spent roughly thirty minutes here, taking photographs of the area. The plaza is home to an incredible amount of pigeons and there were locals feeding them. Despite this, though, the square was remarkably clear of birdshit. I wondered if they hosed the place down daily. Afterwards, we continued walking down Carrera 7, past the Congress building, towards the presidential palace known as the *Casa de Narino*. To our left on the corner of Calle 10 stood the San Bartolome La Merced, one of the most prestigious colleges in the country. Several blocks before the *Casa de Narino* we encountered barriers monitored by elite presidential guards. The public is allowed to go through the barriers (providing they don't look suspicious and show the contents of any bags they might be carrying) and walk up to the building to take pictures, but if you want to go inside the presidential palace you need to request permission in advance. Our group stood in front of the barriers and took zoomed-in photographs of the palace from there. To our immediate right was an enclosed courtyard, and on the opposite side was the *Iglesia Museo de Santa Clara* (the Church Museum of Santa Clara). This is one of the oldest churches in Bogotá (built between 1629 and 1674) and perhaps the most richly decorated one. The single-nave design has a barrel vault adorned with golden floral motifs and walls covered with nearly 150

paintings and sculptures of saints. The building is now administered as a museum by the government.

From here we walked east along historic Calle 10, making a brief stop at a small garden square known as the *Plazuela de Don Rufino Jose Cuervo*, dedicated to the famous Colombian writer and philologist whose main body of work was the study of Spanish dialects spoken in the country. His dictionary is still in use today. There is a statue of him in the garden. Along the wall of a surrounding colonial building adjacent to the plaza are two carved signs listing a Bill of Human Rights (I believe these are from the Declarations of the Rights of Man from the French Revolution, which formed the argument for the independence movement). Just up the street further east we came across the *Palacio de San Carlos*, which served as the presidential residence of Simon Bolivar. He survived an assassination attempt here when his mistress Manuelita Saenz tipped him off and he fled through one of the palace windows. She was jokingly referred to as "the liberator of the Liberator". A sign outside the palace window details the incident. Across the street is the *Teatro Colon*, a theater dating back to 1792. It was redesigned by Italian architect Pietro Cantini in 1892, and recently underwent a six-year interior renovation making it the most lavish theater in the city, a premier venue hosting concerts, ballets, operas, plays and even live DJ events.

We made a left on the corner and walked one block to Calle 11, passing many local restaurants including one that specialized in capybara, the world's largest rodent. Closely related to guinea pigs, a full-grown capybara can reach more than four feet in length and weigh over one hundred pounds. They are native to South America and quite the delicacy. The restaurant we passed had an open grill where a capybara was slowly roasting on a spit. I actually thought it was a small pig until John told me otherwise. *Wow, that is one enormous rat*, I remember thinking.

We stopped at the *Centro Cultural Gabriel Garcia Marquez* on Calle 11, a modern exhibition complex named after Colombia's most famous literary writer. In addition to its literature exhibits (and the center's huge bookstore), the site has rotating presentations that go beyond the literary field. For example, they were featuring a *Lucha Libre* wrestling exhibition on the day we arrived. At this point our group broke for a one-hour lunch break. John recommended several nearby restaurants, telling us to try a local specialty called the *Ajiaco Santefereno*, what can only be described as a gut-busting

chicken soup. The big meal of the day for most Colombians is lunch. This was going to be my first dining experience in an authentic Colombian restaurant. I had read that large portions are the customary fare down here, but I was still shocked (*pleasantly*, mind you) by the amount of food served. America's concept of 'super-sizing' takes a backseat in this country.

I asked Missy if she'd like to accompany me to lunch and we broke from the others and headed down the street to a place called *La Puerta de la Catedral*, one of the restaurants recommended by John. From the look of the place, the establishment seemed built inside an old colonial building. They had two floors; we sat on the first level in an enclosed courtyard. The restaurant was packed. A good sign. We each order the *ajiaco*; the soup was served in an over-sized pot (with handle), filled to the brim and accompanied with white rice and avocado slices. Missy dumped the rice and avocado into the soup, so I did the same. It was absolutely delicious! There are different recipes for Colombian *ajiaco*, but the ingredients are similar. This one had three types of potatoes, thick pieces of corn on the cob, capers, various herbs and other spices, heavy cream and at least two whole shredded chicken breasts.

We rendezvoused with the group at 3:00pm back at the cultural center and walked up the street to visit the Botero Museum. The museum features paintings and sculptures by Fernando Botero Angulo, an internationally renowned figurative artist who hails from Medellin, Colombia. His style is often referred to as '*Boterismo*', and depicts his subjects in large, often exaggerated form. Born in 1932, and still working today (mostly from Paris) Botero has received numerous awards for his easily identifiable artwork, which can be found all over the world. If you're not sure if you've ever seen a Botero (and trust me, you probably have), think *big, round fat people*. I love the man's work, and was simply delighted to wander around the various galleries within the museum admiring his collection of clothed and naked chubby persons. There is nothing like a Botero to boost your own self-esteem. His portraits and sculptures made my 250-pound body feel positively *svelty*. The museum opened in the year 2000 after Botero donated 208 works of art from his private collection to the Bank of the Republic. Currently, there are 123 Botero items on display along with artwork from other prominent painters such as Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Joan Miro, Claude Monet and Marc Chagall (among others). I *highly* recommend this museum.

Shortly after 4:00pm we re-boarded our bus near the historic landmark *Iglesia de la Candelaria* (the Church of our Lady of the Candelaria) and headed over to the Monserrate station. Monserrate is a mountain that dominates the eastern edges of the city, rising to over 3,150 meters above sea level. From the very top, the *Cerro de Monserrate* (Monserrate Peak), you not only get a sweeping panoramic view of the entire capital, but also – if weather permits – you can see parts of the volcanic range of the Cordillera Central to the west. This mountaintop is one of the most popular tourist attractions in the city. In addition to the excellent vantage points there is also a church (built in 1917 to replace the original 17th century chapel destroyed by an earthquake) with a shrine devoted to the image of the "Fallen Christ", a sculpture made in 1657 depicting Jesus after He was taken down from the cross. This popular religious statue, which now sits atop the main altar, has been the source of pilgrimage to this peak for centuries. Many miracles have been attributed to this image and devotees still flock up the mountain to ask for blessings. On one part of the summit are restaurants and small souvenir shops.

Not everyone had signed up for this optional excursion. John remained on the bus and accompanied those who were not interested back to the hotel while Diego stayed with the rest of us. There are three ways to reach the top of Monserrate. For the athletically inclined there is a hiking trail that takes about 60-90 minutes to walk, what I imagine is a grueling uphill trek all the way. During the weekends, *Bogotanos* love to make the climb, but I read the areas around the trail at night and during the less frequented weekdays attract knife-wielding muggers. You can also ride to the top of the mountain in either a funicular railroad car or the *teleferico* (a cable car lift). Originally, the Monserrate excursion (the only optional excursion of the tour, by the way) included a funicular ride, but for some reason we were not able to get on the train, so we took the cable car lift to the top. The ride lasted approximately 5 minutes and went over the tree line (actually, we scrapped a few branches near the top), rendering a nice view of the city below.

We spent the better part of an hour up there. Diego led us to the Monserrate Church but many of us stopped first to photograph the valley, with its panoramic scope of Bogotá stretching out between the surrounding mountains below us. We toured the church, walking to the main altar to see the famous 17th century statue of the 'Fallen Christ'. During an annual pilgrimage ritual, the statue is carried down the mountainside by the faithful to one of the churches in the city where Mass is performed before a large

gathering. Diego took us around the back of the altar to a smaller semi-circular chapel. We saw one section of the church where devotees who'd been blessed by miracles of some sort had glued tiles or plaques of gratitude to the walls. Some of these plaques were quite interesting to read. One individual thanked Jesus for his American green card! Eventually, the church put a stop to this practice, fearing it would damage the interior of the building.

After touring the church, we made our way through a vendors' section, a combination of souvenir stands and makeshift restaurants. At one food vendor stall, Diego invited us to drink coca tea. We sat on plastic chairs while the female owners served us the hot tea (some laced with *aguardiente*, a popular liquor here made from sugarcane). A few in the group sampled the empanadas. Afterwards, Diego gave us some time to wander around and take photographs or shop the souvenir stands. On the way back down we were able to take the funicular train, sitting in the first compartment. The steep incline (which passes through a tunnel, as well) made it feel like a slow-motion roller coaster ride. At the bottom, a mini-bus was waiting for us and we headed back to the hotel.

In my room I washed up, made some coffee and spent an hour writing details of the day inside my journal notebook. At 7:00pm I went down to the hotel restaurant for our 'welcome dinner', sitting with the Ortiz family and brothers Ken and Abdi. We had soup and roasted chicken with mash potatoes and veggies. The conversation was great. Annette works as a forensic examiner and had some very interesting stories to tell. By 8:30am I returned to my room and was thoroughly exhausted after an entire day of sightseeing. I tried to watch the CNN news broadcast but soon fell asleep.

Day Three

I awoke at 4:30am and was unable to go back to sleep. My right foot was a little painful, I think from all the walking we did the previous day. After showering, I made coffee and busied myself writing in my journal and

editing photos on my Nikon camera, and caught up on the national news back home via the CNN channel. At 7:00am I went downstairs for breakfast. The big sightseeing trip for the day was a visit to the *Catedral de Sal* (the Salt Cathedral) in the town of Zipaquira, approximately 49 kilometers north of the capital. By 8:00am our group was assembled on the bus for the hour-long drive.

It was Sunday, and we had to leave early for two reasons. John told us the Salt Cathedral is a very popular tourist destination and if we really wanted to enjoy the site we needed to get there before the large late morning crowds arrived. The second reason for leaving early was the traffic out of the city. On Sundays, the municipal government of Bogotá closes many of the major *carreras* to allow for bicycling, skate boarding, running, and so forth. The residents of the city are very sports-orientated, and we saw families out in large numbers exercising along the streets or in the many parks. Traffic has to be diverted and getting around is slower than usual.

We drove along Autopista Norte (the North Highway), the main road out of the city, and then hooked up with Route 45A all the way to Zipaquira. As we were leaving Bogotá we passed the famous Heroes Monument, a massive rectangular stone tower dedicated to the soldiers and battles that led to the region's independence from Spain. On the north side of the monument is an equestrian statue of Simon Bolivar. At this point, John gave us a brief history on Colombia. For the purpose of making this journal a little more informative, I will try – in a nutshell – to expand a little on what he said.

The geography:

Colombia is primarily situated along the northwestern portion of South America, with some territories in Central America. It is bordered in the north by Panama, to the east by Venezuela and Brazil, and to the south by Ecuador and Peru. Colombia's landmass is dominated by the Andes, which is divided into three main mountain ranges known as *cordilleras*. Because the country lies within the geographical area referred to as the Ring of Fire, Colombia is prone to earthquake and volcanic activity. The country has two oceans, the Caribbean and the Pacific, and maintains insular areas consisting of island territories off both coasts. The lowlands south of the Cordillera Oriental (the eastern mountain ranges) comprises only 5% of the total population even though it makes up roughly half of the nation's territory, this includes the savanna of the *Llanos* (a large plains region) and the jungles of the Amazon

rainforest. The vast majority of Colombians live within the central and northern regions of the country. The current population hovers close to 50 million. With a total landmass of over 440,000 square miles, it is the 25th largest country in the world and only second to Brazil in terms of biodiversity. Simply put, this country is beautiful. A fascinating mix of Andes Mountains and forests, Amazon jungles, two coastlines, vast plains and desert areas, mighty rivers and lakes, and a growing number of cosmopolitan cities.

The history:

Because of its unique location, Colombia served as a corridor for early humans traveling from Mesoamerica and the Caribbean into the Andean valleys and the Amazon jungle. The oldest archaeological site in Colombia dates back to what is called the *Paleo-Indians* period (18,000 – 8000 BC), this was the first wave of peoples who entered and inhabited the Americas towards the end of the last ice age. Basically, these early inhabitants formed hunter-gatherer tribes that would occasionally trade with one another. Between 5,000 and 1,000 BC, many of these nomadic tribes established fixed settlements once they mastered the art of farming, and unique cultures began to emerge. Three distinct cultures that were prominent in Colombia during Pre-Hispanic times were the Quimbaya civilization (in the Cauca River valley between the eastern and central Andes), the Tairona civilization (located in the isolated northern Andes) and the Muisca civilization (who controlled the central part of the country where Bogotá is today). These early civilizations established a political system known as *cacicazgos*, a feudal-like pyramid structure headed by a *cacique* (a strong prince or ruler). In addition, the various Muisca tribes formed an alliance known as the Muisca Confederation. These were the people the Spaniards encountered when they finally reached the areas near Bogotá.

After Columbus 'discovered' the Americas, a frenzy of conquistador-led expeditions began exploring and conquering the region. In 1510, the Spaniards established a settlement (Santa Maria la Antigua del Darien) in the northern section of Colombia, the first city founded by the conquistadors on the American mainland. They ventured further across the continent, establishing the city of Cartagena on the Caribbean coast in 1533. By 1536, a conquistador by the name of Gonzalo Jimenez de Quesada was leading an expedition through the central regions of Colombia where the Muisca ruled. Two years later he founded Santa Fe de Bogotá (what is now the capital of

Colombia). The famous conquistador Sebastian de Belalcazar, who defeated one of the last remnants of the Inca Empire in Quito, Ecuador, headed north into Colombia and founded the cities of Cali and Popayan. Nikolaus Federmann, a German conquistador working as an agent for a prominent Augsburg family with close ties to the Spanish King, led several expeditions (obsessed with finding the legendary gold city of El Dorado) and founded the city of Riohacha in the northern Caribbean region of Colombia.

And so it went, all across the country, the conquistadors established settlements that would eventually become major cities, creating what they called the New Kingdom of Granada, a series of Spanish provinces mostly within the boundaries of what is currently Colombia. Amazingly, it would seem, these conquistadors, with such small armies (often no more than one or two hundred soldiers), were able to conquer large numbers of native inhabitants. The Muisca people were considered an advanced civilization, so how was it that they fell so quickly? Their demise came about in two ways. The first, as civilized as the indigenous peoples were, their loyalties centered around their particular tribe, something the Spaniards were able to exploit, befriending one group and pitting them against another. Secondly, and more importantly, the Europeans had a superior weapon. I'm not talking about firearms, either, but rather diseases that the locals had no natural immune defenses against. Small pox, a lethal virus that didn't exist in the New World, was spread quickly by the Spaniards to the native population, wiping out millions in a matter of years. Such was the magnitude of the 'European plague' that whole regions became de-populated without so much as a fight and the Spaniards simply moved in and took over the lands. Incidentally, this same scenario occurred in North America.

In 1542, the Spanish crown created the Viceroyalty of Peru, headquartered in Lima, a colonial administrative body that had jurisdiction over New Granada and all of the Spanish territories in South America. The size and terrain of Spain's holdings in South America, though, made communications very difficult between Lima and the rest of the territories, and in 1717, the Viceroyalty of New Granada was created with its capital in Santa Fe de Bogotá, consisting of what is now Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela. During the 17th century slaves began arriving from Africa to the colonies of South America. In Europe, the slave trade was illegal, but the New World was exempt from such moralities. The indigenous peoples, who had dwindled in size considerably after more than a 100 years of European rule, were legal subjects of the crown and could no longer be forced into

slavery. Besides, land reforms established rules and regulations governing *haciendas* and *encomiendas* (the properties of the new colonial aristocracy), which also extended to the locals who lived on the properties. So, to augment the farm labor and replace the indigenous population killed off by disease or exempt by law, traders began bringing in slaves who eventually helped transform the ethnic and racial makeup of the continent. In addition, more and more Spaniards began arriving from Spain to help colonize the new territories, hoping for a better life in the New World.

I will spare you the tedious history lesson and fast-forward to the region's independence from Spain. During much of the 1700s, a movement known as the Age of Enlightenment dominated the intellectual circles of Europe. Spurred on by advances in science, the political and social philosophers began musing on a greater society free of religion's stranglehold on government, and the desire for basic human rights, free elections and the end to the system of monarchies that governed most of the world. In Europe, this movement spurred on the French Revolution and the toppling of the king. In the New World, the colonies of North America rallied successfully against the British crown for their independence. In 1804, Haiti won its independence from France. Influenced by the Enlightenment and emboldened by the American and Haitian revolutions, the people of the Spanish colonies of South America yearned for their independence, too, and by 1810 the uprisings began in earnest.

Initially, the colonists were able to stage successful military campaigns that liberated Cartagena in 1811. But a civil war broke out among the colonists who were divided over different political ideologies, allowing the Spaniards to retake the city and punish those responsible for the uprising. Despite their efforts, though, the Spanish crown had been weakened by continued wars in Europe and the ongoing rebellion of its colonists. A Venezuelan-born colonial aristocrat by the name of Simon Bolivar, who had lived in France during his youth and was influenced by the Enlightenment philosophers, took advantage of this opportunity. He began leading a rebellion against the crown in 1808 and was eventually able to rally the support of the wealthy colonial families to support his cause, raising a strong military force that defeated the Spaniards in several key battles, slowly liberating South America. Bolivar declared independence in 1819, but it took four more years before the continent was truly free of its former colonial master.

The initial country created after independence was called Gran Colombia (Great Colombia) and encompassed much of the previous territories ruled by Spain (what are present-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama and parts of Peru, Guyana and Brazil). Bolivar became its first president, and Francisco de Paula Santander (who I mentioned earlier in this journal) became his vice president. Had Gran Colombia survived as a nation it would have become quite the powerhouse in the Americas, but, unfortunately, its scope was too ambitious. Continued threats from abroad and discontent among the former colonists who repeatedly clamored for self-rule in their own territories broke the new Republic apart by the 1830s. Venezuela and Ecuador declared their independence, and the remaining territories would soon become parts of other, newly established countries. Panama, thanks to U.S. influence over the canal, was the last to split away in 1903. Gran Colombia was whittled down to just the Republic of Colombia, the name it officially adopted in 1886.

And that, dear reader, is the end of today's history lesson. Yeah, yeah, I know, that was quite a nutshell…sorry.

As we left the outskirts of Bogotá, John pointed out a series of hillside neighborhoods in the mountains surrounding the city. He told us these were level 1 neighborhoods (comprised of poor people) that sprang up over the past thirty years as displaced farmers fleeing the FARC insurgency and the increasingly violent drug gangs flocked to the capital. Unemployed and homeless, these rural peasants began building makeshift homes and shanties in the unused mountains above Bogotá, a process repeated in many of the country's larger cities. Eventually, the government gave these poor families the title to the lands and passed laws enabling them to borrow money at low interest rates to build better homes. As a result, many of these neighborhoods have been transformed for the better, no longer resembling squatter camps.

Colombia, like most other countries, has long been a place divided along ethnic, racial and economic lines. Almost since its inception, skirmishes between the classes have led to full-blown civil wars (the FARC insurgency is nothing more than a perpetuation of this cycle). In 1994, a law was passed that created an 'official social strata division' in the country. Basically, this law permits local governments to classify neighborhoods into distinct economic and social zones by using a numbered scale system. For example,

a social strata level of 1 or 2 refers to a low-income area, a social strata level of 3 or 4 usually marks a middle-class neighborhood, and a social strata designation of 5 or 6 is where the affluent live. The differences between the social strata levels are quite marked. There are no ambiguities here; you'll know immediately if you're in a level 6 or a level 1 by the look (or feel) of the neighborhood. Likewise, if someone tells you they live in a level 2 neighborhood, the socio-economic implications are fairly obvious. The cost of living at each level is commensurate with the incomes of the people of those classes. Homes in level 1 might cost $20,000 or $30,000, while homes in a level 6 will easily top one million dollars. Most of the higher level districts are within the city; the level 1, 2 and 3 tend to be on the outskirts and up the hillsides.

If you're wondering why the Colombian government instituted what appears to be – at least on the surface – an official 'caste system', it was done to benefit the classes in need. Population is another thing that divides the social strata levels, since there are more lower income people than wealthy ones, which means that lower level neighborhoods qualify for more funding from the government for their infrastructure than richer counterparts. And this was evident to me as we traveled throughout the country. In almost all the big cities we visited, the level 1 and 2 neighborhoods did not seem 'run-down' as you might expect a poor area to be. In fact, in Medellin we visited a previously *notorious* level 1 area (once infested with warring street gangs) that has completely transformed itself. But more on that later.

