

OAT's Colombia and the Coffee Triangle

Copa Air flight 160 circled Cartagena as if in tribute. Sheila's (who did the archaeological trip with me) LAN flight is five minutes behind mine. I watch her plane taxi out and I wave an unseen goodbye. It has been a glorious three weeks, with a tremendous number of "ups" and a few (very) minor "downs."



Copa Airlines Logo

Let me backtrack a bit to just before we joined the OAT group.....

So here we are in Popayan, with two full days to relax after our archaeology adventures. Now we have time to enjoy this colonial city filled with magnificent churches, leafy squares and interesting shops. As mentioned in the first email, I spent one day camped in the hotel restaurant at a table overlooking an ever-changing street-scene. It gives my body a good rest and I am able to write. Sheila explores around town so well that on the second day, she is my guide. She discovers a great bakery, the location of the Natural History Museum, a fantastic bead store and knows the way to the handicrafts center.

The Natural History Museum in Popayan has an archaeological collection that I am very interested in visiting. After paying the entrance fee and making our way to the third floor, come to find out the archaeology section is under renovation and closed! What a disappointment!!! So in my best Spanish, I ask a worker about this. He knocks on an unmarked/nondescript door and explains my situation to a woman. The Curator asks me about my interest in the collection then takes me to the section, turns on the lights, lifts the "do not cross" banners and invites me to look around and photograph anything I want. What a darling!

Some of the pieces are in open cases and I am able to get good photographs, as well as being extremely tempted to snatch a bit of pottery (I didn't)! Of course they have some pieces from San Agustin (remember the megalithic statues?) which was like being reunited with old friends. When others visiting the museum ask to enter the archaeology galleries, the curator says "es una especialista" -- and doesn't let them in!

Not only that, but I am taken to a large closet where they keep a (eight foot or so) phallic megalith they deem too anatomically correct to put on display as so many children visit the museum. It has storage boxes piled on top of it!

The rest of our adventures this day consists of checking out the handicraft center with significant time at a wonderful bead store that custom-makes us earrings, purse jewelry and zipper pulls using pre-Colombian design charms.

You will never meet friendlier people than those at this bead store in Popayan.



Just before he left to return to Bogota, Jonathan, our guide for the archaeological trip, had taken us to the Viña Restaurant for high-altitude trout (a favorite!) and we make our way back for another gargantuan meal of this tasty grilled fish.

By the time Sheila and I leave Popayan, we are well rested and ready to join the OAT “Colombia and the Coffee Triangle” group in Bogota.



Street art in the Candelaria area of Bogota. Our tour takes almost three hours!



Our Guide, Ray -- a Colombian who studied in Wisconsin-- points out more art

We have an early flight from Popayan which allows us to take a “Graffiti Tour” in Bogota’s Candelaria area. We had arranged it with Christian Peterson, an Australian expat and artist who designed the tour. Our guide, Ray, leads us up and down winding cobblestone streets as we view wall art by several dozen artists but the only names I remember are Stinkfish and Pez. I’m glad we did the tour for several reasons: it was a lovely walk, we had a chance to talk to our very own beatnik-style resident, and we explored the alleyways of Candelaria. It was a great few hours.

Later that afternoon, we meet our OAT guide Leon Pardo - young and well experienced in handling groups. I later learn he guides for Explore Worldwide, my favorite UK company!

This is my second time around OAT’s Colombia itinerary, but with the changes (Santa Marta and Tayrona National Park are out, Medellin, Pereria, the hacienda stay and the coffee plantations are in) it is a brand new trip.

Though we loved having our own guide and a driver at our beck-and-call, when one is part of a tour, one can no longer function as an individual, but must meld in to the group. As for the interesting personalities, we came to think of them as theater. Unfortunately there was one couple with physical limitations which made the guide almost run two trips -- the regular itinerary for 11 of us and an itinerary that included wheelchairs at airports, alternate activities where we had walks/hikes, etc. and numerous taxi transfers for them. There is a place in heaven for this guide.



We begin in Bogota and I have yet to finish all the fabulous museums there! Leon does a great job of showing us the city, including a surprise visit to the Botanical Garden complete with Butterfly Conservatory. These 20 acres are filled with orchids, palm trees, heliconia and cabbage-type plants- everything well managed and well signposted.



