



MindStormPhoto
Colombia
2015

Burt and Evelyn Johnson

Colombia 2015

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Bogotá – Welcome To Colombia

Bogotá – Welcome To Colombia



We are just finishing up our four days in Bogotá, Colombia. It has been common to hear a passerby, or even a taxi yell out his window "Welcome to Colombia!" It is clear that gringos are wanted here.

Bogotá – Welcome To Colombia

The highlight of the city was the three hour Graffiti Tour, a free (supported by tips) walking tour of some of the highlights of street art in La Candelaria. Cuenca is well known for its elaborate mural graffiti, but it can't compete with Bogotá in this regard. Our guide was Jeff, a professional anthropologist that has studied the history of street art. He told the group of 25 about the various types of murals, as well as the history of them.



Bogotá – Welcome To Colombia

In Colombia, "graffiti is prohibited, but not illegal," which means that you cannot go to jail or get a criminal rap sheet from painting on walls. However, it is still officially discouraged, and if the police catch the painter, he may be forced to pay a fine.

A major turning point in the street art history of Bogotá was 2011, when a young artist was stopped by police, ran, and was shot in the back and killed. The city rose in anger over police brutality, which resulted in the city apologizing and setting aside a portion for artists. The artists told the city where to stick it, and went on a mural graffiti rampage, with the police deciding to back off and allow it.

