THREE PERFECT DAYS

BOGOTÁ

From the green mountains that encircle the sprawling metropolis to its blossoming arts and entertainment offerings, Colombia's abidingly beautiful capital city is a place bursting with optimism, energy and life

BY JANET HAWKINS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL HANSON
Taking in the view from the Teleférico de Monserrate cable car.
BOGOTÁ IS USED TO BEING misunderstood. It’s chilly, we hear, and a bit wet. It’s true, the city gets a fair amount of rainfall and the mercury rarely climbs above 67 degrees Fahrenheit, but a shower here is as apt to last a few minutes as an afternoon, and the temperature rarely dips below the 60s. Plus, it’s the weather that keeps the city green and fragrant.

There’s also the misconception, a residue from cinematic crime capers and a history of news reports, that Bogotá is teeming with drug lords. No one would deny that this city of more than 8 million people has had its share of problems, but the crime risk today is pretty much on par with any major urban center. These days, Bogotá is as safe as London or New York.

As intensive public safety initiatives have transformed the city’s streets, major redevelopment programs have further heightened Bogotá’s appeal as a place to live and visit, helping the Colombian capital to reposition itself as a hotbed of art and architecture, hospitality and nightlife. You can see evidence of this in the leafy facade of its whimsical Bio Hotel, and in the couples sipping mojitos on the patios of upscale bars.

Walking around this vibrant city, you get the sense that even Bogotans are surprised at how much it has changed. Residents who ten years ago left to seek their fortunes elsewhere have returned, and there’s a Sí, se puede air about the place that’s infectious. Last summer, the city hosted the third annual Bogotá Wine & Food Festival, an opportunity to show chefs from around the world just how it’s done in this cradle of diversity.

As it turns out, it’s done very well.
Sabogal says she sells 300 tamales, easily, during the week, and another 500 on weekends. You can taste why.

After a short plod you’re in Plaza de Bolívar, an expansive square whose disparate architecture aims for grandeur and delivers a lesson in resilience. The neoclassical Palacio Liévano—a replacement for earlier structures destroyed by earthquake or fire—stands along the western side, flanked by the colonnaded Capitolio Nacional and the blocky Palacio de Justicia. “I was 13 when the previous building was leveled. Now, it’s hard to imagine,” a security guard tells you, referring to a 1985 battle between the army and a guerrilla group.

You pass the Bolívar statue and sit on the steps of the Spanish colonial Catedral Primada, surrounded by a small army of pigeons.

Next, you brave the onslaught of articulated TransMilenio buses on the Carrera 7 roadway to find Iglesia de San Francisco, Bogotá’s oldest church. Dating back to 1621, it doesn’t look like much from the outside, but inside it’s a golden cocoon, its congregants praying amid glorious carvings and dim stillness, the only sound the scritch-scritch of a woman hypnotically scrubbing the floor outside.

Eventually, you stumble across La Puerta Falsa, a tiny family restaurant that has served santafereña cuisine for seven generations. Inside, on a tight balcony above the kitchen, you sip hot chocolate with melted cheese, then grapple with a huge tamale, peeling back plantain leaves to reveal a fat chicken leg in the embrace of carrots, corn, rice, yellow peas and pork grease. Proprietor Mónica

**BOGOTÁ BY THE NUMBERS**

- **Population**: 8.7 million
- **Tourist Visitors Per Year**: 850,000
- **Altitude Above Sea Level, in Feet**: 8,660
- **Number of Neighborhoods**: 20
- **Number of Parks**: 4,500
- **Distance Covered by Bogotá’s Ciclovía, The World’s Largest Bicycle Network, in Miles**: 186
- **Percentage of the World’s Coffee Produced by Colombia**: 12%
- **Professional Soccer Clubs Based in Bogotá**: 4

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**DAY ONE** | The shutters on the 15-foot windows are closed, the light on the trendy phone switched off, so your sensory input is limited to the brush of a silky duvet and the scent of old money. It’s not a bad way to wake up. You hop out of bed and bring up the lights on a room that has a touch of “Downton Palacio” about it. The Orchids Hotel is one of Bogotá’s most luxurious properties, and your Midsummer Night’s Dream suite takes this to extremes. A butler in a morning coat pours your coffee, which you sip beneath a gilded ceiling before descending to the lobby in a glass elevator, passing a pebbled fountain and emerging into La Candelaria, the cultural nexus of Colombia’s capital city.

Whitewashed walls running along the avenue outside are capped at either end with swaths of green—the Monserrate and Guadalupe peaks that shadow you throughout the city. You quickly become lost in a warren of pastel-painted streets lined with dinky shops and homes with doors polished to perfection.

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87 | Dining on hearty tamales, historic sightseeing, indulging in aguardiente

88 | Spelunking in a salt cathedral, scaling Monserrate, digging into some ceviche

92 | Sampling the wares at a tea café, appreciating forbidden art and fine shopping
BOGOTÁ | THREE PERFECT DAYS

ladybugs and a life-size bear close by. This area is renowned for its graffiti—there are said to be 3,000 street artists in Bogotá—and tours are devoted to the art. Later, you will book yourself a place on one.