Our one regret was that we didn't have time to get back to a restaurant called "La Puerta Falsa." Just before our archaeology tour, Sheila and I had a great Ajiaco (a Colombian soup) lunch there but were too full to try the hot chocolate and cheese drink or their tamales, both reputed to be delicious. The restaurant has been operated by the same family for seven generations and is one of the treasures of Bogota.

We soon find ourselves at the airport on a flight to to Medellin, a city known for its drug connections of the past. Things have changed for the better and it was recently designated " City of the Year" by the Wall Street Journal .

The crowning glory of Medellin is the Antioquia Museum stuffed with the sculptures and paintings Fernando Botero gave to the city before moving to Italy. Copies of the robust sculptures are in a square in front of the museum and you can photograph and climb on them to your heart's content. This museum also had great gift shops -- much better than the Botero Museum in Bogota!



We love Botero! Here Sheila poses with a Botero Horse; and me with his classic woman.



After Medellin, we fly to Pereria, the coffee area in the central highlands of the country. We spend one day at the Hacienda Venecia Coffee Farm learning the whole process from a lovely young woman from Durban, South Africa named Coco, who is studying coffee production in Central and South America with plans to open her own coffee shop (s) in Capetown, South Africa.

The part I enjoyed the most was her rendition of the history of Juan Valdez, the spokesperson/logo of Colombian Coffee. There have been several “Juan Valdez’s” over the years and she chronicles how the spokesperson comes to be chosen, calling him “Colombia’s James Bond” as there have been so many over the years.



I will never complain of the price of coffee again now that I’ve walked thru a coffee plantation, seen how painstakingly first quality beans are selected by the pickers, then sorted again before roasting and packaging.



We also visited the town of Salento and a upscale coffee house where we learn the art of decorating cappuccinos and lattes. We love the little bit of free time we have in this colorful town and wished we could have spent much more time here on our own.

Decorating cappuchino’s and latte’s is an art. Here an expert demonstrates how carefully it must be done to come out perfect.



Our tour includes short hikes both at the Coffee Farm where recent floods washed out the regular bridge and at Cocora National Park.

Photos by Sheila



Leon pauses and waits for the group to assemble.

The three internal flights in the itinerary aren't too bad. The only time we spend almost a full day "in transit" is from Pereria to Cartagena as we have two flights: Pereria to Bogota, then Bogota to Cartagena. The layover is less than an hour and allows us to have a snack lunch at the airport.

OAT's hotels are superb. I've put my reviews on Trip Advisor, and have appended them to the end of this email. First, it is like coming home to the Hotel de la Opera in Bogota. It is a large colonial home that has been turned in to a hotel. In addition there are rooms on the 7th floor of an adjacent tower, and those are the rooms I like best as the views are spectacular. I upgraded to a suite from OAT's standard-issue rooms as this is one hotel you want to enjoy to its fullest. It was worth it. In Medellin, our group stays at the contemporary Art Hotel with very modern, beautifully decorated rooms and

a great kitchen. I especially enjoy the the three nights at the Hacienda Castilla in Pereira as it was so relaxing. The property has been in the family since 1737. Everyone is so hospitable, the surroundings are beautiful and the food is great. It has a nice pool, but we are so busy that I just have a chance to use it once. And, of course, the Bantu Hotel in Cartagena.

Thanks to Arlette, the manager I had made friends with last time at this hotel in Cartagena (I always seem to be very needy when I visit Cartagena), I was able to move in to my favorite room 106 (which has its own archaeological site) for the last two nights of our three night stay. Though this might look like an ordinary room to others, it has a glass floor showing the original foundation of the 16th century building as well as the main wall has been left in its original state. For someone interested in archaeology, it is nirvana.



Room106 is the one with the lights on. Its archaeological features are amazing and it feels like you are sleeping at a historic site.

That evening, Henry, a guide I met two years ago, takes Sheila and me on a tour of the magnificent and historic city walls. It is just after dusk and the walls are beautifully lit. It has been a long day, though, and I return to the hotel before the tour is over while Sheila continues with Henry for another half hour or so.

