

## Columbia 2026

Thurs Feb. 12 Leave home at 11:20. I had a security spot saver, but there was no line. So nice that you no longer have to remove shoes. The TSA people were so friendly. New training? One even asked me if I knew how to get to my gate.

Went to north (N) terminal to watch my friend Abby perform. Serendipitous timing. She is very talented, and an inspiration to me. I hope to get to her level someday.

Had to gate check my backpack. Very nervous about the straps getting damaged, and hoping it makes it to Bogotá!

Full flight, 4.5 hours. Got an aisle seat. Listened to audio book (Hamnet). Watched Eleanor the Great, which was good. Wore a mask b/c I really do not want to get sick. Snack was choice of pretzels or caramel waffle cookie. I chose the cookie then realized it was a lot of sugar on top of the salted almond chocolate bar I ate (freebie from PCC). So I passed on cranberry juice (which I love). PB and frozen blueberry sandwich plus carrot sticks for dinner.

Plane had no power outlet (that I could find) but I had my power brick. Also no seatback screen, but I had my tablet. Free wifi connection to inflight entertainment. My new noise cancelling over-ear buds worked well.

Arrived in Houston around 8:30.

2.5-hour layover, short walk to gate. Time to pee, brush teeth, get water, journal, stretch legs.

I need to stay hydrated to help reduce altitude effects, but don't want to have to pee on the plane (I'll have a window seat - good for sleeping but hard to climb out).

Houston airport is quiet. I was happy to get an Exit row seat until I realized it didn't recline! And there was no window armrest. They provided a blanket.

Plane left the gate on time at 11:15 p.m. 4:19 minute flight. I slept off & on but couldn't get comfortable until I put my inflatable pillow on the tray. At 2 am they served us a meal! I wasn't thinking clearly, gobbled down the chicken risotto & brownie, then had gas pains. Still was able to sleep until 4.

Land at 4:45. Dark, 55°, raining. Immigration took about 45 - long lines. They've been striking for better pay, so apparently I got lucky, as it could have taken much longer. Emir picked me up at 5:45 and it took about 30 minutes to get to the Cranky Croc Hostel. Oh, and I am happy to report that my backpacked arrived unscathed!

The hostel seems great. Bed was comfy & I crashed for 5 hours, until 11. Woke with mild headache - altitude or pillow?

# Bogotá

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Feb. 13

Today would be my Dad's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Met Cécil from Paris (bunkmate). Up at 11. Sunny + 63° after rain earlier. High UV here.

Hostel playing 70s music - Bowie, Zepelin, Fleetwood Mac - which means younger people must like it too. I'm seeing a range of ages here. Owner, Andy, is Australian. Common area has kitchen, restaurant, seating areas. Activities include walking + motorcycle tours.

Got 520,000 pesos from an ATM (~\$150). The money is hard to get used to. 1000 COP (Colombian pesos) is about 27 cents.

Got yogurt, muesli, + a banana at a small grocery on a plaza near the hostel. Lots of benches + people. Sat on a bench, ate my food. Many young people, perhaps on school break? Eating pizza, vaping. Black clothes popular. Purple hair. Private security guards. Woman wearing a shirt that said "Housekeeping" empty garbage cans + sweeping. Kids with braces (braces = middle class = economic + political stability?). Starbucks. Litter, graffiti, street people, 8 million people. High 65° today, quite warm in the sun.

Gold Museum was free over age 62. Lots of gorgeous pieces, well displayed, with signs also in English.

Not much evidence of Valentines Day, like you'd see in Mexico. No carts selling balloons, chocolates, stuffed animals.

Went to Embajada de la Coca coffee shop for a small glass of coca tea, just to try it.

My headache is gone & I haven't felt short of breath. The tea was fine, no strong flavor. Tasted kind of woody. Some friends of one of the cafe workers walked in to surprise her on her birthday, bearing a small cake & candle & playing happy birthday on a flute. A very heartwarming moment.

Gets dark around 6, being so close to the equator. Chatted for a bit in the common area. There's a guy here from Lichtenstein. The young folks were talking about going out salsa dancing.

I walked about 10 minutes to La Puerta Falsa restaurant to try ajiaco soup, but there was a line, and people coming out said it was a tourist trap, so I went to another place a few doors down. The ajiaco was delicious. Huge bowl for 45k pesos (\$12) which is probably kind of expensive for here, but it's the tourist zone (La Candelaria = "old town"). I brought a tupperware for leftovers. When I left a 5k peso tip (10% is normal), the owners were thrilled, which made me wonder if I'd misread the menu price. In any case, 50k pesos is \$14, not bad for basically two meals. I debated getting ajiaco because Lina's mom is making it for me tomorrow & I don't want to spoil it, but it will be good to see how hers differs. Mine was a thick broth with potato, chicken, rice, and a chunk of corn on the cob (kind of tough). I didn't like the large capers - too strong - I'd have preferred them chopped.

Traffic was choking, both in density & fumes. Hard to cross the street. No stop signs or traffic lights at many intersections.

Back to hostel at 7. Tired!

Sat. Feb. 14 High 65° Low 50° partly sunny

No heat in the hostel but it's been comfortable. Had my ajiaco leftovers for breakfast. Decided to hang at the hostel until time to meet Lina's parents, to conserve my energy, and I'm glad I did, as it was a long (and wonderful) day! Lina's dad, Juan, planned to arrive at 10:30, but due to traffic it was closer to 11. I enjoyed waiting outside the hostel & watching local life go by. (I tried playing the house guitar but it wasn't playable.)

Note that tap water here is safe to drink.

Juan drove me to their apartment in the north part of the city (Portales del Norte). It took us over an hour. It's a little greener and less frantic up there. They live in a "conjunto," or apartment block with a gate. The apartment is quite small, with a tiny kitchen, living/dining, one bathroom, and three bedrooms, with a small patio area. I met Lina's brother Daniel, who speaks English. Lina's parents (Juan & Omaira) do not, although they understand some. Omaira is so warm & sweet. She made me her specialty: ajiaco. It was delicious! And way more food than I could eat, although I gave it my best effort! Better than the restaurant because the corn was fresher & the capers were on the side.

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I also paid 9k (#2.50)  
for parking.

Around 2:30 we drove almost an hour to the botanical garden. I paid the 40 pesos (#16) for all of us (senior rate: Omaira is 68 and Juan is 70). We spent a little over two hours wandering the paths and through the exhibits of all the plant zones of Colombia, from the high mountains to the coasts & the jungle. I learned about "páramos," high altitude, neotropical wetland ecosystems. They capture water from mist & clouds and are biodiversity hotspots. 60% of them are in Colombia. A highlight was a viewpoint of a forest. It was nice to be out of the city.

Then we drove to a nearby street lined with pastry shops. First we tasted pan de bono, round cheesy rolls. The farmer's cheese is mixed in to the dough. I didn't love it but it was filling. The texture is a bit like undercooked dough but with a fairly strong cheesy taste. Then we bought actual pastries to share: tres leches with fruit, tres leches with chocolate, millefeuilles (milojas), plus a treat for Daniel. I asked if I could pay because they had done all the driving & spent a lot on gas, and I know they don't have a lot of money, 57k (about #16) for 4 pastries. They were very good and not too sweet. They enjoyed looking at my photo book.

They dropped me at the hostel at 8 pm! They still had to drive almost an hour home (assuming that traffic had let up a bit by then). Traffic is crazy here, with motos splitting lanes & everyone jockeying for position.

# Bogotá

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It takes forever to get anywhere, but there's surprisingly little honking.

When I returned to the hostel the common area was full of people. So nice to know I could hang out if I wanted to. Tired though, and wanted to journal & post pics on FB. Bed curtains are nice if you don't feel like chatting with dorm mates. To sleep at 10.

Sunday Feb 15 Low 50°, high 65° partly sunny with a moment of rain late afternoon.

Walked to Oxxo but no unsweetened yogurt, so I ordered a fruit/yogurt/granola bowl at the hostel. Delicious. 18k (\$5). Goodbye to Cecil.

At 9 I met Pia & Mauricio in the main Plaza Simón Bolívar. It was so wonderful to meet her in person after 12 years. She's an audiologist and also in the reserves. Mauricio (her second husband) is a dental surgeon & professor at the national university.

First they gave me a tour of the historic plaza, with its cathedral, legislative building (its back to the church for separation of church & state), the city hall, and palace of justice. Pia showed her reserve card & got us into a gated area where we could see the president's house & an ancient monastery.

Then we walked some of the narrow stone streets of La Candelaria to the Plazoleta Chorro de Quevado, where Bogotá is said to have been founded in 1538 (of course the Muisca people already lived here). They had reserved a graffiti

tour in English & Spanish. It lasted two hours & was interesting. I got to see more of La Candelaria, which is super charming (& touristy). One street specializes in chicha, a strong fermented corn drink. The tour lasted two hours. At the end they served coca tea. We were all a bit tired.

They had made reservations at a restaurant but got a bit lost walking there and ended up in a pretty ugly part of town with red brick facades. Turns out it wasn't a super safe area either. Finally took a cab.

Testigo restaurant was hidden inside a market. A company bought an old warehouse & converted it to a large restaurant, as a way to help the area economically. It's very popular. Traditional Colombian food cooked over wood. Mauricio's son Fernando joined us. He's 32, has a degree in history, works as a tour guide, and speaks good English. We ordered two appetizers: patacones (smashed, fried green plantains with sour cream and hogao sauce - delicious) and papas criollas (small potatoes cooked in a cheese sauce melted at table with a torch - also delicious). I ~~also~~ ordered pincho: skewers of chicken & beef with potatoes & guacamole. I ate the chicken & Fernando ate the beef. The chicken was super tender & flavorful. I tried Pia's coconut rice, which I loved. They insisted on paying for everything. I know they can afford it so I didn't feel too bad accepting.

# Bogotá

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Fernando gave us quick tours of the money museum, the Botero museum, & an exhibition at the library. I loved the Boteros. I did not like the library exhibit, which was a kind of disturbing history of the impact of violence on humanity.

At 4 we got their car from the garage & drove to the crepes & waffles shop in the plaza where I ate my yogurt the other day. I had arequipe ice cream (dulce de leche). It rained for 20 minutes or so.

Then we drove to the national university where Mauricio teaches (and where Lina studied). It was kind of a long drive, and I was getting really tired. They showed me an award-winning brick building designed by Rogelia Salmona, we walked around a few more buildings, and to the central plaza with drawings of Che Guevara & other revolutionaries. It was quiet with no students, & the buildings were covered in graffiti, so it was kind of depressing.

They drove me back to the hostel at 6:15 & we said a sad goodbye. What a day!

I don't like the music they're playing at the hostel, but it's too early to go to my room so I've got earplugs & am sitting in the common area.

Pia & Mauricio have a one- to two-hour drive back to their house...

I'm the only person in my room now.

Omaira & Juan want to move to Baranquilla, where he is from, & escape Bogotá & the high cost of living. Hopefully in one to two years. Pia & Mauricio want to move to Ramiquirí, 2.5 hours north of where they live now, and where they are building a house.

It's a bit warmer there, and they want to be out in the country as well.

Here in Colombia they say pensionar instead of jubilar for retired.

Because Pia is in the Reserves, she greets all police + military with "Dios y la Patria." She's pretty badass.

Mon. Feb. 16 65° high 51° low no rain, cloudy

I slept almost 9 hours, until 6:40. A lovely young German girl arrived in the night, though I never heard a thing. Breakfast at the hostel because their yogurt-fruit-granola is really good for only \$5.

Checked out + said goodbye to Andy, the Australian owner, who has the same birthday as me, (but probably 20 years younger).

