



# Booming Bogotá

With its beautifully restored colonial architecture, bustling art scene, culinary wonders, luxury shopping and spicy salsa clubs, Columbia's colourful capital is thriving, and navigable by bicycle.

*Text Margriet Marbus  
Photography Mirjam Bleeker*



Ten years ago, La Candelaria was considered a no-go area. Today, it's the place to be

**J**uan Pablo Ortega, grey-haired and tall, is sitting on a bench at the foot of mount Monserrate, holding a cup of strong coffee. Taking his time, the old farmer from the Andes stirs a scoop of sugar from a brown can into the dark liquid. And then another one. "I like my coffee hot, but most of all sweet," he explains. Standing next to him is his nephew Juan Gabriel, who is holding on to the colourful halter of a llama. Monserrate towers over our heads against a backdrop of other green mountainsides, while foggy wisps of clouds drift over and by. Below us, the Colombian capital stretches out. Bogotá: a colourful, diverse mixture of high-rises and low buildings, which lights up every now and then when a slant of sunlight manages to dance on its rooftops for a bit. Summer or not, it's chilly. Bogotá sits 2,640 metres above sea level, on an Andes mountain plateau. Summer heat just doesn't stand a chance at this altitude.

Ortega buttons up his leather duffle coat. "First order of duty, coffee," he says. Once a month, he brings his llama to Bogotá. "To do business. Visitors want to have their picture taken with a llama, the way tourists in Africa want to pose with an elephant. They'll find me here, near Ana Maria and her cookie stand."

Across the street, an older woman stands, almost hidden, behind a canopy with bags of coloured cookies hanging from it. Her hands are resting on her hips.

"Ana Maria!" Ortega shouts. "*Dulce, mi amor!*" ("Something sweet, my love!") She holds a bag in the air. "Peanut cookies, Juan Pablo? The ones you like?" she yells against the noise of a timeworn but brightly painted school bus that passes by. "*Si, mi amor.* And make it snappy!"

"Those peanuts will kill you, old man," Ana Maria cautions, after crossing the street. "Whether it's peanuts or love, something's going to get me in the end," he replies. Laughter ensues. A bag of cookies and 2,500 Colombian pesos (approximately US \$1) change hands.

The nephew shakes his head. "The same cookies every day, the same joke every day... They ought to get married," he mumbles as the first children ready for a llama picture arrive.

Ortega gets up. "Work to be done," he says, before turning to me and pointing his thumb towards Monserrate. "And you. Get yourself up that mountain. It's the most beautiful view in the world."

### Quilted blanket

The cable car to the top reveals a spectacular panoramic view indeed. From here, Bogotá resembles a vibrant quilted blanket covering a valley and several Andes mountainsides. On the Monserrate side, the old city and business districts can be made out. The other side of the valley is speckled with lopsided, hand-built shacks, nailed together by fortune seekers and displaced hopefuls.

Bogotá is the fifth largest city in the Americas, by population. Colombians refer to it as 'The heart of the Andes' or 'The Athens of South America', based on the abundance of libraries, state universities and colleges that attract a flock of foreign students; the wide variety of quality levels notwithstanding.

From the top of the mountain, it's easy to make out the city's Cartesian layout: squares with streets flowing from them that are either parallel to the mountain range or perpendicular to it, and sorted by numbers instead of names, the way they are in Manhattan. No knotty tangle of alleyways like you'd find in Amsterdam, Paris or London, but a regular square grid. Streets where old meets new. Where skyscrapers sit next to historical cathedrals; where colonial squares are lined with modern shopping malls.

Next to Monserrate is her sister, Guadalupe Hill. Both places have been considered holy since days of yore, when the area was only populated with indigenous people, before the 16th century when Spanish conquistador Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada conquered this part of Colombia. Magical, spiritual things, like resurrections and apparitions, are said to occur on Monserrate. Once the setting for Andean Indian rituals, it is now the location of a church.

At the foot of Monserrate, you'll find La Candelaria, the old colonial district with its bright historical dwellings, Spanish baroque churches and squares. As recently as ten years ago, this *barrio* (neighbourhood) was seen as a no-go area. Today, it is the trendy place to be. Many buildings have been renovated to bars, >

Previous pages (from left to right): La Candelaria, the old colonial district of downtown Bogotá; *The Dancers*, by Colombia's most famous artist, Fernando Botero.

