

Latin America holidays**Postcard from...Medellín**

Once known as the world's most dangerous city, Medellín has reinvented itself with a new art museum, a thriving restaurant scene — and rising visitor numbers



© Matthew Cook
Paul Richardson YESTERDAY



Friday night in Parque Lleras: the benches and walkways are heaving with high-spirited partygoers dressed up to the nines and emitting an impressive volume of good-natured noise. But among the flowerbeds of the little park, the keen-sighted visitor might detect a jarring note. Flanking a saccharine statue of the Virgin Mary stand two plaques discreetly recalling the night of May 17 2001, when a car bomb killed eight and injured more than 130. Many of the victims of that outrage were young people, much like the ones hanging out here 18 years later.

Medellín: the very name still carries a charge of something very like fear. In 1988, when the horrors of Colombia's drug wars were at their height, Time magazine dubbed Colombia's second city "the most dangerous in the world". An epidemic of gangland violence made this a dead zone for tourism — not to mention a nightmare for its long-suffering residents. The uptown barrio of El Poblado, surrounding the Parque Lleras, was generally safer than deprived areas such as San Javier and Comuna 8. Even so, middle-class *medellinenses* now in their forties and fifties remember the

tedium of weekend nights at home when “it’s not safe to go out” was the familiar injunction from their worried parents.

The transformation wrought in Medellín since the start of the peace process has been widely recognised — in 2013, the Urban Land Institute named it the world’s “most innovative city”. But it still has to be seen to be believed. Driving along the Carrera 43A, I catch sight of a building that was once famously owned by Pablo Escobar, abandoned at his death in 1993 and in 2016 reborn as a luxury hotel, the *Viaggio Medellín*. As for Hacienda Nápoles, the sprawling country estate that was a notorious symbol of Escobar’s bling lifestyle, it has become a theme park. (Reports suggest the hippopotami brought by the drug lord for his private zoo have run wild and grown into a formidable herd.) Tourism has grown too, up from 33,354 foreign visitors in 2004 to 274,693 last year, according to the city’s Department of Economic Development.

For any global city seeking to rebrand a bad reputation, the playbook includes opening a spectacular new art museum — and Medellín is no exception. The geometric forms of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín (Mamm), whose ambitious new extension opened in 2015, occupy a former steel factory in a shiny new development along the river. Ciudad del Río’s post-industrial wasteland has been reclaimed for apartment blocks, a state-of-the-art new hospital, and the cultural powerhouse of the Mamm.

The peace dividend is dealing Medellín a generous payout. Back in El Poblado, once a sleepy residential neighbourhood, a surge of new restaurants and bars has energised the barrio. Kentucky-born Rob Pevitts opened his restaurant Carmen in 2008 — “when Medellín was just emerging from the bad times” — and has witnessed manifold improvements, from the spending power of locals to the availability of previously hard-to-come-by ingredients. “Back then I’d have been amazed if we got a bunch of rocket — this was the Wild West of cuisine,” he tells me, bringing out a parade of dishes whose vibrant flavours are powered by indigenous Colombian ingredients like fermented coconut, *corozo costeño* (palm berry) and crunchy fried *hormigas culonas* (literally “big-bottomed ants”).

On a warm evening on Calle 10, El Poblado’s main drag, the streets vibrate to the thump of Miami bass and the throb of reggaeton. At the avant-garde restaurant El Cielo on a quiet side-street, chef Juan Manuel Barrientos gives me his side of the story. He now has branches of El Cielo in Bogotá and Miami, but the 10-year-old Medellín flagship, a traditional house with a bamboo roof and varnished wooden floor, makes an odd backdrop for modernist culinary theatrics like *La Experiencia*, a dish that requires diners to coat their hands in a rich chocolatey liquid and slowly lick it off.

Meanwhile his Fundación El Cielo has trained more than 600 former FARC and ELN guerrillas in cooking and pastry-making. The foundation’s school, in a rehabilitated army barracks, also hosts

“forgiveness and reconciliation” sessions and get-together lunches for men who would have slaughtered each other 20 years ago. When lunch is over they all hug each other, says Barrientos — a gesture nicely embodying Colombia’s collective dream of peace.

Details

Paul Richardson was a guest of Miraviva (miravivatravel.com), which offers a three-night break in the city from £845 per person, or a week’s itinerary around Colombia from £2,350, both including private tours and transfers (but not international flights). For more general visitor information see colombia.travel

Follow [@FTLifeArts](https://twitter.com/FTLifeArts) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first. Subscribe to [FT Life](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFTLife) on YouTube for the latest FT Weekend videos

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2018. All rights reserved.

Latest on Latin America holidays