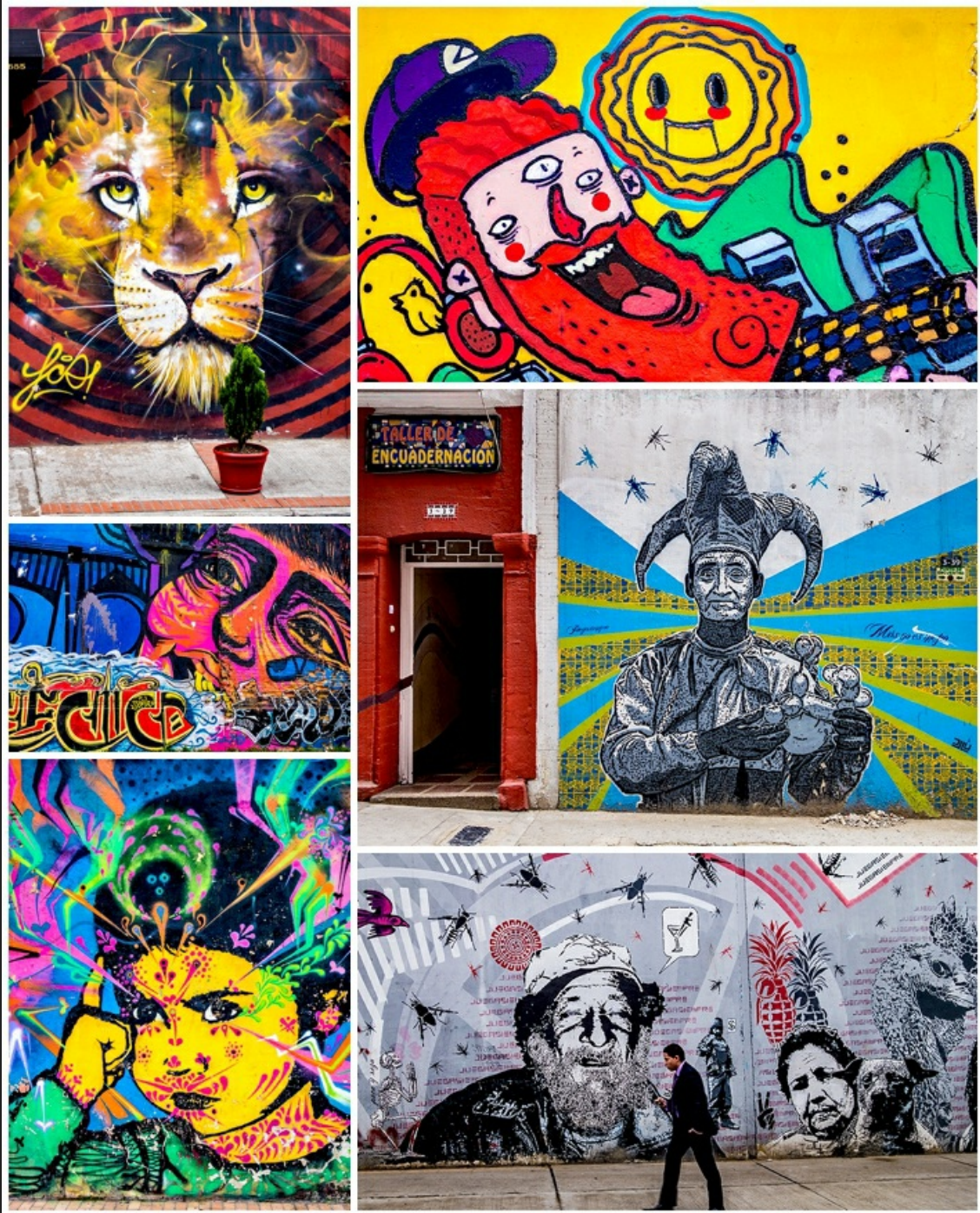
Bogotá – Welcome To Colombia



Bogotá – Welcome To Colombia

The next major turning point was 2013, when Justin Bieber (yeah, the teen idol) came to town and decided to paint a mural in support of the local artists. Unfortunately, the local artists did not appreciate the outsider, painted over Justin's work, and spread out even further around town. Around that time, it was noted that where there were professional murals, there was very little gang tagging. Even the gangs were respecting the true art. The mayor then gave his blessing to street art, and it has now spread throughout the city, and has become a tourist draw. A few of the artists have even become recognized and been invited to give gallery presentations around the world.

Bogotá – Welcome To Colombia



, December 6, 2015

Travel · Colombia

Bogotá 2 – City Highlights

Bogotá 2 – City Highlights



Bogotá 2 – City Highlights

We left Bogotá this morning, enroute to Medellín. Yesterday, I posted about the [street art of the city](#). Today, I will talk about the rest of our trip. Much of the time here has had overcast skies with occasional drizzle -- never enough to pull out the umbrella, but enough to keep it cold. Late on the first afternoon, the sky cleared enough that we took the cable car to the top of the local mountain. It gives a breath-taking view of the city -- all the more so, since the top of the cable is at 10,428 ft elevation.

On the third night, the man at the front desk of our hotel asked me what I thought of Bogotá. I told him that I was glad we came to visit, but that I would not want to live here. The city is cold -- much more so than Cuenca. The streets are lined with trash constantly (he said the city is not very organized in its trash collection). There are many homeless sleeping on the streets (and in this cold, I am surprised they can survive). Crime is high throughout the city (we are constantly warned not to walk out at night). There is dog shit on almost every sidewalk (I never once saw a dog owner scoop after their dog).

On the other hand, the food here is delicious and amazingly cheap. Our first meal was at a Japanese restaurant. We had sushi, plus calamari, plus an appetizer and two drinks. When we left, I looked at the receipt, thinking they had forgotten to charge us for something. Nope. It was all there. The entire meal had set us back \$9 for the two of us. It takes some getting used to, dividing all prices by 3200 (the exchange rate), and realizing that 10,000 Colombian Pesos is just a tad over \$3! The ATM here won't give out more than 300,000 pesos at a time, which is only \$100, but that goes quite a ways in this town.

Bogotá 2 – City Highlights



Bogotá is a city of 65 museums, so there is something for everyone that likes museums. One of the most famous is the [Gold Museum](#), which houses the largest collection of pre-Hispanic gold art in the world, which we visited on our first day. The Colombian government was originally rounding up all gold artifacts and melting them for gold to put in their treasury. In 1939, the head of the state bank decided to save some of the best pieces to be put on display. The item in the top left above was the first piece he saved. It has the interesting property that looking at the urn (used for lime, to neutralize cocoa when chewing the leaves), it appears to be a normal golden container. When a digital camera is moved in front of it, a face suddenly appears -- which cannot be seen without a camera. Given that this was created more than a thousand years before cameras makes you wonder...

Bogotá 2 – City Highlights



Another of the famous museums in Bogotá is the [Botero Museum](#) -- dedicated to all things fat. In 2000, Fernando Botero donated 123 of his paintings and sculptures to the city for a new museum, plus 85 pieces of art from other internationally known artists, such as Picasso, Dali and many others. If you are an art lover, this is a museum not to be missed.

Bogotá 2 – City Highlights



Bogotá 2 – City Highlights

Outside of town is the [Salt Cathedral of Zipaquirá](#), a salt mine that has been operated since the 5th Century, and is still in full production today. We hired an English speaking guide, or you can join a free Spanish speaking tour group. Part of the tour is a 3D movie giving the history of the mine, including the ways the salt has been retrieved over the centuries. There are 5 levels of the mine, excavated with traditional explosives, picks and rail cars. The salt is now mined by pumping high pressure water through, bringing the salt to the surface with no need for underground miners.

The tourist part of the mine is the cathedral and stations of the cross. Originally created in 1932, that cathedral was closed in 1990 due to structural concerns. A new cathedral was started in 1991, and opened officially in 1995, which is the one you are now allowed to visit.



