



# Enrique's Colombia

Photos and story by Willie Weir

**W**e pedaled into the tiny town square, our bodies soaked with sweat from an all-day climb up an unpaved road. A local pointed out the *hospedaje* (small hotel), but the soldiers behind the sandbagged check station on the corner waved us over. One of the soldiers rested his arms on his assault rifle slung across his chest while he looked at our passports.

He glanced over at our loaded touring bikes, then shook his head slowly and said, “What are you doing here? Haven’t you talked to your embassy?”

We hadn’t.

Why were we in this obscure mountain town high in the Andes in what many people perceive as the most dangerous country in the world?

It began with an email, one of dozens that pop into my inbox everyday. It was from a woman who had listened to my commentaries over the years on public radio station KUOW in Seattle.

She had heard that Kat and I were going to travel to Colombia. In a nonchalant manner, she wrote that she had a friend whom she thought we might like to meet. His name was Enrique Peñalosa. I glanced at the name again. *Oh, my God!*

For those who don’t recognize the name, let me put this into perspective. Imagine someone contacting you out of the blue and saying, “I’ve got a friend who is a cyclist. He is kind of an interesting guy, and I thought you might like to meet him. His name is Lance ...”

To those in the bicycle advocacy world, Enrique Peñalosa enjoys Lance Armstrong status. He is the former mayor of Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, a city of over seven million people. Not that long ago, it was considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world.

What happened under Enrique Peñalosa’s leadership is referred to as

the Bogotá miracle. A crime-ridden, polluted, congested, barely livable city was turned around through an amazing series of programs.

Libraries were built in the poorest of neighborhoods. Bollards were erected to keep cars from parking on the sidewalks, giving the streets back

are closed to vehicular traffic from 7:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. and turned over to the people of Bogotá (see sidebar).

We met him in his office north of downtown. Enrique Peñalosa is a tall, strikingly handsome man with salt and pepper hair and the engaging presence of a seasoned public official.



**Fresh Fruit.** Produce stalls are frequent and abundant along Colombian roads.

to the people. Rapid bus transit was developed throughout the city. Over 350 kilometers of bike paths were constructed, and a Sunday tradition called “Ciclovia” was greatly expanded. Every Sunday (52 weeks out of the year), over 70 miles of arterials in the city

He didn’t waste any time and quickly asked to see our route.

Every traveler we’d had contact with, every blog we had read, every article, guidebook, pamphlet, and website had said the same thing: “Colombia is much safer than it used to be, but you

must travel on the main highways only. Don’t even think about straying off these arterial roads.” We had been disappointed to learn this but had resigned ourselves to the fact that we wouldn’t have the back-road options we had so enjoyed on our other travels.

Enrique pondered our route as we traced it on the map.

He frowned. “You won’t see my country this way. This is the way for trucks.”

His finger traced the thinnest of lines.

“This is Colombia. Most of these roads aren’t paved. This one here. You’ll have to walk your bike up this road.”

He then proceeded to trace out routes all over Colombia, years worth of pedaling.

We asked about the guerillas.

“You may encounter FARC, but two Americans on bicycles, I don’t think they’d know what to do with you.”

That brief meeting transformed our journey. Anyone else could have said the same thing, but it wouldn’t have carried the same weight. Our respect for this man allowed his words to propel us past our fears and to turn off the main highway.

So what I should have said to the soldier when he asked what we were doing in his small mountain town was, “Enrique sent us.”

Ask the general public what comes to mind when you mention Colombia and they’ll say — kidnapping, FARC, drugs, guerrillas, murder.

For decades Colombia has been the country that travelers (including cyclists) fly over or express-bus through on their epic journeys in South America.

A few brave souls have traveled overland, many of them praising Colombia as their favorite South American country.

Our journey from Bogotá to Medellín on the main highway could have been pedaled in five days. Our Peñalosa-inspired route took over three weeks. The main highway follows the valleys or climbs up the gradual ridges. The

main highway might gradually climb from 3,000 to 10,000 feet, whereas the alternate route roller coasters up and down the river drainages, forcing you to pedal upwards of 25,000 vertical feet to get to the same destination.

It became hard to remember when we last saw a flat piece of road. Hours and hours of climbing each day — ascending 5,000 feet only to descend 4,000 feet and then repeat. One evening we were so exhausted that we set the tent near a farmhouse on a rocky patch of ground at an angle so steep it was comical. We didn’t care. We gnawed on some cold food in our packs and fell asleep within seconds. The next morning I got Kat to chant, “Yo soy una machina” (I am a machine), as we finally crested the first of many passes over 10,000 feet.

But, oh, the rewards for our efforts — hillsides of a thousand shades of green, parrots and macaws, the sweet smell of coffee blossoms, picturesque towns perched on mountaintops.

We encountered a man named



**Medellín to Cartegena.** On the “other” route, you’ll encounter less traffic and less pavement.

Moncho on our first week out. He invited us to his farm and took us on a walking tour of his land — dappled with coffee, sugarcane, and cattle. We ended up back at his small humble dwelling where his wife and mother had prepared a lunch of grilled meat,

rice and beans, grilled potatoes, fresh milk, and blackberry juice.

