

The best bookshops in Latin America and the Caribbean: Bogotá, Colombia



Which are the best bookshops for academics to visit in Latin America and the Caribbean? As part of their series of [Bookshop Guides](#), our colleagues at [LSE Review of Books](#) have been finding out. Here [Daniel Osorio](#) (Banco de la República) gives us a tour of the best bookshops in Bogotá, Colombia.

Bogotá, the fifth largest city in the Americas, is back on the radar of international travellers. After the dark days of the 1980s and 1990s, a remarkable urban renaissance and the consolidation of peace prospects in Colombia have persuaded foreign visitors ([5.1 million of them in 2016 alone](#)) to call in on this dynamic city, awash with cheerful people, beautiful mountain views, world-class street art and, of course, bookshops.



Possibly the most traditional bookshop in town, [Librería Lerner](#) (Avenida Jiménez 4-35), is the legacy of Salomón Lerner, a brilliant Jewish immigrant who opened the shop in 1958 on a site a few blocks from its current location. Since then, Lerner has been the place to go for readers working or studying around La Candelaria (Bogotá's old town).

It's not a giant bookshop, and once inside you are struck by such a rare sense of knowledgeable tradition that it makes you wonder whether it's better to leave the book on the shelf rather than take it away to buy: the books themselves seem to feel at home there.

A special room is exclusively dedicated to Colombian literature and books about Colombia (quite a photogenic country, judging from the many photography books there). For those of you wandering through chic northern Bogotá, a slick new branch of Lerner opened in 2016 at Carrera 11 93A-43, complete with a nice Colombian coffee shop.

In 2008, a group of enthusiasts from the Colombian and Mexican governments, together with Mexico's Fondo de Cultura Económica, turned a parking lot in La Candelaria into the massive [Gabriel García Márquez Cultural Centre](#) (Calle 11 5-60). The centre includes a coffee shop, exhibition spaces, a restaurant and the best new bookshop in the city.

The architecture of the place is a highlight: the building was designed by award-winning Colombian architect Rogelio Salmona, and the bookshop was designed to embrace its curvy, red-brick structure.

Naturally, Latin American literature in both Spanish and English features prominently here. There is a section entirely devoted to García Márquez, the Colombian-born Nobel prize winner who died in Mexico City in 2014. The graphic novel, photography, and art collections are also excellent. The bookshop hosts lectures on literature and Mexican-Colombian cultural activities throughout the year.





The city of Bogotá [was founded in 1538](#), and in five centuries a lot of old books pile up. Turning west from Plaza Santander onto Calle 16 (the narrow passageway between the Church of the Veracruz and the Church of the Third Order), you enter what used to be the old books quarter, where you could once find them all. Nowadays, it's a haunt of pirated music and DVDs, but one place manages to retain the magic of old.

[Librería Merlín](#) (Carrera 8A 15-70) is a four-storey house where old books and magazines are literally everywhere: high up on shelves, down on the floors stacked in small towers (by author!), on tables, on sofas, in boxes, in sideboards and on the stairs. Every floor, every room, has a different thematic structure.

As in days gone by, the price of books is generally scribbled in pencil inside the back cover. If you can't find it, check with owner Célico Gómez downstairs, who can also give you a hand finding that extremely rare García Márquez first edition that you've been after.

Throughout all those dark years of the past, Bogotá kept working hard, playing hard, and printing hard. Today, Colombia is the fourth largest producer of books in Latin America. The three bookshops reviewed here, as well as the many others you will discover around town, are a refined way to celebrate this tradition. Bogotanos have long enjoyed them; the world is catching up. At last.

Notes:

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