Bogotá 2 – City Highlights

I mentioned earlier that the food was amazingly cheap in Colombia (when paying with US Dollars converted to Colombian Pesos at 3200 pesos / dollar). I didn't mention how absolutely ginormous the fruits and vegetables were though. Above is a photo of a vendor selling avocados from his wheelbarrow. We had to get a shot. Those avocados are more than a foot long and maybe 7 inches wide! Here Evelyn is holding a "normal avocado" as we would find in Ecuador or the States, next to one of these giant avocados the vendor is selling. If we had a kitchen here, I would have bought one to try -- at less than \$2 each. (For comparison, I buy the small ones like Evelyn is holding for 50 cents each in Cuenca.)

Medellin Festival of Lights

Medellin Festival of Lights



Medellin Festival of Lights

Cuenca has a few lights during Christmas on Plaza Otorongo and along the Rio Tomebamba. All those lights combined would not total as much as any single smaller park in Medellin -- and every park of any size seems to be lit up! We took a "Festival of Lights" tour tonight to see the lights of town. The tour lasted about 4 hours, and we simply drove past most lit parks -- just not enough time to see them all. The cost of the tour was 45,000 pesos, or about \$15 USD.

All main stops in Centro included Plaza Mayor, Avenida de Playa, and Envigado. Here is a small selection of images from those areas tonight.

While Cuenca's lights are identical each year (at least for the 3 years we have seen them), they change every year in Medellin. They are put up by various groups, who compete for awards of the best designs. And many of them go way overboard to do so. Above are some of the general light displays covering many of the parks and streets.

Medellin Festival of Lights



One strip of Plaza Mayor had large (10 foot diameter) balls with lights inside that rotated colors. Many people stood in front of them, while their friends took silhouette photos of them. Of course we had to do it too! (lower left in red is Evelyn)

Medellin Festival of Lights



The Festival of Lights is really supposed to be the days in which families get together and light candles, and pray. The massive glitter of the commercial lights overwhelms much of this tradition, just as it does in much of the States. There were still a few families getting together and lighting their candles, and maintaining their calm traditions in the middle of such overdone commercial lighting.

Medellin Festival of Lights



And among all the glitter and party atmosphere, there are the people enjoying the show. From infants in arms, to young children with their light sabers, to retired men sitting on the side playing chess, it seemed the entire town turned out for this party.

, December 8, 2015

[Travel](#) · [Colombia](#)

Medellin 2 – Exotic Fruits Tour

Medellin 2 – Exotic Fruits Tour



Having lived in Cuenca and shopped at mercados weekly for the past two years, I wasn't sure about wanting to take a tour of a Medellín mercado. However, we have loved most of the walking tours we have taken in various cities, and the reviews were good, so we decided to take the "*Exotic Fruits Tour*" from "*Real City Tours*." I'm glad we did, and recommend the tour for anyone coming to this city.

Medellin 2 – Exotic Fruits Tour

The *Minorista* mercado itself was similar to *Feria Libre* in Cuenca. What made it different was our guide. She told us things about many of the fruits I had not known before. At numerous stops along the way she would pick out some samples, explain how to tell when the fruit is ripe, then cut them open and give us each a sample to taste. Several were fruits I had never tried before (lolu anyone?), and will now be making it to my weekly shopping list when I am home in Cuenca.



Medellin 2 – Exotic Fruits Tour

There was the normal assortment of fruits here, but as we had seen earlier with the wheelbarrow vendors, some were gigantic relative to what we are accustomed to. The avocado (right above) is more than twice the size of what I normally buy in Cuenca. We also saw massive watermelons and cantaloupes, though they were harder to photograph in any way that really showed their size.



Diana (our guide) had laminated cards for 20 of the fruits in the market. Each time she would stop to tell the history or use of a fruit, or to give us a sample, she would hold the card and the fruit, to allow us to make the connection to the name -- both in Spanish and English.

As we finished the fruit section of the market, Diana had us sit down, where she gave us a summary of what we had seen and tasted. She then offered each of us our choice of juice drink. I opted for strawberry, and Diana suggested I have it mixed with milk instead of water. I had never tried it that way before, but I will now be experimenting to make it at home when we return -- it was delicious!

Medellin 2 – Exotic Fruits Tour



As always, though the food is what you come to buy, the people are what we like to watch. As throughout Colombia, as foreigners we were welcomed everywhere we went, and most people would willingly pose for our cameras.

Medellin 2 – Exotic Fruits Tour



Beyond the fruit part of the mercado were sections where you could buy live animals (for pets or for food), and every kind of second hand item you could conceive of. One stall (upper center) had hundreds of roller skates and parts thereof, while another (lower right) had stacks of seemingly random circuit boards. A vendor (lower center) even had piles and piles of second hand plumbing connections.