Took an Uber to the north bus terminal with Orlando. He picked me up at 8:40 and we didn't arrive until 9:35. Traffic wasn't bad, but the city just goes and goes. It only cost 35k plus 5k tip (\$10).

So worth it to not have to deal with the Transmilenio.

Ticket to Zipaquirá 10k (\$2.50). I only had to wait 20 minutes + I got a seat up front. We left about 10 + got to Zipa about 10:50. A good toll road. The city continued, but finally we got out into the country. Lots of new housing developments. I saw a sign advertising new houses for

## Zipaquirá

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around \$140k U.S. Gas is sold by the gallon and is about \$4.

The outskirts of Zipa were congested, ugly, and cluttered with garbage & light industrial. Just like in Mexico, I had to remind myself that you can't judge a town by its cover.

Reading signs is a good way to review & learn Spanish. Drywall & closet have been adopted.

I missed the Zipa stop because there was no bus station (the map said there was, but the bus didn't stop there). I realized quickly and only had to walk 10 minutes back to my hotel. I dropped off my bag & headed off to the Salt Cathedral! It was a really nice walk that took about 30 minutes. Along the way I passed through the two beautiful plazas. One has a big old church and a lovely French-looking town hall. The other is ringed by restaurants & cafes. Grabbed a chicken-mushroom pastry at Cafe Juan Valdez. 12k (\$3), tasty, and just the right amount of food. The town was quiet on a Monday at noon. A "City Tours" trolley went by.

To get to the cathedral you walk up a long series of steps through a green park. I got out of breath from the altitude (Zipa is same elevation as Bogotá: 8700'). It's 40 km from the Bogotá north terminal.

A senior ticket for the basic tour was \$30.

You have to go in with a tour, which lasts about an hour, and then you are free to roam. I went with a Spanish group & had no trouble understanding the guide. There were about 6 in the group.

The guide had a tourism degree with a specialty in geology. It was quite interesting learning about the history of the salt deposits & the construction of the cathedral.

You descend 180 meters in near darkness. On the ramp down we passed 14 salt crosses (carved in place) representing stations of the cross. At the bottom is an actual cathedral where masses are held. Everything is carved from salt, and colorfully lit. It's pretty magical. At the bottom is a big commercial center with cafes, shops, museums, and a spa. Lots of things made of salt for sale.

A mirror pond reflects the lighted salt ceiling above it but the shallow briny water is so still it looks like you're gazing into a bottomless abyss.

An 8-minute sound & light show in the main cathedral might have been cool if it had anything to do with the mine or cathedral. The 15-minute 3D history of the mine movie was very cool. This whole area was an ancient sea. The Muisca people used the salt loaves they made as currency. Now salt is extracted using injected water.

For a snack I had a piece of torta Beso Andino, yummy layer cake with matcha tea & some sort of salted fruit in the middle. \$3 Fluffy & not too sweet. Not many visitors today so the shop workers seemed kind of bored. Weekends are packed. The young woman at the cafe said at first it was strange to work

## Zipaquira

Cafe gal said the torta is a specialty here.

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so far underground with daylight for 8 hours, but now she's used to it. The workers all dress like miners & wear yellow hard hats. It seems that the mine & cathedral provide a lot of local jobs.

After three very enjoyable & interesting hours down in the depths I walked back up to the surface about 3:30.

Checked into the hotel. My \$20 room (no hostels here) is nice. Only complaint is the couch has crumbs on it?!

Headed back out to find a haircut. Fabio, a Bogotano who lived the past 25 years in Ecuador, just opened the shop in December. His wife is also a cosmetologist. He was super nice, and asked for my contact info to practice English, so I gave him one of my Seattle postcards with my contact info preprinted on the back. He straightened my hair. We'll see how long that lasts! 40k (\$10).

Bought a small container of milk for breakfast. Couldn't find any unsweetened yogurt. Had a chicken sandwich at Qbaro, a Subway-like eatery. \$7 for a large crunchy panini-like sandwich with chicken, veggies, mayo. Sat at a table with a view of the square & wrote in my journal until I got too cold. Back to hotel at 7 for journal, FB, email, WhatsApp, text. Omaira (Omi) is checking in with me - it's so sweet!

Tues Feb. 17 50° morning Zipa. 68° afternoon VdL.  
Up at 6. No headache, yay! Might have been the thinner pillow, or maybe I'm getting acclimated to the altitude.

The hotel guy wasn't in the office so I went to buy a banana. 15 cents. The guy said he'd be there at 8. At 8:05 I messaged him and got an auto response. I did a quick search & saw that\* I needed to catch a bus at the station to Briceño & then transfer. By 8:30 I was on the mid-size bus to Briceño. Everyone was kind & helpful.

Lots of new construction on the outskirts of town, including retirement compounds. In 20 minutes we were out in the country. Bumpy roads with lots of trucks (no semis) & potholes. As in Mexico, you greet the bus when you enter.

I had asked a woman where to transfer, and was surprised at the location: a busy crossroads with no signage. It took 45 min. & cost 6200 (\$1.60). Several people pointed me to the stop across the busy road. I used the pedestrian overpass - most people didn't bother!

I asked a woman about the bus and she looked at me blankly & said she couldn't understand me. I know people speak with a different accents outside of Bogotá, but everyone else seemed to understand me...

Then I asked another person & they pointed me to the transit worker, who was very helpful. He called the driver and told me it would be 20 minutes. Meanwhile, everyone else also told him where they were going and he made sure they got on the correct bus. Twenty minutes later a small bus showed up & he explained

# Villa de Leyva

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that the driver would take me to the main road where I could catch a large bus all the way to VdL. I asked, but the driver said no cost. They dropped me at an empty bus shelter next to the highway, and kindly explained that there would be a big, yellow bus #930 in 5-10 minutes. I was a bit nervous, not knowing what I'd do if the bus didn't come, but sure enough, in less than 10 minutes along came a big yellow bus, #930. Boarded at 9:50, arrived in VdL at 12, cost 47k (#13). The bus was Flota Valle de Tenza. The driver played music.

I sat up front with a view of the road. The road was mostly quite good & there were 3 toll booths, charging around \$3 for cars.

If you want to go somewhere you have to get there. Sometimes that can be a bit scary, the great unknown, a leap of faith.

I like the challenge of travel, and pushing my comfort envelope. Like weight lifting, the only way to get stronger is to sweat, as in, will a bus actually come, and what will I do if it doesn't? Everyone today was so kind and helpful. It really helps to speak Spanish - gives me more confidence and makes it so much easier for those trying to help.

We began to wind up and down hills. Saw a place selling cute little wooden houses with big windows, called Domos Glamping (glamping domes). Passed some tired-looking people, presumably Venezuelans, pushing a cart with a sign saying, "Liberty for Venezuela."

Vendors climb on & off the bus to sell snacks. We crossed into the Department of Boyacá. Colombia has 32 departments with governors & legislative reps, but not true states, and have less power. It's an election year (president & congress seats) so lots of political billboards. Plenty of Jehovah's Witnesses standing patiently with their displays. (What is the appeal?!)

We began climbing up a windy mountain road. Glad I had a good view out the front b/c I did not take a motion sickness pill! Lots of cows, free range chickens, farms, rolling hills, sacks of onions. No bathroom on the bus, but I made it to the depot where the baños cost 1k (25¢) w/o paper (that's an extra 20¢ & I had my own).

On the bus I ate my banana & a protein bar.

Google Maps took <sup>me</sup> on a 13-minute walk in one direction, then changed its mind and sent me another 13 minutes, this time back toward the main plaza, which is fabulous! Huge & cobbled, surrounded by low white buildings with terracotta roofs, dark wood balconies, and covered portals. Take away the modern signs and it's 300 years ago.

VdL is 7000-foot elevation, so less shortness of breath. It's also warmer - 68°! Blueberries are a thing here - they're grown nearby and cafes sell blueberry ice cream and other pastries. Milojas arándanos are popular.

# Villa de Leyva

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The hostel was locked when I got there. I messaged and they gave me a different address. Turns out they haven't yet moved to the new location. The current location is close to the plaza & is very nice. So far I'm the only one in my room so far. There are four beds & an ensuite bath. Clean & comfy. Angela, an owner, is young & really nice.

Headed out to wander the town. Sampled blueberry ice cream & passionfruit slushie, both delicious. Settled in to a cafe on the plaza for hot chocolate (\$2), journal, people watching. Definitely a tourist destination. Very hip. Some gringos and many more wealthy-looking Spanish-speaking tourists. VdL is known as a foodie destination, with some pricey restaurants. I sat at a cafe on the plaza and had a hot chocolate, wrote in my journal, watched people go by. What a view. A delightful travel moment, reminding me why I love traveling. The dueling music was a bit much ☺ Latin music in the café, loud rock (light rock) music kiddy corner.

Back to hostel to pee and a British couple were standing out front with their heavy packs, waiting. (They had Whatsapp'd Angela.) I was able to let them in, but Aura (Angela's mom) arrived shortly.

Early dinner (at 5) since I didn't have much lunch. \$10 burger at a place on the plaza. Worth it for the location, plus everything else is more expensive. Bougainvillea here! Also lots of big cobblestones. Glad I have boots! Breezy here.

Talked to waitress. Proudly born here, likes the tranquility. Says tourism has really driven prices up though. People come here from all over the world.

☒ The burger was good but way too much food. I removed the ham, bacon, cheese sauce, and most of the bun & still could barely finish it. Hopefully they give the scraps to the street dogs, although that just worsens the dog poop problem - there is a lot, and you really have to watch where you walk.

I wandered around a bit but it's a small town with mainly high end shops & restaurants. It gets chilly at night so there's not much night life. Back to hostel at 6:30. My finger feels tender. Hopefully bacitracin will nip it in the bud. Glad I brought a small first aid kit!

This hostel is friendly & comfy but there is no kitchen or common area. I have the room all to myself.

Wednesday Feb 18 low 56° high 69° mostly sunny

Slept til 6. Comfy bed & pillow. So dark & I needed my phone to find my way to the bathroom to pee. Very quiet.

Yogurt & granola for breakfast. At 7:30 started walking to the mirador. The trail was steep, rocky, slippery, primitive and too treacherous for me.

Walked to the Teracota casa. I knew it was closed but hoped to catch a glimpse

from the road, but it wasn't visible. I continued on to the Fossil museum, about an hour on foot on a fairly green & quiet dirt road.

On my way through town at 7:30 it was only school kids and workers. Lots of benches ring the plaza, making it easy to sit & people watch.

The large round stone cobbles on the roads & plaza look great but are hard to walk & drive, and to sweep out debris. Kids can't really play in the plaza. Besides being so bumpy, it's quite sloped. Once upon a time I'm sure it was a good solution for mud or dust. Hard for horses though! and strollers.

Lots of large estates on the outskirts of town, including several very fancy new developments. Warm day with a breeze. The road was lined with green & only a trickle of vehicles, mostly motos. Nice to be out in the country.

Got to the Fossil Museum about 9:30. It's run by the local community, and was built when a local farmer & fossil lover found a nearly-intact ~~adult~~<sup>baby</sup> kronosaurus in 1977. Rather than move "their" fossil elsewhere, they raised money to build a museum around it. 25k ticket. Well done exhibits, with most in Spanish & English. The kronosaurus is impressive at about 30 feet long (part of the tail & one fin is missing).

Refilled my water then walked to the Sol de Muisca, another 30 minutes or so. Ancient muisca site used as a sundial, and for earth fertility rituals. 20k entry

A muisca guide gave three of us a brief overview of the site & let us wander.

Before walking to Sol de Muisca I needed a little something, so I bought a homemade blueberry ice cream, which turned out to be a blueberry popsicle. 5500 k (\$1.50). Refreshing but not many calories. At the muisca site I was flagging, so I ate an aplet & a cotlet from the bag I brought to share with nice people I met (individually wrapped).

