



DAY 456 - LA CANDELARIA, BOGOTA, COLOMBIA - 8957 KM

## Bogota

—Latin America's bicycle capital

The Darién Gap is bad news. It's a lawless stretch of jungle in between Panama and Colombia without any public roads going through. Although there are people who have successfully crossed borders here, albeit illegally, it's strongly discouraged. Not only is the jungle impenetrable and the wildlife dangerous, but there are also reports of robberies and kidnappings. Therefore, I found myself a cardboard box in Panama and disassembled the bike for a flight to Colombia's capital. Everything arrives in one piece at baggage claim.

Walking out into the crisp mountain air from the airport invites a sigh of relief. Bogota is located 2500 meters above sea level, meaning cooler temperatures. I couldn't wait to arrive here after so much time in the tropical heat of Central America. It feels like coming home. Bogota seems much more modern and developed than I expected. My image of the city was poorly constructed by the usual headlines of drug trafficking and violence, and more recently by *Narcos*, the series about Pablo Escobar. The image I see now as I cycle the long bike lane from the airport to the center is totally different. Many people commute by bicycle, the streets are clean and organized, and the architecture is modern. The old center, Candelaria, looks typically Latin American with its colonial architecture, but the majority of the city has red brick facades and more of a European character.

On Sunday, I see a phenomenon I wasn't expecting in Latin America: La Ciclovía. Every Sunday from 7:00 in the morning to 2:00 in the afternoon, some of the main connecting roads are closed to motorized traffic, allowing people to freely bike, run, skate, walk their dogs, or just sit on the curbs to socialize. There are no isolated freeways or expressways in Bogota, so roads get clogged easily, making this an especially welcome break from the tedious everyday traffic. Every Sunday the streets are



quiet and filled with people. The vibe is incredibly uplifting—it's a joy to be outside. And, as it is known for having the most extensive network of bike lanes on the continent, I'm not hesitant to dub Bogota the bike capital of Latin America.

I spend my days in comfortable Airbnbs and catch up on emails, photo editing, and writing for a few days. And it's again time to throw away some clothes and buy new ones. This is an instant upgrade from the gritty lifestyle on the road of the previous leg of my trip. I cherish the clean sheets, the soft bed, the shower that's actually warm, and the bathroom I can stand up straight in. The food is great and the menus are well designed. I even make new friends who speak English. I'm instantly back to the life I used to live, enjoying all the small things I normally take for granted.

As in other big cities, I stay in the capital for a while to connect with people more deeply. Speaking Spanish is still a struggle, so in small towns, communication never goes much beyond small talk. That's different in cities, where people are more educated and speak English. As I

continue to settle in, it appears that I know more people in Bogota than I thought. One guy who has followed me for a couple of years on Instagram invites me to lunch. He has done some cycle touring as well so we have plenty to discuss—this is the wonderful world of social media. It's never been easier to connect with like-minded people instantly, anywhere in the world. But the connections also happen the old-fashioned way. Outside the supermarket, my bike attracts the attention of Dan, a French guy who married a girl in Buenos Aires and has been settled in Bogota with her for the last decade. We chat and he gives me his phone number. A few days later, we have dinner in a downtown restaurant with another cyclist friend. This is how I get to know the city—it's a lot better than hiring a travel guide.

I also get to know Paula, a Colombian model. She's a vibrant personality, with a short blue buzzcut. I ask if she wants to do a photo shoot, and we take some photographs of her in an eclectic apartment with sweeping views over Bogota. We talk about life in Colombia, and about gender equality. She shows me photos of when she had long hair and fit in with everyone else. It's still quite controversial to express yourself in the way