One woman in our group commented that the local laundry had used too much heat in the dryer and shrunk her clothes. She headed off to the second hand clothing section to refresh her wardrobe, as the rest of us separated at the end of the tour.

Medellin 3 – Guatapé and Centro

Medellin 3 – Guatapé and Centro



Yesterday we hired a driver to take us to Guatapé, a small town outside Medellin that we had heard was quaint. Along the way, we visited other towns --Marinilla and Peñol, In short it was a LONG tour with 6 hours of driving, 1 hour of exploring the town. Though Evelyn liked the tour, I did not think it was a good use of a day, and do not recommend it to others.

Medellin 3 – Guatapé and Centro

En route the smog was overwhelming. Like Bogotá, Medellín limits cars to driving on odd/even days matching the last number of their license plate. In Bogotá, most middle-income or higher people have purchased two cars to get around the limit, thus defeating the intent. In Medellín, the limit is only for 2 hours per day, so drivers simply delay their trip, as our driver did this day, picking us up half an hour later than otherwise planned. However, most of the visible smog was being generated by a heavy flow of diesel trucks spewing thick black clouds, and an overwhelming number of two stroke motorcycles doing the same.

As we drove through the lush countryside, our driver told us that it was barren a mere 5 years ago. Guerrillas had terrorized the countryside so badly that most farms were abandoned. Only in the last few years have people come back -- often not the same people that left -- and returned the fields back to lush farms.

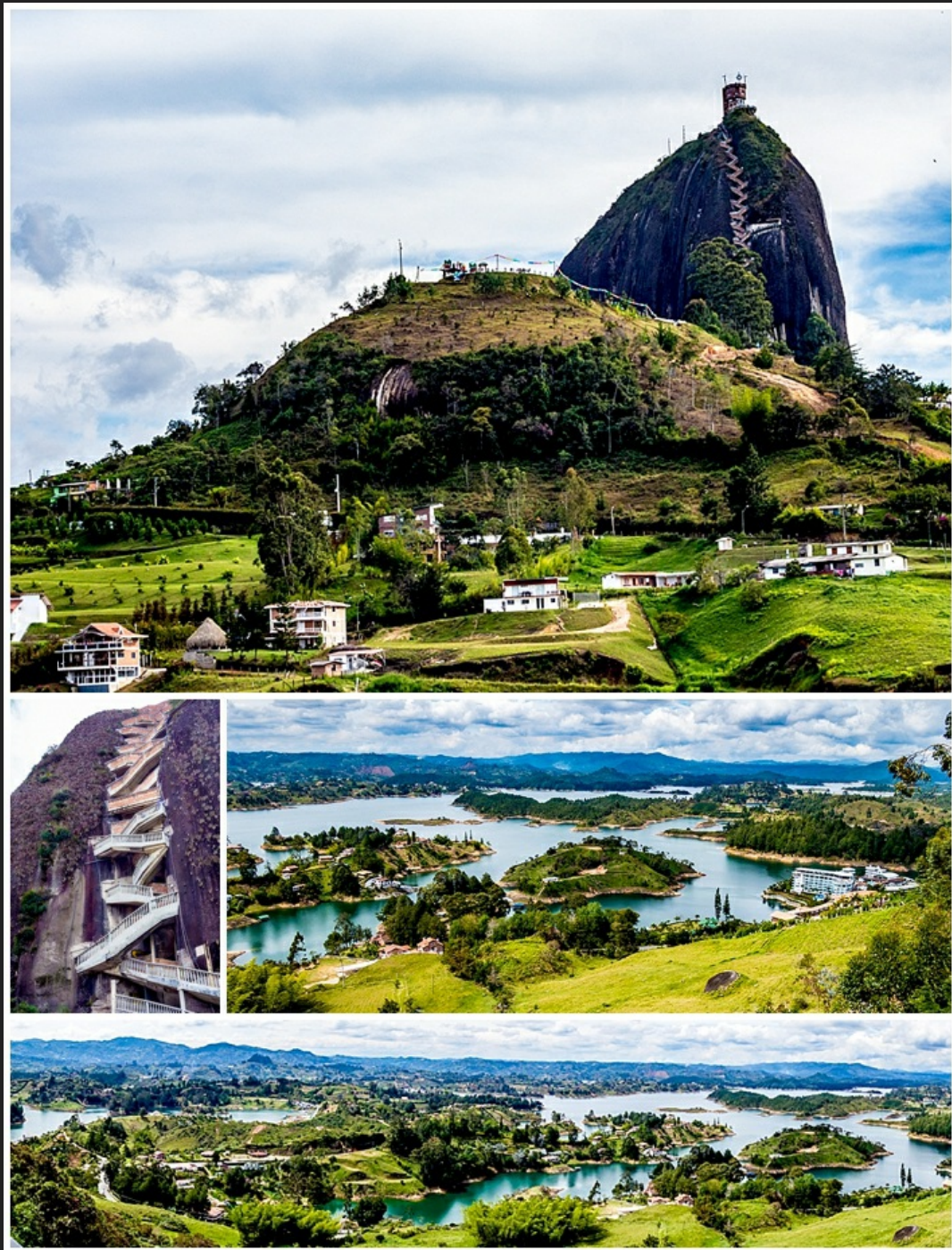
Guatapé has two claims to fame. The first is its unique facades. All are created by a single family in town, and some are 3D, being constructed of concrete. Each home has them along the base of their walls, most measuring roughly 3 feet high by the width of their home or store. The home owners commission the artist, and can give direction on the desired subject matter, usually depicting their livelihood or history.

