



On a high
From left: the ceiling of the
Teatro Colón; the Andrés DC
restaurant-cum-nightclub



BOGOTÁ IS BACK

As it emerges from more than half a century of civil war, tourists are finally rediscovering this South American capital. **Jack Aldwinckle** investigates a city in the flux of a dramatic renaissance – with world-class theatres, museums and galleries leading the way

On a weekday afternoon, downtown Bogotá is an oasis of calm. Immaculately uniformed soldiers patrol the grounds of the presidential palace. Outside the Capitolio Nacional, which houses the Colombian congress, politicians dash between meetings, phones clamped to their ears. In the lively bars off the Chorro de Quevedo square, students sip *chicha*, a local brew made from fermented corn. In the shadow of the Catedral Primada, in the city's main square, tourists mingle with the local *Bogotanos*, posing with a posse of long-suffering llamas.

But the city's streets weren't always so peaceful. On 7 August 2002 Álvaro Uribe, Colombia's president-elect, was en route to his inauguration ceremony when his convoy came under attack from left-wing Farc guerrillas. 'Panic reigned in the minutes after the explosions,' reported the *Los Angeles Times*. 'The visiting foreign delegations would have been forgiven for thinking they'd arrived in Kabul rather than Bogotá,' President Uribe later wrote. The attack demonstrated that not even the president was safe.

This was just one deadly chapter in the world's longest running civil war, which has taken the lives of around 220,000 Colombians and displaced more than six million – the highest number outside of Syria. Today, negotiators working for Uribe's successor, Juan Manuel Santos, are working on a peace deal with the Farc that would put an end to the danger. The talks started in 2012 and have progressed slowly but many predict a resolution this year. ➤

Photograph: Camera Lucida; Peter Frank Edwards/Redux/Eyevine

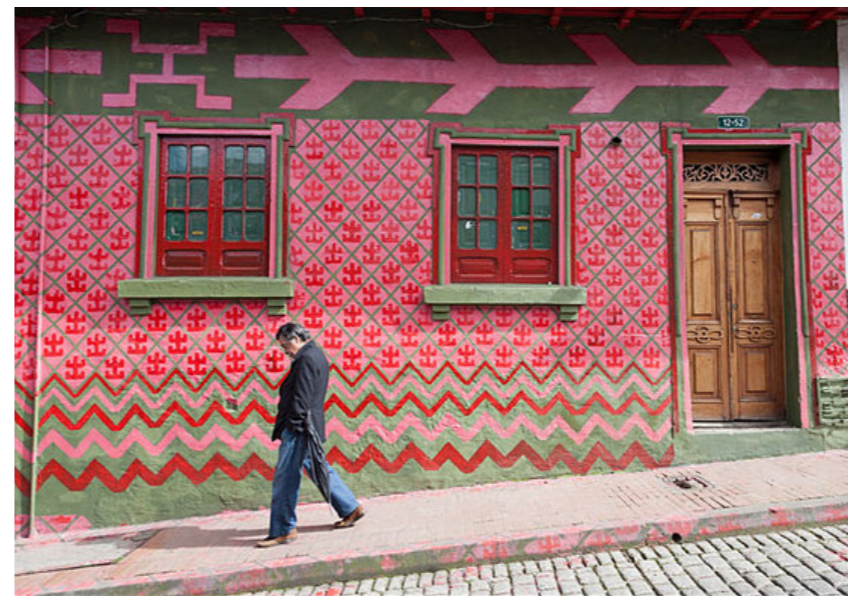


As optimism has returned, so too have the visitors, reassured by the prospect of peace and a sharp reduction in crime (Colombia's homicide rate fell by almost half between 2002 and 2012). In the past few years Colombia has been firmly restored to the backpacker trail, with a steady stream of travellers attracted by its Caribbean beaches, lush landscapes, colonial architecture and, increasingly, its capital. Nestled in the Andes, 2,640m above sea level, Bogotá is sometimes overlooked by tourists in the rush to the northern coast. But it is a fascinating city to explore, with a cultural heart that is second to none.

The colonial neighbourhood of La Candelaria, spreading north from the presidential palace, is leading Bogotá's artistic renaissance. Tiny cafés are interspersed among pastel-coloured houses, serving up steaming bowls of *ajiaco* (chicken and potato soup), the epitome of Colombian comfort food. Walking the cobbled streets, I'm transported back 200 years. I can almost sense the whiff of gunpowder and the murmur of revolutionaries plotting behind battered wooden doors. On Calle 10, a plaque commemorates the most famous window in the city. Simón Bolívar, the great liberator of Latin America, used it to jump to safety while escaping a band of deadly assassins.

