

A Leap of Faith



A photo essay of a changing nation
and its welcoming people.

“Corre! Corre! Corre!” shouts a voice behind me. He is very close, practically breathing down my neck. Within seconds, he glides us both into the skies and we are soaring, floating amidst the clouds, above a patchwork of green fields, brown rivers and towering hills.

I am paragliding near San Gil, a city quickly becoming Colombia’s adventure tourism hub due to its proximity to untouched mountains, canyons, and rivers.

I suppose I took a bit of a leap here, in more ways than one. For years, Colombia had been associated with drug lords and crime –detering many travelers from visiting this beautiful South American country. Even some local residents give me warnings to be careful. “Cuidado,” they say as I wander around Medellín with my camera swinging around my neck. And I do have to be careful, just like visiting any other city really. There are a few bad elements and still some crime in the wrong neighborhoods, but the same can also be said for my hometown of Chicago.

From colorful Caribbean Cartagena to Medellín, once known as one of the most dangerous cities in the world, and eventually to Bogotá, I continue to push myself out of my comfort zone, only to find a country working hard to overcome its muddled past.

Since the early 2000s, the crime rate has fallen, murder rate has dropped by nearly 50%, and there’s been a huge jump in security and social development.

These days, peaceful parks, green spaces, and bike lanes abound. I am welcomed into homes, I drink coffee in lively squares, I cycle around the capital city, and all the while I am greeted with warm smiles. Colombia is dusting itself off to reveal a colorful and stunning place and it’s evident that the country has taken a giant stride towards a better future.

In a very short time, the leap I have taken has me floating like a feather and I’m not so sure I want to land. **WJ**



Clockwise from top left:

Colorful Nation: Bright yellow architecture abound in Cartagena.

La Bandera: The Colombian flag has three bands of color: yellow represents the gold found in the country; blue is the sea off Colombia's shores; and red, for the blood shed during the country's fight for independence.