Medellin 3 – Guatapé and Centro



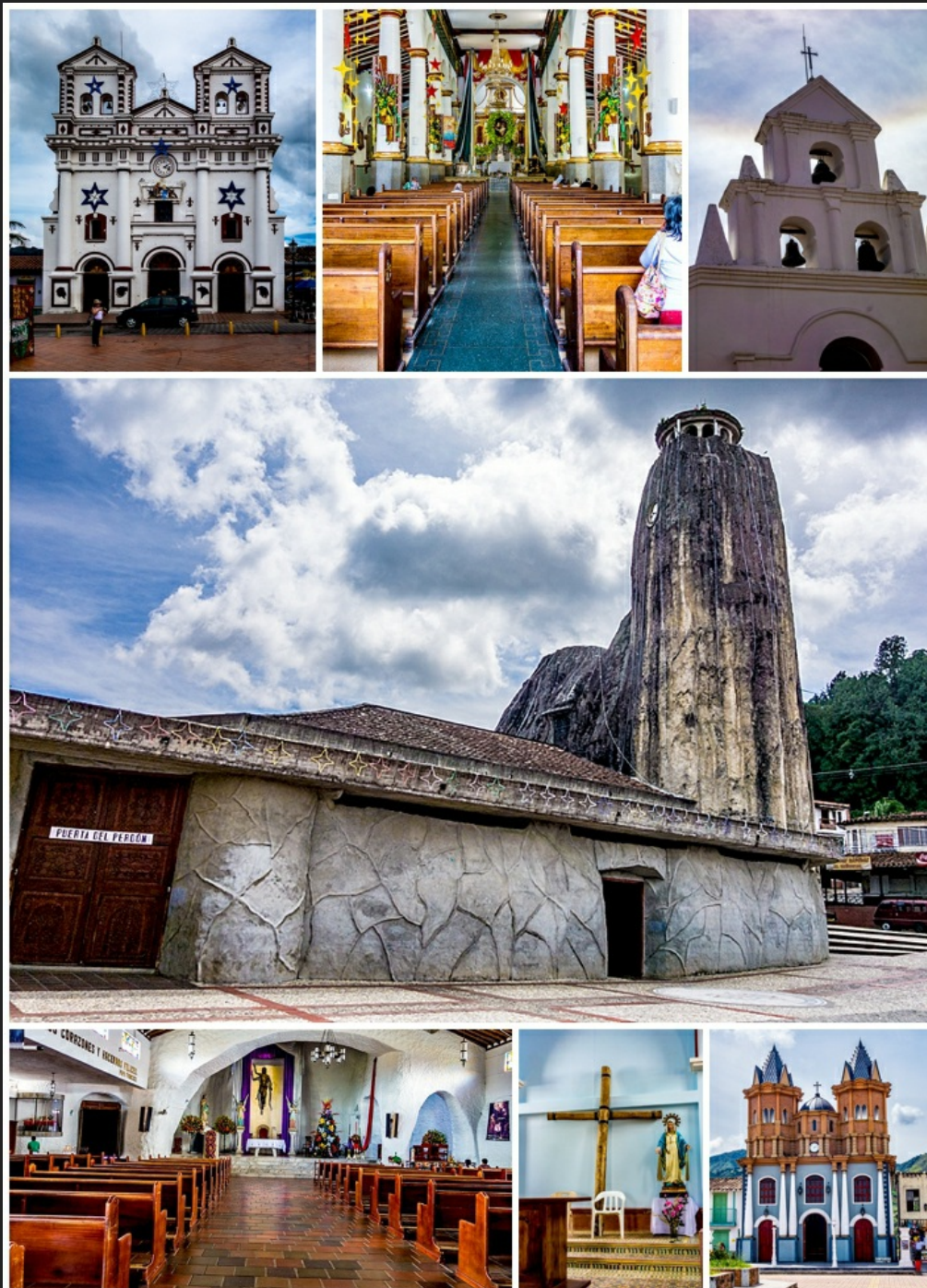
Three members of the artist's family were busy in town when we were there. One was refreshing an existing mural (upper and middle right above), while two others were creating new concrete reliefs.

