Two foreigners, Edward Davey and Karen Greiner, give a personal reflection of a year spent in Bogotá and how the experience has changed their lives.

Edward Davey:

I arrived in Colombia at the beginning of October 2008. In the US, the Obama victory was approaching, although it looked by no means certain at the time. In the UK, where I am from, the financial crisis was reaching its zenith, with gloom and recrimination in the air, and unemployment on the rise. Colombia seemed a good place to be!

In Bogotá, in what was perhaps a metaphor for the times, the rainy season was beginning, and there were torrential downpours — followed by bright sunshine — most afternoons. The DMG financial pyramid scandal had recently erupted, with the country gripped by tales of this elaborate hoax which had invariably ended in tears and protest.

A year on, the events of October 2008 seem simultaneously vivid and part of the distant past. President Obama looks older and wiser, a year into his administration, and continues to act — in this author’s view — in an inspirational and refreshing way on almost all fronts. The first ‘green shoots of recovery’ from the financial crisis, meanwhile, seem to be showing themselves in the UK and elsewhere — or so an exhausted-looking Gordon Brown would have us believe.

In Bogotá, the ‘winter’ has returned, in even more dramatic fashion, although this bemused Englishman can’t avoid a wry smile when friends complain of the terrible cold. The mysteries of David Murcia’s exploits have been eclipsed by the daily, and more far-reaching, discussions of whether President Uribe intends to stand for an unprecedented third term in government — and what it might mean for Colombia if he does.

All in all, it seems a good vantage point from which to reflect on a year in Colombia, and I am grateful for the Editor’s invitation to do so.

I would like to begin with the positive. Colombia continues to amaze me in multiple ways every day. I am consistently taken aback by how kind Colombians can be. In a multitude of daily transactions — whether buying vegetables in the market, in conversation with taxi drivers, porters, shopkeepers, waiters, mango and newspaper sellers, or in the context of professional life — there is a kind of human warmth, a pulse, a sense of humour and a sense of exchange which constantly lifts the spirits and adds a lift and a spring to daily life. I find Colombians almost universally courteous, warm-hearted and kind; if there were one reason for the joy and zest I have experienced in the country over the past year, it would unquestionably be this.

Bogotá has won me over too. Despite the terrible traffic, the aggressive buses, and the dispiriting pollution — about which much more should be done — I have grown to love this ‘Athens of South America’.

Take the magnificent view when you walk from the Exterior University down to the Plaza Bolívar in the bright morning sunlight, or on a golden sunny afternoon; the colonial houses with their tiled roofs, the church spires, the handsome Republican Government buildings; and — towards the horizon — the city spanning out towards the distant hills.

Or the view on an early morning, after the walk up to Monserrate or the pine forest at the top of ‘Quebrada La Vieja’ in Rosales (one of the city’s great unknown treasures), with the whole city waking up to life: a riot of orange-red apartment blocks, skyscrapers, avenues, parks, and the snow-capped peaks of Tolima and Ruiz a majestic backdrop on the distant horizon.

I am enthralled by the city’s bookshops, restaurants, cafés, museums, cinemas, and cultural and musical festivals — the city has yielded its secrets slowly, and has drawn me in.

It’s been love at first sight with the rest of Colombia and the country’s exceptional beauty and diversity continue to stagger. The National Park of Naquí, Choco, stands out in my memory, with pristine rainforests bordering the Pacific ocean; so, too, the glories of Colombia’s relatively intact Amazon Rainforest, visited by boat and on foot from Leticia and the astounding setting of Parque Tayrona and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta on the Atlantic Coast.

The countryside surrounding the ruins of San Agustín was memorable too and the 12-hour road journey from Bogotá to Popayán for ‘Semana Santa’ in March 2009, was one of the most glorious road journeys I’ve taken in a long time, seeming as it did to encompass so much of Colombia’s variety of landscapes and climates: the green hills of Cundinamarca in the cold morning air, the ‘Eje Cafetero’, endless rivers, the vast sugar fields of Cali and the Valle del Cauca, and then the red clay as we descended into the hills of Cauca and the outskirts of Popayán.

