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an urban adventure

Despite the notoriety surrounding Colombia's second largest city, Jonathan Cane discovers Medellín also has its hip, and surprisingly rather fun, side

Text Jonathan Cane Photographs Name here

In 1988 Medellín was the most violent city in the world. The infamous drug lord Pablo Escobar was exporting tons of cocaine to the United States via his fleet of ships, planes and submarines. He was so powerful and wealthy that, when faced with prison time, he offered to pay the entire national debt of Colombia. When he eventually agreed to go to prison he designed his own jail—nicknamed Club Medellín—chose his own guards, and continued his narco-terrorism from inside La Catedral Prison overlooking the lights and hills of Antioquia’s capital.

Anyone who annoyed or threatened him was assassinated and/or bombed and/or had their family kidnapped and/or tortured. His roaring rampage of violence included the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán, the bombing of Flight 203—a failed assassination attempt of another presidential candidate César Gaviria Trujillo—which caused the death of 110 passengers, and the siege of the Supreme Court, which led to the murder of 50 per cent of all the Supreme Court Judges. Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez’s *News of a Kidnapping* is thought to be about Escobar’s escapades.

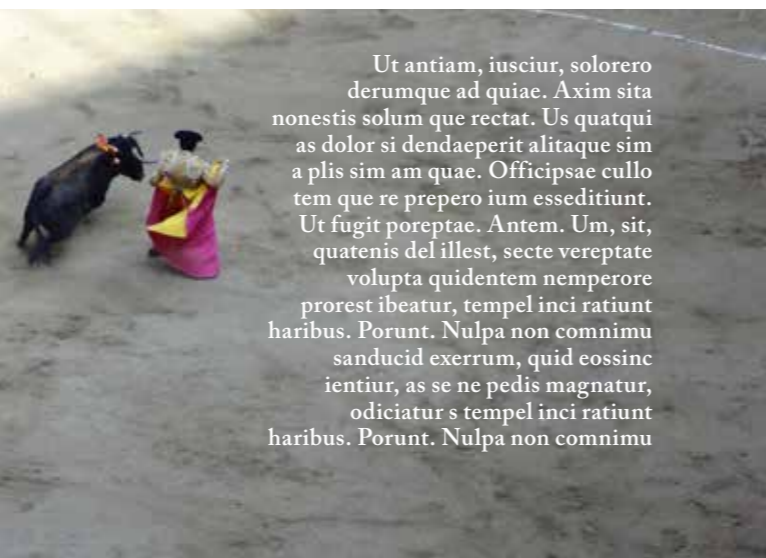
When Escobar was eventually assassinated in 1993 he and his associates left behind a city entangled in a complex war, where drugs and politics intersect with ideology and profit.

It is not 1988 any more. The Most Violent City is now San Pedro Sula, Honduras; however, depending on whom you talk to, you’ll get a different answer about how safe and healthy Medellín is. At one end of the long mountainous city gangsters with mullets extort money from poor widows and launch grenades at their neighbours, waking the comunas with semiautomatic gunshots. On the other side of Medellín, in El Poblado, old ladies wearing stockings laugh in Spanish drinking espressos at Pergamino Café. What is perfectly clear is that ‘Paisas’ (residents of Antioquia) don’t want to talk about their troubled history; they would rather have fun, talk about art, go shopping or get drunk in one of the many, very social parks.

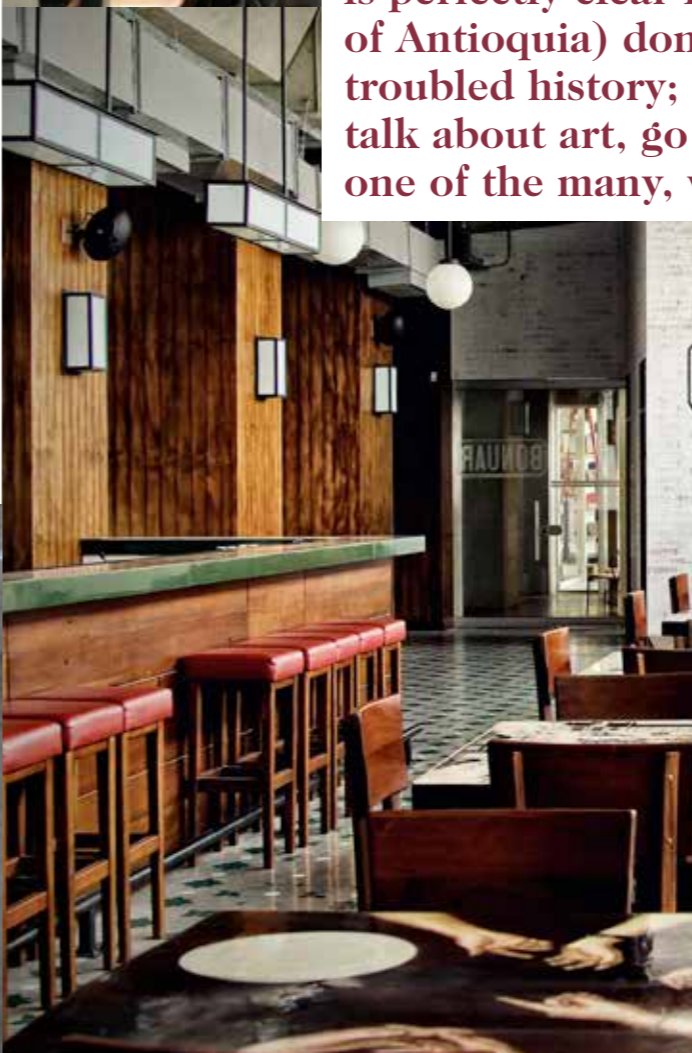
The parks and civic spaces are vital to Paisa life; they are where people flirt, buy and drink Aguardiente ‘guaro’ (licorice firewater), do gym, protest, play, just sit, or think. The parks may not be pretty—they don’t look like the Tuileries in Paris—but they are one of the most exciting spaces I’ve ever spent time in. As a rider, there is one exception to the ugly-park-rule: Jardín Botánico’s contemporary wooden orchid ‘greenhouse’ designed by plan:b architects

