

# CAPTIVATING *Colombia*

**Eugene Yiga** visits friends in Colombia and realises the locals are correct in saying that the only risk to visiting Colombia is wanting to stay!

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(Norma Gómez, Martin St-Amant, Pedro Szekely)



**T**he initial reaction to my news is one of disbelief. "Why, of all places in South America, are you going there?" many ask. "Wouldn't you rather go to Argentina or Brazil?"

But I have a good reason for being in Colombia. This is where one of my best friends from university days is getting married. This is also where I, along with 2.5 million tourists in 2014, will discover one of the continent's hidden gems.

The journey isn't easy. Flying from Cape Town requires an overnight stay in Buenos Aires (where I lose my credit card on the first day of travelling!) and an airport layover in Panama. But here I am at last.

After Christmas Eve dinner at our beachside hotel, my friends and I explore

(including precious metals and slaves), pirates held the city hostage in 1586 and ransomed it for about \$200 million in today's terms.

"Colombia was already investing quite a lot to protect Cartagena after severe plundering two decades before this," I translate from the guide, my online Spanish lessons coming in handy. "But they continued paying military engineers for construction that took over 200 years to complete. That's how they created the 11 km wall surrounding the old city and Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas, a castle named after the Spanish king."

I explain that it was never penetrated, despite many attempts. "The city also became a UNESCO World Heritage site



morning. In true South African style, we plan to spend the day on the beach. "You can find some of the best beaches on Las Islas del Rosario," I point out. "It's an archipelago of 27 small islands. They even declared it a national park."

It's easy to get a taxi in Cartagena, but planner that I am, I insist that the hotel calls one ahead of time. I also insist that the concierge tells the driver where we're going and negotiates the fee upfront. "In case the meter isn't working," I explain to my friends. "Or if he wants to charge us the 'gringo' price."

We get to the harbour and it hits me: this place is hot. Never mind that it's 9am; the temperature is over 30°C and humidity is around 90%. "I guess we're not in Bogotá anymore," I say. "I read that the highest

I was in Armenia, a city in the lush Cocora Valley, where I spent a few days before reuniting with my friends. While they were on an Amazon Jungle trek, I had been dressing up as a coffee farmer – machete and all – to pick beans on a working farm ...

But these happy recollections of cooler climes don't last long. Back in Cartagena, the street vendors are yelling "¡Agua! ¡Agua!" I'm reluctant to buy a bottle because I know they'll insist that I also buy sunscreen and a hat. But the weather gives me no choice. "¡Gracias, señor!" a jovial man says as I hand over my cash. His smile must be the reason the Happy Planet Index ranked Colombia third in 2014.

At last, our boat departs from the



the Colombian city of Cartagena by night. "The best way is in a chiva," I say, referring to the ever-present and ever-colourful open-air party buses. "I went on one earlier today before you guys got here. So much fun!"

It turns out we have different definitions of fun. I find it fascinating to learn about the history of Cartagena, founded in 1533 and named after the city in Spain that most of the colonising sailors called home. I find it equally fascinating to learn that when the region became a main area for trade

in 1984," I add. "So that should keep it safe from attack!"

I don't know if anyone's listening. It's hard to hear myself over the sound of thumping reggaeton beats. "This stuff is like tequila," one of my friends says as he takes another shot of aguardiente, an anise-flavoured liqueur derived from sugarcane. "But more bearable." I surrender at last and have some "fire-water" too.

After a long night of celebrating, we somehow still have energy the next

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** Colombia is a colourful country full of friendly people

**ABOVE LEFT:** Cumbia, a music genre popular throughout Latin America, originated in Colombia's Caribbean coast

**ABOVE RIGHT:** With so many friendly faces, it's easy to see why Colombia is ranked third on the Happy Planet Index!

**TOP:** Colourful buildings and cobblestone streets are common in Cartagena, a modern city that retains the charm of the old world

**ABOVE LEFT:** Sunset over Cartagena Harbor as seen from La Popa

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Teatro Heredia was constructed in 1906

temperature there averages about 20°C all year."

Ah, Bogotá: bustling at 8500 ft above sea level (or 2600 m closer to the stars, as the locals like to say). I close my eyes and think of the time we spent there earlier in the trip. I see us atop Monserrate, a mountain east of the city that came with spectacular panoramic views and a chilly Andean breeze that took my breath away (quite literally, given how thin the air was).

The memories change. Before Bogotá,

harbour, on our way to the beaches of the Las Islas del Rosario archipelago. It's a choppy ride to the island and one that makes me glad to stand on solid ground. "We chose the perfect time to be in the country," I muse. "December to March. Good planning. It's when a lot of the cultural festivals and religious holidays happen, so good thing we booked early."

