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MARKETING THE NICHE MARKET OF MARKETS

Or How I survived 73 minutes in Bazurto

Steve Gillick

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27 SEP 2013: The Mercado Bazurto in Cartagena, Colombia is one of those "I dare you" destinations. Just ask the concierge at any hotel and they'll

advise you to stay away from the place. Sort of. The mixed-messaging about venturing into the 'mercado bazurto' or shopping market is that a) you will experience a genuine market where Cartagenians like themselves, do their shopping but b) as a tourist you will stick out like a sore thumb and inevitably be stalked, robbed, harassed, intimidated and ultimately, shocked.



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Those involved in tourism would prefer that you not visit the market, lest you use this as a reference point to speak negatively about the city of Cartagena. And the advice, if you do decide to visit, is the usual “don’t wear jewellery, dress down, don’t take photos, don’t get lost in the maze of narrow alleyways, watch yourself ♦ but enjoy!”

Yikes. So much travel advice we receive nowadays is based on perceptions of tourist behaviour. I remember a classic incident ♦ straight out of a Marx Brothers movie - where I asked the concierge at my hotel in Kaohsiung, Taiwan for directions to a particular restaurant. I said I

wanted to walk. He said it was too far and unsafe so I should take a taxi. Well, who was I to argue with a knowledgeable local? I waited for a taxi, gave the driver the address, he drove 2 blocks (literally), stopped and pointed to the restaurant. So I learned the hard way. But the perception of the tourist (me in this case) was that we are innocent, gullible don't speak the language, could get into trouble, and no one wants negative publicity if something should indeed happen.

Back in Cartagena, I mulled over the scare tactics used on me. Then I remembered other so-called 'dangerous' market adventures from the past, ranging from Rabat, Morocco to San Telmo in Buenos Aires, and from Mombasa, Kenya to Sulawesi, Indonesia, and I decided that in the spirit of bold adventure we would definitely check out Mercado Bazurto.

While shopping is considered a popular niche market for travellers, a sub-set of this niche includes the markets themselves.

The sights, smells, colours, chatter, activity, excitement and energy-charged atmosphere lure locals and tourists alike, whether it's a fruit and vegetable market in Kuala Lumpur, fish in Shimonoseki, textiles in Jaipur, a flea market in Xian, antiques in Dublin, magical potions in Johannesburg or an entire town market, such as Pisac. The market's the thing. I have re-arranged complete travel plans just to ensure that I would be in Chichicastenango on a Sunday morning or Villa de Leyva on a Saturday morning.

Bravery has nothing to do with it. Curiosity, discovery and a love for photography, mixed with the repartee, arguments and banter over

bargaining and negotiating prices, takes precedence over scare tactics.

Travel agents who are aware of markets in the cities where their clients will travel, would do well to jot down the details and then keep them handy as suggestions for free time on package tour schedules or as activities to include on FIT and DIY travels. And like everything else in travel, the agent's personal experience at the market allows them to comment, first hand, on what are some of the great buys (or what not to buy), or some tips on visiting the market (e.g. ideal times to visit, whether bargaining is expected, etc).

For those who are a bit skittish about taking on the market themselves, there are tour guides that can be hired (or friendly taxi drivers to escort individuals). But most people don't get robbed or intimidated unless they are outwardly insensitive to their whereabouts.

So, the next day, after wandering around the Old City of Cartagena, we grabbed a taxi, said the word 'mercado' and the driver knew exactly where to take us. It was about a 20 minute drive. After passing by some market stalls, we asked to be let off and then timidly wandered down one of the mysterious alleyways that we were suppose to avoid.

After about five minutes, I could not resist, and I dragged out my Digital SLR and started to take photos. We received some quizzical looks but mostly it was curiosity about who we were and what we were doing in the market. We asked some of the vendors if we could take photos of their stalls and they not only agreed, but posed for us. I then showed them their digital image and they

were smiling and thankful. If we lingered in front of a display a bit too long, the vendor would offer us a taste of the plantain or grapes or oranges for sale. We got lessons in how to prepare fish (1. Clobber with a club or machete. 2. Delicately place fish in even rows on the display cart), as well as the proper etiquette for brushing flies off the slabs of raw meat for sale (whisk quickly as customers approach or not at all, in order to prove the freshness of the product).

After we left the food area or the market, we entered more of the nuts and bolts area, featuring electronics, hardware, garments, shoes, CDs, music boxes, knives and did I mention music?

You can test your hearing as you pass by tiny shops cranking their speakers up to what seemed to be 200 decibels (125 decibels is the noise level of a jack hammer). And then as you amble along, sidestepping the massive holes and puddles in the concrete and mud sidewalks, you also need to avoid the hundreds of buses that quickly stop to let off and pick up passengers, each with an assistant who yells out the destination of the bus and exhorts passengers to jump on, fast! And of course, the cacophony and confusion would not be complete without hundreds of motorcycles and cars revving their engines and honking as they wait impatiently in the gridlocked traffic, and bold pedestrians weaving around vehicles as they dash across the wide streets. Your senses get blasted from every angle.

Eventually we too made our way to the other side of the street and hailed a taxi to take us back to the Old City. No one robbed us and no one harmed us during our 73 minutes in Mercado Bazurto.

It was a friendly, eye-opening, picture-taking experience that adds an interesting story to a travel tale. And you know that's just what travellers are looking for these days. They want the bragging rights to tell their friends of their own 'survival' ordeals. Whatever your motive, remember the niche market of markets, and market those remarkable markets as exceptional enhancements to your clients' travels.





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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