

Three Days in Bogota  
Arthur Lewbel - Oct. 8, 2007



View of Bogota from Monserrate Mountain

I was invited to give a talk at the Latin American meetings of the Econometric Society in Bogota. When I got the invitation, I immediately googled crime in Bogota, and discovered that, due to the new repressive government, violent crime there is way down, and that Bogota is no longer the kidnap capital of the world. So with that reassurance, I accepted the offer to go.

The trip began with typical flying hassles. I arrived at the airport with a business class ticket on American via Miami, and ended up in coach via Atlanta on Delta, only barely catching the last flight of the day after a full bag and body search.

The guy next to me on the plane told me how great Bogota is for partying at night, and how friendly the people are, that he'd spent over a month there and was only robbed once, and that he loves the place and never wants to leave. We landed about 8:30 PM. Customs is a bit of a mob scene. There is a line, but behind where the official line starts is a confusion of bodies - Colombians don't

seem to be big on lining up. That takes about an hour, and then I go to change money.

One of the warnings to tourists is to use credit cards only in nice hotels, since the numbers on US cards get stolen. So I bought 200,000 Colombian pesos, which is about \$120 American. To catch money laundering, Columbia is very sensitive about documenting cash. Getting money changed requires filling out a detailed form. The form then needs to be signed and fingerprinted before they hand over the cash. I reminded myself that the 10,000 peso notes are really just 6 dollar bills.



Hotel Tequendama doormen

There is another mad crush of people being met at the airport. The airport is too small for a city of 8 million people. I soon found the folks sent by the conference to pick me up along with other arriving economists. After a great deal of confirming names and checking forms, we were allocated to cars and driven to the hotel.

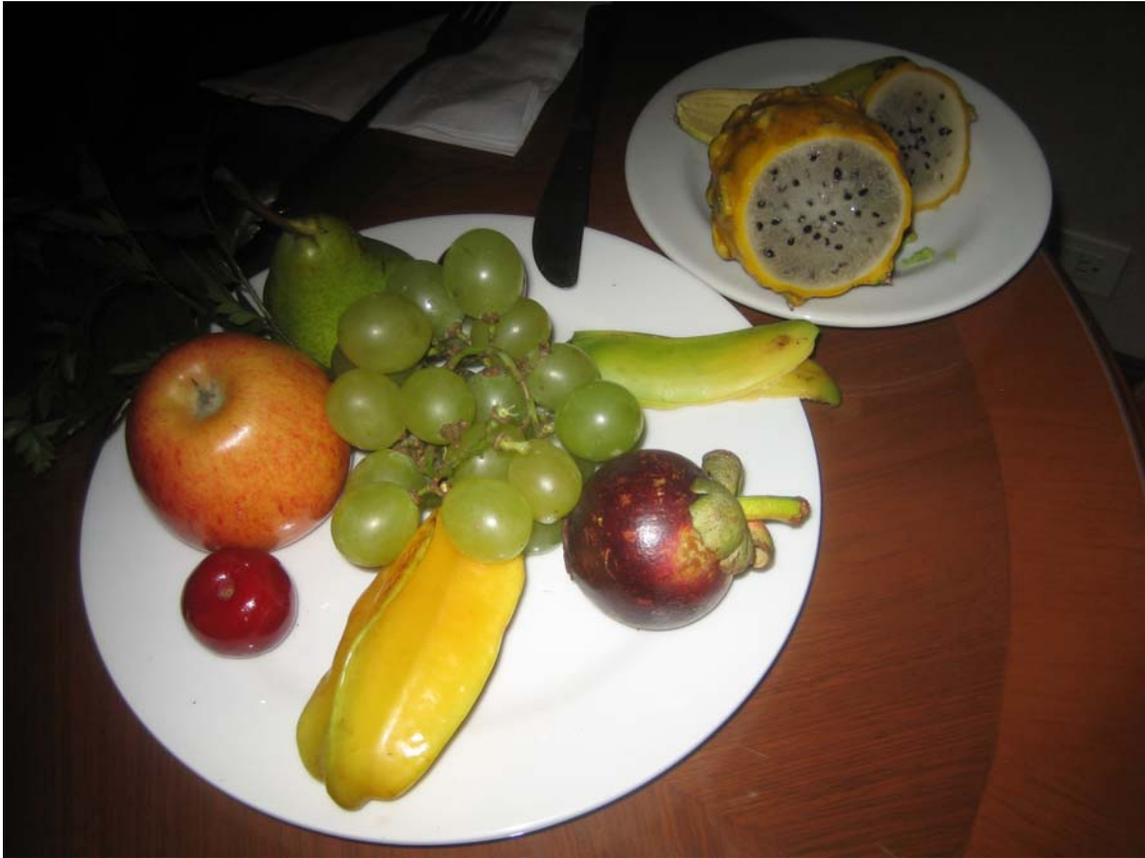
Bogota drivers are maniacal, with no regard for pedestrians. The rule of the road is that the larger and more aggressive vehicles win. The streets are too packed for much speeding, so driving is mostly the automotive equivalent of shoving and elbowing your way through a crowd. After a fifteen minute drive featuring a few dramatic u-turns, we arrived at the hotel Tequendama, one of the largest hotels in Bogota.

