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Colombia's mountain villages—this one in Boyacá—invite you to slow down with peaceful plazas and stunning churches

Colombia is for cyclists

As top cyclist Nairo Quintana and Tour de France winner Egan Bernal put their homeland on the map, travelers are taking to the South American country on two wheels *By Jen Rose Smith*

AFTER HOURS SPENT CLIMBING THE dizzying roads of Colombia's Boyacá department on bicycle, my legs were ready to quit—the Andean highlands are as rugged as they are beautiful. But as we pulled into the town of Tunja looking for a place to spend the night, my travel companion and I heard an encouraging shout: “Ey, Quintana!”

This region, where high-altitude tundra, or páramo, drops away to steaming forests and coffee-colored rivers, is home to Colombian cyclist Nairo Quintana, who won Vuelta a España and has twice been the runner-up in the Tour de France. The same winding tracks that we were struggling up had shaped Quintana into one of the best climbers in the world. Now, near his hometown of Cómbita, we heard his name while resting in roadside cafes, saw his smiling face on billboards and ate beside posters from his greatest races. We'd traveled to Colombia to explore the steep folds of the Andes Mountains, and what we found was a country in love with bikes.

To come here, we packed our well-worn bicycles into boxes for

the flight to Bogotá. Everything we needed went into waterproof bags cinched to our bicycle frames; the packs bulged with tents, sleeping bags and clothes. What we carried would warm us through chilly nights above 13,000 feet, then ward off the sun in the Cauca River valley.

We're not the only ones. Bike tourism in Colombia is a growing trend, according to Anisha Ghoghari, the CEO and founder of cycling company Equipo, who has been bringing cyclists to Colombia for six years. “We get a lot of clients who say, ‘I've never been to Colombia, but I've heard about Nairo Quintana and I want to check it out.’”

As we traced a route north from Bogotá, we arrived to smiles and handshakes each time we pedaled into a village. When our daily rides took us through small towns in Boyacá and Santander, we slept in guesthouses or small hotels, grateful for a shower and a hearty dinner of Andean cuisine. In more remote communities, we'd buy supplies in tiny markets then pitch a tent on campsites, local farms or



Camping in Colombia's páramo

even in soccer fields. There, we'd use a portable camp stove to cook a simple meal as we waited for the inevitable visitors: Children came to say hello, neighbors stopped by to chat about bikes and farmers brought us milk still warm from the evening milking.

Starting early, we rode between six and eight hours each day, often pausing for the generous fixed-menu lunches served in small cafés. Traveling by bicycle is slow by design, and instead of ticking off a list of sights, we spent much of our time in the forests, valleys and back roads that lie between towns. With vibrant rural culture and constantly changing scenery, Colombia invites this kind of off-the-map adventure, and you don't need a bike for a rolling ride through the mountains—the places we visited would be just as inviting for a driving trip between whitewashed villages and towering peaks.

Midway through our journey into the Andes, we curved south into the green-trimmed terrain of Antioquia. Over the next two weeks we'd climb to the base of smoking volcanoes in

We traveled to Colombia to explore the mountains and we found a country in love with bikes.

Parque Los Nevados, pedal through the brightly painted towns of the Eje Cafetero and soak in thermal pools steaming from the mountains.

First, though, we had to summit Alto de las Palmas, a sustained climb that extends for 11 miles from downtown Medellín. With heavily laden bikes, we climbed slowly; local riders tossed off words of encouragement as they spun past. Partway up the ascent, a billboard loomed by the roadside with a message that seemed designed for cyclists like me: “Ser Positivo.” Be Positive.