

TRAVEL

Blow it up in Bogotá: Tejo, the Colombian national sport, is explosive fun

The Colombian national sport of tejo is explosive fun.

By **Diana Lambdin Meyer** Special to the Star Tribune | MAY 19, 2023 — 7:50AM

With an adult beverage in one hand and a solid steel disk in the other, I steadied myself and took aim at the little red target, a small explosive about 20 feet away.

POW!

My friends cheered and chugged as the smell of gunpowder filled the air, chalking up another three points for our team.

Alcohol and explosives are not typically a recommended combination for a good time. Seriously, don't try this at home.

But when you visit Bogotá, or nearly any community in Colombia, it's not only socially acceptable — it's the national sport. The game is called tejo, and it reaches to the heart of Colombian culture.

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A tejo player hurls a metal disc at the target at Tejo La Embajada, a bar in Bogotá, Colombia, devoted to the sport.

Explosive fun

In this South American country of more than 51 million people, Colombians are as passionate about tejo as Americans are about football, baseball, basketball and soccer combined. A movement is underway to make it an Olympic sport, although organizers admit the association with alcohol needs to be eliminated.

Tejo is also popular in Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama, but an online search reveals fewer than a dozen tejo bars in the U.S. Those are in Florida and New Jersey, where large populations of Colombian immigrants have settled.

So what is tejo?

Pronounced TAY-ho, the game is often compared to cornhole. But the otherwise soft cloth bags filled with resin or corn are replaced with a solid steel disk that weighs about a pound. The disk is called the tejo.

Like cornhole, the backdrop is tilted at an angle, but the surface is clay rather than wood. There is no hole in which to sink your disk. Instead, there is a metal circle in the clay outlined by small triangles of paper. The folded paper triangles, called mechas, hold the smallest amount of gunpowder. When hit by a steel disk, the mecha explodes with a force similar to a cap gun.

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Hitting the center of the ring and making one of the little pieces of paper explode scores nine points. Hitting the outside edge of the circle while blowing things up is three points. Closest to the ring without blowing things up is one point.

The first team to score 21 points wins.

We had five people on our team and to be quite honest, we were having so much fun that we totally forgot to keep score. But we cheered heartily for anyone on any team who made the thing blow up. A couple of times, my disk hit the mecha, but it just fizzled like sad fireworks. We counted it as a win anyway.

After an hour or two, our hands and clothes were dirty from digging our disks out of the clay, and a few on our team were tipsy, but we were all feeling quite macho for our athletic accomplishments in another culture.

'Let's blow it up'

Tejo is thought to be about 500 years old and first played in the town of Turmequé, about 65 miles north of Bogotá in the department of Boyacá. So occasionally you'll hear tejo called turmequé. The national championships take place in Turmequé in October. Like football in the U.S., autumn is the season for professional tejo, but Colombians play the game year-round.

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Historically, it's believed that the disks were made of gold, but you can see how that might become a problem in the modern era. Gunpowder didn't become a part of the sport until the 1960s.

Our introduction to tejo came from Daniel Lozano, co-founder of Tejo La Embajada, a tejo bar in Bogotá's San Felipe arts and culture district. "La Embajada" translates to ambassador or embassy of tejo. I particularly liked the sign on the wall "Vamos a reventarla" which translates to "Let's blow it up."

Lozano admits he's an amateur tejo player and assured us that you do not have to be an expert to have fun.



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The tejo target features a clay surface and tiny explosive "mechas" containing gunpowder.



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A tejo disc.

"I love tejo's capacity to amplify happiness," he said. "You want to have a good time with your friends and as soon as someone hits the first mecha and you hear the small boom, it is arousing."

In Bogotá, most tejo courts are indoors because the climate and elevation all but guarantee a daily afternoon rain shower. Tejo is not a spectator sport. There are no stadiums or arenas dedicated to tejo and no regional teams or superstars selling jerseys, hats or other paraphernalia.

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At Tejo La Embajada, there are a few tables near the bar where you can have a snack and see the action on one of the courts through a chicken-wire fence of sorts. If you are a first-timer, Lozano and his English-speaking staff at Tejo La Embajada will provide some instruction and clarification on keeping score.

But folks, it's not that complicated. Just go and blow things up.
