



# Speaking good Spanish isn't enough, you also have to listen

A bus ride through Colombia taught Michael Evans that despite knowing a language well, it's still important to pay close attention when locals are trying to tell you something

**Michael Evans**

Saturday 25 January 2014 09.01 GMT

I recently found myself stuck in southern Colombia during a student strike. Protesters were blocking the Pan-American Highway, so I had no choice but to wait it out. After a few days, I found a bus company that would take me to Cali, just north of the road blockage. Relief washed over me, and a mental image of my comfortable bed came into focus.

Escape solutions headed to my mental back door and a new set of thoughts replaced them: "From Cali, I can go to Buga, stay overnight at the Buga Hostel, then on to Ibagué the next day, where I can catch a taxi back home to Líbano. I'll make beef stew for dinner when I get there." I had been in English gear all morning and didn't realise it was time to shift back to Spanish. I vaguely remember standing at the ticket counter, seeing the face of a dark-haired man mouthing something, as he took my money and handed me a ticket.

As I sat down in the bus, an invasive thought came to the forefront of my mind: "Get off the bus now, just get off." I had a feeling that, in my haste to get unstuck, I'd missed some tidbit of information. But I wasn't sure what it might be. I convinced myself I was being silly, took a Dramamine tablet and promptly fell asleep just as the bus pulled out of the station.

About an hour later, I awoke, bouncing up and down in my seat. We were on a dirt road and dust was pouring in through the windows. At that moment, I realised that the voiceless talking head at the ticket counter was probably trying to tell me the bus would be taking an alternate route, because protesters were blocking the highway. In that part of Colombia, areas east and west of the Pan-American are trouble zones, so I knew our detour was not taking us to Disneyland.

At times, it seems as though my brain's hardwiring can only handle English, which presents a challenge since I live and work in Colombia. The problem may stem from an underlying fear of saying or doing something stupid when speaking Spanish. Unfortunately, such fears have a way of turning into self-fulfilling prophecies.

To work around the hardwiring issue, I send a message to my brain, telling it to listen and think in Spanish, whenever I step out into the world. It's my way of switching gears. It works, at least most of the time. But when an unexpected complication rears its ugly head, my brain tends to switch back into full English gear to find a solution. Rapid-fire mental dialogue takes over, presenting options and likely outcomes - all, of course, in English. I inadvertently block out every voice around me, even when I'm engaged in conversation. This is the point at which a new misadventure often begins.

As a travel writer, I work hard to reassure my readers that much of Colombia is reasonably safe. I often use the analogy that staying safe is like avoiding a dangerous neighbourhood. Just don't go there. It's that easy. That is, it's easy as long as you don't tune out when someone - perhaps a ticket vendor - is trying to offer you important information.

As we travelled along the ridge of a mountain, a small city appeared in the valley below. "Suuuuarreeeee," the man sitting next to me said. The other passengers whipped out their cellphones and started snapping pictures, as if it they were marveling at some mythical place they never thought they'd see. They began talking amongs themselves, a chatter so thick with emotion that I couldn't make out a single word.

But the name "Suarez" immediately rang a bell. Actually, it was more like lights blazing in front of my eyes and a siren going off in both ears. I was in the middle of a red zone. A little more than two years ago, the Colombian military killed the leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc), Colombia's most notorious rebel organisation, in Suarez. And a month before my trip, the army had discovered and broken up several Farc camps in the forests outside Suarez.

As I looked around the bus, I noticed that all of the other passengers were indigenous people. And there I sat, with my gleaming white skin and a US passport in my pocket. For a brief moment, I imagined rebels stopping and raiding the bus. They would kidnap me and take me deep into the jungle, where I'd live in a bamboo cage for the next few years. I would adopt a howler monkey to keep me company. I would name him Lorenzo, dress him in a grass skirt, and teach him to fetch fruit from nearby trees.

But none of that happened. The bus continued down the mountain, drove through the weathered streets of Suarez and made it safely to Cali. My suitcase was a dusty mess, but I was unperturbed.

My unexpected detour didn't sway my opinion about Colombia's safety. I still consider it a great place for a holiday. But I did learn a new lesson about adopting a second language and living in a foreign land: always mind the gears.

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# Seven Things You Need to Know About Package Tours

by Michael Evans / Published April 05, 2013 / Bankrate.com



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### So, You're Thinking About a Package Tour

When you think of a tour vacation, you might imagine retirees dressed in Hawaiian shirts and Bermuda shorts packed on a bus making an exhausting number of stops at tourist traps. But today you can find package tours for different age groups and trips designed for people interested in doing something more than seeing the usual sights.

If your career leaves you with little time to travel, a package tour may help you get the most out of your vacation. "Package tours are best suited for someone who doesn't have a lot of time but wants to experience a lot," says Rich Sorensen, a spokesman for the Europe Through the Back Door tour company launched by author and TV host Rick Steves.

For families and young adults, package tours can provide cost savings while eliminating many of the hassles of independent travel.

Certain types of package tours are not for everyone. However, the market offers all sorts of options, from fully guided, one-size-fits-all tours to custom packages that put you in control.

Before choosing a package tour, there are a few things to know. So let's get going!

### You Can Leave the Planning to Them

With tours, you can do as much or as little planning as you choose. Fully guided tours enable you to leave the logistics to someone else, though you must stay with a group on a set schedule much of the time. Many packages include accommodations, attraction tickets, ground transportation, tour guides and several meals -- all rolled into one price.

"It's a very efficient way for some people to travel who lack the time to plan or the travel skills to feel confident about using time wisely," Sorensen says.

If you're not the most experienced traveler, a guided tour can reduce your stress level, so you can relax and enjoy the trip. You won't have to worry about language barriers or missed connections because a professional will be escorting you.

Some tour operators offer semiguided packages, which cover major travel arrangements and accommodations but leave the sightseeing to you.

If you want to be completely hands-on, a travel agency in your area can help design a custom tour package, allowing you to choose all travel dates and stops. Besides helping reserve flights and accommodations, an agent can pre-purchase vacation activities, such as city tours or helicopter rides.

### You Can Take a Vacation Geared to Your Interests

Whether you're an adrenaline junkie or a laid-back artisan, you can find a tour geared to your interests. For example, Silver Lining Tours leads storm-chasing tours through the central U.S. "Tornado Alley," and Arena Travel offers trips for knitters to Scotland's Shetland Isles.

Before buying a special-interest tour, find out about any special requirements. For example, a backcountry trek might require previous wilderness hiking experience, or a photo safari might recommend special gear, such as a hard-shell camera case.

Social and professional organizations often sponsor tours geared toward their members' common interests. For example, Carole Harris, of Columbia, Tenn., visited Scotland on a tour with her then-husband, who was involved with the Clan Wallace Society, an organization for Scottish history buffs.

"My ex-husband was interested in the William Wallace 'Braveheart' story (a la the Mel Gibson movie), and we thought a bus tour was a great way to see the country without having to drive. We had a blast," Harris says.

Tour operators who offer more conventional package tours sometimes arrange custom packages for organizations. Groups that purchase these custom tours typically can choose the travel route and attractions and even supply their own guide.

### You Can Get a Great Deal

Because they buy travel services in bulk, tour operators often are able to negotiate cut-rate pricing that can mean big savings for you. "We get competitive rates from hotels that are centrally located that would be priced significantly higher if someone were to walk up and book them on their own," says Karoline Bowman of AESU, a tour operator specializing in vacations for young adults. A prime location can reduce other costs, too, such as taxi rides.

Group tours that include ground transportation, some meals and a tour guide can be cheaper than putting a trip together piecemeal because costs are divided among several people. Some package tours can offer special value because they include attractions not open to the general public. For example, a tour company called Viator claims a special arrangement allows it to offer a tour of secret rooms at the Vatican.

Still, if you're looking to save every dollar and cut every corner, independent travel might be your cheapest option. "If they're the type of traveler who's willing to stay in hostels and little (bed-and-breakfasts) that you can't get in a package, then they will definitely save money," says Jonathan Klein, owner of the Now, Voyager travel agency in San Francisco.

### You Need a Tour Operator You Can Trust

A good tour experience requires homework. If you book with a bad tour operator, your vacation might turn into a travel disaster.

"Book with a reputable company, one that's been in business a while, one that has experience and contacts on the ground in these locations. Ask about who their tour guides are: Are they native speakers, are they employees of the company?" says Bowman.

Ask friends, family members and co-workers about their experiences with tour companies and travel agencies. Look for recommendations and warnings on online travel forums, and check the company's rating with the Better Business Bureau.

When you find a tour prospect, find out how large a group you'll be traveling with. Group size is important because some companies run a numbers game, filling buses to the brim and treating passengers like cattle.

"A company that markets skillfully and ethically will convey in its promotional material what sorts of people will find their tours to be most rewarding," says Sorensen. "A company that is not skilled at this will simply try to attract everyone, which I think is a recipe for disappointed customers."

### You'll Have to Read Some Fine Print

Before you book a tour, explore all those "what if" details. Will you get a full or partial refund if you have to cancel? Will the company reimburse you if the tour misses stops due to weather? Can you transfer to another tour if your plans change?

Go online to check out places mentioned in the itinerary because the tour operator might be skimming on something important.

While Harris enjoyed her Scotland travels, the accommodations could have been better. "The innkeepers and hotel staff were all very good. Just terrible beds."

Shadier tour operators may not tell you everything you need to know, so find out exactly what your tour package includes. For instance, travel agencies in Cusco, Peru, sell a tour that takes tourists to several historic sites in the city, located near the famed Inca ruins at Machu Picchu. But some agencies neglect to tell passengers that the price doesn't include entrance fees at the attractions.

"This is not an isolated problem, so always confirm that all the costs have been covered," says Susan Birkenshaw of YourTravelQuest, a travel agency based outside Toronto.

Give yourself time to think it all over before making a final decision.

### You Can't Forget Travel Insurance

A great tour guide can give you the lowdown on sights, but if you sprain your ankle while tango dancing, you'll need a doctor. If your tour package doesn't include travel insurance, purchase a policy on your own before you leave home.

