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## How Ripe Is Colombia For Hotel Development?

Dec 5, 2011 6:53 AM, By Carlo Wolff

This one-time haven for drug cartels is trying to shed its dangerous image and promote tourism and resort development

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The entry to my suite in the 226-room [Hotel Spiwak](#) overlooking Chipchape Mall is brown and charcoal and modern, with a flagstone floor. Pass the coffee maker on the left, across from the sleek, muted bathroom, to reach the bedroom. There, find a comfortable, king-size bed, a desk equipped with all the necessary outlets, an ergonomic chair and good, free Wi-Fi. A sparsely furnished balcony looks over the busy mall. All seems right with this world, particularly since Angel Spiwak, a long-time Cali hotel figure who developed this Preferred Hotel, throws in a complimentary minibar, an unusual and welcome amenity distinction. His ultra-hip, upscale hotel feels like safe harbor in restless waters.

The \$35-million Spiwak was my favorite of three hotels I stayed in during an Oct. 3-9 trip to this Latin American country of 45 million, best known until recently for its drug wars. Although Cali felt largely safe, and Cartagena more so, at times the vibe of the '90s and 2000s, when Colombia was a country non grata because of its cocaine cartels, narco guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary, arose again.

In researching Angel Spiwak, I came across a report noting his new hotel contains five armored rooms as well as a floor dedicated to women.



Angel Spiwak says the government is prevailing in the war against narco guerrillas.

In a subsequent phone interview, Spiwak told me there are four such rooms on the ninth floor and one on the tenth. "It's Cali, Colombia," he said. "This is not Bern, Switzerland. There is occasional trouble and some people that travel around Colombia need the extra protection." The walls in these special rooms are steel, their windows bulletproof, and there is concrete in the ceilings and floors. These rooms are a bit more expensive to build than regular rooms, he said, noting they are marketed to diplomats, politicians and the heads of multinational corporations, who would "rather have extra protection—almost the same as a bulletproof car."

The floor for women caters to a growing domestic market, he said. Twenty to 25% of business travelers are women who might prefer certain amenities and colors, as well as the company of other women.

Spiwak's main competitor is the 279-room InterContinental downtown, operated by the

hotel company Estelar. Spiwak says the InterContinental is in a dangerous section, as are other urban hotels like the Dann Carlton. "It's very easy for you to get into a not so good neighborhood," he says. "Very easy."

Rates at the Spiwak are \$130 for a regular suite to \$600 for the presidential suite, which is three times larger. Open since February, the hotel is posting occupancy of about 50%, lower than the area's 55%, Spiwak said Oct. 12. He expects to reach 75% in the next six months. A second Spiwak, the Stancia, just opened downtown. The 84 rooms in that

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The Hotel Spiwak features dramatic lighting.

new-build business hotel go for \$80-\$90. There's little tourism as yet, Spiwak noted; most travel is for business, stemming from hundreds of multinational companies with Colombia offices. Otherwise, his customers come from the United States, South America and, less so, from Europe. A trickle comes in from Asia, but "the U.S. is the main business partner for Colombia."

### Reaching out

My trip was arranged by [Proexport Colombia](#), the government's tourism investment arm. It consisted of three days each in Cartagena de Indias, a picturesque city on the northern coast, and Cali, in the Cauca Valley to the southwest. Our party stayed at the [Sonesta Hotel Cartagena](#) for three nights, spent one night at the Dann Carlton in downtown Cali, and two at the Spiwak. The Sonesta was in pre-opening mode; just off the beach, among a gang of condos that served as weekend residences for wealthy Latin Americans, it is an attractive property. It also had some service issues: One night, I and the other reporter on the trip had a tortuous time getting drinks at the bar.

At the same time, Cartagena was a delight, particularly its Old City, a series of public squares featuring well-preserved 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century architecture, and the formidable Fort of San Felipe, so well built it repelled invasions by the British—and pirates. We also visited the Sofitel Santa Clara, a gorgeous, smoothly operated hotel in downtown Cartagena. A conversion of a convent, that Accor property was the most refined of our visit—and among the most photogenic. We also toured the Hotel Las Americas Casa Playa, a big, new five-star convention hotel, along with the more rustic, remote, and already somewhat dated (though new) Estelar Grand Playa Manzanillo.



The front desk at the Sonesta Hotel Cartagena is bright and inviting, even early in the morning.

We spent the next day on one of the Rosario islands, an archipelago of some 30 coral islands an hour's boat ride from Cartagena. There, Accor runs the San Pedro de Majagua hotel, a clutch of cottages for the ecologically oriented leisure class. The place was beautiful, similar to Roatan in Honduras but more refined. The boat ride was delightful, the day sunny, the wind leaching the humidity from the tropical air. Our Cartagena stay ended with dinner at the excellent El Santisimo Restaurant, capped by coconut pie I can still taste.

