

WITH SOARING MOUNTAINS, A THRIVING CYCLING CULTURE, AND A PROMISING NEW PEACE DEAL, COLOMBIA JUST MIGHT BE THE UNEXPECTED BUCKET-LIST DESTINATION YOU'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR.

BY **AARON GULLEY**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **GREGG BLEAKNEY**

↳  
A CLEAR  
MORNING  
ATOP  
OLD LETRAS  
PASS

Stories



COLO

MBIA RISING



## The asphalt ribbon, pocked by decades of overloaded lorries and frayed at the edges by torrential rain, snakes skyward into the cloud forest. A couple of stray dogs wince into the dripping greenery. Only a quarter of an hour has passed since I set out toward Matarredonda Pass, and already the thrum of Bogotá's 8 million residents is a whisper.

High in the Andes, on the precipitous edge of the Cordillera Oriental range, I'm in the cultural and geographic heart of the country, chasing the soul of Colombian cycling. I became obsessed with the country in 2013 on a trip to the Tour de France where I witnessed a pint-size, barely known climber unsettle the world's strongest stage racer.

It was Nairo Quintana, of course, the most prominent of a new wave of Colombian pros. Since then, a brigade of his compatriots has crowded UCI podiums. In the last year, Esteban Chaves podiumed at the Giro d'Italia and the Vuelta a España, Miguel "Superman" López won the Tour de Suisse, Sergio Henao captured Paris-Nice, and Jarlinson Pantano climbed to a mountain stage win in the Tour de France. Most of their success comes in the high peaks, though the country also has winning sprinter Fernando Gaviria, who has snatched a raft of UCI stages, including at the Giro d'Italia. Over the past four seasons, the country has racked up more grand tour podiums (10) than any other. Colombia even claims what must be the luckiest name in the peloton: Winner Anaconda, the 28-year-old Movistar Team racer.

Dominated by a history of cocaine trafficking and a 52-year armed conflict that left more than 220,000 citizens dead and nearly 7 million displaced, Colombia is an unlikely cycling incubator. For decades, leftist guerrillas struggled

for independence, right-wing paramilitaries fended them off, drug cartels dispatched anyone messing with their product, and armed bandits routinely took hostages for ransom. That started to change around 2002, when the president, Álvaro Uribe, abandoned negotiating with guerrillas and began quashing them by force, an approach that was controversial but reduced kidnappings by 79 percent during his tenure and drove the rebels to capitulate. Uribe's successor, current president Juan Manuel Santos, won the Nobel Peace Prize last year for brokering a deal to end the conflict.

What Colombia has lacked in stability it makes up for with bracing topography. The first day's ride up Matarredonda starts at 8,675 feet and rises at a 4 percent average grade over 11 miles to an 11,102-foot saddle. Near the top, my riding companion and de facto guide, Gregg Bleakney, an American photographer and filmmaker who settled in Colombia after bike touring from Alaska to Patagonia, turns to me and says, "Good little warm-up, eh? Don't worry, we'll do some real climbs this week."

Longer than Alpe d'Huez, where Quintana announced himself in 2013, Matarredonda is a rarely ridden warm-up. Not even Quintana has done it, despite coming from this region, which speaks to Colombia's vast untapped potential. I'd go home happy if it was my only ride in Colombia. Just an hour from the capital, I spin

under a canopy of oak and waxy myrtle, and the air is flush with the shrill cries of sparrows and the patter of drizzle.

The road descends east to Choachí and the Rionegro, a longtime rebel holdout. As recently as 10 years ago, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas stopped buses here to kidnap anyone whose families might pay to get them back. Julián Manrique, Gregg's Colombian buddy who will alternate driving support and pedaling alongside me throughout the trip, says that he and his friends didn't begin riding this climb until a year ago for fear of violence. Now he spins intervals here a few times a week.

Judging by the drop off the east side of Matarredonda, the road itself has replaced the guerrillas as the bigger hazard for cyclists. The pavement alternates between glass smooth and

backhoed, with construction signs so late and ill-placed they're scarier than the inconsistent surfaces. Automobiles are sparse, but the unpredictable mix of halting trucks and impatient drivers makes the traffic hard to read. Several times, I swing past a vehicle only to find another careening toward me, and just barely squeak through the gap. A menagerie of confused chickens, sulky dogs, and the occasional oblivious mule compounds matters.

