

1. The View from Bogotá

I had a few preparations to make before I could hit the country roads, as well as some old friends I was keen to catch up with, so I paid £220 for the month and moved into a little flat in La Candelaria, Bogotá's old colonial quarter. It was on the fourth floor of Casa Los Alpes, a new apartment block, just around the corner from Casa Los Andes, the warren of Andean cottages where I'd lived back in 2001.

The Andean version had offered Eduardo the limping handyman a template, but the flats he had built at Casa Los Alpes had none of its rustic charm. The ceiling and the roof were made of great concrete slabs that he had pebble-dashed and whitewashed. The windows had metal frames, into which he had gummed squares of glass with silicon. Since the frames ran flush with the outside wall, they took the brunt of the winter rains, which seeped between the glass and the metal. I liked Eduardo and didn't have the heart to complain about his craftsmanship. The puddles that accumulated at the foot of the window evaporated soon enough and I soon got used to drawing the green nylon curtains whenever it rained – which as I soon discovered, was all day every day. The curtains, the rings they hung from and the poles on which the rings were strung were all home-made too. Eduardo had also made the kitchen counter, the shower cubicle and the single sheet of corrugated steel that was my flat's front door.

The building was owned by an old Italian with bristling eyebrows, who would eye me suspiciously whenever I passed him in the street. If there was a ranking among the expat community, the old man was at the top, whereas I was just a rung

above the dreadlocked backpackers who lived in the hostel at the top of my street. The old man shared a tiny office with his son Guillermo, who was the more amenable, public face of the enterprise. Tacked to its walls were various pithy *bons mots*, all of which hinged on the folly and menace of the global communist conspiracy.

Over the course of October, I found a tutor who helped me to get my Spanish back up to scratch and scoured the newspapers to re-acustom myself to the intricacies of the political scene. After eight years in power, Álvaro Uribe had left office in August as far and away the most popular president in the history of the republic. To his defenders, he was the greatest Colombian of modern times, the cattle farmer who restored the good name of a proud country. He was credited with building a dedicated, professional Army that had taken the war to the terrorists. His belligerent treatment of the guerrillas seemed to have secured the peace and prosperity that years of negotiations had not.

Once out of office, however, his star was quickly losing its lustre. An American court had called him to testify at the trial of alleged paramilitaries who had been extradited to the United States to face cocaine trafficking charges. Protesters had disrupted the lectures that he had been invited to give at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. And in Spain lawyers were preparing to prosecute him for human rights abuses. Back in Bogotá, the intelligence agency officials who had served under him were being called to account for the *chuzadas* or wire-tapping scandal. In the last year of his second presidential term, Uribe had tried to change the constitution so that he might run for a third time. Colombia's intelligence agents (and by implication, their boss) stood accused of bugging the journalists, judges and opposition politicians who had spoken out against the constitutional amendment.

In terrorizing the terrorists, Uribe had strayed a long way from the constitution he had sworn to uphold. But inadvertently, he had also made it possible for journalists to visit the villages that had been on the front line of the conflict. On my map, whose dark greens, beiges and deep browns hinted at the dramatic peaks and troughs of the unseen country, I began to plot a route.

My abiding memory of Bogotá was of a city rendered pin-sharp by blazing Andean sunshine. In my fondness I'd forgotten how cold and damp the capital could get. On most days it rained so heavily and for so long that the narrow streets of La Candelaria became rivers that left those without rubber boots and umbrellas stranded on whichever city block they happened to be standing on. Come evening the rain would finally let up, allowing the storm drains to swallow the last of the floodwater. Mist descended from the surrounding mountains like a cloak, enveloping my neighbourhood in fog.

Yet it seemed that the city had got used to life without central heating. So one morning I walked down to the clothes shops below the Plaza Simón Bolívar, hoping to find a decent jumper. All I could find were hoodies and tracksuit tops – it seemed that *bogotanos* also lived without wool. So I jumped on a bus heading north. After the huge riots that had gripped Bogotá in 1948, anyone with any money had deserted the traditional barrios of the city centre to settle the north of the city. The banks, embassies and corporations had followed them. Their employees moved into pleasant tree-lined streets of brick low-rises, where their wives could spend their afternoons in beautifully appointed boutiques and patisseries styled after those of Paris and Miami, and the poor were nowhere to be seen. They left the accumulated architectural heritage of the city centre and its rather gloomy history behind, to be blackened by exhaust fumes and soot.

I jumped off the bus outside the Andean Centre, Bogotá's best-known upmarket shopping mall. I padded its marble floors, cautiously eyeing the expensive imported clothing in the shop windows. Eventually I found a sweater in Benetton and paid the equivalent of £50 for a fluffy mixture of every warm thread imaginable, including alpaca, which is what kept most Andeans warm over the centuries before the arrival of cheap Asian polyester.

I'd arranged to meet an ex-girlfriend in the city's nightlife district, a square mile of bars and clubs around the Andean Centre that is known as the Zona Rosa. I had some time to kill before we were due to meet, so I found a seat overlooking the atrium and ate a burger. A pair of replica monkeys were gliding up and down electric-green jungle creepers, watched by twin infant boys in matching school blazers and caps. I cast an eye around at my fellow diners. Notwithstanding the tropical theme, I could have been in Madrid. Everyone was impeccably dressed, and nonchalantly watching one another as they tucked into their barbecued ribs and stuffed-crust pizzas. Of course the illusion was dependent on there being no poor people in the Andean Centre, which meant that there were no Andeans to be seen either. There was no trace of the Muisca, the original inhabitants of Bogotá, nor any of the other ethnicities native to the highland capital, much less the black Colombians who make up a fifth of the country's population.

Apart from a cleaner and a security guard, nobody was watching the television in the corner, so I bought a coffee and pulled up a chair at their table. The newsreader was a statuesque blonde woman with a steely, penetrating gaze. I had the feeling that her beauty was a deliberate ploy to distract viewers like me, who knew that the news was important, but found their coverage of it rather boring.

Over the years, she said, the FARC had been instrumental in