

Diario Colombiano – Part 3

by Ralphino Verde

Cali, Colombia

Getting out of Medellin should have been easy. There is the hill the city is built on and the river below, add compass in tank-bag map pocket and there should no reason not to keep a grip on whether you are going in the right direction. Starting less than auspiciously, the third turn after leaving the hotel car park was an illegal left. This hardly presented any danger against the oncoming 'drive on the right' traffic. During the execution of this routine I could hear a riot of whistling of the type that the *Transito* traffic police perform when directing vehicle movements. On completion of the turn the source was discovered; a lass in blue pants, lighter shirt with epaulettes, peaked pill box hat and hair bun. She ran across two lanes gesturing to the kerb. Navigator Mary Ann suggested we ignore her and keep going. This has been the policy we have adopted of recent times since being stopped by any official wastes time and may result in a bribe being requested. Plus *Transito* cops don't carry weapons. I kept my eye on the mirrors for several intersections then forgot about it. No sooner a *Transito* officer on a trail bike, obviously summoned ahead by radio, blocks the intersection and singles out the guilty gringos to the roadside. He wanted licence, papers for the bike, passport produced. We played the 'don't speak spanish' routine, this has its limitations when the spanish word *pasaporte* is almost phonetically identical to its english equivalent.

So we were led away, him in front with my passport in his pocket. I expected it would be to some dishevelled office where some higher official would write out (or threaten) a fine then possibly rescind it for cash. However we went back to the scene of the offence. There, while we were told to park up in a position far more dangerous due to oncoming traffic than the crime itself, I was required to apologise to Ms *Transito* and be given a lecture by Mr *Transito* on how we could not have traffic officers ignored and how this must surely be the same in Australia. Apology accepted we were then directed to leave by merging right from standstill into flowing traffic from a left hand turn lane. A further traffic violation that was allowable under their watchful eye.

Medellin must have the most illogical, over complicated road system and layout of any 2~3 million population city we have ever been to. 45mins of spiralling off freeway ramps, following lengthy instructions from by-passers and running into one way streets going the opposite way to that required. Time to ask a cabbie to lead us out. This we have only found necessary on a couple of occasions in the last 10 years travelling in Latin America. The pillion navigator, architect and urban planner, feels very aggrieved when she can't fathom, the logic of the city.

At last the reward came, of the type that re-affirms that the considerable expenses and efforts have been worthwhile. A magic 200km of mountain road, breath-taking mountain views, every type of descending ascending corner of every radius, almost devoid of other traffic. The trance of the seductive rhythm of rider, pillion and bike fused as one, in a mantra of oscillating motion, on a patched and occasionally shelved, subsided bitumen surface. At times riding the clouds, at others stealing a glance at them licking their way up the valleys while passing intense greenery incised by gushing mountain streams. After four hours this led eventually back to the Valle de Cauca and tollway to Cali. At the toll booths on the far right there is narrow brick lined channel less than a meter wide with speed bumps to allow motorcycles free passage. There are often the occasional post, rail or even detour along this channel taking precise judgement to navigate the swinehunt's width through. By comparison cars pay around \$3 every 30~50 km and heavy vehicles considerably more.

Cali is about the size of Medellin but built on the flat Cauca valley floor. It to has an aspirational neighbourhood but rather than being particularly upmarket it's quite tacky. We ended up taking a taxi there for my first meal in 24 hours when most eating places around the CBD had closed by 8pm. Contemplate for a moment a night club / discoteca whose front façade features a fibreglass replica of Mt Rushmore USofA where the faces of several Yank past presidents are carved in the rock. Not-quite-right replicas of fast food chains with blaring westernised music and casinos were prominent. We selected an unpretentious spaghetti restaurant. Discovering spaghetti was not on the menu I ordered it anyway and was pleasantly surprised. La Madre of the premises, from an Italian family, married a German guy who sat in one corner of the restaurant BMW classic owners club badge on his jacket. Thier daughter married an Italian guy and proudly we were shown pictures of a large Italian restaurant in Berlin. The reason we know this is that the patriarch owns three BMW bikes, one a rare 250cc single. As soon as we let him know we were travelling on our BMW brought from Oz we got the full story. How he has helped numerous well round-the-world riders with repairs in Colombia. I refrained from suggesting this is primarily because the bikes are unreliable heaps of angst whose vital components fail on a regular basis. Instead of typing this, with a Costeña lager computer side, I am meant to be around there showing him the bike. It is best for everyone that I spend minimal time with BMW enthusiasts. It allows them to remain in delusion and prevents me from causing offence.

