

Colombia Birding, December 1-16, 2016

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After an uneventful flight from Atlanta we arrived in Bogota close to 11:00pm on 12/1 and were able to quickly find the Courtyard Marriott shuttle outside the airport. Upon arriving at the hotel we were surprised at how modern it was in terms of architecture and interior décor. Breakfast the next morning was included, and was phenomenal- a massive plate of six varieties kinds of fresh fruit formed the centerpiece of the spread. A large tray of hot, fresh scrambled eggs, hot potato and onion scramble, a rice dish, and a whole selection of bagels and pastries along with fresh, local coffee rounded it out.

December 2

Our first birding stop for the trip was Parque la Florida for three endemics- Bogota Rail, Apolinar's Wren, and Silvery-throated Spinetail. While only an eight mile drive from the hotel it took around an hour to get there in a taxi as a result of the ridiculous rush hour traffic. The park isn't located in the friendliest part of the city, and when we arrived we discovered that the park was guarded by a local private police force and that we needed a police escort to bird around the lake and marsh that host the rail and wren. Luckily, we happened to arrive at the exact same time as another birding group. Six British birders led by local guide Oswaldo Cortes already had a police escort and were nice enough to let us join up with them for much of the morning. Ruddy Ducks, American Coots, and a few Spot-flanked Gallinules along with a scattering of Lesser Scaup were present on the lake while Blue-winged Teal and Andean Teal were present along the edge of the marsh. Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers were both common along the lakeshore.



Spot-flanked Gallinule

Walking down a grassy trail along the edge of the lake we found a few small mixed passerine flocks which largely contained a variety of eastern North American passerines- Tennessee Warblers, a few Blackburnian Warblers, two Yellow-billed Cuckoos, and a couple Scarlet Tanagers. Andean Siskins and Lesser Goldfinches were present in good numbers and we also found several Black Flowerpiercers, Rufous-browed Conebills, and several Yellow-backed Orioles throughout the morning. Two White-tailed Kites kept watch over the park while we were

there, occasionally taking off from their perch to make a few short flights or circle overhead to make sure their kingdom was still in order. Yellow-hooded Blackbirds were common in the marsh adjoining the lake. The group stopped as we neared a large bamboo blind as this was apparently the best spot to find a Bogota Rail. Sure enough, it didn't take long for one, then two, and then up to five to start calling, flying up and down in the marsh, and swimming across a small water channel. The excellent views far surpassed our expectations for this normally shy species.



Bogota Rail

Other noteworthy birds at this spot included a singing Apolinar's Wren and a Grassland Yellow Finch. We then moved across the road to the edge of a small farm and hedgerow beside the park where Oswaldo played tape for Silvery-throated Spinetail. Sure enough, almost immediately one popped up directly in front of us and gave crippling good looks and photo ops. It then flew from the top of a trellis to the hedgerow five feet in front of me- too close for my lens to focus! After this, we split off from the group and one of the policeman was kind enough to escort us back to the lake so we could bird before leaving. We used this opportunity to get a little better acquainted with the birds here, while also finding our first Spackled Parrotlet and a male Mourning Warbler. Great Thrushes were everywhere and continually moved about from treetop to treetop.

We left early in the afternoon and got a taxi to the nearest bus terminal where we caught a bus to Periera. About \$15.50 USD/person for what turned into a nine hour ride seemed pretty reasonable to us. The bus was pretty modern with spacious seats, TVs, and on-board restroom facilities. We passed through the poor neighborhoods of Soacha and made our way up into the Andes before it got dark. The road west was steep and very curvy, full of buses and trucks. Passenger cars were sparse. It was not unusual for our driver to pass a semi-truck (or multiple ones) across double yellow lines on seemingly blind curves. More than once, he had to quickly return to the right lane as a result of an oncoming vehicle. That seemed to be the standard way of driving in Colombia, and to our driver's credit we ended up arriving in one piece.