Insurance plans vary but generally can help if you need to cancel your trip or if you have unexpected costs due to issues such as injuries, stolen baggage or missed airline connections.

If you've never bought travel insurance, ask your travel agent or tour operator to recommend a company. You also can look for recommendations in a travel guidebook, such as Frommer's, or there are websites where you can compare rates from several companies.

When looking at plans, consider all your travel needs and activities. If you won't be traveling with many valuables and don't plan to drive, a basic policy might be all you need.

Plans that are more expensive typically provide coverage for more misfortunes and can offer higher coverage rates. If you plan to carry expensive camera gear, jewelry or computer equipment on your package tour vacation, you might need to increase coverage for lost, stolen or damaged items.

### You May Not Really Be the Tour Type

Group tours are perfect for some people but not everyone. It's important to be flexible and personable -- and you may ultimately decide that's just not you.

A willingness to step out of your comfort zone is essential on a group tour. "We're really looking to appeal to people who have a playful sense of discovery," says Sorensen. "One of our little slogans is 'Great guides, small groups, no grumps.'"

Typically, the tour operator has lined up the people you'll travel with, the departure times, attractions you'll visit and the hotels you'll sleep in. And staying on schedule is crucial.

"If you are looking for the experience of wandering off the beaten path and getting lost in the little towns of Europe, then a package tour might not be for you," says Bowman.

For many travelers, group tours offer the lowdown on sights, and social experience they're looking for in a vacation. "If you enjoy meeting new folks or traveling with friends and you don't mind sticking to a predetermined schedule, a package tour can be really enjoyable," says Harris.

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Invest Well, and Live the Good Life For Less**

**1st edition**

**Author: Michael Evans**

**Editor: Nazareen Heazle**

**Designer: Lorie Drozdenko**

**Cover photos: ©Fotolia.com/jkraft5**

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**©Fotolia.com/Butch**

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ISBN: 978-1-905720-81-1

120B003154

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# CHAPTER TEN

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## Traveler's Colombia

### Getting to Colombia

Travel to and from Colombia is becoming easier every year. Dozens of airlines operate direct flights from major North American and European cities to Colombian destinations such as Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Cartagena, and even Armenia, located in the heart of the Coffee Triangle. In low season, you can often find flights between Colombia and the United States for as little as \$450 round trip. Flights between Bogotá and Miami take less than four hours.

Let's take a quick look at a few airlines that offer direct flights to Colombia's three major cities.

#### **Bogotá's El Dorado International Airport:**

<b>Airline</b>	<b>Direct flights to:</b>
American Airlines	Miami, Dallas/Fort Worth
Avianca	Miami, New York, Madrid, Fort Lauderdale, London, New York, Washington, Mexico City, Orlando
Spirit Airlines	Fort Lauderdale
Copa Airlines	Mexico City, Cancun, Panama City
Delta	Atlanta, New York
United	Houston, Miami, Newark
Aeroméxico	Mexico City
Air France	Paris
Air Canada	Toronto
Jet Blue	Fort Lauderdale, Orlando
KLM	Amsterdam

## Medellín's José María Córdova International Airport:

Airline	Direct flights to:
American Airlines	Miami
JetBlue Airways	Fort Lauderdale
Avianca	Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, Miami, New York, Madrid
Spirit Airlines	Fort Lauderdale

## Cali's Alfonso Bonilla Aragón International Airport:

Airline	Direct flights to:
American Airlines	Miami
Avianca	Miami, New York, Madrid
Copa Airlines	Panama City, Panama
KLM	Amsterdam

## Getting around Colombia

In the past, Colombians typically traveled around the country by bus, because flights within the country were too expensive. Bus travel is still quite popular and multitudes of companies offer routes that will connect you with just about any city or small town in the country. The exceptions are isolated places such as towns and cities in the Amazon region.

Due to Colombia's strict safety regulations, most bus companies operate fleets of well-maintained buses and vans. Nonetheless, all bus companies are not created equal, so it's worth paying a little extra to travel in style. Fares vary widely and tend to run higher when traveling from south to north. Colombia's best bus companies include:

- Bolivariano; *website: [www.bolivariano.com.co](http://www.bolivariano.com.co)*
- Copetran; *website: [www.copetran.com.co](http://www.copetran.com.co)*
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## Domestic flights

A new air carrier, VivaColombia (*website: [www.vivacolombia.co](http://www.vivacolombia.co)*), began operating domestically in 2009, offering flights so cheap that it often makes

more sense to fly between major cities, rather than spend hours on the bus. Best of all, other airlines, including LAN and Avianca, work hard to compete with VivaColombia's prices, so you often have numerous options for low-cost domestic flights.

Competitive airfares make it easier to see more of the country and give you more options when searching for a city to live in, because you're just a short flight away from most major cities.

Here's a glance at a few of the great domestic airfares you'll find in Colombia:

Airline	Round trip airfare
VivaColombia	\$51—Bogotá to Medellín
EasyFly	\$110—Medellín to Pereira
VivaColombia	\$61—Cali to Bogotá
VivaColombia	\$98—Cali to Cartagena
Avianca	\$103—Bucaramanga to Medellín
EasyFly	\$149—Barranquilla to Bucaramanga
LAN	\$82—Bogotá to Cúcuta

### Inner city transport

Even most small towns have a local bus service. And most large cities have multiple public and private bus companies that can take you anywhere you need to go. Since public transportation is cheap—less than \$1 in most cities—local transportation costs won't put a dent in your pocketbook.

Major cities have rapid transit systems that can take you from one side of the city to the other in just a few minutes. For instance, Medellín has the metro system, a rapid transit train system that cuts across the concrete jungle. Bogotá has Transmilenio, a wide-reaching bus system that uses dedicated traffic lanes.

Local governments regulate taxi fares and most towns and cities have minimum fares. For example, the minimum fare in my small town is COP 3,000 (\$1.50) and Pereira's minimum fare is COP 4,200 (\$2.10). Taxis in most cities have meters, along with rate charts in the passenger section of the car. That makes it easy for you to see the rate you must pay.

If you decide to buy a car, expect to pay through the nose at the pumps, because Colombia's gasoline prices often exceed \$5 a gallon.

## Places to go, things to see

You can spend a lifetime in Colombia and still not see everything. There is something for everyone here. If you love cultural attractions such as museums, music, theatre, and dance, Colombia has you covered. If you're an outdoor lover, you can discover everything from Amazon jungles to pristine Caribbean beaches to snowcapped volcanoes. And if you're a history buff, you can explore colonial era battlegrounds and pre-Columbian archeological sites.

## Explore colonial Colombia

You'll see remnants of Colombia's colonial era almost everywhere you go. A colonial home here, a colonial building there, and lots of plaques marking historical sites. Attempts at preservation has been mixed here. Some cities have well-preserved historical centers, while many small towns have allowed their colonial homes and buildings to deteriorate into piles of termite-infested sawdust. Nonetheless, if the charm and rich history of the colonial era takes your fancy, you'll never run out of places to explore in Colombia.

Here are a few of our favorite places to visit:

### Cartagena

A British expat living in Colombia refers to Cartagena as a place for movie stars. That's because celebrities such as Mick Jagger, Anderson Cooper, Anthony Bourdain, and Bill Gates are often sighted there. A few have reportedly fallen so in love with Cartagena that they've bought homes there. And you need to be a well-paid entertainer or business tycoon to live in Cartagena's historic district, because homes start at around \$1 million. But, you don't need to be a millionaire to spend a relaxing weekend soaking up all the culture and charm Cartagena has to offer.

Even during Colombia's darkest years, the rich and famous visited Cartagena to soak up the Caribbean sun and delve into the city's rich culture. Nobel Prize winning author Gabriel García Márquez romanticized Cartagena in his books and stars such Rita Hayworth often visited to attend the annual film festival. Cartagena has also served as the backdrop for many memorable films, including *Love in the Time of Cholera*, *The Mission*, and *Romancing the Stone*.

Many of the brightly colored homes and buildings in Cartagena's historic district date to the early 16th century. In 1984, UNESCO deemed Cartagena a World Heritage Site for its authentic fortifications and stunning original

monuments. Here's a shortlist of must-see attractions you should check out when visiting Cartagena:

- Bolívar Square
- Gold and Archaeological Museum
- Castle of San Felipe de Barajas
- Palace of the Inquisition
- San Pedro Claver Cathedral
- Temple of Santo Domingo
- Mucura Island

But you don't need to wear holes in your shoes to enjoy Cartagena's rich environment. Sitting in an outdoor café, you can enjoy a plate of fresh seafood, while listening to traditional *champeta* music and watching the celebrities stroll by. Or perhaps you can take a sunset cruise or rejuvenate your body, mind, and soul in one of Cartagena's luxury spas. Cartagena is the capital of the Bolívar department—home to nearly 1 million people—so you'll also find plenty of modern-day conveniences and attractions outside the historic district.

Visiting Cartagena isn't cheap, but it doesn't have to be expensive, either. Rooms in corporate-owned or boutique hotels cost between \$150 and \$300, but you can also find wonderful accommodation for under \$100 per night.

## Salento

Colombians call Salento “The Father of Quindío” because it was the first town founded in the Quindío department, back in 1842. But unlike Cartagena, Salento is home to just a few thousand people, offering lots of small-town charm—the perfect place to enjoy a relaxing weekend.

Many of Salento's original colonial homes have survived, particularly near the town center. But North American rock stars aren't snatching up Salento's colonial gems for Latin American getaways. In fact, even in the main plaza, it's common to see white-haired Colombians sitting on the second-floor balconies of their homes. Such quaintness is one aspect that makes Salento such a charming place to visit.

In the main plaza, a statue of Simón Bolívar—*El Libertador*—watches over the town, surrounded by brightly colored colonial buildings.

Salento lies in the heart of Colombia's Coffee Triangle. If you're a coffee lover, or simply enjoy breathtaking scenery, you can take a farm tour, where you'll learn all about the coffee growing process. One farm, Finca Don Eduardo (*website: [www.theplantationhousesalento.com/coffee/coffeefarmtours/](http://www.theplantationhousesalento.com/coffee/coffeefarmtours/)*), even offers basic accommodation in a building surrounded by beautiful coffee fields.



