Hola Familia y Amigos,

This series of dispatches represents our second foray into South America: Colombia. When we shared with others our plans, there were those who must have just finished watching the Netflix original, Narcos, featuring Pablo Escobar and the attendant Colombian violence. They asked why we would put ourselves is such dangerous environs. For some of those people I replied that we were going to be totally safe as we had signed up for a newly created tour, bringing tourists directly in contact with Cocaine processing, with protection provided by the BACRIM (emerging criminal organizations that have replaced the old cartels of Medellin and Cali). I went on to tell them that this safeguarded us, our signing a non-disclosure agreement and being blind-folded at key points to preserve anonymity. I nearly doubled over with laughter at some of the responses. What folks are not aware of are the changes that have been made and any dangerous areas are relegated to a couple of regions, none of which we were targeting.

We had planned for 17 days in Colombia, sandwiched between 4 days in Oceanside with Jordan and his family and 10 days in Costa Rica with them as well, celebrating Maggie’s “Welcome to Medicare” birthday on May 13.

We connected through Bogota, flying on to Cartagena. The airport for this 5th largest city in Colombia, located on its NW coast, was extremely small, with no ATM and hardly any buffer between baggage claim and the neighborhood sidewalk, where we picked up the next small cab in line. Only two blocks away we were amidst sidewalk cafes, food vendors and their carts on either side of our very narrow (12 feet wide) cobblestoned street, veering onto the Carretera bordering the Caribbean Sea on our right, looking at kite surfers, a number of breakwaters and horse-drawn carriages crossing in front of us in our 5 p.m. commuter traffic. We had a good piece of the 25 foot high wall of the “Walled City” portion of old Cartagena (photo attached) on our right as we made our way into the Getsemani district and our hotel near Plaza Trinidad, an artistically appointed hangout allowing beautiful street art (photos attached). This district was brimming with 2-wheeled carts laden with produce, lining the sidewalks, hundreds of motor bikes parked everywhere. We were greeted at the small, 14 unit Casa Lola, our new home for the next 4 days, by the handsome, suave, 30-something, English-speaking manager, Fabio, wearing a fashionable white custom-made tunic.

Our time here was quite lovely, with a jungle-like outdoor dining area (photo attached) and a giant Nispero tree (aka Loquat) bearing its brown sweet fruit used for jams, jellies and chutney; a 3rd story pool open to the skies; and some avian friends dropping in on us (photos attached), watching us lounge in the heat and humidity. From this vantage point we also had some interesting views of the city (photo attached). We accessed our room walking over a 2 foot wide wooden planked bridge spanning a one foot wide aqueduct-like system with water from a waterfall in the outdoor dining area, providing a soothing environment to offset the heat and humidity.

After settling in to our smallish room, we took Fabio’s map and directions to arrive at La Cevicheria, an Anthony Bourdain recommended restaurant, sitting at the only empty table, off the sidewalk and in this narrow cobblestoned street, which was just wide enough for one Kia-sized vehicle at a time to pass by us. We were serenaded by a young female songstress on the sidewalk opposite the eatery, her sweet voice plying us with her gift. This dinner was a wonderful introduction to Cartagena, whose food was some of the best in all our travels: De Camaron ceviche (mandarin and lemon juice, mint, coriander, garlic & olive oil, shrimp) and De Calamar ceviche (fish of the day, squid, conch, mint, coconut milk, coriander, lemon juice, garlic, coconut flakes, olive oil and pepper). Dessert you asked? Slowly cooked and sweet gooseberries coupled with French Vanilla ice cream, rum and mint. Before we departed, another street event occurred, blocking multiple cars and a horse-drawn carriage for 10 minutes, as 6 young men (Mo Kidz Flavor) performed some outstanding break dancing.

Our first night in Cartagena ended wandering (the Spanish word, ‘deambulando’) by parques with outside dining, side streets with music spilling out from multiple spaces, espying edifices of typical Caribbean bright oranges, blues, greens, some showing the ravages of wind, salt, and humidity with their peeling facades (photos attached). At the square in front of the Museo de Cacao y Chocolate we heard the strains of a familiar song and quickly realized it was from a musician with guitar singing the quintessential Elton John ‘Your Song’ which brought back memories of performing that for Jordan and Erika’s 1st dance at their 2008 wedding. We tipped him, explaining the specialness of this song, to which he asked if I would sing with him. I politely declined. The moon was full this night, adding magic as we strolled by apartments off the sidewalk, with doors ajar, curtains and/or wooden shutters open, allowing us to view their lives behind the vertical iron bars…dinner tables, easy chairs, couches, TV’s flickering, lounging inhabitants, with little regard for privacy. This represents the focus for us in our travels: the cultures, so different in some ways from our own lives, revealing of another value system, yet at the same time, so much in common.

We spent the next 3 days exploring the streets of several of the districts that make up Old Cartagena: Centro, San Diego, Matuna and our own Getsemani. We managed to stumble on entrepreneurial efforts down a small alley way abounding with flower stands, rows of old men sitting at very old typewriters (Royal, Underwood, those that I had honed my skills on), typing up documents and certificates for their customers that stood waiting while they completed the forms (photo attached). We were always surrounded by 2-wheeled fruit carts loaded with mangoes, limones, apples, bananas, pears etc., vendors hawking them loudly: peras! platanos! We felt at home with the balcony-styled buildings similar to those we have seen in Cuba and New Orleans (photos attached).