We reached a toll station marking the end of the Bogotá city limits, entering the town of Chia, which, according to John, is probably the richest municipality in the country, consisting of level 4, 5 and 6 neighborhoods. We were now officially in the department of Cundinamarca. Chia lies just to the north of the capital and serves as a suburb of Bogotá but might eventually be incorporated into the city as other outlying townships have been. As we drove through Chia we passed Marroquin Castle, built during the end of the 20th century in a European medieval architectural style. Formerly the home of Lorenzo Marroquin Osorio, a famous writer and diplomat (and son of a past Colombian president), today the castle serves as a museum and hotel. Not far from the castle is the historic *Puente del Comun* (Bridge of Commons). Constructed in 1796, this thirty-two meter long bridge lies over the Bogotá River and is the oldest such structure in the country. It is a designated historical monument and well maintained.

As we continued on towards Zipaquira, we passed a police officer giving a summons to a motorist off the side of the road. Diego told us an interesting story about how the government has battled police corruption in recent years. Politically, the country is divided into 32 departments (or states) with Bogotá as a separate, independent capital. The national police force has jurisdiction in all of these 32 departments and is used not only to combat crime but also in the fight against the insurgency, so trying to keep a good public image is paramount. Several years ago the passenger of a motorist who'd been stopped for a traffic violation used his smartphone to video tape the officer soliciting a bribe. When the video was posted on the Internet the public outcry was such that it forced the government to act. Police officers are now being required to wear video and audio monitors when stopping citizens to record the incident for later review. Also, to stem the need for soliciting bribes, police officers actually get a percentage of the money raised from the issuance of tickets. According to Diego this has helped keep police corruption in check. Just this past May, the national police fired 1,400 officers for taking bribes. Hopefully, this concerted effort will …(pardon the pun)…pay off.

Next, we drove through the town of Cajica, the third most important municipality in the department of Cundinamarca after Zipaquira and Chia. Much of the local economy here is based on agriculture, we passed many commercial greenhouses along the roadway, but increasingly this area is also used as a retreat for wealthy Bogotanos who maintain villas in Cajica. In the distance we could see limestone and sandstone hills, used in the mining industry, and we also passed a large salt refinery. John told us he attended school at a former military university in Cajica.

A short drive further north we finally crossed into the municipality of Zipaquira, John's hometown. Even before this historical city was 'founded' in 1600, there were native Muisca people living here for more than ten centuries, exploiting the famous salt mines in the region. According to John, the local economy is quite strong, centered on agriculture, cattle, mining, various manufacturing industries and tourism. The city is a quaint mix of colonial buildings (some 300 years old) surrounded by more modern dwellings, although the place has the feel of a small town. The cathedral in the central square (built between 1760 – 1870) is easily one of the tallest structures in the valley. And while the city offers interesting museums, colonial homes, craft shops, great dining and a vibrant nightlife experience,

the real draw in Zipaquira is the Salt Cathedral, a subterranean Roman Catholic Church originally built during the 1950s and then reconstructed in the 1990s.

Miners have been carving salt mines into the halite mountains that rise above Zipaquira for more than a thousand years, beginning with the indigenous peoples whose trade in salt, like today, was a key economic endeavor. The dangers inherent in mining prompted workers back in the early 1930s to carve out a sanctuary within the tunnels so they would have a place to pray to the saints for protection while in the shafts. As a result, the idea to build an actual church within the mines took shape and one was completed in 1954, dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary, the patron saint of miners. But because the site was still an active mine, dangerous structural issues emerged forcing the government to close the church in 1992. A new church, the one we see today, was inaugurated in 1995. It is not a real 'cathedral', the name is more of a marketing ploy to draw tourists to the area, but it does function as a Catholic Church and can accommodate roughly 3,000 visitors for Sunday Mass. The construction of this church is often referred to as a 'notable cultural achievement' in modern Colombian architecture, unifying both religious and environmental elements. Making structural changes to the caves and tunnels left behind by previous mining operations, the Salt Cathedral is a collection of impressive corridors and sanctuaries. If in Bogotá, put this hour-long journey on your must-do list. The Salt Cathedral is definitely worth the visit.

We drove up the hillsides of Zipaquira to the salt mine entrance. We arrived ten minutes before opening time (9:00am) but there was already a long queue of vehicles and buses waiting to go inside. To our left was a small paved square housing the Zipaquira Archaeological Museum, and adjacent to it an old converted school building now being used by the Colombian military. Once the road gate was opened to the public, we drove to the parking lot and spent almost three hours touring the inside of the salt mines. On display in the parking lot was an old yellow dump truck used during the 1980s to transport salt from the mines. John purchased our tickets and advised us to use the bathrooms next to the outdoor food court section before we went inside the tunnels. Afterwards, we followed him to the Miner's Plaza, the site's official walking entrance, crossing a small open sitting arena where exhibitions are held. On one section of the cement wall heading into the main shaft tunnel is a diagram of the entire underground mining area. *This site is huge*. The Salt Cathedral is 220 meters below the

earth, and hundreds of meters below *that* is an enormous on-going salt mining operation.

To enter the tunnels we passed a mannequin dressed as a salt miner and walked through a semi-circular opening shored up with colorful red wooden boards and lit up with decorative lights, beyond this was the actual main shaft. I suffer from claustrophobia and I was a little concerned about how I would react inside the mines. As it turned out, though, the shafts used by the public to visit the Salt Cathedral are actually quite tall and wide. I didn't feel 'enclosed' at all. The real problem was the lighting; it was very dark inside the tunnels. Most of the lighting fixtures are placed along the bottom of the shaft walls to illuminate the uneven rocky floor. The actual 'cathedral' was built in sections since it would have been physically impossible to carve a freestanding church inside the mineshaft. The first sections you come across are a series of small chapels representing the 14 Stations of the Cross. Each chapel is different and built in front of a closed mine shaft. What they have in common is a large, simple cross and several kneeling platforms carved right out of the rock. The size and shape of each chapel is unique, and are lit with different colored floodlights that lend an almost eerie quality to each one.

As we walked past the Stations of the Cross chapels, spread out over hundreds of feet, I realized the tunnel was descending. Beyond the last chapel is the cathedral dome, carved into the rocky ceiling and illuminated by blue lights, giving the impression of an interstellar portal from a sci-fi movie. Further down we reached a series of bas relief cross structures and a large balcony (with a statue of Gabriel blowing his horn) overlooking the main church with its humongous simple stone cross suspended above the altar, the entire area lit up brightly by stage lights. A visiting symphony orchestra was in the process of setting up for an afternoon performance just below the altar. The view from the balcony of the church was pretty dramatic, the entire structure seemed carved out of an enormous cave chamber below us. We descended down a flight of stairs, protected by a Guardian Angel statue, and entered the Narthex, a labyrinth of rocky corridors leading to the main church. There are three naves, or sections, each with icons or statues depicting the Birth, Life and Death of Jesus. I found the Nativity scene – with Baby Jesus in the manger surrounded by Joseph, Mary and all those farm animals – to be quite, um, startling. The background was lit with blue light that cast strange and sinister shadows over the animals, giving the whole scene a creepy, unsettling feel.

To reach the actual church we had to maneuver through a very narrow, twisting tunnel (luckily, it wasn't very long). We entered near the back of a row of pews and stood there taking it all in. On the floor in front of us was a beautiful round sculpture rendition of Michelangelo's famous Creation of Adam scene by artist Carlos Enrique Rodriguez. *Wow*. Standing in that cavernous chamber, looking up at the altar with that gigantic cross, deep within the earth, was absolutely amazing. Sadly, we could not stay around for the free symphony concert (scheduled for 1:00pm); I would have loved to experience the acoustics in that place.

We exited the church on the right hand side via another narrow, twisting tunnel and found ourselves in a very large rocky corridor with concession stands and souvenir shops. John took us to a chamber entitled the Water Mirror (*Espejo de Agua*) to show us a bizarre illusion. We walked around a wooden platform looking into what appeared to be a large pit, but was actually a small pond reflecting the shape of the ceiling overhead. The group took a short break here. Some of us shopped the gift stands or had coffee at the café. Abdi and I each ended up buying a clay replica of a Muisca face mask. At the time we thought we were getting a great deal but later realized, as the tour unfolded, we had overpaid. *Ah, well*. Gullible tourists, what can I say? Before we re-surfaced we saw a 3D movie presentation – in what I thought was a spacious theater considering the underground location – on the history of the Zipaquira salt mines. It was both informative and entertaining. Back at the Miners' Plaza I asked fellow tour member Angel Ortiz if he would take my picture in front of the huge miner statue. By 11:45am we were on the bus returning to Bogotá.

An hour later we arrived at La Principal – a fairly new and trendy restaurant – for an included lunch in the upscale El Chapinero-Zone G area of Bogotá, just north of the traditional downtown area. This particular section of the capital features some of the best eateries in the city (Zone G stands for the gourmet zone); in fact, you'll find many of the country's best restaurants within walking distance of each other. This was the first time Gate 1 Travel was using La Principal. John told us our post trip reviews would determine if they would continue to use this establishment in the future. Cool, I was now an official food critic.

We were greeted by host Milena in front of the restaurant. An attractive, fashionably dressed woman who never stopped smiling, she led us to our

tables, explaining the menu items we would be served. At one point the female chef appeared offering information on the ingredients used or the preparations involved in our meal and taking questions from the group. The entire meal consisted of authentic Colombian dishes. We started out with several plates of fried appetizers called *bunuelos*, doughy round breaded balls stuffed with meat or cheese. There was a bit of confusion when the staff placed pieces of guayabana (soursop fruit) and a vegetable sauce on the table. These were for demonstration purposes only, but most of us began digging into the fruit and eating the sauce like it was some kind of salad. Milena must have thought we were a bunch of country bumpkins, especially when we asked for more 'salad'. The next dish was called *salpicon de pulpo*, a tasty octopus cocktail. This was followed by the main course; I ordered the stuffed chicken a la Santafereno, a simpler nod to the city's famous ajiaco dish. For dessert they placed two types on the table: a cheesecake-like pastry and an artfully decorated mound of meringue. All and all it was a great lunch, we learned a little about traditional Colombian cuisine and got to sample some very tasty dishes.

After lunch, we took a short drive to a *tejo* parlor to try our hand at this entertaining national sport. *Tejo* has been around since the ancient Muisca, who apparently taught the game to the Spaniards. But historians strongly disagree on its origins because the Muisca left behind few archaeological records concerning the sport. Basically, the game entails throwing small, round stones or metal discs (depending on the venue) at a clay post board with the diagram of a circle in the middle. The stones or discs are tossed underhand, from a distance of roughly 20 meters away, and usually stick to the clay board (positioned at a 45 degree angle) depending upon the skill of the thrower. Like darts, the closer to the center of the circle the higher the points scored. The conquistadors, according to John, added a unique twist to the game. They placed small gunpowder charges around the circle that would explode if struck by the stones. Today, four triangle-shaped gunpowder caps (called *mechas*) are positioned around the edges of the circle to provide an additional thrill; whenever these caps are struck, they pop like firecrackers. *Tejo* is extremely popular in Colombia, and there are even professional teams that travel to different cities to compete. Beer or liquor companies often sponsor these teams because drinking is heavily associated with this game. In fact, John told us most Colombians gather to drink and socialize around the sport. Somehow, the notion of inebriated people tossing rocks doesn't seem to raise much concern.

When we arrived at the hall it resembled an old, run down bowling alley, with four or five cement lanes at the end of which were clay boards. A group of young Colombian men were having a game in the first lane. John wasted little time getting us into the 'spirit' of the sport. He purchased a round of beer for those who wanted to drink (the rest of us had soda or water) and a bottle of aguardiente liquor. Once everyone was loosened up with beer and shots, he explained the concept of the game. Since we hadn't established any certifiable skill level yet, we tossed the stones (which varied in weight and size) from the center of the lane instead of at the far end. I don't drink alcohol, and I am not much of a sport participant, but this turned out to be a lot of fun. After John demonstrated how to do the underhanded toss, we took turns trying to hit the clay board. Some of us had to try it a few times before we got the hang of it. I missed the board completely on the first two attempts, my stone rolling along the floor like an errant bowling ball. A few of us were naturals, though, sticking the inside of the circle. One of our members even set off a *mecha*, which exploded loudly giving us a cheerful start. All the while, John kept coming around offering more shots of aguardiente. I understand now the popularity of this sport, both as a game of skill and a social event. We had a great time.

By 3:10pm we boarded the bus and headed back to the hotel. The rest of the day was free and a group of us wanted to go to the local flea market in the district of Usaquen, located in the northeastern section of the city. Originally its own municipality, Usaquen became incorporated into the capital during the 1950s. The district has its own historic quarter, with Spanish colonial architecture and one notable church (Santa Barbara) dating back more than 300 years. This is a fairly large locality within the capital, with a population around half a million; it is a popular commercial zone that also includes upscale residential areas. Back at the hotel, about a dozen of us piled into a taxi van and asked the driver to take us to the *Plaza Central de Usaquen* (the main square) where every Sunday a large local flea market is held that radiates out for several blocks along the streets and sidewalks. Traffic was insane, especially around the narrow colonial plaza streets. We got off at the square and everyone split up into groups, quickly disappearing into the large crowds. The Ortiz clan went off in one direction, Cathyrne and her mom, Penny, headed down the street, and I hooked up with Missy and brothers Abdi and Ken. It was almost 4:00pm and we initially agreed to meet back at the same location (in front of the old church) at 6:00pm to take another taxi van back to the hotel, but nobody kept to the plan.

We wandered through the square and along the streets, stopping to admire the items on display. The streets were lined with booths, stands, and tables offering a unique mix of locally made trinkets and artwork. Some of the sellers were young, possibly college students trying to make a few bucks on the side; they set their wares on blankets over the pavement. And what an usual selection of…*things*. One vendor sold old LP vinyl records cut up into hangable artwork. Others offered homemade jewelry, bottled scents and soaps. There were original sketches, paintings and sculptures. We passed rows of souvenir items like bags, scarves or face masks (this is when Abdi and I discovered we'd been ripped-off back at the Salt Cathedral). A homeless-looking man was selling puppies on a street corner. I saw some very interesting sculptures made out of metal scraps and gears, next to this display was a young hippy couple selling a collection of bongs and marijuana paraphernalia, including what looked like a super inhaling gas mask contraption that would have made Cheech and Chong proud. Missy purchased a beautiful purple necklace made out of melon seeds. I found interesting souvenir magnets for my growing collection. Throughout the flea market you will encounter street entertainers. Near the square, an elderly couple, in traditional costume, did tango dances, while elsewhere groups of musicians serenaded the crowds. We even came across a black Colombian sporting dreadlocks and banging out Rastafarian songs on a guitar.

By 5:15pm we had seen enough and decided to hail a taxi and return to our hotel. A word of caution: if you're tall, sit in the back. Most local taxis in Bogotá are not spacious. I sat next to the driver and had my knees pressing uncomfortably against the dashboard the whole time. The four of us agreed to meet back in the lobby after putting our things away and head into the Zona Rosa district for dinner. It was a cool night, perfect for a stroll. We couldn't decide on a place to eat, so we wandered into the Andino Mall in the heart of the Zona Rosa – a multilevel collection of upscale shops and clothing stores – and had dinner in the fourth floor food court. We each ordered from different food vendors; I got an enormous steak with mushrooms, roasted potatoes and an arepa (with soda) for the equivalent of $7.00. As we ate, Ken mentioned an article in that week's Time magazine about the upcoming election to ratify the peace accord between the government and the insurgent FARC. From what our guides were telling us, the general mood in the country favored the ratification of the peace negotiations, but Ken said the Time article had painted a troubling picture of the amnesty proposals and the political concessions within the accord that was angering many of the victims of the longstanding civil war. At the time,

I, like many around the world, had assumed the country had had enough of the armed conflict and wanted to put this violent chapter of their history behind them. In fact, I debated with Ken over this very fact. Turns out, though, Ken was right. Two weeks later the voters narrowly rejected the peace accord at the polls and both sides had to return to the negotiating table.

Shortly after 7:00pm we walked back to the hotel and called it a night. It was still early, but we'd been on the move all day and were fairly exhausted. I managed to write in my journal for about an hour. Later, as I flicked through the TV channels I was surprised to discover a Spanish-language broadcast of the live Sunday Night NFL game between the New England Patriots and the Arizona Cardinals. I fell asleep by the fourth quarter.

Day Four

We had an early morning flight to Pereira, in the heart of Colombia's coffee region. My iPhone alarm clock went off at 3:30am. I shaved, showered and repacked, made several cups of instant coffee and wrote in my journal. At 5:45am I went downstairs for breakfast. An hour later we were on our way to the airport. It was a damp, chilly morning, and we encountered no traffic, arriving at El Dorado International Airport by 7:10am. We tipped and said our goodbyes to Diego and our bus driver before entering the terminal building. John had already downloaded our boarding passes the night before via his laptop computer and we breezed through the check-in process, but all this 'time saving' turned out to be unnecessary. Our flight was delayed an hour and forty-five minutes. We had to change departure gates twice, and when we finally boarded, they discovered that not all the luggage was on the plane and we sat on the tarmac for another 45 minutes. We didn't take off until 10:40am. The only saving grace was that the flight lasted just thirty minutes. Pereira is 104 miles west of Bogotá; the stewardesses hadn't finished serving us drinks when the pilot announced our descent.

In Pereira, John had two porters load all our luggage into our new bus, which was a bit smaller than the one we had in Bogotá but still very

comfortable. The bus driver's name was Julian, and our new local guide was Carlos, an affable young man who would stay with us through Medellin. We left the airport parking lot and began our drive to the department of Quindio. On the way, Carlos welcomed us and gave us the lowdown on the country's coffee region:

Colombian coffee beans are harvested within the high elevation of the Andean cloud forest, usually between 1,200 and 3,500 meters above sea level, producing some of the best coffee in the world. Although there are many departments in Colombia where coffee is grown, the northwestern, most developed coffee region is located between the departments of Caldas, Risaralda and Quindio. These three departments are among the smallest in the country (representing only 1.2 % of the total landmass) but together they form an axis that is more commonly referred to as the Coffee Zone of Colombia, and have experienced the most development (in terms of both culture and infrastructure) due to coffee cultivation, garnering for the region World Heritage status by UNESCO in 2011.

The coffee plant was first introduced in Colombia in the late 1700s, and by 1835 was being harvested commercially. But the industry didn't really take off until the 20th century when groups of small coffee farmers and producers banded together to form the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia (1927). This organization would become a political dynamo within the country, not just in terms of lobbying and marketing, but also in funding important research and development. The popular character of Juan Valdes, a coffee farmer, was created by the federation as a marketing tool during the 1950s. Today, the actor who portrays Juan Valdes (there have been several over the years) is an actual coffee farmer himself, from the *paisa* (northwestern) region of the country; he is the official living symbol of the coffee industry in Colombia. Eventually, much of the country's mountainous regions were turned over to coffee production, making it one of the top exporters, and generating incomes for more than 500,000 coffee farming families.

We drove south out of the city of Pereira – the capital of the department of Risaralda – along Route 29, the only main highway in that area (at least, according to the map I was using). After crossing our first toll station we entered the department of Quindio, which lies primarily on the western face of the Central Cordillera Mountains. It was rainy, and while the sky was a dark gray as we climbed through the lush Cocora Valley the scenery was

still beautiful: seemingly endless miles of tropical cloud forest interspersed with thick patches of Guadua bamboo. We were heading towards the colonial town of Salento (one of the coffee region's oldest towns) for a visit, but prior to this we were supposed to hike through the rainforest at the Los Nevados National Park in the central mountains. Unfortunately, the rainy weather made the conditions a bit hazardous and John had to switch the itinerary. (We ended up hiking a private nature reserve in Manizales the following day, instead). For now, we continued along a narrow, two-lane switchback mountain road through the Cocora Valley on our way to Salento.

At one point we passed an abandoned hillside hacienda that once belonged to Carlos Lehder, one of the founders of the Medellin cocaine cartel who is currently serving a 55-year sentence in a U.S. federal penitentiary. Nowadays, no trip to Colombia would be complete without at least a brief historical account of the country's notorious drug trafficking past. Make no mistake that cocaine is still produced in Colombia today and smuggled elsewhere, but the cartels are long gone; at least, the ones most people remember, like the Medellin or Cali cartels. From what our guides were telling us, the cocaine business in Colombia today is run by either the insurgents or former paramilitary groups. According to them, cocaine trafficking is not on the scale that it once was, nor does it include the ceaseless (and senseless) violence that governed the trade back when Pablo Escobar was in charge. The arrest of Lehder and his extradition to the U.S. in 1987 – and his cooperation with authorities – would pave the way for the downfall of the cartels' leadership by the late 1990's.