We sat dazed after stuffing ourselves. Moncho motioned to the cot in the next room with a contented smile. It was time for us to take a nap.

Every adventure has its magical

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place — a destination to which your mind repeatedly returns long after the journey is over.

Herveo is a tiny town that may never make it into a guidebook. A quick glance at our map in the morning said “easy day.” Herveo was at the same elevation as the town we were leaving. A closer look revealed two river crossings, which meant two major climbs.

The steep dirt or mud road wound its way through coffee fields. Small

Several horses stood tethered outside the cowboy hat shop while men swept up coffee beans that had spent the day drying in the sun. A couple of tall cera palm trees of Quindío towered over the whitewashed Catholic church. Kids laughed as they ran across the square headed for the ice-cream vendor.

“Do you have many tourists visit here?” I asked.

“Yes,” the cultural minister beamed. “Two.” He pointed to us and laughed.

For the next two days, the little



**Small mountain towns.** Places like Salamina, in Colombia's coffee region, are a traveler's dream.

waterfalls spilled over our path. Hummingbirds zoomed through the trees while vultures lazily soared high above our heads.

We limped into Herveo not long before sunset. They knew we were coming. Not just the military or the police, but the whole town. Our welcoming committee included the head of the cultural department, the middle-school IT/English teacher, and the local historian, a short, barrel-chested man with a bright smile and weepy eyes.

They had already arranged for a room at the local *hospedaje* and sat us down at the town-square bakery for coffee. The golden light of late afternoon spilled across the cobblestone square.

town of Herveo reached out and gave us a collective hug.

We toured every square inch of the town. We were never allowed to buy our own coffee. We were invited to be special guests on the local radio station. The studio was a tiny room donated by the hospital. The announcers were schoolteachers who spun vinyl on a child's record player while holding a microphone over the spinning disc.

Our hosts treated us to dinner at both of Herveo's restaurants that night as a cold mist fell over the town square. It was Saturday night, but the sidewalks were still rolled up by 10:00 p.m.

We left the next morning after hugs and two cups of coffee, only to discover that we had escorts. The whole town

was concerned for our safety (the road we had entered town on was considered dangerous — many of the locals had not traveled on it for over a decade), so they sent a couple of policemen on a motorcycle to guard us. For the next five hours, they putted along beside us or motored ahead to the next bend in the road and waited. We bought them lunch when we reached the closest military checkpoint. Then, reluctantly, they turned back to Herveo while we pedaled on to the city of Manizales.

The roads Enrique had recommended were always a physical challenge. It was slow going. But the lack of traffic, the fresh mountain air, the sheer beauty that surrounded us, made us want to slow down even more. We called it the “art of the linger.” When the woman behind the counter at one café cracked a couple of eggs into a dish and then used the steamer from a giant old Italian espresso machine to froth them into breakfast bliss, I considered slashing the tires of our bikes and declaring the trip over.

But there were more mountain towns to explore (Aranzazu, Salamina, Pácora, and Aguadas). Each had a town square worthy of an extended stay.

Our route to Medellín finally forced us to the main highway for a day, offering us a chance to experience what our journey might have been like if we hadn't met Enrique. The Pan American highway through this section of Colombia is two lanes of curving asphalt with no shoulders. There is nothing like spending the day with hundreds of semitrucks — whose drivers have never met a blind corner that would prevent them from passing — to make you yearn for a rock-strewn, muddy dirt track back up into the mountains.

“Get me off this thing,” Kat yelled above the din of diesel motors.

We planned our escape for the next morning, searching for an alternate route to Medellín as we ate breakfast at a roadside café. It was nothing more than a table with wooden benches and a simple thatched roof over several wood-fired pots.

We ate what the locals ate — eggs and *arepas*, washed down with hot chocolate. (You've got to love a country in which burly truck drivers enjoy their morning cup of hot chocolate).

A man walked up to us and said, “Thank you for taking the time to visit my country. I hope you are treated well here.” He then climbed into a Land Cruiser and drove off. We realized soon after that he had paid for our breakfast.

We arrived in Medellín, another city steeped in bad media, as the former headquarters of Colombia's cocaine cartels. But good news rarely makes it into mainstream media. Medellín is currently a safe city to visit with art galleries, museums, parks, and an eternal springlike climate. The metro whisks you efficiently across the city. A cable-car system services the poorer neighborhoods high up in the hills to the north. The ride provides stunning views of the city and surrounding mountains and shouldn't be missed.

It was in Medellín that we met our first foreign tourist. We had been traveling in Colombia for over a month.



**A day in the life.** After lunch and a nap, Moncho and his family are still a bit languorous.

The typical traveler flies into Bogotá, then buses to Medellín, next stop Cartagena. Then it's off to another South American country. Oh, what they miss!

