

DREAMING BARRANQUILLA

By Cecele Kraus

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“a mass of concrete bricks and dusty streets...

with few tourist attractions and little reason to visit”

(Lonely Planet Travel Guide)

1. Lemon Tree 1964

A slatted fence surrounds our shanty.
The brick-floored latrine slants
on the yard’s pressed dirt.

Rain washes feces and urine
into the soil and as the sun dries
the bricks, breezes waft the stench.

Having fled violence in a village
outside Bogotá, Señor Perdomo quietly
reads William Blake’s poems

while flies buzz on meat hanging
in his *tienda*, meat we sliver and fry
to kill parasites. We smoke
his unfiltered cigarettes,

crush leaves of the single lemon tree
in our fingers, and hold
the fragrance to our noses.

2. La Manga 1965

Yearly monsoons carve the road
into a treacherous arroyo.
Black women balance baskets
of folded wash on their heads
while white-shirted men trudge
through mud in search of work.

Sundays we drive a flat bed truck,
cajoling men to build
a retaining wall while women
fill a cauldron with enough fish,
yucca and plantains to feed the workers.

Trash-wood dwellings surrender
to the rains and we wonder how long
the wall can resist, knowing its bow
to the waters has already begun.

3. Night Taxi 1965

Marta sang, *Why oh why oh why oh
did I ever leave Ohio*,
strummed songs of Odetta
on nights I cried in the heat –

left our shanty for a village, a house with
shutters, and Raúl.

Heat like an iron presses me
into my cot and I roll melted
candle wax into balls to throw
at bats circling overhead.

Tires wake stray dogs;
headlights cast shadows
on our bare walls.

Marta throws clothes and journals
into her knapsack –
embraces me,
smiles wistfully,
rejoins Raúl in the taxi.

4. Playing With Stones 2008

Tony, tall gringo, picks up a small stone,
stretches his arm, stands alone.

Palm down, places the stone on his wrist,
tosses, catches it with a small twist –
inviting boys who lost their fathers
and live without toys.

Accepting, they toss the stone.
Today there’s no sound of guns.

5. Hotel El Prado 2008

Once elegant then sold to a drug lord
now in jail – taken by the state,
put up for sale.

By the pool, a suited man protects
his wife in a burka; his daughter
wears a bikini.

Elderly tourists practice tai chi.
I doze in the shade.

Once we swam in El Prado’s
pool for free, washing away
dirt and poverty.

Now night winds gust its colonnades
and stir up La Manga’s dirt roads.

Black and white tiles clack
under my feet, its corridor
floors are skidded.

6. Terminal 2008

A man taps my shoulder, points to my
passport on the floor:
*You’ll have trouble reentering
the States if you arrive without that.*

He congratulates the military raiding
a drug cartel on the Ecuador border, or
maybe
protecting President Uribe in Bogotá.

In stumbling Spanish I chat with una señora
in sensible shoes as women totter in stilettos
carrying American items
to be sold at afternoon teas.

A Muslim father talks urgently
to his departing son: maybe he leaves
for a Fulbright scholarship.

A village woman nurses her infant, breast
shielded by her wrinkled grandmother.

No Más FARC placards on the counters.
Protesters on TV monitors.
Guards everywhere.

Sparrows swoop through the terminal.

7. Living in Barranquilla 2008

Slim women in sunglasses race SUV’s
through El Prado’s tree-lined streets.
I drink lattes with the Levys at the mall
while Carlos, their driver, waits.

From the slums, motorcyclists
with young children onboard speed
the city’s arteries. Squatter camps
still circle the city; air sears my skin
with a smell voluptuous and dirty.

Particles of lemon, blood, meat,
and rum, dormant for forty years
now flare, pungent,
quicken in Barranquilla’s streets.

How can I long for a squatter camp?
Acres of shanties be the center
of the world?
As if I could burrow into stench,
crawl right into the ground:
find the essence of life.

I knew my grandfather
by the smell of farm on his skin.

8. Communion

I often cried in the heat – rats
running on rafters. Loneliness
unabated.

Rain brings it all back – smell
of Esso burners, cement powder sifting
off the new school. Unfiltered
bus fumes, drying grime.

Midday everyone closed their doors,
shut the shutters
if they had them – yet
we were all asleep together.

Roused by hungry babies waking,
dogs mounting, I listened
to my five-band radio
bringing music from England,

to drums from La Manga’s outer rim
where the dark-skinned families lived.

