

## Colombia's New World

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**How does a nation ravaged by civil war and drug trafficking turn itself around? One road at a time. T+L reports from Bogotá and Medellín—and the beautiful, notorious route between them—on a country in transition**

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The road from Bogotá to Medellín cuts through the Colombian heartland—dropping down one spine of the Andes, crossing the Magdalena River valley, then climbing into the Andes again. In a couple of hundred miles, it passes sprawling cattle ranches, mist-covered coffee plantations with stately haciendas, small villages with colorful houses, and steep mountainsides that plunge into fierce, narrow rivers.

Five years ago, taking a drive on this road would have signaled something of a death wish on the part of the driver. Four decades of bloody, cocaine-fueled civil war have given Colombia a reputation as one of the world's most dangerous countries. Bogotá, the capital, was long kept under virtual siege by bombings, kidnappings, and contract killings. Medellín, the second-largest city (and former home to Pablo Escobar's drug cartel), once claimed the highest homicide rate in the world. The road between the cities was filled with checkpoints, all of them equally menacing. If it wasn't left-wing guerrillas or right-wing paramilitaries, it was common bandits (or corrupt soldiers) out to kidnap random victims.

But in the past few years, things have changed. I recently asked a hotel clerk in Bogotá about safety on the road. The clerk's advice: that I wear my seat belt and avoid driving drunk. Her assessment was overly optimistic—according to the U.S. State Department, travel through rural Colombia is still wholly inadvisable—but her misunderstanding was telling, an indication of just how far the country has come.

Throughout my visit, everyone from government officials and security experts to shopkeepers and demobilized rebels told me that Colombia is becoming "a normal country"—or, if not quite normal, at least one where violence no longer defines daily life but merely infringes on its margins. Since President Alvaro Uribe took office in 2002, murders have fallen by more than 30 percent, kidnappings by 80 percent. (Murder rates still remain high, at 17,200 deaths in 2006; drug production has not decreased, despite more than \$5 billion of U.S. anti-drug aid.) As a friend in her thirties put it to me, "It is like returning to a place we have never known."

Now Colombia is trying to achieve the same thing outside the country: shedding its narco-state image and persuading travelers that it is becoming safer to visit one of Latin America's most physically stunning and culturally vibrant countries.

Before I set off on the road to Medellín, Andrés Hoyos, the publisher of the magazine *El Malpensante*, guided me through the changing landscape of Bogotá. He showed me the northern edge of the capital, which has long been fairly accessible to visitors. Here, American defense

contractors and anti-drug officials linger on the outdoor patio of the Bogotá Beer Company (despite a grenade attack on the bar in 2003). Nearby, posh lounges and casinos teem with *traquetos*: drug millionaires who drive black SUV's, pay cash, and are trailed by an entourage of *cuchibarbies*—Barbies by the plastic surgeon's knife.

Bogotá's real charm lies in La Candelaria, a recently revitalized neighborhood of grand colonial buildings and narrow cobblestoned streets. According to Hoyos, the area "used to be hell: part of a whole city of private splendor and public squalor." Now, its Teatro Colón participates in one of the continent's most important theater festivals, and its restored mansions have been turned into museums. Galleries, yoga studios, and dimly lit cafés give the area an air of gentrifying boho-chic. Hoyos calls it "a renaissance of public space."

Bringing about just such a renaissance has been a core part of President Uribe's campaign. But he has focused as much on reclaiming rural areas as he has on rescuing urban centers. Securing the Bogotá-Medellín road and the areas around it was one of his first major offensives. In 2002, even before the military had increased its presence in the countryside or a controversial amnesty offer had persuaded paramilitaries in the area to start disarming, Uribe launched a high-profile tourism initiative called Vive Colombia Caravans, an effort to encourage Colombians to venture into the countryside again. On holiday weekends, a convoy of road-trippers would roll down a stretch of highway under the watchful eye of the military—an army of families in station wagons striking a blow for normalcy.