As for notorious drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, his downfall was rooted in the ruthless terror campaign he waged against his opponents, especially the Colombian government (which was trying to extradite him to the U.S.), setting into motion a series of counter military and police campaigns – aided by various American agencies – that would eventual kill him and wipe out his organization. Several years later the Cali cartel leaders were rounded up and sent to prison. I refuse to go into any further detail because I do not want to sensationalize or perpetuate the drug-dealing stereotypes that have defined Colombia in the past. While one can argue more still needs to be done on this front, the country has definitely moved on from those dark days and deserves recognition for doing so.

The Cocora Valley was named after a princess from the Quimbaya civilization, the people who ruled over this area more than 1,000 years ago.

Below us was the Quindio River. In 1985, a large portion of this valley was designated an official natural reserve in order to protect the wax palm tree, the national tree of Colombia, which was on the verge of extinction. Many factors contributed to this loss. The tree was used to make wax candles and provide building materials for rural farmers. In addition, the cows of the region found the seeds very tasty, inhibiting their cultivation. But the real culprit endangering the species was religion. Each year the trees were cut down so that the fronds could be used on Palm Sunday. Today, the Cocora Valley remains one of the few places on this planet where you can still see this rare palm tree. Incidentally, the wax palm tree is not really a tree, but rather a member of the *monocotyledons* family, a species of flowering plants, making this the tallest plant on earth, growing to heights of between 45 and 60 meters (that's nearly 200 feet tall). They dwarf anything that stands next to them. Thanks in large part to the government's efforts, the Quindio wax palm tree is no longer an endangered species. Just on the outskirts of Salento we stopped to have lunch at a place called *Restaurante Donde Juan B*, a sprawling ranch and fish farm at the bottom of a wax palm tree forest, where we got to see these magnificent 'plants' up close.

When we arrived at the restaurant the forested mountains surrounding us were blanketed in thick white fog. We sat outside on long benches underneath an open hut for lunch; a delicious smoked trout served on a large, thin, fried patacon (plantain). I am not a big fish eater, but this meal was wonderful, including the fish soup. On the table were three different types of sauces (made from mangoes, tomatoes and garlic butter). Most of us dipped our bread in the garlic butter sauce. Mmmmmmmm. After lunch we gathered at the back of the ranch next to a wax palm tree nursery. Carlos introduced us to a local ecologist named Marino Toro who lectured us briefly on the Quindio wax palm tree and the conservation methods used to preserve them. All around us the mountains were lined with forests of wax palm trees. We split up into five small groups and each group took turns planting a palm tree seedling, with Marino directing the process. A special ritual was performed prior to planting the seedling in the ground; we would hold up the seedling to the sky, asking for Pacha Mama's blessing (Mother Earth). At some later point, once the wax palm tree reached a certain height, it would be transplanted somewhere up in the mountains. As we stood in the nursery, we could spot colorful parrots in the nearby trees. This entire valley is known for rare birds and its abundant species of hummingbirds.

By 3:00pm we left the restaurant-ranch and headed towards Salento, one of the biggest tourism draws in the department of Quindio. Along the way, we passed fields strewn with large boulders from long-ago volcanic eruptions. This is a volcanic valley; the mineral composition of the soil makes it very fertile. As we drove through the center of this lush valley it seemed as if every inch of hillside was being used for planting. We arrived at the Salento main square about fifteen minutes later and spent the next hour on our own exploring the town. John and Carlos recommended a few places to purchase coffee cookies (an original treat from the region) and other souvenirs. I headed off with brothers Abdi and Ken.

Located in the northeastern section of Quindio, Salento is the oldest town in the department. During colonial times it was an outpost on the Quindio Pass, part of an important trade route that originated in Popayan, the capital of the southwestern department of Cauca, passing through Cali on the way to Bogotá. In 1830, Simon Bolivar ordered the trail to be upgraded. A penal colony called Barcinales (filled with political prisoners from the country's first civil war) was established on the site where Salento is today. The prisoners were forced to build the new roadways in Quindio and were later allowed to settle in the valley. Mass flooding of the Quindio River in 1854 forced these settlers to move to Barcinales, creating a new town that they called Villa de Nuevo Salento (or Salento, as it is commonly called) in 1865. The original trading route between Popayan and Bogotá was eventually diverted away from Salento; this actually permitted the sleepy, isolated little municipality to retain its colonial *paisa* design and flavor, making it one of the country's most popular tourism destinations. If you want to get an idea of what a traditional Spanish town looked like back then, go to Salento. The place has barely changed since the 1800s.

The streets radiate out in a typical grid-like pattern from Plaza Bolivar (the main square). Most of the buildings are two-story, with traditional balconies and large colonial wooden doors. The most popular strip is a narrow street called *Calle Real*, which extends from Plaza Bolivar for several blocks ending at a series of stairs (containing 250 steps marked by the Stations of the Cross) leading to the Alto de la Cruz, a large cross on a hilltop overlooking the town. *Calle Real* is lined with artisan shops and restaurants and is usually packed with tourists on the weekends. We saw quite a few horses, as well, since horseback riding is a popular attraction here, lending an even more 'authentic' feel to the place. Each street corner rendered an incredible view of the verdant scenery surrounding Salento. To

the east were the wax palm forests of the Cocora Valley, and all around the town were the coffee estates that give this region its livelihood.

We browsed the many stores looking for traditional crafts. In one small shop, Ken and I were able to purchase unique earrings and necklaces made of local flowers set in some kind of resin. Back home I gave the sets of earrings to my sister-in-law and nieces as souvenirs. We walked the length of *Calle Real* and then returned to the main square where I purchased the famous coffee cookies inside a mini-mart. Our guides told us the cookies were local treats and could only be found here, so I bought a box for myself and a large bag with individually-packaged cookies to give out as souvenirs… um, I shamefully admit I ate them all by the time the trip ended, which is not a big shock to those of you who've read my previous journals. I have the will power of a crack addict. (But in my gluttonous defense, they were *delicioso*). Before leaving Salento I toured the town's church, Our Lady of Carmen, in the main square. Originally constructed during the 1850s, this quaint, simple church was moved to its present location and later rebuilt following several earthquakes during the 1920s. It has a large bell tower with a clock. I read online that the structure is unique because the entire thing, from the columns to the roof, is made of wood.

We left Salento shortly after 4:00pm for what turned out to be the longest bus ride of the tour, a three-hour journey north through the beautiful hills of the Coffee Zone region. We were heading to the city of Manizales where we would be staying for the next two nights. The distance was not very far, but the main road cut through the mountains and it was slow going. We were rewarded by the view. We traveled further up into the Andean cloud forests, at times running into patches of fog. As we maneuvered the mountain turns, the perpetual cloud cover would suddenly give way to an intensely blue sky, the contrast against the green valley was visually stunning. At one point we drove through a forest of eucalyptus trees originally planted to prevent soil erosion (they absorb an enormous amount of water from the ground), but the oil within the trees make them toxic to many species of animals, and the area was eerily devoid of fauna. When we reached the toll plaza heading back into the department of Risaralda it began to rain very hard, this was accompanied by increasingly thicker fog.

During our drive we passed many areas overgrown with thick patches of bamboo. Carlos told us that Colombia produces dozens of different species of this sturdy plant, and has the second highest woody bamboo diversity in

all of Latin America. The vast majority of these woody species (nearly 90%) can be located within the Andes, more than half growing along the Eastern Cordillera at an altitude between 2,000 and 3,500 meters above sea level. Colombia is one of the few countries in the world where bamboo actually plays an important role in both the culture and the local economy. Native and rural mestizo communities use the different species for basic needs, and Guadua bamboo is manufactured into poles for construction and piping.

Just before 5:00 pm we reached Pereira, driving through the center of the city on our way further north towards Manizales. Pereira is the capital of the department of Risaralda, and with a population around half a million it is the largest city within the Coffee Axis region (the triangle of coffee-growing lands between Cali, Bogota and Medellin). Surprisingly, this was a fairly large, modern city, not what I would have expected amidst these verdant mountains and valleys. We crossed an impressive, award-winning cable-stayed bridge built in 1997 and named after Cesar Gaviria, the country's 28th president who was born in Pereira. The bridge actually links another municipality called Dosquebradas to the capital, giving the impression that the city is much larger than what it is. Beyond Pereira, we continued along an often-scary two-lane mountain road, stopping once at a way station (known as a *tambo*) to use the restrooms and take a thirty-minute break. The *tambo* was situated on a high cliff, rendering two panoramic views: the cities of Pereira and Dosquebradas on the south side of the valley, and the much smaller municipality of Santa Rosa de Cabal on the northern side. Our guides bought us coffee and we took the time to sip our brews and take pictures of the scenery.

As we continued northward, we drove by the city of Santa Rosa de Cabal, a rather gritty-looking urban area; at least, as seen from the highway. According to Carlos, during the 1980s, Pablo Escobar began recruiting *sicarios* (hitmen) from among the teenage gang members who lived in the poorer sections of this city. Because the law back then excluded underage teens from serving adult sentences, he often chose gang members barely into their teens to do his bidding. These adolescent killers were given motorcycles and assault rifles and committed many drive-by shootings, targeting the enemies of the Medellin cartel. If arrested, they usually only served until their eighteenth birthday before being released to commit more crimes.

Just on the northern outskirts of Santa Rosa de Cabal we stopped to look at an old, two-story farmhouse in the distance painted red and white. The significance of the house colors signified the political party affiliation of the family. Traditionally, the two major political parties in Colombia have been the conservatives (blue and white) and the liberals (red and white). In the past, many Colombians, especially in the rural areas, painted their properties in the colors of the political party they supported, even though this was often considered a risky thing since Colombia has a long history of violence between political factions, and it would be easy to signal out who belonged to which group based on the color of your house. Today, I'm not sure if this is a common practice; Colombia now has dozens of political parties.

As dusk fell upon the valley, we passed the small town of Chinchina. About 30 kilometers east of here is an active volcano called Nevado del Ruiz. This volcano has been active for nearly two million years and has had three major eruptive periods. Its impressive snow-capped cone was formed during its current eruptive period, which began roughly 150,000 years ago. Nevado del Ruiz usually produces what are known as pryoclastic flows, eruptions of swift-moving currents of hot gas and rock that often cause massive lahars (huge landslides of mud and debris). The situation is worsened when the snowcap melts during an eruption, adding enormous quantities of water to the landslides. In 1985, a small eruption caused the snowcap to melt abruptly and the ensuing lahar buried the unsuspecting town of Armero in the nearby department of Tolima. The town was completely wiped out, more than 22,000 people were killed, making it the worst lahar disaster in recorded history. In July of 1986, Pope John Paul II visited the site and prayed for the victims. Since then, both government and international agencies have set up monitoring services within the valleys surrounding Nevado del Ruiz, but there are still more than half a million people living in towns and villages in the area who are at risk. Lahars can sometimes travel as far as 100 kilometers (60 miles) away from an erupting volcano. *Yikes!*

We reached the Hotel Estelar Recinto Del Pensamiento around 7:10pm; it was so dark outside I had no idea we'd driven through a portion of Manizales, nor could I see the beautiful nature reserve surrounding the hotel property. We checked into our rooms and put our things away. I soon discovered I had lost the key to the lock on my luggage and was in a bit of a panic, thinking I would need to break the zipper latch to open the darn thing. Fellow tour member Andrew Halstead came to my rescue, he heard about

my predicament and handed me his set of spare luggage lock keys to see if any of them would open my lock. I was elated when one of them did. *Thanks, Andrew*! We gathered in the lobby thirty minutes later for dinner. John led us through the back of the complex to the hotel restaurant. The meal was wonderful. I had the pork tenderloin served with rice, soup, salad and a local dessert. By 9:00pm I was back in my room, unpacking the clothes I would be wearing for the next two days. As usual, I was thoroughly exhausted (we'd been on the go since early that morning) and fell asleep watching the Spanish-language broadcast of the NFL's Monday Night Football game…

Day Five

I was wide-awake by 4:00am, partly due to the fact that my room felt very cold. Having lived in Miami since the early 1990s, my body has acclimated to hot, humid weather, so I tend to be a tad sensitive to sudden dips in temperature. My internal thermostat happens to be my own testicles; whenever it drops below 60 degrees Fahrenheit they disappear from sight. Manizales is more than 2,100 meters above sea level, and while it usually has beautiful spring-like weather throughout the year, the evenings and mornings can get quite chilly. There are no ac/heaters in most of the lodges here, so it requires getting used to. I made my typical 'gallon' of coffee and sat down to write in my journal for over an hour.

At 7:15am I was heading towards the restaurant for breakfast when I ran into fellow tour member Angel Ortiz who was photographing the landscape around the hotel in the early morning light. And what a gorgeous view! The complex is situated at the foot of a private nature reserve. I accompanied Angel on a tour of the hotel property. Located approximately 11 kilometers from the city of Manizales, the Hotel Estelar Recinto del Pensamiento ('Thoughtful Enclosure') is a sprawling complex spread out over roughly fifty acres that include gardens, streams, native forests and ecological trails. In addition to the usual restaurant, spa, exercise room and coffee shop, the hotel grounds also offer a small chapel, a pond filled with large fish, an enormous outdoor meeting pavilion made entirely of guadua bamboo, a

grazing area for wooly sheep and a corral with several very friendly ostriches. We spent thirty minutes walking along the back area of the property – observing the animals and birds – and taking pictures of the flora in the nearby forest.

The previous day, Carlos told us an interesting story about the origins of some of the more exotic animals found in Colombia today, like the ostriches at the hotel. One of the unusual legacies of Pablo Escobar is the introduction of African wildlife into the native landscape of Colombia. During his reign as drug lord, Escobar amassed a fortune that made him one of the richest men on earth, and, like many insanely rich individuals, he was able to indulge his many whims and fancies, no matter how ludicrous. At his luxurious estate called Hacienda Napoles (situated 150 kilometers east of Medellin in the town of Puerto Truinfo), Escobar built a zoo – supposedly for his young daughter – and imported many animals from Africa, including four hippos (one male and three females) that lived in the ranch's pond. When the drug czar was killed in 1993, his properties were abandoned. Eventually, the government took over Hacienda Napoles, transferring many of the animals to different zoological centers or sanctuaries around the world…*except the hippos*. Weighing over 3000 pounds, with razor-sharp teeth and capable of sudden (and frightening) mobility, these fearsome beasts escaped into the nearby rivers and have since multiplied. As of this writing, government estimates put the wild hippo population at over forty. Because they are extremely dangerous animals (thousands of people are killed by them each year in Africa) outside experts were called in to deal with the problem. Unfortunately, hippos are known to carry diseases, which precluded them from being sent back to the African continent. The outside experts told the Colombian government to go ahead and just hunt them down, but nobody had the heart to do that, either. So Pablo's hippos are alive and thriving, apparently. They've since spread out along the river systems and lakes, creating potentially more problems since their massive pooping tends to generate the growth of algae, which chokes the water of oxygen, killing off fish. One option that is currently being used is to sterilize the animals so they can't reproduce. Happy, happy hippo? *I think not*!

After breakfast, we piled into the bus for an exciting day of sightseeing. We drove for about 30 minutes southwest of Manizales to visit a famous 100-year-old coffee plantation called Hacienda Venecia, which opened its doors to tourists in 2009. The farm is spread out over 400 hectares (1,000 acres), nestled within a river valley. To get there, we had to exit the main

roadway and traverse a *very* narrow one-lane dirt trail down a steep hillside. It was such a tight fit that bushes, vines and tree limbs actually scrapped the bus on the way down. At one point we encountered a vehicle coming up the trail, and it had to gingerly back up into a small clearing so we could pass. The drop on the left-hand side of the bus was several hundred feet down into the valley. Nothing but lush vegetation and coffee plants as far as the eye could see. At the bottom of the hill we crossed a small river and soon came to a stop on a private dirt road that led up to the farmhouse. Most of us walked from here. Halfway up we were greeted by the hacienda's official dog, a basset hound named Gringo.

This coffee plantation is centered around a well-preserved white with red trim, roof-tiled *paisa* farmhouse that has been converted into a beautiful lodge. A wide, wooden veranda wraps around the entire house, filled with rocking chairs and hammocks and rendering an awesome view of the surrounding valley. There are gardens and a lily pond nearby, and a striking blue-colored round swimming pool in front of the farmhouse. When we arrived, several peacocks were strutting on the lawn next to the pool. We gathered inside a large pavilion overlooking the plantation and sampled the coffee grown on the farm. Afterwards, we sat in a wide circle and listened to the hacienda guide, Ruben, explain to us the origins of coffee and its production worldwide. Meanwhile, Gringo went from tour member to tour member soliciting head scratches.

According to legend, coffee was first discovered in Ethiopia during the 11th century. Forests of coffee plants have existed since ancient times on the Ethiopian plateau, but nobody thought to harvest the berries due to their bitter flavor. One day, a goat herder named Kaldi observed his flock acting 'strangely' after ingesting the coffee berries and brought this to the attention of the abbot who ran the local monastery. Intrigued, the abbot made a brew from the berries, enticed by the aroma it gave off, and – *walaa!* – a beloved addiction was born. Soon, news of these energizing berries spread east, to the Arabian Peninsula, where coffee would eventually be cultivated and traded worldwide, bringing the popular brew to every corner of the planet. Today, the markets in London, Brazil and New York City set the price of coffee internationally.

There are two types of coffee beans: **Robusta** and **Arabica**. Robusta beans produce a rich body that tends to be bitter – due to its higher caffeine content – and is the cheaper of the two, often used to make instant coffee.

The London market usually determines the price of this bean. Arabica, on the other hand, produces a brew with less body but a smoother taste (less caffeine) and is usually more expensive. Most of your gourmet coffees are made from Arabica beans. Coffee is grown in many parts of the world on a seasonal basis. Only three countries currently produce coffee beans year round: Kenya, Tanzania and Colombia. The only coffee grown in Colombia is Arabica; it is mostly cultivated in the cloud forest regions of the country at an elevation *above* 1,200 meters. Apparently, the moisture and richness of the soil here is conducive to growing what is considered one of the best coffees in the world. The largest producer of coffee worldwide is Brazil, second is Vietnam, and tied for third are Colombia and Indonesia.

Interesting aside: the most expensive coffee in the world is an organic Arabica coffee grown on farming cooperatives in northern Indonesia. It is called Kopi Luwak, and can cost between $100 and $600 *per pound* depending on the current market rate (supposedly, less than 1,000 pounds of this coffee is produced annually). Why so little, and why so expensive? Well, the processing is extremely unique. What we call coffee beans are actually the *seeds* of the coffee berries (which are later dried); they contain caffeine as a natural defense mechanism against animals, making the taste bitter. But in Indonesia, one animal, the palm civet cat, loves to eat the coffee berries. These small forest mammals consume the coffee berries, digesting the pulp and skin. The seeds are passed through into their feces intact. Apparently, some kind of fermentation process goes on inside the palm civet's body during the 24-hour digestion period that gives the seeds its special flavor. Farmers go around picking up the clumps of feces for processing into civet coffee beans. Yes, folks, *they wash it*. The end result, according to connoisseurs, is the smoothest, most aromatic coffee on the planet. Incredible. I would love to hear the legend of how *this* coffee came about…I mean, who was the first guy who looked at a clump of wild cat shit in the forest and thought, "I wonder what this would taste like?" By the way, the standing joke among coffee growers is that civet coffee beans make an awesome ca-*poo*-chino. Hahahahaha.

Ruben then explained how the Arabica beans are processed at Hacienda Venecia. First, the fruit (coffee berries) are harvested. Only the ripest, reddest berries are selected. The seasoned men who pick these berries come from a long line of coffee pickers, utilizing the same technique as their forefathers: they go among the coffee plantations, up and down the hillsides

for ten or more hours a day, plucking red berries by hand. On our way down to the farm we spotted a few of these weathered individuals hunched over the fields. They're paid by the weight of the berries they pick; so the more they can bring back the better the payday. The berries of Arabica coffee have a sweet, jelly-like pulp that gives the beans its subtle flavor. At this point, Ruben passed around a tray of coffee beans still wrapped in the pulp so we could taste how sweet it was. The picked berries will normally be stored and allowed to dry for two weeks before undergoing a process in which the seeds are separated from the berries mechanically (there is some kind of washing process, as well, to remove the seed peel) before ending up in a dryer to form raw, dried coffee beans. Throughout this entire production, the beans are being sorted by quality. One method of determining the quality of a bean is if the berry sinks in water. Apparently, buoyancy in a berry is not a good sign. When first picked, they're put in large vats of water to separate the floating berries from the rest of the batch. Incidentally, the inferior beans are utilized to make coffee for local consumption. Nothing is wasted. The best coffee produced in Colombia is for export because it brings in a higher price. Which meant, ironically enough, that the coffee I generally consumed throughout my stay was not top quality (although, you can easily purchase great Colombian coffee in the endless Juan Valdez coffee shops or better hotels and restaurants in the country).