The bus stopped at the terminal in Ibague to offload a couple passengers and allow us to grab a quick dinner. Two arepas and a lemonade came to only \$2 USD. We passed through Armenia before I fell asleep, and after an hour and a half we finally arrived in Periera. It was after

midnight and we quickly got a taxi outside the bus terminal to take us to Kolibri Hostel, a short five minute ride away (cost was the equivalent of around \$1.75 USD). The hostel was clean and modern and the perfect place to crash for a brief night's sleep.

December 3

Waking early the next morning we stepped out onto the spacious rear balcony where we immediately found a couple of Saffron Finches as well as my lifer Gray Seedeaters. However, we didn't have long as we had to catch the 7:00 chiva up the mountain to Otun Quimbaya. The guy at the hostel's front desk gave us directions to an intersection only a couple blocks away where we could hop on board the chiva to save us from walking the twelve blocks across town to the company's main office. What the heck is a chiva, you may ask? Well, it turned out to be a colorful, open sided bus with a big roof platform and a smaller platform attached to the back, with these two connected by a welded ladder. Similar to what may more widely be referred to as a chicken bus. When the chiva finally showed up about ten minutes late it was absolutely jam-packed full of people. Not a single seat was left inside the bus, but we were able to squeeze onto the back platform with and stand with five other passengers while holding on for dear life as we made our way across town and up the mountain. We got used to it quickly, and were able to generally enjoy this novel mode of transportation.

Many of the other passengers were going to Parque Nacional Ucumari to hike or camp for the weekend while others were going to one of the scattered small villages along the 20km road up the mountain between Periera and Otun Quimbaya. We stopped several times on the way up the mountain to pick up additional passengers from scattered dwellings or small villages, many of which were transporting bundles of fruit and travelling only a short distance to the next village up the road. Shortly before the road turned from asphalt to gravel, Matt and I climbed up on the roof along with four local teenagers to ride the remaining distance. They were going backpacking in Ucumari for the weekend and invited us to partake in breakfast with them atop the chiva- Bologna and strawberry jam sandwiches. A very interesting food combination that may have been dreamed up as a result of the substance in the pipe they were smoking, but the food was actually surprisingly good. Maybe it was just because I was very hungry. The road narrowed soon after the pavement ended and the six of us had a comical game of ducking beneath the upcoming water-soaked tree branches that would buzz past overhead as the bus continued to rumble up the mountain.

Nobody on staff at Otun Quimbaya spoke English, so there was definitely a bit of a communication barrier. However we were still able to quickly get settled in. Right outside the lodge were a plethora of blooming shrubs which hosted several species of feeding hummingbirds- Bronzy Inca, Buff-tailed Coronet, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Greenish Puffleg, Lesser Violetear, and Sparkling Violetear. Black-billed Thrushes, Saffron Finches, and Yellow-bellied Seedeaters rummaged about on the lawns. The trees along the edge of the forest seemed to constantly have a few birds moving through, most namely Blue-gray Tanagers, Bay-headed Tanagers, Saffron-crowned Tanagers, Blackburnian Warblers, and Red-ruffed Fruitcrows, among others. After dropping off our gear and getting acquainted with the birds around the lodge area we set off on a short hike through an interior forest trail behind the lodge.

After two hours we got caught in a downpour and had to hoof it back, but not before we were able to stumble across some great birds. A Moustached Puffbird perched at eye level less than thirty feet away, and we flushed a Pauraque off the side of the trail. A distant Blackish Rail responded to playback in a large marshy area, though we never were able to see it.

A deliciously filling lunch at the lodge included fresh avocado, fried plantains, cream of tomato soup, and chicken and rice. The rain let up shortly after we finished lunch and we birded our way down the road. In the forested areas we came across several diverse mixed flocks where we picked out several tanager species included Golden, Multicolored, and Saffron-crowned, as well as our first Andean Motmot, Red-headed Barbet, and Emerald Toucanet of the trip. A calling and cooperative Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet turned out to be our only one of the entire trip.

December 4

The next day we started birding before breakfast by walking down to a bridge across the Rio Otun below the lodge. Thanks to an advance tip by Nate Swick, we were treated to close views of a male and two female Torrent Ducks!



