

Country Briefing:

COLOMBIA

The fourth largest country in South America and the only one that possesses an Atlantic and Pacific coastline, Colombia is now firmly on the intrepid traveller's map. Anthony Lynch introduces its jewels, from the thriving metropolis of Bogotá to the colonial gem of Cartagena and the country's plantations, in its lush Andean highlands, that produce the world's best coffee.



Cartagena



Coffee plantation

Bogotá

Bogotá is an intriguing mix of the old and the very contemporary. With a population of eight million people, it is a large city, delineated by the Andean range which serves as an excellent reference point when wandering around some of the distinct barrios of the central district. Candelaria is the old part of town, and also home to some fine museums including the world famous Gold Museum and the Botero Museum which houses some of Colombia's best known artworks. Zona Rosa is the commercial centre, full of excellent shopping, vibrant bars and internationally renowned restaurants. The further north you go the more chic and affluent the neighbourhoods become, offering some excellent boutique shops and eateries. There is also a great cable car ride up to an impressive vantage point and the city has some spectacular architecture in the art deco Carmen Church and the Moorish Plaza de Toros (bullring). The central Plaza Bolivar, first defined as a square in 1539, marks the heart of the city. This is also where Simón Bolívar was received after his victory over the Spanish, and as such this should be at the start of any historical sightseeing tour.

Cartagena de Indias

Lying on the Caribbean coast, Cartagena was founded in 1533, and later developed by the Spanish as a walled city to fortify it from the persistent attacks of British, Dutch and French pirates. Today, Cartagena's old town is a colourful pleasure, the narrow streets and open plazas are perfect for exploring the city on foot and there are a number of excellent boutique hotels. The vibe is one of laid-back old-world elegance and there are plenty of romantic spots to enjoy an evening watching the sun set over the sea. Great restaurants and bars abound, the leafy plazas have lots of outdoor cafés in which to enjoy a cooling fresh limonada and there are city beaches nearby if you want to go for a swim in the Caribbean. A short trip away is the Volcan de Lodo el Totumo where you can partake in the rather unusual experience of a mud bath in a volcano followed by a wash-down in the river!



Andes

WEB PLUS

www.audleytravel.com/colombia
 For more details on tailor-made travel to Colombia



Villa de Leyva

This small Andean colonial town is only four hours from Bogotá by road. It was declared a National Monument in 1954 to preserve its amazing architecture and gorgeous cobbled streets that give way to Andean ranges of deep green, which serve to highlight the uniform white-wash of the buildings. Taking a walk from the large central plaza around the town is truly like stepping back in time. Old churches, handicraft stores, small local cafés and intimate restaurants dot the vicinity making any stroll around an absolute delight. Excursions from the town (ideally done on horseback) take you to El Infernito (Little Hell), a “Muisca” indigenous site that the Spanish unsuccessfully tried to destroy, and El Fósil, a museum that has an almost complete fossilised kronosaurus on display in the same place in which it was found in 1977. En-route from Bogotá to Villa de Leyva there is also an astounding salt cathedral hidden in a large cavernous salt mine that is well worth a visit. It includes the 14 Stations of the Cross and a large hall complete with huge salt crosses. This labour of love by architect Jose Maria Gonzalez cost US\$8 million and required up to ten sculptors to create such a majestic and peaceful place of worship.

Zona Cafetera

Located in the lush verdant central zone of the country (around Manizales, Armenia and Pereira), the green rolling hills are home to the best coffee beans in the world. It is possible to stay amongst the fertile, terraced slopes at a family-run finca and do a tour of the coffee plantations, seeing the process from seed to cup! The local hospitality is such that you will want to spend much of your time here enjoying the finest of Colombia and relaxing in this laid-back region. If you want to be more active you can visit the Los Nevados National Park and trek up to 5,100 metres above sea level to view the mountain-top glacier on the Del Ruiz summit.

Colombia has much to offer the discerning explorer. The Amazonian area of the south enables you to spend the morning in Colombia, lunchtime in Brazil and the evening in Peru and the magnificent Tayrona National Park on the Caribbean coast is a must for rugged, deserted beaches. For the more active, Colombia’s three mountain ranges provide superb walking opportunities.

Anthony Lynch
 Colombia Specialist

FACT FILE

A two week trip to Colombia including visits to Cartagena, Bogotá, Villa de Leyva and the Zona Cafetera would cost approximately £3,000 per person. Please contact Anthony for further details on 01993 838 617.

