

# The Guardian

## Medellín, Colombia: a miracle of reinvention

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Downtown Medellín, Colombia, showing the metro station Parque Berrio, Plaza Botero and the Museum of Antioquia

Once dubbed the ‘most dangerous city on earth’, Medellín is now one of

**I** had my doubts about Medellín. Next time someone says “most dangerous city on earth”, I’ll pull a machine gun on them – that spurious claim was made over a quarter of a century ago, in Time magazine in March 1988. Like Bogotá and Santiago de Cali, Medellín is a much wealthier, safer and more fashionable city these days, and its year-round summery climate, nearby forests and bird reserves and, indeed, the fact that it hasn’t been backpackered into oblivion – unlike Cusco, say – makes it a rather more desirable destination.

But I was also dubious about claims that the city is the epitome of the “Colombian miracle” - shorthand for the quelling of violence of the left-wing Farc and paramilitary forces. In just a quick glance around Medellín I saw sizable shanty towns, and the heavy presence of cops in the centre indicates that vigilance is vital to keeping up appearances.

However, on a balmy Sunday morning in the zen-inspired, “interactive” Parque de los Pies Descalzos (Barefoot Park), I started to believe that Colombia’s second city might have something interesting to tell me after all.



The zen-‘interactive’ Parque de los Pies Descalzos (Barefoot Park).

Photograph: Chris Moss

It began with me removing my shoes to stroll along a footpath of pebbles lined by native guadua bamboo. The stones and slimy mud were sort of soothing. Next, I walked out on to a lawn which, according to Adriana, my guide, “absorbed static energy”. A larger group led by two of the park’s official guides (provided free of charge) was hugging some trees. Next came a maze, which visitors are encouraged to cross with closed eyes, using only touch, sound and instinct. Finally I dipped my lower legs into a cooling footbath.

It sounds hippyish, but Adriana gave it an urban slant. “How much time do you dedicate in a whole week to your feet?” she asked. “Consider all that they do for you.”

This all took place in the heart of the city, in the shadow of a utilities company building, for whose employees the park was originally created. With cafes and restaurants close by, it has become a focal point for workers as well as tourists. On that Sunday, the visitors were mainly families with small kids; in fact, it would make anyone feel like a small kid.



The Charlee hotel

Round the corner was an *eco-árbol*, a tall, hi-tech tree-like structure that purifies 22,000 cubic metres of air every hour by removing carbon dioxide and traffic toxins. Built by a company called ConTreeBute, it was developed with help from Italian engineers. When, in 2013, Medellín was hailed as “most innovative city in the world” by the influential non-profit Urban Land Institute - beating New York and Tel Aviv to the title - its civic spaces were praised. The eco-tree, and other urban installations around the city such as the Orquideorama, a wooden meshwork of modular “flower-tree” structures in the botanical gardens, are part of this image rebuild.

Not that good old consumerism was in small supply. I was staying at striking US-owned hotel, The Charlee (surely an expat joke), in the leafy Parque Lleras area of El Poblado, an upscale residential district south of the centre. All around are independent boutiques and interiors stores, art supplies outlets, bars and clubs, loads of places to eat and even a Belgian coffee shop. I skipped the sushi and ceviches and went to Mondongos (Calle 10, 38, [mondongos.com.co](http://mondongos.com.co)) for a *bandeja paisa* - an orgy of fried pork, beans, egg, black pudding, maize buns and plantain. It was a Saturday night, clubbing night, and the whole area was throbbing, despite torrential rain. The sheer bulk of my dinner precluded any notion of dancing.

El Poblado was lively and comfortingly middle class, but more interesting - and indigenous - was Comuna 1, a working-class suburb on the north-eastern edge of the city which had served as a recruiting ground for local drug lord Pablo Escobar. I travelled there on Line K, part of the city’s new cable-car network. From my little pod I surveyed a vast acreage of gimcrack houses and, beyond, the densely forested peaks of the mountains that surround Medellín.