We experienced a small emergency in Cali. After showing me a basement moto park with a radically steep ramp to store the swinehunt the perceptive doorman/portero brought us a jug of iced water for the room. Water quickly consumed revealed the true state of the crisis – ice totally isolated from Chilean chardonnay! As insurance

against perishing at the top of a 5000m Andean pass when the swinehunt breaks down we carry two survival blankets made of reflective foil for when the temperature approaches or plummets below zero. The idea is to wrap up in these, including riding gear if necessary, your body warmth being reflected rather than radiated to the atmosphere. I can now vouch for their insulatory properties for chardez on ice.

Return to Ecuador

Cali was easy to ride out of. All the way to Pasto the weather was favourable. Rising into the mountains from the Cuaca valley was even more impressive with the cloud out of the way. The lush rugged beauty of the southern part of the country is truly outstanding and only more so from Pasto to the border. Crossing the Colombian border requirements was simple. Just hand back the customs permit and get an out stamp in passport. On the Ecuadorian side migración was equally trouble free, though the official did spend several minutes leafing back and forwards through Mary Ann's passport history. Though the process of bringing in a tourist vehicle has improved markedly thanks to Ricardo's lobbying efforts over the years, it is still more complicated than anywhere else in South America. We had to follow a red government ute – part paint, part corrosion with non functioning tail lights, customs officer ensconced inside – 5 km into Tulcan, the nearest border town. In the past this involved the customs lawyer typing up a special letter of permission for the bike to come into the country which then can only be signed by the local customs district chief – who might be at a meeting in another town four hours away. If so you just have to wait it out. In 2003 we spent three days, four if you count the Sunday, waiting for the Coronel to find time to sign a letter. The new form and streamlined process look only 20 minutes. Lucky we hadn't needed to use our expired old type permission letter with the edited dates as it might have meant them smelling a rat!

Back at the moto hotel in Quito things were jumping. Dave (Canada/Britian BMW F650) his wife Deb (USA BMW F650) and Captain Tom (USA Suzuki V-Strom 1000) were in residence and preparing to set off south. Though not together, they had all ridden down through México and Central America. Additionally Timatao, and Luciano both on Brazilian made Honda 600 road/trail models not produced elsewhere on the planet had ridden up from Cordoba in NW Argentina. Outside their real jobs of social worker and civil engineer they run an NGO called *Panchamerica* dedicated to defending children against human rights abuses. I don't quite understand how this works in practice but they had mentioned visiting and working with institutionalised and disabled kids. Cordoba is not that far from Santiago del Estero where *Pilotos Solidarios* will be using the DOCV donated bikes for health service delivery so both of them were very interested, visiting DOCV & PS websites for a look. Their most curious characteristic however was a shared interest, nay obsession, in Honda C90 step throughs. Yes postie-bike cultists of the highest order with a verging on unhealthy obsession with Oz websites that have proliferated dedicated to the 'Asian Kingswood' due to the continuous availability of ex-Australia Post bikes at auction. Their dream is to come to the antipodes acquire a classic specimen each and circumnavigate the sunburnt country.

Dinner a huge pot of pasta to feed seven, was a bilingual affair between people of disparate backgrounds and interests drawn together by a sense of motorcycle adventure. This complex mix and diversity is really what makes the moto hotel a splendid and enduring concept re-inforcing how as citizens of the world we all have so much in common. From this the realisation grows of how the egos of politicians and the ruthlessness of the arms industry and other multi-national conglomerates that gain from the artificial creation of conflict radiated by modern media, imposes a climate of fear and distrust that is completely against these inherent commonalities.

Ricardo was down in Santo Domingo de los Colorados checking up on the business details of his love (short stay) motel, a similar concept to the accommodation we were turned away from in Medellin. He got back about lunchtime the next day which didn't give us much time to talk, the flight to Chile going that same night at 9.30pm. If you would like to test the water of international touring without going to the trouble and expense of freighting your own bike, Ricardo hires out XR600s, a KLR 600 and for the ladies or short of statue a Yamaha 225, or (shriek!) possibly even a purple swinehunt for two up! See www.andesmoto-tours.com for more info.