On weekends, Colombians in the region flock to Salento to enjoy a plate of trout—the town's most popular dish—and hike in the Cocora Valley which lies on the Los Nevados National Natural Park and is home to Colombia's national tree, the wax palm. These towering beauties grow to heights of 160 feet and live for more than 100 years. Trails snaking through the valley offer a great escape for a weekend hike, or a week of backcountry trekking. Along the way, you'll pass cattle ranches and stately colonial homes. And if you carry on along one main trail, you'll enter a lush rainforest, where you might encounter a host of exotic critters such as pumas, toucans, and spectacled bears.

One of the best ways to enjoy Salento and the surrounding countryside is on horseback. This area has a strong horse culture, which dates back to its colonial roots. Horseback tours start in the main plaza, or you can rent a horse at the mouth of Cocora Valley. Several horseback tour companies even take you along the historic national highway, the very roadway that *Símon Bolívar* traveled. Costs range from \$12 to \$25.

For a small town, Salento has an astounding number of great restaurants, many owned by expats. Steps from the main plaza, you can find great Italian and Indian cuisines, even an American-style diner that serves mouthwatering Philly cheesesteak sandwiches. And after a long day of exploring Salento's colonial past, you can sit back in a café and enjoy a cup of Colombia's world famous coffee.

## Colombia's national parks

Did you know that Colombia is the second most biodiverse nation in the world behind Brazil? Colombia has nearly 2,000 bird species, more than 250 type of palm trees, and almost 3,000 species of vertebrates. And it has nearly 60 protected areas, encompassing more than 55,000 square miles.

If you're an outdoor lover, you'll never run out of natural attractions to explore in Colombia. Sure, you'd expect to find dense jungles and rugged mountains, but what about Colombia's amazing deserts and coral reefs? We can't tell you about all of Colombia's spectacular parks, we'd need to write another book for that, but here are a few breathtaking places you can add to your list of future adventures.

### Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta National Natural Park

Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta Natural Park encompasses almost 1,500 square miles and straddles the borders of the Cesar, Magdalena, and La Guajira departments in northern Colombia. The park has something for everyone. It's not just packed with natural beauty, it's also home to 30,000 members of Colombia's oldest indigenous tribes. In fact, UNESCO declared the park a World Heritage Site and a Biosphere Reserve more than 35 years ago.

You can access Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta Natural Park from the Caribbean city of Santa Marta. The park holds the world's tallest seaside mountain range, reaching heights of nearly 19,000 feet above sea level. It's a favorite destination for all types of outdoor lovers, from bird watchers to mountain climbers. And it's home to an array of exotic creatures, including tapirs, condors, and jaguars.

The park also has an archeological site, called Teyuna Archaeological Park, where scientists from around the world come to study a collection of ancient societies. The Ijka and Kogi tribes still inhabit the park, carrying on spiritual and cultural traditions that have spanned the ages.

Most tourists long to visit the park's main archeological attraction, Ciudad Perdida, which translates to the "Lost City" in English. Located deep inside

the dense jungle, Ciudad Perdida dates to 700 A.D. Back then, the community served as a major city, with as many as 3,000 inhabitants. Tours to Ciudad Perdida require several days of trekking and the park service limits the annual number of tourists that can visit the site. If you're up to the challenge its best to arrange a tour through a qualified travel agency such as Magic Tour Colombia (*website: [www.magictourcolombia.com](http://www.magictourcolombia.com)*).

## Tayrona National Natural Park

Tayrona National Natural Park lies adjacent to Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta Natural Park and encompasses 58 square miles of land and sea. Tayrona's dense forests are home to a variety of animal species, including pumas, bats, deer, condors, and chattering howler monkeys.

Perhaps Tayrona's most sought after attraction is its stunning marine life. Divers come from around the world to explore the park's coral reefs, home to an estimated 1,000 marine creatures.



©Creative Commons/Jorge Lascar

Tayrona National Park attracts divers for its many marine creatures

## Los Nevados National Natural Park

From my home in Líbano, I can see the snowcapped peaks of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano, the centerpiece of Los Nevados National Natural Park. This

Central Andean national park covers 225 square miles and has eight volcanos, two of which are in eruption cycles at the time of this writing. The Tolima volcano, which towers more than 17,000 feet above sea level, is the park's tallest mountain.

Los Nevados is one of Colombia's most diverse national parks, with rainforests at lower elevations and barren, snow-covered granite at higher elevations. And because of its extreme biodiversity, it's the perfect home for a wide variety of plants and animals. You'll find more than 2,000 plant species, living in harmony with creatures such as spectacled bears, mountain tapirs, cougar, condors, yellow-eared parrots, and ruddy ducks.

With such a range of elevations, climates, and terrains, you'll have a wonderful mix of outdoor activities to choose from. Otún Lake is a great place to cast your line for trout and the thermal spring at El Ruiz is the perfect spot for a little natural healing.

You won't find fancy hotels within Los Nevados National Natural Park, but it does have a lodge that offers basic accommodation. Numerous companies in Manizales offer tours, mountain climbing expeditions, and treks through the park.

## **Amacayacu National Natural Park**

You won't need a winter parka to explore Amacayacu National Natural Park. It's located in the heart of Amazonas, where temperatures hover around 80° F year round. The park covers a massive 1,600 square miles, much of which is flooded during the rainy season—November to April.

Amacayacu National Natural Park is one of Colombia's most isolated protected areas. In fact, the only way to get there is via plane to the city of Leticia. From there, you enter the park by boat along the Amazon River. Once you arrive, you'll find yourself surrounded by all the wild beauty the jungle has to offer.

Amacayacu is home to deer, jaguars, tapirs, sloths, pink river dolphins, crocodiles, and more monkeys than you ever wanted to meet. The Ticuna tribe also inhabits the park, living traditional lives in thatched-roofed huts along the river.

The park has only one lodge, operated by Colombia's park service, offering basic accommodation. To visit the park, you must hire a professional guide, which you can arrange in Leticia. Before traveling to Amacayacu, or any other jungle location, it's best to get a yellow fever vaccination. And once you arrive, use mosquito repellants and mosquito nets when sleeping.

## **Gorgona National Natural Park**

Mosquitos are a concern when you visit Gorgona National Natural Park, too, but the biggest threat in this Pacific island park is snakes—thousands and thousands of poisonous snakes. In fact, the presence of so many venomous creatures led Colombian officials to establish a prison there, which operated until 1984. The country's most dangerous criminals served their sentences on the island and only one managed to escape. Authorities transferred the prisoners to the mainland long ago, but the prison remains. Today, the building lies overgrown by thick jungle vegetation—an eerie reminder of its dark past.

Snakes and prisoners don't paint a very pretty picture of a national park, but Gorgona has lots of amazing natural landscapes and creatures to explore and discover. Frequent rains deliver a regular supply of nutrients to Gorgona's soil, creating a thick, rich jungle environment. Gorgona is the exclusive home of the blue anole, a bright-blue lizard. It's also home to sloths, capuchin monkeys, and nearly 150 species of exotic birds.

From August to October, visitors come to Gorgona with one mission in mind—whale watching. During these months around 1,000 humpback whales frolic in the warm waters off the island, along with numerous aquatic friends, including sperm whales, hammerhead sharks, dolphins, and sea lions.

Gorgona Island is located off the coast of Buenaventura and only accessible by boat—a 12-hour voyage. The park has only one lodge so you must arrange your visit through the park service or a travel agency.

## **Iguaque National Natural Park**

You might not expect to see beautiful desert landscapes in Colombia, but that's exactly what you'll find at the Iguaque National Natural Park. Situated in north-central Colombia, the park encompasses 26 square miles, including Lake Iguaque.

Iguaque is more than simply a plant and animal sanctuary; it's also a sacred place. According to the Muisca Indians, Lake Iguaque is the spot where the gods first created water on earth. It is also where an ancient goddess walked from the water and delivered the planet's first child—a boy.

You won't find tour buses, or even roads, in Iguaque, so you'll need to strap on your hiking boots for this amazing outdoor adventure. But don't worry, this region of Colombia enjoys mild temperatures of 53° F to 64° F. Along the trail, you'll discover all types of beautiful flora, including ferns, orchids, myrtles, and lichens, along with numerous bird species.

You'll only have one choice for accommodation in the park, the Iguaque Fauna and Flora Sanctuary and you'll need to make a reservation in advance. The lodge offers basic accommodation, mostly dormitories, as well as camping spots.

## National park fees

Many Colombian national parks charge an entrance fee, which varies widely. Some parks charge as little as \$10, but more remote ones charge much higher rates. Also, park authorities place strict limits on the number of people who can enter certain protected areas within parks. So it's always best to plan your trip in advance to make all necessary arrangements.

## Cultural attractions

Colombians love culture. When world-renowned painter Fernando Botero—a Medellín native, who now lives abroad—steps off a plane in Bogotá, Colombia responds as if a royal has arrived. And when Nobel Prize winning author and Colombia native Gabriel García Márquez died in 2014, Colombia's president called for three days of national mourning. Access to the arts is not exclusive in Colombia, it's made available to everyone. And Colombians treat their artists with the utmost respect.

So what is there to see and experience in Colombia, culturally speaking? Just about anything and everything. For a weekend of culture, I love to visit Bogotá, where I can wander through museums, attend a concert, or enjoy a food festival. But cities all over the country have amazing cultural attractions and event. Here's a look at just a few:

### National Museum of Colombia

The National Museum of Colombia (*website: [www.museonacional.gov.co](http://www.museonacional.gov.co)*), located near downtown Bogotá, is the first place new expats should visit in Colombia. It has all types of exhibits, ranging from historical treasures to modern art to pop culture. It's located in a 19th-century former prison and always has something new and exciting. The architecture alone makes this place worth a visit. Its long, wide halls, stone walls, and creaky wood floors form an awe-inspiring atmosphere.