Another thing I learned during Ruben's presentation is that coffee beans are exported raw, both peeled and unpeeled. The *actual* roasting is done by the buyer of the raw beans in their own countries, and this is because the roasting process is what gives the coffee its unique final flavor. Thirty to forty percent of a coffee bean is made up of carbohydrates; when the bean is roasted, different temperatures produce different tastes due to the caramelization of these carbohydrates. A mildly or medium-roasted bean will produce a sweeter, milder flavor, whereas a darkly roasted bean gives off a richer, bolder taste. And the way roasted beans are grinded also affects the flavor. Finely ground beans, for example, like those used in espresso, have less surface area for water to pass through, producing that strong coffee taste. John and Carlos walked around the pavilion showing us samples of the various stages of the coffee bean: raw, dried and roasted. Ruben had placed some raw beans inside a portable roaster on the table beside him when he began his lecture, and the aroma was just now wafting over us. *Mmmmmmmmm*. He later showed us what freshly roasted beans look like. Oh, that marvelous smell! As far as freshness goes, Ruben told us that dried,

unpeeled beans can last for eight months, once peeled they have a shelf life of six months. It takes approximately one year from the time a berry is picked before it becomes part of your morning ritual. Someone in the group asked Ruben what he thought was the best coffee in the world. He shrugged and replied: “It’s a matter of personal taste.”

From the pavilion, we embarked on a tour of the plantation. Ruben, with Gringo by his side, led us to a coffee plant nursery where there must have been several thousand seedlings growing out of individual plastic bags lined up in neat rows. After about nine months, when a seedling sprouts its first butterfly-like leaf, it is replanted in the fields around the farm in between other coffee plants to prevent soil erosion. It will bear fruit in another one and a half years. The first berries a new plant produces are usually not very good, but after that the quality improves with each harvest. From here, we walked along a dirt trail (passing a Virgin Mary statue) to get a good feel of the acreage of this farm. Above and below us the valley was completely covered with coffee plants, interspersed with patches of bamboo. We saw a few pickers in the hillsides and hacienda workers stacking sacks of raw beans inside trucks for transport to the marketplace. Ruben pointed out the nearby coffee berries, most were still green, telling us that only the reddest ones are picked. To avoid bug infestation, the plants are constantly being cut, pruned and picked (every 20 days or so). Colombia utilizes approximately one million hectares of land for coffee cultivation, with half a million families earning their living from this industry. The average size of a coffee farmer’s lot is only 2 hectares.

We continued to the processing area. The first section contained large vats of water where the picked berries are dumped to determine their density. The berries that float are separated from the rest. Next, they end up in machines that remove the seeds from the pulp and then into large, lined cement pits where they soak in water for the eventually peeling process. The whole while the beans are separated by quality. The final step is the drying process. Enormous cylinder ovens are used, which have long mechanical arms the slowly sift the beans. Workers were constantly checking the humidity to prevent over-drying. When the tour ended, Ruben led us back to the farmhouse. The staff had placed pitchers of lemonade on a table in the front lawn near the pool. On the table was also a mound of prepackaged Hacienda Venecia coffee beans for sale. After drinking my lemonade, I climbed the steps to the farmhouse and walked the entire length of the wraparound veranda taking photographs of the scenery. The views of the

surrounding valley were stunning. I was able to get a quick look inside one of the guestrooms, and photographed the staff preparing lunch in the large central kitchen. If I ever come back to this region, I will definitely book one night's lodging in this beautiful place just to sit in one of those rocking chairs on the veranda, sipping freshly-roasted coffee, losing myself in the serene natural beauty of the land.

Around noon we left Hacienda Venecia and began the slow climb up the narrow hillside road back to the main highway. We were on our way now to Manizales for a short tour and some lunch. Along the drive Carlos gave us a brief history of the city. Manizales is the capital of the Caldas department, and sits in the northern part of the Coffee Axis. While it is often described as a midsize university town, it appears much bigger because it is spread out over the valley. The city was founded in 1849 by a small group of former colonists who had fled the civil wars in what is now the department of Antioquia. Initially, the town's population consisted mostly of white people of Spanish descent, but as it grew into a larger city, becoming the main center for coffee production in Colombia, it began to attract other ethnic groups. During the latter half of the 20th century, several universities and colleges were established here, making Manizales the second-largest university city in the country. Currently, there are seven major institutions of higher learning in Manizales, with a student population totaling more than 30,000 (almost 10% of the citywide population). The students hail mostly from the surrounding departments.

The geography of the city is quite startling. It is located within the basin of the Chinchina River and the sub-basin of the Guacaica River, along the Central Cordillera Mountain Range. The city is surrounded by steep slopes and ridgelines, a dramatic and often awe-inspiring panorama of green mountain scenery in every direction. But all this majestic natural wonder comes with a price. Manizales lies near the active Nevado del Ruiz volcano, and is prone to earthquakes, possible eruptions and mudslides. The city has already been partially destroyed on several occasions in the past due to earthquake activity and fires, and much of the construction that exists today is designed architecturally to address some of the geographical challenges facing the valley. As a result, there are few 'historical' buildings still remaining in Manizales. Tourists who came here do so to enjoy the nature activities in the area. And with 30,000 students, the city has a reputation for a vibrant nightlife!

We drove through Manizales, passing a bullring (the bull fighting season starts in January). Manizales also has Palogrande Stadium, a large soccer arena and home to the city's own professional football team, the *Once Caldas*. Like in many of the capital cities, Colombia's Bank of the Republic maintains a gold museum here; in addition, many of the universities house art and historical museums that are worth a visit. We followed an access road along the mountains to the top of the city to one of Manizales' more famous quarters known as *Chipre* (Cyprus). Tourists usually make the climb to *Chipre* to visit the areas' various panoramic lookout points. One of those is the Tower to Heaven, a platform built around an old water tank that renders an incredible view of not only the city, but also the surrounding mountain ranges, the snowy tops of the volcanoes Nevado del Ruiz and Santa Isabel, and the Cauca and Risaralda River valleys. Our bus driver parked the bus on one lookout point along the main road (the *Avenida Octubre 12*) and we stood over this gorgeous landscape snapping away with our cameras. The sky was overcast and lent a nice contrast to the verdant scenery.

We crossed the street to visit the equally dramatic Monument to the Settlers, an enormous sculpture series that pays tribute to the first colonists who settled in the area. Created by artist Luis Guillermo Vallejo Vargas to commemorate the city's 150th anniversary, the sculpture sits on top of a beautifully maintained park overlooking the mountain range, and is divided into two sections called "The Agony" and "The Ecstasy". The former is a group of sculptures on the lower end of the monument (going uphill) depicting the hard struggles those early colonists endured as they climbed the steep, rugged mountains into the valley with their oxen and horses. It shows the colonists (and animals) slipping and falling and trudging and generally having a very bad time of it as they traversed the mountains. The details on the sculptures are incredible, including the look of despair on both man and beast. "The Ecstasy" portion of the monument is the upright top section, which shows the colonists triumphantly marching into the valley atop horses and leading their draw animals to where they would eventually settle. If you visit Manizales, please take the trip up to *Chipre* to see this amazing piece of artwork. Also, the view of the Central Cordillera range from up there will not disappoint; in fact, it lends credence to the sculptures because these are the same mountains the settlers had to cross.

We walked back to the bus and drove a short distance to a restaurant called *Nanay Cuca* for lunch. Parked next to our bus was a Willys Jeep,

whose owner was using it to sell produce on the street. In the Coffee Axis of Colombia, the folks have an affinity (often bordering on obsession) for these vehicles. First designed for American combat troops during World War II, these jeeps eventually found their way to Colombia following the war and have become a beloved part of the landscape in the Coffee Zone region. Easy to maneuver the muddy trails, the Willys Jeep quickly morphed into mechanical donkeys, becoming an invaluable method of transportation in the valleys. You will see them *everywhere*, sometimes packed with more people than they're supposed to hold. They can be used as taxis, to carry cargo, or just as an everyday means of getting around. And while these particular models have not been made in decades, most coffee-growing families proudly own at least one retrofitted model. We saw some pretty 'tricked-out' versions during our stay here.

For lunch I decided to order the *bandeja paisa*, a dish made famous by the farmers of the northwestern regions of Colombia. The term *paisa* comes from the word *paisano*, which means countryman; *bandeja* means platter. And this is exactly what you get, a platter of food from the countryside! The meal is easily big enough to feed two people, maybe even more, but is served individually. A typical *bandeja paisa* is served on a large oval-shaped tray and, *at the very least*, contains the following: a grilled steak, an over-sized country sausage, two jumbo fried eggs, a thick, long piece of crunchy fried fatback, a pile of white rice, red beans, plantains, an avocado slice and a piece of arepa. After eating all this you need a defibrillator to restart your heart! I wasn't even halfway through the meal when I realized I couldn't finish the whole thing. Yes, *me*, a 250-pound American had to raise my hands and say, "*No mas*." I asked Carlos why did the dish come with so much food… I mean, who could possibly eat all this in one sitting? And why would you want to? He explained the tradition of the *bandeja paisa* dates back to early colonial times. Basically, it is a meal that combines both native and European foods, and was prepared for the hard-working farmers who often spent all day in the fields and needed tremendous amounts of calories to sustain their energy levels.

By 2:25pm we waddled back to the bus after our huge lunch and returned to our hotel. The *bandeja paisa* was settling in my stomach like a bottle of Ambien. I was so sleepy I just wanted to nap for, uh, I don't know…*forever*. But at 3:00pm most of us gathered in the hotel lobby for a scheduled hiking tour of the adjacent nature reserve. Owned, operated and maintained by the Hotel Estelar, the Recinto del Pensamiento nature reserve is spread out over

the hilly forest behind the hotel, offering two ecological trails (one has a partial cement walkway) that allow visitors excellent viewpoints into the biodiversity of the area. Colombia cultivates roughly 10% of the world's 3,500 species of orchids, and you will find about 180 different kinds of orchids growing within the reserve's forest, along with 6,000 species of plants. There is also a medicinal herb garden here and a plantation of guadua and chusque bamboo. Near the top of the hilly reserve is a butterfly pavilion. The site offers several bird observatories to view the different species that inhabit the park. Colombia has the largest collection of birds on the planet – more than 2,000 species – including hundreds of different types of hummingbirds. This place is a bird-watchers paradise! You can see many varieties of tiny and incredibly swift hummingbirds here, along with a multitude of other, larger – and just as colorful – birds. The Andean motmot, different types of tanagers, the white-throated screech owl, and the majestic condor (the national bird of Colombia) are just a few of the species you might encounter at Recinto del Pensamiento.

The price of admission into the reserve includes a mandatory 2 ½ hour guide service. Our guide was a young college student who spoke almost no English, so John did the interpreting for him. Once we were in the reserve he was joined by a female colleague who also accompanied us around the park. Instead of walking up the hillside into the reserve, John had purchased chair lift tickets for us and we rode up the side of the mountain, two at a time, over the forest canopy. At times I had to actually raise my feet so as not to scrape the top of the trees. *It was so cool*! I sat with Cathryne for the 12 minute ride, getting a 'bird's eye' view of the reserve; I could see the path of both ecological trails from up there, and the expanse of the forest all around us. Absolutely beautiful. When we reached the top of the cable station we slid off the chair lift while it was still in motion (the chair lifts are constantly moving, going up and down on thick cables connected to about a dozen concrete towers). Next to the cable station was a pen with several white-tailed deer.

We began our tour of the reserve a few hundred feet away at the hummingbird observatory. Several birdfeeders were suspended just in back of the building's veranda and we sat watching the different hummingbirds as they would appear momentarily – hovering like flying insects – to drink from the feeders' concoction of nine parts water to one part sugar. The ratio of the liquid meal is very important, according to the park guide, since too much sugar can kill the birds. As the tiny creatures flitted in and out of view,

the guide told us some interesting tidbits about them. Hummingbirds are native to the Americas, and are the smallest of all birds. They are particularly useful in the coffee region because they help pollinate the flowers and plants. Some suggest they even add a distinct flavor to the coffee seeds. The hummingbird wings rotate independently of each other at an astonishing 60 – 200 flaps per second. Helicopter engineers have actually studied this unique physical feature when creating their aircrafts. The heart of these tiny birds is huge (in comparison to the rest of the organs) and has a resting beat of 600 per minute; when airborne it will increase to an unbelievable 1,260 beats per minute. But when sleeping their heart rate can slow down to only 1 or 2 beats *per hour*, rendering them into a stupor. This ability to slow down their heartbeat allows the birds to have long life spans (ten to fifteen years). Their natural enemies tend to be snakes and large predator birds like the falcon. Mating is done in midair. Once the female gives the signal to the male, he bumps into her (the process takes all of *two* seconds) and the mating is completed. (So, guys, if your woman's nickname for you in the bedroom is "my little hummingbird" I don't think it's a compliment).

Inside the hummingbird observatory building are numerous photographs of the various bird species found in the area. Adjacent to the observatory was a tall patch of bamboo. John told us it is illegal to cut bamboo in Colombia without the government's permission. These sturdy, woody plants produce more oxygen than trees and supply water to the rivers. From here, the guide led us on a path to a Japanese garden – replete with a pond filled with over-sized carp – where a collection of bonsai trees were displayed on wooden plank tables throughout the area. It was absolutely adorable. We saw miniature versions of bamboo, Colombian pine, ceiba, carbonero, palm and ficus trees. There was even a section of artistically created bonsai trees using new, innovative technology, like metal bases and wires to shape the tiny branches into unique shapes and patterns. We walked up a small hill to the butterfly pavilion and made our way through the screened enclosure in a single-file to observe these delicate insects, which included the silver-washed fritillary and the glasswinged butterfly (with their unusual translucent wings). Beyond this was a trail that led through the orchid forest back down to the hotel. We came upon so many different and beautiful varieties of orchids it would be impossible for me to list them all… (Um, primarily because I didn't have my pad and pen when the guide was describing each one). We walked through a section of thick vegetation that is referred to as a *humid forest*; and believe me, even at that elevation you

could feel the heat. We crossed an enormous, 200-foot ficus tree that was three centuries old. But the real stars of this forest were the beautiful flowers. We saw orchids of every size and color. Purple, yellow, red, orange, white, and every combination thereof. My personal favorite were the monkey orchids, which, when observed upside down, have an image that resembles an angry baboon. We saw orchids with very tiny petals, and big round flowering ones. With such a huge and varied collection, I can see why Colombians have such an affinity for their flowers. During our jaunt through the woods it began to rain, and we quickened our step towards the end of the hike, making it back down to the hotel shortly after 5:00pm.

In my room I made some coffee and sat down to write in my notebook for almost one and a half hours. These note-taking sessions later become an invaluable source of information for when I begin writing my official website journal. If I didn't write down what I saw and experienced on a daily basis, I'm not really sure I could recollect it from memory later on. At 7:30pm I went to the hotel restaurant for an included dinner. I had the tomato soup, the baby beef (which refers to a special cut of beef and not veal), stewed tomatoes with melted cheese, rice and a local dessert of caramel with figs. Delicious. It was a great dinner and our group's conversation was quite lively, touching upon everything from our travel experiences to our occupations. I was back in my room by 9:00pm. I started to watch the CNN international news broadcast but soon drifted off to sleep.

Day Six

I was awake by 4:30am and quickly showered and shaved. After several cups of coffee I repacked my luggage and then managed to jot down some more notes in my journal before heading to the hotel restaurant for the breakfast. By 7:50am we were all on the bus heading towards the airport in Pereira to take a flight to Medellin.

During our drive to the airport, John gave us a brief lecture on the FARC guerilla movement, explaining some of the historical situations that led to the communist insurgency. Since the country was founded there have always

been warring political factions in Colombia, something that is quite common throughout Latin America. The battle lines are almost always drawn along a socio-economic divide, with the rich and powerful usually on the conservative side of the equation and the lower classes on the liberal end. What starts out as angry rhetoric and debate between the conservative and liberal parties has, on numerous occasions, spilled over into out-an-out armed conflict between the classes. In the past, these skirmishes have been contained, or, at the very least, momentarily pacified, through political mediation of some kind.

The origins of the present-day insurgency could be traced back to a general workers' strike against the United Fruit Company during the 1920s. The strike set the stage for what would later become a series of very violent clashes between the upper and lower classes within the country. The United Fruit Company was a very powerful American corporation formed in 1899 after two smaller fruit companies banded together. This corporation owned or managed a series of plantations throughout Central and South America in a hugely successful attempt to dominate the international banana market. Using bribes or the threat of U.S. military intervention, the United Fruit Company controlled vast networks and territories in Central America, the West Indies, Ecuador and in the coastal regions of Colombia, leading to the phrase 'Banana Republics'.

By the 1920s, the company employed more than 20,000 workers on their plantations in Colombia. Not surprisingly, these laborers were over-worked, poorly paid and given no benefits. Such conditions are the hallmark scenario for any workers' strike. Initially, the United Fruit Company simply ignored the strikers' demands, assuming they would return to work after a period of no income. Two months into the strike, though, the company panicked. Not only were they losing money, there was a genuine fear such discontent could quickly spread to their plantations in nearby countries. This was something that needed to be *dissuaded* immediately. The company, through its political influence in Washington, had the U.S. government threaten military intervention if the strike was not resolved soon. In a heavy-handed response, the Colombian government sent in troops and attacked the picket lines. What ensued was a massacre. Supposedly, almost two thousand striking workers were killed in just a single day. This led to complete chaos in the region as clashes continued to break out between the military and the poor farm laborers.

Ironically, the United Fruit Company – after instigating this mess – decided to abandon Colombia altogether, but in the process inadvertently planted the seeds (pardon the pun) for future violent uprisings. Because of the strike, armed conflicts turned into pitched battles along political lines; it was the conservatives against the liberals (as usual). The parties came to a momentary accord, and there was a very brief period of cooperation in the 1930s to try and stem the violence. According to our guides, during this period the conservatives passed a law forcing people to paint their houses based on their political affiliations. I have no idea under what guise this law was justified, but it conveniently allowed conservative militants to know where their enemies lived, and liberal-leaning country folks were targeted and killed. This enabled the conservative party to sow fear and control the elections and hold on to power. Liberal Party supporters began fighting back, and the ensuing political violence between supporters of both parties claimed thousands of lives. Following the assassination of popular Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan in Bogotá in 1948, the capital exploded in violence, angry people took to the streets rioting, looting and burning down buildings in what is now referred to as the infamous *El Bogotaso*. But even after the mob subsided in Bogotá, the violence continued all over the country. Over the next ten years, hatred and distrust on both sides of the political aisles led to an escalation of killings, mostly among peasants and laborers in the rural areas by military forces who continued to crack down on leftist enclaves. This bloody chapter in Colombian history is known as *La Violencia*. An estimated 200,000 people died, mostly members of the lower classes.

Eventually, both parties came together in order to stop the violence, creating a bipartisan plan (later a constitutional amendment) wherein the country became, for the purpose of stability, a two-party state for a limited time, with each party alternating power originally. During this period other political parties were excluded from the democratic process. The Colombian communist party had already existed in the country since the end of World War I, mainly organizing in the countryside. Following this new ‘two-party’ constitutional amendment, the plight of poor rural people continued to worsen, and continued violence against them (seen as leftist sympathizers) led to the creation of FARC in 1964, which officially served as the military wing of the alienated Colombian communist party. Initially, the rural population saw the role of FARC as a good thing; the guerillas protected them from the military and ruthless right-wing death squads, providing some basic services. But as the movement grew from a small band of Robin Hood-

like outlaws into an armed rebellion aimed at overthrowing the established order, the tactics of FARC changed dramatically. By the 1980's, the insurgents numbered approximately 12,000 and could no longer sustain their size with the limited aid from their communist allies abroad. Taxation on the rural citizenry proved to be very unpopular, so the group turned to other means to support their cause. They began levying annual taxes on wealthy plantation owners, which later morphed into monthly extortions fees, forcing the elite to sell off their properties and leave the country. FARC committed armed robberies, extorted money, conducted illegal mining activities and eventually took to kidnapping wealthy people for ransom, first in the countryside and then eventually from the major cities. As the pool of potential kidnap victims began to dwindle (the rich either moved abroad or took to disguising themselves within the country by trying to blend in with the local population), FARC came up with a concept John called 'miracle fishing'. They would stop buses traveling between cities and randomly kidnap half a dozen people hoping their families had money to pay ransom demands. According to our guide, Colombians became prisoners of their own cities, fearful of venturing into the countryside.