Leon gives us a nice tour of Cartagena visiting all the “usual” spots: La Popa Convent located high on a hill, San Felipe Castle (the Spanish fortress), various walking tours and a visit to the Alex Rocha Foundation, a program for children run by a former OAT guide and sponsored by the Grand Circle Foundation.

I wouldn't say that this is a very “adventurous” trip, but it is a nice second-time-around look at Colombia. I enjoyed Pereira, in the center of the country and the epicenter of coffee production very much, had a chance to visit more museums and visit my favorite emerald dealers in Bogota and Cartagena.



A loo with a view! The unmarked door next to the watchtower at San Felipe Fortress leads to a very nice bathroom.

After the OAT tour is over, Sheila and I move to one of Deb Bennetts' apartments on Calle de la Moneda, the next street over from the Bantu Hotel. I had hoped we could go out the back/service entrance to the hotel which would have put us across the street from the apartment, but for some reason, it was not allowed. Instead Sheila and I along with Henry, Rigoberto (the friendliest hotel porter in the world) and another porter, form a parade of people and luggage moving down the street, around the corner, up the next street thru an unmarked door and up a set of stairs to our two bedroom/two bath apartment. It was comfortable and spacious and staying here gives us a different kind of city experience.

So on our extra days, Sheila and I, along with Henry as our guide, visit La Boquilla, a fishing village just outside Cartagena and half the fun was getting there. It involves a taxi ride to the edge of a beach, a canoe ride thru mangroves, a 15 minute walk by a small fishing village to a lovely beach lined with shacks/restaurants.

First on the agenda is lunch -- we are presented with a tray of fish to chose from. The meal takes an hour to prepare and meanwhile a wonderful woman named Cleopatra comes by and offers a relaxing hour-long massage for \$15. Two men carry over her massage table



and set it next to a cerviche cart -- a shady and cool spot.

We return to Cartagena on the public bus, which is a trip in itself as it lurches thru the beach area, then drives slow as molasses thru town picking up as many passengers as possible.

The next day's adventure is a trip to Totumo, a mud volcano located 50 miles from the city. We make arrangements with Los Pinos, a local travel company and are picked up bright and early for a one hour drive paralleling the beach to the small village of Santa Catalina. The company has a house with changing rooms, lockers, showers, toilets, bar and sitting area at the site, which was very convenient. The experience is hard to describe, but I will say that after climbing in and around the tombs of San Agustin and Tierradentro, it is the most adventuresome thing we did.

After leaving our things at the house, we climb steps up about 90 feet to the top of the volcano, then climb down a ladder into the mud-crater. It has been so dry that the level of the mud has gone down by about 20 feet since I was here last. The ladder is caked with slippery mud and is an insurance man's nightmare. Waiting for you in the mud-pit are attendants offering mud massages. This sounds dirty (no pun intended), but its very soothing/relaxing and each man does about 50 people a day. The mud is so buoyant that you can't swim or stand up, so after the 10 minute mud treatment attendants propel you like a little rubber-ducky over to a shady spot.

When you are ready to "emerge" you get yourself over to the "up" ladder and make your way to the rim on the ever-slippery stairs. But you're not finished yet.... you have to get yourself off the volcano, so down you go on more slippery steps.



You need to make your way up to the rim of the mud volcano, then down the make-shift ladder to the mud. It is worth it!

The final step is a walk over to the lagoon where ladies wait to wash the mud off your body. Quick as the dickens, they strip off your bathing suit, give it a rinse in the lagoon then help you get it back on. If you ever go, take lots of small bills with you for in addition to the mud-men, you pay several others. This is what you can expect:

10 minute mud massage 3000 pesos = \$1.50

shoe minders 3000 pesos = \$1.50

Lady who washes you 3000 pesos= \$1.50

Fresh coconut or soft drink 2000 pesos = \$1.00

Cartagena is hot year-round and Sheila and I had just about had it by our last day. So our final activities consisted of visiting Las Bovidias, a handicraft and emerald market carved out of former dungeons, stopping in at the Exito Supermarket to buy Colombian chocolate, and having some beauty treatments at a local salon followed by a leisurely dinner. When we walk back to the apartment, we have the feeling the walled city has emptied out. Where is everybody? Streets are vacant and the city is ours.