Medellin 3 – Guatapé and Centro



The second claim to fame of the city is the Peñol Rock -- a huge basalt rock on the edge of town. You can climb the 770 steps to the top, for a reportedly stupendous view of the lagoons, though we have to take others' word for it...

Medellin 3 – Guatapé and Centro



In the last 1960's, the Colombian government decided to build a reservoir for generating power (which now accounts for 40% of the country's electric generation), that would flood part of the city, including the main church. The government offered to rebuild the church as it was, but the local people chose to pay more to build a new church -- and created the one in center above, which is supposed to be a rock similar to the Peñol Rock outside town.

Medellin 3 – Guatapé and Centro



Today we took a walking tour of Medellín Centro. The guide was entertaining and informative, but frankly Centro Medellín is not as interesting as many other cities we have walked. Hernán (our guide) tried to give the history of the city, while downplaying the violence of the recent past. Given that the city was considered the most dangerous in the world just 15 years ago, that made his history lessons difficult.

One interesting point that Hernán made is that Colombians use religion as a soap to wash off the guilt. A hit man will go into the church to pray before a murder, asking Jesus to forgive him and to decide whether the hit will succeed or not. It is then Jesus's decision if the murder will take place or not, not the person pulling the trigger. The churches in Medellín are the centers around which prostitution exists, and form the hub of streets for selling porn and cheap fake goods.

Medellin 3 – Guatapé and Centro

The Colombian government has been fighting an undeclared civil war for the past 70 years, only 20 of which were related to the drug trade. Drug money basically took the ongoing civil war and provided more guns and training, turning anti-government farmers into a paramilitary. With bounties offered on both sides (government paid for every rebel killed, and drug lords paid for every politician killed), the city was more dangerous than Beirut. In 2002, **Álvaro Uribe** was elected on a platform promising to quell the violence. He was known -- both affectionately by supporters and derisively by others -- as the "*iron fist president*." Though controversial, he did manage to follow through on his main promise, and Colombia finally started on its road toward recovery and peace.

Hernán pointed out that drug money does not provide infrastructure, and Medellin's current prosperity came from 100 years of gold mining and 30 years of being a financial center. He claimed that at its peak, drug money only accounted for 6% of Colombian GDP.

There have been peace negotiations with FARC, the largest anti-government paramilitary group, for the past three years. Of 75 negotiating points, 74 have been settled. The last point, who would serve prison time and for how long, is rumored to have now also reached an agreement. The treaty is expected to be signed by March 1, 2016, and hopes are high that the long civil war will finally be only a portion of the history books.

Medellin 3 – Guatapé and Centro



As with Cuenca, parades seem to spring up out of nowhere. However, while the parades tend to be religious in origin in Cuenca, they are more circus oriented in Medellín. This was the third such parade we saw start up in town, in as many days. We never did find out why...

Medellin 3 – Guatapé and Centro



Of the 21 participants on the walking tour shown above, only one other person besides ourselves were from the USA. The rest were from Netherlands, Croatia, Australia, and other countries outside North America. English was the common language though. Look at the image (with us near far-image-right) and note how tall everyone is. We felt like midgets in that crowd, with many of the men -- and even a couple women -- towering over me!

San Andres

San Andres



San Andres

We decided that a few days on the beach would be a nice way to relax, so we went to [San Adres](#). Oddly, this island is 470 miles North of Colombia, yet only 140 miles East of Nicaragua. Looking on the map, you would think this would be a Nicaraguan island, but you would be wrong. Officially, there are three languages spoken on the island -- Spanish, English and Creole. In practice though, we met very few people that spoke any English. The Spanish was heavily influenced by Creole, meaning it was largely incomprehensible to us. Our Spanish was mostly understood though, so we could explain what we wanted, even if we rarely understood the words in response.

Colombia is making a very strong effort to eliminate illegal drugs. That was nowhere as obvious as trying to get to the island. After a long line to pay 49,900 pesos entrance tax -- about \$15USD (could not pay in advance, required pesos, and payment was so inefficient that the flight was delayed), we made it to the normal X-Ray machine. Then a second X-Ray machine. Then two drug sniffing dogs wandered through the line for 15 minutes. Then a pat-down (men on the left, and women on the right). We were then finally let on the plane. When we arrived... yep, you guessed it... another X-Ray machine and another drug sniffing dog. I'm pretty sure no illegal drugs are arriving by commercial flight!