Opposite page (clockwise from top left): Fresh orange juice being sold by one of the city's many street vendors; Xxxx xxxxxx xxxxxx.

## Destination Bogotá

hostels, museums and galleries. Also, real estate in the area is booming now that an increasing number of people from Bogotá try to lay their hands on a house with a courtyard and fountain. This is not as easy as it seems, because prices have shot up in the last few years. Whoever manages to buy a fixer-upper has a good investment on their hands.

### Culinary destination

*“Empañadas, plantaños agados, pan de yuca!”*

A street vendor wearing a straw hat and a purple poncho loudly advertises his freshly made goodies. Next to the snacks on his cart, blue, red and yellow cups of *chicha* take pride of place. This local brew – a fermented corn beverage – is available with or without alcohol. “I’ll serve you just the one,” the vendor decides, “because mine is strong and you’re really not used to it.”

La Candelaria is jam-packed with street carts selling *empañadas*, *arepitas*, coloured cookies and fresh fruit cups. Numerous bowls of chimichurri and red sauce are put out to spice up your *arepita* or *empañada* – not that you really need to.

Whereas street carts tend to specialise in local and traditional foods, newer restaurants focus on international cuisines. Mexican, sushi, Italian and Arabian: many of the city’s historical buildings today house top-notch restaurants with delicious foreign food. Bogotá is now known as a new culinary hotspot among epicureans, although it seems to be part of a larger trend. Many Latin countries with a cuisine that mixes local and Spanish traditions suddenly find themselves basking in the glow of foodie appreciation.

### Beauty in the beast

Not only is La Candelaria the place to be for a good meal, it has also become a gathering spot for artists. Young Colombian hipsters whose work is shown in the district’s new galleries like to gather in hostels and bars around the old quarter, including people such as Cesar Luis Carrera, a 26-year-old artist from Medellín. “There’s no place in the world where you’ll find as much fresh, new art as right here,” Carrera says. “After several nationwide conflicts were >

### To do

#### Centro Cultural Gabriel García Márquez

This expansive complex pays homage to the famous author, offering exhibitions and events. There are several restaurants, as well as a Juan Valdez café.  
Calle 11 #5-60

#### Catedral Primada

Colombia’s largest cathedral is situated in the exact spot where Bogotá’s first ever mass was held. Inside, visitors will find the tomb of conquistador Jiménez de Quesada.  
[bogotaturismo.gov.co/catedral-primada](http://bogotaturismo.gov.co/catedral-primada)  
Plaza Bolívar

#### José Celestino Mutis Botanical Garden

Colombia’s biggest botanical garden serves both as a recreation and research centre, and features an astonishing array of plants from every Colombian altitude, climate and region.  
Avenida Calle 63 #68-95

#### Palacio de San Carlos

This 16th-century colonial villa was the official residence of several Colombian presidents. Nowadays, it’s home to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.  
Calle 10 #5-51

#### Teatro Colón

An impressive neo-classicist building that houses the national theatre of Colombia, its velvet curtains opening for anything from operas and ballets to world-renowned musicals such as *Annie*.  
Calle 10 #5-32

#### Museo Botero

Dedicated to Colombia’s most famous painter and sculptor, Fernando Botero, the museum has an admirable collection that also includes Picassos, Monets, Mirós and Bacons.  
Calle 11 #4-41

**Opposite page (from top to bottom):** the historic district of La Candelaria; many houses in Bogotá have been decorated with beautiful murals.

