

Solo Female Going to Colombia? Just Don't.

Jan 11, 2016 / most popular posts, stories & photos



Photo credit:

It was 6:00 a.m. and I was laying in bed reading when the low hum of voices from the next room over started to rise.

"You coke whore...you fuckin' coke whore! Where's my money?" Screamed a male voice.

Search



Hi there. I'm Gigi—a location-independent writer traveling the world with my pint-sized pooch, Luna, and my partner, Chad. I believe in slow travel, risk-taking, and living life on your own terms even when it's hard.

Love that idea? Get new blog posts in your email twice a week.

Oh, and let's be Facebook friends, shall we?

POPULAR POSTS

The original article is not on the website anymore, but it's still accessible on [Archive.org](#).

I copied and pasted the article for easier reading.

It was 6:00 a.m. and I was laying in bed reading when the low hum of voices from the next room over started to rise.

"You coke whore...you fuckin' coke whore! Where's my money?" Screamed a male voice.

A female voice answered in high pitched Spanish.

"You whore. You stole my money. You whore!" the man spat.

I lay there paralyzed for a few moments, waiting for it to stop, unsure what to do.

But it kept going, the screaming, the insults, the rage. And then there were muffled noises—booming and shaking. I wondered if he was hurting her. And I climbed out of bed and into my clothes and shoes, running down the hall and downstairs.

It was early, so only a few people were awake in the hostel. An Australian nurse, an Australian handyman who had been working at the hostel that week, a tall American man, and me.

I could still hear the fight from downstairs and now there were loud slapping noises. Someone was definitely being hit.

"There's a violent argument going on in the room next to mine," I said. "I think someone's being hit."

I asked the handyman if he had the owner's phone number. He said he didn't.

I think I asked if anyone knew the number of the police. No one did.

The nurse suggested we go upstairs as a group and try to get the woman out of there.

I was scared to confront the loud, angry, possibly-high man, but I also couldn't let him keep hurting the woman in his room (who later turned out to be his wife and not, as he so delicately put it during the

It was 6:00 a.m. and I was laying in bed reading when the low hum of voices from the next room over started to rise.

“You coke whore...you fuckin’ coke whore! Where’s my money?” Screamed a male voice.

A female voice answered in high pitched Spanish.

“You whore. You stole my money. You whore!” the man spat.

I lay there paralyzed for a few moments, waiting for it to stop, unsure what to do.

But it kept going, the screaming, the insults, the rage. And then there were muffled noises—booming and shaking. I wondered if he was hurting her. And I climbed out of bed and into my clothes and shoes, running down the hall and downstairs.

It was early, so only a few people were awake in the hostel. An Australian nurse, an Australian handyman who had been working at the hostel that week, a tall American man, and me.

I could still hear the fight from downstairs and now there were loud slapping noises. Someone was definitely being hit.

“There’s a violent argument going on in the room next to mine,” I said. “I think someone’s being hit.”

I asked the handyman if he had the owner’s phone number. He said he didn’t.

I think I asked if anyone knew the number of the police. No one did.

The nurse suggested we go upstairs as a group and try to get the woman out of there.

I was scared to confront the loud, angry, possibly-high man, but I also couldn’t let him keep hurting the woman in his room (who later turned out to be his wife and not, as he so delicately put it during the argument, a coke whore). So I agreed with the tall nurse and we all went upstairs, her and I, not comfortingly, in the lead.

The man—a loud, fat, stout, ugly American without a shirt on—answered the door and yelled at us to mind our own business. We tried to invite the woman to come downstairs with us. She was speaking in fast-paced, high-pitched Spanish, so it’s hard to be sure, but I think she said he hit her. Then he defended himself to us, screaming that she hit him with a belt.

We asked them to calm down. We asked her to come downstairs. And he told us to mind our own fucking business, then shut the door in our faces.

The commotion had drawn two of the South American boys who were working at reception out of their room and into the hall. I ran to them and asked for the owner’s phone number.

“Oh, this happens all the time,” they said, shrugging off the smacking noises as if someone’s well-being weren’t in danger. “We’re used to it.”

“I don’t care if it happens all the time. We’re not letting it happen here and now,” I said. “Do you have the owner’s phone number?”

