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# THE OLDEST TRAVEL NICHE MARKET

## Hanging Out in Colombia's Small Towns

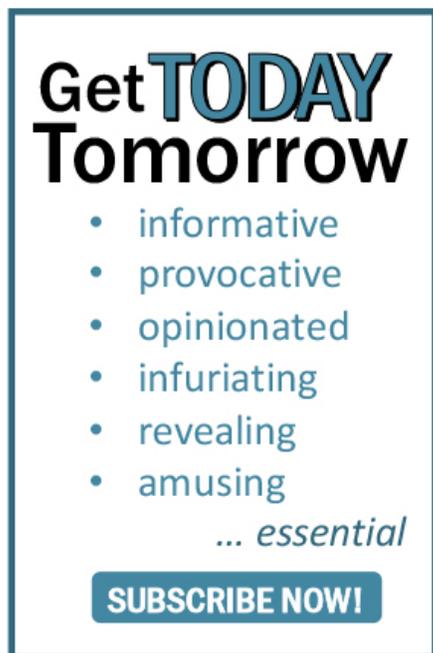
Steve Gillick

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16 AUG 2013: While it's not officially recognized as a niche interest, we need to give serious thought to how many people travel somewhere just to

'hang out'. Hanging out can mean a number of things from 'simply being there' to 'watching the world go by' to 'actively engaging in a non-specific agenda of inactivity'. On package tour itineraries, this usually boils down to 'free time to explore'.



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During my travels in Colombia in July, I found the major cities of Bogota, Medellin and Cartagena to be fascinating and offering lots of activities, museums, amazing restaurants and places to wander and take photos. But it was the small towns just outside of those cities that were so memorable, and it was the 'hanging out' that made all the difference.

Getting to Villa de Leyva, roughly four hours north of Bogota, can be an adventure. You can rent a car or take a package tour or do what we did-- take local buses. And while this can be time consuming, it can also be a journey of discovery, especially if you don't speak Spanish (like me!).

The first bus took us to Zipaquirá, known for the

Cathedral built in the salt mines 200 meters below the surface. We roamed through the tunnels on our own and soon came upon a stone cross in front of a cavern-like excavation: the first of the chapels. A dimly lit passageway leads past the Stations of the Cross and then to three other chapels. The immense Salt Cathedral can accommodate 3000 guests. It's quite impressive and usually makes it into those global lists of places you must see.

The second bus took us to Chiquinquirá which is considered to be the religious capital of Colombia. We wandered the main square, visited the Basilica, found a coffee shop to check out the local scene and eventually found the bus to take us to our final destination. It didn't help when we thought we had to travel to the town of Tunja to change buses yet again. Whenever a taxi stopped near us, we got the name of the town wrong and asked the driver about 'trucha' which means 'trout'. So no wonder it took us a bit longer to travel that day.

Villa de Leyva is a small colonial town that boasts the largest cobbled town square in Colombia. Bordering Plaza Mayor is a 17th Century church along with shops, restaurants, cafes, and many places for locals and tourists to sit around with their Club Colombia or Pilsener beer (or, in many cases, an ice cream) and just 'hang out'. In addition, there are very interesting side streets with small hotels, restaurants, museums, souvenir shops, cobblestone streets and colonial architecture, so it's quite a beautiful, if laid back town.

But the reason we arrived on a Friday was to be at the Saturday market at 5:30 am. And when we arrived it was like cowboy country: men and woman wearing ponchos and cowboy hats and

setting up their vegetable stands, unloading huge bags of carrots and potatoes from trucks and horses. Women started cooking yards of bright red sausage, grilling corn on the cob, making the hearty local soup as well as their own salsa concoctions. By 8:00 the market was in full swing; the colours and flavours were amazing.

Later that morning we hired a taxi to visit El Fossil, where in 1977 a man found the intact skeletal remains of a dolphin-like creature called a Cronosaurus. There's a small museum on the spot. Then it was on to the astronomical observatory where the Muisca, the indigenous people, established a site for religious ceremonies. The Spanish immediately dubbed the site "El Infiernito" ♦ Little Hell ♦ due to the 'pagan' practices that took place and possibly also due to the phallic shape of many of the 115 cylindrical stones at the site. Nearby at Pozos Azules ♦ you can follow billowy pine trees down a hill to a beautiful blue lagoon.

On Sunday morning it was market day in Raquira, about 45 minutes away. The market is smaller than in Villa de Leyva but certainly not lacking in the smell of sweet, fresh vegetables, the smiles of friendly vendors and, when we were there, a cow auction. The town itself is full of souvenir and pottery shops, each behind a brightly painted facade ♦ with colourful swinging hammocks on display. It's touristy ♦ but worth the visit, especially for clients who are into photography and just 'hanging out'.

Jump ahead a few days. Two hours east of Medellin we visited the town of Guatap ♦, where the attraction is the Piedra del Pe ♦ ol. This is a 200 meter high rock with over 750 steps to take you to

the highest level for absolutely stunning views of the lakes and mountains in the area. The town itself has some very good water front restaurants specializing in paisa food ♦ very hearty portions of grilled fish or meat with beans, rice, corn and potato.

In the opposite direction, about two hours west of Medellin is the town of Santa Fe de Antioquia. The town square and side streets are so picturesque ♦ just wander and enjoy. We found an outdoor caf ♦, chatted up one of the local kids, and observed the hustle and bustle of town life. Afterward we hired a taxi to visit the Puente de Occidente, a suspension bridge over the Cauca River ♦ one of the oldest in South America. You can walk over the bridge (watch out for missing planks), under the bridge, and even above the bridge!

We had one more interaction with a small city just outside of Cartagena. El Totumo is the site of a volcanic crater filled with mud that has the consistency of thick cream. Wearing your bathing suit, you climb up a short but steep wooden staircase, and then at the crater, you climb down into the oozing mud. We took the guide's suggestion to indulge in a mud massage (\$1.50), where you are plastered in mud, front and back, head to toe and then massaged (somewhat). You then hang out in the mud - with the 15-20 other people - feeling as if you are in suspended animation. You don't actually stand - you just float - and while doing this, one of the locals takes photos of you with your camera (for \$1.50). When you're ready to leave, you suction yourself out of the mud, climb up the ladder, then down the volcano and along the path to the river where, for yet another \$1.50, a woman orders you to sit in the

water while she roughly but laughingly washes the mud off you - everywhere.

Colombia's cities have great attractions but the small towns are really where you can appreciate colonial architecture, old streets, food markets, an opportunity to chat with the locals (even if you don't speak Spanish) and get a glimpse of a more rural lifestyle. And all this in the spirit of 'just sitting back and watching the world go by'.

Hanging out is the oldest travel niche interest - but only recently 'discovered' as a prime motivation for travelling the globe.





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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