A hand-lettered sign, "Palacio del Zancudo," marks the gate to a farm that Gregg leases, where we'll stay the night. From the pass, we've plunged 22 miles and more than 6,000 feet, and this road continues to sea level in the Amazon Basin. The air here is thick, sticky, and humming with mosquitos. Wealthy Colombians keep properties like this one, lush with citrus,

cherry, mango, and coffee trees, where they escape the clamor of Bogotá and "change the spark plugs," as the saying goes. "You eat better here, can stay up later, sleep better," says the 72-year-old caretaker, Don Salamon. With eight days ahead all bigger than today's warm-up, the spark plugs already need changing.



**NOWHERE IS COLOMBIA'S** zeal for cycling on sharper display than on a Sunday morning in Bogotá, when more than 70 miles of the city's normally gridlocked streets are cordoned off to motor vehicles. Dating back to the mid-'70s, the weekly closure, called Ciclovía, is the model for every Critical Mass movement

worldwide. From 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., an estimated 2 million people—25 percent of the city—take to the streets on foot and by bike to get exercise, run errands, and visit their favorite cafés. The morning after we return from the farm, I join the carnival, riding the eucalyptus-shaded boulevards alongside racers in Lycra and pear-shaped mothers on department store bikes corralling their pedaling children, who dodge and weave like fireflies. One primped woman in white short shorts and cat-eye sunglasses rings a bell that reads, "My bicycle is my car."

Each week before Ciclovía, on an eastside avenue called Via La Calera, cyclists congregate before sunrise to ride a 3.6-mile climb called Patíos that rises 1,300 feet at an average grade of 7 percent. Hernan Acevedo, who runs a company called Pure! Colombia Travel



WHERE THE PAVEMENT  
TURNS TO DIRT ON  
OLD LETRAS PASS,  
JUST OUTSIDE THE  
TOWN OF MURILLO.





COLOMBIA IS ONE OF THE MOST FORMIDABLE AND SUMPTUOUS LANDSCAPES I'VE EVER PEDALED. I'D RETURN HERE WITH MY BIKE LONG BEFORE I'D GO BACK TO EUROPE.

## BEST CLIMBS IN COLOMBIA

### 1 OLD LETRAS PASS

DISTANCE 51.1 MILES  
ELEVATION GAIN 12,202 FEET  
MAX ELEVATION 13,327 FEET  
AVERAGE GRADE 5 PERCENT

A rarely ridden back road between Mariquita and Manizales tacks on 25 miles of high-altitude dirt roads. Standard Letras is nearly as long and high, but fully paved.

### 2 ALTO EL LIMONAR

DISTANCE 5.3 MILES  
ELEVATION GAIN 3,590 FEET  
MAX ELEVATION 8,170 FEET  
AVERAGE GRADE 13 PERCENT

There are steeper, shorter climbs, but this wall on the north side of Medellín is perhaps the meanest, with lots of sustained climbing over 20 percent and a few pitches over 30.

### 3 EL SOTE DESDE MONQUIRA (A.K.A. DANGER CANYON)

DISTANCE 29.4 MILES  
ELEVATION GAIN 4,685 FEET  
MAX ELEVATION 10,197 FEET  
AVERAGE GRADE 3 PERCENT

Climbing through a quiet limestone canyon, this road is mostly forgotten, lightly trafficked, and ascends at a steady grade. And it ends just uphill from Quintana's village.

### 4 ALTO DE CARAMANTA

DISTANCE 20.8 MILES  
ELEVATION GAIN 4,740 FEET  
MAX ELEVATION 6,911 FEET  
AVERAGE GRADE 4 PERCENT

What this Antioquia climb lacks in grade and elevation, it makes up for with scenery, as the road zigs and zags from the Cauca River through coffee country to the quaint brick-plazas in the village of Caramanta.

### 5 MATARREDONDA PASS

DISTANCE 21 MILES  
ELEVATION GAIN 6,066  
MAX ELEVATION 11,102 FEET  
AVERAGE GRADE 5 PERCENT

You can climb this pass on the eastern hills of Bogotá, but the westerly route from the town of La Unión is longer and wilder, with sweeping hairpins and overhanging cliffs.—A.G.

← RIDING OFF THE WESTERN ESCARPMENT OF THE CORDILLERA ORIENTAL, FROM FACATATIVA TO THE MAGDALENA RIVER





↑  
A SWEET CORN  
AREPA AND  
SUGARCANE-  
INFUSED  
AGUAPANELA  
CON QUESO.

that specializes in cycling tourism, meets me there at 6:45 a.m. A torrent of riders three or four abreast storms uphill—unlike during the laid-back Ciclovía, people jockey for position and attack if you dare to pass. Every 10th rider, it seems, wears the black-and-green Movistar jersey of Nairo Quintana.