The boys danced around the question, not wanting to give me the number, repeating that this happens all the time. I don’t know if they thought they’d get in trouble for calling the owner before 7 a.m. or what, but they kept changing the subject over and over, trying to explain to me that domestic violence wasn’t a big deal.

Shocked and furious, I kept at it: “You don’t have to call the owner. You won’t be the one bothering him at 6:00 a.m.,” I said. “I will call him. Just give me the number.”

Finally, they acquiesced and handed me a phone. I quickly explained everything to the owner and he said he was calling the police and coming over.

He arrived soon thereafter and the police weren’t far behind.

We led them up to the room and then retreated back downstairs. I sat at the kitchen table, humming with anxiety, and waited.

In the end, they took her and her things out of the room and away with them. I don’t know where. And I don’t know why they took her instead of him.

Whatever their reasons, the abusive asshole was left behind to gather up his things and check out. He took his sweet time and, not feeling comfortable returning to my room beside his, I sat in the kitchen for a long time, drinking coffee and feeling unsettled, thoughts circling:

Why would they leave the aggressor behind with the people who confronted him? Were we in danger? How could those South American boys think this is okay? And, worst of all, if I were in danger, screaming for my life, here in Colombia, would everyone shrug and say “it happens all the time” and leave me to my fate?

* * * * *

A few weeks later, in the larger city of Medellin, I met a Colombian American woman who had just moved to Colombia from the States to work on development projects with a particular focus on women.

I asked her about the harassment. I told her about the indifferent boys. I told her that the violence scared me, yes, but the indifference was worse. How can a woman feel safe in a country where no one would come to her rescue?

She said she didn’t think it was indifference that held them back.

Things are better now, she said, but not so long ago there was so little value on human life that if you interfered, if you knocked on the door, if you tried to help, the abusive man might just shoot you in the head. It's fear, she said, fear that holds them back.

Perhaps that's part of it. Or perhaps what used to be fear has become apathy over time.

Because it wasn't fear I saw from those boys that day. They didn't warn us of the danger. They didn't call the police. They just shrugged it off, quite literally shrugging their shoulders when I asked over and over again for the owner's phone number.

* * * * *

One scary experience isn't enough to sour me on a whole country. But a scary experience almost every time I left the house? That's damn sure enough.

When I moved to Medellin, a large man who must live near my apartment would frequently stop on the corner and stare at me intently while I let the dog out. Once he walked past me and stopped only a foot or two away, partly blocking my way back into the building, staring silently and forcing me to go around him in order to get back into my apartment building, my entire body tense, hoping to god he wouldn't touch me.

Another time, I was sitting on a hotel terrace having a coffee and Skype date with a friend when a man leaned over the railing, staring at me and muttering to himself and then screaming "I love you. I love you!" aggressively.

It would be funny, except that I was terrified. Except that if he did try to hurt me, I didn't know if anyone would intervene. Or if it would just be another thing that "happens all the time" here.

A few days later, I walked a few blocks to the grocery store and stopped into the ATM on my way home. As I stepped into line, the man ahead of me turned around and reached out to grab me. I stepped back and he smiled, thinking my discomfort was funny, I guess.

He turned back to the ATM and collected his money, then stepped out of line and out the door. But he didn't leave. Instead, he stood at the window, his face near the glass, staring at me until I left. Then he got on his motorcycle and proceeded to follow me down the block.

* * * * *

It's hard to describe how the harassment here feels if you haven't felt it yourself.

I've had men shout at me or approach me in other places around the globe, including the US. I've been honked at and touched. And I've certainly been stared at creepily. I think most women have.

But there's something different about it here, something that makes it more frightening, more intense.

Most of the harassment I've experienced in my life has felt like posturing...just some guy puffing out his chest, showing off for his friends, something like that. It was something I could ignore, could shuffle past, could walk away from and try to forget.

But here...the screaming, the grabbing, the staring...it has *intent*. It feels dangerous. It's not just posturing. It's not just one idiot here or there behaving badly. It's an entire culture of men without boundaries, who see women as something for the taking.

I've felt this scared a few times before, but these were always isolated incidents. Here the sheer volume of predators is overwhelming and terrifying.

* * * * *

I tried to be invisible.

