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# BEING BOGOTA

Buenos, Bolivar, Bikes, Botero, and Ben-Hur

Steve Gillick

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30 AUG 2013: Mike our guide, came out of the small refreshment stand carrying a goldfish bowl of live river crabs. He described the speciality of the house ♦ a drink called Poderoso Berraquillo (Powerful Mixture) made from blended fruit juices, booze, a few secret ingredients, and one live crab. The nickname for the drink is 'savage love' –

supposedly a natural Viagra -and he asked if anyone was interested in trying it for only 5000 Colombian pesos (about US \$2.50).



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This was the first stop on our bike tour around Bogota. There was silence amongst the group, so I volunteered in the spirit of 'try anything once'. I took a sip♦it tasted like a crabby-fruity milkshake♦and then offered tastes to the group. While we all agreed that 'savage love' was a bit of marketing hyperbole, the drink certainly brought the group together and kept up our spirits and energy for the five hour tour.

And why bikes? Well, the traffic in Bogota can best be explained by picturing the chariot race from the movie 'Ben-hur', but substitute thousands of cars for the nine chariots that took part in the famous movie race. The same fierce determination, conniving, swerving, cutting off, jumping ahead and avoiding collisions is the norm for traffic in and around Bogota. We referred to it as Ben-

Hurrying around the city.

Bogota sometimes gets a bad rap. I heard from friends and colleagues that I would not want to waste my time in 'a city'. It would be dirty, dangerous and crowded. I'll admit that that this advice rang true in some parts of the city ♦ as it would in any city in the world ♦ but after an hour of so you can warm up to Bogota quite nicely and have a great time.

Like in many South American cities, the greeting of Buenos Dias or simply "Buenos" does a lot to bring you closer to the locals. It simply means good day and an enthusiastic 'buenos' is the surest way to break the ice. You will inevitably get a 'buenos' back ♦ and sometimes a conversation in a restaurant, or simply a smile.

From Bogota's airport it's about a 30 minute drive to the city through some very congested areas. But then we started heading to the north and all of a sudden there were broad avenues, office buildings, shopping areas, restaurants and the Bogota Hilton. I will say that it was one of the friendliest and most helpful hotels I have stayed in, anywhere. And while it is a distance from Plaza de Bolivar, the main city square (about a \$6.00 taxi ride each way), the area around the hotel (Bellavista) is walkable day or night.

After checking in we immediately headed downtown to Plaza de Bolivar with the Primary Cathedral of Bogota as the centre-piece, flanked on either side by the Palace of Justice and the National Capitol building. This is the historic core of the city. The side streets in the area send you back in time to the call for Independence in 1810, past churches and flower-festooned house

balconies, all against the backdrop of Monserrate, the mountain.

About a 15 minute walk away is the Gold Museum. And this truly is a treasure house, displaying some 6000 awesome pieces of pre-Hispanic gold. (This plus the Zeu Gold Museum in Cartagena and the Museo Oro del Peru in Lima, comprise the holy trinity for South American niche travellers interested in gold and gems)

We had read about Bogota Bike Tours and decided that this was probably the best (and most unique) way to see parts of the city that we would never otherwise find, so we signed up the next day. Mike Caesar, our guide, led us to the Paloquemao Market, filled with fruit and vegetable vendors, where he arranged for the group to taste a dozen or so different local fruits. We then headed to an off-street coffee importer to learn about production, and in the adjoining cafe, to order tinto (black coffee) and cappuccino. We continued on to the historic city cemetery, the colourful red light district, the bull-fighting area, back to Bolivar Plaza to taste ants (apparently it's an acquired taste) and then ended the tour. It was a most amazing afternoon and certainly equalled, if not surpassed the next day when we signed up for a two-hour Graffiti walking tour of the downtown area. Graffiti is an accepted art form in the city and paintings by artists such as Stink Fish, Nomad and Rodez are treasured and admired.

This is another tour for your 'must do' list.

And no visit to Bogata would be complete without a trip to the Museo Botero, celebrating the art of the Cartagena-born artist, Fernando Botero, famous for his paintings and sculptures of

'voluminous' men, woman, cats, horses and even the Mona Lisa. And lastly we visited Cerro de Monserrate the city mountain where you can take a funicular or cable car to the shrine to get a spectacular view of the city from 3160 meters.

Being Bogota means getting into the spirit of the city by exploring as many nooks and crannies and untold tourist tales as possible but also by sharing the 'buenos' with people you encounter.

It should get you thinking the next time someone counsels you to avoid Bogota because 'it's just a city'.





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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