The hotel had two guards outside dressed in camo fatigues, one with a submachine gun. They check some people's bags on the way in. They also sometimes hold the door open for you. When you register, the hotel hands you a room key and card with emergency phone numbers for calling the police, an ambulance, civil defense, and the army, as well as a general emergency number (the numbers are 112, 125, 144, 147, and 123, respectively). My hotel room was very nice. The Tequendama is one of the main businessman's hotels in Bogota, and the organizers put us invited guests into suites. They also had me preregistered for the conference, with all my conference materials waiting for me in the room, along with a Juan Valdez baseball cap, and a large fruit plate. Very considerate, far more so than usual (the more standard thing for a conference is that I find my own way from the airport to the hotel, find my own way to the conference venue, and stand in line to register).

Some of the fruits on the fruit plate in my room I've seen in stores but never buy, like star fruit, while others I've never seen before. There are standard warnings about not eating uncooked food (since they're washed in the local water, which you shouldn't drink), but that's not a problem in a fancy hotel, so I chow down after having only eaten airline food all day. Something with a thick bumpy yellow skin is pale white inside with little black seeds, and tastes kind of like kiwi. There are big green grapes. There's something like a red plum, but with a much stronger taste than a plum, and a miniature banana. Also something that looks like a small round eggplant. I cut it in half, and found it had a very thick inedible purple shell, and inside that was a white filling, and inside that was a star shape of yellowish fruit with tiny seeds. The white and yellow stuff was like a sweet creamy kiwi. If you could generically create a fruit flavored Cadbury cream egg, this would be it.

I didn't sleep well the first night. The altitude is over 8600 feet, which is high enough to sometimes causes shortness of breath and the heart to race a bit, which woke me up from time to time. This is apparently a very common problem for visitors. Also, the hotel windows were thin, and there's a lot of traffic noise outside, though most of that dies down at night. The hotel is in a

business district, so it is busy during the day, but becomes a perilous, thinly populated area at night (hence the heavily armed guards).



Fruit Plate

## Day 1

Next morning was a conference breakfast at the hotel - lots more fresh fruit, scrambled eggs with an orange and green tint (we called them rainbow eggs), sausages that looked like miniature hot dogs, ham, cheese, sweet roll, fresh juice that looked and tasted not quite like orange juice, and strong Columbian coffee of course. Breakfast was about the same every morning.

A hired bus took us to the University of the Andes, where the conference was held. Wide steep steps lead up into the building (I guess the climbing makes one think of the Andes). The university itself is also right on the edge of a steep mountain, Monserrate, which is beautiful and covered in trees, in sharp contrast to the rest of the city. Between lectures Shak and I sat outside on a terrace, and watched small cable cars and a funicular that goes up and down the

mountain. There is a white church on top. It was a lovely spring like sunny day (despite the weather forecasts of rain), so we decided to skip an afternoon session to go up the mountain. The cable cars leave from a spot about a mile away, but we are advised not to walk, because there are no sidewalks along the road filled with crazy drivers. Also, it's a steep uphill and one fatigues very easily at this altitude. A group of five of us went to the cable car by taxi.