I stopped wearing makeup or leaving my hair down. I stopped wearing dresses. I never wore jewelry, even the cheap stuff. I never looked a man in the eyes, since they seemed to take that as an invitation. I barely left the house and when I did, I was on guard.

It didn't work, of course.

* * * * *

I talked to a few other women about their experiences.

One told me, via Twitter, that she was walking down the street in Medellin when a construction crew started shouting at her. As so many of us do, she ignored them. This pissed them off, so they drenched her with a hose.

Pause there and take that in: *they hosed her down for not responding to their cat-calling.*

Another woman told me she has to wear long sleeves even on hot days. It doesn't stop the harassment, but she thinks maybe it slows them down.

Still others reported being followed, having their space invaded, and, of course, being relentlessly stared at.

* * * * *

Harassment isn't the only problem.

I spoke to [another woman](#) who doesn't remember the harassment, but is in therapy after being the victim of an armed robbery.

Like me, she felt that the actual violence was almost less shocking than the apathy of the people around her. She was stuck here for three days after the robbery, waiting for an emergency

passport so that she could get the hell out, and where she expected to find compassion, or at least acknowledgement from the Colombians around her, she found only denial, apathy, and blame.

In Colombia, it seems, they think you get what you ask for. Being western, being wealthier than your average Colombian, wearing a pair of earrings, checking your phone...that's just asking to be robbed. They call it "dar papaya," a Colombian slang phrase that means putting yourself in a bad situation.

It's victim blaming and its rampant.

She also found out she'd been lied to.

"This never happens here," people said. But some research online showed her that the bus she'd been on when she was held at gun-point and robbed had been a target multiple times before, as far back as 2011. This supposedly safe place, raved about by all the tourist websites and blogs, actually had a long history of unsafe bus rides.

* * * * *

I know four other travelers who were robbed here.

Two were robbed in northern Colombia near Santa Marta, one at knife-point, one at gun-point.

The third was robbed *and stabbed* in Cali and ended up wandering the streets bleeding from the chest and begging for help.

The fourth, a young solo female traveler, has been robbed five times since entering Colombia a couple months ago. *Yes, five times.*

It's not unusual, I'm told. Robbery is something everyone seems to shrug off.

And, frankly, it's that apathetic attitude that's keeping the rest of us in the dark. Because all we hear about is how far Colombia has come from its terrifying drug-trafficking past. We don't hear about the fact that [street crime in a city like Medellin is up 300%](#).

By the way, robbers here will shoot you if you don't hand over the goods, so you better not try to negotiate or fight back. Like this fall, when [that tourist was shot because he gave up his wallet, but refused to take off his necklace.](#)

* * * * *

And so I spent most of my time in Colombia counting down the days until I could leave, staying in my apartment, double bolting the door.

I'm not a person who is easily spooked. I'm cautious and aware of my surroundings. I try to pick safe neighborhoods and research countries I'm going to. But I don't see threats around every

corner. I don't assume different means dangerous. And I try to take dangerous reputations with a grain of salt.

But here in Colombia, the threats really are around every corner. They peeked their heads out almost every time I left the house.

Before I came, I was told that Colombia is safer now. It's making top travel destination lists and is being touted as a great retirement destination.

I came because I heard so many rave about how much it has changed.

And I suppose that's true. It's *safer* because there's less crime than 10 years ago. Safer because so much of the drug trafficking has moved to Venezuela. Safer because 10 years ago it was scary-ass place that nobody—including men—wanted to visit.

But here's the problem: *safer doesn't always mean safe*. And safer for a man doesn't always mean safer for a woman. And when a destination feels truly unsafe, we travel writers have a responsibility to say something. Because I listen to you, People Who Make Those Top Destination Lists. We listen to you. And we owe it to each other to tell the truth.

The truth is that while homicides are down, [street crime has gone way up](#).

The truth is that I couldn't leave my apartment without being stared at, screamed at, grabbed at, followed, or intimidated.

The truth is that robbery is commonplace, bus rides are particularly dangerous, and robbers will shoot or stab you without a second thought.

The truth is that the culture here will shrug off your trauma as something that "happens all the time" or will pretend it doesn't happen at all.

The truth is that I beg you, lady readers, skip Colombia and get your Latin America fix from somewhere like [Sayulita, Mexico](#), instead.