#### Museo Nacional de Colombia

Bogotá’s former jailhouse now holds a collection of paintings and artefacts that tell the rich history of Colombia.  
Carrera 7 #28-66

#### Monserate

Take a trip to the top of Monserate for what is hands-down the best view of Bogotá. A good starting point for a tour of the city.  
[colombiainfo.org](http://colombiainfo.org)

#### Museo Internacional De La Esmeralda

If you have a head for heights, make your way up to the 23rd floor of the Avianca Tower, where you’ll find the Emerald Museum and watch artisans make jewellery from one of Colombia’s most cherished export products: locally mined emeralds.  
Calle 16 #6-66

### To stay

#### NH Collection Bogotá Andino Royal

Comfortable, well positioned and a marvellous breakfast to boot. What more could you ask for?  
[nh-hotels.com/hotel/nh-collection-bogota-andino-royal](http://nh-hotels.com/hotel/nh-collection-bogota-andino-royal)  
Calle 85 #12-28

#### Click Clack Hotel

With an innovative approach of constantly reinventing its spaces, and rooms from XS to XL, this is a creative, interactive hotel with a difference. Its restaurant, 100gr, serves up 100g-sized portions, while its Apache bar on the tenth floor serves up a 360-degree view of the city.



Street vendors provide bowls of chimichurri to spice up your *arepita* or *empanada*. Not that you need to



Opposite page (clockwise from top): *empanadas* consist of dough filled with, for instance, meat, cheese or vegetables; one of the city's many places to enjoy *empanadas*; a street vendor selling avocados in downtown Bogotá.

To eat

**La Cabrera**

This is a trendy club and restaurant catering to a young, uptown crowd. This is where soccer players, real estate agents, models and lawyers gather at night to enjoy their delicious cocktails.  
Carrera 13 #83-57

**Club Colombia**

Fine dining in stylish, on-trend surroundings.  
Carrera 9 #Av 82, nr. 9-11

**Casa de Citas**

Peruvian delicacies served amid a jazzy background.  
Carrera 3 #35

**La Peluqueria**

A restaurant that also happens to sell vintage fashion, exhibit art and house a hairdressers (hence the name). On the menu: raw food and plenty of fresh juices from local fruits.  
Carrera 3 #12d-83

**Quinoa y Amaranto**

Five elderly ladies behind a counter prepare the menu of the day. Choose from two vegetarian main courses.  
[bogotáveg.com/2015/07/restaurant-quinoa-y-amaranto](http://bogotáveg.com/2015/07/restaurant-quinoa-y-amaranto)  
Calle 11 #2-95

**La Totuma Corrida**

Enjoy your sushi in a brightly coloured setting.  
Carrera 2 #12B-90

resolved, people were so relieved that it led to an outburst of creativity. Our local galleries are doing well and have found ways to sell our work abroad. My pictures are going to be exhibited in Los Angeles next."

The work of these artists goes beyond the boundaries of shops and museums. Many houses in Bogotá have been decorated with beautiful murals: giant, breathtaking works depicting animals, people, landscapes, gods. Brash graffiti is nowhere to be found. "There's no room on our walls for ugliness," declares Gloria Villallobos from her rocking chair in the doorway of her historic house.

The 84-year-old former cook, who was once famous for her fish, cassava and agave chowder, has been living here all her life, and her house is one of those hidden gems homebuyers are after. Her patio has a pond with a fountain in the middle. She uses the pond to breed goldfish.

"If my aunt were to sell this house, she'd be rich," a visiting niece says.

"Rich? With money in the bank and no house to sleep in?" says Villallobos, letting out a raspy laugh. "I'd be poor without this house. This is where I was born and this is where I'll die. A person needs to know what he owns. Money is just money. It does bad things to people. Look at what happened to Colombia." Villallobos points one finger in the air. "Every bit of unrest, all the ugly things that happened – it was all because of money. Colombia is blossoming once more. Ten years ago, I would not even go out at night. Now Bogotá has been cleaned up and beautified. And this time, it will keep," she says with conviction. "Para siempre. Forever. Now you go and have another walk through our *barrio, mi amor*. Walking makes your legs beautiful." And she laughs her raspy laugh again.

Watching the world go by

A stroll through the old town of Bogotá will both energise and exhaust you at the same time. La Candelaria is not just positioned high up the Andes mountainsides, but steeply so as well. Nevertheless, this part of the city abounds with people exploring, on foot or by bike. For years, Bogotá suffered from the kind of traffic

congestion typically found in fast-developing metropolitan areas. But the city council has been taking measures to keep the cars at bay, from installing a rapid-transit bus system to dedicated bicycle routes. Tourists and locals alike now zoom along on their mountain bikes over narrow, cobblestone streets to the Plaza Bolívar, which was named after freedom fighter Simón Bolívar, and city parks with sturdy, knotty trees.