The museum holds more than 20,000 pieces, including pre-Columbian antiquities, works by Fernando Botero, afro-Colombian art, colonial-era antiques, and items that belonged to Latin American liberators. While you can always enjoy the museum's permanent exhibits, it has exciting temporary exhibits too, ranging from contemporary photography to sports memorabilia.

## Botero Museum

An estimated 500,000 people visit the Botero museum (*website: [www.banrepcultural.org/museo-botero](http://www.banrepcultural.org/museo-botero)*) each year. As I mentioned, Fernando Botero is a revered figure here. Bank of the Republic owns and operates the museum, which they started with more than 200 pieces donated by Botero himself. While most of the collection features works by Botero, it also includes pieces by other international artists.

If you aren't familiar with Botero's work, don't worry, because your education will begin as soon as you step foot on Colombian soil. You'll see pillows, mugs, posters, t-shirts, mouse pads, shower curtains, just about anything with Botero's paintings plastered on them. And once you discover Botero, you'll never forget his work, and likely will fall in love with it. His trademark rotund characters illustrate all manner of Colombian life and history, including the drug wars and everyday Catholicism.



Fernando Botero is a national treasure in Colombia and his work can be seen all around the country

©International Living

## Bogotá Gold Museum

You'll find gold museums all over Colombia, but the Bogotá Gold Museum (*website: [www.banrepcultural.org/museo-del-oro](http://www.banrepcultural.org/museo-del-oro)*) is the granddaddy of them all. The museum holds more than 30,000 gold pieces excavated from pre-

Columbian archeological sites all over Colombia. The institution doesn't discriminate, because it also holds more than 20,000 pieces of ceramic, textile, and stone. This is also a great place to visit if you love antiquities, or if you want to learn more about Colombia's indigenous roots.

## **Bogotá Philharmonic**

Although most major Colombian cities have symphony orchestras, the Bogotá Philharmonic (*website: [www.filarmonicabogota.gov.co](http://www.filarmonicabogota.gov.co)*) is the most renowned and important. Founded in 1967, the philharmonic performs nearly 150 times a year and often offers free public concerts at Bogotá universities. Like most great symphony orchestras, the Bogotá Philharmonic primarily concentrates on delivering classical performances. However, it also participates in all types of music festivals, including Rock in the Park, Hip Hop in the Park, Jazz in the Park, and Opera in the Park, which take place at various times throughout the year.

This is actually a really fun symphony orchestra. I've seen them several times, including a performance with one of Colombia's most popular pop bands. People aged from 8 to 80 were dancing in the aisles at the symphony hall.

## **Salsa dancing**

Even if you have two left feet, you'll have to give salsa dancing a try. And don't think you'll get away with the "Oh no, I'm not a good dancer" line, because someone will grab you and drag you out under the mirror ball. This is Colombia and in Colombia, everyone has to dance.

You'll find salsa dancing clubs and schools all over Colombia, but to see dancing at its best, head to Cali. During the first week in August, salsa dancers from around the world come to Cali for contests and festivals, including the annual World Salsa Cali Festival. Cali's most popular salsa nightclubs include Kukaramakara, Changó Club, Tropical Cocktails, and Delirio.

## **Vallenato music**

Vallenato, a form of folk music, was born in Colombia. You'll hear this unique music all over the country, in buses, on radios, in TV shows, at concerts, and blasting out of your neighbor's stereo system. You can't escape vallenato in Colombia, whether you love it or hate it.

Vallenato bands use a variety of instruments that produce a truly distinctive sound, including accordions, small drums, and pieces of dried sugar

cane, which musicians stroke with a stick to produce a scraping sound. Even if vallenato isn't your cup of tea, you'll have a blast dancing to it at the New Year's Eve gatherings.

## Colombian festivals

Colombia has 20 national holidays each year. And if that's not enough special days for you, they also host a slew of festivals throughout the year. Here's a glance at some of our favorites:

### January

**Carnival of Blacks and Whites:** The Carnival of Blacks and Whites, held in Pasto, celebrates the cultural, ethnic, and racial differences of Colombians. The event features parades, period costumes, dancing, music, and the mother of all water balloon fights.

### March

**Barranquilla Carnival:** The Barranquilla Carnival is so exciting, that the folks at UNESCO deemed it a World Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The event features parades, music, dancing, colorful floats, and beautiful, scantily clad dancers. Who could ask for more?

### April

**Holy Week in Popayán:** Popayán has been holding Holy Week processions for around 400 years and they've perfected their performances. The processions take place over an eight-day period and feature a huge elaborate alter, carried by strong, but very weary men. The event also includes an orchid show, free concerts, and other cultural offerings.

### July

**Medellín's Colombiamoda:** Colombia has a host of incredibly talented fashions designers. Want to see what they've been up to? Then go to Medellín's Colombiamoda, where you can pull up a chair next to the runway and check out what the in-crowd will be wearing next season.

### August

**Wind and Kite Festival:** In August, when winds blow all over Colombia, you'll see kites flying everywhere. You'll also see more than a few casualties dangling from tree limbs and power lines. But the place to be is the lovely colonial town of Villa de Leyva, where you can enjoy the most popular kite festival in all of Colombia. It features wind and kites.

# A Day of Art, History and Food in Bogota, Colombia's Capital

By Michael Evans

**B**efore moving to small-town Colombia, I lived in Bogotá, where I indulged in the things I love most—art, history, and food. Every weekend I would set out on foot to discover the city's restaurants, museums, and galleries.

And I found them. If you're new to Bogotá, it can be hard to find the city's deepest treasures. After all, it's a big place, with nearly eight million inhabitants. So here's my advice on how to jump headlong into a cultural adventure.

**Breakfast:** An active day in the metropolis calls for protein and carbs, and there's no better place to fuel up than Desayunadero de la 42. Located at the corner of Carrera 14 and Calle 42, Desayunadero de la 42 has been serving delicious breakfasts for more than 40 years.

Housed in a colonial-style building, this family-owned restaurant is an early-morning hot-spot for weekend merrymakers and a hangout for Bogotá's elite, like former mayor Antanas Mockus, who drops by to energize his political engines.

Desayunadero serves a huge selection of breakfast dishes, from Santander-style tamales to chicken soup with eggs, to omelets, to beans with rice—a Colombian tradition—with prices ranging from \$3 to \$9. See: [Desayunaderodela42.com](http://Desayunaderodela42.com).

**Museo Botero:** A trip to Museo Botero is like a crash course in Colombian culture, with a twist of humor and political cynicism thrown in for fun. The museum centers on a large collection of artwork donated by Colombian artist Fernando Botero, including his drawings, sculptures, and paintings. It also includes pieces by international artists such as Willem de Kooning, Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, and Salvador Dalí.

Botero turned 80 in 2012 but still cranks out work that delights the art world. The matador-turned-artist's trademark style transforms his subjects into rotund caricatures that illustrate his view of everything from religion to the family cat.

Museo Botero occupies a beautiful colonial mansion on Calle 11 in the heart of La Candelaria, Bogotá's historic center. It is one of three museums housed in the same complex. The Museo de Arte, Museo Botero's neighbor, displays works by contemporary Colombian and international artists. Casa de Moneda exhibits Colombian currency from the colonial era to the present day.

Like most Bogotá museums, Museo Botero costs less than \$2 to visit. See: [Banrepcultural.org/museo-botero](http://Banrepcultural.org/museo-botero).

**Lunch:** After a morning of spectacular art and hours

of walking, you'll have an unrelenting appetite. Just down the hill from Museo Botero on Calle 11, you'll find two of Bogotá's best traditional restaurants, La Puerta Falsa (the False Door) and Mama Lupe.

On weekdays, La Puerta Falsa fills with senators, judges, and military brass who work in nearby office buildings. On weekends, Bogotá residents drop by to satisfy their craving for traditional cuisine.

Family-owned since 1816, La Puerta Falsa is the city's oldest eatery. It's famous for its Santa Fe tamales, which come packed with chicken, pork, beef, potatoes, and boiled eggs steamed in plantain leaves.

A few doors down from La Puerta Falsa, you'll find the Mama Lupe restaurant, which specializes in *ajiaco*, a chicken-and-potato soup invented in Bogotá.

*Ajiaco* is no plain-Jane bowl of soup. It contains three types of potatoes—yellow, red, and white varieties—cilantro, fresh garlic, and a special herb called *guascas*. Mama Lupe's serves *ajiaco* topped with fresh cream and an ear of corn, along with a side order of rice and a slice of fresh avocado.

Both restaurants are easy on the pocketbook, with meals priced at \$5 or less.

"Just down the hill from the Museo Botero you'll find two of Bogota's best traditional restaurants."

**Museo del Oro:** If you ordered tamales for lunch, you'll need a good walk to kick-start your digestive system. So stroll down to Parque de Santander, at the corner of Carrera 5 and Calle 16, where you'll find Museo del Oro (The Gold Museum).

The collection of artifacts at Museo del Oro includes more than 20,000 pieces of pottery, clothing, and bones, along with more than 30,000 solid-gold objects. It's downright mind-boggling. Exhibits trace the history of 13 pre-Hispanic cultures, exploring their religious beliefs, community structures, industries, and social legacies.

Museo del Oro is spread out over four floors—yes, there's a lot to see—and each level covers a different aspect of native culture. It also has an Exploratorium—a hands-on hit with kids and adults alike—and offers tours in Spanish, French, and English, Monday to Saturday. See: [Banrepcultural.org/museo-del-oro](http://Banrepcultural.org/museo-del-oro).

**MAMBO:** If contemporary art is your cup of tea, head to Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá—affectionately known as the MAMBO—located on Calle 26, just off Carrera 7.

Visiting the neighborhood surrounding the MAMBO is half the fun of going there. On weekends, the adjacent Parque de la Independencia is the site of a huge flea market, where you can buy everything from cheap household items



La Candelaria is Bogotá's historic center and home to some of the city's best museums.

The first thing you'll notice when you approach is its imposing appearance. The windowless exterior walls make the building look more like a fortress than a museum. In fact, the building served as the Central Penitentiary of Cundinamarca before it held the nation's treasures.