The muisca site is definitely worth a visit. 3000 years BC they were using tall fertility stones - carving them & setting them upright - and an observatory with two lines of stones, used to track planting times.

I was really hungry, and worried about the long walk to town. It was hot in the, despite a strong breeze. Not long after I started walking, a little road-side stand magically appeared. She had fresh homemade empanadas! They were fried, and filled with potatoes & beef, but I was so hungry I'd have eaten almost anything. The dough was corn, and they were delicious! I had one (75¢) and chatted with the old man who was sitting there drinking beers. He was rheumy-eyed and hard to understand, I asked him how he felt about local farmers selling their land for houses. He thought it was great because the land is expensive. The land owner keeps a piece for himself, sells off the rest as lots,

and has enough to build a little house and live on.

It's Ash Wednesday and many people have black crosses stamped on their foreheads. Very low-key compared to Mexico.

Found a real grocery store & bought Greek yogurt, sliced cheese, rusks, and 6 small bags of plantain chips. Back to hostel at 1, having walked 9.5 miles. The shower was cold only, so I took a sponge bath.

The museums I wanted to see are closed. Drinking hot chocolate with cinnamon (milk based) at a plaza cafe. The whole town core is pedestrian - no car exhaust or noise - so nice.

Back at the hostel a storm rolled through, with about 30 minutes of lightning, thunder, and torrential rain. The courtyard flooded. A few drips even came into my room. Had a nice chat with a British couple who are on the road in South America for 5 months. Feeling just a smidge lonely. Can't watch PBS or Prime here due to being out of the country (don't feel like dealing with a VPN).

Everyone says you have to hang out in the plaza after dark, but on a chilly Ash Wednesday there wasn't much happening. Too cold to sit outside. Sat in a bakery near the hostel and had a piece of not-too-sweet, pretty good carrot cake. A busy place, lots of locals buying breads and rolls. Most seemed to know each other.

Back to the hostel at 7. Sometimes three hours flies by, with journaling, FB, etc, but

sometimes it drags. VdlL reminds me a bit of Patzcuaro. Touristy & pricey center with real life on the edges, and not much to do if you don't know people. The main square is great, but you can't just stare at it all day. I'm ready to move on.

You know the touts who stand in front of restaurants trying to lure patrons? I saw the same guy in front of one restaurant both days, looking incredibly bored, so I asked him about it. He said yes, it's really boring, and they pay him hourly, not on any sort of commission.

I also learned that many of the big houses outside the town are owned by foreigners. This has of course driven land values up.

Thurs ~~Feb~~ Feb 19 56° sunny

Christian from Taxi Villa de Leyva picked me up at 8 am. Nice young man in black pants & white shirt, easy to understand his Spanish. He drove me to San Gil. It cost 450k (\$122). A bit of a splurge, but it saved me taking 3 busses as well as a taxi across town in San Gil. It might have been difficult to get to Barichara before dark. Not having to go to Tunja to catch a bus to San Gil saved two hours of driving time, and more than that in bus time. As it is, it was 6 hours door to door: 4.5 hours in the taxi, 1/2 hour at the bus station, and about an hour on the

bus (which cost \$2). I arrived at the hostel at 2 pm.

The reason the taxi was so expensive is because I had to pay round trip (9 hours at \$14/hour). The taxi rules only allow him to take someone into another "state" with permission papers, so he couldn't pick up passengers on the way back. (VdL is in Boyacá, San Gil & Bari are in Santander.)

I of course asked a lot of questions, so it was like having a 4.5-hour private Spanish tutor. In Boyacá, when you want to show extra respect, you use the term "sumercé," a colonial holdover meaning "your grace."

At a routine police stop an officer asked Cristian if he would carry a couple things to someone in San Gil. They opened the plastic so Cristian could see there was nothing incriminating inside.

This is low season, and he makes more money doing long distance trips. In high season (December) he makes more doing town trips. He got lots of phone calls from people looking for rides.

The Monquirá river was raging due to rains over the past four months. There was also a lot of road damage.

At one road work stop I bought a small bag of red & yellow plums (small) from a vendor, mostly out of pity, but also to get some more fruit into my diet. The yellow were sweet, the red a little bitter.

I brought an extra bag of plantain chips for Cristian & he seemed happy about that. He was planning to stop at a friend's mother's restaurant for lunch.

We talked a bit about the election and he said the two biggest problems he sees are road maintenance and crumbling school buildings.

Beautiful scenery! Green rolling hills, bananas, sugar cane, horses laden with cane or canela, panela factories, cattle, piles of wood for cooking (no gas service here).

Pee stop for me at a gas station at 11:15 (Cristian neither drank nor peed).

76°! I was roasting on the sun side of the car with no AC & the window down.

I did not expect this area to be so warm. Luckily I knew which terminal to go to in San Gil (there are two) or he would have taken me to the wrong one. He dropped me at the terminalito (little terminal) at 12:30. I did not tip. Don't know if I was supposed to, but it was already a lot of money. I did give him an aplet and a cotlet.

Paid for my ticket (they asked for my passport), climbed on the bus, and ate my rusks & cheese, a perfect lunch. It was much cooler on the bus.

A mom sat next to me with her adorable 3-y.o. daughter on her lap. The

# Barichara

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little girl was motion sick but not crying. Luckily they didn't have to go very far.

The Macuma Garden Hostel is nice! Four beds in the room (not bunks). One other woman is in the room (she was out). Nice garden with view of the cathedral. Nice owner (Camilo) has a cute 13 month old daughter Alicia, crawling around & squaking. Nice common areas, kitchen (a fridge for my cheese yogurt, and plums!), and hot showers!

met denizen Denis, a German guy. Then out to wander. Interior of the cathedral has arches built from the local golden stone, plus plenty of the requisite gilt.

Settled in to Dona's Bread cafe on the main square for hot chocolate (\$1.75) and a chicken pastry (\$1.35). I figure the milk & chicken give me some protein, and it's about the right amount of food. The place is very popular, with what appears to be mostly locals.

The town is really charming! Lots of hills. It's cooling off nicely, the wind is a bit cool.

Camilo says it's very safe here and I can walk anywhere at any time without worrying.

4300 feet elevation here. High today 76°. 67° now at 8:40. A few mosquitoes...

Tuk tuk ply the town offering one-hour guided tours. Not planning to do that. I don't want to support the noise!

At 6 pm the cathedral rang a long loud series of bells, calling everyone to church.

My one roommate is San Mei. From China,

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Lives in Germany. First time traveling alone, doesn't speak Spanish, very brave. Also a Mexican mom & daughter arrived today.

Illuminated cupola & turrets of the church visible from hostel garden. Lightning visible to the east.

A heavy rain woke me in the night. Windows wide open you could hear the church bell ringing every hour, & roosters crowing before dawn. I slept great and only got up once to pee.

Friday Feb. 20

Up at 6, breakfast, leave at 7:15. 64° Birds singing in the garden. Motorcycle noise & fumes marred the tranquility of the morning a bit. Lots of loud cackling chachalacas as well.

Other gringos seem to ignore each other. Few even look at me. I guess they like being independent. I suspect there may be foreigners living here as well. Denis, from the hostel, is building a house.

First I walked south (downhill) to the Salto de Mico viewpoint, with killer view of the Suarez River valley. Barichara is built on the ~~side~~ top of a cliff. Tourist with a drone - I don't like the mosquito-like whine.

Then I walked uphill to the Camino Real trail. Started walking at 8:30.

It was steep & rocky & a bit slippery after last night's rains. Trekking poles would have been nice, but not worth the space in my backpack.

After crossing a road the trail got flatter, but was still paved with large cobbles. They probably help prevent the trail from washing out, but are hard to walk on. The trail was shady until about 9. It's lined with stone walls. The trail in its current form was the work of a 19<sup>th</sup> century German immigrant, but presumably the trail existed before that.

Saw lots of jet black greater ani, and more chachalacas. A really loud cicada-like noise (turns out they are cicadas) alternated between a sort of chirping and a high-pitched whine. I ~~can't~~ almost put in earplugs.

Saw a treehouse for rent - with a disco ball!

I crossed the road again and a sign said I'd come 1.4 km and had something like 4.8 to go, for a total of 6.2 km. The distances vary depending on the source.

I saw one person walking up and three coming down. You could hear the road at first, but it wasn't busy. A few mosquitos. Loud music coming from a restaurant with trail access. A few other houses & farms along the way.

Unlike what I'd read, the trail was not

downhill all the way. There were plenty of uphills & it was tiring in the heat.

This area is semi-desert, with cactus. I took a break on a rock in the shade, with a nice breeze and a view of the valley, next to a closed coffee shop, (probably open on weekends). Ate half a bag of plantain chips.

Finally the trail got away from the road. Leaf cutter ants. Took another rest and enjoyed the quiet (cicadas had stopped).

Clouds building in the west (that's why I wanted to go to the mirador early, when it was clear).

Chatted with a nice young shepherd from Guane who was watching some cows (white creole or zebu mixes for both milk & meat).

Arrived in Guane at 10:30. 79°!  
Bought a big bottle of cold water for 3k. (mine was almost gone). Sat in the plaza in the shade & ate my rusk and muenster sandwich. Really hit the spot. The cheese softens the rusk a bit but not too much (when pre-made as a sandwich). Cute little town of a few hundred people. Nice valley & river view from the mirador, and a nice breeze. Church had a different artwork, white, rounded, 3-dimensional. I did not go in the fossil museum but saw

## Barichara

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a lot of ammonites in the plaza, so I guess there are fossils here too.

Colorful striped fiber rugs for sale, locally made. Also lots of alcohol...

Busses run every 50 minutes. Caught the 11:20 & back in Bari at 11:40. On the way we picked up a young Austrian gal who's staying at Nomad Hostel way out of town. 15 minute walk to the road, and busses stop running about 4:30. I like being in town.

Grabbed Greek yogurt & granola at the DI store, then back to hostel at 12:15. Three new packs in the room. I was hot & tired and napped for an hour. (After peeing for the first time in 5 hours!) Fell asleep to the very musical sound of ruddy doves.

Rianna from the Netherlands came in. She was here at the same time last year and said it was much hotter b/c there hadn't been any rain. So I am lucky! How did I not know it got hot here?

Back out at 1:30. Some clouds tempered the heat. Walked up to the Mincora Biopark, a gated restoration area with trails, native plants, interpretive signs, and benches. Really nice.

Back to my favorite bakery at 2:30, for a delicious not sweet apple pastry (4k) and a chicken pastry to go for dinner at the hostel. So many young people with tattoos here. Now down to 69°. A guy ordered a salad that looked amazing - I didn't know they

30

had salads. Don't like the inane girly pop music they play ~~here~~<sup>here</sup>, however.

No microwave here, so I ate my chicken pastry cold. Chatted with Tom from Australia, who is riding his bike to Argentina.

Walked to the plaza after dark, had hot chocolate at my cafe, walked a bit, but not much happening - too early, people just starting to head out for dinner.

Just settling in for the night (at 7) when Susie (from the US) and Tom invited me out for drink at a bar around the corner, owned by an Australian. Drinks were pricey, like \$10+. Really surprised me.

Really enjoyed talking to Susie, who does international humanitarian work. I didn't drink anything, and stayed for an hour. Kind of loud for me!

Barichara has about 13k people (it doesn't feel that big). I sense there are quite a few foreign residents, but there's no data on numbers.

Sat Feb 21 66° at 7:30 am

Left the hostel at 7:22 and got straight onto the bus to San Gil that left at 7:30. Cost 8 k. Gorgeous scenery - green rolling hills, mountains in the distance, cows grazing, sun shining. Taxi to terminal grande 6900 (less than \$2). Arrived 8:30.

