

Colombia

BLUE MOON OVER BOGOTÁ

Text: Bill Drago

Photography: Bill Drago and Mauricio Escobar





Imagine the most amazing motorcycle road in the world. What would it be like? Would it race along the Pacific coast like California's Highway 1? Would it launch you high into the Andes where condors soar beneath the clouds? Maybe you would be greeted by ghosts of the ancients as they watch over their people from the parapets of an old castle ... and would those people warm your heart with their kindness and their smiles? If it was all of this, and laced with asphalt ribbons disappearing into a wooded pathway struggling for significance against a persistent rain forest, it would be Colombia. And, it would smell like coffee.



Coffee plantations sprinkle a patchwork of order among the natural beauty of the Andes. Everywhere you look is like a scene from *Romancing the Stone*.

Pure
Colombia.
Follow the
aroma!

- Bill Drago



Hot out of Medellín, we clap the spurs to our BMW R 1200 GS motorcycles and lay into the twisty asphalt. There is hardly a straight road in Colombia with the exception of a few modern highways crossing the lowland flats near the coast. In a lapse of attention I fail to check my mirrors, and a vicious roar sends a jet of adrenaline through my bloodstream. A white Mercedes-AMG bolts past and wraps itself around the next turn like an Indy Car. I twist the throttle and pick up the pace. We scamper through the curves until a *policías acostados* (speed bump) forces us to slow down. My tour guide, Mauricio Escobar (a.k.a. Micho from Adventures57), eases to the front and takes us down a backroad leading to the Puente De Occidente Bridge. I find a place in the grass by the river where I can rest my head on my backpack for a nap. Closing my eyes, my mind drifts through a fog of half-sleep, recalling the first days of this adventure.

Bittersweet Anticipation

I feel a twinge of concern as I load gear on my GS. I often ride alone, preferring to let the road show me what it has to offer. Choosing to ride with a tour operator was a gamble. Involving a guide means I must comply with someone else's idea of a good time. I shake it off and cinch down the straps on my Kriega UScombo50 soft luggage, just as my host arrives at Hotel B3 where I had spent my first night in Bogotá. My arrival coincides with August's second full moon. I wonder if this blue moon foreshadows the rare possibilities presented by Colombia.

Micho leads the way through Colombia's capital to an open-air breakfast of *Arepas Rellenas de Queso* (cheese stuffed corn cakes), fried eggs, fresh-squeezed orange juice, and a rich brew of Colombian coffee. This is a nice start. We savor the anticipation of what is to come as we move away from the country's center. After discussing the merits of our machines, we are off to meet Micho's friends at a gas station on the edge of town. Alejandro Gómez, a top qualifier for Colombia's GS Trophy team; Nicolás Upegui, BMW Motorrad Director for Colombia; and two of their riding buddies join us for the first few miles. We pour through traffic like warm molasses, splitting lanes and leaving slower trucks and cars to haggle for their places in line.



Chasing Crazy

Shortly after noon our group separates, leaving Alejandro, Micho, and me to tackle the first rural roads as we travel southeast toward Barichara. Traffic is still an issue, but we pass when it is safe based on skill and available power. This practice puts us in the clear in seconds. Alejandro sets a brisk pace, which although thrilling, prevents me from looking around as much as I would like. I swerve around a sheep and meet a truck attempting to claim the same point on my space-time continuum. A quick roll off and tap of the brakes prevents an awkward double occupancy of the asphalt. Alejandro turns toward home mid-afternoon, allowing us to slow down and immerse ourselves in the beauty and culture of a country often thought of for its coffee and its drug trade.

Colonial Barichara's stone-paved streets welcome us as we motor past rows of stucco buildings hiding homes and businesses behind walls. Only the doors and signs distinguish one from another. But behind these plain bastions, real people have made their marks. Each place is as unique as the hopes and dreams of its creator. Barichara's history is spoken in the language

of architecture with magnificent cathedrals and hand-laid cobblestone boulevards. At sunset, I capture images in the soft light. Later we walk to a cantina for dinner and a couple of cold cervezas (beer). I could get used to this.