Hernan and I set a steady pace up Patíos, and he tells me that international interest in Colombia is rising. “The peace process is good for business,” he says. The American pro continental team UnitedHealthcare came to the city of Medellín this year for training camp. And Gregg just finished a documentary called *Thereabouts 3* that follows Tour of Utah winner Lachlan Morton of Team Dimension Data, and his brother, Gus, who races for Jelly Belly-Maxxis, through the country. At the KOM marker, cyclists click around the cafés and plow through glasses of fresh-squeezed OJ and orders of *arepas con queso*, cheese-filled corn cakes available on every corner in Colombia.

On the descent to town, I zip past signs and brake in disbelief: “Cyclists are civic heroes.”

sprawling bike-commute infrastructure, is Mayor Enrique Peñalosa. Though he’s the second most powerful person in the country after President Santos, the mayor cycles the Bogotá streets every Sunday. From Patíos I roll down to meet him at his apartment. A tower of a man with a fluff of gray hair, he emerges wearing a black North Face jacket and a Kask helmet, and pushing a 21.5-inch Trek Superfly hardtail. He waves off his single, dour bodyguard.

Peñalosa leads me on a five-mile tour of northern Bogotá during Ciclovía and rhapsodizes about urban planning. This is an affluent part of the city, with leafy parks and bustling sidewalk cafés, though concertina wire, barred windows, and the occasional armed security guard recall turbulent times. The stream of cyclists is constant. At

“Cyclists are our community priority.” A whole series of these pro-bike messages trims the roadway. The man behind them, as well as Bogotá’s

major junctions, college-aged recruits, called guardians, in snappy red-and-yellow uniforms, direct traffic and serve as the face of Ciclovía.

Passing riders wave and cry “*Alcalde!*” (Spanish for mayor) and Peñalosa stops to shake hands and pose for selfies. As mayor, he’s built more than 200 miles of dedicated bikeways, which he calls symbols of equality. “It demonstrates that someone with a \$30 bicycle is equal to someone with a \$30,000 car,” he says. He whispers about an idea for a total ban on cars during rush hours—it’s grandiose talk that could end a politician’s career in the United States. On this Sunday, though, the gush of beaming cyclists reflects popular support for Peñalosa’s ideas, or for bicycles at the least.



**BOGOTÁ AND ITS LONG STEADY** mountains are only a small cross section of a country that stretches from Pacific beaches, across three fingers of the Andes, and finally to the overgrown Amazon. Almost every region has good riding terrain, so Gregg, Julián, and I hit the road for some perspective. First stop is Cóbbita, Quintana’s hometown, two hours north in the neighboring department, or province, of Boyacá. It’s a typical high-plateau village, with a few thirsty palms on a forlorn central plaza and an outsize cathedral the color of whipped egg yolks squatting beneath open hills.

We stop at El Punto del Sabor and order what the clerk says is Quintana’s daily: a sugar-sprinkled, bagel-shaped eggy bread called a *roscón*, with a side of milky coffee. The only bike shop in town is barely recognizable, just an open door across the square with three dejected tires hanging on bare nails. Inside, a couple of department store mountain bikes dangle from a wall, and battered parts fill the cracked, glass-topped counter. The proprietor, Tito Aguilar, says he sold the Quintana family its first bike, something like one of the cheap models on display. “Nairo doesn’t come to the shop much anymore,” the mechanic says, “But he’s a humble guy. He remembers this is where he got his start.” In fact, much to the chagrin of his Spanish team, Quintana insists on living and training in Cóbbita when he’s not racing. The most important factor in daily life here is the family, and many Colombian racers prefer to be at home when they can.



When I climb on my bike, it becomes clear why Colombian cyclists are so good in the mountains. From the plaza in Cómbita, at 9,268 feet, Quintana faces a 2.3-mile upward scabble at an average grade of around 6 percent, every time he rides. As soon as I pedal out of town, a wiry kid in a threadbare kit on a worn-out Giant TCR materializes from a side street and matches my pedal stroke. Miguel Aguilar (no relation to the bike shop proprietor) is a 19-year-old aspiring local racer. He's just finished his workout and asks if he can ride along to his house up the hill. What ensues is a game I'll soon become familiar with called "Stick It to the Gringo." He attacks, I close the gap, we repeat ad nauseam. Though I'm suffering in the thin air, the views down to the desiccated valley and up into a bank of fast-moving cloud, inspire me to push. At the top, Miguel smiles at my ragged breath, shakes my hand, and rides away down a dirt path.

