

TRAVEL

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2009

16



PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

A GRACEFUL WINDOW ON THE COLONIAL PAST OF Colombia

Located in a high mountain valley, Villa de Leyva's aggressively preserved environs hark back to times long gone

BY DAVID CARR
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

At first glance, the vast, empty expanse of the plaza of Villa de Leyva, a colonial city that is three and a half hours by car or bus from Bogota, seems designed to reduce the onlooker to a contemplation of his or her own insignificance. One of the largest town squares in South America, the Plaza Mayor lacks the decorative playfulness of so many of its smaller siblings in Colombia and elsewhere, with only the paving stones giving it shape and form.

But as the sun begins to drop down toward the nearby mountains, the plaza can quietly dazzle. As I stepped into its vastness, with an expanse framed by the remarkable colonial buildings that define its perimeter, the centuries past seemed near. By sundown, tourists — mostly Colombian — and locals begin to traverse its length to fetch dinner or sit on the steps of the church to watch people or the sunset.

Like the plaza that defines it, the city does not flaunt its charms, but requires a willingness to go beyond that which lies in plain sight.

"You have to go inside these walls to see what is really here," said John Otis, an American journalist living in Bogota who served as our host.

We had been traveling by bicycle in the Boyaca region and elsewhere, including a glorious 16km descent to the Villa de Leyva, which served as an end point after a week of pedaling through smaller mountain villages. The rough-hewn stones of Villa de Leyva pushed us off our bikes, and we settled in for a few days of rest and recreation.

Villa de Leyva, founded in 1572, meets contemporary life on its own terms. Declared a national monument in 1954, it's an aggressively preserved colonial city, so the clank of the modern rarely interrupts the seance with the past. Long a weekend destination for Bogota residents seeking a less-frantic respite, Villa de Leyva has become

a place where Europeans and the occasional American visit to see what made the Spaniards plant a flag there in the first place.

With its uneven streets that threaten even the hardiest vehicle, the spot invites — requires, in fact — strolling (although darkness and a bit too much of the local rum can make walking a hazard as well). Situated in a high mountain valley, the city of 4,000 or so also serves as a base camp for outings in the surrounding hills. And, indeed, many Colombians are fond of nighttime horseback rides and mountain biking. The tranquil comforts of Villa de Leyva, with its mix of people in traditional hats and ponchos walking next to kids in jeans and T-shirts, are especially welcoming upon return.

During the week, it's easy to spend hours ambling along the narrow streets lined by red-tile-roofed, whitewashed houses, many featuring balconies decorated with flower pots overflowing with bougainvilleas and geraniums. Abundant fossils from the surrounding area are embedded into plaster walls, and massive front doors are flanked by carvings, some echoing the occupation of the original residents. Once you leave the old city and venture into the more modern part of town, don't be surprised to see a yard full of chickens or goats next to an Internet cafe.

Evenings in town are equally seductive. On a Thursday night in July on the plaza, a group was gathered around several guitars and a harmonica at Terraza, a patio bar where Europeans and Colombians gathered to drink rum and warble Spanish love songs.

One duo enjoying the bar that evening turned out to be a brother and sister from Belgium, who ended up in Villa de Leyva a bit accidentally. They had begun the day headed to San Gil, a few hours north of Bogota, for some adventure travel, from the bus station in Bogota, but were victimized by a set of



Above: The Plaza Mayor in Villa de Leyva, Colombia, a mountain-valley town founded by the Spanish in 1572 that is notable for its unadorned vastness.

Top: Market day in Villa de Leyva, Colombia.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

thieves in fake uniforms.

"It happened very quickly," they explained at Terraza. "One of the men in uniform dropped his change, we bent down to help him, and that's when they robbed our bags. We saw it on the video later."

(Security in Colombia and especially on the route to Villa de Leyva has improved significantly in recent years, but street crime in the major cities remains an issue.)

If you stay for a Saturday, as we did, head to the north side of the old village, where there is an extensive farmers' market. It was a busy place, with moments of joy bubbling through; families that truck in fruits and vegetables from the surrounding mountains sat on crates and drank *perico*, a tiny cup of the local coffee with a dash of milk, or shared beers. The market was also jammed with stalls that sold fruits that looked colorful and intriguing, but were not immediately recognizable: *lulos*, staples for juicing, were abundant, as were granadillas and banana passionfruit. A more accessible option sat at the corner of the market, where a farmer sliced open giant avocados and salted them for on-the-spot consumption.

"Everything grows here, so you have your

pick of the world," said Alejandra de Vengoechea, a Colombian journalist who is married to Otis, gesturing to the unfamiliar bounty in the stalls as we walked into the market.

Nearby, huge wood-fired pots contained mysterious but tasty soups. Near as I could tell, one particularly delicious batch included the hoof of a cow. (A word about language: This isn't Spain or Mexico, so the practice of just speaking in Spanish until you run out of palabras and then switching to English will be met with quizzical stares. The local people are incredibly friendly and helpful, but they don't hear a lot of English.)

A morning of market exploration, an afternoon of strolling or biking to one of the nearby towns, and soon enough evening settles in over Villa de Leyva.

Because of the relative stability of the current government and the reduced footprint of guerrilla groups, Colombia is opening up beyond typical destinations like Bogota and Cartagena. Villa de Leyva is bound to get some attention because of its ancient — at least in New World terms — origins, and because of its popularity with the Colombians themselves. There is an impressive array of hotels, haciendas for rent and other accommodations. The hotels are relatively cheap and often spectacular on a small scale, particularly the courtyards, which are so inviting and restful that it can be difficult to get motivated and hit the streets.

When you do, though, those uneven thoroughfares serve as a reminder that when you really want to come to know a place, you should look where you are walking and, while you are at it, slow down enough to take in everything around you.

"You are in a place people have been coming to for many years because of its climate and beauty," said Carlos Eduardo Mora, a resident who was our driver for the trip. "The only people who don't seem to know much about it are gringos like you."