A Long Haul on a Short Schedule

A rooster crows at 6:30 in the morning, but he is late. I sit in the courtyard of Barichara's Hostel Mission Santa Barbara sipping coffee and watching birds flit in and out of the greenery. The sun creeps up over my hideaway adorned with dangling bougainvillea and fragrant, flowering ylang-ylang trees. My host has a knack for ferreting out the most extraordinary places to rest and dine.

It will take a heavy throttle hand to put the day's 250 miles (400 kilometers) behind as we ride north parallel to the Venezuelan border, but we find time to stop at a roadside stand for refreshment. The pretty, young proprietor blends a tasty fruit juice with chunks of a nectar-like substance suspended in the glass. I make a pig of myself and ask for seconds. Micho urges me to move along before I overindulge and can't ride.

Midday we enter the Cañón del Chicamocha. Deeper than the Grand Canyon, this geological accident is a playground for anyone on a well-mannered motorcycle. Micho is a superb rider and knows these roads well. The road down is a purist's dream, and the powerful boxer motor keeps the fun factor going.

Toward evening, a golden sunset graces the Andes, turning mountain passes into slotted windows, luring us deeper. Our destination is the Orquideas Plaza Hotel in the town of Playa de Belén. An electric shower head and spartan accommodations make it clear we are a long way from Bogotá's comforts. We have come here to visit Los Estoraques Área Natural Única. It would take weeks to explore all of the caves and crevasses of this natural park, but a morning stroll allows us to take a glimpse at its strange geological formations, tall spires carved by the hands of time.

True Grit and New Friends

Our longest stretch of dirt spans a large portion of the 230 miles (370 kilometers) northwest from Los Estoraques to Mompós. Although some of it is paved, the unimproved roads are fascinating. Cattle graze



We stop occasionally to visit with the local farmers. They are happy to share some of their fresh, tiny green onions with the Gringo who wears the funny pants.

Colombia has many cathedrals, but these natural spires in the Los Estoraques Área Natural Única (what equates to one of our national parks) challenge them all for their majesty.

Men have always been intrigued by another man's horse. In this case, one horse versus 100.







in damp, rich grasslands as long wooden boats drift slowly propelled with poles through the shallows. We roll down rutted trails, past mud and cinder block huts, occasionally stopping to visit with the locals. Motos are prevalent, but we may as well be riding starships for the attention our big adventure bikes bring. Citizens of all ages gather at every opportunity to talk, laugh, and ask us about our machines. Odd as we seem to them, we are ambassadors from another world and are careful to remain respectful.

Mompós is “the town that time forgot.” The Magdalena River flows past what was once a thriving trading post and the third most significant city in Colombia. Silt has filled the river and forced larger boats to stop coming, leaving this former center of commerce to fend for itself. Churches and other colonial buildings are still in use, well maintained, and welcoming the traveler. Tourism has replaced tobacco, precious metals, contraband, and slaves as a means to existence. The relaxed setting affords a perfect respite from the rigorous travel required to get here. We take a moto-propelled rickshaw to dinner but decide to walk to our hotel afterwards, enjoying the dim, yellow lighting and eerie feeling of walking along the river after dark.

Chugging Down the Magdalena River

We are up before dawn to catch the ferry down river. The boat ride will put us well on our way to Cartagena, which is still several hours northwest. As day breaks, we arrive at an old steel tub brimming with locals. One offers fresh fish from a stained Styrofoam ice chest, but we decline. I imagine I am Humphrey Bogart on *The African Queen* as we chug past fishermen and women doing laundry on the banks.

Leaving the ferry, we pass workers honing planks for the long boats we saw on the river. Each board is hand-laid and sculpted to fit its neighbors with watertight precision. As a hobby woodworker, I can appreciate the craftsmanship that goes into each vessel, but I am eager to see Cartagena so we avoid the temptation to linger in an effort to get there before dark.