The two-lane road rolls through swells of open pastureland, passing Quintana's parents' house. A 15-foot mural with two paintings of the champ in his winning Giro and Vuelta jerseys fronts the road, and a small shop sells traditional wool ponchos, called *ruanas*, in Giro pink and Vuelta red. Locals in passing cars smash on their brakes to stop and admire the mural. The shopkeeper snaps photos for passersby, and when I note that there's no room on the wall for the addition of Quintana in Tour de France yellow, he assures me, "We've left just enough space."

Next up is the descent through Danger Canyon. That's not the official name, nor is it dangerous, but the ride is unfamiliar to Gregg, so he named it for the "Peligroso" signs warning of cliffs. Descending about 30 miles with almost zero traffic through broad hills that choke down to a limestone gash, the ride puts the first day's descent in perspective. Matarredonda was hilarious fun; Peligroso is the empty, monumental road that I'd travel to ride time and again.

"Only locals know this," Gregg tells me at the bottom, in the sugarcane- and coffee-farming village of Moniquirá. "We found it based on a rumor." He recalls a major bike touring company arriving here a year earlier to scout. "The guide said, 'Okay, what are the routes?' But Colombia's not like that," he says. "It's unexplored, unpredictable."

After a meal of roast chicken, beans, rice, and yucca, washed down with a pitcher of fresh raspberry juice, we climb south on a narrow and deserted asphalt lane through overgrown



← JULIÁN RELAXES IN THE NATURAL HOT SPRINGS AT THE HOTEL TERMALES DEL RUIZ AT THE TOP OF OLD LETRAS PASS.

greenery that gives way to a dirt two-track mined with bedded rock. In the fields, bony cows pick at weeds. Gregg, Julián, and I are belching our way upward when a fireplug of a man on a dented mountain bike huffs up from behind. He pulls even, then attacks. Nobody told Daniel Hurtado, 56, that 26ers are obsolete, and when we reel him in, he smiles

sheepishly. When I compliment his fitness, he says, "I didn't ride for two decades because of my kids. I used to be really fast."

After almost an hour, Daniel peels off while we grind another hour up ropey dirt roads to 7,000-foot Villa de Leyva. With whitewashed façades, sandstone archways, and red-tiled roofs, it's the stunning | CONTINUED ON P. 95

## FIND A TOUR

Medellín-based **Colombia Cycling** specializes in tours with big days and hard climbs, including multiday winter training camps. Owner Tomás Molina is a native of the region, so all trips take in quiet villages and backcountry roads you're unlikely to see otherwise.

¶ In addition to cultural tours of some of the country's biggest attractions, including Cartagena and Tayrona National Park, **Pure! Colombia Travel** has an extensive network of cycling tours for those who want immersion in the country as much as the riding.—A.G.

# Colombia Rising

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sort of place that should be crawling with tourists, yet in Colombia it's more or less as it was when it was founded in 1572. In the main plaza, which is almost two football fields across and hewn with cobbles so brutal that we dismount and walk, uniformed schoolgirls chatter on their way home while *gauchos* in *ruanas* and stained cowboy hats sit under the eaves and swill from chipped ceramic cups of *aguardiente*, the local firewater. The clatter of a mule-drawn cart fills the air, and we slump on the central fountain, call for beers from a bar at the edge of the plaza, and toast a good day.

**IF CYCLISTS KNOW ANYTHING** of Colombia beyond its pros, it's likely Alto de Letras, the world's longest road climb. Starting at 1,615 feet and topping out at 12,113, the road rises for 50 miles at an average grade of 4 percent to the top of Letras Pass. Mont Ventoux, Alpe d'Huez, the Col d'Izoard, and the Gavia would look like speedbumps lined up at the foot of Letras. When I planned this trip, I'd envisioned it as the queen stage, the place where I'd finally grasp the magnitude of Colombia's cycling.

But since my arrival, Gregg and Julián have been murmuring about a bigger challenge. It turns out there's a back road, Old Letras Pass, that's longer, steeper, higher, and climaxes with 25 miles of dirt. Though curious, I'm also apprehensive and have mostly tuned out the goading. Then Gregg shows me *Thereabouts* 3, and there's a scene where Gus Morton, having just climbed Old Letras, proclaims: "Those guys who ride the regular Letras are posers. It's not even the biggest climb in the world." Damn the Aussies and their understated bravado. I feel compelled, and not just from the pressure: Where's the glory in succeeding on the world's second-longest climb when you have a shot at the biggest?

