The ‘out of sight’ city

Karen Greiner goes in search of the hard-to-find places in Bogotá and why we should check them out.

If ever a friend suggests brunch at Casa La Cícuta in La Candelaria, just accept – don’t get overly cerebral about the name. Why the restaurant gallery bears the name of Socrates’s preferred poison is unclear. What is however, is that La Cícuta is “out of sight,” both literally and figuratively. It is qualitatively “out of sight” for its delicious French-inspired food served on a breathtaking and extensive garden patio. La Cícuta’s oasis-like interior is also literally “out of sight”; passing this restaurant on the street you would never suspect the hidden burst of greenery inside. This double “out of sight” quality is how La Cícuta made it on my list.

This hidden-treasure map, which began with La Cícuta at the southern end of La Candelaria, takes us erratically northward toward the Plaza-Park Lourdes where instead of holy apparitions we will discover “Mi Tierra,” an underground kingdom of kitsch. Each of these places shares the characteristic of being not apparent to the eye of the casual passerby. Getting there will involve deliberate seeking and in some cases flights of stairs, long dark corridors and a willingness to leave your comfort zone.

Leaving La Candelaria, the next destination brings us very close to the Casa Nariño, Colombia’s presidential palace. On a street closed off to traffic for security reasons, one can find the Museo del Siglo XIX. Tucked away in the courtyard leading to the museum is the delightful La Giralda Café. During my last visit to La Giralda, a man who looked to be in his early 70s was playing piano in the courtyard for the benefit of café patrons, the sound of which had been my first clue that there was more than meets the eye through the museum door. From La Giralda café, a walk through the Plaza Bolivar heading north-east toward the Avenida Jiménez takes us to the “hidden in plain sight” Bolos San Francisco. Perhaps you have already passed by and seen it wedged between Citytv and Restaurante La Romaña. The sign is obvious enough, but the actual World War II era bowling alley must be reached by descending a left-winding staircase that cannot be seen from the street. You know you have arrived when the musty “underground aroma” hits you. The charm of Bolos San Francisco is its ability to transport you, physically and chronologically, away from the hectic streets of Bogotá and back to an era when pins were still reset manually.

If a trip to Bolos San Francisco renders you nostalgic for the pre-digital age, make your way to the next stop on the list where you can find see, hear and feel the way music once was when it was wrapped in art and made of vinyl. I spent an entire afternoon in Ramito Musical, the small second-floor shop in the Centro Cultural del Libro, located in the used-book district, between Calles 15 and 16 with Carrera 8A. After trying out potential purchases on the in-house turntable, I decided on five albums, all of which I could have easily purchased electronically. But had I done so, I would have missed out on the life story found in the liner notes of the Joe Arroyo album and the gorgeously hideous 80s-era cover art of a Hector Lavoe record that was still sealed in its original packaging. When I return to the U.S. with my albums, I will someday be asked: “where on earth did you get these?” And because “itunes” is not the answer I will say: “Let me tell about this out of sight musical paradise in Bogotá, Colombia…”

Each of the next four places on this list of interesting, hard to find destinations is within a short radius of one of the busiest intersections in Bogotá, Calle 19 with Carrera Septima. If you are free on a Friday afternoon, you can take advantage of the “Septimazo” to stroll the traffic-free Carrera Septima and then visit each of the five by making a small detour in the form of a loop.

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Get a caffeinated start at the Plazaleta las Nieves by heading to the café on the third floor of the Universidad Nacional bookstore. The garden terrace overlooking the Septima transforms what would have been an unremarkable café into a rare urban oasis. Refuge from the chaos of Bogotá traffic can be also be sought at Bardo Teatro on the second floor of a nondescript outdoor mini mall at the east end of Calle 19. I recently met a friend for drinks at Bardo Teatro at 6 pm on a Monday and noticed there was not a single empty table when we left an hour later. Bardo’s weekday popularity can be attributed, I suspect, to soothing lighting, inexpensive drinks, and a receded yet central location.

