

## **THE VIRTUOSO LIFE**

### **The Art of Travel**

# **If You Go to Colombia, You'll Long to Go Back**

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### **Just Back: Colombia**

By Joel Centano

**Exploring the capital of Bogotá and coastal Cartagena.**



The view from atop Cartagena's Casa San Agustín (Photo: Joel Centano).

For years sidestepped by most American travelers, Colombia is now a country on the cusp. Expect your fears to be allayed, and to fall in love. Here, a few of my favorite discoveries from a recent five-day introduction with **Big Five Tours & Expeditions**.

## Why Go

To travel to Colombia is to be a part of history. “This is the beginning of an era,” says Big Five president Ashish Sanghrajka. “**Colombia ten years ago was a sleeping giant. It’s now awake.**” That’s great news for travelers who have put off exploring places like Caño Cristales (called “the river of five colors”), Villavicencio (the heart of jaguar country), the Colombian Amazon (home to some 900 avian species), and, as I did on what I plan to be the first of many visits to the country, boho-chic Bogotá and Cartagena’s sixteenth-century Old City.

Following years of violence, the country is now “a **beacon of stability** in Latin America that’s peacefully shedding the nightmares of its past for a greater future,” says Sanghrajka. Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos recently won the Nobel Peace Prize for brokering an accord that ended a 50-year conflict with rebel FARC forces.



Beautiful details in Cartagena’s Old City (Photo: Joel Centano).

## Best Bites

At **Kuru** in the **Four Seasons Hotel Bogotá**, chef Diego Soriano serves signature Japanese dishes and some of the city's finest sushi. I'd travel to Colombia again simply for his bluefin tuna tostadas and cauliflower couscous.



Cauliflower couscous with beet puree at Kuru at the Four Seasons Hotel Bogotá (Photo: Joel Centano).

In Cartagena, line up for the ceviche and tropics-inspired paella at [La Cevicheria](#). It's the "lifetime project" of chef Jorge Escandón, who, with great humor and grace, led my group (and, more notably, Anthony Bourdain in an episode of his *No Reservations* series) beyond the Old City and through the labyrinthine **Mercado de Bazurto** for a culinary tour that we capped off with a cooking lesson and lunch at his seaside home.

For breakfast, try the Típico Cartagenero – a sampling of Colombian staples such as *arepas con huevo* (fried corn cakes stuffed with egg) and *carimañolas* (yucca fritters filled with meat or cheese) – at [Casa San Agustín](#), a seventeenth-century mansion turned boutique hotel. (Also highly suggested: dips in its courtyard pool, which lies beneath the remnants of Cartagena's historic aqueduct).



The courtyard pool at Casa San Agustín (Photo: Joel Centano).

## Happiest Hours

Cocktail culture in the capital begins at **W Bogota Hotel's W Lounge**, where Luis Humberto Cano – a 2016 Country Winner at the World Class bartending competition – mixes inventive cocktails that draw on indigenous ingredients. My favorite: the Lulo Mojito, made with aged rum, mint, and the citruslike *lulo* fruit.

I'm also partial to **El Coro** at the **Sofitel Legend Santa Clara Cartagena**, given that Colombia's native son and Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez bent his elbow there; his former home is just across the street.

## Art & Culture

Speaking of García Márquez, fellow bibliophiles can visit iconic Cartagena spots that inspired some of his greatest works, including a crypt in El Coro that has ties to *Of Love and Other Demons*, and **Plaza Fernández de Madrid** (Park of the Evangelists in *Love in the Time of Cholera*), where protagonist Florentino Ariza famously pined for Fermina Daza. In Bogotá, graffiti – which is often commissioned by the city – is booming. Head to **26th Street in La Candelaria** for works spanning Colombia's indigenous peoples to comic book heroes.

## Souvenirs

Cartagena's **Café San Alberto** offers tastings of Rainforest Alliance Certified coffee grown at its hacienda in Quindío (part of the country's Coffee Triangle). You're a stronger person than I if, upon returning home, you're able to share (as I'd originally planned) rather than hoard (which I did) bags of its award-winning beans. Set aside additional suitcase space for coastal Colombia's favorite spirit: Two well-respected rums are **Gobernador** and **La Hechicera**.

## Give Back

Salsa and *champeta* lessons at **Ciudad Móvil** in Cartagena's Barrio de Getsemani provide more than a chance to shed some *carimañola* calories accrued on your trip – your visit also helps fund the community center and its outreach projects. Trust me, if this reserved New England native with no hips can learn to shake it (or at least, *sort of* shake it), I'm betting you can too.

## Go

**Avianca** operates daily nonstop flights to Colombia from six U.S. cities, plus connections to 22 destinations within the country. **Big Five Tours & Expeditions** crafts customized Colombia journeys – experiences can include everything from tagging walls in Bogotá with local *grafiteros* to tracking endemic birds in the Amazon.

Get inspired with the February 2017 issue of *Virtuoso Traveler*.