My Experience of Teaching English at the University of Ibagué, Colombia (July 2000-October 2001)

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(The information contained herein is up-to-date as of February 2007. All views reflected are my own and do not necessary reflect the views of The University of Bristol or The University of Ibagué.)
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Windfarm near Cabo de La Vela, La Guajira
About me

I did a BA Joint Honours in Computer Science and Spanish at Bristol University from 1996-2000. I spent a year abroad in Barcelona, where I lived with a group of Colombians with which I built a long-lasting friendship. Just before graduation, I saw an announcement in the Hispanic Studies departmental noticeboard advertising a vacancy to teach English at the University of Ibagué in Colombia. This was actually an opportunity reserved for third-year students taking their year abroad, but nobody had signed up, so was being offered to recent graduates. I made a pretty much spur of the moment decision to go for six months. I ended up staying in Colombia from July 2000 to October 2001.

While visiting my mother-in-law a few weeks ago (Jan 2007), I met Astrid, the director of the language school and she told me that nobody from Bristol had come recently. I felt it was a shame for such an excellent opportunity to be missed, so prepared this report outlining my experiences while there, hoping it will motivate some Bristol students. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to ask me any questions, or view some photos. My email address is ixent at yahoo dot com.
I found Colombia a fascinating country. There is a number of reasons why you may decide to take up this opportunity to teach English in Ibagué:

- Colombians are generally extremely friendly and sociable people. It’s a country which is visited by a relatively low number of foreigners, and possibly as a result of this, most Colombians will do their utmost to ensure you are comfortable and feel welcome (“amañado”) in their country. By the virtue of being a foreigner, you will receive interesting invitations.
- Colombia is probably one of the most misperceived countries in the world due, in part, to portrayal by the mainstream media. Due to this, and it’s well off the South American “gringo trail” which most travellers restrict themselves to. For one, consider that the beautiful archaeological site of Machu Picchu, in Peru, receives over 2500 visitors a day. Colombia is a good place if you like to go off the beaten track.
- There are many safe destinations and things to do in Colombia. During holidays, you can travel to the Amazon jungle (Leticia), relax in the beaches of the Caribbean coast, go scuba-diving in Taganga (reputedly one of the cheapest places in the world to so), and admire the architecture of the colonial towns built by the Spaniards such as Cartagena de Indias, Villa de Leyva and Mompox.
- Colombia is the country with the second-highest degree of biodiversity in the world (the first is Brazil, which is seven times larger in area) [4]. It has some amazing scenery ranging from deserts such as La Guajira to snow-capped peaks over 5000m high in the Andean region. Many can be visited safely.
- You’ll be financially self-sufficient during you time there, as you will be working and earn a decent salary by Colombian standards (see the section ‘Remuneration’)
- Colombia is a great place to rumbear (party), and you’ll find yourself dancing to salsa and merengue music to the early hours of the morning.
- Although Latin America’s oldest democracy, it’s a politically complex country, which may provide an interesting focal point for your essay.

You’re probably concerned about safety. For now, I ask you to suspend disbelief, I will attempt to give a balanced view on safety in the last section of this report.
Ibagué

**The City**

Ibagué is a small city, capital of the Tolima department, with a population of 500,000 people, and is located some 300Km west of Bogotá. It’s sandwiched in a valley between mountains of the Andean *cordillera central*, and has an altitude of 1250m above sea-level. This results in Ibagué having a fairly pleasant, spring-like climate all year round; the average temperature is around 22°C. Ibagué is known as the musical city of Colombia, due to its Conservatoire which is renowned throughout South America.

![Ibagué seen from the hills above](image)

Although there is not very much to see in Ibagué itself from the sight-seeing point of view, being pretty much in the middle of Colombia, it is perfectly located for those who wish to travel around. It’s a 3-4 hour bus-ride to Bogotá, or 25 minute flight, making weekend trips feasible. Note that by Latin American standards 4 hours is considered a short bus ride, and buses there are much more comfortable than National Express coaches. Seats are fully reclinable, and there is considerable legroom, similar to First Class in a flight.

At some point in your stay in Ibagué, you should not miss the *Fundación Las Orquideas* reserve and the *Jardín Botánico San Jorge*. If you fancy a panoramic view of the city, you can climb up the *Martinica* hill, but set out early as it is a hot, 3 hour, uphill walk.

Ibagué has two principal universities. The *Universidad de Ibagué* is a privately owned university, founded in 1980, with approximately 3500 undergraduate and 500
postgraduate students. This is also the older Universidad del Tolima, a state-run university.

A number of shopping malls and hypermarkets (comparable to a Tesco Extra) have sprung up around the city, all a short taxi ride from the apartments where you will be accommodated. The most recent is the Multicentro, which boasts a large branch of Carrefour. I personally preferred to do my shopping in the Colombian-owned Exito and MercaCentro. For fruit and vegetables I went to the open-air markets in the city such as La Catorce (but caution should be exercised in these markets for petty thieves).