Well-designed civic space was a priority for ex-professor of mathematics Sergio Fajardo when he was mayor of Medellín in the 1990s. He insisted that the city’s most beautiful buildings should be in the poorest areas and that good design should build social cohesion. He began a crusade of library building, transport integration and upliftment. It’s been argued that his approach has led to a safer city; whether this can be proven is unclear but it is true to say that Medellín is now a more dignified city and one with some really cool new spaces. The Biblioteca España is one of these new buildings: an iconic cluster of big black blocks that have assembled themselves into a library on the edge of the hillside in one of the most dangerous comunas. Well, it was one of the most dangerous. Nowadays an innovative string of cable cars connect many of the most isolated hillside neighbourhoods into the city’s Metro system and a large outdoor escalator runs 28-stories up the hill to help poor residents commute safely.

While this might sound Edenic, and it is, as a visitor you will not always feel so safe. Many areas of downtown still feel a little threatening and because Medellín was cut off for so long—by its mountains in the 19th century and drugs in the 20th century—Paisas are very, very interested in foreigners. They stare, especially if you



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are tall. I'm never sure if I'm being stared at because they think I'm badly dressed (Paisas are formal people, so no shorts and slops allowed) or if I'm are being flirted with, or if someone wants to steal my phone and kill me. All of the above are equally possible.

It is however more likely that you'll be the one doing the judging; most Paisas are in fact infamously badly dressed and still rocking the famous Medellín Mullet. Apart from a tiny set of cool kids and the few super-slick grannies, Medellín fashion is dominated old nuns and 'grillas'. The grillas (pronounced grijas with a 'j' like Medejjin) are new-money ladies who can be identified by their uncomfortably long hair, sleazy highlights, ugly boots and boyfriends with mullets. While certainly not all grillas are actually spending drug money, this style was made popular by The Real Narco Wives of Medellín. Grilla-style stands in contrast with The Old Families who hide their affluence to avoid unwanted attention and/or extortion and/or kidnapping.

The safest area, and hence the highest density of foreigners (and non-grillas) is El Poblado. This neighbourhood is one of the wealthiest and prettiest, and is made up of many small, tree-lined streets that

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surround the two main parks, Parque El Poblado and Parque Lleras (Jjeras). The best hotel in Medellín is on Parque Lleras. The Charlee is a nice new building with an interesting façade, large open balconies that take advantage of the season-less weather and (sadly) hideous interiors, as tacky as a catholic schoolgirl wearing makeup. The cool Art Hotel just down the road is a warehouse renovation with ugly furniture and bad framing-gallery art.

Around the parks are many pretty restaurants and shops. Verdeo is good for boho-chic vegetarian, and Carmen and El Cielo for trendy contemporary Colombian. Pergamino Café pulls one of the best espressos you'll ever drink, in a super hip spot, with good Internet and hipsters. La Libertad makes sexy jewellery with a good sense of humour, and Mon & Velarde produces dapper clothing and shoes for the gentlemen and women of Colombia.

At night every house, alley, window and building becomes a bar. You can drink however you like: buy an overpriced imported beer, with a view, from the Charlee rooftop bar, hang out on the pavement at the cheerful El Social bar, or just buy a cheap quart from a hole-in-the-wall and drink it like a real Paisa in the park. My new favourite little bar is El Guapo (which means handsome), presumably named after the Italian owners and/or their cool new-Colombian style interiors.

On more adventurous nights you could find yourself venturing into the CBD to Parque Periodista. In this park you're likely to be flirted with by prostitutes and/or addicts and/or transvestites. A night in this park is kind of scary, not something you're sure you should be doing, very exhilarating and a little bit dirty – just like a trip to Medellín.



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WHEN IN MEDELLÍN...

STAY

The Charlee, Calle 9a #37-16, Parque Lleras, El Poblado

Art Hotel Medellín, Carrera 41 #9-31, El Poblado

Finca El Retorno, Guatapé, Antioquia

SHOP

La Libertad (vivalalibertad.com)

Mon & Velarde (monyverlade.net)

El Acontista Bookshop, Calle 53 #43-81

FOOD

Verdeo, Cnr Carrera 35 and Calle 8A, El Poblado

Carmen, Carrera 36 #10A-27, El Poblado

El Cielo, Cra 40 #10A-22, Zona Rosa

DRINK

Parque El Poblado, Parque Lleras & Parque Periodista

El Guapo, Calle 9, Parque El Poblado

Bar Calle 9 + 1, Calle 10, El Poblado

El Social, Carrera 35 #08-08, El Poblado

The Charlee Hotel Bar, Calle 9a #37-16, Parque Lleras, El Poblado

COFFEE

Pergamino Café, Carrera 37 #8A-37, El Poblado

VISIT

The Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín (MAMM), Carrera 64B #51-64, Ciudad del Río

Jardín Botánico (Botanical Gardens) & Orquideorama, Calle 73 #51-298

Biblioteca España, Metrostation Acevedo then take Metrocable to Santo Domingo station.

Parque Explora or Parque de los Deseos, for movies at night.

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