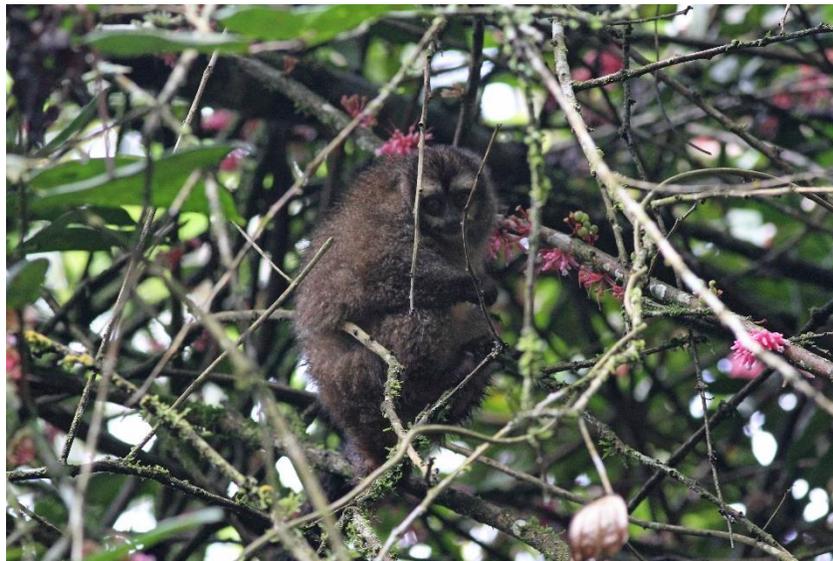
Male Torrent Duck

This was one of our most-wanted birds of the whole trip and they sure didn't disappoint. After breakfast we birded our way up the road towards Parque Nacional Ucumari, about a four kilometer hike each way. We found several new birds on the walk up including Green-fronted Lancebill and Pale-edged Flycatcher, and were surprised at the seemingly constant stream of mountain bikers making their way up the mountain towards the park. It was a weekend after all, I guess. Not long after we left the lodge a curious fox decided to walk up to me and sniff my leg before being distracted by a mountain biker coming up the road who provided it with a new base of interest.



Our newfound foxy friend

About a kilometer or two from the lodge we were looking through a mixed flock and I was trying to get an ID on an uncooperative tanager hopping through a vine tangle when my binoculars passed over a mammalian face looking back at me. It was a monkey! A lemurine night monkey, to be exact. It seemed curious by our presence but wasn't bothered when I started snapping off pictures, instead it continued to slowly and methodically munch of the fruits contained within the vine tangle. But wait a second- there were also two babies with it, hidden slightly farther back in the tangle! Not photo worthy unfortunately, but still a treat to observe.



Lemurine night monkey

Slightly farther up the road, a large Mountain Tapir surprised us by ambling across our path, stopping to munch on some roadside vegetation before entering into the woods. What a stroke of luck! When we arrived at the spot where it entered the woods, we were able to observe it in the brush from only twenty feet away before it got scared off by the sound of an approaching motorbike.



Mountain Tapir

Stopping to check the river at a couple spots on the walk up, we struck out with White-capped Dipper but did find several Torrent Tyrannulets. The timing of our arrival at Ucumari El Cedral was perfect, right when we got there the deluge of rain began. For almost two hours we sheltered under a rain shelter/bus stop that had several benches under it. More and more people started to arrive until there were about ten of us. Most had biked up the mountain and a few were going backpacking in the park by hiking up to La Pastora to camp that night. Everyone was in parties of either only one or two. We drank wine and ate avocado with these guys as we waited out the rain. Andres, the youngest of the group looked to be about 20-21, had dreadlocks and spoke fairly good English. Another guy, Felipe, was 28 and knew a few words of broken English but other than that nobody else knew any language aside from Spanish. From what I could gather, everyone was fairly local- from Periera or neighboring villages. Felipe told us endless good things about the beaches of Parque Nacional Tayrona where he spends every New Years, Saliento, and the River of Many Colors. They were all enthralled with my camera and binoculars, and I showed several of them how they worked and let them take a few pictures with my telephoto lens. They were quite fascinated!