Every now and then, a truly melancholic Colombian song will waft from a doorway, as the late afternoon sun turns old Bogotá into a sepia-tinted postcard. A fashion model wearing a white pantsuit languishes in a doorway, while the photographer is busy trying to capture the pinkish light.

"Si, siiiii, mas," he shouts. Cyclists stop in their tracks to watch the scene.

"*Empanadas, empanadas*," yet another street vendor calls out to the crowd from the other side of the street. "Dude, you should get on a bike yourself and build some muscle," one of the cyclists replies.

"*Gracias, mi amor*, but I'd rather have a snack," the vendor grins, stuffing a *buñuelo* – a corn roll with cheese – into his mouth.

Botero pride

Just a few streets over is the Botero Museum. Inside its walls, visitors spend hours taking in the voluptuous nudes that typify the paintings and sculptures of Colombia's most famous artist, Fernando Botero. His museum draws a crowd, every single day.

"What your Vincent van Gogh is to the Netherlands, Fernando Botero is to us," explains the sales person in the art bookstore across the road. "He's the hero of our nation." A walk through Bogotá confirms as much. Botero's luscious animals and humans seem to decorate anything and everything. The museum also displays works of many of his famous contemporaries, such as Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon and Claude Monet, all of which have been graciously donated by Botero, now 80, from his personal collection.

Entrance to most of Colombia's museums is free and they are dense with information. If you care to know about the development of >

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Colombia as a nation, the National Museum is the place to go. The building is a former jail, and one look at the thick walls and barred windows is enough to realise the chance of escape was close to nil.

### Hip Bogotá

For luxury shopping or late night clubbing, the La Cabrera district is the place to go. A posh neighbourhood from the 1920s, it's the uptown to La Candelaria's downtown. Many of the city's shopping malls can be found here, as well as luxury boutiques from the likes of Hermès and Cartier. Weary feet can be rested and energy levels can be boosted at several locations of Colombian coffee giant Juan Valdez or in various popular restaurants such as Club Colombia and La Cabrera.

"If you are looking for the truly perfect Cosmopolitan, you don't need to go to New York," says Christian Meyer. "And similarly, if you want to dance salsa, you really don't need to go to Cuba." Meyer is a renowned salsaer from Cali and he knows what he's talking about, because Bogotá is also about salsa and merengue. Albeit slightly different from the Cuban variety. "Our salsa is faster and more agile," he explains. "The place to experience it is Club Galería Café Libro, our best salsa club. I've been salsa dancing around the globe, but Bogotá is the place to be right now. Beautiful people, trendy places – Bogotá is *booming*. And it's a happy town. Young people flock to the city from all over the country. Foreigners are coming here now to buy their vacation homes. We are the new face of progress. And it has only just begun. *Salut!*"

### Getting around

Bogotá's streets are laid out on a grid that extends in all directions from the city centre. The majority of streets are either called *Calle* or *Carrera*, and all of them are numbered. Each address has a second number, which refers to the distance to the next road. Therefore, Avenida Calle 63 #68-95 means: on the Avenida Calle 63, 95 metres from the corner of Carrera 68. This will help you on your tour across Bogotá. ■

Opposite page (from top to bottom): view from car in downtown Bogotá; colourful paintings in La Candelaria.

### To shop

#### Mercado de las Pulgas de Usaquén

A giant Sunday flea market with goods from all over Colombia. If you have an eye for a good deal and a talent for bargaining, this is the place to pick up the perfect souvenir.  
Carrera 6 #119-120

#### Andino Shopping Centre

This high-end mall is where you'll find top-notch brands and labels like Tiffany & Co and Dolce & Gabbana. Also, small coffee shops sell brilliant pastries here.  
Carrera 11 #82-71

#### Mario Hernandez

This Colombian label is well known for its quality leather purses. Various stores throughout the city.  
[mariohernandez.com](http://mariohernandez.com)

#### Pasaje Rivas

A craft market that sells beautiful authentic and handmade souvenirs.  
Corner of Calle 10 and Carrera 10.

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