San Andres



There were a few nice murals in town (upper left above), but nothing like in other Colombian cities. One interesting vendor we saw several times was for "minuto celular" (lower left above). At first I thought they were selling minutes to recharge your phone. Then I saw people buying -- the vendor would hand over a phone, the customer would talk for short time, then hand the phone back with the price. Turns out they were selling cell phone time for those without a cell phone. The few transactions I saw were all with obvious tourists, so this appears a decent way to make a call without having to get a Colombian SIM card for your own phone.

San Andres

We snorkeled over the corals, but it was disheartening to see them in such poor condition. Corals are dying the world over, so this is not unique to here, but we still remember the vibrant, live corals we first saw when diving in the 1970's in Hawaii, Mexico, Grand Caymen and elsewhere. They are now overgrown with algae, with many parts bleached white and dead.

On our third stop, the boat captain told us to hold on to a rope behind the boat. We were then towed over a region in which there were several statues that had been sunken. There is an "[underwater museum](#)" in Cancun, Mexico that San Andres wanted to replicate here. It was interesting, and felt like being towed on a "banana boat" but without the banana (since we were snorkeling).

San Andres



San Andres

Food on the island was mostly disappointing, which surprised us. We went to several seafood restaurants (an island? gotta eat fish!), and only the one we went to on the very last day ([Peru Wok](#)) was very good. The others weren't terrible, but simply not up to the standards we had come to expect from Bogota and Medellin. One restaurant did have an interesting use for their wine bottles, using them as sculptures lining their walk. Above is only a tiny fraction of those bottles.

Cartagena

Cartagena



Cartagena

Today marks the end of our Colombia travels, after spending the last five days in [Cartagena](#). This city is the closest we have visited in Colombia to Cuenca in many ways. The total city population is roughly 900,000 compared to Cuenca's 550,000, so a bit larger. The walled city, where we stayed, is known as the Historic Centro, which is the same name of the area we live in Cuenca. As with Cuenca, the Centro district is largely self-contained and totally walkable. There is one important difference though -- while I sometimes say Cuenca is a couple degrees cooler than I prefer, Cartagena is a Caribbean coastal city, and the heat and humidity are killers! We were told that the temperature ranges from 80 to 90 (F) year-round, and always 90% humidity. The days we were there surely had that humidity, but the temperature was in the high 90's too. We would wander outside a few hours in the morning, then retreat to the hotel's air conditioned room until about 8PM, when it was tolerable to go outside again. I have no idea how anyone survived in this city before the invention of air conditioning... Also, while the tap water is safe to drink in Cuenca, here we had to rely on bottled water -- and there is a mountain of plastic being generated from all those water bottles as a result.

Cartagena definitely had the best food we found in Colombia, and some of the best we have ever had, period. We celebrated *our 43rd anniversary* our second night in the city, with an absolutely fabulous dinner at [Alma's](#), just a block from the hotel.

Cartagena

The walls around the city were first erected in the late 17th and early 18th century, to ward off English sea attacks. 80% of the wall is still intact, and the walled portion was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984. I found it interesting how short parts of the wall are. You can see a man running on a section (upper left above), and note that the wall is less than 10 feet high here. Left Center above shows how the buildings (prior to 1984) have massively outgrown the wall and reach right up to within a few yards of the wall. Turn left a little (lower left) and you can see how the wall is a bit higher, and modern high rise buildings in the distance (also middle right). Look closely and you can see construction cranes too, as new buildings are going up constantly outside the walled Centro. The cannon placements are still there, but now overlook a towering landscape. Interestingly, it required between 10 and 15 minutes between each canon fire, because of the heat generated by the explosion. Hard to imagine a battle at that pace.

One interesting vignette was a protest outside the Judicial Center (lower right). There were 9 protesters chanting and yelling, including one priest. Everyone else just walked by, sometimes after taking a photograph, but otherwise ignoring them. My Spanish is not good enough to tell what they were chanting, but apparently they don't have much traction among the locals.

Cartagena



In a city as hot as Cartagena, fruit vendors were everywhere to sell a cool plate of food. Many of the women were dressed in colorful Caribbean dresses, and a purchase of a small plate was rewarded by them also modeling for our cameras.

Cartagena



Cartagena

Just across the highway from the wall was a small area where fishermen would bring in their catch, and sell it directly to anyone wanting fresh fish. All the fish that were caught were quite small, with most being no more than 6 or 8 inches long. Hardly looked like big enough to eat, but they worked diligently to clean and filet them. There were also a dozen or so herons and pelicans hanging around for discarded entrails, as well as a few kids playing in the surf to keep cool.

Cartagena



Cartagena

We have started taking "free walking tours" (funded by tips at the end) in most cities we visit, and we did that here too. Unfortunately, this was not one of the better tours, and I am not sure I would recommend it here. A few times we saw a student in full graduation regalia walking the streets, surrounded by their family. We saw enough of them that it appears to be a tradition for the family to show off their graduating child. At dinner that night, the table next to us filled up with about 20 family and friends, and we discovered (lower right) that it was a university graduation being celebrated.