There are small microbuses leaving for Bucaramanga all the time. I suspect

## Bucaramanga

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they're cheaper but probably stop more and take longer. For 30k (\$8) I got an assigned seat on a big bus with AC. I asked for a window seat on the right b/c Camilo said I'd get views of Chicamocha Canyon.

Bus left at 9:15. Chatted for a minute with a friendly woman my age. She asked if I wanted to sit with her and chat. I said "After the canyon!" At the station there were about 8 different companies, several with busses to Buca. I'm told that prices are the same, just the schedules vary. Since I wasn't in a hurry, I didn't shop around. The first window had a bus in 30 minutes.

We follow the river past some waterfalls, then through mixed forest with an understory of bananas & coffee bushes. Green! mixed clouds & sun.

Woman in the seat behind me spent most of the ride either chatting on the phone or listening to music (Tik Tok?) snippets. She talked several times with her young son, who was upset that she was gone. She told him that when she came home she'd take him for ice cream & new shoes, why do so many parents feel they have to "fix" their kids' feelings, instead of just acknowledging them? Lots of phones ringing. Bus more than half empty. Many people sleeping.

The views of the Chicamocha Canyon were spectacular! Fun to think that Ian & Lina were here just a few years ago.

Scary dropoffs very close the bus!  
I had to look away a few times.  
I saw the cable cars going from one side of the canyon to the other. We dropped down to the river on a series of tight switchback (good road). Crossed the Rio Umpala at Pescadero. Toll booth closed. Like in Mexico, people refuse to pay if the roads aren't repaired.

A vendor gets on the bus selling "pasteles" (stuffed savory pastries) and beverages. Guy in front of me watching soccer videos w/o headphones. The whistles were loud! I put in earplugs. I guess there's no earbud policy on the bus.

We followed a lush river for a while. Then I went to sit with the friendly lady, Rosa. She was going to a medical appt - 7 hours round trip! She lives in San Gil. She seemed so nice, so I was dismayed when the first thing she said to me was that she thought Trump was doing a great job! She's glad he intervened in Colombia and agrees with his immigration ~~is~~ policy b/c she thinks he's only targeting bad people. She says most Venezuelan immigrants to Colombia are lazy & bad. She thinks they're used to being handed everything w/o having to work. The women steal Colombian husbands, the men rob people. She thinks the current Colombian president is a crook who is stealing all the tax money. She

hopes the conservatives will win the next election in March. At that point I changed the topic and asked her if she had any kids (no wedding ring). She has a 35-y-o old son in Cali and two grandsons, 7.5 & 2.5. The older one has mild autism. I showed her my picture book. She asked for my contact info & invited ~~her~~ me to come back & stay with her in San Gil. Her husband (second?) is a retired Avianca pilot.

I gave her one of my Seattle postcards with my contact info. I hope she doesn't contact me.

She also told me that Colombia is in "poor health," mostly meaning the economy & infrastructure.

She got off before me. I got to the station at 12:35. Taxi to the airport took 30 minutes & cost \$14. 82° & humid. A moto taxi was \$8 but didn't feel safe! Plus two backpacks wouldn't fit. 20 minute ride.

12:55 at airport. Sat at the food court tables outside security for a while but no AC.

Through security (short line) at 2:30. AC in here but the PA system is incredibly loud. Even with noise canceling earbuds it's almost unbearable. Fill water bottle and hang for three hours. Better too early than stressed or late!

PA announcements are only in Spanish and garbled.

Leave the gate at 6:15, 30 minutes late, due to some sort of passenger list confusion.

Hopefully I'll make my connection. My flight cost \$78 and included a carry-on & seat choice.

I picked a window, hoping to see the view, but it was dark by the time we took off.

Lift off 6:25. Lightning was magical.  
Landed on time at 7, only 35 minutes in  
the air.

Quick note: saw a woman teaching her  
young daughter to roll her r's and the girl  
couldn't do it (yet). Made me feel better,  
my ability is slowly improving.

Walked off the plane at 7:15 and  
luckily my next gate was close, as the  
plane was boarding. Another window seat with  
view of city lights below.

Lift off 8:20. Fabulous crescent moon  
all the way. Land 8:50 and at the curb  
at 9. Hostel taxi picks me up 9:20. 8 km  
tunnel under a mountain, only 6 years old.  
120K (\$30) for half hour ride. Arrive hostel

9:50. First impressions not good. Reception  
guy covered in tattoos - too suave for me.  
Trance music playing. Felt way too hip &  
young for me. Also they didn't have a  
bottom bunk for the first night. House  
activities are mainly focused on drinking  
and dancing.

The room felt claustrophobic, and the  
bunk had gaps all around it so you  
couldn't lean against the wall. Finally to  
sleep at 10:20. Bed pretty comfortable  
and good sleeping temp.

medellin

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Sunday Feb. 22 65° low, high 77° overcast, rain

In the daylight this place turned out to be pretty OK. Green park out back with trails & river, quiet street, room has window into lobby for air circulation.

Bottom floor is Bread Factory restaurant with terrace onto the garden. Empty early but packed later. I'm on the main level, which is really handy for going back & forth to get stuff.

Reception, tables, couch, library, fridge, microwave, dishes here as well. They wash the dishes! 2nd & 3rd floors are rooms. Fourth floor has bar & hangout space. 5th floor rooms. 6th floor terrace with small pool, seating, computer, large screen for movies. Saw an ibis fly by. View of the area. A bit upscale with nice, newer-looking buildings. Music kicked on just before 8 am.

Lovely young woman from Israel leaving gave me her empty metro card. They cost 10k. I gave her 4, then added two trips when I went to use it later today.

Overheard a young Australian woman say her phone had been stolen last night when she was out dancing & drinking. What a bummer!

I finally headed out, after breakfast & pattering, to see the Ciclovía, on the main drag near the hostel. It was great, with hundreds of people walking, running, & rollings, vendors, farmer's market, live music, hip hop dancers, human statues. A 3-piece rock band playing

metallica was great! They had a singing bass player. A man was watching with his little boy in a stroller. The boy was holding a miniature electric guitar. Adorable!

Nice grocery store nearby. Got a bag salad, bottle of dressing, sliced cheese, and whole wheat rusks for about \$8. Also a good ATM close by. I love that BECU reimburses fees so I don't have to take out a lot of money each time.

Back to hostel for lunch of salad, bread, cheese. They use a clever system for fridge food. You put a colored dot on each item, representing that day of the week. When that color comes around again, they throw it away.

Walked across the river to the park behind the hostel, La Presidenta. Beautiful gardens & short trail along the river. Giant bamboo grows in clumps. Parks have wifi, workout equipment, nice playgrounds.

So far Colombia has pretty good sidewalks, better than Mexico.

Booked a city walking tour. Google maps said it would take me an hour to get there so I left 90 minutes early. Walked 15 minutes to the Poblado metro station. It's above ground, so feels bright & safe. Purchased two trips on my metro card: 4400 each (\$1.20). Only took 15 minutes to travel three stops north to Alpujarra (trains run about every 7 minutes) so I was an hour

early. Popped into a restaurant + ordered milo, a frothy chocolate-malt beverage, fortified with vitamins, mixed with milk. Delicious! 4500 (\$1.30). The restaurant was empty when I got there but soon got busy with the 2 pm Sunday lunch rush. Complete meals for less than \$5.

The Real City Tours "Free Walking Tour" was really excellent. Our completely bilingual guide was Achira, and she was amazing! A really gifted storyteller. Her name actually means storyteller.

It was a tour of downtown Medellín, a somewhat sketchy place, if one is alone (and quite dangerous at night). Lots more black + very dark-skinned people than I've seen up to now.

Turns out Sunday was a good day to come because it's much less crowded, and less chance of pickpockets. The Colombian expression is "no dar papaya," meaning don't make it easy for someone to take your stuff.

Achira gave us a wonderful review of recent Colombian history, explaining that there were guerrillas, paramilitary, and government forces all fighting each other. One in four Colombians were forced to flee their homes. Then the cartels formed and united the two illegal armies to their side. Escobar wanted to be dictator. He was not a Robin Hood. She called this period "The Tragedy." Like most Colombians, she has trauma issues, PTSD + mental health issues plague most of the country. In her childhood her home was broken into multiple times, dogs killed with poisoned meat, gunfights, dead bodies, grandfather murdered.

The tour was 3 hours & was really interesting. There was loud music blasting from every quarter, so it was great that she had a headset. There were 20 in the group but it didn't feel unwieldy.

It began to pour & we took shelter under an overhang. She said it's not rainy season. The rain lasted much longer than the usual 10-30 minutes. Vendors appeared to sell umbrellas & ponchos.

Mother's Day most deadly day in Colombia due to family trauma. Still lots of homeless, but now it's no longer children & families, it's drug addiction, and it's men. You also don't see land mine disabilities so much, like during the war years. They say that every gram of coke (cocaine) has killed a Colombian.

They love the metro, which represents hope & transformation, and there is no graffiti or vandalism. Cable cars have connected marginalized people to jobs. One million riders per day on the system.

The Botero sculpture park was awesome. He donated them & wanted them accessible to everyone, with no entrance fee. A few parts have been stolen, but mostly they are respected. One was bombed during the bad years. Botero insisted it be left as a monument & a reminder. He made a replacement to put next to it, to show the hope for a better future. He was

from Medellín.

Saw some parrots!

Former slave market, in front of a church, is now red light district. Venezuelan refugee women hoping for a better life & not finding it...

Handy to be next to a church because "If you sin then pray, it's OK."

A student movement in 1991 led to constitutional changes including separation of church & state plus human rights improvements.

Candidate sign: Security = Tarism

Recent Medellín mayor said "The best for the worst," built libraries, schools, parks in the poorest places. Democrat architecture = social urbanism = gentrification for the poor.

Green walls at government buildings, new in last few years. Green initiatives have apparently reduced city temps by 2 degrees.

Achira gave an impassioned & moving talk at an eternal flame for journalists killed during all the unrest. She believes that thanks to their courage, and that of many others, Colombia avoided becoming a dictatorship. We all clapped when she was done.

Rain finally stopped but it was chilly.

Colombian diaspora. Only Latin American country that never had dictator. Escobar gave a choice: silver or lead. Either let him buy you off or he'd shoot you.

She showed us some beautiful green spaces, including a river trail, and said these kind of places wouldn't have been safe

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until relatively recently.

Colombia didn't teach history for 40 years, wanting to sweep the horrors under the rug, but is slowly realizing that telling the story is necessary to heal.

Tour ends 5:30. Recommended 50k (\$14) tip was totally worth it.

Back on metro with nice Italian guy from tour. At hostel 6:30. Salad, bread, cheese for dinner. Dressing not very good but craving veggies.

Playing much better music tonight: rock!

Mon. Feb. 23 65° low 69° high in MDE

Up at 5:30 to go on tour to Guatapé.

Bus leaves Poblado Park at 7:15. Bus full with 41 people. Info in Spanish & English.

Seatmate is Margo from Vancouver. Not too chatty. Tour cost 129k (\$35).

Stopped in Marinilla at 8:15 for breakfast. I chose fruit (banana, papaya, pear, apple) with arepa (dry) & cheese (mild white soft) + hot chocolate made with milk.

Guide ordered ahead so food came fast.

Town is known for guitars, cabbage, agriculture, troubadors, religious music festival, cowboy hats. Old town is 350-y.o. national historic site.

Leave at 9. Starts raining. El Peñón reservoir: built dam to create

# Guatapé

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electricity. It would flood the town. Utility company offered to pay residents & they could move wherever they wanted. The men accepted but the women refused. They wanted the company to build a new town so everyone could stay together. It took 10 years to negotiate, but they got their town.