About half an hour before the rain stopped, a French couple in their twenties came biking up the mountain and joined us under the shelter. They'd been living in Cali for two months for his job, during which time the gal's Spanish went from nonexistent to conversational, and they had another month or two in Cali before moving to Bolivia for 6 months. They were both tri-lingual in English, Spanish, and French and helped act as our interpreters as times. We meant to ask him what he did for work but got distracted and forgot to ask in the end.

December 5

We were able to get some good birding in the next morning before the rain started around eleven. Two Black-capped Tanagers we found by the river before breakfast were new for the trip, and we found multiple singing Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrushes. A walk through the inner forest after breakfast produced multiple heard-only Stiles's Tapaculos, and I caught a brief but great look at a Barred Fruiteater feeding with a mixed flock. Unfortunately Matt wasn't able to get on it. Larger than the more common Green-and-black Fruiteater, Barred Fruiteater has distinct horizontal barring across its breast and a pale eye that contrasts sharply. Another highlight of the

morning was two Howler Monkeys that Matt spotted feeding in the canopy several trees back. I wasn't able to get a photo as they generally remained pretty hidden, but it was still cool to see them. As we were finishing the trail loop it began to rain hard and steady, at which time we returned early to the lodge to watch the hummingbird bushes while waiting for lunch. After lunch the rain didn't let up much, but we braved the wet and hiked about a kilometer down the road and managed to find a few mixed flocks and several more new species for the day.

December 6

On 12/6 we again birded the interior forest before breakfast by walking a short, ~.75 mile loop, and we did the same loop again after breakfast before catching the chiva back down the mountain. We were able to add several new trip birds and couple lifers including Plain Antvireo, Gray-cheeked Thrush (not a lifer), and Linnated Woodpecker during this time. After catching the chiva back to Periera we navigated the city and found the bus terminal where we caught the next bus to Manizales. A fairly short ride of about an hour and a half, we passed through the heart of Colombian coffee country and were treated to several impressive vistas along the way.

When we arrived in Manizales the next challenge was to actually get to Reserva Ecologica Rio Blanco from the bus terminal, which turned out to be more of a chore than we anticipated. We caught a cab from the terminal with no problem, but when we told the driver where we wanted to go he was very hesitant to take his car, an older model compact hatchback, up the steep gravel road to the lodge. To further complicate matters, he also spoke no English and his Spanish was too rapid for us to really understand. So to solve this problem he drove us halfway across town to his house where we picked up his 21 year old son, Christian, to act as our interpreter. Christian was quite fluent in English and was self-taught since age 12 in order to better communicate with people he played online video games with. He was thrilled to be able to put his English to practice with Americans in a real world situation. As it turns out, we were able to talk his dad into driving us up to the lodge after all for the total of 40,000 COP- about \$13.33 USD. We arrived just before dusk, with enough light to catch the tail end of the incredible hummingbird show around the feeders. Long-tailed Sylphs, Buff-tailed Coronets (tons), Speckled Hummingbirds, and Collared Incas were abundant with a handful of each seemingly constantly battling for a spot on the extensive feeder array. Slightly less common but still regularly present included Lesser Violetear, Sparking Violetear, Tourmaline Sunangel, Bronzy Inca, Fawn-breasted Brilliant, and two White-bellied Woodstars.



(L to R) Matt, Christian, and myself

December 7

The next day morning we went out with a local guide and started the morning by visiting three of the antpitta feeding stations that are set up on the property. Along with a group of Americans from the Road Scholars program we were treated to fantastic views of the common Chestnut-crowned Antpitta, several cooperative Brown-banded Antpittas as well as a tame Green-and-black Fruiteater. Despite much trying, our guide couldn't coax a Bicolored Antpitta into view but the next day would prove much more fruitful. We also heard one or two of the miniscule Slate-crowned Antpittas singing, but even with playback they wouldn't come into view. A vocal Black-billed Mountain-Toucan gave some of us brief looks but never came close enough for a satisfactory study. Unfortunately this would be the only encounter with this species we would have all trip.