In 1989, FARC set up an unholy alliance with Pablo Escobar and the other drug cartel leaders, accepting huge sums of money from them to protect their coca fields. This had an extremely adverse affect on rural farmers since they were forced, under the threat of death, to abandon their crops and plant coca. Farmers fled their homes in droves, creating massive refugee-like conditions in the major cities. The country's agricultural industry was hard hit. By the end of the 1990s, once the government had diminished the power of the cartels, FARC became one of the leading groups to take control of Colombia's cocaine business. To make matters worse, the right-wing paramilitary groups formed by wealthy conservatives for protection became so brutally violent (massacring innocent villagers) that they lost their funding and turned into drug-dealing armed thugs themselves. In other parts of the country, armed self-defense leagues were created to combat the rebels. By the year 2000, Colombia was, to paraphrase a Colombian friend from work, "a fucking mess." With thousands of armed insurgents (FARC and a lesser known leftist group called ELN), the remnants of the busted-up drug cartels and the violent street gangs they produced, the ruthless paramilitary squads and the privately armed civil self-defense forces, the country was mired in violence at every turn.

So how did Colombia bounce back from all this?

In 2002, Alvaro Uribe was elected the 31st president of the country. A lawyer and career politician from Medellin – he had served as mayor of the city, and then senator and governor of the department of Antioquia – he ran for president under a tough 'mano dura' (strong hand) campaign aimed at eliminating the insurgencies within the country. His dislike for the guerillas was well founded; his own father had been killed in a botched kidnapping attempt by FARC. Uribe had his detractors; he hailed from the former stronghold of the Medellin cartel, which led to some accusations and suspicions about his past relationships with the former drug lords. And as governor he oversaw the creation of public defense leagues that sometimes were a little too zealous in combating leftist sympathizers. But the country was fed up with rampant violence and lawlessness. In addition to the daily kidnappings, FARC insurgents controlled approximately 10% of the country's total municipalities. Uribe ran as an independent Liberal candidate, and chose as his running mate Francisco Santos, a member of a very prominent, respected Colombian family.

Winning 53% of the popular vote, Uribe wasted little time turning things around. A charismatic workaholic who preached a popular austerity method for running his administration, he directed the national police and armed forces against the insurgencies like never before. He went in front of the United Nations and argued that since FARC was producing and exporting coca they should not be considered combatants but rather 'narco-terrorists' (I believe he coined the phrase) and should be treated like violent criminals. Police and military officials were instructed to show no mercy. Our guide said the idea was not to fill the country's prisons. This new, tough law-and-order president wanted the insurgents (and any gangs that supported their activities) eliminated with extreme prejudice, this included a bombing foray into Venezuela to kill FARC leaders who were hiding out there, infuriating the leftist Venezuelan government and creating a tense situation between the two countries. He instituted laws that began reeling in the paramilitary and defense leagues, as well. The cumulative affect of Uribe's policies decreased the size of FARC incredibly, pushing them out of the cities and sending them scurrying back into the jungle. Kidnappings and murders decreased dramatically. FARC tried to re-energize its insurgency, but with popular support in the countryside waning, their rank-and-file dwindling and many of their top leaders killed, the rebel group was forced to begin negotiating a peace treaty with Uribe's successor in earnest in 2012.

In addition to ‘forcing the tide’ against the insurgents, Uribe initiated many programs that seem to have re-shaped Colombia’s economy. To curb corruption and improve efficiency, some nationally run industries were privatized, others outsourced. Labor groups complain that wages are now lower and benefits have been reduced, but the economy does appear to be stable. Uribe’s legacy – beyond his social and administrative policies that went a long way in streamlining the government and empowering the people – is the overall peace-and-order situation that exists in Colombia today. Granted, there are still pockets of rebellion (in the smaller ELN regions) and coca-growing areas controlled by drug gangs, but FARC will soon be a thing of the past. Law and order has been largely restored to all the major cities in the country. In fact, members of our tour group ventured out almost nightly in just about every city we visited without incident or safety concerns whatsoever (beyond a little common sense). I strolled the streets of Medellin by myself in the evenings and didn’t feel nervous or threatened, at all. I did the same in Bogotá and Cartagena.

John also touched upon the educational system in Colombia. Public education is mandatory in the country (and is enforced like in the U.S.). Kindergarten lasts three years, elementary is five years and secondary schooling another six years. Most students graduate by the age of 17 or 18. The quality of the education tends to vary from department to department, according to John, as some areas have as many as 50 students in a classroom. Getting into a public university is based on grades and aptitude tests, and if accepted the tuition is free. Private schools are costly, but provide a much better education. The only prerequisite for entering a private university or college in Colombia is the ability to pay the tuition. The more expensive the school is, the more prestigious and elitist the student body.

We arrived at the Matecana International Airport in Pereira around 9:15am. Originally, we were going to drive from Manizales to Medellin, a trip through the mountains that would have taken roughly six to eight hours, but ongoing road construction prevented daytime passage so Gate 1 Travel booked a flight for us with a small charter company called EasyFly. The domestic departure section of the airport looked somewhat chaotic, packed with locals who occupied – seemingly – every inch of available floor space. Our flight was scheduled to take-off at 10:45am but was delayed nearly two hours. Judging from the frustrated looks of the weary travelers around us, this was probably a typical occurrence. After clearing security we headed downstairs to a departure gate – directly adjacent to the tarmac – and sat

waiting for our small charter plane to arrive from Medellin. During this time John cajoled the staff at EasyFly to provide us with a snack; they served us a selection of very tasty empanadas. When our charter plane arrived I nearly suffered a panic attack. The size of this tiny propjet made my anxiety levels sail off the charts. The aircraft cabin was small and narrow; I had to hunch over in order to walk down the aisles. Thankfully, though, the flight lasted just under 30 minutes, and, truth be told, was one of the smoothest plane rides I've ever experienced. Although, I never kept my eyes off the propeller on my side of the aircraft. I'm certain had that thing sputtered even once during mid-flight I would have barfed up my empanada whole.

After retrieving our luggage in Medellin, we were met by our local guide Carlos and bus driver Julien. They had spent the night driving our tour bus from Manizales to Medellin. We greeted them with a round of applause. We made several stops before heading to the hotel. The first was a visit to the top of *Cerro Nutibara Park*, situated on the west bank of the Medellin River, in the center of the Aburra Valley where the city is located. Cerro Nutibara is one of the seven 'guardian hills' of Medellin, and while this rocky outcrop is only 80 meters tall, it renders an incredible panoramic view of the entire city. The park is named after Nutibara, a famed indigenous Cauca chieftain from the 1500s, and contains one of the few conserved ecosystems within the valley. In addition to the beautiful natural landscape, there is an open-air theater along its northern slope where concerts are held throughout the year. At the foot of the hill is a sculpture park featuring works from ten renowned artists (both national and international) selected by the Medellin Museum of Modern Art, including a sculpture of Chief Nutibara. Just below the summit of the hill is a replica of a colonial *Paisa* town square.

We parked just below the hill and broke for lunch inside one of the restaurants lining the small town square. I sat with Weimin Jiang and Jie Zuao at a balcony table on the second floor. We ordered a *cazuela* ('pot') dish consisting of a very hearty red bean soup with potatoes, avocado slices and *chicharrones* (fried pork cracklings). It was delicious. After lunch, I climbed the stairs to the observation point and was rewarded by a spectacular view of the Aburra Valley with the skyline of Medellin stretching out in all directions. I was amazed by all the high tower structures rising up from the hillsides, in certain areas there were so many they resembled large domino pieces lined up in a row. I have no idea what this city looked like during the time of Pablo Escobar, but today it has morphed into a modern, bustling sophisticated metropolis. In fact, in 2013, Medellin

was voted most innovative city in the world by the international Urban Land Institute. In current surveys, Medellin ranks among the top places to live in all of South America, and just this year, in 2016, it was awarded the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize in Singapore, a prestigious recognition akin to winning the Nobel Prize for urban planning. I couldn't wait to experience this fascinating city.

By 3:10pm we left *Cerro Nutibara* and drove to the center of the historic quarter to visit the second-oldest museum in the country, the *Museo de Antioquia*. We traversed the wide main avenues, witnessing the ebb and flow of daily life. The traffic congestion was particular heavy at this hour of the day. On several streets we came across the large tramline stations; an integral part of an award-winning public transportation system that keeps this entire city humming. On a few corners – below the tramline tracks – were sections of very colorful and expressive graffiti. During Pablo Escobar's time, graffiti was used to threaten the public and instill fear, but today it has become part of the urban artistic landscape. You can actually take tours to see the various graffiti artwork throughout the city, some of it quite impressive. We drove beneath the tramline through a very crowded commercial district known as El Hueco ('the Hole'), the area reminiscent of a working-class New York City borough. In addition to the storefronts, a small army of street vendors – selling everything from produce to T-shirts – lined the sidewalks, hawking their wares from portable tables underneath huge umbrellas.

Our driver parked just across a wide intersection in front of the *Plazoleta de las Esculturas* (the Sculpture Plaza), a wide-open square with native ceiba and yellow lignum vitae trees dotting its green spaces. This plaza is more popularly referred to as Botero Plaza because there are 23 Botero bronze sculptures on display throughout the area, donated by the artist himself. Some are representations of his most iconic obese images, like the 'Hand', 'Eve', "Maternity', the 'Roman Soldier', the fat and adorable 'Cat', 'Dog' and 'Horse', to name a few. Throughout the city, in other plazas, you will also encounter Botero sculptures, but not like the concentration you see here. On one side of this plaza is the *Museo de Antioquia*, and on an adjacent side is the grand art deco structure called the *Rafael Uribe Uribe* – yes, that's *two* Uribes – *Palacio Cultura* (the Cultural Palace) a municipal building that once served as the governor's mansion and is now used to showcase cultural programs related to the Department of Antioquia. This beautiful, four-story Gothic Revival structure has a central courtyard and a

rooftop observatory, with several domes and a checkered dark and light-colored stone façade that is quite unusual. The building is considered a national monument. We crossed the intersection and made our way through the square, admiring the enormous bronze sculptures. In front of the Cultural Palace was one of my favorite Botero sculptures: the head of a man with a naked woman on top of it. According to our guide, this was Botero's attempt to depict what is typically on the mind of most men!

On the western side of the plaza is the building that houses the *Museo de Antioquia*. Originally, the museum opened in 1881 and was named the Zea Museum in honor of Francisco Antonio Zea who served as vice-president of the short-lived first Republic of Colombia (established in 1819 and later supplanted by the creation of Gran Colombia). The Zea museum housed a large library and included weapons, documents, flags and other memorabilia from the independence movement and a collection of pre-Columbian artifacts. It closed down in 1925 to make way for the construction of the new Cultural Palace building. In 1955, the museum re-opened in its current location, inside the old *Casa de la Moneda* (the former coin mint) and was renamed *Museo de Antioquia* in 1978. Today, the museum contains 17 rooms with permanent collections, including Pre-Columbian and colonial artifacts, artworks from the country's leading artists (past and present), a photography section, contemporary art and several sections of Botero works and donations, including some interactive rooms. I am a huge museum fan, and this one is definitely worth a visit.

We crossed the pedestrian street (Carrera 52) adjacent to the plaza and entered the museum building just as it began to rain, spending the next hour and a half touring the exhibition halls. I seldom stay with the group during these visits; the guides tend to consume a lot of our time with endless explanations. I prefer to just wander from exhibit to exhibit and explore the artwork for myself. Besides, viewing art is a highly personal experience; what moves me emotionally might not affect someone else. I'd rather be alone at moments like these. As a group we climbed a center staircase up to the top floor where the Botero exhibits begin. From that point on I ventured off on my own. I walked the galleries viewing the Botero paintings and sculptures, visited some of his interactive rooms where you can stand in front of funhouse mirrors and distort yourself into a 'real life' Botero character, or try your hand at creating a computer Botero-isque drawing of yourself (which they email to you, by the way). I particularly enjoyed the modern art sections, the murals of the famous Colombian painter Pedro Nel

Gomez, and the artwork of other great – but lesser known – national artists. The building itself is a pleasure to walk through, with long, wide corridors, eloquent conference halls decorated with enormous murals and beautifully landscaped courtyards. I had a great time here.

We were back on the bus shortly before 5:30pm heading south through the city to the Poblado district where our hotel was located. The entire Poblado has a mean social strata level in the range of 4 to 6, and is perhaps Medellin's wealthiest neighborhood. The area is home to towering new upscale apartment buildings and business skyscrapers, malls, trendy shops and fine eateries. The tree-lined streets here are dotted with creeks, parks and nature paths. The area began its amazing transformation during the nineties, when Medellin's elite began moving into the district to insulate themselves from the growing epidemic of drug violence in other parts of the city. Today, Medellin in general is a great place to live, and the Poblado district is its most beautiful and safest enclave. We arrived at our hotel, the Hotel Poblado Plaza, just after 6:00pm. Dinner was on our own that night and most of us split up to explore the local malls and restaurants that our guides had recommended. It's interesting to note that some of the best restaurants in the city are actually situated within the large malls. During Pablo Escobar's time, drive-by shootings were common occurrences, and people took to eating inside the malls for safety. Near our hotel were several multi-level modern malls and numerous casinos.

After checking in I went to the McDonald's next door to the hotel and purchased a large coffee. I then went up to my room and busied myself putting my luggage away and sorting out the clothes I would be wearing for the next couple of days, writing in my journal and watching the CNN news broadcast. By 7:15pm I hit the pavement and spent the next two hours strolling up and down the main avenue in front of our hotel. I checked two of the casinos nearby, including one associated with the Hardrock Hotel. I love to play baccarat but was a little hesitant when I saw that the local table buy-in was 500,000 pesos with a minimum wager of 50,000 pesos per hand. Actually, this was like sitting down with $150 and playing at the $15 level, which is not that high, but somehow the peso conversion made it seem very expensive to me. I continued walking along Poblado Avenue, enjoying the cool night air, opting to pick up a cheeseburger and fries at a local fastfood joint for dinner. I stepped inside several of the malls to have a look around and then returned to the hotel, completely exhausted. I went to bed shortly thereafter.

Day Seven

I was awake by 3:00am, bothered by a worsening sore throat I attributed to the cold mountain temperature. I gargled with hot water and took some Advil but could not go back to sleep, so I spent the next several hours writing in my journal and deleting unwanted photo images from my Nikon camera (I had already snapped more than 900 pictures on this trip and we still had four full days to go). I headed for the breakfast buffet at 7:00am, sitting with Missy that morning. By 8:30am we were on the bus heading out of the city proper. Medellin is nicknamed 'City of Eternal Spring' due to its pleasant year-round climate, the rich, fertile valley perfect for growing just about anything, it seems. We were on our way to visit a hillside village called Santa Elena, a leading commercial producer of flowers in the region, and home to a unique tradition called the *sillateros*.

To exit Medellin we drove up through the narrow hilly streets of the valley, traversing several neighborhoods within the social strata categories of 1 and 2. The further up we climbed, the rougher the area, though. At one point below us were 'neighborhoods' without classification – shanties with no running water or electricity (what one would consider 'slums') – ringing the upper reaches of the valley. We passed some very interesting graffiti murals along the way. During our drive to Santa Elena, local guide Carlos spoke about the city's transformation from the cocaine capital of the world to the most innovative city in the world. The current story of Medellin's metamorphosis, he told us, could be divided into three periods, dating back only forty years. But I will add a brief historical prelude of my own:

The city was founded in 1616 by a small group of Spanish settlers who created small haciendas which they farmed themselves without the benefit of slave-labor, the first nod to the fiercely independent *paisa* tradition that would eventually dominate the culture of the Coffee Zone. The valley grew slowly, and in 1826 the city became the capital of the department of

Antioquia, but remained a relatively small provincial town until the 1900s. This is why you will not find many historical structures within the city; much of it gave way to the economic expansion of the 20th century. The building of a railroad, and the boom in coffee and mining, led to investments in the textile industry and soon the city grew into a large metropolis, becoming an economic powerhouse in the region. By the 1980s, the dark underworld of Pablo Escobar emerged to engulf Medellin. This, according to Carlos, was the first period in the city's recent transformation. Medellin became notoriously linked with the worldwide cocaine industry; gun battles on the streets were ordinary occurrences. The soaring homicide rate made Medellin one of the most dangerous places on earth. The next period in the transformation came following the death of Escobar and the elimination of his cartel. A power vacuum ensued; street gangs battled continuously for control of the city's cocaine business, bringing even more instability and mayhem to Medellin.

The turning point happened during the early part of the 2000s. Aggressive military and police campaigns slowly took control of the poorer neighborhoods within the upper valley. But the political leadership within the city knew that if changes were not made to better the economic conditions of the poor, they would constantly be facing criminal elements and growing insurgency activity. An ambitious new urban planning model was created for the city that eventually connected the lower class neighborhoods in the upper valley with the rest of Medellin, spurring on a revival that changed the socio-economic landscape. The new infrastructure centered around a metro system utilizing cable cars, tramlines, buses and even the use of free municipal bicycles that enabled the poorer classes easy (and cheap) access into and around the city where they could find work, spurring on economic growth that in turn improved the class 1 and 2 neighborhoods in the upper valley. Gang activity declined markedly, and the violence associated with them vanished. Today, Medellin is considered one of the safest and best places to live in all of South America. It truly is a beautiful and innovative city, and should be on everyone's list if visiting Colombia.

We reached the small town of Santa Elena by 9:30am. Located high in the mountains above Medellin, this sleepy little village is spread out over small plots of hilly farms dotted by some beautifully quaint and colorful farmhouses. Although not quite evident from the roadside, this mountainous stretch of land is at the heart of an industry that provides an abundance of

tropical and local flowers for the international markets. In addition to some traditional crops, most of the rich soil around here is used for the cultivation of a wide variety of flowers, rendering, in patches, the kind of inspired landscape one only sees in paintings hanging on museum walls. Santa Elena is also the birthplace of an ornate flower arrangement called *silletas,* a contraption made of wood and bamboo that acts as a portable drawer and is filled with an arrangement of colorful flowers. The *silletas*, some weighing in excess of 100 pounds, are strapped to the backs of these sturdy farmers (known as *silleteros*) who then carry them down the mountain for the annual flower festival parade in Medellin held in August. Awards are given for the best *silletas* in different categories like monumental, commercial, emblematic, overall arrangement, etc. It is an incredible source of pride in these parts to win an award for your *silleta*, and farmers will often display them in front of their farmhouses like trophies even after the flowers have wilted and dried.

Our first stop that morning was to visit the *finca* (farm) of a local *silletero* whose elderly mother had created a private museum inside their farmhouse. There was a sign over the walkway leading to the sprawling ranch-style home that read: *Finca Silletera y Museo Abuela Sarito.* The mother, a weathered woman named Maria who wore a light green skirt and purplish blouse beneath an equally colorful apron, greeted us in front of the house holding the hand of her 2-year old granddaughter. According to our guides, the house was a typical single-level design common in this area. What was unusual about the place is what *Dona* Maria had done to it; or, more accurately, what she had stored inside of it. This perky lady could be an inspiration for hoarders everywhere. The entire tiled veranda, which wrapped around the house, was like a walk down memory lane, lined with household items dating back five decades or more. In fact, the experience for me was almost nostalgic: I saw models of turntables, large black and white console television sets and even a Brothers portable typewriter I had used growing up. And interspersed with all the old computers and technologically outdated gizmos were a collection of local housewares and tools from a long-ago era. A scale used by midwives to weigh newborns, a wooden churn to make butter, tins cans cut in the shape of candleholders, rusted old farm tools, an antique hunting rifle and sewing equipment. I'm not sure what impressed me most, the extent of her 'museum'… or her ability to acquire all this stuff. I mean, for gosh sakes, this was a rural mountain village! *Where did it all come from*?

Dona Maria led us through the farmhouse; each room (with the exception of the bedrooms) was also filled with memorabilia. The only other person in the house was her daughter-in-law who was busy at an outdoor stone grill warming arepas made from *choclo* (a large kernel sweet corn) for our mid-morning *merienda* snack. We toured the entire house, with Carlos doing the interpreting while *Dona* Maria spoke about some of the more unusual items on display. When I asked about her family, she told me she had 12 grown children, 16 grandchildren and one great-grandson. Later, we sat at picnic tables next to the outdoor grill and ate warm arepas with thick slices of fresh farm cheese and drank homemade hot chocolate. Gosh, was it tasty! After our snack, *Dona* Maria showed us several of the large *silletas* her son had made over the years for the annual flower festival. She told us that there are currently about 520 *silleteros* in the area. That's a lot of flower farmers for such a small town.