I still don't know if anyone's listening. And so I might as well surrender again. I pack away the guidebook, join my friends



ABOVE: Blue water and white sand equals bliss at the beach!

for a swim, and later put my feet up to relax for a lazy afternoon in the shade.

Never mind the naysayers. The locals are right: the only risk to visiting Colombia is wanting to stay!

### Other activities

#### Exploring the culture of Bogotá

In exploring the city, our first stop was to Plaza de Bolívar, the city's main square and pounding political heart. It's here that we admired buildings like the Supreme Court of Justice, the Principal Mayor's Office, and Casa de Nariño (the president's home). In nearby La Candelaria, the historic and cultural centre of the city, there are also universities, museums, and quaint houses preserved in the original colonial architecture from 17th-century Spanish rule.

As expected in a country in which 90% of the population is Roman Catholic, historic churches are sprinkled throughout Bogotá. The oldest of these is the towering Church of San Francisco. It was built 400 years ago and is still adorned with an altarpiece that is the city's largest and

## Some of the best beaches are on Las Islas del Rosario, an archipelago of 27 small islands which has been declared a national park

most complex.

But the honour of most unusual church would have to go to the Catedral de Sal de Zipaquirá (Salt Cathedral of Zipaquirá), situated 49 km north of Bogotá. Initially built so that the salt miners could pray for protection in their work some 200 m underground, the church now accommodates up to 3 000 visitors for Sunday services. The serene marble sculptures and the delicate details of hand-carved halite rock explain why it's often called a "Jewel of Modern Architecture".

Speaking of jewels, with some of the finest precious stones in the world, no visit to Colombia would be complete without a tour of El Museo del Oro (Gold Museum), one of almost 60 museums in the city. Over

35 000 pieces of gold and 30 000 other archaeological finds make it the world's largest museum of its kind. Even non-lovers of history will be fascinated by tales of El Dorado, the city of gold that fuelled Spanish conquest and colonisation in the early 1500s, even though it proved to be nothing more than a myth.

#### Tasting coffee in Armenia

A 60-minute flight west of Bogotá took us to Armenia, the heart of the coffee region. Even after the January 1999 earthquake killed over 1000 people and destroyed almost one-third of the city centre, Armenia has rebuilt itself and proven why it's often referred to as Ciudad Milagro (Miracle City). Besides hiking or horseback riding through the lush Cocora Valley, home of the national



TOP: Statue of Simón Bolívar, widely regarded as one of the most influential figures during the Latin American Wars of Independence of the early nineteenth century

ABOVE: Teatro Herida was inaugurated in 1911 for the first centenary of the Independence of Cartagena

ABOVE RIGHT: The Castle of San Felipe de Barajas

wax palm tree, we got a chance to interact with artists in the bohemian markets of Salento and to sample some delicious river trout.

If you aren't up for a visit to a working coffee farm where you can walk through fields and pick beans with the locals, the brewing process is all explained at Parque Nacional del Café (National Coffee Park). This giant funfair includes an interactive Museum of Coffee and an unforgettable theatrical production that takes you on a memorable journey through the region's history and

trip is suitable for families with older teenagers, or we could put a private group on a similar itinerary."

So if you're looking for an adventure full of rhythm, music, colour and life, then jump on board this trip and experience the best that Colombia has to offer. With historic Cartagena, the Caribbean coastline, jungles and rainforest, everyone in the family will find something to love!

**Gauchaca Region:** A major tourist destination for beach-loving Colombians, Santa Marta is also the jumping-off point

most glorious beaches.

**Villa de Leyva:** Settle in among the quaint whitewashed villas and expansive cobblestone plazas of Colombia's best preserved colonial city. Don't miss out on a visit to the traditional farmers market for the chance to snack on some local delicacies. ●

### Getting there

A number of airlines fly from South Africa to the major cities in Colombia, including: South African Airways, United Airlines, Lufthansa, British Airways, KLM Taca International Airlines

Air fares start at approximately R16 500 per person. South African passport holders travelling for recreational purposes do not need a visa to visit Colombia for up to 90 days. Business travellers do need a visa, and remember that children travelling with parents will need their full, unabridged birth certificate. There is a South African Honorary Consulate in Bogotá in case of emergencies.

## December to March is the best time to experience extravagant cultural festivals and religious holidays

culture through song and dance.

#### Experience South America's best kept secret on the Colonial Colombia tour

"We know families tend to prefer trips of less than two weeks on the ground," says Ben Roseveare, the Intrepid Group's Marketing Director for Europe, Middle East, and Africa. "Our 9-day Colonial Colombia

for a range of adventure activities, from exploring Caribbean reefs to jungle trekking. **Tayrona National Park:** Sample a slice of seaside bliss far removed from the tourist crowds in the stunning Tayrona National Park. Hike through the dramatic mountain scenery, verdant rainforest, and jagged rocks for a swim at some of Colombia's