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BOGOTA, COLOMBIA---The widest range of emotion rolls across the narrow ridges of Monserrate.

The 10,300-foot mountain is the highest point in Bogota, the capital of Colombia. On a clear day, you can see much of the metropolitan area, home to a staggering 7.8 million people. But things change quickly.

Skies were blue at the beginning of a late September lunch at Casa San Isidro, one of two restaurants on Monserrate. An hour later, the restaurant was framed in thick fog.

Pilgrims have been visiting Monserrate for reflection and respite for centuries. A monastery was built here in 1657. The mountain also has a 17th century church, an artisan market and gardens of cinnamon, ferns and grapes. Nearly 60 types of birds grace the skies, including doves, meadowlarks and white bellied woodstars.

It is heaven above earth.

Locals escape from the dense city to Monserrate to relax in the park or go for a jog. Every month, about 4,500 athletes scale the summit of Monserrate. The record to the top is 18 minutes. You race from lush green to shrouds of clouds.

I went to Monserrate twice.

The first was for a leisurely dinner of rabbit and a bottle of red wine at San Isidro. A pumpkin-colored cable car takes visitors to and from the mountain top for \$7. At night before departure, guests are offered a free shot of tequila before the four-minute trip. I liked that.

My girlfriend tipped the host for a window seat at the restaurant. City lights below looked like a lake mirroring twinkling stars. It was something. We were something.

The second visit was for work. I was alone. I discovered the bountiful beauty of ajiaco bogotano soup, a staple of Colombian family dinners. The soup contains chicken and three kinds of potatoes, including the native yellow potato. The Andes people are known for their diversity of potatoes. (Monserrate is part of the Andean mountain range.) The soup is served with a small ear of corn and scallions as well as rice and cilantro on the side.

Ajiaco is a hallmark item on the menu at Casa Santa Clara, the other restaurant at Monserrate. The soup was a special at San Isidro (about \$12), where my waiter

was a dead ringer for Mike Ditka.

I had more ajiaco during a warm dinner in the Chaperino district of Bogota. I visited Eduardo Menendez Miranda, who left Cuba in 1957 for Colombia. He's the 78-year-old uncle of my friend Maria Xiques, who cuts my hair in Chicago.

Dinner ended early. I had a 6:30 a.m. Friday flight out of Bogota.

About 45 minutes before departure, I was having coffee at a Juan Valdez coffee shop near my gate. My laptop lingered near my left foot like a bad thought. I looked up at my girlfriend and then looked down at the floor. The laptop was gone. By Sunday, she was gone. It was something. We were something.

In 13 years of travel writing, I'd never been the victim of theft. I'm a prudent roamer who sticks my wallet in my front pocket when riding New York's subway or walking the narrow streets of Guatemala City. I knew within a minute my stuff was gone. And while the Bogota airport police moved as slow as I do at 6 a.m., the incident hasn't deterred me from wanting to return to Colombia.

I'm intrigued by Colombia as an emerging and affordable tourist destination. I found round-trip flights between Chicago and Bogota for as little as \$325. My friend Sam from the beloved Dr. Wax Records in Hyde Park is going to Bogota later this month because of the attractive price.

In 2005, 981,459 tourists visited Colombia. The number jumped to 1,451,187 by 2008, according to the country's Administrative Department of Security.

The new tourism motto is "*Colombia: The Only Risk is Wanting to Stay.*" The campaign was created as a response to the perception of Colombia as a sketchy, drug-filled country.

Colombia is one of the closest U.S. allies in Latin America. The United States has helped fund the war against the left-wing guerrilla group FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), fueled by kidnappings and the illegal drug trade. During my recent visit, Colombian security killed Mono Jojoy, FARC's second in command.

I've been to Colombia twice and feel just as safe as I do in my Humboldt Park neighborhood (except at the airport). For me, Mexico has a more dangerous vibe than Colombia.

Someday, I will go back to Bogota. And Monserrate will be a staple of every visit, just as the Golden Gate Bridge is on each trip to San Francisco. Atop the Colombian mountain there's regional food, fine wine and gentle smiles. I found serenity, unparalleled beauty and memories of a lifetime.

You can't steal that.