Museo Nacional de Colombia's permanent galleries exhibit all types of objects, including pre-Hispanic pottery, revolutionary uniforms, and colonial-era household items. Temporary exhibits keep the museum fresh, and past exhibitions have included collections of miniature portraits, Peruvian funeral textiles, and soccer memorabilia collected from players, journalists, coaches, and fans. See: [Museonacional.gov.co](http://Museonacional.gov.co).

**Dinner:** As the sun sets over the capital and visions of art and history dance in your head, it's time to relax and reminisce over fine food and wine.

Diehard Bogotá foodies head to renowned gastronomic districts, including Zona G, Parque 93, and Zona T. Harry Sasson, one of

Colombia's most celebrated chefs, operates a restaurant bearing his name in the heart of Zona G (the "G" stands for *gastrómico*) on Carrera 9 at Calle 75.

The restaurant occupies a Tudor-style mansion, with an eclectic mix of dining environments. The lounge and dining rooms sport a décor fitting the building's original design, with wooden beams, flowery wallpaper and crystal chandeliers. But my favorite spot is the modern atrium, where you can enjoy the outdoor scenery without the Bogotá chill.

The menu at Harry Sasson features Asian fusion dishes, many including seafood delicacies, including octopus, squid, crab, and tuna. You'll also find modern renditions of Asian classics like duck tenderloin and Japanese dumplings.

Sasson's also boasts a selection of dishes cooked on a Japanese-style Robata grill, which uses firewood to seal in the flavors of foods such as pork chops, beef tenderloin, scallops, and chicken. And to complement your meal, you can choose from a variety of European and South American wines.

While Harry Sasson's ranks among the best restaurants in Bogotá, it won't break the bank. Most meals cost between \$17 and \$28. See: [Harrysason.com](http://Harrysason.com).

**Salsa Dancing:** If a big meal and glass of fine wine boosts your energy level, slip on your dancing shoes and head over to Galería Café Libro, one of Bogotá's hottest salsa clubs, located at Parque 93.

The nightclub plays Caribbean, salsa, and Latin-jazz music, and hosts live bands. From the outside, Galería Café Libro doesn't look very special, but once inside, you'll enjoy two dance floors and an exotic décor of live trees, bamboo rafters, and colorful lanterns.

The club caters to a more mature crowd than many Bogotá nightspots and always extends a warm welcome and dance invitation to foreign tourists and expatriates. See: [Galeriacafelibro.com.co](http://Galeriacafelibro.com.co). ■

to antique Pez dispensers. And just behind the museum lies the Plaza de Toros, Bogotá's bullfighting arena.

Discovering new artists is a grand adventure for me, and the MAMBO never fails to deliver something exciting. Temporary exhibits showcase photography, video art, paintings, and sculptures. The MAMBO also hosts art workshops and has an auditorium for film and live performances. To see what's on display, go to: [Mambogota.com](http://Mambogota.com).

**Dessert:** By mid-afternoon, I often want something sweet and refreshing, a craving I can only satisfy with ice cream. Just around the corner from the MAMBO, at Carrera 7 and Calle 27, you'll find a Crepes & Waffles restaurant.

Crepes & Waffles is a Colombian sensation, with restaurants in cities all over the country. It serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Best of all, many Crepes & Waffles locations have an ice-cream parlor.

For breakfast, you can enjoy mouthwatering dishes such as scrambled eggs with smoked salmon or crepes and eggs smothered with cream sauce. Lunch and dinner menus include homemade pumpkin soup, artichoke-stuffed pitas, and crepes with calamari.

I've relished many delicious meals at Crepes & Waffles, usually for \$12 or less, but I keep going back for the desserts and homemade ice creams. For something truly decadent, order a waffle with fresh berries, smothered in chocolate sauce and topped with fresh whipped cream. I usually keep it simple and go for a homemade sugar cone with chocolate ice cream and lemon or orange sorbet. See: [Crepesywaffles.com](http://Crepesywaffles.com).

**Museo Nacional de Colombia:** If you love great art and want to know more about Colombia's history, you won't find a better classroom than the Museo Nacional de Colombia. Located on Carrera 7 at Calle 28, the museum holds more than 20,000 items, ranging from military weaponry to contemporary paintings.

# What brews in Buga?



MICHAEL EVANS

The town of Buga has come up with its own Holy brew to keep pilgrims and tourists happy claims author Michael Evans.

It's Saturday night in Buga, Valle. You may have passed through here to Cali, but chances are you've never stopped to look around. That's a shame, because Buga isn't your average slice of Colombia; even though it's filled with elegant colonial and Republican-era buildings. It has a few things you don't find in most places like meter-long iguanas in the main plaza, a gigantic pink church and a population obsessed with creativity. It's a town where newcomers find a place at the table and where history and modernity stroll hand in hand.

A few blocks from the Basilica del Señor de los Milagros, I peer through an

open door. Strands of Christmas lights adorn the railings, the kind you see in some funky neighborhood bars along the U.S. West Coast, and hand-painted designs embellish the walls. At the top of the stairs, a poster with pictures of pizzas, sandwiches and beer adorns a wall. Written in bold type The Holy Water Ale Café. It's a name that tongues locals, so folks affectionately call it "The Holy."

The Holy is more than a pub. It's a hostel/brewery, which produces a Holy Water Ale. The beer's name is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the religious significance of Buga, the site of a miracle, supposedly. The Basilica displays an icon of the miracle, referred to as the Black Christ of Buga and a tourist attraction which draws in the faithful and infirm from all over Colombia.

Inside The Holy, large plants course the walls, arched windows frame distant colonial buildings, and original artwork adorns. Glasses of various shapes and sizes hang above an ornate bar and an antique coffee machine reflects accent lights, giving the tavern a chic ambience. Stefan Schnur, the bar's owner, and business partner, Clint Johnson,

are perched on barstools, chatting with locals, as the voice of Amy Winehouse emanates from speakers.

The Holy's roots run long and deep, to Port Townsend, Washington, where Clint and Stefan first met. With backgrounds in construction and home renovation, they both enjoyed shooting the breeze at a local beer garden. But Stefan wasn't content supping the suds of others' beers, so he set up a home brewing system, where he perfected his recipes.

Stefan isn't new to starting trends in faraway lands. He introduced Port Townsend to the schwenker - a swinging, rotating grill which originated in Germany, his homeland. Soon, schwenkers popped up in backyards all over Port Townsend and "schwenker parties" became the rage in summertime.

When The Holy opened its doors in 2011, microbrew beer was a new concept for Buga, one that Stefan and Clint thought wouldn't go over well with locals. So they turned a few rooms of their sprawling early 20th century building into a hostel, hoping to attract foreigners to Buga to drink their beer. Then a used pizza oven helped turn this initiative in a bakery.

Offering a full menu was like adding rocket fuel to the business. Locals pour into The Holy to enjoy a glass of beer and pizza they can't find elsewhere in Buga. Today, The Holy serves nine different beers, a dozen styles of pizza, a host of sandwiches and items you can't find in other Buga eateries, such as hummus, baba ganoush and fleischkäse—a Bavarian-style meatloaf. "The original idea was to get foreign business, but as it's turned out, we get more local customers than tourists," Stefan says.

A few restaurants in this town by the Piedras River already serve Holy Water Ale, and hotels are clamoring to get their hands on Buga's new brew.

As I sit at a corner table in The Holy's main dining room, the waiter delivers a Holy Chicken pizza and a cold IPA. Live music rings through the air, thanks to a quartet of musicians, in town for a chamber music festival. The lights are low and the crowd is abuzz: a perfect way to end a week in a town where Liberator Simon Bolivar used to kick up his boots; and with all its hidden treasures, including one of the best microbrews I've enjoyed south of California.

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# Murillo: Mules in our midst

PHOTOS: MICHAEL EVANS



When you drive into Murillo on weekdays, its shuttered windows and empty streets may lead you to believe you've stumbled upon the site of an alien abduction. The town lies in the Tolima department, about 10 miles east of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano, the last community you'll pass through on the way to Los Nevados National Park.

Founded in 1872, Murillo still has a handful of rustic Republic era buildings, all brightly painted in tones of orange, yellow, green, and blue. It's a place where the walls of a general store hold decades of coarse history and creaky wooden floors intone folk songs. Although the town boasts around 100 businesses, you won't find chain stores or strip malls, and the surrounding area is devoted to cultivating potatoes and tree tomatoes, and raising cattle, chicken, and pigs.

If you'd ventured to Murillo during the 1990s and early 2000s, you would have found a community wearied by tensions between government troops and the ELN, National Liberation Army. In 2001, rebels captured two police officers, including



a lieutenant and held them captive for weeks.

As recent as 2012, Murillo's police station - situated in the town square - looked like a frontline battleground position, with layers of sandbags standing two meters tall and a machine gunner at the ready. But today, the sandbags are gone - replaced with a new, fortified police station - and townsfolk seem undisturbed by the past.

You'll find all manner of animals wandering Murillo's streets, but it might take a while to spot a two-legged resident. The people are there, just indoors, trying to escape the chill of the frequent fog. But on weekends, the town comes alive - sort of - as farmers converge to restock supplies and gather in hole in the wall bars for a little social life.

In a country filled with unique towns and villages, Murillo emerges

Writer Michael Evans takes a road trip to Murillo, a town off the beaten path and which time seems to have passed by. With its cold climate and soft Andean light, this corner of Tolima is old style Colombia.



distinct, seemingly untouched by modernity. Sure, you'll see electric lights, cell phones, a few cars and motorcycles, and the occasional computer, but overall, Murillo exists as it has for generations. Locals step out wearing heavy wool *ruanas* and straw hats, dairy farm-

ers make home deliveries, and mules carry crops to market.

The nippy air and ghostly feeling of Murillo might give you the shivers, but the townsfolk will bid you welcome and warm your spirit with their stoic air of pride. It's a town where

800 pesos will buy you a cup of coffee and freshly baked pastry, and curious residents will chat you up and invite you to lunch.

Outsiders pass through Murillo daily en route to the national park, but few take the time to stop and

look around. However, savoring Murillo takes a bit of time. You'll always find picturesque landscapes of rolling hills and pastures, and scenes from times gone by, but if you stick around a while, you'll fall in love with Murillo's inimitable innocence and quirky

## Authors' authors

Short stories showcasing the work of aspiring writers hits the city's literary scene.