Chestnut-crowned Antpitta

After coming down to the lodge for lunch, Matt and I stuck close by and birded independently along the entrance road heading back down the mountain during the afternoon. We found a number of new trip birds including White-rumped Hawk, Yellow-vented Woodpecker, Golden-fronted Redstart, and a heard-only Golden-headed Quetzal. Additionally, we heard four species of tapaculos during the course of the day but were unable to catch any views of this secretive group of birds. The day's list ended at 104 species, plus nocturnal White-throated Screech-Owl, Rufous-banded Owl, Common Potoo, and Band-winged Nightjar for a total of 108 species.



Long-tailed Sylph



Collared Inca

December 8

The next morning we started birding before breakfast independently near the lodge where we had great luck with a couple of mixed flocks. Chocked full of flycatchers, colorful tanagers, warblers, and the occasional woodpecker, toucanet, or other goody it would have been possible to stay with a single flock for several hours and still find new birds. After a great breakfast of eggs, fruit, and homemade arepas we birded again with a guide for the morning and at last got to see the

skittish Bicolored Antpitta. Even when it would come out to partake in a worm at the feeding station, it would almost immediately dart back into the dark, impenetrable jungle of brush.



Our best look at the secretive Bicolored Antpitta

We were with a solely Spanish-speaking guide this morning and a group of younger Colombians, most of which were in their twenties and thirties. They weren't birders per se, but came up for the hiking and general jungle experience which included seeing birds to an extent. A couple of the guys were fairly serious photographers with Canon 100-400mm lenses and enjoyed getting bird photos throughout the morning. We added a several more lifers this morning, including Smoky Bush-Tyrant, Dusky Piha, and a group of noisy and photogenic White-capped Tanagers- perhaps one of my favorite birds of the whole trip! Their group was a little too big for just one taxi, so they had ordered two- perfect for us, as there was room for both Matt and I in one going back down the mountain.

Their hotel was only two blocks from the hostel we had reservations at in Manizales (the Golden Frog Mountain Hostel), so we got dropped off with them and walked the last couple blocks. If it weren't for the excellent directions on their website, we wouldn't have found the entrance to it. Going up a narrow interior staircase between a shoe store and a tailor shop, the hostel was on the third floor. Once entering it was very spacious, with couches laid out tastefully in the center room with an enormous kitchen adjacent. Dorm rooms lined the perimeter of the hostel, surrounding the interior space. Another room was complete with hammocks and a video game console, and in yet another was a pool table.

After checking in we walked a few blocks west to "La Catedral", the tallest cathedral in Colombia. We bought tickets for one of their afternoon tours (10,000 COP; \$3.33 USD apiece), with the primary goal of climbing the 461 stairs to the top of the galley/circular where we could overlook the city. After sitting through a brief history lesson of the cathedral we did just that. Despite a sketchy stretch and a seemingly endless spiral of stairs, the view from the top galley overlooked 360 degrees of Manizales and the surrounding mountains. Phenomenal. Our guide was telling us that before they modernized the interior spiral staircase, all the stairs were wooden

and there wasn't a handrail at all in the several hundred feet of rise! Despite this, apparently there was never a fatality even though somebody climbed these near-daily.

The owner of our hostel, Lucho, hooked us up with a friend of his, Juan Carlos, to act as our personal driver and tour guide in PN Los Nevados the following day for \$100 USD total. We thought this was a fantastic deal considering the amount of freedom we had to explore compared to how we would have been extremely limited had we taken one of the organized tours, which cost nearly as much.

December 9

At 4:30 in the morning we met him (Juan Carlos) and began the ride in his Mitsubishi Montero up to the park in time for sunrise. The fog was as thick as molasses as we climbed in elevation, and needless to say there wasn't much of a sunrise visible given those circumstances. However, once the sun started to peek through and the fog began to clear the views we were treated to were incredible! Stout-billed Cinclodes were common hopping along the roadside rocks as we continued to drive into the higher elevations, and Juan Carlos was quite happy to stop the car anytime we asked him to if we wanted to get out to look at a particular bird or to take a picture of a particularly scenic spot. Needless to say, this happened quite frequently. Despite the language barrier between us, Juan Carlos's slow and (very) patient speech helped us to understand enough to communicate with him. As it turns out, he actually has an aunt that lives in Raleigh, North Carolina. Small world. For his normal job he helps run a coffee plantation complete with outdoor recreation activities for tourists (zip lines, ATVs, etc) so he is experienced in dealing with people that speak poor Spanish.