REPORT FROM OAS ASSEMBLY IN MEDELLÍN

By Jim Todd, Colombia XIII

Last June I traveled to Colombia
to work with the U.S. delegation
to the annual General Assembly
of the Organization of American
States. Then-Deputy Secretary of
State John Negroponte headed the
U.S. delegation (Secretary Rice was
in Stockholm trying to drum up
financial support for Iraq). We were
about 25 people in all, plus 40-odd
drivers, guards, and support staff
from the U.S. embassy in Bogotá.
Here are some impressions.

President Uribe really pulled
out all the stops to show off
Medellín, his home town, where he
served as mayor before becoming
governor of Antioquia, senator,
and president. He hosted a sit-
down dinner for several hundred
people in a semi-outdoors setting
in the orchid area of the botanical
garden to commemorate the 60th
anniversary of the OAS Charter,
signed in Bogotá in April 1948. He
also held top-level meetings in the
Museum of Antioquia, and took
people through the Fernando Botero
exhibit. Mrs. Uribe conducted a
special program for spouses with
elaborate luncheons, visits to flower
farms, schools, libraries and a new
teleférica called Metrocable that
connects poor barrios to downtown
via cars hung from cables.

The OAS meetings themselves
took place in a huge convention
center downtown called Plaza
Mayor, the equivalent of any
modern convention center in a large
U.S. city.

Medellín has grown tremen-
dously. The most pleasant area
(where most of our hotels were)
is called Poblado. The women
delegates were disappointed with the
shopping, saying the malls everyone
recommended were too much like
American ones, too youth-oriented,
and too expensive. Although
Colombia still has huge numbers of

very poor people, there’s obviously
a huge middle class there, with lots
of car ownership and the ubiquitous
small two-rider motorcycles whose
riders’ vests, by law, bear their
license plate numbers.

In addition to the Metrocable
operation, there was a new Metro
system (mostly above-ground
trolleys). The Antioqueños were
anxious to point out that Bogotá has
NO metro, and that the *teleférico*
that goes up Monserrate in Bogotá is
much shorter, doesn’t have multiple
support pylons, etc. Didn’t they
used to say that Antioquia was like
Texas in some ways?

I found that a lot of my Spanish
came back, although it was still
difficult to understand people on the
phone, especially those darn little
cell phones. I told the Colombians
that they had to let me practice
my Spanish, because I learned it
there 40-some years ago, and that
usually surprised them so much that
they went along. I also enjoyed
reading the local newspapers and
remembering the names of familiar
places and prominent families.
I read in *El Tiempo* about some
festivals in Boyacá. Of all things, the
town of Sutamarchán now has an
annual festival in which they throw
tomatoes at each other! It’s called
the Gran Tomatina Colombiana, and
is patterned after a similar festival
in Spain. In Boyacá’s capital, Tunja
(my Peace Corps site), they had just
celebrated the Virgen del Milagro,
the patron saint of Tunja, with a
procession from El Topo Sanctuary
to Plaza Bolívar. I had forgotten
about all the religious holidays in
Colombia, especially around this
time of the year. June 2 was San
Pedro Day, the previous Monday
was another saint’s day, and so on.
I remember that the first year we
were there as PCVs, sometimes we
took the bus in Bogotá out to visit

our assigned schools, and discovered
they were all closed because of a
religious holiday. Of course, no one
had told us!

The U.S. once had a consulate in
Medellín but closed it down because
of all the narcotics trafficking and
threats of kidnapping. This was a loss
for American foreign service officers
because the local women had a well-
deserved reputation as being the
most beautiful in all Colombia, and
I have met many vice-consuls who
as single young men were assigned
there and married local girls.

Security was tight but not
overwhelming, and the citizens
of Medellín appeared quite
comfortable with the situation.
Sidewalks were crowded with
people, market areas were bustling,
buses and taxis were constantly
on the move. The Colombian
government had banned public
demonstrations during the OAS
meeting, and the only group
that appeared affected was one
planning to protest on behalf of
persons displaced by violence in
the countryside, and this group
blamed the right-wing AUC (self-
defense groups financed by large
landowners) rather than the left-
wing FARC for their plight.

After the conference, just before
we boarded our aircraft, passengers
were divided into separate lines of
men and women and thoroughly
“patted down” by two police
officers just outside the door of the
airplane. It was reassuring to know
they take security seriously.

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