We concluded our visit, thanking *Dona* Maria for her hospitality, and drove to another *finca* about 10 minutes away called *Finca Silletera Los Girasoles* owned by a farmer named Joaquin Zapata. Along the way we passed farmland after farmland, each growing a rainbow of beautiful flowers. Joaquin (who had donned the traditional white costume and brimmed hat of the *silletero* for our benefit) and his wife greeted us when we arrived. They led us to a terrace at the back of their farmhouse overlooking what had to be one of the prettiest fields I have ever seen. Extending downward along a hill, the Zapatas had planted rows of different flowers, orchids and herbs; each colorful variety had a marker with the species name in Spanish next to it. It was an incredible sight: I saw roses of every color, marsh or spotted orchids, white margarita flowers, different types of fagonbushes, azaleas, chrysanthemums of every stripe, Brazilian sky flowers, yellow daylilies, orange and red torch lilies, large sunflowers, purplish Clavellina flowers…the list went on and on. Joaquin took us on a short walk through the fields, pointing out the more interesting varieties. At the time I couldn't distinguish the species from the Spanish names, so I had to look them up when I got back home, but the collection was impressive. We also came across a section of aromatic flowers, a vegetable patch and even a separate herbal and medicinal garden that included aloe vera, chamomile and mint. This was quite a place.

We returned to the farmhouse terrace and Joaquin – with our guides interpreting – gave us a brief lecture on the history of the *silletero* tradition. The term *silleta* actually means 'seat'. During colonial times the sick and

elderly were carried down the mountain in them. Later, the *silleta* was adapted as a means of transporting goods down to the marketplace. Flower growers would fill the wooden contraptions with fresh flowers and walk several hours down the mountainside with these things strapped to their backs to sell them on the streets of Medellin. One morning, during the 1950s – as the story goes – a wealthy patron observed this procession of *silleteros* coming down from Santa Elena and was so moved by the sight of them he purchased all their flowers, but under the condition that they first parade around the city to show the townsfolk the beautiful flower arrangements. Supposedly, this was how the annual Medellin Flower Festival was born, and the *silletero* tradition began. Joaquin said the competition is quite intense (but good-natured), a source of personal pride for the farmers. The *silletas*, depending on the variety or class, can weigh up to 135 pounds and include more than two dozen different types of flowers in their individual arrangements. Delicate flowers or orchids are usually placed on the *silleta* the night before the competition, the rest of the flowers are cut fresh that morning and arranged in whatever pattern the *silletero* has come up with. Emblematic or commercial *silletas* will have the group, business or communities' name spelled out in flowers. When completed, they are visually stunning.

Joaquin then made us a small *silleta* with flowers he had cut fresh that morning. Afterwards, Annette and I took turns putting on the white scarf and wide-brimmed hat of the *silletero* and had the thing strapped to our backs. We briefly 'paraded' in front of the cheering group, tipping our hats in gratitude the way a *silletero* would do. Let me tell you, the *silleta* Joaquin made for us only weighed about 35 pounds, and it felt pretty heavy. So walking down the mountain (for several hours, no less) with a larger one weighing a hundred pounds more must be an incredibly daunting task. Someone asked Joaquin what happens if the *silletero* needs to use the bathroom? He told us they just pee as they go, usually while walking alongside a donkey or horse to give them some cover. These are dedicated people! We took turns having our pictures taken with Joaquin and his wife in front of the *silleta* before leaving around 12:30pm.

We drove a short distance to a popular local restaurant called Club Colombia for an included lunch. I had a national dish called *fiambre*, another belly-busting meal consisting of a grilled steak, rice with red beans, salad, sweet fried plantains and avocado slices. *Fiambre*, like the *bandeja paisa*, was originally designed for the hard-working farmers of the region, and can

easily include more food than what they served us, like sausages and roasted pork skin (*chicharron*). A traditional *fiambre* is often wrapped individually in plantain or bijao leaves, and generally implies some kind of road trip for the average Colombian family.

After lunch we drove over to the metro station at Arvi Park (*Parque Arvi*), an ecological nature reserve (that also contains a Pre-Hispanic archaeological site) situated on the eastern slopes of the Aburra Valley. Our guides wanted us to take the cable car lift back down to Medellin so we could experience the city's public transportation system firsthand. Halfway down the valley we would get off at the Santo Domingo station to tour what was once one of the most violent, gang-infested neighborhoods in the area, a former war zone where opposing gang members would shoot at one another from rooftops, indiscriminately killing anyone on the streets who crossed into their territory.

Medellin's Metro system is based on a tramline that follows two pathways, crossing the city from north to south and from the center area to the west. Several aerial cable car lines were added to supplement the tramline system. These cable cars travel along steel cables connected by huge concrete towers spreading up the valley's mountains, traveling slowly up and down the hillsides, connecting the lower class 1 and 2 neighborhoods with the rest of the city below. Currently, there are 27 train stations and 7 cable car stations in the Metro system, accommodating more than half a million travelers a day. The socio-economic impact this transportation network has had on the city cannot be understated. In addition to connecting the poorer neighborhoods with the more affluent ones, allowing for more interaction and commerce between its peoples – which in turn has spurred on economic growth in all sectors of the valley – the Metro has become a source of pride for the community and has created a new boom in tourism. And truth be told, riding the cable cars down from the mountain was fun, fun, fun! The view of the Aburra Valley was astonishing. Carlos told us the cost of riding the Metro for the poor is *less* than one U.S. dollar a day, a far cry from when a bus ride into the city cost the equivalent of seven dollars roundtrip and took more than three hours each way. Today, residents of the hilltop neighborhoods can reach their jobs in the city in 30 to 40 minutes.

We split up into groups of six to ride the cable cars. In my group were Abdi, Ken, Laura, Weimin and Jie. As we made our descent towards the Santo Domingo station, we passed the tree line of the mountain forest,

coming across a cleared hilly section with a haphazard collection of makeshift shanties. These were extremely poor families, with no running water or electricity connected to their homes. John told us these impromptu neighborhoods were designated ‘zero’ on the social strata level, and were considered more like squatter camps. Eventually, though, they could become level 1 neighborhoods as the area improved and more public facilities were added.

It took us about 15 minutes to reach the Santo Domingo cable station, which was situated about halfway up the mountain from Medellin. We regrouped and followed our guides through the winding hillside streets of this level 1 neighborhood to a park area with an observation point that overlooked the entire city below. Another spectacular view! Twenty years ago, according to Carlos, this walk would have been impossible, as warring street gangs had divided the neighborhood along an imaginary line (where the cable car now crosses) and would kill anyone who violated their territorial space. Intervening police and military action, and the creation of the Metro system, eventually did away with the gangs and created economic opportunities for its residents. I saw a vibrant, happy community, with lively commerce and open-air cafes. Children were playing everywhere. Some of the graffiti was starkly prophetic, including one near the park that was a personal favorite of our guides; it had the drawing of a young woman springing up from a skull buried in the ground, the following words (in Spanish) were inscribed: “They tried to bury us but didn’t realize we were seeds.” If traveling to Medellin, you must ride the Metro to experience this incredible transformation; descending from the mountaintop you can see how the poorer neighborhoods ringing the valley improve significantly the closer to the city you approach. I understand now why Medellin has won numerous awards for its urban planning innovativeness; this place should be a role model for struggling cities everywhere.

We returned to the Santo Domingo cable station and continued riding down the mountainside for three more stops until we reached the city’s Acevedo Metro train station. From here we boarded the *incredibly* crowded tramline and traveled south for eleven stops to the Poblado station, cutting across almost the entire city. At every station I kept thinking that passengers would exit and lighten the load, but it seemed as if no one ever got off and more and more commuters kept piling in. We stood the entire ride, holding on to overhead bars and straps to steady ourselves. Thankfully, our bus was waiting for us when we reached the Poblado station. The rest of the day was

free and some of our members elected to walk off and explore the Poblado district from the train station. But I remained on the bus and returned to the hotel by 4:15pm. I purchased a large coffee at the McDonald's and a box of sore throat lozenges from a nearby pharmacy and then headed up to my room to relax for 45 minutes. At 5:00pm I met brothers Abdi and Ken in the lobby and we headed south along Poblado Avenue towards the district's main square.

Today, the Poblado has been nicknamed *Las Manzanas de Oro* (the Golden Apples) because its 24 *barrios* (neighborhoods) constitute the main commercial and industrial center of the city, which in turn is the second largest economy in the country. Although obscured now by its modern high-rise buildings and bustling street life, the Poblado district has quite a bit of history attached to it. This is where Medellin began back in 1616, when Spanish explorer Francisco Herrera y Campuzano established the first settlement in the Aburra valley in what is now the district's main square. This small village (the literal translation of *poblado*) consisted of approximately 80 people, many of them indigenous. A royal edict later declared that whites should live separately from mestizos and natives, and the township was moved to the Berrio Square in the central part of the city in 1675. The Poblado, for more than two centuries, was nothing more than a small rural enclave on the southeastern fringes of the valley, home to several large *fincas* that later gave name to its neighborhoods. Eventually, as land became too expensive within the city center, up-and-coming wealthy families began building villas in the area, and with this new money came road improvements and the building boom that followed.

We walked about 11 blocks or so to reach the historic Poblado Square, the 'original' main square of Medellin. I had assumed the site would be more impressive, but it was almost nondescript as far as park squares go, small in size with an uninspiring circular design and modest landscaping. I read the park is a popular hangout for young people due to the surrounding nightlife. A bronze statue memorializes the site. It has a sculpture of an indigenous bare-breasted woman hunching down holding a pan – fetching water, I think – while the sides of the statue have sculptured images of armed Conquistadors. On the avenue in front of the square is the *San Jose del Poblado* Church, a relatively small Catholic church originally built during the late 1800s and reconstructed fifty years later to address some deterioration issues. We stepped inside to have a look around. The interior

consisted of a narrow single-vaulted nave with a simple wooden altar. I found it as inspiring as the park.

We followed Poblado Avenue back north, on the opposite side of the street, stopping to visit a flea market inside the plaza of a cluster of modern office buildings. This had to be the most 'upscale' flea market I've ever seen; the items were designer quality and the vendors themselves looked like sophisticated hipster types. Just further north of here we decided to have dinner at a restaurant called Hacienda (recommended by John). The establishment was located on the upper level of a mall. We sat at an outdoor terrace overlooking the busy avenue below. I ordered a non-alcoholic beer and a delicious rib dinner. During our conversation that evening, I discovered that Abdi and Ken were both licensed pilots. Ken, a retired gynecologist, even owned his own plane. Their father had been an Iranian Air Force pilot during the 1950s; after his tragic death their mother moved the family to the United States where the two brothers grew up. Abdi, who is an engineer employed by the state of California, had a great sense of humor (and a slight resemblance to my favorite uncle). I really enjoyed their company. They were seasoned travelers and always had interesting stories to tell.

I was back in my hotel room shortly before 8:00pm. I spent about an hour writing in my journal while simultaneously watching the Spanish broadcast of the Thursday night NFL game on TV. Boy, these Colombians sure like American football. I was too tired (and still feeling a little under the weather) to repack my luggage; I decided to go to bed early and do it in the morning.

Day Eight

We had an early morning bus ride to the airport in Pereira so I set my smartphone alarm clock for 3:30am. My sinuses were congested and my throat was still aching. I rummaged through my toiletry bag for cold medication and gargled with hot water. I shaved, showered, dressed and repacked my luggage, heading downstairs for breakfast by 5:30am. An hour later we were on the bus for the hour-long drive to the airport. Along the

way, our local guide Carlos recapped the things we had seen and experienced in Medellin, reminding us of the unique transportation system and the changes the city has undergone. As a tour guide I'm sure he spends a lot of his time promoting and talking up this particular part of the country, but you could also sense his pride. Carlos is from Medellin, and he took considerable delight in showing us 'his town'. I personally loved the city and if I ever go back to Colombia I will definitely spend more time here. We arrived at the airport by 7:40am and said our 'goodbyes' to Carlos and our driver Julian. Inside the terminal, John checked us in as a group. When we headed over to our departure gate – lo and behold! – our plane to Cartagena was actually scheduled to leave on time. It was another short flight, lasting just under an hour. We touched down in Cartagena by 10:00am. (Note: the actual name of the city is Cartagena de Indias, but I will refer to it simply by its more popular name: just plain ole *Cartagena*).

After collecting our luggage and exiting the terminal building of the Rafael Nunez International Airport in Cartagena, we were welcomed by local guide Samuel and our new bus driver, Jorge. Gone was the comfortable mountain air of the Andes, replaced now by the hot, sticky humid weather of the Caribbean coast. The temperature was in the low nineties (Fahrenheit), which turned out to be the 'coolest' of the three days we spent in Cartagena. *It felt like I was back in Miami*!

From the airport we headed to a local fishing village called La Boquilla seven kilometers north of Cartagena to visit the Foundation Casa Italia (Italian House), a non-profit community center and school established by a husband-and-wife team from Italy. I'm not sure when this started, but its been a growing and popular trend among tour companies to include a 'cultural visit' to schools like this one, which are usually located within economically depressed areas. The tour company normally sponsors the school, providing donations and materials, and encourages tour members in advance to bring a small supply of school materials (notebooks, pens, crayons, backpacks, etc) to be presented to the head of the facility during the visit. I have used multiple touring companies in the past, and each one now embraces this practice. And let me tell you, these stops are often *highlights* on any tour. No matter what part of the world you travel to, the children are *always* adorable and will melt your heart, allowing you to feel a compassion for the local people like never before. In this particular case, some former Gate 1 tour members have become passionate contributors to the Foundation Casa Italia.

It took us roughly 30 minutes to reach La Boquilla in traffic. This sleepy little fishing village sits on the narrowest section of what is already a narrow peninsula, bordered on one side by the Caribbean Sea and on the other by the Cienaga de Tesca, a large coastal lagoon. Samuel told us La Boquilla is a social strata level 1 neighborhood, one of the poorest in the area. The streets were unpaved and filled with large waterlogged ditches, forcing our driver to detour, maneuvering our coach along the wide sandy beach that runs the length of the village. The homes in La Boquilla are mostly wooden shacks or simple brick and mortar dwellings that really underscore the poverty of the neighborhood. The residents are almost all of African descent. Along the beach were numerous outdoor improvised cafes or restaurants where you can buy a very good, inexpensive seafood meal (caught fresh by the locals daily). We saw a collection of wooden fishing rowboats beached just yards away from the waterline; the village fishermen ply their trade in the early morning hours and were done for the day. Scattered groups of school-age children were playing on the beach or kicking around a soccer ball. Despite the obvious poverty, this place had the laid-back feel of a Jimmy Buffet song.

We parked in front of the building housing the Casa Italia's community center and school. The sign above the door read *Instituto Una Nueva Luz De Esperanza* (the New Light of Hope Institute). Rosy Soprano, who together with her husband, Guiseppe Mazzoni, created the foundation in the late nineties, greeted us when we arrived. Originally, Casa Italia was a small center that promoted Italian culture (and still does), but later grew into the *Boca Azul* (Blue Mouth) Project, a private, non-profit organization with a mission to provide good nutrition, healthcare and educational training to the area's impoverished children. The center itself has grown over the years, from a nursery/community kitchen to several buildings housing a dining area, large kitchen, several classrooms, a computer room, a health center and living quarters for volunteers. They were in the process of constructing a new school addition on property adjacent to the center when we visited.

Currently, 300 or so children from the neighborhood receive educational training and services from the Boca Azul Project (they teach kindergarten to seventh grade at the school). On the day we arrived, the school and center were mostly empty since it was the Love and Friendship Day weekend (*Dia de Amor y Amistad*), something akin to our Valentine's Day and apparently a national holiday of sorts. Standing beneath the palm-thatched roof of the

visitors' welcome area (built with a donation from Gate 1 Travel), Rosy spoke to us in Spanish, with John interpreting. She had just come from the hospital where her husband, a former Italian Air Force officer in his eighties, was convalescing from a serious illness. She told us the story of how, in 1996, on a trip through Latin America to see archeological sites, they came upon the village of La Boquilla and found many underfed and barefoot children playing in the muddy roadways and along the beach, surrounded by rats, stray dogs and pigs. The children, she told us, seemed almost abandoned to their life of poverty. It was a heart-wrenching but inspiring moment for this retired couple from Italy, who decided on the spot to stay in Cartagena and do something about the situation. The couple even adopted a little girl from the neighborhood who is now a young woman in college. Rosy and her husband normally stay 11 months out of the year in La Boquilla administering the foundation. All of the funding is provided by donations, much of it coming from abroad. John told us that 1% of the cost of our land tour is donated to Casa Italia, and that, to date, more than $65,000 has been raised by Gate 1 Travel for the school.

Rosy led us on a short tour through the two-story facility. We saw several classrooms (varying grades) and a computer room with banks of donated equipment for the students to use. The kitchen area had a large walk-in freezer/refrigerator that Guiseppe built himself. There were fairly modern bathroom and shower facilities for both students and staff. Upstairs was the school nurse station. Once a month, volunteer physicians from Doctors Without Borders come to the school to provide vaccinations or free check-ups and treatment for the students. This actually led to some conflict (even angry confrontations) with the older members of the community who showed up expecting free medical care. But Rosy explained to the parents that the services were only for the children. The elders – grudgingly, I assume – eventually accepted these conditions. Throughout the building we saw modern amenities (for example, A/C units, computers and TVs in the classrooms and offices) but also some 'improvisations', like chairs fashioned out of plastic buckets covered with cloth.

We ended up in the audio-visual room on the second floor, a long wide hall used for presentations and meetings. We sat in chairs lined along the walls and were introduced to the school's principal, a young local woman whose name escapes me. She was all smiles and thanked us for coming, giving us a little more background information on the school and the services it provides to the community. Afterwards, we were treated to a

dancing exhibition by some of the students. They performed three traditional dance numbers for us. The first, the *cumbia*, was initially introduced by the African population of Latin America. It is a courtship dance. Two students, a boy and a girl, dressed in traditional country costumes of the region, performed the dance number. The second one, the *champeta*, was also inspired by the African community of the Caribbean coastline. Although originally a dance of cultural expression, today it has morphed into a hot, little risqué number of gyrating hips and pelvic thrusts. A young female student performed the dance without a partner. Apparently, the gyrations of a boy and girl dancing this provocative number must have raised eyebrows among the more staid older members of previous tour groups, and it was decided to just have one student dancing it alone….(but let me tell you, it was still a little awkward watching this little girl moving around like that). The third number was a traditional *salsa* dance, with three boys starting the number in unison and then joined by the two female students. Eventually, they went around the room grabbing tour members by the hand, inviting them to dance. I can say that Laura, Mireya, Ken, and Abdi cut quite a rug on the dance room floor!

When the dance presentation was over, we were served Coca-Cola and a snack of beef empanadas and fried arepas filled with cheese. Rosy once again thanked us for coming; those who had brought along school supplies handed them over. Many of us also gave cash donations. John presented Rosy with a customary check from Gate 1 Travel totaling the 1% our group members paid for the land trip. It was a great stop on the tour, an enlightening and inspiring moment. The foundation, through all its efforts, gives hope to the children of La Boquilla to realize dreams beyond their own poverty, to improve their lives through better nutrition, healthcare, education and vocational training. Thanks to the caring, unselfish act of a retired Italian couple, a generation of young adults from this region will go on to college and/or better lives. *God Bless Them.*

We left the school at 12:30pm and headed to the Hotel Caribe, our home for the last three days of the tour, traveling first along Carrera 1 which cradles the beach facing the Caribbean Sea, and then turning down Carrera 2, the central shopping and commercial area of the city. Cartagena is divided into several neighboring districts, but the two most prominent seem to be the colonial quarter downtown (referred to as *El Centro*) and the modern touristy section known as *Bocagrande*, which runs down the southern peninsula of the city, the streets lined with hotels, restaurants, shopping

malls, casinos and apartment complexes. This district is nicknamed 'Colombia's Miami Beach' and I have to admit, as a Miamian, it did resemble my hometown. On our drive to the hotel, our new guide Samuel gave us some of the historical skinny on his beloved Cartagena:

The region around Cartagena Bay was home to one of the earliest human communities in what is now Colombia. Various indigenous peoples known collectively as the Puerto Hormiga Culture had established settlements in the lower Magdalena River basin near Cartagena beginning around 4,000 BC. Over the succeeding millennia, other tribal groups dominated the area, building on the culture of the earlier inhabitants. By the time of the first Spanish expeditions to the area – at the beginning of the 1500s – different tribal cultures belonging to the Carib language group populated the Caribbean coastline of Colombia. The most preeminent of these – at least according to archaeological findings – appears to be the Calamari Tribe. In 1533, Spanish conquistador Pedro de Heredia founded what became known as Cartagena de Indias – the city's official name – on the site of an abandoned Calamari village. His small town quickly became prosperous due to the plundering of the indigenous peoples' wealth. A local tribal group known as the Zenu (or Sinu) buried the dead with their gold possessions, and the Spaniards wasted little time digging up the graves and pretty much ransacking all the nearby tribal villages in search of gold and silver. As word of the area's 'bounty' spread, more settlers arrived and Cartagena de Indias grew into a rich town in short order. In 1552, a massive fire broke out, destroying a large number of the town's wooden structures. Pedro de Heredia, who was governor at the time, ordered that all future construction in Cartagena be made of stone, brick or tile to avoid a similar catastrophe; as a result, many of the structures are still largely intact today. In 1984, the walled, Old Town became a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. I would spend the next two days exploring this fascinating historical treasure.