You’re lunching across the way, at Sant Just Traiteur, a French café popular with the university crowd. Perched on a high stool, you watch owner-chef Eric Noirard toiling in the tiny open kitchen. You have the salmon, served on a bed of quinoa and beetroot, accompanied by roasted veggies. In true Gallic style, Noirard aims to marry flavor and nutrition in everything he creates, right down to the apple pie sprinkled with amaranth and topped with a dollop of vanilla and passion fruit ice cream.

Fortified, you head to the Museo del Oro to take in a few thousand years of precious metalwork by pre-Hispanic Colombians. There are 30,000 gold pieces on display here—from animal figures to breastplates—many of which were once regarded as expressions of the soul. One piece depicts a chieftain standing on a raft, ready to toss his riches into a lake as a hara
t,[…]

FLOWER POWER

That aromatic bouquet you picked up at the supermarket? Chances are it came from the Bogotá savanna.

eggs to rare spices. It is also the place locals come to stock up on flowers. Paloquemao is stacked with carnations, chrysanthemums, gerbera daisies, roses, baby’s breath and other blooms whose names you might not know. They’ve been cultivated in the hothouses that cover the Bogotá savanna, and those not trucked to local markets end up at El Dorado International Airport, many bound for Miami.

Colombia is the world’s second-largest exporter of cut flowers—only the Netherlands produces more—a trade that adds more than $1 billion a year to the country’s coffers. Much of the growing occurs on the high plain outside Bogotá, because it just happens to be the perfect place for it: plentiful light, mild temperatures, rich soil and ready sources of water. This trade took off in earnest in the 1990s, when the U.S. government suspended import duties on flowers in an effort to reduce the cultivation of coca, and so disrupt the supply chain of the drug industry. “This is not just for the sake of beauty,” says one vendor, a middle-aged woman holding a bunch of alstroemeria lilies. With this, she briskly gets back to work. After all, as she points out, “a flower doesn’t live forever.”
EAT, DRINK, SLEEP... REPEAT
Clockwise from top left: Andrés Carnes de Res; corn at the Plaza de Mercado de Paloquemao; pouring a cup at Taller de Té; a bed in The Orchids Hotel
Breakfast is at a modest counter in the middle of the marketplace. You examine containers of colorful liquids and pick _jugo de mora_—a heavenly blackberry juice—then order _arepa con queso_, a cornmeal flatbread stuffed with a traditional mild white cheese. Afterward, with a wave of his arm, Andrei signals that it’s time you hit the road for the _Catedral de Sal_ at Zipaquirá, 30 miles away.

The city gives way to verdant savanna hemmed in by hills. Soon, the car starts on a steep climb toward the storied salt cathedral. From the hilltop, you descend a concrete slope into dark passageways dug out of halite rock. The tunnels are lined with recesses bearing blue-lit crosses. After a while, you emerge into several cavernous, rough-hewn chambers filled with pews and religious carvings. Crystals of salt cascade down the walls, alongside pick and chisel marks. Created in the 1950s as a chapel for workers in adjacent salt mines, the cathedral was reengineered in the 1990s and now claims a top spot among Colombia’s tourist attractions, drawing tens of thousands of visitors a month.

Under a warm sun, you descend from the hill into Zipaquirá, described by Gabriel García Márquez—who went to high school here—as a “frozen town.” (Originally from the tropical coast, the author couldn’t abide the cooler Bogotá climate.) In a central plaza bordered by white stucco, blue balconies and red roof tiles, you enter the towering 19th-century cathedral, whose intricate, domed interior is bursting with worshippers. A few old dogs lie on their sides in the aisles, enjoying mass along with the throng.

Heading back to Bogotá, you stop for lunch at _Andrés Carnes de Res_ in Chía, a restaurant known for its flea-market décor and all-night dance parties. You sit beneath a metal cage that contains naked mannequins, inhaling the scent of sizzling steak. You choose the chicken kebab with onions, peppers and bacon-wrapped prunes, which comes with potatoes the size of grapes and three traditional sauces. You favor the _picante_, which you apply liberally. As an antidote, you order a Pony Malta, a soda with a deep molasses flavor so good you worry it might be habit-forming.

It’s midafternoon and drizzling as you reenter the city, but you decide to scale _Monserrate_ anyway. You’re dropped off in Candelaria and trek up the hill to a cable car station. A few minutes and a couple of ear pops later, you’re at the summit. At 10,341 feet above sea level, Monserrate has its head in the clouds; they cling to the peaks and drift across the rooftops before tumbling down toward Bogotá, which extends in its entirety before you. You climb the steps to the monastery, whose sharp white spire keeps vigil...
COFFEE TALK
Friendly folks have a chat outside Abasto
BOGOTÁ  THREE PERFECT DAYS

over the city, and gaze for a while in wonder, the murmur of the wind and the scent of ozone lulling you perilously close to sleep.