You don’t have to travel very far if you fancy a change from Ibagué’s perpetual spring: the nearby Nevado del Tolima, a perfectly cone-shaped extinct volcano stands at 5215m tall and has perpetual snow at its peak, in contrast to settlements such as Melgar and Honda, which lie on the banks of the River Magdalena and are suffocatingly hot. (You should, however, always check the safety situation before travelling anywhere).

For further information on Ibagué, have a look at the online Wikitravel Ibagué guide (wikitravel.org/en/Ibagué), of which I am the main author.
The University of Ibagué

The University of Ibagué is a private university with 3500 undergraduate and 500 postgraduate students. It’s also known as La Cor or Coruniversitaria, which is short for Corporación Universitaria de Ibagué, its former name. It’s mostly caters for middle-class Colombians. It comprises seven faculties offering courses at undergraduate level: Engineering, Economics and Business, Law, Humanities and Social Sciences, Earth Sciences and Mathematics and Architecture. A number of postgraduate courses are also offered.

It has a proactive international relations office, led by Bernard Baeyens (Astrid’s husband). Many students come from abroad under the IAESTE programme (The International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience) to undergo work placements in local companies. In the language centre, native English teachers come via agreements with The University of Bristol, The British Council and Friends of the Americas.

The main university campus is a 20 minute taxi ride from the centre of town, and a 10 minute walk from the apartments where you will be staying. It’s a large campus with an area of approximately 64,000 m², and 16 buildings, and plenty of greenery and a number of cafeterias with pleasant outside terraces for socializing. A wireless network throughout the campus is in its initial phases of being implemented. For a photo-tour of the campus, see http://www.unibague.edu.co/eventos/fotografias/. In addition, there’s a ‘branch’ of the university in the city centre (where language classes are sometimes taught), the Centro San Jose, where vocational courses are taught (and serves an additional 1000 students). There is also CENDES (Centro de Desarrollo Productivo) Tolima, an entity dedicated to regional development of the area.

There are sports facilities next to the Student’s Union building, however, the university has recently inaugurated a sports centre at Cañasgordas, on the outskirts of Ibagué, which will be available for your use. The sports centre includes tennis, basketball and volleyball courts, swimming pools, ping-pong and pool tables, as well as a football pitch.

The Language Centre

The language centre of the university is a three-storey building located just outside the main campus. There is also a branch in the centre of Ibagué, near Plaza Bolívar (known as la sede del centro) where a few classes take place. This year (Jan 2007) approx 3300 students were registered, taking courses mainly in English, but also French, Italian, Portuguese, German and Japanese. The English courses range from absolute beginners to intermediate levels. Students have diverse backgrounds: they are teenagers, university students (students from all degrees are required to do 8 levels of a language of their choice at the Language Centre as a pre-requisite for graduation), people with relatives in the United States and mature professionals, often mixed in the same class. There are currently approximately 15 full-time and 46 part-time teachers.
A source of pride of the language centre has been its ability to attract native teachers. In the past there have been teachers (at least) from the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Austria, Japan, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium and Brazil. Being taught a language by a native teacher is quite a privilege in Colombia.

**Travel Preparation**

**Guide Books**

The only guide book I am aware of is the Colombia Lonely Planet guidebook.

The online PoorButHappy Colombia forum contains in many cases more up-to-date guides for more locations throughout Colombia. This is downloadable as a PDF. It’s also a good place to chat with other foreigners who are about to travel to, or already in, Colombia. The URL is [www.poorbuthappy.com/columbia](http://www.poorbuthappy.com/columbia).

**Visa**

You will need a visa. The University of Ibagué will be unable to employ you if you don’t have a visa as you can only stay as a tourist for 90 days, and are not allowed to work. This will involve a visit to the friendly consulate in London. Astrid will inform you of the required documents when you have been accepted for the teaching position.

**Health Insurance and Vaccinations**

There is no need to have any malaria vaccinations, unless you leave the Andean region.

The University will provide you with excellent private health insurance, so you won’t need to buy any from the UK.

**What to bring**

Bring a UK 3 square pin to US 2 flat pin adapter, and make sure your laptop and any other electronic equipment can operate at 110V.

The Colombia Lonely Planet guidebook.

A decent dictionary; these are expensive in Colombia.

Don’t forget to bring photographs of you with your family, your home, your university and your friends. Many of your students will be very interested to see them
(Colombians are a very family-centred society, and you will be asked numerous times about whether you miss your family).

**Money**

You will need some money (e.g., 400 GBP) to cover living expenses for the first month, as you will be paid in arrears. You can bring dollars cash, dollars travellers cheques, a Visa debit card, or preferably, a combination of all three.