Samuel also spoke briefly about Cartagena's commerce and tourism industry, and about the ethnic and racial make up of the city, a large mix descended from white Europeans, African slaves, indigenous Carib natives and mestizos. According to our guide, an African-Colombian, discrimination in his country is not based along ethnic or racial lines, but rather socio-economic conditions. In other words, it sucks to be poor. He also praised the local cuisine, recommending that we try at least three dishes before leaving Cartagena: the *pargo rojo* (red snapper), a tender sirloin beef dish called *posta negra Cartagena*, and the incredible *cazuela de mariscos* (a hearty

seafood soup that – to paraphrase a line from Seinfeld – 'will make your knees buckle'). I made a mental note to try all three dishes over the coming days.

We arrived at the Hotel Caribe Cartagena shortly before 1:00pm. Check-in wasn't until 3:00pm but our rooms were already available. John suggested a few places around the area where we might want to have lunch (which was on our own). The Hotel Caribe (as it is more commonly called) is located at the end of the southern peninsula, directly across the beach in the Bocagrande district. Built in 1939, this Spanish colonial masterpiece is regarded as a national icon in the city; I believe it is the oldest luxury hotel in Cartagena. The building's three-sided front sits at the end of Carrera 1 (the main road along the beachfront) almost like a fortress, blocking the large lagoon of the trendy El Laguito section in back of the hotel. The entire structure underwent a massive renovation in 2009; its classic large corridors and arches were upgraded with new technologies and modern comforts. With a 5-star rating, Hotel Caribe offers all the amenities one expects in such a resort, including a massive pool and sundeck, surrounded by 35,000 square feet of exotic tropical gardens (complete with wandering deer and other animals). There is also some notoriety associated with the place. Back in 2012, during the Summit of the Americas, several members of President Obama's secret service detail were entangled in a scandal at the Hotel Caribe involving local prostitutes and a night of drunken revelry.

After washing up in my room and squaring away my luggage, I returned to the lobby and joined Abdi and Ken for lunch. We crossed the street in front of the hotel and headed over to an outdoor seafood joint located right on the beach called El Bony, owned by former professional boxer Bonifacio Avila, who represented Colombia in the 1972 Olympics. In fact, El Bony, Avila's nickname, is on hand to greet customers and have his picture taken with them. His establishment is basically a fish fry kiosk with tables and chairs underneath a nylon tent for shade. But looks can be deceiving. El Bony serves up some excellent seafood dishes. We each ordered the fried red snapper – recommended by Samuel – served with coconut rice, fried plantains (*patacones*) and salad. Delicious! The service was a little slow, but that was due to the fact the place was mobbed.

I returned to my room by 2:30pm, preparing a cup of instant coffee and sitting down to write in my journal. Thirty minutes later I went back to the main lobby where John had agreed to take a group of us to visit the nearby

Museo de la Esmeralda, an emerald museum owned by a jewelry firm called Joyeria Caribe just a few blocks from our hotel right off Carrera 2 (also known as San Martin Street). There are several emerald museums within the city – usually associated with a jewelry company – and visitors should take a moment to stop in one of them to appreciate these precious gemstones. Colombia is the world's largest producer of emeralds, mining more than two-thirds of the total global market. It turns out John used to deal in emeralds and was quite knowledgeable on the subject. We spent more than an hour here, walking through the exhibits and spending time in their jewelry shop.

The museum contains a replica of an emerald mineshaft with information about the process of mining and refining the precious gemstones, and maps of the various countries where they are produced, including emerald rock samples from around the world. You will find a section on goldsmith techniques, as well, and an explanation of the El Dorado ritual of the Muisca culture (with a miniature gold boat replica like the one we saw in Bogota's Museum of Gold). One display has emerald-and-gold rings found on the Spanish galleon Atocha, which sank off the coast of Florida in 1622 and were recovered by American treasure hunter Mel Fisher in 1985. The main attraction is an exhibit featuring a 260-pound rock called Petra, it is the largest emerald matrix ever discovered in Colombia containing more than 60 emerald crystals embedded in white calcite weighing more than 2,000 carats. Another fascinating chamber has a collection of beryl gemstones (emeralds are the *green* variety of the beryl mineral) with different shapes and colors, including some very rare varieties. At the end of the tour a few of our members purchased emerald jewelry in the company's showroom. All of the items on display were made or set on the premises, and expertly crafted, but a little pricey for my budget as far as 'souvenirs' go…(um, I'll stick to kitchen magnets, if you don't mind).

I left the museum with Abdi and Ken. The three of us wanted to sample the *limonada de coco* (lime-coconut drink) Samuel had mentioned on the bus when he was talking about the local cuisine. We found an outdoor café and ordered a round of the cool, refreshing beverage, perfect for such a hot afternoon. When I returned to the hotel the sun was beginning its descent over the western sky. I hurried to the beach to photograph the event, the sun's orb casting a serene orange glow over the coastline as it nose-dived over the horizon.

Earlier, I made arrangements with Arthur and Rhoda Turkel to join them for dinner (also on our own that day). At 6:45pm I met them in the lobby and we walked several blocks along San Martin Street to a popular local restaurant recommended by Samuel called *La Olla Cartagena*. This large – and lively – establishment was packed with both tourists and locals. In one corner, on a small stage, musicians entertained the dinner crowd with Latin music. Towards the back of the restaurant a group of about 20 women were celebrating the soon-to-be nuptials of one of its members. They had apparently been drinking heavily during their meal and were now dancing to the music on the floor space around their table… to the cheers of the other patrons. Nearby, several other members of our tour were having dinner, as well. I ordered the famous *posta negra Cartagena*, a delicious portion of beef eye round marinated in Coca-cola, onions, Worcestershire sauce, cumin and brown sugar, and then slow-cooked until the meat is tender enough to slice with your fork. It came served with coconut rice, fried plantains and salad. During dinner, the Turkels and I shared stories of our travels. As it turns out, they're from Teaneck, New Jersey, where I grew up. Arthur even worked at one of the elementary schools I had attended back in the 1960's. *What a small world*!

I was back in my hotel room by 8:30pm, stopping first at a convenience store to buy a small jar of Nescafe instant coffee. I made a cup and relaxed watching the CNN international news broadcast on TV. But having been up so early that morning, sleep soon overcame me…

Day Nine

I awoke shortly after 4:00am and could not go back to sleep, so I shaved, showered, made several cups of coffee and wrote in my journal. I headed downstairs for breakfast at 7:00am. It was Saturday, and according to Samuel several large cruise ships were scheduled to dock that morning in Cartagena, unloading more than 10,000 tourists on the streets of the Old Town. In order to avoid the large crowds, it was suggested we begin our tour

of the historic quarter earlier than usual. By 8:00am we assembled on the bus.

Our first stop that morning was to visit the old Spanish fort of Cartagena, the Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas. We traveled east on Carrera 6, the picturesque Cartagena Bay to our right, passing several marinas along the way. As the peninsula narrowed we crossed an inlet known as the Bay of Souls (*Bahia de las Animas*), the internal port of the city, used as a quay for the boats servicing the small Colombian archipelago of San Bernardo and the Rosario Islands off the Caribbean coast. During my research I discovered that the wharves of the Cartagena Bay were the disembarkation point for more than 1.1 million African slaves brought to the Americas from the 16th to the 19th centuries, making Cartagena the largest slave trading port in all of the Americas. This vile institution was finally outlawed in 1852. Today, the descendents of those African slaves make up a large percentage of the population of Cartagena.

At the mouth of the Bay of Souls is the Navel Base ARC Bolivar. In the past, conscription in the military was mandatory; all males aged 18 had to do an obligatory service of eighteen months. But today, the Colombian military is an all-volunteer force. Samuel told us that basically two types of people join the military, those from the lower classes (where jobs are hard to come by) and those from military families keeping up the tradition. We turned right when we reached *Avenida Blas de Lezeo*, a wide avenue stretching along one portion of the Old Town's defensive wall, and made another right in front of the Clock Tower plaza, continuing into the historic quarter of Getsemani. According to Samuel, the old city of Cartagena was originally divided between two small islands (which have since been united through landfill); one section forms El Centro, where the Old Town is located, and the other is Getsemani, a smaller outer walled extension just to the south.

We drove down the famous *Calle de la Media Luna* (Street of the Half Moon), one of the widest avenues in the city, through the very heart of the Getsemani district. On our left was a large memorial park, *Parque del Centenario*, commemorating the 100-year anniversary of the country's independence. This historic quarter is another example of the amazing social transformation spreading across the country. Ten years ago, amidst its 17th century cobblestone plaza and 18th century colonial buildings, Getsemani was a dangerous place to visit, one of the most run down, crime-infested areas of Cartagena. Today, the hookers and drug dealers have been replaced

by tourists who arrive in ever-increasing numbers for a more authentic slice of local culture. Getsemani is undergoing a gentrification process, with trendy boutique hotels, salsa clubs, hip drinking establishments, tapa bars and fine dining locations replacing the seedy dives that once permeated the quarter. Along our way, we passed the famous Café Havana, a Cuban salsa joint – described as a throwback to another time – that is so popular even Hillary Clinton partied there!

Calle de la Media Luna led us directly to a bridge dividing two small lakes. On the other side, rising above San Lazaro Hill, stood the triangular shape of the mighty Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas, the largest Spanish fortress ever built outside the European continent. Situated atop its strategic location, the fortress protected the city from both land and sea approaches, a formidable defensive barrier that was never breached in battle, no matter how many times it was attacked. We parked on the street directly in front of the Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas and followed our guides up a wide stone ramp leading into the fortress for an hour-long walking tour, passing rusted old cannons that were fixed in place facing the water so as not to be used against the city (in case the fort was ever taken). A large Colombian flag was hoisted near the entrance, its distinct stripes of yellow, blue and red symbolizing the history of the country. The yellow represents its riches (gold, in particular, but other precious metals and minerals, as well), the blue represents the oceans surrounding its borders, and the red – like so many other flags – represents the blood spilled in conquering and defending the land.

We stood on the stone ramparts admiring the walled city of Old Cartagena (and Getsemani) on the other side of the small bodies of lakes that line the front of the castle while Samuel gave us a brief historical accounting of the fortress. One of the reasons Cartagena played such an important role in Spain's colonial territories was geography. This coveted port city had natural defenses which protected it from hurricanes and human invaders alike. A system of coral reefs and mangrove swamps limited access from the sea. As Cartagena grew, the city became a strategic trading port. In addition to the lucrative slave trade, the city was the major depository for the region's wealth, and galleons laden with gold, silver and emeralds mined in the Spanish colonies of South America routinely departed its wharves bound for Spain. As a result, Cartagena became a prime target for the pirates of the Caribbean and the enemies of Spain (the English, French and Dutch).

Construction of the fortress – atop San Lazaro Hill – began in 1536, just three years after the city was founded. The structure was initially called Castillo de San Lazaro, but was later renamed San Felipe de Barajas in honor of King Philip IV. During the 1560s, Cartagena was pillaged by French privateers (licensed pirates, so to speak) necessitating further defensive measures. A thick wall (11 kilometers long) was eventually built around the city and the fortress underwent continuous reconstructions and upgrades that lasted more than two centuries (in addition to other fortifications). Each subsequent attack by buccaneers, privateers and the enemies of Spain led to newer and stronger measures.

Because of the wealth generated by the port, Spain heavily subsidized the city's defenses, creating over the years an impregnable barrier. The command center being the fortress. Using some of Europe's finest military engineers, the *castillo* was designed with numerous strategic defenses to prevent its capture. Constructed 41 meters above sea level for tactical leverage, the castle was fortified by a series of walls that were wide at the base and narrow toward the parapet, containing numerous artillery batteries and defensive parapets that faced each other the further up you went, providing layers of protection in case of an enemy breach, making it impossible to take over the entire fortress in a single attempt. Additionally, a labyrinth of tunnels were built to scurry soldiers from one end of the fortress to another, providing deadly stealth in case of close quarter fighting, with strategic and well concealed openings for marksmen to shoot the enemy while remaining concealed. The entire structure is still as impressive today as it was back then, with a commanding view of both land and sea from all directions. In 1984, the *castillo*, together with the Old Town, was listed as a World Heritage Site. If you go to Cartagena, you *must* visit this fortress.

Samuel slowly led us through the fort, explaining various defensive details to us. At one point we even traversed a section of the tunnel system. At the very top of the castle is a conveniently located gift shop that also sells ice cream, and a few of our members indulged themselves to ward off the incredible early morning heat. It was only 9:00am, but my polo shirt was already sticking to my torso. As we licked our frozen treats and tried to find shade from the unrelenting sun, Samuel recounted the famous *Battle of Cartagenas de Indias* – an amphibious assault on the city by British forces – using a diagram posted next to the castle's keep. Spain had to fend off many challenges to its rule in the Americas. In 1741, Vice-Admiral Edward Vernon, who had successfully engaged the Spanish in the Caribbean before,

led a military attack on Cartagena with 186 ships and over 27,000 men. Ironically, when his forces landed on the outskirts of the city he sent a message back to the King of England that Cartagena had already fallen. There was much jubilation in London, and a coin was even minted commemorating the victory. But the celebration was premature. Not only did Vernon fail to take the city, his forces suffered a humiliating loss. Cartagena's natural and manmade defenses conspired to deal the British a resounding defeat. The military landing got bogged down in the mangrove swamps where epidemics of yellow fever, typhus, scurvy and dysentery decimated the soldiers. Furthermore, as the ships entered the Bay of Cartagena and proceeded into the inner port, they were attacked relentlessly by a series of artillery batteries placed strategically along the waterway. Vernon could not overcome the castle's defenses with his weakened forces and had to retreat, losing more than 13,000 men in the process. (Interesting aside: George Washington's older brother served on Vernon's flagship, and Mount Vernon – the Washington family estate in Virginia – is named after him). The hero of this battle was the Spanish admiral Blas de Leso y Olavarrieta, who commanded the forces of Cartagena. His victory is even more impressive when you consider he had only 4,000 men and was outnumbered nearly eight to one. Today, he is regarded as one of the greatest naval strategists in Spanish history. And ole Blas cut quite a figure, um, both literally and figuratively. The veteran of many brutal naval clashes, he was nicknamed 'half man' because he was missing an eye, a leg and the use of his right arm. There is a statue of him in front of the fortress, and one of the avenues lining the Old Town is named after him.

We finished our tour of the Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas by 9:30am and headed over to El Centro (the heart of the Old Town), entering the walled city along Santander Avenue (Carrera 1), the side facing the Caribbean Sea. I would spend the next five hours walking the streets of this historical wonder. Undoubtedly, the old city is Cartagena's main attraction. This well-preserved throwback to Spain's colonial glory days is simply amazing. Amidst the newly renovated buildings, you will find beautiful rows of centuries-old colonial homes on cobbled stone narrow streets, 16th and 17th century churches and plazas, museums housed in restored administrative buildings, shops and restaurants hidden behind large oversized doors and below ornate Spanish balconies. One can easily spend an entire weekend lost within the Old Town, admiring the architecture and discovering the treasures this 'slice of history' has to offer.

From our bus we followed the shady side of a narrow street called *Calle de los Estribos* until we reached the Plaza de Santo Domingo, where the church by the same name is located. The original Santo Domingo Church – built in 1539 in a different plaza – was destroyed in a fire. It was re-built here in 1552 and is supposedly the oldest church in Cartagena. As we walked up the street towards the plaza, Samuel pointed out the large buttresses that were added to the side of the church to prevent it from collapsing. The original builders made the central nave a little too wide and topped it with a particularly heavy roof that caused the vault to crack. The bell tower is a little crooked, too. But little of this detracts from the historical importance of the building, painted a bright mustard color. In front of the church is a large bronze Botero sculpture of a fat, naked woman lying on her side. I couldn't resist having Abdi take my picture while grabbing the sculpture's ass. Call me immature, but I'm certain I'm not the only moronic tourist who came up with this idea.

From here, we walked one block further east and stopped at an ice cream shop called La Paletteria where John bought us a round of the frozen treats. The place resembled a bakery, but instead of pastries, the refrigerated display cases had rows of freshly made ice cream on a stick, with a tantalizing array of flavors. I opted for the salty caramel. By now, it was so hot outside you could have dipped me in a vat of ice cream, as well. We took a fifteen minute break and continued to the next street, *Calle de Don Sancho*, and made a right, following that to *Plaza de Bolivar*, a small, tree-lined square surrounded by some of the old city's most elegant colonial structures. In the center of this shady park is a statue of Simon Bolivar atop his horse. The area was filled with locals, probably trying to get a respite from the glaring sun. On one corner is the *Catedral* (the Cathedral), which was originally built in 1575 but was partially destroyed in 1586 while still under construction by the cannon fire of Sir Francis Drake – the famous English sea captain and privateer who rose to become Vice-Admiral of the British fleet – when he attacked the city. The church was not completed until 1612, undergoing several alterations since then. The modestly decorated cathedral looks almost like a fortress (maybe due to Drake's attack) and has been mostly preserved in its original form except for the upper section of the tower. The interior has three naves with massive archways supported by tall stone columns. Surrounding the Plaza de Bolivar, housed in a colonial structure, is the *Museo de Oro Zenu* (the Zenu Gold Museum), a smaller (but equally fascinating) version of the gold museum of Bogotá featuring displays from the Zenu tribe who inhabited the region when the Spaniards

first arrived. Taking up the western side of the plaza is the famous *Palacio de la Inquisicion* (the Palace of the Inquisition), one of the finest colonial buildings in the entire city, which is now a popular museum. Later that afternoon I toured both the museum and palace together with Abdi and Ken.

We proceeded south along Calle de Don Sancho for several blocks and turned right into *Plaza de San Pedro Claver*, another of Old Cartagena's many squares. The centerpiece here is the San Pedro Claver Church and its adjoining convent, founded by Jesuits in the early 1600's. The church was originally named after San Ignacio de Loyola, but was later dedicated to Pedro Claver, a Spanish-born monk who lived at the convent and spent his life ministering and trying to protect and improve the lives of slaves brought from Africa. He is known as the 'Apostle of the Blacks' and is obviously revered by the African descendents of the city. There is a life-size bronze statue of the saint in the plaza comforting a slave. Samuel led us on a short tour of the convent grounds and church, which also serve as a museum. By now, the hordes of cruise line tourists had reached the Old Town, and the place was mobbed.

The convent is a three-story building surrounding a beautiful courtyard with exhibition areas featuring Christian artwork, pre-Columbian pottery and contemporary Afro-Caribbean sculptures and paintings. You can also see the room where San Pedro Claver lived and died. Samuel gave us a brief lecture in the courtyard about racial and ethnic equality in Colombia, mentioning the different groups that make up the city's population, including *mestizos* and some other racially mixed sub groups whose names I'd rather not repeat in this journal. African slaves who fought with Bolivar were freed after Independence, creating a long-standing tradition of racial harmony within the country, despite the political and social issues that often divide Colombians. I wasn't sure if Samuel wasn't just putting a positive spin on things for the sake of us tourists, but the city did seem to be a well-mixed and peaceful place. We then toured the adjacent church, which was completed in the first half of the 1700's. It has an impressive stone-block façade, a tall central nave with beautiful stained-glass windows and a high altar constructed out of Italian marble, including a statue of San Pedro Claver, who was canonized in 1888. Beneath this altar are the actual remains of the saint encased in a glass coffin. His skull is clearly visible and makes for one *incredibly* creepy moment the first time you see it.