The road we traveled was a fairly narrow dirt road that hugged the side of a cliff in places and with certain sections that were full of large rocks and potholes. Thus, it was slow going up the mountain but that made it optimal for birding. We had several Tawny Antpittas (were surprised to see two sitting on fenceposts), Plumbeous Sierra-Finches, and lots of Plain-colored Seedeaters as we continued up the mtn. We soon came across an isolated farmhouse, where we stopped and Juan Carlos paid the lady for two cups of coffee (1,000 COP apiece- \$0.33 USD). This was arguably the best coffee I'd ever had. I don't know if Juan Carlos or other tour groups regularly stop here or not, or if this was a spur of the moment isolate decision to do so- but I sure appreciated it. The hot coffee warmed me up a bit on this chilly morning. Soon thereafter we saw our first Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle of the morning as well as several Viridian Metaltails and multiple hummingbirds that got away too quick to nail down an ID. One of the avian highlights of the morning was a flock of 19 Rufous-fronted Parakeets that were feeding in the low shrubbery only twenty meters away from us on the road shoulder, allowing for some nice photos. Perhaps the biggest prize of the day was an Andean Condor that was visible overhead for about five seconds before disappearing behind a ridge. What an enormous and majestic bird!



Rufous-fronted Parakeet

Despite much searching, we struck out on Bearded Helmetcrest. However, we did have a few additional goodies in Los Nevados including Andean Tit-Spintail, White-chinned Thistletail, Plain-capped Ground-Tyrant (flagged on Ebird), Brown-backed Chat-Tyrants (common), Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanagers, and Blue-backed Conebill. After lunch, which consisted of some delicious homemade empanadas and ham/cheese sandwiches Juan Carlos brought, we made our way to Hotel Termales Del Ruiz- our other stop for the day. Famous for its hummingbirds, this was a must-see for us while we were in the area. We had to pay 6 USD apiece to enter the garden and see the hummingbird feeding station, but that was okay. Juan Carlos stayed behind and napped in the car while we were birding here but we were careful not to stay more than an hour or two.



Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant

Entering the gardens, we were immediately knocked senseless by the clouds of hummingbirds buzzing around the feeders. Giant Sapphirewings, which are near the size of a small bat, were quite common here with a conservative count of 9, but not quite as abundant as Shining Sunbeams. The nine other hummingbird species here included Rainbow-bearded Thornbill, Golden-breasted Puffleg, Black-thighed Puffleg, Mountain Velvetbreast, Tyrian Metaltail, Viridian Metaltail, Buff-winged Starfrontlet, Collared Inca, and an awkwardly magnificent female Sword-billed Hummingbird! This is the only bird species in the world that possesses a bill longer than its body. It was overcast and very dark, but with high ISO settings we were both able to get some nice shots of most of the hummingbird species present. Additionally, Masked and Glossy Flowerpiercers gave us ridiculously close looks at the feeding station.



Sword-billed Hummingbird

There were several miniature circular hummingbird feeders set up on a stump, so on a whim I decided to pick one up and see if a hummingbird would visit it while I was holding it in my hand. To my delight, I had four species do so and also sit on my hand while drinking! These were Golden-breasted Puffleg, Shining Sunbeam, Buff-winged Starfrontlet, and the sharp Rainbow-bearded Thornbill. The Sword-billed came awfully close to doing so, but at the last minute decided to set up shop on a branch about a foot away.



Rainbow-bearded Thornbill

A brief walk down the road below the gardens produced a few new species, including the much-anticipated Paramo Seedeater and Golden-crowned Tanager. Another highlight was a Little Red Brocket Deer feeding in some tall grass close to the road shoulder. Endemic to the high elevations of the northern Andes, this uncommon species wasn't really even on our radar for this trip.