**B**orn out of a writing group that has met regularly at Authors Bookstore since 2011, the 12 short stories featured in Authors range in subject from recent Colombian history to dystopian futures.

Author and writing group facilitator Tom Moffatt says writers are encouraged to write about whatever they like, which has resulted in an eclectic collection of stories. "There are stories set in Colombia, there's sci fi: many genres and settings are covered. The only thing in common is that the stories have all been discussed at Authors over a glass of wine."

Tom says one of his favourite stories in the collection is Monica Ramirez Hartmann's *When the Fog Lifts*. "It's about a woman who goes to a restaurant in Milan called The Gates of Heaven. It becomes a heavenly experience, the

story has really nice descriptions and details."

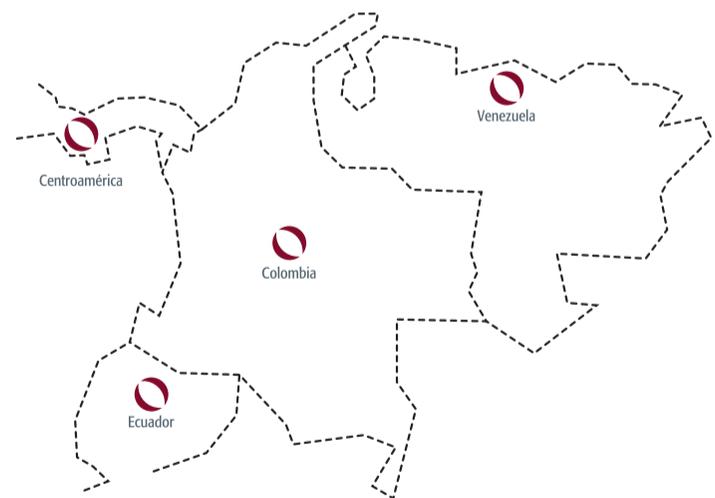
Another writer, Clara Irene Reyes, tackles Colombia's False Positives scandal in her eponymous short story, a sobering and powerful tale told from the point of view of two narrators.

Moffatt's own contribution, *Donor*, is a sci-fi tale about a man who wakes up in a drugged haze having donated all his limbs and organs for drug money and realises there's nothing left to sell. An aspiring children's book author, Moffatt believes his short stories contain "darker remnants" that don't make it into his children's books.

The book is a chance for readers to discover some new voices. "None of us are professional writers but we have all have something to say," claims Moffatt. "It's a passion; everyone who's doing it wants to be writing, and I think you can tell that when you read the stories." The collection of stories was printed by The English School.

Authors from Authors goes on sale mid month at Authors Bookstore. Copies are priced at \$25,000 pesos. If interested in becoming a member, you may submit a piece of writing at Authors (Calle 70 No.5-24).

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## A Crash Course in Peruvian Cuisine

Pimsleur Approach • April 16, 2012 • Food & Wine • Comments (0)



Inca-inspired terraced systems

A trip to Peru is not complete without exploring its diverse culinary pleasures. Geography plays a major role in the diet of Peruvians. The Andean region runs through the center of the country and has an arid climate, but the west borders the Pacific Ocean and the east features thick Amazon jungles.

Peruvian farmers still grow crops using Inca-inspired terraced systems, and many tend fields with ox-drawn plows. Peruvian markets sell locally grown fruits and vegetables, most produced without non-organic fertilizers or chemicals. Many of Peru's valleys have vast

forests, with wild banana, lime and avocado trees. As you pass through small villages, chickens roam freely and goats, pigs and cows occupy front yards.

While families often eat chicken up to three times per day, beef dishes are less common. The country produces more than 8,000 potato varieties and mountain farmers grow coca, which Peruvians have used for centuries in foods, drinks and medicines.

If you visit Peru, do not be afraid to try something new or unusual. Ask locals about typical foods and visit towns that specialize in particular dishes. If you receive an invitation to join a family for a holiday or birthday celebration, you can expect a memorable food adventure.

### Coastal Cuisine

Ceviche is perhaps Peru's most famous dish. To make ceviche, chefs do not cook the fish with heat. Instead, the fish is soaked in a mixture of lime juice, red onion, cilantro, garlic and yellow or red aji and the citric acid cooks the fish. Coastal cooks often use sea bass, or you may also find ceviche made with calamari, octopus or shrimp.



Ceviche

To make palta rellena, Peruvian chefs stuff avocados with crab meat and shrimp and add a touch of lemon juice for flavoring. You may also want to try fondo de alcachofas relleno con conchas, made with stuffed artichoke hearts and scallops. Cooks often serve fondo de alcachofas relleno con conchas using raw scallops, with a dash of Worcester sauce, or baked with a parmesan cheese topping.

For an exotic culinary adventure, try pulpo a la oliva, made with boiled octopus and served with a mayonnaise and olive sauce. Shrimp lovers may want to order chupe de camarones, a chowder dish made with shrimp, fish, eggs, milk and oregano.

### Andean Cuisine



Alpaca

The everyday diet of Andean Peruvians varies widely according to economic class. Many poor Peruvians subsist primarily on potatoes, corn and bread, and often chew coca leaves to stave off hunger pains. Middle and upper income Peruvians eat roast chicken, potatoes and soups made with vegetables and pasta.

If you visit the Andes, you will notice alpaca grazing throughout the countryside. Alpaca meat has a sweet taste and little fat. You can order alpaca a number of ways: as a steak, in sandwiches or on skewers with potatoes.

For the ultimate Peruvian culinary adventure, order guinea pig, called "cuy" in Spanish. Families often serve cuy as a special dish for birthday, holiday and religious celebrations. Cuy has a similar taste to rabbit, and is commonly served whole, head and all, with its legs sticking straight up.

Street vendors in some Andean cities sell rocoto rellenos and papa rellenas. Cooks make rocoto rellenos with rocoto peppers, stuffed

with beef or pork and a mixture of cheese, garbanzo beans and milk. The pepper is then battered and deep-fried in vegetable oil. To make papa rellenas, Peruvians stuff potatoes with beef or chicken, hard-boiled eggs and olives, before deep-frying in vegetable oil.



Roasted Guinea Pig

### Jungle Cuisine

Peruvians living in Amazon regions subsist primarily on foods produced, gathered or hunted locally. Residents gather native jungle fruits, such as camu camu and bananas, and cultivate non-native fruits, such as guanbanas and mamee apples.

While visiting the Peruvian jungle, you can also enjoy native freshwater fish, including paiche, sabalo, gamitana and boquichico. Timbucho, a typical jungle dish, often includes the meat of piranhas. Locals also eat jungle mammals, including sajinos, majas and agoutis.

### Countrywide Favorites

You can find many favorite foods enjoyed by Peruvians in all regions. Street vendors sell anticucho – a skewer of meat with a potato on top. Common anticucho varieties include chicken and pig intestine, but most Peruvians prefer cow heart. Some restaurants serve anticucho and you can usually find anticucho vendors at sporting events.

Cooks throughout Peru use lean and fatty cuts of pork to make chicharron. The meat is salted and fried, then served with potatoes, corn and an onion and mint salad. Most restaurants that serve chicharron also offer adobo, a pork soup made with onions and hot chili peppers.

Chinese and Japanese cooking styles influenced the creation of lomo saltado. To make lomo saltado, cooks stir fry red onion, yellow aji, potatoes and beef, along with a generous portion of soy sauce. Peruvians commonly serve lomo saltado with rice, and often add a few fried potatoes on top.



Mazamorra Morada

For dessert, you may want to try mazamorra morada, a pudding made with purple corn, or picarones. Chefs fry a mixture of squash, yeast and sweet potato flour to make picarones, Peru's version of the donut. In most cities and towns, you can find ice creams and cakes made with native fruits, as well as simple Peruvian favorites, such as fresh fruit with yogurt.

Peruvians love chicha. Kids and adults enjoy chicha morada during the warm dry months. Ingredients include purple corn and fruit juices, which produce a rich, dark color and sweet, refreshing taste. Chicha also comes in an alcoholic version, typically identifiable by its pink color and bitter taste. Most small towns have at least one chicha bar, where locals gather for long nights of drinking and dancing.

The pisco sour is Peru's national drink. A Pisco sour is made with lime juice, sugar, an egg and pisco, a type of grape brandy. It has a frothy head and a sweet, rich taste, almost like lemonade. However, do not let its innocent taste fool you, because a good pisco sour packs a punch.

### Indulge

You can find many everyday Peruvian favorites, such as lomo saltado, at family-style restaurants. While certain typical restaurants serve anticucho, it is typically street food. Some foods, such as rocoto relleno, are typical only in particular regions, such as Cusco.

If you want to experience food like a Peruvian, head to a local market. Farmers sell fresh fruits and vegetables, usually organic and locally grown, including tomatoes, avocados, onions, bananas and potatoes. Local markets also sell meats, as well as sausages made to order. In small towns, you can also buy live chickens and guinea pigs, which merchants slaughter and clean while you wait.



Pisco Sour

Most large food markets feature a food court, where you can buy prepared meals or a snack. Many vendors offer a menu of the day, which features two to five meal options. You can often find the best examples of typical foods, such as ceviche or chicharron, sold at local markets.

When you set out on an adventure to Peru, be sure to include a few food experiences. Peruvians like to celebrate their rich food heritage as often as possible. As a visitor, you too can enjoy the natural and creative richness that has made Peruvian cuisine a growing international sensation.

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## Discovering the Lauterbrunnen Valley

Pimsleur Approach • October 29, 2012 • [Travel tips](#) • [Comments \(0\)](#)

When you think of Switzerland, you might imagine breathtaking Alpine scenery, farmers tending their livestock and traditional homes adorned with bright flowers. In a world that never seems to slow down, such a vision might seem like just a fantasy. However, it still exists in the Lauterbrunnen Valley.