According to the government's figures, tourist traffic has increased by more than 200 percent since the start of the program. As Carlos Alberto Vives Pacheco, the national director of tourism development, sees it, reviving domestic travel is a first step toward changing foreigners' perceptions. "The kind of image we have is not something you change in a day," he said. "But when people in the United States see Colombians out in their own country, that the vast majority of the country is safe and clean, they will see that the reality is different."

Already, foreign tourism has risen by two-thirds since 2002. In 2005, the U.S. State Department softened the language of its draconian warning against travel to the country. The official advisory is still a Travel Warning, and notes "ongoing security concerns," including kidnappings, violence in major cities, and guerrilla attacks—dissuading most Americans from visiting. But for Colombia, even that change is a major step forward. Last year, the country was on track to receive more than a million foreign visitors, including around 250,000 Americans.

On a quiet morning, I struck out for Medellín. It did not take long for rural Colombia's potential as a destination for travelers to become apparent. Farms and haciendas spread out on the hillsides, and the road curved before leveling out onto the lush Magdalena Valley. The nearby coffee zone is home to Colombia's biggest plantations, as well as a growing network of adventure-tourism companies. Over the past few years, dozens of haciendas have been converted into rustic inns that look out on dramatic mountain valleys.

But closer to Medellín, in an area that has long been a main front in the civil war, the rugged terrain also provides good cover for guerrillas. Every couple of miles there were army checkpoints made of sandbags, with young men carrying machine guns. When I stopped in one small town, a soldier approached me and warned me that the army would be closing the road at sunset. He said the road was well guarded and safe during the day. "But the enemy is still out there," he went on. "They still want to attack."

I arrived in Medellín at dusk, coming over a ridge with the city spread out in a gentle bowl below it. Medellín used to be called the City of Eternal Spring, but in the 1980's that image was displaced by its newfound fame as the center of the global cocaine trade, the world's most dangerous city.

When I discussed this reputation with Jesús Ramirez, a crime analyst in the mayor's office, he scoffed. "That was the Medellín of ten years ago," he told me. Key statistics support that claim: in the past 15 years annual murders have decreased by 90 percent to roughly 700 in 2006. The city's homicide rate is now nearly identical to that of Washington, D.C.

Medellín is now gaining a reputation as a cultural center, with its own international fashion week and a thriving arts scene. (It is also a center for plastic surgery: package tours sometimes include hotel, transportation, and a cosmetic procedure.) Colombia's most renowned artist, Fernando Botero, was born in Medellín, and the city's plazas are dotted with his cartoonishly fat sculptures. One famous Botero work, *Bird of Peace*, was damaged by a bomb soon after it was installed; city officials made a replica and put it next to the original.

There is, of course, a lingering anxiety in Medellín that recent steps toward peace will prove illusory. The city has indeed been at war for much of the past century, and today, the improvement in security is owed at least partly to the fact that gangs have consolidated their control over some urban slums. And drug money still courses through the economy. (According to Mauricio Romero, an expert on armed groups at Pontifical Xavierian University in Bogotá, the tourism industry is not immune: "Many hotels have money from paramilitaries and drug traffickers in them.") Pablo Escobar's grave, on the outskirts of Medellín, has become both a tourist attraction and a pilgrimage site for many of the city's poor, who still revere the former drug lord as a modern-day Robin Hood.

On one of my last nights in Medellín, I rode the Metrocable, a new mass-transit gondola system that extends the subway network up and into the city's notorious hillside slums. On a visit to the city a few years ago, I had trouble finding a taxi driver who would take me into the slums after dark. But the Metrocable is starting to open up some of Medellín's most dire neighborhoods, connecting these once isolated urban communities to jobs, schools, and municipal services. When I got to the top, I found a warm and welcoming scene that resembled a village gathering, with residents drinking and playing music and dancing in a small plaza. At that moment, it was impossible not to believe that Medellín—along with the rest of Colombia—had begun to turn a corner.

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