El ~~Peño~~<sup>Peñon</sup> was touristy but pretty cool. 35k entrance fee (\$9). you climb 723 steps to the top of a tall rock monolith. About 20 minutes up and 20 down. It must have been quite an engineering feat to build the concrete steps and railings (separate stairways up and down). The first ascent (pre-stairway) took 5 days. The stairs were steep but not too scary. Great views of the enormous reservoir far below. Rain stopped but clouds reduced distance views.

The workers walk up each day. There is a cable basket for cargo only (cafes & shops up top). I had to laugh because on the way down they force you to exit through a gift shop. The down stairs were mostly covered and had good railings. The stairs are numbered (each 25<sup>th</sup>) both up & down. El Peño~~ñ~~, aka La Piedra, is a "national treasure" but privately owned.

By the time I got down to the bottom it was warm & sunny. on the bus at 11:20.

At 11:40 we disembarked in the town of Guatapé for a walking tour. It's a captivating

and colorful town, famous for its "zocalo" decorations at the base of each building. Very touristy and packed even on a Monday.

Lunch at 12:30 at a restaurant on a 2nd floor with a view of the lake.

I chose grilled chicken (pounded thin, good, a bit dry) which comes with fries, which I ate, plus rice, patacon, and "salad" (shredded lettuce, pineapple, & raisins) which I did not eat. Also came with a delicious glass of lemonade.

Next up was a one-hour boat ride on the lake. Reservoirs, with their bare belly bands, aren't very pretty. Lots of vacation houses line the steep shores, with no beaches. A cold wind kicked up, clouds lowered, and it began to pour. Back to dock at 2:15. We were to have one hour of free time to explore the town, but it was pouring, so we sheltered at a covered area on the dock with seating.

Bus left at 3:30. Stopped at the breakfast restaurant for a bathroom break and I bought a piece of yummy carrot cake with nuts (no frosting). \$1.40.

Hoping it will be warmer & drier in MDE, which is 1300 feet lower. Back to park at 6:05. 69° & not raining. Bread & cheese for dinner then up to 4th floor bar to use my "free welcome drink" coupon on a yummy guava juice. Chatted with a delightful young couple from Quebec, then wrote

in my journal. Warmer up there than in lobby common area, but really vile rap music lyrics, so went to my room, where I chatted for quite a while with 'lovely' maita from Germany.

Tues Feb. 24 65° at 6:15am High 76°

Shower didn't get warm so I decided to take one later. Out at 7:30 b/c forecast called for afternoon rain. It apparently rained all night b/c streets very wet. Walked around Provenza & El Poblado. Very quiet in the morning. Lots of pedestrian streets. Will try to check it out at night when it's more vibrant.

Walking is an extreme sport. Cars do not stop for pedestrians, and many roads don't have signals. You really have to pay attention!

Medellín River runs through town & is lined with greenery.

Garbage day and the corners are piled with bags, many split open or spilling. Workers clean it all up.

Metro is busy at 9:30 am, even heading north away from the center. (Sardines coming south.) Transferred at San Antonio to San Javier. Met a really nice woman my age from Syracuse. She & her husband live here now. She gave me some good tips.

Got on the cable car that rises over Comunidad 13. Met a UK couple and one from near the Venezuela border. They said it's a bit chaotic there but not too dangerous.

It was a long ride up one hill, down the other side (couldn't look down!) and up another steep hill. Three stops total. So interesting to get a look at these lower-income areas from above. This system allows people to commute to jobs quickly and cheaply.

On the way back I got off at the Stadium stop and walked down bustling Calle 70 into the Laureles neighborhood. Looked for a vegetarian restaurant on Google maps & found Uno Mas Uno, where I had an incredibly delicious "bowl" with brown rice, crunchy lentils, chicken, tomato, grated carrot, pesto, hummus, avocado. \$9 + tip. It was so good! Pleasant chill music too.

Wandered around Laureles to its two main parks. Quiet residential neighborhood if you get off the main drag. Google maps to the wrong "stadium station" (operator input error), so I had a long walk back to the right place! ~~76°~~ 76° at 1:30 and the metro was fairly busy.

Grabbed a few groceries (including peanut butter) and back to the hostel at 2:30.

After doing some research I decided not to go to Jerico tomorrow. It would be 7 hours round trip on the bus & not worth it for one day, especially given the iffy weather right now (rain every day).

## Parque Arví

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From 5-6 I had a 60-minute deep tissue massage with Carmen at Medellín Sports Massage. Busy place! She was great, but I had a lot of knots + it hurt! Cost 130k with tip (\$35). Thrilled to have a hot shower when I got back (it was raining and I got a bit wet + chilled in two blocks). Had been planning to stroll El Poblano this eve + get a smoothie, but not in the rain. Peanut butter toast for snack + cheese toast for dinner!

Wed. Feb. 25 64° at 7am high 77°

Walk to metro. Young blind man playing beautiful music on reed instrument. Street food is mostly fried + unhealthy, except the fruit cups, which I can't eat. I was walking against the commuter grain, like parting the Red Sea to plow through the throngs coming toward me. On northbound metro at 8 am. Not crowded. Tracks go along river, which is brown from sediment.

There are street cleaners everywhere. It's a surprisingly clean city.

Got to Acevedo station at 8:20 and got on the cable car to Santo Domingo. Got there at 8:30, 30 minutes before the Parque Arví cable car opened. I'm surprised the cable car heights don't bother me. They are smooth + quiet. Each car holds 6 people seated.

They float over the rooftops & you can hear sounds of life below: roosters crowing, dogs barking, people calling, music playing. I had the car to myself.

A woman with a broom cleaned every car inside & out as it emptied on the platform!

Low clouds today. Everyone has cell phones here.

The Parque Arvi station opened right on time at 9 am. 26,700 fare each way, \$14 round trip. There's also a bus but the cable car is way more fun.

I was on the first car of the morning, with some park workers. It was an amazing 20-minute ride floating above the treetops in the mist. Some trees blooming. Tree ferns. Pine trees. One of the workers had a thick winter coat and I was worried I'd be cold, but it was 58 degrees at the top.

\$8 entry fee to hike in the park. For free you can enjoy some beautiful seating areas with views of the forest. There are food vendors, and others selling nice quality forest-related souvenirs.

Not raining, but drippy in the forest, so I donned my hat & rain jacket. There are apparently 54 miles of trails up here, but my tickets got me access to around two miles, with a shorter & longer loop. This is high Andean cloud forest at around

8000 feet altitude. Lush & jungly, but cool, with no bugs. Lots of familiar-looking plants, including many we grow as house plants up north.

Saw three birds soaring & squaking & gliding, but couldn't tell what they were.

There was a demonstration garden with "aromatic plants," important for pollinators & medicine.

It rained a lot last night & the trail was a bit muddy, but not deep, and not too slippery.

The longer Sendero Vital was covered in slippery roots. I walked slowly & carefully. It went down pretty steeply, with some handrails, over a bridge across a stream, then climbed back up. Excellent interpretive signs, all about the importance of water. The trails are well marked, so no worries about getting lost. I heard a chestnut antpitta (according to Merlin) but couldn't see it.

After having the trail all to myself for over an hour, reveling in the fresh air, lushness, and bird sounds, I ran into two other people coming the other way. Then I saw some maintenance workers and then one other hiker. Learned that the current trails were built in 2010. Before that it was a network of smaller trails & it was easy to get lost.

Patches of blue appeared & it's warming up. I finished hiking about 11:45, so hiked for about two hours. Walked down to main entrance, which is a really nice covered plaza with food & seating. Started waiting for the bus to Santa Helena,

and it started to rain. Lunchtime, so I ducked into a restaurant across the street and had the \$5 menu del día: flavorful soup with potatoes, fried plantain slice (yum), pork cutlet (dry, but good protein), lemonade, and some things I didn't eat: rice, salad, arepa. Everything cooked over a wood fire. Not great but edible, cheap, and fairly nutritious. Three guys at the next table listening to some kind of talk show on a phone. The rain stopped.

The bus to Santa Elena took about 30 minutes, cost \$1. Authentic small town, famous for flower arrangements made by silleteros. This little agricultural town has amenities like a nice turf field, indoor sport courts, wifi in the park, shops, & restaurants. Murals celebrate "campesino pride." At the cemetery I got a nice closeup view of a striking Southern Lapwing.

Stayed for half an hour or so and caught the bus back to Parque Arví. I enjoyed the slice of life on a local bus & in a pueblo.

Great t-shirts today: 1) Not a dad bod, a father figure. 2) Support your local planet.

Took 20 minutes to ride the cable car down to Santo Domingo. I just loved gliding serenely over the forest. So peaceful and beautiful, with some nice views of mountains in the distance. Two guys from Miami in my car, heading to Cartagena for a wedding. It's around 3000 feet drop from the park to Medellín. 77° down below.

Grab some pan tostado at the store, and some money at the atm (with security guard). Back to hostel at 4 and it starts pouring - what lucky timing.

For dinner I went to Final Feliz in the Viajero Hostel, about 10 minutes away. The menu looked good, and I wanted to see the hostel I would have stayed in if they'd had late checkin. The common area wasn't as appealing, and they had loud sports TV playing, so I'm glad I stayed here.

The chicken bowl was wonderful. Quinoa (a bit mushy) mixed with pesto, plus chicken, corn, cherry tomatoes, cucumber, avocado, broccoli. The veggies were so good! 36k with tip (\$10).

Popped out to check out the local night scene. Yowza, what a scene. Loud bars, flashing lights, giant TV screens, scantily clad women, police. So not my scene, but I was curious. The lobby is pumping out reggae, and there's karaoke wafting down from the 4th floor.

Only one other person in my room. Luis from Brazil + Maita from Germany have left. I've got the room all to myself for journaling + Facebooking.

Two new girls arrive, so now we are four. Karaoke singing now sounds like drunken Russian sailors on shore leave.

Thurs. Feb. 26 64° at 7am, high <sup>82</sup>  
 Slept til 7 am. Smell of bread from bakery below, sound of timers dinging. Young'uns spend the morning on their skinny laptops. It's sunny!

Walk to metro at 8:30. The air here is bad. The same street vendors each day - I wonder what their life is like.

Decided to try a buñuelo from a popular vendor. Long line so I know they're fresh. Yum! Crispy outside, creamy inside. Probably best hot. 27¢. That's for plain. They also having fillings.

metro culture signs & announcements: no food or drink, must use earbuds. Wifi available in stations - 30 min. free. Free wifi is a boon to those who pay for data.

Arrived botanical garden 9:15. Free entry but you must show an ID card. A lovely oasis of green & fresh air. Several cafes.

Saw a lesser kiskadee & a big iguana.

The Andean forest area was excellent, with great interpretive signs. Would be good to see it before going to Arví. A vulture landed right in front of me.

Clean bathrooms with paper, soap, & <sup>PAPER</sup> towels!

Spent 1.5 hours there, then took the metro to the Berrio station. When you tap your Civica card to enter, it tells you how much money is left.

## Medellín

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Plaza Botero felt perfectly safe during the day. Queer guy (gender non-conforming) got on the bus wearing skirt, tank top, makeup, jewelry, but with beard, chest hair. I wondered if they felt vulnerable. They were watching a video on their phone of them putting on their outfit - the one they were actually wearing. Interesting! Looked like they were maybe editing to post online.

Botero museum (Museo de Antioquia) cost 46 K (\$13). I loved the Botero paintings! Not too much else interested me. Wish there had been more info about the meanings of his paintings. One was of his son, Pedro, who died in an accident at age 4 (actually several were). Botero believed in museums being places of learning, especially for artists.

