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## south and central america

### City of Salsa

By Mark Edward Harris

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Salsa dancing in Cali // © Mark Edward Harris

The citizens of Cali like their salsa hot and spicy. Not the tortilla chip or nacho kind, but the music-blasting, hip-gyrating, sweat-inducing sort. After a mere 24 hours in the self-proclaimed "Capital of Salsa," it's easy to see that this southwest Colombian city lives up to its name.

Cali's reputation (and Colombia's in general), due to internal drug wars and struggles with armed insurgent groups, has long hampered its tourism efforts. Despite the fact that security issues have improved dramatically since the election of Alvaro Uribe in 2002 as President and his re-election in 2006, a lingering uncertainty continues to hinder foreigners from vacationing here. In a clever move to

dissipate this daunting media cloud — without overlooking the obvious, Colombia's advertising campaign contends, "The only risk is wanting to stay."

Indeed, salsa lovers want to stay — and dance. And this they do all night long. A visit to Cali should be coordinated to include Delirio, a Cirque du Soleil-esque spectacle that happens the last Friday of every month. The show's brochure professes accurately, "In a city where the music is the language, salsa has become its expression." A look around the dance floor at any club demonstrates this fact.

A visual inventory might also reveal another popular pastime — aesthetic enhancement. Colombia has become a major destination for cosmetic surgery. Medical tourism is alive and well in this South American country. Besides breasts, faces and tummies, Colombians may also have derrieres reshaped and even augmented. Of historical note, it was a Colombianpet-based Spanish ophthalmologist, Jose Barraquer, who, around 1950 in his clinic

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sound systems, Cali's huge convention complex is capable of handling several major events at the same time with movable walls on tracks to expand or contract room sizes as needed.

While parts of the country may not be ready for prime time, seasoned travelers will find Colombia, with cities such as Cali, an exciting, dynamic and educational destination.

NOTE: Travel agents should pass along basic U.S. Department of State recommendations to their clients including the avoidance of some small towns and rural areas of Colombia that could still have safety issues.

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