Little Red Brocket Deer

We left Hotel Termales del Ruiz about mid-afternoon to make our way back to Manizales via a seemingly endless dirt road, with some brief birding stops en route. Just below the hotel we were surprised to come across a young, twenty-something Russian hiking up the road picking and eating blackberries. It turns out he had walked twelve kilometers from the outskirts of Manizales and didn't have any food or water before heading back down. So we gave him a ride back to town and shared some of our water and bread loaves with him, and he was eternally grateful. Not sure why he didn't prepare for his hike better! I forgot his name, but his English was sporadic at

best although his Spanish was somewhat conversational. We also ended up running into him the next day coincidentally at the bus terminal leaving town.

Matt had to leave early on the 12th, so the birding today pretty much wrapped that aspect of the trip. The next two days would be devoted to traveling back to Bogota and sightseeing around the city, so we decided to enjoy ourselves a bit at the hostel that night (same place as the night before). We sampled a variety of local beer and rum, learned to play Colombian billiards, and made some new friends and acquaintances at the hostel. One guy was a 20-year-old professional graffiti artist from Medellin whose artwork was commissioned several years prior for the FIFA U-20 World Championship. As the night waned, we discussed conservation, ecotourism, and American politics and education theory with Lucho before hitting the sack.

December 10

As a result of its mountainous location Manizales has a cheap and effective cable car system that acts as a form of public transport between main areas of the city. We took the cable car from downtown all the way down the slopes to the bus terminal which came to 2,000 COP, or \$0.67 USD apiece. A cute kid of about 5 years old came up to us at the bus terminal and was excited to practice her English, which was surprisingly good for a second language of someone that age! We then boarded a bus for the long and windy 8 hour trip back to Bogota. I felt oddly nauseous during most of the ride and coped by listening to music and sleeping a little. After arriving in the monstrous Bogota bus terminal, we caught a taxi to our hostel for the night in La Candelaria neighborhood, where most of the tourist attractions and backpacker bases are. The city streets were absolutely bustling on a Friday night, and after a few wrong turns in the narrow, cobbled streets of La Candelaria we finally arrived at the poorly marked entrance to the hostel. Our surly young cab driver must have had a hot date later that evening, as he didn't particularly seem to want to be on the job and he drove us around the city in a near-suicidal fashion.

December 11

We were pretty exhausted and decided not to go out at all on Friday night (12/10), instead opting for an early night to bed at the Ulacaho Hostel. The next day we enjoyed a breakfast of homemade tamales before hiking up the mountain from the hostel to the entrance to Cerro de Monserrate. We were looking forward to climbing the 1000+ stairs up to the top, but were disappointed to see they were closed for construction. Instead, we waited in line to take the tram and/or cable car with everybody else. We must have waited in line for about half an hour, but did make friends with the girls in line in front of us- two American sisters about our age, Alli and Madi who lived in Texas and Florida. After an enjoyable chat with them and exchanging travel tips we finally got our tickets and made our way to the top. The views over the sprawling metropolis of Bogota were incredible, and the historic church at the top was also impressive and thought-provoking. And even while battling throngs of other tourists, we were able to find a Sword-billed Hummingbird and several other bird species. We took the near-vertical tram up the mountain and the cable car back down again when we concluded our sightseeing here.



View of Bogota from atop Monserrate

We spent the afternoon walking around downtown Bogota, through Bolivar Square and past the Presidential Palace. We stopped in at the Museo del Oro and Museo Botero where we ran into Alli and Madi again. We crossed paths with them a third time later in the evening at Andres Carne del Rez restaurant in the Zona Rosa district after stopping by a nearby local brewpub for a few beers. Matt had to fly back early the next morning so we again called it a fairly early night.

December 12-16

I stayed in Bogota for four more days, calling Swiss Hostal Martinik my home base. I used the time to primarily decompress, sort through photos, and generally get caught up on some work while continuing to explore downtown Bogota a bit more. I was sad to leave on the 16th, and I learned that I could easily spend three or four months in Colombia yet still not fully tap this country's wonderful diversity. Despite the many safety concerns regarding Colombia, we didn't have any issues during our visit although there was a bombing at a police checkpoint just outside Bogota only a couple weeks after we left. With certain precautions however, most perceived danger while travelling in Colombia can be minimized. I can't wait to go back!



Parque Nacional Los Nevados