At noon I went to the museum cafe, thinking I'd get a beverage and eat my sack lunch, but the cheapest thing was lemonade for 10K, \$ plus the guy took forever, plus it didn't look like the kind of place where you could eat your own food, so I found a courtyard where museum workers were eating. Two invited me to share their table.

The older sister had brought lunch for her brother, who works at the museum as a researcher. She'd made some amazing looking rice, chicken, + garlic with pickled veggies. She is a poet. I understood his Spanish, but she spoke very fast. She lives in the non-touristy part of Comuna 13, where she says life is just "normal."

She seemed a little offended by tourists ogling the misery of the poor.

Lots of security people in the square, no doubt to make tourists feel more confident. 82°! Took bus to Caribe station, arriving at 1:30. My tour was at 2:30, so I took the pedestrian overpass to the north terminal and found a cafe for a milo. 9500K. Incredibly noisy so I put in earplugs. Fancy mall shops at the station.

Waiting by metro for tour, nice breeze off the river. Guy walks by carrying a rooster in a bag... A young woman and I exchange dismayed looks.

The Real City Barrio Transformation Tour cost 100k (\$27). Nine people plus a guide & a community leader named Gloria, who's lived here since 1969 at age 6 months. We visited Moravia, one of 14 neighborhoods in Comuna 4. It has the densest population of anywhere in Colombia, with 50k people crammed into 10 acres.

The history is complex and even in English I didn't understand it all. The city tried to force people to leave by putting a garbage dump in the neighborhood but people just used it as a source of income as garbage pickers. A huge garbage mountain formed. When the dumping stopped, people built on the dump. Toxins, smells, can you imagine? The government offered free apartments to anyone who would move.

10% refused to leave. They are allowed to own their houses but not the land. Gangs kind of run the place, providing water & electric hookups to squatters who can't get city services. There was some kind of peace deal in the 90s? and gang members were sent to a farm community somewhere. Incredibly unbearably loud music as we enter neighborhood. We met a kite maker. It's windy on the hill. No photos allowed in general. Most people live through selling stuff, with no government benefits. I learned a lot about economics, how taxes, health care, pensions work. 70% of people are low income, only 20% pay taxes.

We chatted with an old man (Gloria knows everyone). Not sure how it came up, but he said of the 5 women on the tour, he was most drawn to me. I figured it's because I was the oldest, but maybe it was my hat or glasses, or who knows. The tour included a "crema" or ice cup from a woman who runs a small business out of her home. I chose queso-bocadillo out of curiosity. Edible but different. milk, cheese, cornstarch, with chunks of guava marmelade, called bocadillo. I liked that part.

Later we stopped at a vendor selling fried stuff. I had a potato ball for 20¢. Tasty & filling. I won't need dinner!

The community had a big garden but it was taken over by gangs who sold the right to build houses there (even though the government owns the land). People in the "informal economy" don't have pensions, so they try to build 2nd &

3rd stories to rent out for income.

Then we met Gloria's mom, Mama Chila, a force of nature at age 89. What a face! She's been a community organizer all her life, and Gloria followed in her footsteps. Tragically, her three sons (Gloria's brothers), and Gloria's husband, were all killed during the violent years.

We met Gloria's grandson, Julien, age 2. Also a German guy who helped start a foundation for a small community center. He spends 6 months a year here, and his mom was visiting for a few weeks.

Our last stop was a community center built by a company that dumped a lot of toxic waste in the dump. It's designed by the same architect who designed the library I saw at the university in Bogotá, Salmon I think. The center is called La Casa de Todos. A group of seniors was playing bingo. People of all ages were hanging out or doing various activities.

It was a hot day but began to cool off. The tour ended at 6. The metro was packed and very warm. They have an elevator at some stations, only for seniors with their special Civica senior card.

Back to hostel at 6:45. Shower felt amazing. I was sweaty!

The two other women in my room are young American blond bimbos, just

talking about shopping, and what to wear to go out drinking. Cracked me up. One said she didn't feel comfortable going out alone because she gets too much attention with her long blonde hair (I'm sure the very short shorts are part of it).

Friday Feb 27 62° low 92° in Santa Fe!  
Chatted with front desk guy whose name I forget (Santiago). Told him he reminded me a bit of my boys & showed him pictures. He loved my picture book and gave me big hugs. Very sweet.

Left at 7 to north terminal. Audio message on the metro says "Breathe to control your emotions," then says "breathe in," "now breathe out." Very cool.

There were something like 40 different bus operator windows at the terminal! I asked someone & luckily only two went to Santa Fe. The first one had a bus leaving soon for 25K (\$7). It turned out to be a 9-passenger van. They put me up front with the driver, but just outside the terminal we picked up a young man & he was told to sit in the middle, between the driver & me. Loud news program on the radio then changed to sappy love songs with soaring vocals. One seatbelt for the two of us. It cut into my neck so I held it down.

Curvy road & the driver took them fast. Came upon an accident: motorcycle on the road on its side, the rider lying on the road,

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alive but unable to move. Two people directing traffic. Made me very sad.

Santa Fe is 3000 feet lower than Medellín, (and it's much warmer), so the road began to drop. Chatted with my seatmate & showed him my pictures. He works building pools. Began to see water parks. I was nervous about the heat. Hard to believe it could be so much hotter just an hour from Medellín.

Arrived at 9:15, having left at 8:15. 82°. Walked two blocks to the main plaza. The cathedral was cool inside, with pigeons flying about. The interior was nothing special.

Had ice cream at 9:45 b/c it was hot & why not? The young woman called me "amor," which I thought was very sweet. I tried frutos rojos (berries) with a drizzle of arequipe (dulce de leche). 3K (80¢).

Yum. I picked the place b/c the music wasn't too loud. Watched people. Plaza fairly quiet this early. A few men in traditional hats & scarves hanging out chatting.

The city is the oldest in the region and was once the capital of Antioquia. The Juan del Corral museum is a preserved 18<sup>th</sup>-century colonial mansion that houses the table where Antioquia's independence was signed. Also Bolívar's final doctor's bed. Museum is free & has lockers too, and clean bathrooms. Viewed the fronts of several closed churches. Ogled silver filigree at a

# Santa Fe de Antioquia

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really nice woman's shop. Not my style but I admire the incredible amount of work.

For 35k (\$9) took a tuk tuk to see the Puente Colgante de Occidente bridge, a 130-y.o. suspension bridge across the Cauca River. 955 feet long, completed in 1895. Has wood decking. I walked across & the tuk tuk met me on the other side. It was quite scenic & interesting. I was hot & bought a passionfruit juice, made by blenderizing frozen passionfruit (maracuyá) with water & sugar. Deelish. 8k (\$2).

In town I heard a parade. Turned out to be a small band promoting an election candidate. Popped into the Casa de la Cultura, where they have a filigree school. Watched a woman making a necklace chain from tiny pieces of silver. Super labor intensive work! Took advantage of the quiet courtyard with shade and tables to eat my picnic lunch. One guy painting. nice breeze. Refilled my water bottle in the bathroom but used an aquatab just in case.

At this point it was 92° & I decided to head back to medellin. Only had to wait a few minutes, and it was a big fancy bus with AC - yay! Only 20k (\$5). It also had working seatbelts, reclining leather seats, and power usb outlets! It left at 1:20 and we were back at the north terminal at 2:25. 84° in medellin felt downright cool after 92°.

Santa Fe was nice, but not as special as Villa de Leyva or Barichara, plus too hot for me.

Getting lots of hangnails, but the weather doesn't feel dry. Also getting a sore throat  
:-)

The city is building high rise apartment blocks to meet the demand for housing. 30+ stories. What happens if the elevator goes out? There are currently four million people here.

Grabbed a final buxuelo from the place at the Poblado station. Crunchy on the outside, fluffy inside, not greasy.

It's an uphill walk from the metro to the hostel and I was tired. Took a shower then a one-hour nap. Loud thumping music from downstairs, where they're having a birthday party for one of the Swiss owners.

Peanut butter toast for dinner. Sat on roof deck - perfect temp - until it got too dark to write, then in quiet bar on 4th floor.

The party went until midnight & I really didn't think I would be able to sleep. The music pulsed & throbbed & was so loud my head was bouncing on my pillow.

Sat Feb. 28

Check out 8 am. Uber to south terminal. 14k 10 minutes (would have been a 30 minute walk with my 2 backpacks - doable, but my throat is still sore & I don't want to overdo it).

Bus leaves for Jardin at 8:39. 46k.

Nice bus, mostly empty. Bathroom says "Only for urinating." Some is playing a phone game without earbuds - ding! ding! ding! Glad I had my earbuds & music.

Head south out of town, picking up people en route. Vendors get on selling cheese bread, chips, fresh mango slices with lime. Two traveling salesman, one selling pomade (for hair?).

Grateful I don't have to make a living that way. Glad I had earbuds to block out the yammering.

Guitar player got on and sang a nice song. I gave him 50¢. Glad I'm not trying to earn money that way either.

Cleaning lady at Medellín hostel says weather is changing here, with more rain causing road washouts & travel delays.

Passed a coal yard, everything coated in black dust. One toll booth. Another tunnel.

Cerro Tusa was a fabulous pointed peak! Better views on left side of bus, so I moved there. Fabulous scenery - narrow country road, steep green hills, clear roaring rivers (not brown with silt), cattles, farms.

Bathroom stop in Bolombolo. Family gets on with a chihuahua. 10:30-10:38. Then we turned onto the road to Jardin and

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started climbing up. Jardín is around 6000 feet. Most people got off in Andes. Lots of chivas (colorful open-sided truck busses) at this station, like bush taxis. Banana trees with blue bags. Trees waving in the wind. Lots of giant bamboo (it's native).

The bus barely fits in some of these town streets - inches between us & overhangs. Driver had to back into two stations, or make multi-point turns.

Arrive Jardín 12:20, so about 3:40 door to door from Medellín. Short walk to Oliva's House hostel. I'm the only one staying here tonight except for Carolina, one of the owners. Her partner, whose name I didn't ask, was driving to Manizales for work. 50k per night. My room has two double beds, but no window or ventilation. Nice kitchen I can use, and sitting area with table. Carolina is expecting a baby in three months. She & her partner work as rural health care administrators, bringing health care to rural areas.

I think this is my favorite town so far. Colonial balconies, colorful houses, horses in the street, lively plaza, gardens & flowers everywhere. 76 degrees. Much of the town smells like horse manure. Walked a short cobbled trail and saw a blue grey tanager. Also a garden made from junk turned into art. The old cable car, called La Garrucha was fun

# Jardín

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to watch travel across a deep ravine, but I felt no need to ride it. The town has a nice vibe, with tasteful shops and not trinket vendors. Many older men in straw hats & shawls.

Had a yogurt & fruit smoothie (batido) in the plaza. Yummy, but lots of seeds, and they added sugar. A few sprinkles of rain. Thunder in the distance. Adorable woman selling homemade plantain bread. Large piece for \$5. Smoothie \$4 with tip. The plaza was hopping at 3 pm on Saturday.

At 3:30 I walked a short distance to the Reserva de la Roca to see the Andean cock of the rock birds who come there each afternoon to compete for mates. It's a lek. They are gorgeous - bright red, black, & white. You can see them up close. I stayed for about an hour. Nice trails, seating areas, and a short, informative film. 25k entrance for foreigners. I think there were a few biting bugs but I might have imagined them. It was quite humid. Around 4:30 lots more people came & the birds didn't come as close.

It also got kind of dark in the thick trees and the birds were harder to see. Saw a hummingbird, probably a steely-vented. I think this area was restored & that's why the birds came here.