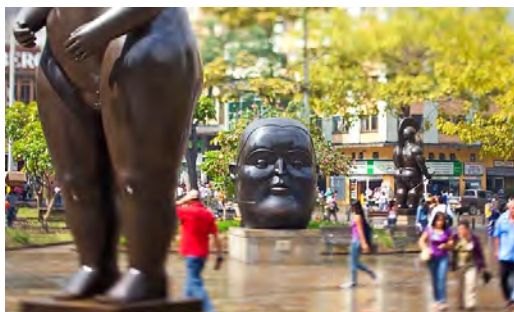


The cable car system has cut journey times in the hilly city. Photograph: imagebroker / Alamy/Alamy

At the top is the eye-catching and award-winning Parque Biblioteca España or Spain Library-Park, an arts-cum-community centre funded by the Spanish government and opened by the king and queen of Spain in 2007. Inside I watched a funny little play for children that made them laugh while teaching them about hygiene. Outside I took in the street art. One mural by young artists celebrated the World Urban Forum of 2014. Another commemorated flood victims and displaced persons who had been victims of violence in Comuna 1 in the past.

The smell of meat *empanadas* and roasting chicken mixed with fresh mountain breezes blowing through this once disaffected, disconnected poverty-stricken sprawl. On the way back down, a man returning from a visit to friends said the journey to the barrio had been reduced from an hour or more on foot to 10 minutes by cable car. Comuna 1 belongs to Medellín now, and vice versa.

Artist Fernando Botero is the Beryl Cook of Colombia, known for paintings and sculptures of figures of exaggerated volume. He provides a useful commentary on Medellín's sense of self and the body. In the south-west corner of central Parque Berrío is his *Torso Femenino*, a bronze sculpture of a very inflated female form nicknamed *La Gorda* (The Fat Lady) by locals. It was given to the city in 1987 - the first of many donations by Botero, who was born here in 1932. On nearby Botero Plaza are more of his bronzes - of men, women, a cat, a Roman soldier. Adriana told me some of the sexier figures had become meeting points for couples. "Local men like voluptuous women," she said.



Boteros figure in Plaza Botero. Photograph: Alamy

In Plaza de San Antonio stand two bronze birds by Botero. At first they look similar but as you approach you see that one is intact and the other is all twisted, with bits broken off. In 1995, a bomb - planted allegedly by Farc militants - killed 23 people attending a concert and destroyed the statue. It has been left as a "homage to the barbarians". In 2000, Botero had an intact version of the sculpture placed in the park as a symbol of peace.

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Under the tropical noonday sun, you can only do so much outdoors. I slipped into the Museo de Antioquia (an art museum with lots of Botero oil paintings) for a coffee - a good one. Colombians are beginning to take their best-known (legal) export seriously, training baristas and toasting the beans with care.

There is plenty more art here, if you want it. The Museo de Arte Moderno (MAMM), housed in a repurposed steel factory, has just opened a new wing to house a permanent display of Colombian artists, making it the largest in the country - and the city’s vibrant art scene now rivals Bogotá’s.



Fernando Botero's oversized figures adorn a wall in Medellín, with the Andes in the background. Photograph: Chris Moss

Medellín is also known for its textiles industry, which has been established for more than a century. In recent years this has developed into a fashion scene. El Poblado’s Vía Primavera (also called Carrera 37) is an open-air space for independent designers - especially of shoes, leatherware and accessories - trying to tempt shoppers away from the huge malls that dominate the city. Local designer Camilo Álvarez, whose silky, summery couture opened last year’s Colombiamoda (the country’s biggest fashion show held in Medellín), says: “The local *paisa* style is most evident in underwear and swimwear, sexy with a rich mix of textures.” The sea is many miles and quite a few Andean mountains away from Medellín, but the penchant for skimpy bikinis is of a piece with Botero’s love of “voluminous” women.

All this enterprise and creativity give Medellín a tangible, youthful energy. In three days I’d done no ordinary touristy things - no souvenir shopping, no ancient ruins, no major museums, no trendy galleries, no folksy dance and music - but I liked this city and felt I was getting to know it.

Medellín says something original about regeneration and tourism. In future, perhaps other cities will invite visitors to feel and sense things, to meet people and learn about them, to visit the margins as well as the museums of the centre. I hope so, because that would reopen a lot of places that have become jaded or bloated or just boring. Medellín is definitely not the most dangerous city in the world. It’s not even the most dangerous city in Colombia. But it’s almost certainly the most interesting and innovative one.

● *The trip was provided by Miraviva (020-7186 1111, miravivatravel.com) which has seven days in Colombia, including flights and three nights in Medellín, from £1,995pp.*

*The Charlee hotel (+574 444 4968, thecharlee.com) has doubles from £72. More information at More information at colombia.travel*