To get there, we drive three hours southwest from Villa de Leyva, then saddle up for a 50-mile plunge from the city of Facatativá to the Magdalena River. Three fingers of the Andes scissor Colombia from south to north, and we're riding off the western edge of the easternmost range, the Cordillera Oriental. Tomorrow, we'll climb up the Cordillera Central.

Makeshift Catholic shrines erected by travelers festoon Colombia's roadsides. My favorite is on this descent: a Virgin Mary huddled in a white-painted tractor tire. Everywhere you go, there's unannounced road construction, too, leaving motorists waiting for hours. Crews often flag bikes through if you sweet talk them—or act like an uncomprehending American—but it's at your own peril. In Boyacá, an excavation crew

rained boulders onto the road they'd just said I could ride, the tumbling rocks so close they shook the ground. There's no such drama at the closure today, and we enjoy the last 20 miles of hairpin descent car-free. Across the Magdalena, gray and cheerless as a runway, dusk brings chirping crickets, bleeping frogs, and an electric whirl of cicadas, a spooky Brian Eno soundtrack for the 15-mile, dragstrip finish.

Though tourism in Colombia has seen huge growth—up 87 percent since 2006—it's still in its infancy. In 2015, the country had fewer than 3 million visitors compared to, say, Mexico, which saw 32 million. So in backwoods towns like Lérیدا, at the base of Old Letras, accommodation is scarce. Our only option is a love hotel, where rooms rent by the hour and adjoin drive-in garages that conceal your car. Julián says places like this are booming because kids often live at home past 30 and need a reprieve from parents' prying eyes. The lack of international-standard hotels throughout the country has been one deterrent for bike tour companies setting up in Colombia, but the funky room with huge garage space works well for spreading out my bike and gear.

Julián and I roll out at 4 a.m. to avoid storms

and cold up high, which seems ridiculous in the dense air of the Magdalena basin. Gregg trails in the car. Otherwise gregarious with a spray of wild dreadlocks, Julián is not a morning person, and we climb in silence, car headlights turning us into disjointed shadow puppets on a jungle curtain. By sunrise, we've climbed for two hours to reach the first of two villages on this ascent, El Líbano, where we pause for warm pastries stuffed with guava jelly. My local hill climb in New Mexico—Ski Santa Fe—ascends 16 miles and tops out over 10,000 feet, so I am no stranger to big mountains. It's daunting to realize that I've already climbed for twice as long as it takes me to do that climb, yet we're still barely a quarter of the way to the top of Old Letras. The good news: There isn't a cloud in the sky.

The climb sharpens, and progress is marked by the shifting agriculture: first coffee trees, then lulo and tamarillo plants with orange and red fruit like cheery Christmas ornaments, and finally potatoes and yucca. From the fields, creased farmers wave and shout "*Fuerza!*" or "*Venga! Venga!*" Old men lean on ramshackle fences out front of dairy farms, waiting for the daily truck that collects their steel jugs of fresh milk. At 5 percent, the climb is never too steep, but is stupefying in its consistency. The



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view at every bend is just more hairpins snaking to the horizon. It's like pedaling up an MC Escher staircase.

Two more hours lead to Murillo, at 9,680 feet, a town of bubblegum façades at the end of the pavement, where we fortify with *aguapanela*. This steaming, sugarcane infusion served with salty cheese that melts in the mug sounds peculiar but proves delicious. "It's Nairo's drug," Julián says. "When they test him, it's all they'll

find in his blood."

A friend of a friend, retired pro racer César Grajales, 44, has ridden to meet us from Manizales, over the pass. César raced as a pro for two decades, perhaps most famously beating Lance Armstrong, Chris Horner, and top Europeans to win the queen stage of the 2004 Tour of Georgia, and he insists on joining us when he hears I'm visiting. "I'm so happy you've come to my country," he says. Like many Colombian climbers,

he's built like a 1950s TV set, with spindly legs and a boxy torso holding oversize lungs. He and his American wife live in Lyons, Colorado, but he spends a few months a year in Colombia, which, he says, has riding unlike anywhere else. This is César's first trip over Old Letras, and he raves about skirting the active Nevado del Ruiz. The volcano's mushroom cloud is visible from Murillo. "Holy cow!" César says, his serious pro racer demeanor falling away to reveal an endearing enthusiasm. "It was amazing up there. But the road is rough. I hope it won't rain."