Dinner at Consulado Vegetal: hummus, tomato, roasted broccoli, baguette slices, stewed onion and summer squash. Yummy & I couldn't finish it all. My nose is starting to run ;)

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The sky was exploding with lightning + thunder and moments after I returned the sky opened up and I can hear rain deluging on the glass skylight in the main room.

Miserable night, but managed to get about 12 hours of sleep, waking up every two hours or so. Thank god for decongestant + tylenol. Probably a blessing that internet down from the storm, so I didn't have to think about doing any FB posts.

Sunday Mar 1 61'

A cup of tea felt so good on my throat! Walked to bus station and bought a direct ticket to Manizales for tomorrow at 10 am for 75k (< \$20). Mass was in full swing, so no cathedral visit. They were setting up a booth about the importance of sleep, since Sunday is a busy day and lots of rural folk come into town to do their shopping. Bought more tylenol - 10 tablets for 2200 (about 6¢ each). Glad the pharmacy was open on a Sunday. The town was bustling at 9 am.

I decided to go on the cave tour even though I wasn't feeling that great. Better than sitting around feeling miserable. It actually felt good to walk a bit. The company was La Cueva del Esplendor. 80k (\$20) included transportation (40 min. each way), snacks, entrance to

the cave site (which costs \$20k on its own). Well worth the price. We went in Willys Jeeps. I got to sit up front. We left about 10 and got back at 2. The drive was spectacular. We climbed up a narrow rocky road with gorgeous views of the town below. The jeeps dropped us at a farmhouse at around 8000 feet elevation. They served us agua de panela (felt wonderful on my throat), small empanada, and a choco arepa and a piece of cheese. I liked these arepas much better - made from coarsely ground yellow corn, they are sweeter and moister than the dry white ones I've tried. Before we left town they also gave us a bottle of water, a granola bar, and a square of bocadillo (guava marmelade) wrapped in banana leaf. It's about 1500 foot steep trail to drop down to the falls. There are plastic tubing hand rails, which really help. The tour instructions were only in Spanish. Supposedly they limit the falls to 40 visitors a day, but our group alone was about 15 and there were others already there or arriving. We saw people walking from town. It's a steep hill in the sun and takes 2-3 hours each way.

The river and falls are gorgeous. The falls are very loud! They pour through a round hole in the roof of an open cave. Pretty spectacular. Many people swam, said the water was chilly but felt nice.

The trail + rocks were slippery - glad I had good boots. Waited for what felt like

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10 minutes for a couple to take about 100 posed pictures before I could take an unobstructed shot. I left before the rest of the group so I could have some solitude on the way up, to enjoy the lush forest & river. Also wanted to be able to take my time, in case my cold or the altitude bothered me. I did OK. Lots of butterflies but didn't see too many birds. No bugs.

Back at the farmhouse they served us blackberry juice & a slice of moist yellow cake that was delicious. The jeep ride down was even more spectacular than the ride up. Incredible green vistas!

Chatted with two ag engineers and show them my Seattle pics. One of them works in Jardín with avocado growers and the author is an auditor who lives in Zipa and travels around.

Back to hostel at 2, feeling wiped. Slept for an hour but room is stuffy even with door open. It rained for a while. Chatted briefly with Carolina,

from a distance, wearing a mask. Don't want her to catch my cold!

Walked to the plaza at 4:30. Feels better to walk than to swelter and moan in my room. The plaza is hopping! All the cafes are full. Mass just got out. Kids playing and

## Jardín

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squealing. Old guys in cowboy hats cruise by on horses. Sit a table and drink hot chocolate (7k). Green hills rise all around the town. They say this town is popular on weekends, but other than a few gringos, it all seems like locals. Old guys sitting on benches or at cafe tables together.

This my favorite plaza so far. Wonderful vibe. Colorful chairs & tables, food vendors, lots of families, guys riding into town on horses, fountain, lots of benches, lots of noise - cars, music, talking. It's a very happy place!

Sweet Carolina brought me tea with panela & lime! Feels amazing on my throat, but the acidity gave me reflux, alas.

The ag engineers told me that young people here are leaving farms in droves, just like everywhere. Also, the rainfall & warm temps cause all kinds of crop pests & diseases.

Mon Mar 2

Up at 7 feeling OKish. Slept 11 mostly restful hours. Said goodbye to Carolina (after showing her my pictures). They're planning to name their baby Coral. His name is Ali. 68° at 9:30, when I got to the bus pickup. Had hot chocolate w/o milk, thinking it might be better to avoid milk with my cold. 6k. Chatted with two Irish gals who knew all the old R+B tunes the restaurant was playing. It made me happy that the tunes won't be forgotten.

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9-passenger van left at 10. Mostly gringos. I sat up front with Elias, the driver. We made one stop in Andes, and a bathroom stop. No AC, windows down, I was sweltering. I was on the sun side the whole way. Driving north to the junction I was on the east side. Driving south I was on the west side, but the sun had crossed to that side!

Driver played pretty OK music. Got a kick out of Sound of Silence in Spanish. At one point the cicadas were so loud I had to put in earplugs! I was not feeling great. At one point it was  $93^{\circ}$  outside...

Didn't expect that. There are so many microclimates here. Hit a few construction delays. Got on a nice toll road with several booths. One cost 9100.

At our bathroom stop I thought the driver said there wouldn't be time for lunch, but in fact he said he was planning to eat lunch. Thinking we were in a hurry I grabbed a cookie (stale & awful), and an ice cream bar b/c it was so hot. The driver had fish soup. 40 minute stop. Chatted with a couple my age from the UK.

Got to Manizales station at 2:45. Bought a ticket on the cable car that is right there (3200 pesos) to Fundadores way up a hill. Nice young man helped me get on the correct car.  $79^{\circ}$  here. It was

## Manizales

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a 15-min walk to Golden Frog hostel, along congested streets (and noisy too). The city has half a million people. I have ~~at~~ a three-person room to myself (no bunks). Fairly quiet, on third floor, bright colors. It's an old building. The wood floor of my room is red. All checked in by 3:30. Shower and one-hour nap!

met Luis, Colombian guy who tried to talk me into one of his pyramid energy healing treatments. Made a reservation for Recinto de Pensamientos tomorrow. Bought groceries - long lines at 7 pm. Got a sachet of cream of mushroom soup, which tasted great on my throat. Had a horrible coughing fit (actually two today), and sure hope that's the last of that.

The hostel is 60k (\$16) per night. It has a large kitchen with stove + fridge, and various common areas. There are quite a few rooms but not too many staying here. All on one level with a small terrace on the roof.

Tues Mar 3 57°

Up at 6 after a pretty good night with only one small coughing episode, but grateful I had the room to myself, so I didn't have to worry about waking others. Felt sort of normal.

walked the short two blocks to check out the large + impressive cathedral. Always surprises me to what extent colonized people accept

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the religion of their colonizers.

Taxi to El Recinto del Pensamiento, about 30 minutes from town. 28k. Arrived at 8:20, hung out til they opened at 9. Taxis here use meters + I was told they are honest + safe. The city was surprisingly quiet at 8 am, with not much traffic.

The Recinto is an eco park, 35k entry, reservation + guide required. Saw glossy ibis + woodpecker. (So many men here look like the evil Colonel Barragán in the series *La Niña*.)

The two-hour tour was in Spanish. There were 6 of us plus Felipe, our young and enthusiastic guide, recently graduated with a degree in biology. First we saw the giant bamboo pavilion (used as an event space). Then we climbed a trail into the cloud forest and saw lots of beautiful orchids. The butterfly enclosure was great, and I loved the hummingbird feeders. The Japanese garden had nice bonsai but otherwise didn't do much for me. The biggest thrill was seeing an Andean motmot! I got to stare at it for a few minutes. Gorgeous bird.

We're at 7100 feet and it was a nice cool morning. Felipe showed me where to catch the bus back to town. 3200 pesos. Back hostel around 12:30 for soup, bread, and a nap. 71° at 2:30.

# Manizales

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## Miscellaneous notes:

Police wear black & neon green and often ride in pairs on motos.

Gays & queers seem well accepted here, is my impression.

Extensive tattoos are surprisingly common, on men & women.

Colombia is a clean country: cities, roads, streets, sidewalks, bathrooms.

My driver's license has often sufficed for ID in lieu of my passport.

I'm getting better at rolling my rs!

Walked 20 minutes up to Chipre Tower, on a hill above town. Nice wide sidewalks up there, lined with vendors, as it's a popular spot for strolling and watching sunsets. 13k senior rate to go to the top (I chose elevator). Nice young woman gave me an overview of the town and what I was seeing. Clouds, so no distant peaks visible, but nice views of the city.

Had a piece of not-bad poppyseed cake (10k) at the cafe at the base, thinking I'd wait and watch the sunset, but around 5 it started raining. When it didn't show signs of stopping I headed back to the hostel. Apple and peanut butter for dinner - couldn't find an open restaurant with veggies. Hostel very quiet. Still have my own room. I'm paying 60k per night (#1b).

Wed. Mar. 4

Tough night with lots of coughing. Up at 6, leave at 7:15. Walk to the Fundadores cable car station, this time on a pretty pleasant semi-pedestrian street lined with shops. Great vistas from the cable car.

Direct bus to Pereira cost \$5.50 and left at 8:20. Some blue sky, not so common here at this time of year. While they don't have seasons here, people talk about winter/summer, dry/rainy. Not sure which we're in - I get different answers depending on who I ask.

Lots of bicycle riders on the roads here, dressed in lycra. Often see them drafting trucks, directly in the exhaust stream! (I sometimes feel like traveling to places with bad air takes months off my life.) Colombia's Tour de France win in 2019 is still a source of huge national pride, and perhaps an inspiration to riders.

Several toll booths. At one I saw a car pay \$4.

I'm at the stage of this cold where my ears are plugged. Feel about 70% - a bit tired, sinus pressure, chest sore.

Big tree fell over road, but they had already cleared one lane in each direction. Driver listening to fairly pleasant Colombian traditional music - all sappy love songs!

More crews weeding with screens. There are miles of roads to trim & it must employ a lot of people.

Things that Colombian people say a lot: chévere, listo, vale, muy amable.

I learned that day lilies are native here. They look beautiful lining the roads or medians.

Arrive in Pereira at 9:40<sup>(1hr 20 min)</sup>. I now know to go straight to the info booth to ask which companies go to my destination. There are cable cars here too. People say it's a nice city, but I couldn't tell. Just looked like a busy city to me.

Bus to Salento cost 14k and took 55 minutes. Left at 10:05. Smaller bus with tight seats. Couldn't see much scenery. Wore earplugs b/c the bus engine was very loud. 71° at 10 am & stayed that way all day.

Picked up a bunch more passengers at the Salento junction then headed up a windy mountain road. Pulled into the small bus station at 11:10. Enjoyed the walk to the hostel. It's a small town of about 7000, probably more with all the tourists. It's got a lot of old hippie charm. Altitude 6200 feet. The main plaza is undergoing renovation & is all torn up, but I bet it will be really nice when it's done.

Splurged on a private room at Tralala Hostel. At a little over \$20 a night, totally worth it. Small but has private bath, wall

hooks, shelf/power/light switch next to bed.  
Had cream of veggie soup with bread at Serendipia, on the bustling & fun pedestrian street. 20k with tip. Then a shower (hot!). Then walked the 200 steps up to a mirador (with the obligatory stations of the cross along the way). Another mirador nearby had stunning view of a valley below the town. Gorgeous. I stared for a while.

Passed a massage place and made a reservation for Friday. After a one-hour siesta I walked up the hill and ordered a Buddha Bowl at Coco Bowl: greens galore topped with garbanzos, quinoa, carrot, avocado, sauteed zuke, & onion, tofu, sunnies, sesame, microgreens. Deelish, though a tad vinegary. 33k+tip. The nice server brought me a glass of cold water when she heard me coughing.