We were told by our guide that the government here is very corrupt. As one example, they let in 3000 students into the university each year. However, there are only 80 seats for the final graduation exam. Most students must bribe the professor to get a passing grade without actually taking the exam.

Cartagena



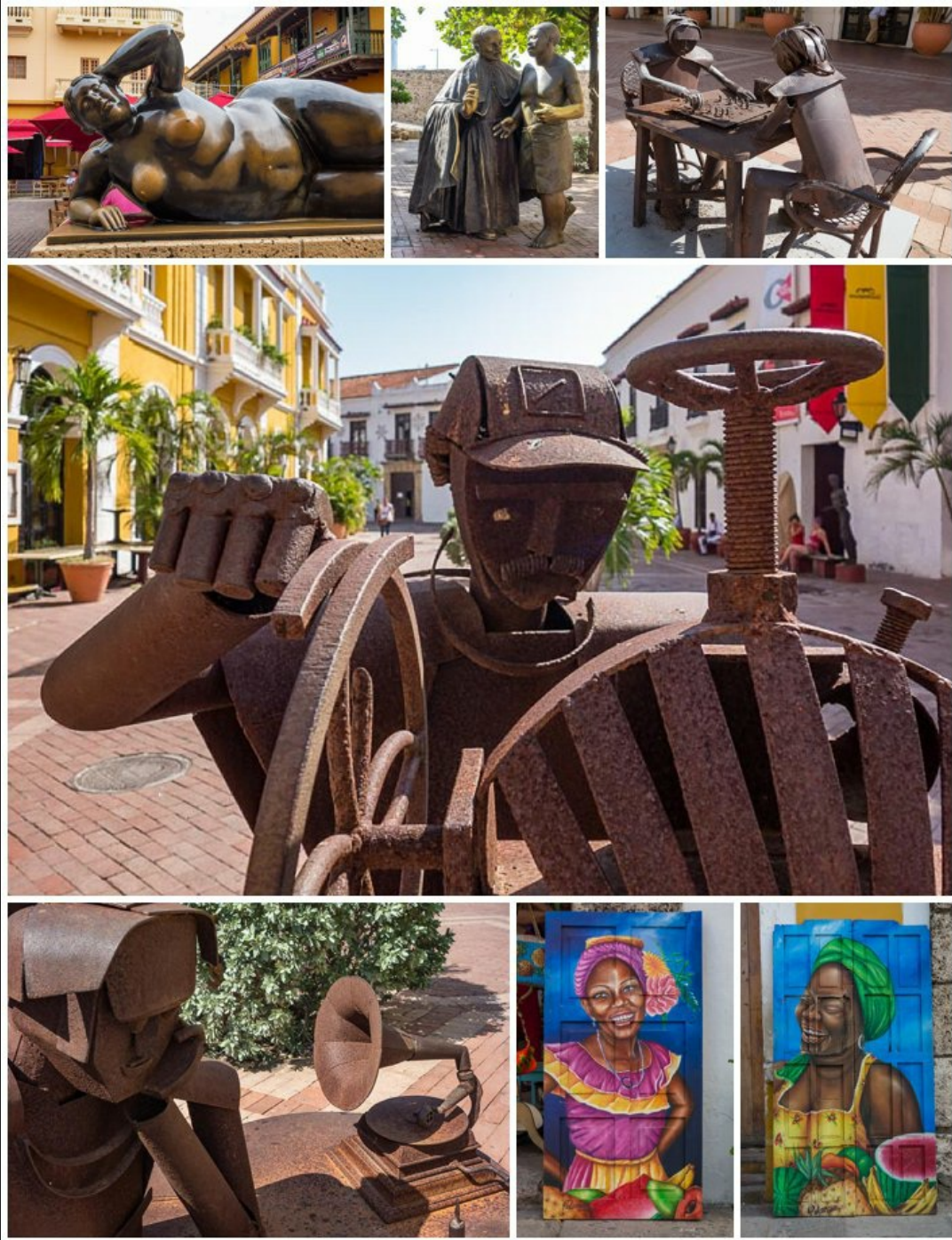
Many of the doors in the walled city had elaborate door knockers on them.

Cartagena



As with every city in Colombia, wall murals were quite common.

Cartagena



There was also public art throughout the walled city.

Cartagena



Cartagena

We then headed over to a restaurant on the Western wall, to watch the sunset, on the night of our anniversary. We came across an engagement photo session on the wall too (upper right above). The sunset was a bit of a disappointment (not much color or drama that night), but it had a cool breeze off the ocean, making it a nice way to stay outdoors and not melt in the process.