Two hours and 2,000 vertical feet later, crystal morning skies have given way to angry clouds and drizzle. We stop to put on our warmers. Mist enshrouds us and the drizzle turns to stabbing rain. "Holy cow!" César says again. "This is the worst thing that could happen!" I don't know whether to laugh or panic.

César is the only Colombian who hasn't attacked me. But he stamps an unrelenting pace through a minefield of baby-head rocks and dodges puddles swelling to pools. Runoff blasts across the road, and we skid through the hub-deep currents and past *frailejónes*, head-high endemic plants in the sunflower family named for their resemblance to friars. I'm not Catholic, but I pray for their beneficence. My legs are starting to knot and cramp, and food that would stave off the fatigue is out of reach beneath my vest and rain shell. It's the sort of day that tempts me to climb into the van. But here, despite chills that clench my shoulders and road grime filling my eye sockets, I want the moment to last. These mountains have bred a generation of the best cyclists in the world and a local passion for riding like I've seen nowhere else, and I feel like they're forging me.

Nine hours after we start, my hands and feet numb from the cold, we hobble into the Hotel Termales del Ruiz, a resort at the top of Old Letras Pass with modern rooms and sulfuric hot springs said to have healing properties. It takes more than an hour in the springs, and several aguapanelas, before I can think about what we've managed. This isn't the sort of day you'd repeat, at least not with such wicked conditions, but it's one I'll gladly replay and boast about forever. "Holy cow!" says César, as he floats on his back in steaming waters and wiggles his fingers and toes. "You see how hard it is here! This place makes you tough. It was never *if* we Colombians would be successful at cycling. It was *when*." (For the record, anyone who rides Old Letras on a clear day is a poser.)

**AFTER EIGHT DAYS** of riding, Colombia's second largest city, Medellín, is probably the wrong place to wind down, but I'm not ready to leave

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anyway. Immortalized by cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar and infamous today as a party destination, Medellín is a city of beautiful people, endless nightlife, and blunt climbs. On a Friday night, the city's glitziest corner, Zona Rosa, is pulsing with cumbia and techno. Tanned couples in oxfords and floral dresses mill from bar to bar and spill into Parque Lineal la Presidenta, where they sip on sweating cocktails and undulate in salsa steps. The sensual atmosphere is a departure from the city of a few decades ago, when cartel sicarios assassinated policemen and locals feared the streets.

"A lot of people think Colombia is about drugs and violence. But that's the past," Tomás Molina, owner of Colombia Cycling, tells me over a bottle of aguardiente at a packed sidewalk café. His company runs tours and training camps for cyclists. "I want to bring people here because I think they will be amazed." Every Colombian cyclist will tell you that his or her region has the country's best cycling—quick access in Bogotá, protracted climbs in Boyacá, varied climate in Manizales—but coming from a *paisa*, a native of Medellín and the surrounding department of Antioquia, it's probably true.

The next morning, the seven-mile Las Palmas climb, Medellín's answer to Bogotá's Patíos, is indeed astonishing. At 7 percent, it's steeper than any climb I've seen here so far, and streaming with cyclists in matching kit on imported carbon bikes. At the top, Tomás meets me for café cortados, then we roll out on buttery asphalt. Single-lane roads telephone-cord through sharp, short hills commonly called *repechos*. Compared with the rougher edges I've seen in the rest of the country, it could be Napa or Boulder, except for the horses tethered on broad, stony plazas in the villages, and the sweet corn arepas when we stop for snacks.

The sparkling green pastures, the hearty food that powers you to the next town, the hills you can barely climb—I understand why Quintana would rather ride here than abroad. It's one of the most formidable and sumptuous landscapes I've ever pedaled. I'd return here with my bike long before I'd go back to Europe.

The conundrum for Colombia, both as a country and a destination, is that memories outlast progress. In the fall of 2016, when president Santos put the peace deal to a referendum, Colombians narrowly rejected it. The vote wasn't binding, and the government pushed on with reconciliation, but the defeat illustrated the country's challenges. If Colombians can't yet agree to forget the sordid past, I wonder whether many foreign visitors will. The riding here is rewarding and bursting with potential,

and it's also young and raw. "This is the biggest peace process we've ever had," Tomás says. "It's time to move forward." After the stop, Tomás prattles on about the Colombian dishes I've yet to try and the rides in Antioquia he wants to show me. Then, at the next repecho, he smiles, looks up the road, and attacks.

Holy cow! I shift down and stamp on the pedals to close the gap. I may be chasing Colombia for the rest of my life. **B**

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