The return to street level brings you back to your senses. You grab a cab and direct the driver to the B.O.G. Hotel, in the stylish Zona Rosa district, famed for its nightlife and swank malls. Bogotá’s first Design Hotel, B.O.G. is a kind of geometric artwork, tinted with emerald and gold (a nod to the country’s natural resources). Your room, with its muted tones and downy pillows, does not make it easy to embark on a night on the town, but you need to eat, which you’ll be doing tonight at Central Cevichería, a 10-minute walk away.

A lively place of patios and wood accents, Central has a lot more up its sleeve than marinated raw fish. You have a grilled octopus salad, sea bass with yellow potatoes and creamy (yes, creamy) ceviche with sweet plantains, accompanied by plenty of mojitos and topped off with coconut flan. You have a look at the pretty little fish market next door before heading back to your hotel, seafood occupying your thoughts and your stomach, to swim into that pile of pillows.

DAY THREE | You present yourself at Taller de Té—an atelier/café in a converted 1950s garage near Parque Simon Bolívar. There are magnolia blossoms here the size of cabbages, elephantine palm trees, beds of lemongrass and mint and rue. It’s a splendid place to rehabilitate, but you’ve reserved a spot on the Bogotá Graffiti Tour, which leaves from central Candelaria. You join a small cluster of backpackers and follow Aussie expat Christian Petersen, the tour’s founder and an artist himself.

“Street art in Bogotá is prohibited, not illegal,” he says, describing a rather murky distinction that has nonetheless allowed the practice to thrive.

With Petersen leading the way, you wend your way up steep alleys and calles, passing the works of artists with names like Stinkfish and Toxicómano, along with bars, jewelry shops and tattoo parlors. At the top of one alley is the circular Plaza del Chorro de Quevedo, with its famous Oscar Rodriguez,

DESIGNER, PROYECTO SINERGIA

“If you want the perfect combination of relaxation and exercise, visit the city on a Sunday, when you can join in CicloRuta, or Ciclovía. Miles of city streets are closed to traffic, and cyclists, skaters and families show up for fresh air and something to eat. It’s a great way to be a Bogotan.”

Yuliana Saavedra,
SOCIAL COMMUNICATOR, JARDÍN BOTÁNICO JOSÉ CELESTINO MUTIS

“The Botero has works by Colombia’s own Fernando Botero. It also exhibits paintings from his private collection, by artists such as Chagall and Matisse, Dalí and Léger. The people in Botero’s paintings are like the hearts of Bogotans—big and beautiful.”

Leopoldo Castillo,
CHAUFFEUR

“Go to the Estadio El Campin, the fútbol stadium near the Universidad Nacional, and catch a game with the Millonarios, if you can. You won’t see Bogotans any happier than when they’re cheering on their team, and it will probably make you happy, too.”

Oscar Rodriguez,
DESIGNER, PROYECTO SINERGIA

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HOW DO YOU LIKE DA APPLES?

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DAY ONE
The Orchids Hotel
Carrera 5, 10-55, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-745-5438
La Puerta Falsa
Calle 11, Bogotá
Plaza de Bolívar
Carrera 8, Bogotá
Iglesia de San Francisco
Calle 16, 7, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-335-1634
Sant Just Traiteur
Calle 16a, 2-73, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-477-7555
Museo del Oro
Calle 16, 588, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-343-2222
Doneoasia
Calle 29 bis, 5-84, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-287-3943
Quiebra Canto
Carrera 5, 17-76, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-243-1630
DAY TWO
Plaza de Mercado de Paloquemao
Calle 19, 25-04, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-742-6664
Catedral de Sal de Zipaquirá
Carrera 6 and Calle 1, Zipaquirá;
Tel. 011-57-1-594-5959
Andrés Carnes de Res
Calle 3, 11a-56, Chia;
Tel. 011-57-1-863-7880
Monserate
Carrera 2 E., 21-48, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-284-5700
B.O.G. Hotel Carrera 11,
86-74, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-639-9990
Central Cevichería
Calle 13, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-644-7766
DAY THREE
Taller de Té Calle 60a,
3a-38, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-255-4128
Abasto
Calle 6, 119b-52, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-215-1286
Hacienda Santa Barbara
Carrera 7, 116-60, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-612-0388
Bolívar Old Prints
Calle 79b, 7-46, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-317-427-3048
Matiz Calle 95, 11a-17, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-520-2003

Jardín Botánico
José Celestino Mutis
Calle 63, 68-95, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-437-7060
Bogotá Graffiti Tour
Carrera 4, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-321-297-4075
Abasto Carrera 6, 119b-52,
Bogotá; Tel. 011-57-1-215-1286
Hacienda Santa Barbara
Carrera 7, 116-60, Bogotá;
Tel. 011-57-1-612-0388
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Tel. 011-57-1-520-2003
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DINE AND CLIMB
A few plates at Donostia; Mount Monserrate.