Flight Quito to Santiago, via Guayaquil is an overnight, red eye special arriving 5.30 am in the Chilean capital. Surfacing around midday we had an enjoyable day hanging around the cafes of Providencia. While I have been critical of the 'westernised plasti-culture' of entertainment areas in Cali and the elite aspirational of El Poblado in Medellin, Providencia seems to have quite different spots. For a start, in spite of international fast food and hotel chains, the vibe is distinctly Chileno and confidently assuredly so, not some local construction (see *Orientalism* by Edward Said) of what western modernity might mean to visiting gringos. Strolling between cafés and bookshops, a generous plate of Chilean salmon – fish with world's highest fat content – topped off with local bubbly at our favourite restaurant on the continent was excellent preparation for the show. Billed as *Origins of the Tango*, *Orquesta Fernandez Fierro* was on tour from Argentina at the faded, intimate *Teatro Providencia*. Music rather than dance, the performance showcased the early development of the tango genre. To appreciate same one really needs to understand a little about the Argentino consciousness. Having spent two months in the country in the last ten years would hardly qualify me to embark on such instruction. However as ignorance has not precluded me from expressing opinions in the last 46 years, why set a precedent now?

Argentinos inhabit a world of diaspora (: *the dispersion or spreading of something that was originally localized as a people or language or culture*) desperately clinging onto a notion of Iberian 'European-ness' despite

the enormity of both the Atlantic Ocean, 500 years of separation, and over 150 years of independence. This sense of ‘uniqueness’ is however far from the smug ‘exceptionalism’ of the USA. It is infused with a sense of vulnerability, melancholy, disappointment even, yet is strong enough to draw a barrier to ideas of inclusiveness, resulting in the caricature of the ‘arrogant Argentinean’ as viewed from other countries in the south of the western hemisphere. The recognition is unforthcoming since Argentina lies outside the daily consciousness of Europe, nor can surrounding countries with a mixed hispanic-indigenous cultural heritage understand this dilemma. Frequently falling short of exalted expectations makes occasional triumphs extra syrupy sweet, explaining the insipid cult that has evolved around Diego Maradona and the victorious 1986 world cup squad. It also multiplies the bitterness of failure such as the Falklands Islands fiasco. Enough social science!

On stage are, at rear, a baby grand, double bass, cello, three violins and a viola with the necessary attendant musicians. In front seated on low stools are four squeeze box (accordion) players, none looking as if they are within a decade of middle age. Dress is ultra casual, long hair and dreadlocks are the go, including one ‘front rower’ attired in a “KILL BUSH” T-shirt. A powerful, gliding, sensual, strutting, rhythm emanates from the stage complete with light show. Intermittently the singer appears – racing down the isles to vault the stage or whipping out from behind the curtain – when the mostly instrumental set is interspersed with a lyrical piece. More impressive, though inseparably intertwined, is the physicality of the performance. If your image of an accordion performance is middle aged Germanics stretching to slap ankles over beer guts in lederhosen or background music for a Temperance League wedding think again! Smashing and bending the squeezeboxes against knees, heads tossing, dreadlocks flaying but always sympathetic to the piece and the mood. The result is something proud, passionate, moving, delicate even fragile at times, poignant yet conversely good humoured, serious but self conscious. Something uniquely Argentino, to be celebrated. While silent during the pieces the crowd of a couple of hundred within the cosy confines of the Teatro Providencia are hardly diasporic leaping to their stomping and cheering their appreciation and howling for more at the suggestion of any cessation.

Nothing much happened on the flight home.... except on arrival at Santiago airport we found our tickets had been cancelled and the plane *completely* full. The multiple flight ticket trip deal had involved booking an unnecessary flight within Peru to get some discount on the leg Buenos Aires -> Lima -> Quito. Our ‘South American Specialist’ travel agent in Melbourne advised to just show up for this extra flight, everything would be fine. Turns out that lack of appearance leads to all other pending flights cancelled. We should of course have been told this the day before on the Quito to Santiago flight but since this was not fully booked we were just given seats. Fortunately Lan Chile were up front in acknowledging we should have been told of the cancellation at that last flight so promised to find us two seats on the ‘full’ plane. This they accomplished by throwing off some freeloaders who were either volunteers in some organisation or event that Lan Chile sponsored or perhaps airline staff who get to fly for 10% normal fare but only if empty seats are available. We stood at the check-in counter for over an hour and a half with the scheduled departure time constantly encroaching. This was made more tedious by a repulsive ozzie woman who claimed to have some monopoly on particular seats for her partner and about 4 year old daughter. She quite unreasonably remonstrated with a number of staff, progressing up the hierarchy until, with great administrative difficulty, people already on the aircraft were shuffled to appease her. We would have happily sat on two of the plane bogs all of the 16 hours!