At night, the lights of Cartagena splash like phosphorus across the ink black Caribbean shallows. Founded in 1533, this port city once harbored galleons loaded with gold and silver bound for Spain. In the dark times of the early 17th century, Cartagena became a seat of the Inquisitions. Implements of persuasion are still on display at the gruesome Palace of the Inquisition. It is easy to envi-



One needs only to snap a picture—anywhere—to capture an image worthy of framing.

As a craftsman, I find their precision work with such crude tools almost unfathomable. It is easy to admire their skill as they build these boats in a matter of a few days.

It takes some getting used to, but dining in Barichara typified many of the splendid presentations we enjoyed throughout the country.

sion the ghost of Sir Francis Drake walking the narrow streets or the spirit of Cartagena’s founder, Pedro de Heredia, standing watch from San Felipe Castle, where visitors can look out over the seawall. A turn of the head is rewarded with a view inland across clay-tiled roofs adorning Spanish architecture. We dine next to gun ports overlooking the bay where rusty cannons maintain an aura

of security for the guests. Cartagena is truly a feast for the senses.

In the Footsteps of Pablo Escobar

It is a long 415 miles (670 kilometers) from Cartagena south to Medellín, with the first miles over hot coastal lowlands. Set among the Andes in a mile-high valley, Medellín's cooler climate is a welcome change from the heat. It is a place that once struck fear in the hearts of *Gringos* (English-speaking foreigners). A few years ago I might have been shot for merely showing my face here. During the reign of drug lord Pablo Escobar, the country's second largest city was considered the world's most dangerous, and the San Javier district we are visiting was one of the worst of its slums. My host assures me things have changed, and the smiles of the youngsters seem sufficient evidence. Statistics demonstrating the recent 80 percent plunge in homicides are also comforting. Our ride up the \$5 million cable lift provides an extraordinary view of the city. Built in 2004, the lift offers the poor quick passage to and from work, and like the metro train serving the lower elevations, it was built to ease travel and tensions between the haves and have-nots in this city of three and a half million.

From Medellín, we ride west and north to Santa Fe Antioquia where we encounter our wealthy friends in their high-performance cars. We learn that one Porsche driver also rides a GS. The brotherhood of the bike paves the way to forgiveness for our taking advantage of them as they entered the rough pavement.

Tipsy Cowboys and Dancing Horses

Soon we arc south again to the village of Jardín. A magnificent church building stands at the end of the square, and festivities go on well into the night. As we stroll past bright, multi-colored storefronts, the rhythmic clicking of prancing ponies catches our attention. A Saturday night ritual here, Paso Fino horses carry their smartly dressed riders from bar to bar. The riders are given shots and cervezas until they are hardly able to navigate the streets. Fortunately, their horses' more sober judgment helps them get home safely.

Where the Red Beans Grow

From Jardín, we take the mountain road to Riosucio, a twisty paved route starting in the Antioquia coffee region. The

asphalt ends suddenly, leaving us on a dim dirt road covered by a dense jungle canopy. Climbing again, the jungle gives way to mountain vistas. We cross the two mile (3,700 meters) Letras Pass, then ride the last 15 miles (23 kilometers) at night. We finally end up at the Damasco Ranch, owned by Micho's friend Felipe Luque, a rancher turned entrepreneur.

Two GSs and the Jungle

From Damasco Ranch we turn north to Villa De Leyva, and then begin our arc east and south toward our home base in Bogotá. After crossing the Magdalena River Valley, we ascend a narrow dirt road leading us back into the jungle. Mud slides are frequent here, and crude road repairs are underway. Giant steel plates cover washed-out areas, and I feather the clutch to maintain traction on the slippery surface as we squeak by equipment and trucks hauling out debris. While Micho buys us soft drinks at a work site in the middle of the jungle, I discover an old foot bridge high above the river. The entire structure is wrapped in vines like a high trelis. Boards are rotten and broken, dampening any thought of trying to cross. We continue our climb, temperatures dropping with



I ordered several glasses of this fabulous fruit concoction until Micho finally tore me away.