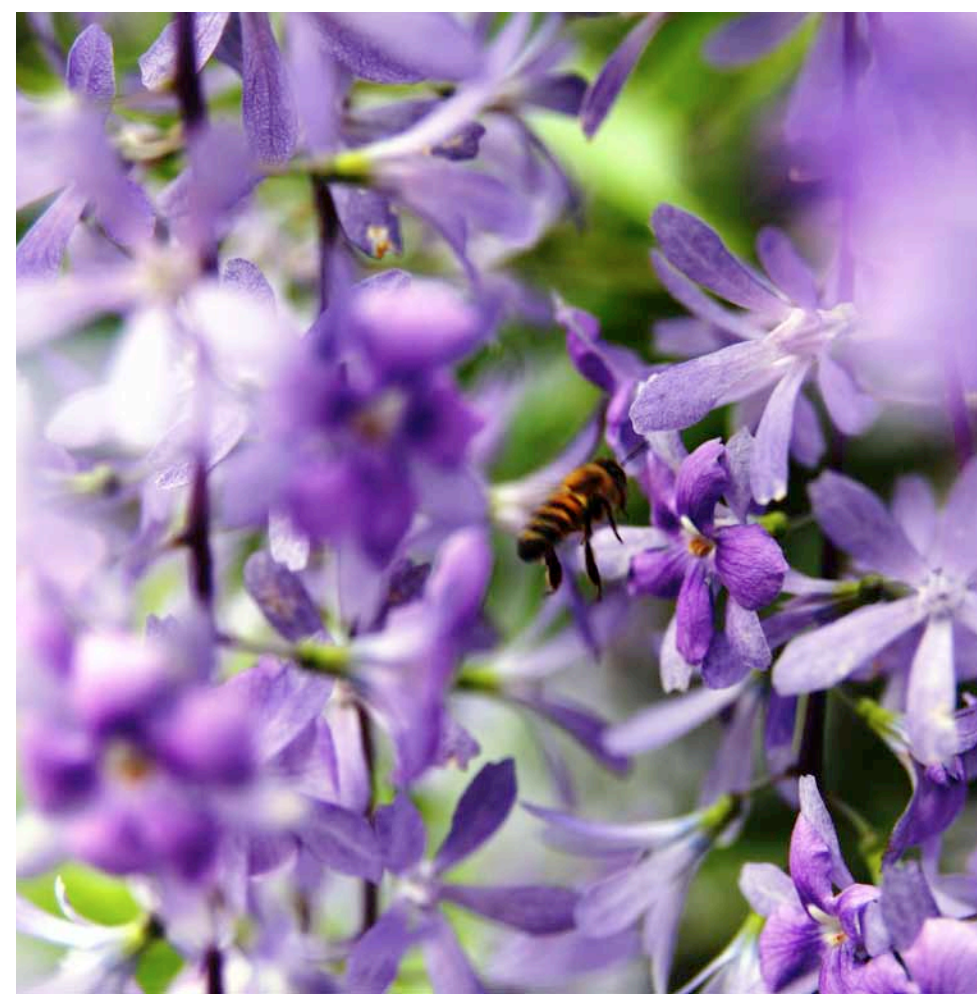
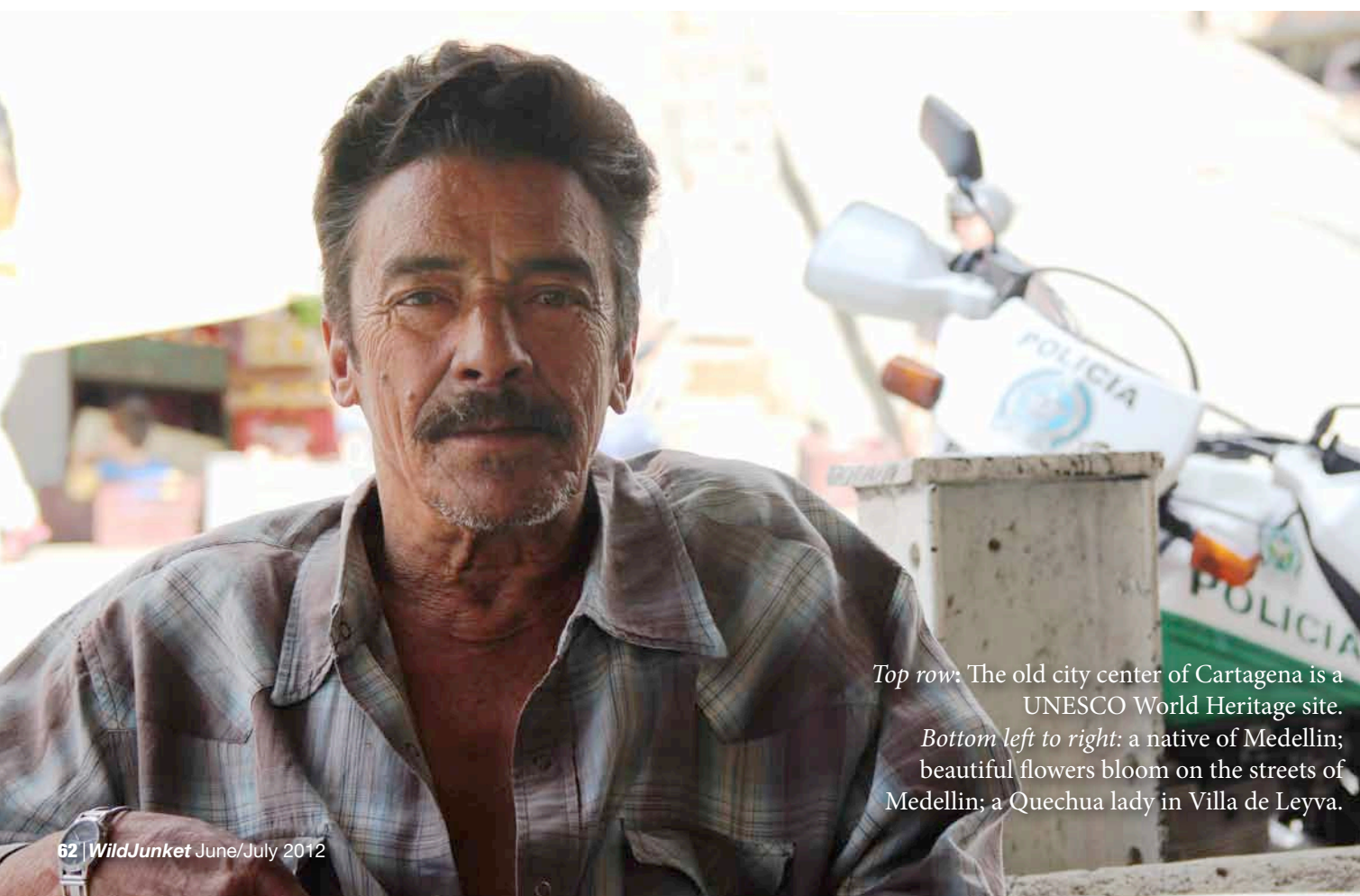
Bienvenidos: Welcome to Cartagena, Colombia's Caribbean jewel.

Got Coffee? Colombia's biggest export is coffee, recognized world over for its superior flavor.

Bohemian charm: The walled city of Cartagena is an enclosed maze of cobbled streets and colorful stucco buildings.



Colonial flavor: The orange walls of Cartagena, a beautiful colonial city.
Faces of Colombia (opp page clockwise): An elderly fisherman sits by the port of Cartagena; a smiley police officer patrolling the streets of Villa de Leyva; a local in Bogota.



Top row: The old city center of Cartagena is a UNESCO World Heritage site.
Bottom left to right: a native of Medellin;
beautiful flowers bloom on the streets of Medellin; a Quechua lady in Villa de Leyva.