Cooling off at 6 pm after a light rain. I've been getting a lot of use out of my umbrella.

On the way back I passed a place with Carbonera Valley tours for 200k. The hostel charged 250k. I had to pay to secure my spot. I had already made a reservation at the hostel but hadn't paid anything. I went back to cancel & it was awkward b/c it turns out that the hostel gets a 50k commission. Now I know to book directly and not thru a hostel, to avoid the

commission. Turns out that other companies in town charge even more for the same tour.

Lots of French people in town & at the hostel. Made myself some hot cocoa (with water) and sat in the common area to read. Chatted with ~~Julie~~<sup>Julie</sup>, Carlos, & Guillaume, who are probably going on the same tour tomorrow. Raining hard. Sound of horses clip clopping down the street.

I'm reaching several conclusions about future travels. One is that a private room is awfully nice. Two is that an organized tour can ensure you see more things in a shorter time and don't miss out on things that require too much planning ahead (like Los Nevados Natl. Park).

Thurs Mar 5 58° at 6 am

My clothes feel damp in the mornings lately. Guess there's a lot of moisture in the air.

Popped up to the cemetery but it was closed, plus didn't look interesting. Streets still puddled from night ~~pl~~ rain. On one street every door had tour signs. So many tour companies here and so many tour options! Also noticed that many sidewalks are stamped with cute designs.

Carbonera Valley tour left about 9:15.

Six of us in back of Jeep on padded seats, including the guide (he actually stood on the back), one person plus driver up front. It was a much longer ride than I'd expected - almost three hours - and I got very uncomfortable after a while. Also the road was really rough. But it was fun

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and exciting. We drove up to a pass called La Línea, at almost 11,000 feet. It got chilly. On the way we stopped for views of Salento nestled in green hills below and the cloud-covered valley on the Salento side of the pass - Andean cloud forest.

As soon as we crossed the pass the sky cleared and the air warmed. We had entered a microclimate, but still a cloud forest. The scenery was breathtaking. Pics won't do it justice and neither will words. The palms are huge, grouped in clusters are standing like sentinels. Unfortunately they are threatened by cattle grazing. There are a few stands of intact forest, with a healthy mix of the palms plus other trees & understory plants. Our biologist guide, Daniel, was excellent.

We hiked for about 3.5 hours, mostly downhill, and to a waterfall, stopping for a box lunch picnic of a lentil burger (not great but edible). The terrain was often steep & rough, with two tricky stream crossings and a very steep descent to the waterfall. It was about at my limit and I can see why some tour companies say you must be under 60.

Saw wonderful birds: yellow-eared parrots, green jays, black-billed mountain toucans (!!!), and Andean motmot!

It was an amazing day of incredible scenery and camaraderie. Really liked Clarissa from Denmark.

On the drive back (only two hours) ~~to~~ I sat up front and it was more comfortable. Still I was exhausted when we got back to town at 5:45. Ate my leftover bowl from last night, and declined when Julie kindly invited me to join them for dinner.

The 8.5-hour tour ~~last~~ cost 200k (\$54). Totally worth it. Daniel said this road was controlled by guerillas until the 2016 peace agreement. Saw saddled horses trotting home, trailed by a German shepherd. These dogs are very popular here. No rangy streets dogs, even those running loose are healthy.

Fri Mar 6 59° low 70° high

First normal sleep night since cold began. No coughing, clear nose, only ~~got~~<sup>woke</sup> up once (to pee). Up at 6, out at 7. Wet road - I think rain just stopped. Walking loosens up phlegm and I'm coughing up gunk.

Quiet country road ~~to~~ past coffee farms. Green & pleasantly cool. Birds! Thrushes, parrots (zipping thru the sky), yellow-faced grassquit, saffron finch, lapwing, rufous-collared sparrow, slate-throated redstart, summer tanager, caracara, hawk, yellow-bellied seedeater, phoebes, kingbird, and two motmots a few feet away! Constant weed whacker noise from clearing

~~climbing~~ around coffee plants. In this climate plants grow like crazy. So much barbed wire - does it really have to be barbed? I wish barbed wire were illegal.

Down, down, down the road went. Stopped at Entre Bosques coffee farm to ogle the view and birds, and fend off a friendly German Shepherd who wanted to play and jump. At 9 am a few Jeeps began passing by loaded down with tourists heading somewhere. A few bugs.

Made it to El Ocaso coffee farm at 9, after two hours of slow walking. It's the most expensive & popular tour the say. But I wasn't interested in a tour and instead followed a steep, slippery trail down to the river. Felt like a miracle that I didn't fall. Had to crouch a few times to keep my center of gravity low.

A narrow, bouncy bridge crossed the roaring Quindío River. Followed a quiet road along the river past camping and country hotels. At one point the road was bisected by a 30-foot deep hole big enuf to swallow a bus, with only ~~a~~ flimsy caution tape barely visible on each side, and I doubt visible at all at night! A footpath went around it.

I was tired when I got to the road at Boquía at 10:45, after four hours of walking. Ordered a mango juice at a restaurant by the road. Lk for a big

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glass of mango pureed with water, no sugar. It tasted amazing! Then waited for a bus. The first one didn't stop b/c it was full. The 10-minute ride to Salento (uphill) cost 2500.

Headed straight to Coco Bowl & ordered stirfry (34k with tip). Delicious but just a smidge spicy, which got my sinuses going - probably a good thing. Shrooms, carrot, red pepper, onion, soy crumbles, with rice. Suddenly a flash and an earsplitting bang right overhead - everyone had a moment of shock until we realized it was thunder.

Back to hostel for siesta, and the skies opened. Massage at 4. 120k with tip for one hour relaxing massage. Had a headache all day & it went away. I think it worked better than deep tissue on my neck. Sprinkling when I left. Back to hostel for hot-ish shower. Yogurt & granola for dinner. Chatted with a sweet young Irish couple. Then a Whats App video chat with Inese. She had to cancel her trip to Oman due to new Middle East war.

Sat Mar 7 57° at 6 am.

Up at 5:10, on the bus to Armenia at 6. 8k one hour. Just getting light. Some coughing in the night but no headache or sore neck.

Bus to Bogotá left at 9:15. 84k. On the way out of town saw a young woman sitting on the sidewalk eating garbage. I can't begin to imagine that level of desperation.

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Bus only 1/4 full. They carefully checked the passenger list before leaving. Bus clean, comfortable, seats recline, has bathroom.

Grilled arepas a popular morning street food. Full-face moto helmets are worn by most riders, including kid passengers. One toll booth was 13k for cars.

The stretch to Alto de Línea pass (3200 meters) was gorgeous. Slow mountain road with lots of tunnels. A bit chilly with AC blasting but I closed the vents. Steep green slopes planted with coffee, bananas, other crops.

Stopped for 50 minutes in Ibaque. 72° here. Ate my sandwich. Good road. Finally saw a solar farm.

Started creeping into Bogotá at 3 and got to the Salitre terminal at 4. Called a taxi via Uber (met a guy who told me ~~taxi~~<sup>taxi</sup> is cheaper). But he didn't come to my location. It was pouring rain & I was running all over across the street, couldn't find him, and he canceled.

Back to terminal. An older guy with a friendly face says "taxi?" Fearing another pickup snafu if I tried Uber, I said yes. Turns out the taxis are on strike, ~~are~~ protesting high gas prices. He said taxis who are working are incurring the wrath of other drivers, so he was driving his private car, and had

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parked it a ways away. At this point I was starting to wonder... He wouldn't give me a price, so I just told him I'd pay 38k (\$10), which is what the Uber taxi would have been. He didn't push back too hard. His car was kind of a beater. Took about 30 minutes. Poring rain, big puddles in streets.

He flirted with me, which felt quite awkward. Said I was so strong & healthy. I kept steering to safer topics. He also badmouthed all the Venezuelan immigrants, saying they were all bad. I very much doubt that is true, and said so. (Have a little empathy for their desperation.)

Hostel at 5. Same room, same bed. Lentil soup for dinner & ran into Cecil! We had fun getting caught up on our adventures since almost three weeks ago.

Tomorrow is Intl. Women's Day and the hostel made free drinks for all the ladies. They made me one w/o alcohol. Back in my room, the two Irish girls from Jardín were there, planning their next stop: Ecuador. Enjoyed listening to them chat with their accents.

Sunday, Mar. 8 51° low 64° high

Omi, Lina's mom, met me at the hostel at 7 am and we walked up to the Monserrate ticket booth. I could really feel the altitude & my recent cold. I was struggling up the hill. Took the funicular up

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(12 k for seniors). Cloudy with sprinkles, but expansive view of the city. Crowded on a Sunday. Many vendors plus food court at the top. Tried cheese with jam & arequipe. <sup>yum</sup> I was hungry, only having eaten a handful of nuts at the hostel. We walked down in a pretty dense crowd. Many people climbing up, some even jogging. Would have killed me today. It was cold up there at over 10,000 feet. I began to worry I had a fever or was getting pneumonia because I was alternately sweating or shivering, taking my coat on & off. Low energy. Going down was tiring! The stone steps were a little slippery so we had to be careful. Many people blaring bluetooth speakers, many vendors using loudspeakers. Turns out the hummingbird path is somewhere up top, costs about \$20, and there aren't so many hummingbirds on busy Sundays.

We walked to an indoor food court and had hot chocolate with bread. yum. Omi paid. She took me along <sup>carretera</sup> ~~the~~ (street? ~~avenue?~~) once an upscale shopping street, now filled with street vendors. She was disappointed to see the changes (for the worse).

We came upon a vendor selling chontaduro, palm fruits that look and taste like winter squash, cooked, peeled, and eaten with salt & honey. It grew on

me. Super nutritious, pricey at 75¢ each. They're a bit smaller than a tennis ball.

Today is election day for congress and many things are closed, including the National History museum (I was relieved b/c I didn't have the energy for a museum). We walked all over the Macarena neighborhood. Some areas were all closed up and empty on Sunday, others were busy. Popped into Iglesia de San Diego, ca. 1606. San Diego neighborhood. Had a very cool golden chapel enclosure.

Saw the bull ring (now closed due to cruelty to animals, but Omi remembers coming here with her dad as a child), and walked through the tranquil adjacent park.

Back to the food court for a wonderful lunch of grilled chicken breast (tender & perfectly seasoned) with yucca (delicious), potatoes, and rice. We split a perfectly ripe avocado Omi bought from a vendor on the street. Delicious meal and I brought home half for dinner. 77k with tip (I paid 50).

Back to hostel so Omi could pee before walking back to the Transmilenio and her 45-minute ride home. Said goodbye about 1:30. She gifted me a bottle of special nail "polish" strengthener. Started raining at 2:30, after she was safely on her bus.

Walked 8 miles today! Hoping I didn't overdo it. Really enjoying the music - so much better when owner, Andy, is here. Light rock 70's-80's. One-hour siesta, dinner, read, torrential rain. Lying low after a long day - still tired and

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coughing up gunk. Alarm set for 4:50 am.  
Only one other dorm mate tonight.

Mon. Mar. 9

48 k ride to airport (\$13). These days you have to pay extra on many airlines if you want to choose your seat. I got assigned a window seat in a full row. Luckily I didn't have to pee on the 5 hour flight. They served a pretty gross meal of egg with an incredible slice of ham(?) with some mushroom + tomato. The fruit cup and roll with butter were good!

Arrive Houston 1:30. They're playing country music in the airport! Hang out til boarding at 7:30. Land at 11 after a 4.5 hour uncomfortable flight.

Only a bag of pretzels, and seats don't recline. Watched Spinal Tap 2. Not great but still fun. In bed by midnight!