Lauterbrunnen Valley - via Wikipedia

The Lauterbrunnen Valley is one of the deepest gorges in the Alps. It is narrow, less than one mile across at its widest point, and features dramatic limestone cliffs on either side. The valley is famous for its stunning waterfalls, including Trümmelbach and Staubbach Falls, some of which cascade from heights of 900 feet.

Avalanches are quite common in the Lauterbrunnen Valley, so residents build their houses extra sturdy to withstand heavy snow loads. Most mountain houses are made of timber and have whitewashed facades and flower boxes in the windows. People living along the valley floor often build their houses and barns next to large boulders to shelter them from snow that can drop from upper mountain ledges.

While tourism and winter sports play a major role in the economy of the valley, many of its full-time residents still earn an income by farming. Cow bells ring out throughout the area and farmers tending sheep and hauling hay are a common sight.

The valley has a number of small towns and villages to explore, including Lauterbrunnen, Wengen, Gimmelwald and Mürren, which lie at various altitudes. Each community has unique attractions and activities and offers a different perspective for enjoying the stunning views.

Most activities revolve around the outdoors, such as hiking, skiing and mountain climbing. Hiking routes vary from short half-hour jaunts between villages, to full- and multi-day treks that take you through unspoiled landscapes. If you prefer to enjoy nature by relaxing, you can always admire the view in a comfortable lounge chair on the lawn of your hotel.

Trains depart for the Lauterbrunnen Valley from Interlaken's Ost station. You can also bike to the valley from Interlaken, or hitch a ride with a passing farmer. Many of the villages do not have cars. However, these communities are very small, so you can walk or hire a golf cart taxi to get almost anywhere you need to go.



Lauterbrunnen - via Wikipedia

### Lauterbrunnen

The town of Lauterbrunnen lies in the heart of the valley and is the connection point for villages in the Interlaken-Oberhasli municipality. Lauterbrunnen has just over 2,500 inhabitants and most residents speak German. However, people throughout the region use words that also draw upon Italian and French dialects.

The origin of the town's name is a topic of debate among locals. It comes from the combination of two words, "lauter" and "brunnen". While most agree that brunnen means fountain, well or spring, the debate lies in the meaning of lauter. Some believe lauter means many, while others claim it actually means clean or clear. Both definitions are fitting, because Lauterbrunnen is indeed clean and surrounded by many beautiful springs.

Melting snow from surrounding mountains feed the Weisse Lütschine River, which flows in front of Lauterbrunnen. The water is so pure that locals and campers often use it as a source of drinking water. The river is typically a peaceful element of the valley, but tends to overflow in the spring.

The land surrounding Lauterbrunnen resembles a bright green carpet, with patches of forests and orchards. While visiting, you can relax to the sounds of rushing streams and the bleats of sheep.

### Gimmelwald

Gimmelwald lies south of Lauterbrunnen, halfway up the mountain on the western side of the valley, at an elevation of about 4,400 feet above sea level. To get to the tiny village, you can catch a gondola from the Stechelberg or Schilthorn stations, or hike from Stechelberg.



Gimmelwald - via Wikipedia

Most of Gimmelwald's residents are descendants of one of three families and the population numbers less than 200. Locals work as farmers, raising hay for cattle, and also produce delicious cheeses. The village has a large hostel and a number of small bed and breakfast inns.

Relaxing and admiring the spectacular sights are common activities enjoyed by tourists, but Gimmelwald also offers fantastic hiking. Many residents and visitors enjoy hiking to nearby Mürren, about 30 minutes away, to shop for groceries while enjoying the fresh mountain air.

If you are up for something a little more challenging and adventurous, go for a hike to the lake at Oberhornsee, which takes about seven hours round trip. The walk is breathtaking, winding through beautiful wildflower meadows and past surging waterfalls.



Mürren - via Wikipedia

### Mürren

While Mürren has fewer than 500 residents, its hotels can accommodate up to 2,000 visitors. The village lies at an elevation of around 5,400 feet above sea level and is not accessible by public roads. In fact, Mürren has no cars, but you can easily walk from one end of town to the other.

The village is accessible by four cable cars, with service to and from Stechelberg, Gimmelwald and Schilthorn. You can also reach Mürren via train from Lauterbrunnen.

Mürren was traditionally a farming hamlet, but winter sports and tourism are the primary contributors to its economy today. It became a major ski resort in 1924, when Englishman Sir Arnold Lunn established the Kandahar Ski Club in the town.

The area has more than 30 miles of ski runs, along with sledding routes and a bobsleigh track. If skiing is not your sport, you can also enjoy ice skating, swimming, mini-golf, tennis and squash at Mürren's sports center.

### Wengen

Wengen is situated halfway up the mountain on the eastern side of the Lauterbrunnen Valley, about 1,300 feet above the town of Lauterbrunnen. The small village is a favorite winter holiday escape for European travelers and the main hub for exploring the Kleine Scheidegg Pass and Männlichen Mountain.



Wengen - via Wikipedia

Like its neighbor, Mürren, Wengen is car-free and you can only get there via cog train on the Wengernalp Railway. It sits on a sun terrace and typically receives daily sunshine, even when other towns have cloud cover. At daybreak, you can often look down upon a layer of clouds floating above the valley.

Wengen is home to around 1,300 people, but winter tourists often increase its population to 10,000. Its first guest lodgings were built in the mid-nineteenth century and have welcomed the famous and infamous, including German composer Felix Mendelssohn and Adolf Hitler.

From the village, you can enjoy stunning views of the Jungfrau and Mönch Mountains. During summer months, you can often hike from Wengen to Kleine Scheidegg, where you can enjoy indoor or outdoor dining, while admiring the scenery. During winter months, several feet of snow cover the trail, but you can still travel through the pass on a cog train.



Jungfrau mountains above Lauterbrunnen valley - via Wikipedia

### Eiger, Mönch, and Jungfrau Mountains

Kleine Scheidegg offers fantastic views of the Jungfrau, Mönch and Eiger Mountains. The Jungfrau stands as the centerpiece of the trio and rises to a height of more than 13,500 feet above sea level. It was first summited in 1811 and is now part of the Jungfrau-Aletsch Protected Area, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Mönch stands to the east of the Jungfrau and appears in the center of the bend in the Lauterbrunnen Valley. The Jungfrauabahn Railway

runs through the mountain beneath its peak.

The Eiger is perhaps the most famous mountain in the group. It rises to an elevation of around 13,000 feet above sea level and faces Kleine Scheidegg. The northern side of the Eiger peers down on the small town of Grindelwald and its south side features some of the most massive Alpine glaciers.

The first successful ascent of the sheer north side of the Eiger occurred in 1936. Since that time, dozens of climbers have lost their lives trying to achieve the same goal. Because of its deadly reputation, the Eiger has earned the nickname "Mordwand", which means murder wall.

The Eiger has appeared in many books and films over the years. Rodney William Whitaker's novel "The Eiger Sanction" tells a story of intrigue that features a breathtaking climb of the north wall. The book was made into a film in 1975, which stars George Kennedy and Clint Eastwood.

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## Discovering the Hidden Gems of Cusco, Peru

Pimsleur Approach • April 26, 2012 • [Travel tips](#) • [Comments \(0\)](#)

Travelers pass through Cusco, Peru on their way to Machu Picchu. The name "Cusco" refers to the Department of Cusco, as well as its capital city. While Machu Picchu may be the most visited attraction in the country, Cusco has many hidden gems worth exploring.

The city lies 11,000 feet above sea level and was the capital of the Inca Empire. Today, it serves as the jumping-off point for Andean treks and tours destined for the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu.



Cusco is the official cultural capital of Peru and UNESCO it a World Heritage Site in 1983. By taking the time to explore the city of Cusco and surrounding region, you can discover why Peruvians refer to the former Inca capital as "magical."

### Plaza de Armas

The tourist district of Cusco is located downtown, with Plaza de Armas its center point. This area of the city features well-preserved pre-Columbian and colonial buildings, most constructed with mud bricks or stones. Primary thoroughfares in Cusco's downtown are brick, while side streets are cobbled. The streets around Plaza de Armas are always swarming with street vendors, hawkers and foreign travelers, but the area's romantic charm still shines through.

The massive Cathedral of Cusco dominates Plaza de Armas. Constructed in a Gothic-Renaissance style, the Cathedral of Cusco holds hundreds of European artworks, as well as paintings created by the Escuela Cuzquena, an art school founded by the Spanish to teach Incas European art styles.

The buildings surrounding Plaza de Armas primarily house businesses catering to tourists, such as restaurants, tour agencies and hotels. However, if you venture away from the plaza, you can discover many of the city's true treasures and get a glimpse of everyday Cusquena life.



Corikancha

### Common City Attractions

Peruvian tourists visiting Cusco typically seek out the same common attractions as foreign visitors, because much of the city's allure centers on its Inca and colonial heritage.

Corikancha lies just a few blocks from Plaza de Armas. Its current structure serves as a Catholic church and monastery, but the site was once occupied by the Temple of the Sun, or "Inti Kancha" in the Quechua language. The Temple of the Sun was one of the Incas' most revered religious sites, and featured gold statues and gold covered floors and walls. While the Spanish destroyed most of the temple, a few hand-carved stone walls remain on display inside the church compound.

San Blas is one of Cusco's oldest and most charming neighborhoods. The Spanish built the neighborhood during the sixteenth century, and many of its original stone and mud brick structures remain today. The oldest church in Cusco stands in the heart of San Blas, adjacent to a small plaza where artisans sell traditional Peruvian crafts, such as hand-woven belts, handmade jewelry and original paintings. The neighborhood features narrow, cobbled streets, often traveled by local indigenous people dressed in traditional clothing. At night, you can enjoy a drink or romantic dinner in one of San Blas's many small and inviting restaurants and bars.

The city of Cusco also offers a number of spectacular museums. The Museo de Arte Precolombino stands in Cusco Plaza, adjacent to the Hotel Monestario, Cusco's most exclusive hotel. The Incas constructed the plaza during the fifteenth century as a ceremonial court. The museum occupies a traditional colonial mansion once owned by Alonso Diaz, a conquistador who conquered the city for the Spanish. The Museo de Arte Precolombino holds more than 400 pre-Columbian artworks, dating back to the thirteenth century.