Discovering Colombia’s natural beauty and national parks has become somewhat of an obsession: I hope to discover all 55 of the latter in my lifetime, continuing next year with Cocoy, Los Katios, Chiribiquete, Sumapaz and several others.

The achievements of President Uribe in his first two terms are now threatened by the worrying development of a second re-election. I feel this is anti-democratic and a risk to Colombia’s democratic history and strong institutions. There are good potential Presidents in waiting, with interesting propositions, who deserve a hearing in 2010 and the chance to stand.

I worry too about the widening gap between rich and poor, particularly acute in cities. I worry about the hard lives so many people lead, both those working informally in the cities and poor farmers in rural areas. I am appalled that there are over 3 million displaced people in the country and that so little is being done to provide a meaningful, lasting response to their plight.

I worry about corruption in the political class. And finally, regarding the environment, from a professional and personal point of view, I am acutely concerned by several worrying developments which indicate that Colombia’s uniquely beautiful and biodiverse environment will be put seriously at risk in years to come.

But I don’t want to end on a nega-
tive note: rather, simply highlight points which are of serious concern from a personal point of view. It has been an extraordinary year in Colombia, and I feel a depth of gratitude to the country and its people which is difficult to convey, adequately in words.

Karen Greiner

It’s a chilly fall day in south-eastern Ohio. It has been over four months since I returned to the U.S. and I cannot seem to shake my nostalgia for Colombia. I enter my classroom, as I do every Monday and Wednesday at 4pm, and greet the thirty or so university students who are taking my class on communication and culture. On a whim, I ask the class: “Have I ever told you about the year I spent in Bogotá?” The word “Bogotá” does not seem to ring any geographic bells. “It is the capital of Colombia.” I say.

The sea of blank stares makes me suddenly feel like the economics teacher in the movie “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” Colombia. The country. In South America. Anyone? Anyone?

The students, I imagine, are searching for Colombia in the mental library of media stereotypes every Estadounidense is equipped with. I swiftly decide to counter stereotypes with personal memories. Before my students have a chance to notice the curricular diversion, I open an online photo album and begin projecting the images for the class. “This is my year in Bogotá,” I say, as I begin turning memories into stories.

I show them a picture of an old woman holding a guitar on La Septima during a “Septimazo” and then I have to explain what a Septimazo is and how if you want to make something bigger in Spanish you can add “azo” to the end of it. I show several photos of the “Colombian phone booth,” the stationary mobile phone-stations that one can find by following the sound: “llamadas, llamadas, llamadas.” I talk about the view from the church of Guadalupe and how you can eat the most delicious empanadas and get herb flavored aguardiente for a dollar. I tell my students that Guadalupe seems to always be the bridesmaid to Montserrat’s bride and they don’t know what I mean by this and I say “nevermind.” I show photos of all my favorite storytelling corners in the city: “This is La Perola at the National University. These are the steps of a church called Lourdes, where an old man with a red scarf holds court everything Thursday night. Here is a photo of Diego, one of my favorite storytellers at the historic Plaza de Chorro de Quevedo. Here is a plaza in the neighborhood of Usaquén where all the storytellers wear matching t-shirts.”

I show them a photo of a street mime and try to explain how, once upon a time, mimes used to enforce traffic regulations and help people get across the street but now they just follow you and mock you until you pay them to stop following you and when you finally pay they give you a little happy face sticker.”

I show them a picture of the Transmillenio and I explain how I LOVE that mode of transport even though some of my friends called the big red buses the “transmilenio,” which is a play on words and a criticism that I then have to explain.

I realize at this point that my class is nearly over and I have shown hundreds of photos and haven’t stopped talking for an hour. “I wanted to share with you my version of what Bogotá is like,” I tell my students. “As you can see,” I conclude, “my version of Bogotá is neither a crime story nor a war movie. It’s a big, guilty romance.”