Russell, Oliver, Shakeeb, & Arthur on Monserrate

Bogota taxis are tiny, cheap and plentiful, though one must be careful to get one from a hotel or somewhere reliable, and not just flag them down, since tourists may be robbed or kidnapped (I know an economist who was robbed by a rogue taxi driver in Mexico). A typical taxi fare here is under 5000 pesos, which is less than 3 dollars. Oliver accidentally gave a taxi driver a couple of 10,000 peso notes instead of 1000 peso notes, but still ended up paying less than he would have for a similar taxi in London where he's from.

After a bit of confusion buying tickets for the cable car (apparently it's possible to buy a one way ticket, even though there doesn't seem to be any obvious other way down), we rode to the top. This mountain, Monserrate, and another

next to it, Guadalupe, mark the edge of the city. The view from the top is spectacular, with all of Bogota spread out below, dense urban buildings for many, many miles around. In the other direction are only tree covered hills. On our return the taxi took about 1/3 the distance we traveled to get there before. This seems to happen often.

That evening we were bused to the Museo del Oro, the museum of gold, for a tour and reception. It wasn't not clear how much food there would be, so three of us walked over to a nearby deli for a sandwich beforehand. The only vege option was cheese. The cheese here is very nice, it tastes halfway between provolone and goat cheese. I never saw a choice of different kinds of cheese, it was always just queso. Everywhere, including small stores and shops, sells liquor, and this place had a few loud drunks in it, so we left quickly. Again only a beggar bothered us.

The museum was very impressive, mostly precolumbian gold artifacts, many very elaborate and beautiful. The reception was appetizers, wine, and endless quantities of whiskey, so I was glad to have had the sandwich. Oliver found the best way to get fed was to stand by the kitchen door, to have first dibs on each tray of skewered meat or eggrolls that emerged.

Shak didn't get on the bus back to the hotel with the rest of us. He had befriended some locals, who took him on a drive all around town, and late night partying. I didn't see him until afternoon the next day, because his new friends kept him out until 5 in the morning.

## Day 2

After another breakfast of great fruit and dubious eggs, I listened to lectures in the morning, but then the afternoon was nice weather, so Russell, Shak, and I again decided to skip a session, and this time go look around Candelaria, the historic colonial district. Once again we were warned not to walk, due to distance and bad neighborhoods in between. The cab driver took us on a route that included some narrow cobbled alleys rather than roads, trying unsuccessfully to avoid traffic jams. People and cars seem equally at home in the crowded streets, though cars definitely do not stop for pedestrians. Most of the route looked like the relatively poorer parts of any big city. I've been told that FARC rebels actually control parts of Bogota, but that is miles away from anywhere we were.



Plaza del Bolivar

We wandered across the pigeon covered plaza del Bolivar and up and down some surrounding streets. It was rather more sketchy and less touristy than we expected. The neighborhood is a mix of teens and young adults with school backpacks, guys in business suits, beggars, street vendors, and a few too many rough looking hombres. The only other obvious tourists were a school group in matching uniforms lined up by the edge of the square.

The Candelaria neighborhood had many interesting looking brightly painted buildings, some hundreds of years old. We poked around in a bright yellow church, and a nice old former residence that had been converted into a small textile museum (entry fee 500 pesos, about 30 cents). It had a surprisingly quiet and pleasant garden in the back, and a room full of amazing emeralds on display (Columbia is a big exporter of emeralds). A tiny hole in the wall store crammed with stuff nearby was optimistically labeled a supermercado (supermarket). At the end of one street a party with loud music spills out of bar. Bright blue and yellow or red colonial buildings abut run down wrecks, which in turn are adjacent to white walled government administration offices.



In the Textile Museum

Among the many excessive warnings in my Columbia guidebook was the advice to be very discreet with cameras, or better yet to not to use one at all since a camera marks you as an obvious tourist and is tempting to steal. I decided I'm so obviously a tourist anyway that a camera won't make any difference, so I use it with abandon. The only people that accost us are some persistent beggars. For some reason, the beggars all thought Russell was a more promising mark than Shak or me.

It looked like it was about the rain, and we had the dilemma of how to find a safe taxi. We resolved it by getting into one that had just let someone else out, on the theory that at least one person rode that taxi without a problem. Our timing was perfect - the rain started on the drive back to the university.