Being interested in the history of such a city we climbed up to the top of the Wall that served as a fortress against invaders, with the old cannons still in place (photo attached) on this 36 foot wide (at its narrowest) red-tiled brick and concrete surface. It encircles Old Cartagena (founded in 1533) and construction spanning over 200 years (1586-1796). The cool breezes coming in from the Caribbean Sea were a welcome relief from the 88 degree F and 79% humidity, a Heat Index of 106 degrees. From the Wall, we espied the Castello San Felipe de Barajas (photo attached) on top of the 40 meters high San Lazaro Hill. This castle’s construction spanned only 120 years, beginning in the 1650’s and was intended to be the city’s principal fortification. We continued on foot over one of the bridges spanning the several lagunas separating Old Cartagena and the high rise district of Bocagrande from the larger city communities to the east. We hiked up to the castle top, meeting with a splendid view of where we had just come from and the Bocagrande towering cityscape (photo attached). It commanded an hour of our time in the heat to walk through a warren of tunnels (photo attached), being 6’2” in height and 3’ wide in most of the mazes, eerily lit and intriguing, passing by insets 4 feet deep and 3 feet wide, likely storage spaces for supplies and ammunition. Crossing a different bridge going back to our district, over the waters of Laguna de San Lazaro and Laguna de Chambacu, we passed by mangroves, with their distinctive root systems, scores of egrets in the shoreline trees, espying an abandoned foot bridge missing a connecting piece between an island and the mainland (photo attached).

Our nights in Getsemani were spent strolling in the cooling of the high Heat Index days, discovering what were to become our favorite venues, all within a few minutes walking from our hotel in different directions. Trinidad Square, however, was at the center of most the activity, with the aforementioned street art, a general atmosphere of music, kids’ laughter from within the school just off the sidewalk, multitudes of folks sitting on the curved marble benches that perimeter the semi-circle square in front of the 17th century Iglesia de la Trinidad and statues denoting this as the site of many congregations during the fight for independence of the city (photo attached), dancing in the square, a Zumba class at 9 p.m. with 30 women, sweating and moving to the boom box emanations on a Friday night. Demente is one of those iconic ex-pat hangouts, with its dimly lit environs, great pizzas and bebidas, mirrors hanging on the walls, etched with the silhouettes of famous iconic people, e.g., Einstein, Dali, Freud, Steve Jobs, Che Guevara, with quotes relating to each of them. Cocina de Pepina’s was just the opposite of Demente: a brightly lit, old diner-style hole-in-the-wall place with a chalkboard against one wall, which we took a photo of for reviewing purposes at our table. Tight space, no frills, but immensely tasty and well-priced food. La Habana was located on the corner of our block (photo attached), so we patronized it for an hour one night just to see how it measured up to everything we experienced in Cuba. It definitely had the right vibe, one wall covered with sepia photos of the movers and shakers back in the heydays!

Our remaining days in Cartagena centered around more Wall-walking, seeing more of the Centro district, passing through the Torre de Reloj entrance (photo attached), deambulando past schools with children two feet from our faces, at their desks, seeing us, smiling and waving through the vertical metal bars allowing protection and breezes. We happened upon Parque de Bolivar (Simon Bolivar, a revered Venezuelan military and political figure, who led the establishment of Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru and Colombia as sovereign states in their independence from 275 years of Spanish rule), where we came across a lean and intense, maybe 40-ish something man, screaming into a handheld mic, pointing a stern finger at his enraptured audience of a dozen plus locals, a lectern in front of him, piled with books (Pulpit in the Park?). We were entranced, watching this from our park bench, shaded by the broad-leafed trees, and ended our viewing when he got down on his knees (photo attached) in front of the 9 souls left, whose arms were extended to the skies, palms up, the lone old woman shaking and sobbing, being consoled by a fellow park parishioner patting her back gently.

We would also experience exotic gelato (photo attached) at Gelateria Tramonti, ordering scoops of Tomate de Arbol and Nispero, followed by a serenade in Santo Domingo Square from nine men jamming and singing under the table umbrellas outside a small restaurant, using a saxophone, several guitars, wooden maracas and Crow sounders. Meandering further we had a nice view of the Templo de San Claver, an 18th century beauty with an orange dome (photo attached). We popped in to the Museo Cacao y Chocolate where we treated ourselves to Te’ Cacao frio, Frappachino and 4” square brownies to beat the heat.

On our last night in Cartagena, we made our way to Malagana, 2-3 blocks from Lola, on Calle Guerrera, up 2 flights of a tightly spiraled, narrow (3 feet) circular staircase to its funky, small rooftop area sporting maybe a 15 person capacity, with 6-8 inch square kaleidoscope-colored tiles, each one with its own design. We were 2 of nine people at the start, with the population eventually rising to 13. Small world stuff evolved when we talked to the couple next to us and found out they are on the ‘Amazon Trail’, moving to Seattle on Amazon’s dime. Our evening ended on a unique note. While exiting the roof top via the unique staircase, all the lights went out in this whole section of the city. Luckily we made it down the staircase safely, paid in cash, hit the street, where only a few businesses were operating with their generators grinding away, silhouetted figures moving toward us, eerily passing by in this blackout. We were making our way back to Lola when, 10 minutes into this darkness, all the lights in the area returned to wild cheers, music magically spilling back out on the Calles and bills could now be paid! It was a perfect book-end to our visit, as the electricity was out at Lola upon our arrival four days previous, but it was daylight and the outage was not long. We would discover in the ensuing weeks that this would not be our only power outage.

Our next dispatch will cover the rural areas that were part of our Colombian itinerary.

Hasta Luego, Stan & Maggie