

*A TALE OF
Two Cities*

Our Californian-based writer visits Bogotá and Cartagena, two cities that characterizes Colombia, and revels in the historical and natural wonders that enraptures every step of the way.

BY ROSANNE ZINNIGER

OPENING PICTURE:
View of Bogotá,
Colombia





As one of the largest South American countries consisting of multi-climate regions, bio-diverse terrains, including RAMSAR declared wetlands, a host of UNESCO parks and reserves containing a large variety of wildlife, there is fantastic opportunity for spectacular golf courses flanked by those backdrops.

First popularised in 2001 when local hero Camilo Villegas won the Colombian Open as an amateur, golf has become more popular in a country more accustomed to football exploits.

Predominantly Spanish-speaking, Colombia's prosperity is derived from tourism, manufacturing, textiles, and agri-business. And out of the lot, two popular regional cities - Bogotá and Cartagena, of the Central Andes and the Caribbean Coast respectively, stand out.

CAPITAL CITY BOGOTÁ

At first, Bogotá, which is also the District Capital City of Colombia, appears to be one of the busiest cities in South America and with a population of over 8 million, it can be hard to find a quiet spot in this high altitude city 8,675 feet above sea level.

Visitors should acclimatise themselves to the thin air before indulging in strenuous activities to avoid high altitude sickness and fainting spells so I spent some time resting at the luxurious JW. Marriott hotel, located in the historic centre of the city and just some 20-minutes from the airport.

Later in the afternoon, I walk around and gradually become warmly acquainted with the ancient architecture of the houses, the buildings of the La Candelaria neighbourhood nearby, the grid formation of stone streets, and museums with art depicting the struggles of yesteryear,

especially the acclaimed Fernando Botero collection.

Known for the robust proportions of his characters, many of Botero's paintings tell the story of colonisation by the Spaniards from AD 1538 to 1539. The Botero Museum, located next to the oldest museum in South America, the National Museum of 1823, also displays collections of paintings and sculptures by Pablo Picasso and other famous artists.

After visiting both, I decided that this is a good day to walk and from there, trekked to one of the oldest sanctuaries atop Monserrate Mountain. There is a funicular, or cable car as it is more commonly known, built in 1928 and installed in 1955, and I get in, taking in the glorious sights from up high, including the 17th Century Santuario de Monserrate and the pilgrims strolling in and out in search of miracles and healing. Deciding I needed one, especially with the golf looming ahead, I walk in as well.

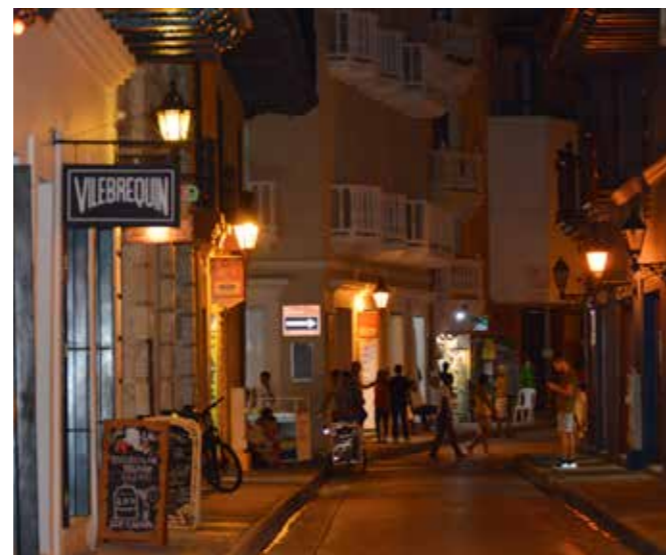
The surrounding grounds are adorned with many religious sculptures imported from Italy and a beautiful wooden sculpted piece called the Señor Caido (Fallen Lord) that overlooks the land below.

This is where most make a pit stop to enjoy lunch at the San Isidro Restaurant, housed in the Santa Clara House that is built in the 1900's, and try the traditional Colombian appetiser, Aborrajado, a deep-fried plantain filled with cheese, washed down with a cup of some of the best coffee I've ever tasted.

Colombia's top export, as I would discover, is coffee and there are few that would rival the variety at San Alberto Coffee estate. Located in the Armenia region, San Alberto's five-step selection process involves picking cherry beans at their ripest, followed by a threshing process with another sifting before the final roast.

LEFT PAGE - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Botero Sculpture; Bogotá streets of the historic area; Señor Caido (Fallen Lord).

RIGHT PAGE - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Santuario de Monserrate; Meat Stuffed Empanadas; Chicharrón; San Alberto Coffee Expert brewing coffee.



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San Alberto Coffee is available for purchase at their kiosk in the Gold Museum in Bogotá, where the largest collection of gold in the world resides, and the most affordable San Alberto Coffee can be imbibed.

From there, I feel about warmed up and ready for my first round of golf.

SAN ANDRÉS COUNTRY CLUB

San Andrés Country Club is a private club on the outskirts of Bogotá, about 20 minutes to the community of Funza. One of the oldest 18-hole golf courses in the area, the 72-Par, 7,145 yard course was built on rich agricultural land in 1945 by architects Stanley Thompson and Robert Trent Jones.

Since the golf club opening in 1947, the original course design has deviated slightly due to damage to trees and flooding from unpredictable weather. Despite these challenges, the grounds are impeccably maintained by greenskeeper, Camilo.

While on a tour of the course, he said, "The land the course was built on was one of the largest producers of potatoes in the area. Our 67-year-old colonial clubhouse was established by the English and is the original building"

One of Camilo's favourite hole is the Par 3, 6th, stating that, "it is a beautiful hole with water to the front, and sneaky bunkers on the back side."

