

STOP LISTENING TO THE NEWS!

Putting fear aside to discover a new side of Colombia

After leaving Santander, where we discovered that the kindness of Colombians is not a myth but a fact, we began our journey south toward Bogotá to visit friends and family.

Our first stop was through Boyacá; a State nestled in the *Cordillera Oriental de los Andes* – the eastern range of the Andes mountains. The road we took was mostly unpaved, winding through quiet countryside where we passed a Tao community with colorful wooden houses. The mountains of Boyacá could be described as a Persian rug – a rich tapestry of colors and textures woven by plantations of potatoes, onions, grains, fruits, and unrefined sugarcane, all set against the natural folds of the mountains themselves.



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We were so enamored with the scenery, like a young lover who forgets the world to focus only on a new love, that we forgot to buy gas before heading down the dirt road! Luckily, we found a woman along the way who sold us just enough to make it to the nearest town, Duitama, where we stopped to visit one of Mafe's cousins.

Our next stop was Bogotá, where we spent about a week and a half at Mafe's mom's house, enjoying her delicious homemade dishes and visiting two other cousins. Our days in Bogotá were dedicated to family and long-time friends (who feel like family) amid the city's chaos. Among that chaos, we managed a detour to Cota, a small town about 20 kilometers away, where the *Sabana* – a wide mountain plain – stretches out in peaceful contrast to the busyness of the capital. In Cota, we shared local food with another cousin and tested Taco Libre's uphill driving ability to soak in some incredible quiet views.

In the middle of the Bogotá chaos, we also squeezed in a short hike just outside of the city at Matarredonda to see waterfalls and *frailejones*, sometimes called the guardians of water, a high-altitude plant in the paramo. During our hike, we met travelers from the U.S. and Europe, all chasing their own South American dream.



As always, looking for interesting food was part of our adventure, this time at *Sauvage*, a French restaurant that uses Colombian ingredients with French technique. The name fits perfectly: wild!

From Bogotá, we drove to Ibagué to visit – you guessed it – another cousin! One of the highlights of this trip was seeing all five of Mafe’s close cousins in one journey, something we had never managed to do before.

Our next destination was Manizales, the city of open doors. On the way, we searched for a place to camp and stumbled upon a man named Hernando, who unbeknownst to us, was a member of an overlanding group we’d been a part of on WhatsApp. Hernando, now about 70, had been displaced during Colombia’s violent years in the 1980s but about nine years ago he returned to reclaim his land, where he built a small hostel and campground.



That evening, after we cooked our meal of Colombian chicken, yuca, and potatoes on our Taco Libre stove, he asked if it would bother us if he played some music and invited us over to his “house” – a room in the camping grounds. What followed was one of those moments that make travel so special, the kind of thing that can’t be found in any guidebook or an Instagram feed, the type of experience that marks your for life: Hernando and his childhood friend played and sang boleros, vallenatos, and classic Colombian songs while we shared stories, rum, aguardiente, and laughter. It felt like a private concert in the middle of the mountains – unplanned, intimate, and unforgettable.

The next day, Colombia continued to surprise us. We were lucky enough to see the *Nevado del Ruiz*, a snow-capped volcano in the *Cordillera Central* – the central range of the Andes. The mountains here are steeper than those in the east range, and their slopes form different color patterns from the distinctive local crops. Scott describes the farming here as “skiing a double black diamond slope, so steep it’s scary!”



After driving through these majestic mountains in the coffee region, we arrived at Manizales. To us, Manizales has the most beautiful setting of any city we’ve seen in Colombia. It feels like a city that grew out of the mountains themselves, houses and streets flowing along the hillsides, following the curves of the Andes. The city is filled with art and pride in its history; its plazas are alive with color and intriguing sculptures.



We found ourselves a little behind schedule because of Mafe’s work, but that turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It forced us to slow down, to savor every moment and truly live within the magic of each place we visit, including that undiscovered colonial town we’ve kept secret.

Every curve in the road has brought a new surprise, every encounter a new story, and every experience something to reflect on...

Eventually, our slow pace had to change. We moved quickly through southern Colombia – from Cali to Popayán to Pasto – before reaching the border with Ecuador.

Friends and family had warned us not to go south: *it's dangerous*, they said, *you're crazy to try it*. People had mixed opinions: some told us it was safe if we traveled during the day, others said to avoid it altogether, others suggested we hire someone to drive the car for us, and the list goes on and on. We listened, we researched, and we worried.

But what we found was not danger. We found peace, calm, beauty, and kindness everywhere we went. We stayed at *La Bonanza*, a campground for overlanders in Cauca. The owner, Anouar, who has lived in the area for almost ten years said something that has stayed with us:



“People are afraid of the guerrillas, but most of them are just people with an ideology. They aren’t out to harm travelers or ordinary people. You can’t live in paranoia, if you do, you shouldn’t travel.”

Anouar’s sentiment took us back to a talk at the Overland Expo in Colorado, where a fellow overlander who has traveled the world, including Central and South America said; “there is preparation and there is paranoia, you can choose to be scared or keep calm to face any challenge that comes your way.”

And they were both correct. If you travel in fear, you miss the essence of travel. You miss the chance to discover new perspectives, connect with others, and learn not only about different cultures but also about yourself. Once we relaxed, what we found was generosity and curiosity. People waved, asked where we were from, helped with directions, and offered warmth in every conversation. We were cautious and always aware of our surroundings (as we have always been in our many trips in Colombia) we obtained information ahead of our travels, and the reality is: we never felt unsafe.

That’s not to say Colombia doesn’t have its challenges, and a troubled history. There are real issues, and some regions remain unstable. But to say that *all of* southern Colombia is dangerous simply isn’t accurate, it is more nuanced than that. As one young traveler told us: “Stop listening to the news!”

Perhaps that’s the deeper lesson. The world has become addicted to fear, and headlines thrive on it. But when you step outside that narrative and see things for yourself, the story changes completely.

Scott often says Colombia is a country of contrasts – yes – but more than that, it’s a country of kindness, warmth, and love. Every traveler we’ve met says the same: Colombians are the kindest, most welcoming people they’ve encountered.

As we make our way toward the border, saying goodbye feels bittersweet. Colombia has been a landscape of colors, mountains, music, and, above all, humanity.

For anyone still hesitating to explore it, here’s our message: be cautious, be informed, don’t be reckless, but don’t let fear be the thing that stops you from discovering beauty and wonderful people.



As we leave Colombia, this is the lesson we carry with us: **life is richer when we stay open, when we listen to people who live in the area instead of headlines, and when we travel with curiosity instead of fear.**

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