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I travel luxe but smart: I know what's worth shelling out for.

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South America's Next Capital Of Cool: Bogota

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Bogota's Cool Quotient



Bogota

The rooftop pool at the B.O.G. Hotel

When my guide picked me up at the airport, she told me Bogota is a business city, not a tourist city. While she was an enthusiastic host and seemed to know everything else about her hometown, I had to disagree with her on this one.

No, the energy in Bogota doesn't revolve around foreign visitors, and no, the city doesn't immediately seduce like Cartagena or Cusco. It's a busy, modern metropolis of some 8 million people who do business there. Many of them also shop in stylish boutiques and eat very well. There are no "tourist places" in town; it's all for locals.

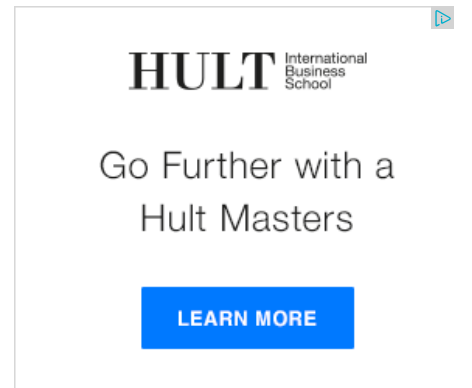
But like most Latin American capitals, Bogota has a charming historic center. In La Candelaria the streets are cobblestoned and buildings brightly colored, both from colonial tradition and from a growing street art scene. It's home to hostels and other backpacker businesses, and an entire narrow alleyway full of cafés serving chicha, a potent [local \(/companies/local/\)](#) LOCM -0.53% (/companies/local/) corn-based hooch. But it's also home to attractions like the Museo del Oro, which houses the world's largest collection of pre-Colombian gold artifacts, and Museo Botero, devoted to the beloved native artist's full-bodied work. Up the street is [El Son de los Grillos, \(http://www.elsondelosgrillos.com/\)](#) one of the city's oldest and loveliest restaurants, which serves traditional Colombian dishes accompanied by live chamber music.

But it's contemporary Bogota that's compelling now, especially the dining-centric Usaquén neighborhood (particularly on Sundays, when a food-driven flea market takes over block after block) and posh, leafy La Cabrera, whose avenues are lined with beer gardens and upscale boutiques, like the multi-label emporium [Per Se \(http://www.perse828.com/\)](#), [Olga Piedrahita \(http://www.olgapiedrahita.com/\)](#)'s ever-changing and conceptual shop, and the showroom of up-and-coming designers [Leal Daccarett \(http://lealdaccarett.tumblr.com/\)](#), whose feminine, colorful collections are produced in collaboration with Colombian artisans.

Bogota crossed the boutique hotel frontier a couple years ago with the [B.O.G. Hotel \(http://www.boghotel.com/default-en.html\)](#) in La Cabrera, whose look—inspired by Colombian treasures like emeralds and gold—landed it in the hip Design Hotels group. The 55 rooms are well tech-ed out and comfortable, with big showers walled in gold mosaic tile. (I stayed in one as a guest of the hotel.) The restaurant, [Le Leo Cucina Mestiza](#), is equally stylish, and its tapas-style menu, conceived by local star chef Leonor Espinosa, lives up to the glam surroundings. The rooftop pool bar is one of the best spots in town at sunset. A short walk away, the [Click-Clack Hotel \(http://www.clickclackhotel.com/\)](#) and its American-themed [Apache \(/companies/apache/\)](#) APA -0.09% (/companies/apache/) bar on the top floor have been the darlings of Bogota's smart set since the hotel opened last fall with 60 mod rooms and a post-Ace sensibility.

The restaurant scene has been buzzing for a while now, for good reason. Local food blogger Diana Holguin, who writes the popular English-language [Bogota Eats & Drinks, \(http://bogotaeatsanddrinks.com/\)](#) gave me a long wish list of restaurants. On it were [Mini-mal, \(http://www.mini-mal.org/\)](#) which bills itself as "an exercise in gastronomic research-creation with the resources from Colombian geography"; the bohemian bistro-café [Salvo Patria \(http://www.salvopatria.com/\)](#); and the very traditional [El Piqueteadero de Doña Nieves](#).

The multistory pleasure dome Andrés Carne de Res (<http://www.andrescarnederes.com/es/>) (about 45 minutes from the city and said to employ hundreds of chefs, waiters, and performers of all stripes) and the La Cabrera spinoff, Andrés DC (as big as the luxury shopping malls nearby) have gotten tons of press since the first opened in 1982. But more emblematic of Bogota circa 2014 is Daniel Castaño, a down-to-earth, self-effacing young Bogota-born chef who studied at New York's French Culinary Institute and worked for ten years with Mario Batali at several of the orange-clogged chef's restaurants. Back in his hometown, he presides over the low-key Naples-style pizzeria Julia (<http://www.juliapizzeria.com/>), the American-comfort-food-focused Gordo (<http://www.gordobar.com/#!/home>) (named for Castaño's dog) and the stellar Emilia Romagna (<http://www.emiliaromagnarestaurante.com/>), which specializes in family-style portions of that region's cuisine (order the pleasingly crunchy *cecí*). Any of them would be beloved in Brooklyn.



