

JOHNSON SCHOOL VISITS COLOMBIA

By Zachry Brown, Johnson School Class '10

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Thirty Johnson School Cornellians twirling, dancing, and gyrating to the DJ's *cumbia* rhythms—this is the story of Spring Break Colombia '09. Earlier in the afternoon, students from la Universidad de los Andes had greeted us at our hotel, where we boarded buses to make the one-hour pilgrimage to Andrés Carne de Res, a steakhouse akin to Pleasure Island, located on the outskirts of Bogotá. Aboard the bus the los Andes students distributed seemingly innocuous juice cartons of “nectar,” subsequently identified as the 29% alcohol Aguardiente (translation: firewater). Eight ounces later, the fiesta had begun. At Andrés Carne de Res, students feasted on steaks and *arepas*, dodged clowns and revelers, and embraced the cadence of Andean night. And, somewhere along the way, Vivek Pai celebrated his very merry unbirthday with a procession of ringleaders and corseted *señoritas*.



Colombia. From McKinsey directors to vice presidents, from TV stardom to white island beaches, Johnson students met a country poised for greatness after a violent past. A profound thank you goes to Professor Wes Sine, the faculty trip leader, and to Margarita Blanco, Santiago Canela, and Ed Rifenburg—Johnson Colombians who tapped their Bogotá networks to assemble an impressive cadre of private and public leaders with whom the group met.

The Colombia trip offered as much experiential learning as it provided a hiatus from academic pressures. The trip—or course, rather—was centered on mini-consulting projects in which four Johnson students were paired with two los Andes students. Following the initial client consultation, students met each afternoon on seventh floor of the los Andes business school to devise recommendations and strategies they would present their last day in Bogotá. Projects ranged from helping the Ministry of Communications develop indicators for assessing the impact of government communication initiatives to working with Agrocombustibles de Colombia to plan logistics for a new alternative-energy production facility. Brooding over the assignments, Johnson and los Andes students formed genuine friendships that many of us will carry for the rest of our lives. Each night when work was done, we followed our Colombian *compañeros* to the trendy Zona Rosa neighborhood, which offered a pulsating selection of eateries and discos. Juan Santiago Rodriguez and Oscar Arango, the spirited honchos of the los Andes posse, took great care in ensuring we remained fully hydrated with Aguardiente

throughout the nights' festivities. The los Andes students opened our eyes to real Colombia—humanizing its past, believing in its future.



The mornings were packed with fieldtrips and office visits, walking tours and receptions. Perhaps the highlight was the group's meeting with Francisco Santos, the Vice President of Colombia, who candidly discussed the challenges and opportunities facing his nation. When asked his views on Plan Colombia, the controversial U.S. program to combat narcotrafficking in Colombia, Sr. Santos teased about the indignity in dealing with Big Stick Diplomacy. Fortunately, Professor Sine later apologized on behalf of the United States and averted a major diplomatic crisis. The meeting concluded with a tour of el Palacio de Nariño, the Colombian White House.

In addition to the Santos meeting, Johnson students met with social entrepreneur Pedro Medina, creator of *"Yo creo en Colombia"*; McKinsey director Fernando Ferrari; Dr. Alejandro Figueroa, CEO of Banco de Bogotá; Beatriz Fernández, founder and CEO of Crepes & Waffles; and Dr. Miguel Largacha, CEO of Fondo de Pensiones y Cesantías Porvenir. The trip also featured a tour of the Grupo Chia flower plantation, the largest flower exporter in Colombia, and a backstage tour of Caracol T.V., Colombia's highest rated television network. At Caracol several students, including Kate Capossela, Brandon Ray, and myself, were anointed with TV

stardom by appearing on *Día a Día* (think *Today Show*) and representing The Johnson School on national Colombian television. Other students, such as Omar Rahman, enjoyed watching the novela actresses demonstrate their acting prowess on the set of *Bermúdez*. The course concluded with an alumni dinner at the Metropolitan Club.



Following Bogota, many students spent their final weekend in Cartagena, a colorful Spanish colonial city on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Cartagena, recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage site, inspires visitors with its expansive fortifications, Andalusian-style dwellings, and rich African history. Several of us chartered boats to the pristine Rosario Islands, where island women kneaded our backs with coconut oil and vendors sold trinkets and shellfish. The sky was blue, the water was clear, and the day was magical.

As noted by Professor Sine, the time is now for Colombia. What we saw was a country not marred by violence but one standing proud and in control. Only eight years ago Colombia was a virtually failed state. Now, thanks to the leadership of President Uribe, Colombia has positioned itself as a nation ripe for investment. The stereotypes have fallen, and we fell in love with the land and its people. In Colombia, there is a place in time where Johnson and los Andes students will always be together. *Somos amigos, ahora y para siempre.*