The easy route to Cartagena was tempting — downhill and then flat all

the way to the World Heritage city. But it also happened to be the main highway. We knew Enrique would have avoided it — and so did we. We turned west out of Medellín and climbed up into the Andes once again. (Colombia sports three Andean chains

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## Nuts & Bolts: Colombia

**Fact:** There are definitely places in Colombia where you do not want to go. No way, no how. Drug dealers are a reality of Colombia and they are very touchy about their turf. If you go to Colombia, you'll have to decide what balance of safety and adventure is best for you.

**Maps:** For an overall look at Colombia that includes good elevation detail, get International Travel Maps' *Colombia Travel Reference Map* (\$11.95, scale 1: 2,000,000).



For the detail you need to get off the beaten path look at the *Mapas de Ruta* from the Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi, a series of 12 maps that follow Colombian travel routes. Routes 2 & 9 will get you from Bogotá to Cartagena via Medellín. You can buy

them in Bogotá at the Instituto Geográfico or at tollbooths across the country. You can buy the whole set for less than \$10 in Colombia. They are hard to find and/or expensive in the U.S. A little sketchy when it comes to elevation, so best used in combination with the ITMB maps.

**Getting There:** Most cheap flights take you to Bogotá. Plan to spend a Sunday so you can experience "Ciclovía." There's a bike path into downtown from the airport – daytime use is recommended. Taxis are inexpensive.

**Lodging:** Most travelers stay in La Candelaria in central Bogotá. Thieves and pickpockets know this. Stay off the beaten tourist path near one of the TransMilenio stops



Currently, camping only on private property or near a police check point or station is recommended.

**Money:** Bankcards are the way to go. Cash machines are everywhere. Good exchange rates, no waiting in bank lines. We opened up a separate savings account and had our debit card only able to access that account. This guards against having your entire savings vulnerable. Good to have a credit card or two. Capital One MasterCard is one of the few that doesn't have a foreign transaction fee.

(rapid bus transit) and you'll have easy access to all parts of the city. There are plenty of hotels and *hospedajes* across the country, but a tent can come in handy.

### Tourism:

- [http://realtravel.com/da-1055-colombia\\_attractions](http://realtravel.com/da-1055-colombia_attractions).
- [www.iexplore.com/dmap/Colombia/Where+to+Go](http://www.iexplore.com/dmap/Colombia/Where+to+Go).

— Cordillera Oriental, Cordillera Occidental, and Cordillera Central). It is truly the land of the granny gear.

Once we pedaled beyond Santa Fe de Antioquia (a country getaway for the wealthy Medellín), the road was lonely and dry. Friendly soldiers at various checkpoints helped us stay on track. On the other side of the mountain pass, we felt the moisture from the Caribbean as we finally descended from the Andes and headed out to the coastal flats. We pedaled through mile after mile of banana plantations, often sharing the road with workers pedaling to the fields.

Colombia is a country of cyclists.

Their competitive racers are considered some of the best climbers in the world. We often encountered club riders of all ages out for a morning ride. There's such a positive difference when traveling in a country that has a culture of cycling. Bicycles belong and are accepted on the road. In over two months in Colombia, we were never hassled by a motorist.

We arrived in one small town only to discover that there was no hotel or *hospedaje*. We found a woman who allowed us to camp on her property behind her house. We pitched our tent under the clothesline next to Victor, a 300-pound pig. Victor had brothers

and sisters. All of us needed a good shower.

As basic as it sounds, the lodging was offered with a smile and grace that made us feel at home — despite our 300-pound roommate.

We arrived in Cartagena a few days later. Enrique had offered us a place to stay — a flat that he shared with a business partner that wasn't being used at the time.

The old walled city of Cartagena deserves its World Heritage status. Founded in 1533, its cobbled streets wind narrowly past ancient churches and residences with enormous balconies.

We had the address but had trouble

finding the flat. We wandered into the Plaza de Santo Domingo, which was filled by over 100 outdoor tables with umbrellas. I pointed to a plain building on the opposite side of the square and asked a waiter if that might be the place we were staying.

He looked at us in our road-wear clothes and filthy bicycles and said, "Oh, sir. Someone of your class would not be staying in that building."

I couldn't help myself. Not one to normally drop names, I said, "I am a friend of Enrique Peñalosa."

His eyes grew wide, and he sputtered, "Oh! Of course, that is where you will be staying."

We entered a simply, yet stunningly furnished apartment. We had to pinch each other to believe that this is where we would stay. Considering we had previously camped next to Victor the pig, these accommodations were a grand contrast.

Our magical journey had been influenced by a man with hope and a vision for a better Bogotá, a better Colombia,



**In the streets.** Kat with Colombian school children participating in the national peace march.

and a better world.

We toasted Enrique as the sun's orange glow filled the Plaza de Santo Domingo and only wished he could be there in person to receive our humble thanks. **AC**

*Willie Weir has cycled in many less desirable places on the planet than Colombia. His idea of "safe" and yours might differ greatly. Also, check out our web exclusive "Bogotá's Ciclovía" at [www.adventurecycling.org/ciclovía](http://www.adventurecycling.org/ciclovía).*



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