This is a good time to mention our favorite restaurant in Cartagena -- Crepes & Waffles. If this chain (there are over 80 in Central and South America) ever comes to the US, places like RubyTuesdays, Panera Bread and Olive Garden better watch out. It is fabulous and over the 6 days we were in Cartagena, we ate here about 6 times. The menu is imaginative, the food presentation is superb and the service -- well, its Colombian, so we are never in a rush. We even have a favorite table -- on the main level (there are three), a single table on a platform next to a fountain all surrounded by green foliage.



We leave Cartagena in "la madrugada" (early morning) just as the sun was coming up. The first taxi driver we stop looks all our luggage and says it won't fit, so Sheila and I travel to the airport in separate taxis arriving within minutes of each other. She checked in with LAN Airlines for her flight to Bogota (then to Miami and on to St.Louis on American) and I go to the Copa Airlines counter for the flight to Panama (then Houston and Chicago on United). Alas, we end up in separate lounges as hers is a domestic flight and mine an international.

And guess what, my checked bag is selected for additional screening which means that a don't-mess-with-me-I-mean-business man empties it completely, gives everything a little feel and sniff, and even unzips the lining and taps all the metal parts. Don't they have cute little beagle dogs for this??????

My seatmate on the flight tells me that the airport police look for drugs as 40% of the world's cocaine comes from Colombia and Peru. And the departure from Baranquilla, a port in northern Colombia is even worse. Oh well, another experience.

So I leave Colombia with tears in my eyes. It has been a fabulous three weeks wandering around archaeological sites, visiting major cities, exploring new museums, and stuffing myself with fresh seafood and high altitude trout every chance I had. And Sheila was a great travel partner.

Leon, the OAT guide, gave me some ideas for an itinerary visiting the north Guajira Province, which is very Caribbean, the Amazonian area, and a group of colonial cities.

So, will I come back? Definitely yes!

XXXXXXXXXX

Contacts:

• Favorite Emerald Dealers:

In Bogota: Doris Ortiz - she has two stores



Jewelry is located in the shop across the pedestrian street from the Gold Museum

Address: Calle 16 No. 5-68 Store 16C (directions: look at the Artesenia Center - there are three entrances. Doris Ortiz is the first store on the right in the center section)

cell: 321 246 28 59 and 321 219 80 47

Handicrafts are at her other store down the street from the Botero Museum: Calle 11 No 5-03

<http://www.lurebogota.com/en/doris-ortiz-artesantias-de-colombia/>

In Cartagena: Sr. Alvaro Lascar and Eduardo (helper) Las Bovidias Store #5

tel: 660 8905 and 664 8119

In addition to a good display, he has a comprehensive selection of unset emeralds and can make up earrings,rings,pendants,etc. in no time at all.

- Henry Castrillon - private guide in Cartagena and manager of Deb Bennett's Apartments:

snowfull1966@hotmail.com

cell: 311-654-8655

Henry at a replica of a San Agustin statue. We stopped at this island on our way to La Bouquilla, the fishing village.



- Deb Bennett's Apartments (Cartagena):

Deb Bennett tel: 214-213-2955

Vacation Rentals by Owner Listing #188185

<http://www.vrbo.com/188185>

- Los Pinos - a Cartagena travel agency that books day tours, including a visit to Totumo, the mud volcano: tel: 311 570 4257 web: <http://ecoturismolospinos.com/principal.html>

Our excursion was 40,000 pesos (\$20) per person for transportation in a shared van and entrance fee to the volcano. They have another offering for 55,000 pesos (about \$28) that adds a lunch and beach time.

Sim Card: If you have a GSM phone, buy a sim card as it is so convenient for contacting guides, reserving day trips, checking on museum times, etc. I bought Movistar and the sim was \$1.50. I added 10,000 pesos (\$5) of pre-pay talk time. I used it frequently and even called the US and came home with 3500 pesos worth of credit!

Hotel Reviews I put on Tripadvisor.com

Bogota: **Hotel de la Opera**

I stayed at this hotel two years ago and couldn't wait to come back.

The location couldn't be better, the staff couldn't be nicer and the buffet breakfast is the best one I had during my 3 weeks in Colombia. There is an omelet chef each morning.