### Cali Caliente

Cali is a city of 2.7 million 485 miles south of Cartagena. It bills itself as the country's salsa capital. It's also the sports capital. It's a rowdy, 24-hour place with heavy traffic and talented drivers. It's funky and sexy and vivid, and unlike Cartagena, a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, it doesn't shout its history (both cities date from the 1530s). We spent the first night at the Dann Carlton, a comfortable, older downtown hotel with attentive staff and a very good location. We spent the last two at the Spiwak.



The Golgotha geoglyph on a mountain in Cali is a tourist magnet.

Among the sights: Cristo Rey, a giant representation of Christ atop the Cerro de Cristo Rey, a hill of 4,720 feet in the township of Los Andes west of Cali. It is an imitation of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At 85 feet, this Christ has oversized feet and an undersized head. On the way to it, one passes El Golgota, a stunning geoglyph by Carlos Andres Gomez, a local artist who carves sculpture into the red earth of the mountain, then glazes it in wild colors. More folkloric and psychedelic than traditional, Gomez's work suggests a mesmerizing way to interact with nature.

We spent an afternoon in San Antonio, a part of Cali similar to Cartagena's Old City but edgier and less gentrified. It consists of small residences, galleries and outlets



Lewis and Liz Perkins.



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for arts and crafts, and occasional, striking public art that crosses graffiti and mural. It also is home to small and charming bed and breakfasts. San Antonio is on an insecure cusp; it wasn't a place where I felt comfortable walking by myself, and our guide told me to avoid a particular street were I to venture out (I decided against that). At the same time, the old San Antonio Church was peaceful, its attached park calming. Because it's so warm, people dress casually and spend a lot of time outside.

We had a salsa lesson, danced one night at a salsa bar (my footwork is terrible), took a whirlwind tour of the NOW Hotel, a small Colombia independent with W DNA in the city's grooving Granada section, and spent most of a day around and on Lake Calima 100 miles south of Cali. That vacation area in the Andes is mountainous, abundantly green and aquatic. It felt peaceful and looked prosperous. Latin American McMansions with massive, highly visible security dot its shores. The visit ended with a meal at the Teatro Magico del Sabor, followed by a salsa show.

### Colombia Calling

Colombia is attractive for resort developers, according to Richard Cotter, managing director and executive vice president of asset management for [Brilla Group](#), a beachfront investment firm with offices in Miami, Cancun and Panama. A panelist at the recent [Lodging Hospitality Lifestyle/Boutique Hotel Development Conference](#) in Miami, Cotter called Colombia a "dynamic country" and "a huge market that is going to grow."

In a telephone interview and e-mail, David Brillembourg, Brilla chairman and CEO, expanded on those remarks. Brilla Group is in the final stages of raising a dedicated, \$50-million fund sponsored by Bancolombia and backed by local pension funds and other institutions. The money will invest completely in the Colombian Caribbean coast, starting in Cartagena. The intent is to penetrate the whole Colombian Caribbean corridor, also covering Palomino, Santa Marta and the Rosario islands. Brilla Group plans to develop luxury hotels four stars and up, Brillembourg said, noting that compared to other Latin American countries, Colombia lacks in that segment. In addition, the labor pool is trained and ready to work in that field, he said. Brilla projects will not be all-inclusive.



Brilla Group Chief David Brillembourg is ready to develop luxury resorts in Colombia.

Brilla works closely with the secretary of tourism, Colombian development bank Bancoldex, the office of President Juan Manuel Santos, and Proexport.

Key feeder markets are the United States, Venezuela, Ecuador and Argentina. Emerging feeders are Brazil, Russia, Germany, Chile and the United Kingdom.

Why Colombia now? Brillembourg said there have been extraordinary improvements in security, the government offers a 30-year tax exemption for new and remodeled hotels, GDP has tripled since 2000, and the country's economy is expected to grow by at least four percent a year until 2016. Tourism generates \$2.8 billion a year in foreign income for Colombia, and is the third-largest source of income after oil and coal. From 2005 to 2010, he said, international tourism to Colombia increased 11 percent a year compared to four percent worldwide.

Worried about the drug problem? "The reason there is so much growth in the country is they've been able to control the violence, reduce it to very low levels," Brillembourg said. "There are still guerrillas, but a minimal amount far away from the cities." Safety is not a concern of his. "Colombia has become very safe and Mexico has become less safe."



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