That evening was a dinner at the hotel. Dinners and sometimes lunches were a problem for vegetarians like me, since the norm is meat and more meat. At one lunch I was offered a salad consisting only of cheese, chicken and ham. At dinner the vegetarian main dish was some kind of Asian thing that had both shrimp and chicken in it. They made up for it by giving me two desserts.



A street in Candelaria

### Day 3

Bogota seems to consist of small areas that only a bit dodgy, surrounded by large slummy zones that are supposedly deadly for an obvious nonnative target of opportunity like me. I think the peril is probably exaggerated. The 'bad' areas we drove through looked a lot like the poorer sections of any big city.

As usual when I travel, I ate more and slept less than when I'm home. Meals were mostly fresh fruit, meat, and sweets, with very few grains. The bread was mostly small sweet rolls, though meat or cheese filled pastry is also common. My talk was this morning, and it went smoothly. I spent the rest of the day in seminars. It rained heavily much of the day, so I didn't feel like I was missing much.

In the evening was the closing reception for the conference. In the US and Europe these are usually staid affairs of hors d'oeuvres and wine, but apparently South America has a different idea of how to end a conference. Many economists gathered outside the hotel around 7 PM. Buses arrived that are

open in the sides, have rows of long benches inside, and an open space with a wooden floor in the middle. When the bus drives away, they turn on flashing lights and loud dance music, and people are encouraged to dance in the bus, as it drives through run down neighborhood streets.



I did not bring my camera, unfortunately, so I don't have a photo of Lars Hansen (a very likely future Nobel prize winner) sheepishly being dragged off his seat to dance with the young woman who was hired to encourage the dancing, in between telling jokes in Spanish.

In under half an hour we arrived at our destination, which was a very large, popular nightclub. Everybody was frisked on the way in (maybe lots of Columbians are armed, but none of the economists were packing heat). We were all offered liquor and little noise makers. Popular music from the 80's blared (Michael Jackson, A-ha, etc.,) from massive speakers. We lined up and took turns going upstairs (outdoors, carrying umbrellas) to a covered roof for a plate of meat and potato dinner, which we then took back down to the bar to eat.

A little later two singers backed up by a 10 piece band set up on a large stage and started playing what I imagine is Columbian pop, basically rock music with a heavy latin flavor. They're really good, but about 20 decibels too loud. This was not the best planning for most of the economists, though a lot of the younger local ones seemed quite happy with the venue.

By 10 PM the little group I was with were ready to go, but the first bus to take people back was not scheduled to leave until midnight. Four of us snuck out and got a taxi back to the hotel. Shak stayed at the club until it closed at 3 AM, and then went out for another hour with his new friends. He says as the night went on the club filled to claustrophobic levels, and after 2 AM the band was replaced on stage by some wild dancers, some in drag. I found out the next day that this club, the Salto del Angel, is where the chic Columbian jet setters go to party. The cover charge for this high tone club in Bogota is 10,000 pesos - \$6.00.

Shak and I were booked on the same flight to Miami the next morning. Security at the airport consisted of being frisked or bag searched at least a half dozen times between checking in and the gate, but most the searches were pretty lax, I guess because everyone knows that someone else is also checking. We never had to take our shoes off. We bought some lunch at the airport café, which was hard because there was no menu. The only thing I successfully managed to communicate to the waitress is that I'd like something without chicken, and cheese is ok. I end up with a grilled cheese sandwich and potato sticks. We also had cokes, which taste better than at home because they're made with sugar instead of corn syrup.

The plane boarded almost on time, but then sat on the tarmac for 2 hours waiting for the wind to shift in a direction that would allow us to take off (I'm guessing they only have one runway). We both missed our connections, and ended up spending the night in a Miami airport hotel. We sat in the hotel's Rickenbacker bar that evening, watching football and decompressing from the trip.

The next morning we took a cab to South Beach, and had breakfast in a nice art deco place on Ocean Boulevard, with a lovely tropical breeze blowing across the beach through the palm trees. The contrast between Bogota and Miami beach was a bit of shock, but a pleasant one.



Ocean Blvd, Miami.