I personally like the 7th floor "Deco" rooms as they get nice light and are quiet. I checked in/out of this hotel twice. The first time I had room 709 which is a junior suite. I was happy with it, but realized that the layout is awkward. Because of the configuration of the room, you cannot sit on the sofa or side-chairs to watch TV. The large bathroom is nice, but only the rain-shower is usable, as the spigot to fill the tub is broken. The view is outstanding though -- it is of the rooftops of the Cathedral and adjacent buildings.

On the second visit ten days later, I had room 714, also a junior suite, which was far better. Sofa and comfortable chairs are well-placed and everything in the bathroom worked. It has the same bank of windows and views as room 709.

According to the schematic on the door, the rooms with the Cathedral roof views are:
709,710,711,712,714,715

Other views are of the mountains, or a general "city-view".

Be aware that a tip is automatically added to meals in the hotel restaurant. Signs are posted indicating that the tips are pooled and shared with waiters, bus boys and kitchen staff.

Complimentary wi-fi is excellent and there are two computers for public use just off the courtyard on the ground floor.

Medellin: **Art Hotel**

This hotel is near perfect. Hotel atmosphere is stunning, the rooms are lovely, and the restaurant is excellent. The buffet breakfast is very good.

The one great failing is that there is apparently no soundproofing in between floors, so if there is someone in the room above you, you will hear every footstep, water running, flush and cough. It may have been my room (303), but it was impossible to get a full night's sleep as the occupants above me slept very little and moved around a lot.

After the first night, I asked to be moved, but was told that the occupants were checking out. The same problem manifested with the second occupants.

So a good tactic might be to request a room on an upper floor, or check if the room above you is empty.

I stayed two nights and would stay here again, but only on the top floor.

Hacienda Castilla - Pereria

This hacienda-type hotel is just about perfect. If it were in a major city like Bogota or Cartagena they could easily charge \$500. per night and operate at full occupancy. The property, which is several hundred acres has been in the family for generations. Once thru the gate, you are greeted like a long-lost cousin and accorded every consideration possible by the friendly staff.

Every room is furnished with antique furniture, yet beds are comfortable. All the linens are monogrammed and the bath sheets are fluffy and large. Lighting for reading is good and wi-fi is excellent. The rooms have flat-screen TV's with cable reception, including music channels. Be sure to explore the property and see the orchid conservatory, pool and enjoy the landscaping. Some years ago the family developed the section fronting the highway as a shopping strip which contains numerous restaurants as well as a convenience store.



When you are on the property there is no noise from the highway. I had the best sleep I've had in a long time.

I was on a group tour and we took all nine rooms in the main house. I had Room #7 which is the one pictured on their brochure. It was large, comfortable and had a good size bathroom. A antique dresser had been outfitted with a sink in the bathroom and it was lovely. I had an opportunity to peek in several of the rooms and these are my thoughts:

El primo room is #9 which is a suite and has an outside exit to the porch, which had a seating area and hammock.

All nine rooms were double and nicely appointed. Rooms # 5 (has a large closet, big bathroom), #3 (large with double beds), #2 (had beautiful antique beds) were particularly nice.

There are two rooms in a separate building about a 30 second walk from the main house: #12 has an outdoor shower and #11 is smaller, but nice.

The food was excellent and we had our breakfasts and dinners in-house.

Bantu Hotel - Cartagena

This is a perfect hotel in a perfect location and is a wonderful respite from the busy and crowded walled city.

The staff is extremely helpful and make you feel like you are coming home. Rooms are on two levels and are set around several courtyards. I especially like the bed linens and room decor -- very tasteful and comfortable.

Be sure to make friends with the colorful Toucans who live in the first courtyard. At night they are in their cage, but during the day they wander around greeting the guests. They also like posing for pictures!

There is a pool as well as lovely sitting areas on the roof which is a great place to hang out on a hot afternoon. Breakfast is a nice buffet with eggs and coffee to order.

The location is just off Madrid Square and there are several restaurants located around this square. Everything you would want to see within the walled city is a short walk away.

I have stayed at the Bantu Hotel twice and will definitely stay here again next time in Cartagena.



Beautiful street art in Cartagena

Photo by Sheila