Colorful Cartagena, The City of Love. This quaint, colonial, coastal city has been a lover's destination for many centuries.



A hand cut nail slows our pace and reminds us that this is no ordinary place to ride a motorcycle. Colombia is like a trip back in time.

Even in its beauty, everything has a purpose here. The grass is food for the cattle. These boats bring fish and eventually, the cattle will become food for those who built the boats.

The Basílica Menor de la Inmaculada Concepción in Jardín is one example of the many fantastic cathedrals found throughout Colombia.

every mile. The chill adds to the jungle's mystique. Micho stops at an overlook and points across the valley to the lush Colombian skyline. "Take one last look, my friend. Remember what you have seen here."

A Dream Come True

Our final night in Bogotá is spent with friends. Beef tenderloin and a good Cabernet Sauvignon is a fitting finale to the experience. My belly is full, but my appetite for adventure has been whetted by the events of this lunar phase. Colombia has so much more to offer. Back at the hotel I sleep well, but sometime before daylight I wake up and remember a dream. Under the last sliver of a waning blue moon, I was flying like an eagle over the Andes. Wafting up from the villages below was the unmistakable aroma of coffee. **RR**

Printable maps, along with the digital version of each issue are included free during all paid subscription periods. To access these benefits, visit us at www.roadrunner.travel.



Facts & Information

Total Mileage
Approximately 1,900 miles

In General

Colombia is a year-round destination. Near the Equator, temperatures vary more by altitude and rainfall rather than being influenced by time of year. A rider should prepare for warm, humid conditions along the Amazon where temps can exceed 100 degrees to mid-40s at altitude. The driest months are December to March, July, and August. The coastal climate is mostly spring like.

Our travels covered much of the northwestern regions. Roads are always twisty, and truck traffic is common near the larger cities. Gasoline costs around \$4.50 per gallon. Ten days in the saddle took us over approximately 1,865 miles (3,000 kilometers). Tour packages vary according to length and your needs but average about \$430 per day. Travel in general is much safer now; however, engaging a quality tour company does a lot to ensure an uneventful trip.

How to Get There

Bogotá provides modern airline access, and if you have a guide, they will meet you at the airport.

Food & Lodging

Food is generally cheap with meals costing \$2–\$5. Hostels can be had for under \$20 nightly, or you can spend much more at the top hotels in Cartagena. Lodging is easy to find.

Roads & Biking

Railroads are difficult to maintain in Colombia due to the extreme mountainous terrain. Roads and rivers take the bulk of freight and passengers; hence, one should have reasonably good rider skills to negotiate the busier byways safely. Nevertheless, wide mountain vistas; winding, well-maintained roads; and lush, green countryside make Colombia an adventure rider's paradise.

Things to Do

From the botanical gardens in Medellín to a stay in a past drug cartel mansion in Santa Marta, Colombia has something for everyone. Backpacking is gathering steam with a few exceptions where the FARC (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) are still somewhat active. www.chron.com/opinion/outlook/article/Colombia-s-Medellin-the-future-of-metropolitan-5663460.php

Resources

- Colombia Tourism, www.colombia.travel
- Indie Traveller (Low budget independent travel guide) www.indietraveller.co/destinations/travel-guide/colombia
- Motorcycle Tours and Rentals, Mauricio Escobar (Micho) is a BMW-certified instructor and international tour guide with extensive experience throughout the region. www.adventures57.com
www.elephantmoto.com



Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.

Books & Maps

- *Lonely Planet Colombia* by Kevin Raub, Alex Egerton, and Mike Power, ISBN 978-1741797985, \$26.99
- *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey* by Ernesto Che Guevara, Ocean Press, ISBN 978-1876175702, \$16.95
- *Colombia Travel Map 1:1,400,000* by International Travel Maps, ISBN 978-1553413301, \$12.95

Motorcycle & Gear

2014 BMW R 1200 GS

Helmet: Shoei Hornet-DS
 Jacket and Pants: BMW Rally III
 Boots: Sidi Adventure
 Gloves: Answer Racing Mesh