Opposite Bolívar's old digs lies Colombia's prestigious Teatro de Cristóbal Colón (known locally as Teatro Colón), which hosts opera, dance and theatre productions from all over the world. Looking at its stunning neoclassical façade from the street, I have to remind myself that I'm not on a European boulevard. The auditorium was built by Italian architect Pietro Cantini in 1892, its horseshoe layout was modelled on Paris's Palais Garnier. For more than a century it has been the place to see the great and good in Bogotá, with performers varying from Titta Ruffo 'The Voice of the Lion' to the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky.

In 2008, the theatre underwent a six-year, £12m renovation to restore it to its original state. The work began by reinforcing the foundations against earthquakes, then holes were filled in so porters wouldn't have to run around with buckets when it rained.



A short cycle from the Teatro Colón is the Botero Museum. It opened in 2000, housed in a colonial villa that was formerly home to the city's archbishop. The collection is free to visit and includes more than 200 works donated by Fernando Botero, the world-famous Colombian artist. At the museum's entrance a colossal sculpture of a hand greets visitors – a perfect introduction to the artist whose generosity helped transform this neighbourhood.

As well as pieces by Botero, the gallery includes works by world-class international artists including Picasso, Renoir, Monet, Dalí, Freud and Bacon. 'A lot of people are prejudiced about Colombia and its culture,' says Sigrid Castañeda, who is in charge of the collection. 'But tourists can't believe the quality of the works here.'

Ten minutes' walk to the north is the Museo del Oro (Gold Museum), home to more than 34,000 precious pieces from pre-Hispanic societies. Until 1959, only visiting dignitaries were able to catch a glimpse of its treasures, says Ana María González, an anthropologist at the museum. 'It felt like a place reserved for rich people, for the elite.'

The gold found in Latin America by early conquistadors sparked the legend of El Dorado (literally, 'the gilded one'), a mythical golden city. The story caused a Latin American gold rush. Over the centuries various attempts were made to drain Lake Guatavita, on the outskirts of Bogotá, in the belief that a treasure trove of gold was hidden on its bed.

Split over three levels, the museum consists of a mind-boggling array of pre-Hispanic bling. It can be difficult to process just how much gold there is on display. It's like peeking behind the scenes at the Bank of England.

The centerpiece of the collection is the Muisca raft, discovered in 1969 by three farmers on the outskirts of Bogotá. The 20cm-long golden vessel depicts a ceremony at Lake Guatavita that would later enthrall European treasure hunters. Standing proudly at the centre of the raft is the tribal chieftain, surrounded by 12 smaller characters. Those at the very front wear jaguar masks and maracas on their wrists. When the raft reached the middle of the lake, the chieftain would throw golden objects into the water as an offering to the spirits.

As Bogotá develops a new spirit of its own, emerging from the fog of war into an era of hope, theatres and museums are set to play an important role in attracting much-needed tourists. But the curators don't just want to introduce foreigners to their country's traditions. They want to inspire the next generation of Colombians. 'This museum has a responsibility to show children that this is a diverse country,' says González. 'We want visitors to be affected by the collection so that when they leave, they have transformed from ordinary citizens into people who respect differences.' And, if 2016 does turn out to be one of the most historic years in Colombia's troubled history, the country could be on the verge of a very special kind of transformation. ■

[@jackaldwinckle](#)

On the wall
Clockwise from above:
a piece by Colombian
street artist Guache;
El Patio restaurant;
the historic neighbour-
hood of La Candelaria;
Bogotá is in the foot-
hills of the Monserrate
mountain range



Photograph: Alamy; Raymond Patrick; Rex Features.
*Based on World Traveller. Excludes reward flights. **Taxes, fees and surcharges also apply

Once the structural issues had been addressed, experts set about repairing the theatre's faded interior. 'The idea was to restore it to the way Cantini had envisaged it', says Max Ojeda, the architect in charge of the project. As he gazes down from the presidential box, the auditorium sparkles as it must have in 1892.

He points to a colossal fresco, depicting six muses from Greek mythology. 'It's the biggest 19th-century mural in the country,' grins Ojeda. The stage curtain, painstakingly produced by the Florentine artist Anibal Gatti in 1890, was also restored to its former glory. Colours burst from the fabric, shimmering as though freshly painted. Coruscating overhead, the original chandelier was updated with electric lights and restored to pride of place at the centre of the ceiling. It gleams over the audience, casting a warm light on the intricate fresco. 'I feel like a kid when I'm back here,' he beams.

When the theatre reopened in July 2014, its directors were adamant that it should focus on original works. Frequent performers include Circolombia, a troupe from Colombia's national circus school, Circo Para Todos. This year the theatre hosted a series of operas and plays to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the deaths of Shakespeare and Cervantes.

Bogotá's cultural rebirth has been matched by improvements in public infrastructure. The streets are still often congested, potholed and polluted but a growing number of brave *Bogotanos* are taking to life on two wheels on the 200km of new cycle paths. On Sundays, many streets are closed to cars and up to two million cyclists come out in force. Also, once a year, on the Día Sin Carro, cars and motorbikes are banned, and cyclists and skaters take over the city.

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