I strongly recommend opening a FlexAccount with Nationwide as they are one of the only banks which do not charge a fee for overseas purchases and cash withdrawals [5].

At the time of writing (Feb 2007) 1 GBP was approximately equal to 4000 COP (Colombian Pesos).

**Bringing a Laptop**

Although there are computers at the university (and you will be provided with an internet account), you may want to bring your own laptop, either to type up your essay, or surf the internet from the comfort of your own home. If you’re really keen, you could create a blog giving an account of your day-to-day experiences in this new culture (I regret not having done so).

It is, however, VITAL, that you use a voltage regulator, as the electricity supply is volatile in Ibagué and can damage sensitive equipment such as computers. You can get one in Ibagué (if there is not one already in the apartment), and try to ensure it also protects the telephone cable. If this is not possible, always disconnect the modem cable after use. Following a thunderstorm one night during which a flash of lightning struck a nearby telephone pole, an extremely high voltage was sent through the telephone cable to my laptop’s modem, burning out its insides. I had to get a new modem; fortunately the laptop was unscathed.

Although it should be safe to take your laptop to the university (many people carry them around), I had no need to and never removed mine from the apartment.

**Living in Ibagué**

**My First Day in Colombia**

I arrived in Bogotá El Dorado airport after a 16-hour flight, slightly dazed. Immigration, baggage collection and customs were rather uneventful. I left the arrivals building, and collected my onward ticket from the Aires office for the flight from Bogotá to Ibagué. In the departure lounge, I met Fred, a US citizen who was also travelling to Ibagué to teach English! By absolute coincidence, it turned out he was also going to be teacher at the University of Ibagué Language Centre, and was
arriving in Colombia for the first time on the same day as me. (It’s one of these surreal things about Colombia which I can’t really explain, but these types of coincidences seem to be quite commonplace there.)

It turned out Fred was on an exchange programme with a US aid organization called Friends of the Americas, with which the University of Ibagué also has an exchange programme. The flight was in a small MacDonald-Douglas plane with approximately 20 seats, and was about 25 minutes; I was surprised because we had barely taken-off when the air hostess swiftly handed each of us a sandwich with a drink, by which time the plane was already descending!

We arrived around 7:30pm to Ibagué Perales airport and it was already dark. Unsure of what would happen next, we walked out of the arrivals door and to our relief Astrid, the director of the language school, and Bernard, her husband, were there to meet us. They drove us to the apartments were Fred and I would be flatmates, along with Kavita, who was a student from Bristol who was about to return for her fourth year. (She was replaced by Joann, who came via the British Council. Funnily enough, both Fred and Joann are still currently living in Colombia, although not teaching at the University of Ibagué).

The apartment is furnished, has three bedrooms, one ensuite, a livingroom with a balcony and kitchen. The showers have hot water, although most people in Ibagué do not have hot water as it isn’t really necessary. There is a television in the sitting room with dozens of cable channels, in Spanish and English. A telephone is provided, but in order to make long distance calls you’ll need to buy a telephone card. (Your friends and family can contact you cheaply from the UK, for as little as 2pm/minute, by using the methods described in the MondaySavingExpert callchecker at callchecker.moneysavingexpert.com.)

I didn’t stay awake for long after having had a wholesome meal.

**Teaching at the Language Centre**

I was required to spend 15 hours a week teaching in the classroom. In addition, my tasks involved holding drop-in sessions for students with queries, hosting a conversation club, setting and marking exams, and lesson preparation. There’s also a bi-monthly publication produced by the Language Centre, which no doubt, you’ll be asked to contribute articles to occasionally.

There is a maximum of 20 students per group, which is a manageable number.

**Is any experience of teaching necessary?**

I had no experience of teaching at all. I found, however, that I complemented the other teachers (who are mostly native Colombians) well. On the one hand, they had a lot of teaching experience and were able to help me prepare activities for my classes. On the other, I was able to help them resolve any complex queries they might have about the English language.
Also, I arrived in July, which is a holiday month in Colombia. During this time, the British Council from Bogotá was contracted to give a 3 week TEFL training course in-house, to a group of less experienced teachers including myself. I found this course invaluable. It seems that these teacher training courses are held (roughly) once a year, and delivered either by the British Council in Bogotá or an experienced teacher from the language centre.

When I mentioned to the co-ordinator that I had no experience and was a bit apprehensive, they made sure that the first set of courses I was assigned were all of the same level, so I could use the same lesson plans for all three classes. So certainly, I found my colleagues all very supportive. The students were also, on the whole, very keen to learn, interested in knowing about me and my background, and very well-disciplined. The only unpleasant experience I had during my whole stay involved a student cheating during an exam.
Remuneration

The University of Ibagué pays students who come as teaching assistants a beca of 470USD. If you have already graduated, this increases to 636USD. In both cases this is subject to a 10% deduction in tax. In addition, a furnished apartment is provided, with all utility bills paid for by the university (gas, electricity, water, and the telephone line rental, but not the calls themselves). The apartment is shared with two other foreign teachers.

