

Re-envisioning Colombia

Contributed by Andrew Blackwell
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Fighting the bogeymen lurking before nations' curtains.

Winner of BEST OF THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (SO FAR) for "Fear(less) in Bogotã"i"

Both of the pieces I have written for InTheFray are about the unexpectedly positive experiences I had in what are often considered scary places: Colombia and Afghanistan. In the case of Colombia, I am still really interested in the tension between the country's horrible reputation and the comparatively pleasant reality of daily life in Bogota. The challenge for me was to explore what was nice about Colombia (and my rather limited experience of it) without denying the horrible problems the country faces. To anyone who has visited or lived in a place like Colombia or, Israel, for instance my point might have been annoyingly obvious: a country can be host to a lot of nasty events, but that doesn't mean it's a uniformly horrific or dangerous place for visitors. Although obvious perhaps, I did not gain this perspective until I moved to Bogota.

My piece was also something of a penance. While I was living in Colombia, I edited a documentary called La Sierra, which tells the story of a small Medellin neighborhood ruled by a paramilitary street gang. Editing this film was a strange experience. Outside the studio, I spent my time enjoying all that was colorful, educational, and cosmopolitan about Bogota, the very things that challenge the Colombian stereotype. But my afternoons were spent editing a harrowing story about poverty, drugs, and violence. Although it is a true story, and an important one to be told, the film does nothing but reinforce the country's bad image. In writing "Fear(less) in Bogota" for InTheFray, I was seizing an opportunity to tell another side of the conversation.

In the year since I returned to the United States, I have continued to fight both sides, when it comes to Colombia's reputation. In my continuing work on La Sierra, I have consciously taken advantage of the "scary Colombia" vibe to promote the film. This doesn't take much effort, since Scott Dalton and Margarita Martinez (the film's directors) needed serious guts just to take on and complete the project. Their protagonist was shot to death during the film's production, and Dalton himself had to dodge sniper fire while filming. Facts like these are invaluable in the selling of such a film, which undeniably benefits from the stereotypes I tried to challenge when I wrote "Fear(less) in Bogota". But I don't think I'm guilty of sensationalism or of the creation of another Clear and Present Danger.

I think La Sierra is an honest film that vividly evokes Colombia's various aspects. For me, the fact that the residents of La Sierra the film's participants being among them are by all accounts satisfied with the film's portrayal of their community validates the film's merits.

So I am eating my cake and having it, too, using the Colombian stereotype in my work even as I challenge it in my writing and among friends. And being pro-Colombia has its benefits. I seem to run into Colombians everywhere (particularly in New York, where I live), and you wouldn't believe how easy it is to break the ice by sharing happy memories of their much-feared home country. Even among Colombians, a Colombia-booster's work is never done. Once or twice I have found myself trying to dispel the doubts of a Colombian expatriate who after years in the United States has been infected by North American fears. It is irresistible to cajole them just a bit. After all, here we have a gringo trying to convince Colombians to visit their own country.

I miss Bogota. I want to visit again and explore more of the country. I am also going to write more travel pieces.

I want to create the possibility that readers will visit such a place, to point out that you don't have to be a combat photographer to enjoy a city like Bogota.

After all, there should be at least some travel writing that opens doors we thought were closed.