

Shopping for Colombian Crafts in Bogotá

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Souvenir stems from the French verb to remember, which is exactly what I do as I look around my office at items collected during my travels. For example, I bought the clay *haniwa*, a replica burial object of a dancing woman with an O-shaped mouth, in Miyazaki, Japan.

Also gracing my office shelves are a small Acoma vase purchased from an indigenous woman in New Mexico, a marble head from Ecuador's Easter Island, and a death mask from Mexico. So is it any surprise I was keen to shop for Colombian crafts on my recent visit to Bogotá?

Colombia's Indigenous *Artesanias*

The second-most ethnically diverse country in the Americas after Brazil, Colombia is home to 80-some ethnic groups. And many of these earn renown for producing crafts specific to their region.

It's estimated that more than 1 million people make a living producing *artesanias* or artisan crafts. Of these, 60 percent live in rural areas, and 65 percent are women. Most artisans learn their trade from their mothers and grandmothers, using techniques passed down for generations. Because *artesanias* are often a primary source of income for rural families, I buy them joyfully.

Colombian crafts make perfect souvenirs



Vueltiao and aguadeño hats at Artesanias de Colombia

If you love color, you'll love Colombian crafts.

One of Colombia's most well-known products is the *mochila* bag, particularly those made by the indigenous Wayuu people living in the La Guajira region in northern Colombia and Venezuela. Although Wayuu, the "people of the sun, sand and wind," live in the desert, their woven bags are spectacular riots of color, with eye-catching geometric patterns and other intricate designs that can fetch high prices.

Perhaps equally well known is the *vueltiao* hat, fashioned from a type of cane and made by the Zenu people for more than 1,000 years. The number of strips used in making the hat determines its price. Those with 15 strips are the cheapest, but you'll get more bang for your

buck (or rather, Colombian peso) for a *vuelto* with 27 strips, as these can be folded and more easily packed.

You'll also find *aguadeño* hats from Aguadas. Similar to Panama hats, they're produced from *iraca* palm fibers. These fibers are also used to make items like placemats and bags. In the village of Usaicuri, near Barranquilla, people have been making iraca crafts for generations.



Vendors at Parque de los Periodistas

Other Colombian artesanias include:

the *ruana* wrap, which is like a poncho, except that it has a slit down the front so you can wrap it around you; usually made of wool, they're popular in Andean towns and villages to ward off the cold,

pottery from Raquira, ceramics from El Carmen de Viboral,

filigree jewelry from Mompox, and

baskets and other works of art from just about everywhere.

Colombia is also known for its gold and emeralds

Where to shop for Colombian crafts in Bogotá



A Colombian crafts display at Pasaje Rivas handicraft market

If you're like me, you probably don't have time to traipse all over Colombia hunting down the country's many crafts. That's where Bogotá, Colombia's capital city, comes in handy. Because it's the nation's melting pot, it's home to people from many regions and ethnic groups. As a result, street markets, artisan shops, handicraft markets and museum stores offer goods produced throughout the country.

Bogotá is also an attractive city, with more than 5,000 parks, Colonial-era mansions and buildings in the historic La Candelaria neighborhood, and mountains flanking its eastern edge.

You'll also see a heck of a lot of graffiti. Bogotá is one of the most street-art-friendly cities in the world, with walls flanking highways, storefronts and even office buildings serving as canvases for graffiti art and graphic designs. Some of the artists are even paid. Of course, you can't take this form of street art home, but it makes shopping for art just that more enjoyable.

Artesanias de Columbia

Artesanias de Colombia is a great place to start searching for high-quality crafts from around the country. Created in 1964 by Colombia's Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism to promote traditional and modern handicrafts, the non-profit supports artisan families by selling their products at a fair price.

Beautifully created handiworks, representing approximately 200 artisans, include furniture, jewelry, baskets, clothing, pottery, hammocks, masks, hats, and bags. In addition, proceeds are used to buy even more products from different artisan communities throughout the country, which made my purchase of a beautifully crafted basket seem like a good deed.



Hammocks at Artesanias de Colombia

Pasaje Rivas

Pasaje Rivas is the largest handicraft market in the country. Its interconnected indoor passages house 45 shops and stalls offering crafts and housewares. These include painted wooden objects, wicker baskets, pottery, musical instruments, mats for sleeping, masks, jewelry, Wayuu bags, and regional clothing.

The mask I bought from one of the vendors now hangs with those I purchased in Uruguay, Japan and Thailand.

La Candelaria and Usaquen

Covered street stalls and sidewalk vendors in the historic district of La Candelaria are good places to hunt for Colombian craft bargains. For example, Parque de los Periodistas, located in the historic heart of Bogotá and dedicated to Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, has stalls offering hats, purses, beaded jewelry, ruanas and other typical crafts in a park-like setting.

And on Sundays and public holidays, the streets of Bogotá's Usaquen neighborhood become an open-air flea market for handicrafts and snacks.

Museum shops

Museum shops are also good bets. For example, the Museo Internacional de la Esmeralda is testimony that Colombia is one of the world's top producers of high-quality emeralds, with about 3,000 specimens in its collection. I

n the museum's shop, you can drop \$150,000 (US) for a ring that converts into a pendant, but I opted for a silver ring (cheaper than the more popular gold) with a speck of an emerald for \$60 (US).

Similarly, the Museo del Oro is home to the world's most extensive pre-Hispanic gold collection, with approximately 34,000 items on display. In addition, its shop carries artisanal crafts, jewelry reproductions from the museum's collection, books, and other items.

Other places to shop for Colombian crafts & souvenirs



Ruanas and other clothing at Manar

The city offers many more places to shop for crafts than I've outlined here, including those outside La Candelaria. Zona Rosa, for example, is Bogotá's premier nightlife and dining neighborhood, but it also has boutiques and international designer shops.

Kuna Mya, for instance, is a casual restaurant specializing in goods from the Cundinamarca region of Colombia, with a store selling coffee, chocolates, jams, snacks, and other organic foodstuffs, while upstairs is Manar, a shop selling housewares, clothing, and accessories, including ruanas, ceramics, baskets, hats, and jewelry.

Of course, you don't have to shop for items that will claim space in your home forever (or until your estate sale). Colombian coffee, chocolate and rum are also good buys and tasteful souvenirs.

What's appealing to the over-50 luxury traveler?

Most of Bogotá's craft stores and markets are concentrated in La Candelaria, making it easy to walk from one locale to the next on foot.

Despite a population of more than 7 million, Bogotá's residents are helpful and friendly. For example, when my companion and I ducked into a shop in La Candelaria during a sudden downpour, the clerk offered to call us an Uber to take us back to our hotel.

Numerous tour companies offer walking and biking tours of La Candelaria. These will help orient you to the neighborhood.

Take note

Bogotá is 8,530 feet above sea level (making it an excellent place to show off your ruana), which shouldn't present problems for most visitors. However, to combat altitude sickness, staying hydrated and avoiding heavy exercise for the first day or two is recommended. Laying off alcohol and caffeine and drinking coca tea instead also may help.

Although Colombia has a history of violence related to drug cartels, the government has increased security measures. Still, visitors should avoid walking at night (even in La Candelaria) and hailing taxis off the street. Instead, ask the concierge at your hotel or hostess at a restaurant to call a cab. Or, take an Uber.

IF YOU GO

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For more on Colombia from Beth Reiber, see her article [Colombia's Fantastic and Wild Amazon](#).

Read about the [Galápagos Islands](#), located about 600 miles offshore of Colombia, on [GettingOnTravel](#).

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Disclosure: The author visited Bogotá as part of a travel writers' conference

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A Buyer's Guide