But some of the most scenic holes are on the back nine, especially Hole 11, a Par 4 where the fairway runs along an irrigation canal that is home to beautiful water fowl and the blue-naped Chlorophonia, a brightly coloured blue, green, yellow bird local to the region.

ZIPAQUIRÁ, THE SALT TOWN

A free afternoon is perfect for a countryside drive to the town of Zipaquirá. Visit the mystical and ancient salt mine located within the hills by descending more than 180 metres below the surface to the reverent Salt Cathedral.

The easy stroll downward will lead to centuries old mystical salt carvings, including a jaw-dropping majestic hand-carved 16-foot-high cross located behind the main altar of an underground Roman Catholic church. Venture through tunnels that lead to more salt filled caverns containing more crosses carved of salt and sculptures of Italian marble.

LOS LAGARTOS GOLF CLUB

Fully acclimatised to the climate and culture, Los Lagartos Golf Club in Cundinamarca is next. This sprawling property that recently celebrated its 80th anniversary contains two 18-hole, par 72 golf courses, named David Gutierrez Course and oddly, Korea Course.

The championship Gutierrez layout was redesigned by Scott Miller in 2012 and is considered the most scenic course in Bogotá. Rolling hills and changes in elevation challenges from the first to the 13th, with scenic views of beautiful flora, trickling creeks, waterfalls and duck-filled ponds along the way.

While there are many doglegs throughout this course, the par 5, 13th has a uniquely shaped fairway named the "Foot of the Duck". Tee off to a narrow fairway that jogs left and right – the heel of the foot - and then straightens to the pin with trouble to the left and back.

Greens on this course are groomed fast and fairways are seeded with Kiku grass that grabs the ball when wet for even greater precision play.

CITY OF CARTAGENA

From there, an hour and half flight takes me to Colombia's northern city of Cartagena. Heat and humidity juxtaposes the high-altitude dryness and cold of Bogotá here along the coasts of Caribbean Sea.

Known as Cartagena De Indias, the city was founded in 1533 by Pedro de Heredia. There is a charm to this lively city contained by a 20-metre-thick limestone wall that stands as a reminder of pirate attacks and battles of centuries gone by.

While strolling through the Plaza Trinidad Getsemani, I overhear a local tour guide explaining to a group of tourists, "The port, Castillo de San Felipe fortress, and group of monuments were declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1984, and the Colombian government has deemed these sites, Cultural Heritage of the Nation status."

Perhaps seeing that I am a lady, he directs me to the renovated 23-vault military barracks turned shopping area called the Las Bovedas. I happily lapped the stereotype in and weave through arch-lined rows and hearing shop owners follow shouting offers for souvenir arts, crafts and artisanal jewellery, stylish hats, colourful

LEFT PAGE - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Los Lagartos GC Hole 18 with view of the city in the background; San Andrés GC Hole 11 tee to right to avoid water to left; Cartagena at night; View of Cartagena beach; Salt Cross in front of open mine shaft; San Andrés GC Hole 6 Tee off over water.



At night, I dream of strangers dancing along a never-ending street of reverie and wonder if I should ever wake up.

THE KARIBANA TPC CARTAGENA

But I do, of course and gladly so as I discover one of the most exhilarating golf courses in the world here in Cartagena. The Karibana TPC Cartagena championship golf course is set next to the Caribbean Sea and is the first TPC property in South America. Also on property is the new Hilton Conrad Hotel with luxury condos and a beach club.

Camilo Villegas and his brother Manny enjoy this Jack Nicklaus design and hosted the 2016 Karibana Skins Game, a first in Colombia, here.

"Colombia is a great country and I miss it a lot. It's one thing to read about it, it's another to visit. There is an energy here in Colombia that all should experience," enthused the four-time PGA Tour winner.

The Skins Game on that Saturday of December 17 between Villegas, Angel Cabrera, Ernie Els, and Bogotá native Sebastian Juan Munoz. While it was a close battle, the host, perhaps due to his intuitive understanding of his home course, managed to edge out friend and rival Els in the end.

While on a brief tour of the golf course, I ask director

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ABOVE PICTURE:
TPC Cartagena at
Karibana a look
back toward 12.

clothing and unique sculptures.

Retail therapy done, I scoot over to the world famous resto-bar franchise Café del Mar to catch an early sunset and enjoy their famous coconut lemonade, made fresh. Their eclectic beats rifts through the air while I take in the view of "Little Miami" and the Caribbean off in the distance from my vantage point atop the city wall.

Then as darkness sets in, the charm of a horse drawn carriage beckons to ride in a magical journey across the streets watching locals playing Zydeco music and vendors selling hot a traditional Colombian corn flour cake called "Arepas".

Tourists and locals alike fill the plazas - some dancing to the music while others simply strolling along with contented smiles on their faces. But as soon as I draw near to my cosy boutique stay, the Movich Hotel, I decided to call it a night, knowing that more golf await the next day.

of golf Juan Felipe Raigoza what makes this golf course so unique. He pointed to the variety on every hole: "The front nine are surrounded by a spectacular natural forest with six man-made lakes, and the back nine runs along sensational ocean front."

While all these beautiful courses are limited to privileged few, foreign visitors are be able to get a tee-time via a reputable tour agent who can also arrange for transportation. Jaime Enrique Acosta of Voyage Colombia Golf is one such operator.

"Why not golf one day, and take an excursion the next to a coffee bean plantation? We can even arrange for cooking lessons and additional tours to nearby regions," offered the jovial Acosta, whose advise I duly concede to be well taken. 🇨🇴

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