You can explore the unique styles of contemporary Peruvian art at the Museo Municipal de Arte Contemporaneo, located just steps from Plaza de Armas in Plaza Regocijo. The Museo Historico Regional, situated on the opposite side of Plaza Regocijo, holds paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, along with the works of Peruvian historian Garcilaso de la Vega.

### San Pedro Market

To understand the lives of local residents, you must step outside of the tourist district. Mercado San Pedro lies just a few blocks from Plaza de Armas. Local farmers and merchants sell almost everything residents need, from freshly slaughtered meats, to festival costumes.

You can always count on a lively atmosphere at Mercado San Pedro. Street dogs wander through the aisles looking for scraps; hawkers announce their daily specials and children kick bottles and cans while their parents shop.



Centro del Cuzco

Vegetable and fruit merchants sell their produce in booths along the main aisles of the market and poor indigenous farmers take up spaces on the ground. Most food sold at the market comes from local farms, including bananas, mangos, papayas, avocados, grapes and apples.

Two aisles of vendors sell all types of juice drinks. You can choose from a set menu of drinks, or design your own, which vendors prepare while you wait. Midway through the market, you can enjoy a bowl of fresh chicken soup, a favorite breakfast dish among locals. Food vendors at the rear of Mercado San Pedro offer plate lunches, along with homemade desserts.



Inca ruins in Pisac

### Pisac

The tiny village of Pisac lies just a few kilometers from the city of Cusco. In addition to its mountaintop Inca ruins, the town offers a massive outdoor market. Pisac is perhaps the best place in the Department of Cusco to buy traditional handmade items, such as hand-woven belts, jewelry, musical instruments, tapestries and chullos, traditional stocking caps worn throughout the region.

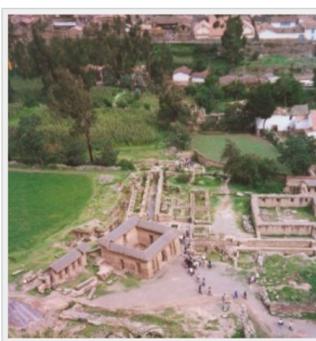
Residents from Pisac and nearby villages make most goods sold in the market. While you can find the same types of items in Cusco's small shops and markets, Pisac's sellers typically offer the best prices.

The town also offers a glimpse into the lives of traditional residents. Along its narrow streets, you can often see women spinning alpaca yarns, knitting chullos or weaving belts.

### The Other Ruins

While Machu Picchu often ranks as one of the wonders of the world, the Department of Cusco contains many other Inca ruin sites. In fact, you will find ruin sites, many unexcavated, throughout the country, along with thousands of traditional farming terraces still in use.

The Sacred Valley extends for 70 miles and runs between Cusco and Machu Picchu. The archeological site at Ollantaytambo features a dramatic set of ruins that begin at the edge of the town and ascend to the top of a mountain. There, you can see beautifully preserved examples of farming terraces, as well as Incan irrigation systems and sites used for religious ceremonies.



Ruins at Ollantaytambo

Because of its rather isolated location, the ruins at Moray see fewer visitors than other sites. The massive complex features concentric circles of terraces situated at different levels, descending into the ground. While Moray remains an historical mystery, archeologists have determined that the Incas used the site to conduct agricultural experiments.

Along the dusty road to Moray, you pass through the tiny village of Maras. Just outside the town lie hundreds of salt ponds, first used by the Incas. Maras's residents continue to harvest salt from the ponds, using the same techniques developed by their ancient ancestors.



Salt pools outside the village of Moray

Tipon, located just 23 kilometers from the city of Cusco, sees few foreign visitors. The Incas developed Tipon as a royal vacation site, constructing an elaborate plumbing system that features fountains and baths. An Incan temple once stood on the site, occupied by priests who worshiped the water as it passed through the complex.

The Department of Cusco has a rich history and continues to play a critical role in Peru's culture. If you want to understand the region, you must take the time to explore its hidden gems and the everyday lifestyles of its people.

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## Germany's UNESCO World Heritage Sites

Pimsleur Approach • July 20, 2012 • German • Comments (0)

Dust off your beer stein, grab your lederhosen and get ready for an exciting adventure in Germany. A trip to Deutschland certainly offers a host of opportunities for fun, but the country also has many historical and natural attractions to enjoy.

Over the centuries, Germans have spared no expense preserving their rich cultural treasures. While visiting Germany, you can explore medieval castles, Roman ruins and Renaissance cathedrals. Or, if you fancy an outdoor adventure, you can find all type of activities, from downhill skiing to sailing.

To recognize the world's most outstanding cultural and natural treasures, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) established a list of World Heritage Sites. Germany has three dozen sites on the UNESCO list, ranging from gothic cathedrals to fossil pits, modern housing projects to Romanesque palaces, seashores to shoe factories.

Unless you have a few years to explore Germany, you probably won't have time to see all of its World Heritage Sites. However, here are a few samples of the riches Germany has in store for you.

### Wartburg Castle

Ludwig der Springer, then-count of Schauenburg, commissioned the construction of Wartburg Castle in 1068. The intention of the castle was to protect the border of der Springer's territory, so he built the fortress on a hilltop in Eisenach.

The castle grounds contain numerous structures, including a chapel, Romanesque palace, drawbridge and knight's quarters. Over the centuries, der Springer's ancestors expanded the castle. In 1318, a tower was erected on the south end of the complex, featuring a dungeon to imprison enemy invaders.

Generations of German administrations have meticulously maintained Wartburg Castle. The last renovation took place during the Cold War, at which time the East German government restored the property to its sixteenth century appearance.



Wartburg castle - via wikipedia

### Messel Fossil Pit

Around 1900, fossils were discovered in an empty quarry near Messel. Even after the discovery, the pit's geological importance was considered secondary to its oil shale and coal deposits.

Commercial mining continued in the area until 1971, after which time the quarry was sold and a cement factory was erected on the site. By 1991, the land was considered commercially useless and plans were in the works to convert it into a landfill. Realizing the site's geological significance, the provincial government bought the property and opened it to scientific exploration.

The fossils in the Messel pit represent a very diverse range of species, some dating back as far as 47 million years. Since geological excavation began, archeologists have found fossils of pygmy horses, crocodiles, aardvarks, hedgehogs, birds, turtles, bats, insects and frogs, as well as more than 10,000 fossils of fish.



Fossil pit - via wikipedia

### Fagus Factory

The Fagus shoe factory in Alfeld on the Leine joined UNESCO's World Heritage Site list in 2011. The building was the last shoe factory constructed in Alfeld and opened for business in 1911. UNESCO honored the site because it serves as an exceptional example of early modern architecture.

Carl Benscheidt, owner of the Fagus company, hired architects Adolf Meyer and Walter Gropius to design the factory. From the beginning, Benscheidt wanted a structure that would be more than simply utilitarian. Fagus had grown to become one of the largest shoe manufacturers in Germany and Benscheidt wanted the new factory to express the company's innovative spirit.



Fagus Factory - via wikipedia

Meyer and Gropius designed the factory with a brick base and glass facades. It was expanded in 1913 to include a new entrance that includes an embedded clock. The factory's 3-storey office building was completed in the 1920s and features rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows, a daring new design for that time period.

The complex also includes a 1-storey manufacturing building, a 4-storey warehouse and several smaller buildings. While the construction took place in several phases, over a period of many years, builders used common materials throughout its evolution. The result is a factory complex that appears completely uniform in its early modern design.



Wadden Sea Mudflats - via wikipedia

### The Wadden Sea

The Wadden Sea is an intertidal zone that lies between mainland Germany and the Frisian Islands in the North Sea. The area features wetlands, shallow waters at high tide and tidal flats at low tide.

The Wadden Sea covers an area of nearly 4,000 square miles, extending from Germany to Denmark and the Netherlands. Each country maintains its property within the Wadden Seas National Park, which was formed in 1978 to protect and conserve the area.

Although the coastline of the Wadden Sea has been modified with causeways and dikes, UNESCO recognizes the area for its biodiversity. Its waters and islands are home to thousands of species, including geese, ducks, seagulls and seals.

### Berlin Modernism Housing Estates

To celebrate innovations in Berlin's public housing policies during the first half of the twentieth century, UNESCO added six housing projects to its World Heritage Site list.

Architects involved in the planning and construction of the projects included Walter Gropius, Martin Wagner and Bruno Taut, all of whom became the leading German authorities in modernist-style public housing.

Each property incorporated building and garden architecture that promoted dignified living and improved housing conditions for poor Berliners.



Housing - via wikipedia

Großsiedlung Siemensstadt is one of the most impressive housing complexes within the World Heritage Site group. An assemblage of seven architects, who were dubbed the Ringsiedlung, completed the Siemensstadt in 1931.

Unlike other low-income housing projects built in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Siemensstadt was funded by a private housing cooperative. The complex, which is still in use today, features numerous open spaces and a modernist style. Many apartments include balconies, which overlook green spaces to enhance the lives of their inhabitants.



Cologne castle - via wikipedia

### Cologne Cathedral

Construction of Cologne Cathedral began in 1248 and was finally completed more than six centuries later in 1880. The cathedral's original architects designed the structure to be a house of worship for the Holy Roman Emperor. However, its primary purpose was to hold a collection of relics said to be gifts brought to the newborn Christ by the three wise men.

Throughout the centuries-long construction process, builders continued to follow the original plans. The completed work is a massive structure, standing more than 500 feet tall and spread out over nearly 135,000 square feet. It has 11 church bells, including one called Pretiosa, which was installed in the mid-fifteenth century and weighs more than 10 tons.

Cologne Cathedral holds priceless historical treasures, including the Shrine of the Three Kings, which contains the nativity gifts the church was designed to house. The Gero-Kreuz, a hand-carved crucifix created in the first century, hangs near the sacristy and two thirteenth century Jewish tablets are embedded in the walls of the sanctuary.

During World War II, the cathedral sustained serious damage from nearly 100 bombs. Restoration began shortly after the end of the war and was completed in 1956.

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