

A flame rekindled

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The chilly mist covering the Andes mountains melts away as the early morning light casts shadows over the church domes and terracotta roofs of La Candelaria. At the top of a hilly street local residents get ready for another day. A storekeeper opens the shutters of his corner shop while an elderly woman wrapped in a shawl sweeps the pavement. It feels like a remote Andean hilltop village but just a short walk away from this colonial quarter lies the bustling centre of Bogotá, the Colombian capital and seat of government.

Founded in the 16th century, La Candelaria was the original settlement around which Bogotá grew into the cosmopolitan city of 8m people that it is today. Over the centuries it has been a cultural hub and a centre of learning, with numerous universities giving it a bohemian atmosphere popular with poets, artists and fringe theatre groups. Yet for many years the area has been shunned by affluent Bogotanos, its colonial gems left to languish because of its reputation as a dangerous place.

Now, however, the district appears close to turning a corner. Municipal authorities are set to spend almost 37bn pesos (\$17m) over the next two years to capitalise on its lovely Spanish colonial architecture and existing museums and turn it into a must-see tourist destination. One of the area's first boutique hotels opened several years ago, right off the capital's main square, Plaza Bolívar. And last year the Mexican government spent more than 13bn pesos via its Cultural Economic Fund, a publishing house promoting Latin American culture and literature, to build the Gabriel García Márquez Cultural Centre, with exhibition space, an outlet of the popular Juan Valdez coffee shop (Colombia's home-grown answer to Starbucks) and what might be the capital's best-

stocked bookshop. “The area has 23 universities with over 150,000 students passing through every day, so it’s a perfect and strategic spot for us,” says César Ángel, the centre’s manager.

One can already see the tentative beginnings of a café society growing around it, with smoothie vendors and a crypt converted into a trendy eatery already trading among the antiquated print shops and stores selling religious ornaments. “I’m getting more customers coming through my door these days,” says Enrique Morales, a long-time La Candelaria resident and bakery owner. “Anything that gets people and the mayor interested in the area is good news for me.”

Not surprisingly, residential property developers are moving in too, courting a wave of new residents, particularly young couples, who see the centrally located neighbourhood as an exciting place to live, and civil servants and politicians who work in nearby government ministry offices, the congress or the Supreme Court. “Bogotanos are beginning to rediscover La Candelaria,” Ángel confirms. “It’s transformed in the last two years and, with more pedestrianised areas planned, it’s only going to get better and attract more people.”

The most important new project in the area is probably the restoration of the Continental hotel, a large art deco structure that for years has lain abandoned. The building, which still has its original marble façade, is being converted into what is billed as a new type of urban living in the city centre, offering open-plan loft apartments with impressive mountain views, a spa and gym and designer shopping and restaurants on its doorstep. “The Continental hotel is an iconic building that’s the pioneer and symbol of the rebirth of La Candelaria. It’s going to redefine the city centre,” says Mayerly Cabanzo, commercial director at Coninsa Ramon H, the company behind the project.

Nearly 80 per cent of the building’s 114 apartments, due to be completed next year, have been sold at prices from 3m-4m pesos per sq metre, which is relatively expensive when compared with equivalent properties in the city’s exclusive northern neighbourhoods. So far the buyers have been Colombians, including businessmen looking for a pied-à-terre in the centre, buy-to-let investors and middle-class families who want a home for children attending university in the area.

Next door is the site of another ambitious project, the 17-storey Torre Bicentenario, or Bicentennial Tower, though it is only in initial planning stages, with construction scheduled to start by late 2010. Dozens of apartments, hotel business suites, office spaces and a rooftop restaurant space are available for sale. “We’ve received down-payments from lawyers and doctors looking to establish their practices in the heart of the city and interest from both young and old couples thinking about moving into the area,” says Juan Alberto Paez, commercial director at CMS&GMP Associates, the developer.

Already savvy Colombians have been snapping up run-down colonial houses at prices from 240m pesos and converting them into rental investments. Their main clients are the growing number of expatriates working in the capital looking for a more authentic experience than they can get in the ubiquitous, bland, modern brick apartments found in the city’s rich northern areas.

Two years ago Jorge Diaz, a Colombian businessman, bought a two-storey, five-bedroom house with high, beamed ceilings and an inner courtyard in La Candelaria. He fixed its leaking roof, added a modern kitchen and polished the dark wooden floors and now rents it out for about 1m pesos a month. “So far I’ve had two foreign couples,” he says. “Foreigners appreciate and value living in a historic building and area.”

Sarah Holmes and her husband, Martin, a British couple teaching English in Bogotá, say they were drawn to the neighbourhood because of its relaxed, village feel. It’s the kind of place where the local shopkeeper remembers your name, still serves you from behind the counter and lets you rack up a bill that can you pay later. “We wanted to feel part of a community and living in La Candelaria you really feel like you’re in Colombia and living the Latin American experience and not just in any old place,” Sarah says. “And there’s a great mix of people and arty types living here too.”

Still, there is a long way to go. The pace of development is slow and progress patchy. The area lacks green space and adequate parking and some of the cobbled lanes in its higher parts are still grungy with litter and graffiti. By day students, street sellers and emerald dealers trading on corners still outnumber more upscale visitors and residents and by night the dimly lit streets are empty apart from the homeless, recyclers and the odd European backpacker. It’s hard to imagine middle-class families leaving gated communities with shopping malls, private schools, supermarkets and round-the-clock security guards for a neighbourhood still regarded as unsafe.

Yet the developers are undeterred. In collaboration with the mayor’s office, they are working to set up another police booth, increase the number of officers on patrol and install new security cameras. “Little by little,” Paez says. “Renovation just doesn’t happen overnight; it’s part of a process and we’re convinced, like those who have already invested here, that La Candelaria has got great potential.”

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