Our ‘official tour’ of the city ended at the church. The rest of the day was free for us to explore on our own. We tipped and said ‘goodbye’ to Samuel who would no longer be joining us and then the group split up to wander around the Old Town. Abdi, Ken and I agreed to have lunch together at a famous local restaurant called *La Mulata* (a term referring to a woman of mixed race). Samuel told us the place is famous for its seafood and generous portions, especially the *cazuela de mariscos*, one of the dishes he recommended we try before leaving Cartagena. We spent about thirty minutes looking for the establishment. Many of the businesses (restaurants, shops, hostels) in the old city are concealed behind the large wooden doors of these historical Spanish colonial structures, which were built side by side along the narrow streets, making it hard to distinguish a residential home from a place of business. We ventured past the *Plaza de la Aduana*, the oldest and largest square in the Old Town. This was the site of all the important colonial administrative buildings, including the former Royal Customs House after which the plaza was named (it now serves as City Hall). In the center of this open triangular square is a statue of Christopher Columbus. Many of the historical buildings here have been restored.

Using the GPS devise in Ken’s smartphone we were able to locate *La Mulata*. The eatery was just opening for lunch and we were the first ones there, but it filled up quickly with both locals and tourists alike. And for good reason. This hip restaurant, which has two small dining rooms up front and a larger area in the back, serves delicious daily specials at a cheap price. As we were ordering, the Ortiz clan wandered in and sat down in the adjacent dining room. The three of us had the *cazuela de mariscos* and a round of freshly made lime-coconut juice. What a scrumptious feast! This seafood stew is prepared with a base of heavy cream and coconut milk, a combination of exotic spices and vegetables, and loaded with clams, calamari, pieces of fish, jumbo shrimp and langostino (a smaller species of lobster, if you will). It was served in a large pot and came with a side of brown coconut rice, an additional grilled langostino, avocado salad and two enormous fried plantains. I couldn’t finish the whole thing. This was the best in a series of wonderful meals I had while in Colombia. I wholeheartedly recommend *La Mulata* if you’re going to have lunch in the Old Town. My bill came to only $13, including the tip. And, surprisingly, this turned out to be the most *expensive* meal I had during my entire stay.

After lunch, the three of us returned to Bolivar Plaza for a tour of the Zenu Gold Museum. Housed in a beautifully restored colonial home, this

museum (like all the other Gold Museums nationwide) is administered by the central bank. Besides the free admission, an added bonus was the modern air conditioning system that kept the place comfortably cool. The displays feature artifacts of the Zenu (or Sinu) peoples and other tribal groups who inhabited the areas between the Sinu and Magdalena Rivers – in the departments of Bolivar, Sucre, Cordoba and northern Antioquia – prior to the Spaniards arrival. Two of the main exhibits concentrate on the intricate metallurgy of the Zenu goldsmiths and ceramic artwork, exquisite works that were often buried with their dead, in burial mounds resembling a pregnant woman's stomach. Sadly, this custom led to the plundering of villages and sacred cemeteries by the conquistadors looking for treasure, hastening the demise of the Zenu culture and furthering the rapid colonization of the area by the Europeans. One can easily argue that the gold of the Zenu is what led to the establishment and growth of Cartagena. Besides being excellent metal smiths, the Zenu (and other regional tribal groups) were excellent farmers, utilizing advanced drainage systems to cultivate their lands. There are displays showing how they achieved this. And while this small museum does not contain the amount of artifacts found in Bogotá's Gold Museum, it still has an awesome collection of gold items – especially gold weave artwork – and should be included on any visit to the Old Town.

On the opposite side of Bolivar Plaza from the museum stands the *Palacio de la Inquisicion* (the Palace of the Inquisition), another must-see site. We paid the senior discount fee of 15,000 pesos – approximately $5.50 US – to enter the palace. Um, in case you're wondering, Ken was the one who initially asked for the senior discount…and, yes, I took advantage (look, I'm 56 and I ain't getting' any younger!). King Philip III, who was ruler of both Spain and Portugal at the time, established the Inquisition court in Cartagena in 1610. A devotedly pious man, Philip III wanted to weed out heretics and non-believers from his empire, particularly Jewish Portuguese merchants masquerading as Christians who were doing business in the colonies. Cartagena became the third city in the Spanish empire to have a tribunal in the Holy Office of the Inquisition. The current building wasn't completed until the 1770s, but the site saw some pretty dark times. It is believed that 800 or so people were convicted of heresy and executed here during its operation, which only ended after the independence of 1821.

As far as museums go, the displays are not numerous (and very few signs are in English). You'll see some pre-Columbian pottery and historical items

dating from both colonial and independence times like paintings, furniture pieces and armaments. The most intriguing displays are those of the horrific torture instruments used by the Inquisitors, including replicas of a wooden gallows and a guillotine in the courtyard. The real masterpiece here is the building itself, an excellent example of late-colonial architecture in remarkably well-preserved condition. The façade's entrance is an impressive stone gateway with the Spanish coat of arms carved above it, flanked by long balconies on each side. As you walk into the two-story structure, you enter a paved courtyard containing a high window with a cross on top from where the heretics were denounced. They were later tortured and tried inside. We spent about forty-five minutes here, walking through the various masonry-built chambers, admiring the limestone blocks, wooden frames and wide staircases that make up the palace.

We backtracked to Santo Domingo Plaza, wanting to stop again at La Paleterria to have another one of their delicious ice creams before returning to our hotel. We flagged down a taxi near the square and made it back to El Caribe shortly after 3:00pm. I headed over to the beach and spent the next thirty minutes taking photos of the scenery along the beachfront. There were so many people (tourists and locals alike) enjoying the ocean's waves. The restaurant kiosks along the sidewalks were packed with customers. It really did feel as if I was back home in Miami. When I returned to the hotel I was shocked to see a deer and her fawn walking passively along the pathway near the pool area, and decided to explore the hotel gardens some more. I came across parrots and a friendly toucan, as well. Up in my room I took another shower and laid down for a nap before dinner. I made the mistake of not setting my iPhone alarm; I was so physically exhausted from the day's activities I slept until the early morning hours…

Days Ten and Eleven

When I finally awoke I thought it was still evening, but upon checking my watch I realized I had slept nine straight hours. It was 3:30am. Unable to go back to sleep, I made coffee and wrote in my journal. Later, I tried to do

some stretching and aerobic exercises ('tried' being the operative word) and then watched the CNN international news broadcast. I later shaved and showered and headed downstairs for breakfast at 7:30am. I sat with Mirta and Alfonso Gonzalez, the only other people from my group who were in the dining room at that hour. Today we were on our own. John and Samuel had both offered some suggestions on how to spend our free day in Cartagena. Initially, I wanted to check out the Aviario Nacional de Colombia (the National Aviary of Colombia) situated about 14 kilometers outside the city on Baru Island. A fairly new attraction in the area, the collection of birds – including some endangered species – in this natural park is supposedly quite impressive. When I asked the hotel's travel agent about a possible day excursion to the aviary, she told me they were closed on Sundays. I later discovered that was not the case. The hotel just doesn't provide excursions to the site on Sundays, but visitors can hire a taxi and go on their own.

Samuel suggested a day trip to tour the Islas de Rosario (the Rosario Islands), an archipelago of 27 small coral islands in the Caribbean Sea situated 35 kilometers southwest of Cartagena. Various companies offer tour boat excursions to the islands leaving from the *Muelle Turistico de la Bodeguita* (the tourist pier along Avenue Blas de Lezo in front of the Old Town). The boats usually depart between 8:00am and 9:00am, and it's a good idea to get there early. They return about eight hours later. I didn't feel like spending the whole day at sea, especially since most reviews on the islands were disappointing. Basically, it amounted to hopping from one sandy beach to another.

The one place our guides suggested that really interested me was the *Convento de la Popa* (the Convent of the Stern) located atop the tallest hill in the city. This historical convent probably has the most commanding view of Cartagena. I asked Mirta and Alfonso if they wanted to share a taxi with me to visit the site. They were delighted. After finishing our breakfast we agreed to rendezvous in the lobby at 8:30am. I spoke to the concierge in Spanish and he summoned a taxi for us. We negotiated the fare with the driver, an amiable middle-aged man named Marlon. He agreed to take us to the convent and later drop us off in the Old Town for 60,000 pesos (just over twenty dollars). The cab, like most in Colombia, was small and a little cramped (for me, anyway), but the A/C worked fine so it was a cool ride to the top of the hill. Marlon was very knowledgeable about the area. In fact, he would have made an excellent tour guide, telling us interesting stories about

the city's history. My favorite was the tale of the famous runaway slave named Benkos Bioho, a former African royal seized by Portuguese slave traders and brought to Colombia where he escaped with ten other slaves into the nearby Montes de Maria mountain chain, creating a rebellion which led to the formation of the village of the *Maroons* (a term used to describe escaped slaves) in what is now the community of San Basilio de Palenque southeast of the city, the first in what would become a series of walled ('palenque') smaller communities established by escaped slaves. Today, the village of San Basilio de Palenque is the only surviving 'walled' African community from that era, and the inhabitants are mostly descended from the former slaves and still retain their customs and language.

The ride to the *Convento de la Popa* took approximately thirty minutes. We had to drive past the Old Town, through Getsemani and beyond the Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas to reach the switchback two-lane road that goes to the top of the hill. There is no public transportation to this part of Cartagena, so if you want to visit the convent you need to hire a taxi. I guess one could hike up the road (we saw some locals doing it) but it would be an uncomfortable and daunting trek, and with this heat probably a dangerous one, too. We spent about forty-five minutes here while Marlon waited in his taxi for us. The entrance fee was 10,000 pesos, or just over $3.00 US. The word *popa* means 'stern', and in this case refers to the shape of the hilltop, which resembles the stern of a ship. The original site was founded in 1607 by the Augustine order, and has always been fondly known as the Convento de la Popa, or just La Popa. But the building that stands there now, constructed two centuries after the original wooden chapel, is actually named *Convento de Nuestra Senora de la Candelaria* (the Convent of Our Lady of the Candlemas). The chapel, which has a beautiful image of the Virgin Mary, is lined with portraits of monks and other religious men associated with the convent's long history. The adjacent halls offer some exhibits highlighting the growth of Cartagena over the years, with artifacts or displays from both its early days and the indigenous peoples who used to live here. The conversion of the locals to Christianity was not without its bloodshed. One chilling statue recreates the gruesome killing of Father Alonso Garcia de Paredes de la Cruz, the Augustine monk who founded the original convent. He was speared to death (at the age of 66) together with five Spanish soldiers for trying to spread the word of God in the northwestern region of Uraba. His bones are on display inside the convent, near a flower-filled patio in the center of the building.

The main reason most people wander up to the site is not for the history, though, but rather for the view. La Popa is perched on the highest hill in the area, roughly 145 meters up, and offers a spectacular panorama of the entire city. The bays, the sea, the fortress, the old city and the new skyscrapers…*everything* is visible from the lookout wall along the side of the convent. We took turns photographing each other standing in front of the old stone cross that overlooks the city. From up here one can almost visualize how Cartagena defended itself from its attackers. You can see where the enemy troops would have disembarked along the former marshy sections, and the path the enemy ships traveled up the bay as they were bombarded by cannon fire (the former artillery batteries clearly visible from this vantage point), and the spot just at the foot of the *castillo* where they would have tried, in vain, to penetrate the fortress.

After touring the convent we returned to our awaiting taxi. Marlon offered to drive me to the National Aviary on Baru Island for an additional price, but the trip would have taken up the rest of the day and I wanted to venture through the Old Town one last time before my return home the following day. We were dropped off near the *Puerta de Reloj* (the Clock Tower Gate) along Avenue Blas de Lezo, the original entranceway into the old city. The republican-style tower – with its four-sided clock – that stands there today was built in 1888, and replaced an older gateway with a drawbridge that went over a moat connecting Getsemani to the inner walled town. From the Clock Tower we entered a large triangular market square called the *Plaza de los Coches* (the Plaza of the Carriages) where African slaves were once displayed and sold like merchandise. The arcade adjacent to the Clock Tower is lined with confectionary stands selling local candies and sweets. In the middle of the Plaza de los Coches is a statue of Pedro de Heredia, the Spanish conquistador who founded Cartagena.

We walked in a southwesterly direction through the narrow colonial streets, passing the Plaza de Aduana and returning to the Church of San Pedro Claver, which we had visited the day before. Mirta wanted to visit the Museum of Modern Art located in the San Pedro Claver Plaza; unfortunately, the place didn't open until 4:00pm on Sundays. We arrived at the plaza around 10:00am, just as the church bells announcing Mass began to ring. I suggested that perhaps we could take a momentary respite and sit in the church to experience the ceremony. Mirta was gung-ho, but I could tell Alfonso was not too keen on the idea. He later told me he was a 'secular Catholic', causing me to laugh out loud. We opted to check out the service,

and I could tell almost immediately this was probably not a good idea. The church was only half full; almost everyone sat in the front pews. We took our seats in the back and soon realized why the parishioners were crammed up front: the acoustics were *terrible*, or maybe it was the microphone system the priest was using; everything he said sounded garbled. I also thought being inside the building would be cooler than the suffocating heat outside, but the San Pedro Claver Church was not designed for comfort, it felt like we were slowly roasting inside a confection oven. Along the nave were rows of large upright fans blowing hot air, their rhythmic whirling adding another layer of audible distraction. Mirta, being a good Catholic, was totally into the service, but I kept exchanging doubtful glances with Alfonso. Before long, us two heathen men abandoned the virtuous Mirta and headed to an air-conditioned Crepes and Waffles restaurant on the other side of the plaza for some refreshing coconut-lime libation. Mirta joined us about twenty minutes later. We ordered another round of the delicious *limonada de coco* drink and sat for 30 minutes, cooling ourselves off. We traded traveling stories, and I got to hear how the couple met. Mirta is Cuban and Alfonso is Mexican, they ran into each other in Chicago (I believe) during the 1960s, the two Spanish-speaking immigrants bonding quickly. It was love at first sight, according to Alfonso. Nowadays, with their children grown and both being retired, they do quite a bit of traveling.

By 11:00am we headed to Bolivar Plaza. They wanted to visit the Zenu Museum of Gold so I showed them where it was located and we split up at that point. I spent the next two hours traversing the streets of the historic quarter, taking photographs of the restored Spanish colonial buildings, stopping to browse and shop in several artisan souvenir shops along the way. I discovered a few more plazas, too, tucked away here and there. A few blocks from the Santo Domingo Church I was able to climb up to the city's defensive walls and walk a section of it facing the Caribbean Sea. The wall was very thick and wide in parts, and contained rows of cannons facing the water. Along the grassy fields in front of the wall a group of youths were having a soccer match. I watched them play from my vantage point atop the wall, but the sun was just too strong. I had already consumed two bottles of water and was completely drenched in sweat. By 1:00pm I hailed a taxi near the famous Café del Mar restaurant, situated along Santander Avenue on the eastern side entrance of the Old Town, and returned to my hotel.

Back in my room I made a quick cup of instant coffee and washed up, changing my sweat-soaked polo shirt and jotting down some notes in my

journal. Around 1:45pm I hit the streets again, taking a stroll up the commercial San Martin Street looking for some souvenir T-shirts for family and friends back home. Strangely, very few of the stores I entered sold souvenir T-shirts, and even less had the XX-large sizes I was looking for. I ended up buying two from a sidewalk vendor along the beach. I also checked out three casinos in the area looking for a baccarat game, but most of the table games were limited to blackjack and roulette. After making my way east for nearly ten blocks on San Martin Street I stopped to have lunch in a local burger joint called Presto, billed as Colombia's first fast-food chain. Actually, I wasn't very hungry, just tired and sweaty again, and I wanted to sit down, rest and cool off. A soccer match was playing on a TV monitor, and while I waited for my burger to be cooked one of the teams scored a goal and the entire kitchen staff erupted and came out to the dining room to watch the replay, completely oblivious to the waiting patrons. Apparently, this must be a common occurrence because nobody complained.

After lunch (the burger and fries were quite tasty, despite the wait) I returned to the hotel via Carerra 1, walking along the beachfront. At one point I stopped to admire a group of locals drinking beer and playing musical instruments beneath the trees lining the sidewalk. The restaurant kiosks were full; everyone seemed to be having a great time. Local families crowded the beaches beneath large umbrellas, children played in the sand. I imagine this is what most Sundays are like here in Cartagena. When I returned to El Caribe I showered again (this place is definitely hotter than Miami!) and took a nap, making sure this time to set my iPhone alarm clock for 6:00pm.

At 7:00pm the gang rendezvoused in the lobby and we walked through the gardens to an outdoor pavilion across from the hotel where we were served our Farewell Dinner. We sat around a very long table, underneath a pitched tent, sharing stories about what we'd done that day. I passed around an email list so we could all keep in touch. John made an official toast and several of our members made some additional, and emotional, expressions of gratitude. It was a great tour made even more special by the camaraderie of the group. Our final dinner in Colombia was great, a delicious fried corvina fish served with a cold mash potato-and-chicken appetizer and accompanied by coconut rice and plantain chips and a fruit mousse for dessert. Throughout dinner, John went around the table giving us our final instructions for the following day's airport pick-up. Most of us were leaving on the same flight back to Miami and had to be ready by 6:30am. I returned

to my room by 8:30pm and set aside my clothes for the trip home, repacking my suitcase one final time. Afterwards, I made another cup of coffee and watched as much of the Spanish-language version of the NFL Sunday night game between Green Bay and the Vikings as I could before I drifted off to sleep.

My iPhone went off at 4:00am. I showered, put on my last clean set of clothing and spent an hour editing my photos in my Nikon camera while having several cups of coffee. At 5:45am I headed down to the dining room for a quick buffet breakfast. By 6:30am the 17 of us who were scheduled to leave together boarded a transfer bus and headed out to the airport. John accompanied us on the 25-minute ride, saying his final 'goodbyes' and thanking us again for coming to his country. He helped facilitate our check-in process and stood at the entrance of the departure gate until the last one of us had cleared security. Let me tell you, nothing beats the 'door-to-door' treatment of a guided tour! I'm certain John was tipped generously for his excellent service. Our Avianca plane left more or less on time, a pleasant flight lasting only two and a half hours. I was completely shocked to find the immigration section at Miami International Airport empty. Perhaps Mondays is a slow day for international travel. After grabbing my luggage at baggage claim I took a taxi and was home in fifteen minutes. As much as I love to travel, there is still no place like home!

I had the rest of the week off from work and spent the time editing, captioning and uploading my photos to my website. I excitedly recounted to family and friends the things I had seen and done while in Colombia. The writing of this journal, though, took longer than expected. Normally, I can write my travelogues in about eight to ten weeks, but this one took me nearly four and a half months. As a letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service I found myself bogged down with an unusually high volume of mail; in addition to the holiday season, we had a ton of political mailings to deliver due to the national elections. My creative writing period is in the morning, but with

earlier starting times at work this process was severely impeded. I also had to do a lot of research for this journal, which was very time-consuming. I apologize to my readers who had to wait so long, I only hope it was worth it.

Some interesting turn of events have occurred in the time it took me to write this, as well. When I began the journal, the voters of Colombia had surprisingly rejected the initial peace accord the government negotiated with FARC. But when I finished the journal, the government had *re-negotiated* the terms of the original treaty (this one only required the approval of Congress, by-passing the voters altogether) and on November 24th, 1916, the new peace agreement was signed, ending half a century of civil war. President Juan Manual Santos, who had earlier been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his pursuit of peace with the rebels, decided not to take any chances on another embarrassing referendum result. His allies in Congress quickly approved the re-negotiated agreement, which included 50 changes to the original accord rejected by the voters back in October. Critics of the new peace treaty still complained about the generous amnesty provisions given to the insurgents, especially concerning the atrocities committed by FARC, but the rebel leadership was not about to agree to any conditions that would put them in jail. Sadly, if there was going to be peace, some painful ‘give-and-take’ had to occur. I can only pray that Colombia’s future will continue to be as bright as I perceived it to be during my visit. I really enjoyed this trip, and whole-heartedly recommend the country to my fellow travelers. The history, the beautiful geography, the friendly people, the wonderful culture and food, the modernization…*what’s not to like*? The country is undergoing a metamorphosis. And, yes, Colombia’s exotic allure might somehow seem tempered by past notions of danger, but much of this is greatly exaggerated, rooted in the stigma of a bygone era, which becomes even more distant with each passing year. So don’t be afraid, dear readers. Take a chance. Like me, I’m certain you’ll fall in love with Colombia, too.

Until next time…

Richard C. Rodriguez,
(My trip to Colombia occurred between September 9th and September 19th, 2016).