

Beloved books and the city



Mann and Merlin. Thousands of used books can be found in this bookstore in the center.

PHOTOS: KAREN GREINER

light, the first thing I noticed was the bar. A bookstore with a bar – what a wonderful idea! The selection of books is limited, but well chosen. On the second floor, with still more light pouring in, I found a small collection of used books in English. The variety of these titles led me to imagine literary-minded gringos who had left behind what they couldn't carry to their next travel destination. A wooden table next to the window on Luvina's first floor was calling out to me but I had to move on to the next address on the list. I nonetheless made a note in my notebook for a future date: "Letter writing and red wine."

A professor at the Universidad Nacional had recommended the next spot, Dinosaurio on Calle 45. The first thing I noticed when I entered the store, also located on a corner, was a wall of books stacked horizontally. When I asked a staff member about that section of the store he didn't comment on the unique display choice but instead explained that the stacks in question were "the Colombia wall." "We get a lot of researchers in here. This wall is all Colombian history and current affairs." I wandered up to the second floor and was surprised and delighted to find a room of vinyl albums and a turn-table for trying them out. I wistfully passed a 70s soul classic by Lou Rawls, vowing to return for it when I had more time and a bigger bag. "What makes this bookstore unique?" I asked the same staff member. He replied: "Here you can find what you didn't know you

Karen Greiner goes on a walking tour of the city in search of English-language books.

“What is the best bookstore in Bogotá?” This sort of question yields a subjective response and I expected the answers to vary accordingly. Instead, nearly everyone I asked said “Lerners,” without hesitation. Some specified: “The Lerners of the Eje Ambiental,” to signal the bookstore branch in the city center rather than the one of comparable size at the *Parque 93*. Despite the consistent response I was receiving, I continued asking about bookstore preferences. I suspected that in Bogotá, “hidden gems” could be found, bookstores that aren't deliberately uniform as chain stores tend to be, places that have a unique character and attributes. I wanted to explore the city in search of these places. I just needed somewhere to start.

The moment I had been waiting for finally arrived when after several more “Lerners,” I suddenly got a “Merlin.” Merlin? This name was new to me. The university student who provided the

name didn't know the exact address, but he pointed me in the right direction by saying: “It's down where all the small used book stands can be found. I think it's on Calle 16 with Carrera 8.” I was not alarmed at the lack of an exact address. For me, one of the charms of living in another country is the adventure of exploring the unknown. After narrowing my search to bookstores with “character,” I was able to compile a list of addresses and set out on a tour that would take me to unknown neighborhoods all over the city.

Merlin is a city block long and three floors of used books – a book lovers paradise. This bookstore has so much space that on the third floor, where I counted nine rooms, there were two rooms that sat nearly empty: they had art on the walls but nary a book in sight. When I asked for books in English, I was led to a room with a floor-to-ceiling wall of second-hand classics. The first book I saw at eye level was J.D. Salinger's “Franny & Zooey,” one of my favorites. A quick scan of the shelf brought into view classic works of sociology by Erving Goffman and a bright orange spine I recognized: It was “Chaos” by James Gleick – not your average airport paperback. Merlin is the kind of bookstore where one can spend hours installed in a comfort-

able, window-side chair without having to fear being shooed toward the cash register by the staff. As reluctant as I was to leave the Merlin, I had other interesting bookstores to check out and thus addresses in hand, I headed to the next spot on the list. Destination: La Macarena.

Entering Luvina, a beautiful corner bookstore with a healthy dose of



Merlin
Cra. 8 No. 15-70.
Tel: 284-4008

Luvina
Cra. 5 No. 26A-06
Tel: 284-4157

El Dinosaurio
Calle 45, Carrera 22
(esquina)
Tel: 245-8802
www.libreriaeldinosaurio.es.tl/

Authors
Calle 70 No. 5-23
Tel: 217-7788
www.authors.com.co

Prólogo
Calle 96 No. 11A-46.
Tel: 757-8069
www.prologolibros.com



On two floors Authors houses a great selection of English-language books. It also hosts readings .

were looking for.” Next to him were two piles of books topped by Plato and Felix Guattari, two translated texts I would never seek out on my own but could imagine myself purchasing. I was also pleased to learn that the Dinosaur has used books in English. Accessing them is another story. The back room where they are piled is definitely a task for the intrepid reader who likes the thrill of the chase.

The next address on my list required a northward zag up to the ambitiously named “Zona G.” After stopping off for a quick caffeine pick me up, at an adjacent café I entered Authors, a well-stocked English-language bookstore. I realized upon entering that Authors was where a friend of mine had done a reading of his latest poems. As I perused the shelves on both floors I noted two features uncommon in chain bookstores in Colombia: ample seating and what one staff member called a “mini-gallery” of original paintings on the walls. The same person signaled fiction and cookbooks as their strength as a bookstore. To those strong points I would add that Authors is a place where artists and poets can showcase their talents. Their immediate proximity to good coffee is also a plus.

Another bookstore with good coffee on hand is Prólogo on the Calle 96.

What appealed to me instantly about Prólogo was the garden terrace. Just as more bookstores should serve red wine in my opinion, more bookstores, Prólogo has now taught me, should have garden terraces. Roberto, one of the bookstore’s partners, helpfully showed around the store and cited the ample collection of literature in Spanish as their strength. He then pointed out the staff recommendation table, an excellent feature I wish more bookstores would emulate. On prominent display were the collected works of Julio Cortázar, an author they had recently celebrated with a reading. “We hold regular events here,” explained Roberto. “Next week we will be discussing the Russian author Vasili Grossman.” Prólogo also has Wi-Fi and a brief but tempting menu of sandwiches, salads and pastries.

At Calle 96 my list of recommended “bookstores with character” had come to an end. I originally crossed the city in search of books and was surprised to also find vinyl albums, perfect writing tables, original art and a Russian author I could learn about over a complementary glass of wine.

My bookstore tour of Bogotá was a delight I look forward to repeating and one I recommend to fellow book lovers.



CUEROS ARQUITECTÓNICOS
POR MARCELA TRUJILLO E.U.

Tel: 622 72 55
617 03 33
Fax: 622 15 55
Cra. 16 A 79 - 95 piso 5
Bogotá - Colombia

www.cuerosarquitectonicos.com