Ralph Green- Somewhere over the Pacific- 24/1/05



Swinehunt Lunch Stop Inspection – small rural town

Understanding the armed conflict in Colombia

Simon Bolivar, who led the forces who liberated the region from Spanish / Portuguese colonialism, had a plan for the continent as a kind of united states of the south. Bolivar's vision of Gran Colombia was to encompass an area larger than China or the now defunct USSR, presenting a formidable economic and political obstacle to the domination of the western hemisphere by the USA. Practically he was only able to politically unite the republics of Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador in the north west of the continent. However Venezuela broke away in 1829 and Ecuador in 1830. These disjunctions led Bolivar to perceptively predict that "the USA is destined to torment Latin America in the name of freedom".

Almost immediately following independence Colombia was plunged into political violence between the conservative christian centralists and the anti-clerical federalist liberals. This struggle escalated into full scale civil war for the second half of the nineteenth century, the liberals finally being defeated in 1902 after a death toll estimated at 100,000. Forty years of relative peace ensured before the eruption of the period known as *La Violencia* from 1948 to 1957 which cost the lives of a further 300,000.

The current guerrilla groups in Colombia grew from grassroots peasant bitterness at the miserable lack of opportunities available. Since the country had not undergone a popular revolution (a frequent-ish occurrence in Latin America the last being in Bolivia in 1952) agrarian reform i.e. land redistribution, had never occurred. This meant over 80% of the arable land remained, after independence, in the hands of a post-colonial, upper class elite minority, who mercilessly exploited the peasants into a life of serfdom tied to the landlord and dependent on him for sustenance, governance and rough justice. Whatever one's level of education, facing this daily degree of deprivation in full realisation of the extensive wealth of one's oppressors, is likely to make Marxism appear as a viable ideological and practical solution to obtaining some social justice by improving one's unenviable lot in life.

Since *La Violencia* ended various governments have negotiated with the Maoist *ELN* who control the north east and the Communist *FARC* who control the south east of the country. While no administration has been successful in negotiating any permanent resolution, these periods were often characterised by diminished conflict due to ceasefire agreements. Over four million people remain displaced within Colombia with peasants and indigenous the groups most commonly fleeing from government troop attacks on occupied areas followed by guerrilla reprisals. A third group the pro-government para-militaries are accused of some of the worst human rights violations.

In 2002 Colombian president Álvaro Uribe's incumbent right wing government launched his 'democratic security' strategy backed by a US military aid package second in value only to that received by Israel. Uribe now boasts that government troops have regained control over more than 500 municipalities from the guerrillas. Indeed for the last couple of years Colombians have been much more able and willing to travel the roads within their own country. The pan-american highway, the lifeblood of trade in, out and across the country, joining with Ecuador in the south and Venezuela in the north, is now secured from guerrilla control. Tourist numbers have recovered to 1 million in 2005, the highest number since 1982. A major component of 'democratic security' is the 'war on drugs' which seeks to reassure middle america with the perverse logic that the USA narcotics demand will cease to exist if the supply side is curtailed. The operational aspects involve aerial spraying of herbicides to eradicate coca plantations (native plants that are refined into cocaine). These chemicals are highly toxic, adversely affect other flora such a food crops and pasture grasses, enter the water supply and permeate the food chain. The chemicals don't magically stop at Columbia's borders. Water flow and wind drift contaminate nearby Peru and Brazil. Peasant advocacy groups claim poisonings (human, domestic and native animal) and an alarming increase in birth defects.

Another requirement of the massive military aid commitment is a free trade agreement between USA and Colombia. Farmers growing less controversial crops fear this will destroy their livelihood by introducing cheap subsidised produce as has happened to Mexican corn growers with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Indigenous groups who enjoy some autonomy and title to natural resources within nature reserves fear 'free trade' will result in ceding of entitlement over large native timber forests to multi-national logging companies. In addition to these fears and uncertainties, these vulnerable groups remain trapped in the crossfire between, government troops, para-militaries and guerrillas.

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