If you stay for a whole year, they pay your airfare. If only staying for half a year, they pay a 500 USD contribution towards the costs of the airfare.

In short, this means you receive quite a lot of money by Colombian standards only to buy food, go out, and get around. I found myself eating out at restaurants most days and travelling around by taxi everywhere, which is quite nice. There should be sufficient money left over to travel around the country during holidays.

Also provided by the university is an internet account, and a very good health insurance (I was interned in a private clinic for two weeks in Ibagué, for no fault other than my own, as I ate some dodgy food I bought off a street-seller – but anyway, I received top-rate medical care by our standards). You will have access to all the sports facilities in the university as described in the University of Ibagué section.

Is Colombia Safe?

It’s certainly hard to give a yes or no answer to this question. During the 15 months I lived in Colombia I never had any sort of safety problem, although I did of course take certain precautions. Personally, my answer to this question would be that it depends what areas you go to. It is large country, and you will be quite safe in much of the country. As Fernando Cepeda, a prominent Colombian academic, once said:

“Colombia es tan grande como España, Portugal y Francia reunidos. Y cuando había la guerra civil en España, no era el caso ni en Francia o Portugal!”

I travelled around most of this country overland, keeping away from areas where I was advised to not go to. A Guardian article[3] puts it very simply:

“Both as a journalist and a tourist, I travelled extensively, overland, in all 31 of Colombia's departments. And why am I here to tell the story? Rule number one: stay out of conflict zones. It's obvious when you think about it.”

Ibagué itself is a small city and as a result very safe. Bogotá has almost 7 million people, and you need to keep your wits about you. I’ve had friends who have been mugged, but they were walking home from a club at 4 o’clock in the morning in the Candelaria district of Bogotá. (Well, would you walk along Stokes Croft at that time?) At night, always phone for a taxi, and ask the operator for the taxis number plate (‘el número de la placa’). It’s better not to pick one off the street as there have
been occasional muggings. I would say quite confidently that the cities are no more dangerous than others in Latin America.

The countryside is perceived as being a war zone between narcotraffickers, guerrillas and paramilitaries. This is, however, a problem which is fairly contained in certain regions. It’s also the case that since Alvaro Uribe was elected in 2002, the situation has greatly improved. A good place to get advice on travel safety is the Platypus hostel in Bogotá, where backpackers are continuously arriving from various points throughout Colombia, and will be able to give you a good idea of where to go.

Colombia is probably the most misperceived country in the world. Another, more recent, article in the Guardian by the journalist Simon Jenkins is worth a read, and may be a good way to reassure your parents [2]. The links below may also help:

- The PoorButHappy Colombia Safety Guide: http://poorbuthappy.com/colombia/node/7315
- A blog by a Scottish guy currently taking a gap year in Barranquilla: http://www.travelblog.org/Bloggers/En-Colombia-sin-tiquete-de-regreso/
- "I believe in Colombia" is a grass-roots foundation aimed at inspiring pride, confidence and social capital in Colombia: http://www.yocreoencolombia.com/en/

Finally, a Colombian once warned me:

"Sí, Colombia es muy peligroso. Pero el peligro no es el que ustedes creen. El peligro son las chicas colombianas; tu vas soltero y te cazan y te casan".

Drugs

Although the number one producer of the world’s cocaine [1], you are unlikely to see anything related to drugs, unless you specifically set out to look for them. Colombian society frowns upon the use of drugs, including soft drugs such as marijuana which is more acceptable by people in Europe and the United States. The Colombian line is generally that they only export them, not consume them. My advice is to steer well clear from drugs, as they could land you in serious problems with the authorities.

I was also surprised that young people generally smoke a lot less tobacco in Colombia than in the UK. I quit while I was living there.

Reading

- Novels by Gabriel García Marques
- Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society by Frank Safford and Marco Palacios presents a good analysis of the country’s history.
- Gaviotas: A Village to Reinvent the World by Alan Weisman, a true account about a unique community in the Llanos of Colombia, which produces innovative technologies with the aim of becoming self-sufficient.
References


[2] http://www.guardian.co.uk/colombia/story/0,,2004281,00.html (If this link doesn’t work, email me and I can send you a PDF version)

[3] Is it safe to travel to Colombia? Guardian Unlimited, 23 December 2003. http://www.guardian.co.uk/colombia/story/0,,1112348,00.html (If this link doesn’t work, email me and I can send you a PDF version)


[5] Spending Overseas: Cut the cost of Spending abroad by 6%. http://www.moneysavingexpert.com/cgi-bin/viewnews.cgi?newsid1106765397,71685,