Bogota is as good for expending calories as consuming them, as it's about as bike friendly as Copenhagen. Most streets have excellent bike lanes, often on sidewalks or grassy medians and safe from opening car doors. A bike-share program just launched, and there are a number of rental outfits like Bogota Bike Tours (<http://www.bogotabiketours.com/>) offering guided tours and bikes for hire. And on Sundays many of the city's major thoroughfares are closed to cars for Ciclovía, part transportation, part exercise and part rolling party.

For all its appeal, Bogota is as safe as most big cities but not terribly user friendly. It helps to have someone show you around. Butterfield & Robinson, (<https://www.butterfield.com/>) which prides itself on being at the frontiers of emerging destinations, has been organizing private itineraries throughout Colombia for several years, and has access to top guides and drivers—even if my guide was wrong about Bogota not being a city for tourists.

Bogota is an easy hop from the U.S., with daily flights on LAN Colombia

(http://www.lan.com/en_us/sitio_personas/special-offers/fly-to-colombia/lan-colombia/) from Miami on new planes with lie-flat beds in business class and extensive on-demand entertainment on individual seat-back screens throughout.

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A South American Surprise: The Subtle Charms Of Santiago, Chile

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If we're
beguiled by
South
American
cities—the
seductiveness
of Rio, the
colonial
romance of
Cartagena,
the edible
pleasures of
Lima—
Santiago
typically
hasn't been

(<http://b-i.forbesimg.com/annabel/files/2013/05/sancristobal008-copia.jpg>)

one of them. “We can’t compete with Buenos Aires,” admitted the manager of the boutique hotel where I recently spent two nights. “Chile is the England of South America,” said my tour guide, meaning things are

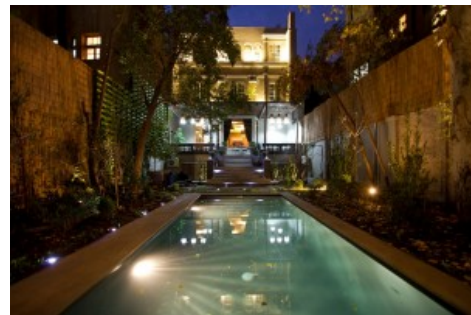
reliable, aboveboard, and orderly—all virtues, to be sure, but not necessarily appealing to travelers who crave a little chaos.



That’s why the Chilean capital has been a stopover city, a place to touch down before heading to the wilds of Patagonia or the stark desert of the Atacama. But a recent stay there (compliments of the tourist board)—yes, en route home from Patagonia—showed that the city has charms that make a multiday layover worthwhile.

Principal among them is the lively Lastarria neighborhood, which my guide compared to Paris’s Montmartre. Art galleries, cinemas, bars, and ambitious restaurants have been sprouting like wildflowers in the past few years, as well as the city’s first boutique hotel (with more on the way). The 14-room Lastarria (<http://www.lastarriahotel.com/en/acerca-de/>) opened two years ago in a 1920s private home that’s retained its original marble staircase and parquet floors (rooms from \$140).

(<http://b-i.forbesimg.com/annabel/files/2013/05/Lastarria.jpg>)



The hotel serves breakfast, afternoon tea, and cocktails, but for dinner you’re forced to explore the neighborhood’s restaurants. A dinner of oysters, king crab, prawns, and Sauvignon Blanc at Nolita (<http://www.nolita.cl/>) proved that while Chile may be the England of South America, when it comes to seafood and wine, it easily outclasses the England of Europe.

The city’s more established attractions hold an enduring appeal as well: lunch at the Mercado Central (<http://www.mercadocentral.cl/index2.html>) for fresh seafood (try Donde Augusto,

(<http://b-i.forbesimg.com/annabel/files/2013/05/fofto-dos-pisos.jpg>)



(<http://www.dondeaugusto.cl/weben/index/index.htm>) and if abalone is in season, by all means order it); a funicular ride up San Cristobal Hill to see the city and distant Andes from 984 feet up (the train recently reopened after some upgrades); and lunch at the nearby El Mesón Nerudiano, (<http://www.elmesonnerudiano.cl/eng/home.htm>) a gathering place for local artists and visitors alike, where the wine list and menu were inspired by poet Pablo Neruda's love of Chile. Sipping a pisco sour in the restaurant's back garden, it's easy to see why he felt as he did.

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