It would be disingenuous to characterize the next place on this “out of sight” list as remotely calm or soothing. Despite its harmless-enough sounding name, the Pasaje Internacional del Gourmet Olga Karina shifts from office-dweller’s lunch mecca to mall of rock dens once day becomes night. I was drawn in by the music and the promise of adventure the first time I passed this invitingly seedy tunnel of bars. I checked out two first-floor bars with dueling sound systems having been lured in by the “jaladors,” employees stationed outside to invite (or “pull”) clients inside. First up was “Woodstock,” a misnamed two-story Metal-lovers paradise. I took a seat in a room with a fake fireplace just below a portrait of unicorns – or maybe they were horses? – prancing in the ocean. On the TV was vintage “Headbanger’s Ball” from back in the days when MTV still played music videos. The crowd, best described as darkly clad eclectic, seemed united only by their visible enjoyment of the music. Across the passage was “Arcangel,” a dimly lit establishment filled with groups of friends singing along to music videos. “Who are your customers?” I asked the bartender, trying to get the feel of the place. “Most come to hear music from the 1990s,” was his quite specific reply.

Around the corner from the Pasaje Olga Karina on Calle 20 is Taller de Encuadernacion, the store/atelier run by book-binder Ricardo Aguirre. I stumbled across this place several months ago when fleeing the noisy construction work on Carrera 3 and have since been in several times to buy gifts for friends. The handmade notebooks created by Aguirre and his staff and apprentices, which come in all sizes and price ranges, are made with high quality paper and often come equipped with handy paper pockets inside the back cover. With the “Septima loop” now completed, jump in cab and head to the Soledad neighborhood to check out the next “out of sight” spot on the list. La Residencia is not hard to find once you know it is a business “disguised” as a house. Equal parts restaurant, bookstore and art gallery, La Residencia’s best features are the attentive staff and the large, sun-filled dining area. The menu was minimal and underconstruction when I last visited, but even the limited choices were tempting: ice cream flavors like kiwi and green apple could be found next to a Camembert cheese salad, vegan vegetable soup, a variety of fresh juices and for breakfast, pancakes – a failsafe gringo-pleaser.

Also sure to please are the delicacies of the next destination, the aptly named Obsesion Arte Chocolate. This small but cozy café near La Javeriana University is sure to satisfy even the most adventurous of chocolate lovers. A recent sampler purchased for a friend’s birthday contained fruit-filled truffles, bits of chocolate-covered orange peels, and specialty chocolates containing arqueipe, pistachio, and – unexpectedly – vodka. As its name suggests, Obsesion Arte Chocolate also has an artistic mission. Owner Maria Isabel says she “wants to promote young artists” and is hoping that their soon-to-open terrace will also showcase talented local sculptors. When I inquired about any additional draws, Maria Isabel answered “hot chocolate with liquor!” without hesitation. The final place on this “out of sight” Bogotá list is one of my favorite “cheezus,” a word that literally means “knife wound” but which I have taken to mean “diver bar.” Mi Tierra is best seen to be believed and eventually appreciated. The last time I went to Mi Tierra I spent several hours drinking draft beer and dancing with friends until I nearly knocked myself out on a cow’s hoof that was hanging above our table. The bar’s décor, replete with fake leather booths and the above-mentioned hanging animal parts, feels like the set of a deliciously tacky B-movie. Scarface meets Blue Velvet. To find Mi Tierra, go to the Plaza-Park Lourdes after dark and look for the inflated, five-foot tall rubber ram statue. Next to this distinguished marker you will see an addressless door leading to a twenty-foot long tunnel. Suspend your good judgment and follow the tunnel to the final “out of sight” destination. Just make sure to stop short of the cow’s hoof.

Bardo Teatro (above) is bohemia, the garden patio of La Cícuta (center); and chocolatier Obsesion in Chapinero (below)