

# Getting Started

Colombia is a surprisingly easy place to get your travel needs squared away. Soon after stepping off the plane you'll have changed money, booked into your hotel, checked your email and downed a *tinto* (coffee). You may also start wondering about the war going on somewhere in the country. Bogotans would rather ignore this fact, but it's a good idea to ask about the security situation in other parts of the country, as it does change.

Probably the most important thing you can do before coming to Colombia, besides reading as much as you can about the country, is to brush up on your *español*. There are very few English speakers in Colombia. Even people important to you – hotel receptionists, tour guides and travel agents – will probably only speak Spanish. Bring a phrasebook and memorize a few polite greetings and enough of the basics to find a hotel.

Traveling outside the main cities can be as easy or as hard as you want it to be. There is a range of accommodations suiting everyone, from cheapskates to high rollers. Food is good, plentiful and cheap. Transportation is reasonably efficient, main roads are well maintained and serviced frequently by air-conditioned buses. There's also a range of activities for every age and taste, from candle-lit dinners in romantic Cartagena to hard-core alpine trekking in Parque Nacional El Cocuy. Flexibility is crucial, but making hotel reservations is also a good idea, especially for the first couple of nights after you arrive. Always check the security situation if you plan to visit very remote regions, which are likely to be sensitive military or rebel-held areas.

## WHEN TO GO

The most pleasant time to visit Colombia is in the dry season, between December and March or in July and August. This is particularly true if you plan on hiking. The dry season also gives visitors a better chance to savor local cultural events because many festivals and fiestas take place during these periods (see p227).

Apart from the weather, you may also consider Colombian holiday periods. There are basically three high seasons when Colombians rush to travel: from late December to mid-January, during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week; March or April), and from mid-June to mid-July. Also take note

See Climate Charts (p222) for more information about the weather.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- maximum-protection sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat
- a light rain jacket and sweater/fleece jacket for Bogotá and the mountains
- a decent change of clothing and a pair of nice shoes for clubbing
- a mask, snorkel and swimsuit for beach trips
- some paperback books in English (poor availability in Colombia)
- photocopying all your important documents, including credit cards, traveler's checks and your passport (take a set with you and leave a set at home)
- labeling your valuables (camera, MP3 player, mobile phone) in case something goes astray
- checking your passport for validity (make sure it's good for at least six more months)
- a small flashlight (for Tierradentro tombs and dodgy electricity supplies)

of three-day weekends, which send a rush of urban dwellers to rural getaways (eg Villa de Leyva), and regional celebrations (eg Baranquilla de Carnaval). During these periods transport gets more crowded, hotels tend to fill up faster and prices in holiday destinations may rise. If you travel at this time, you will have to plan your trip a little ahead and do more legwork to find a place to stay, but you'll also enjoy more contact with traveling Colombians, who will be in a relaxed, holiday spirit.

### IS IT SAFE?

At the time of research, security in Colombia was improving, and all the areas mentioned in this guide were being frequented by travelers. If you didn't know anything about Colombia and just popped in for a tour of the main sights, you would have no idea that a war was being fought elsewhere in the country, which is mostly an indication of the level of security in the cities and on the main roads. That said, the situation is still unpredictable and it's best to confirm the level of security in all areas you wish to visit. Your first point of contact is the Internet, where you can search through recent news results related to the areas you plan to visit. (Search for specific cities and departments rather than just 'Colombia'.) Other good sources of information are tour agencies, guesthouses, the Thorn Tree page on **LonelyPlanet.com** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) and your country's government travel advisory (though these advisories can often be overly cautious).

Once on the ground, continue to ask around for the latest security information. However, bear in mind that locals are likely to be ill informed and their information based on rumors and stories about places they themselves have never been. The fighting with Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) gets relatively little media attention, so a lot of information that locals have might be based on incidents that occurred 10 or more years ago. In this case, travelers and guesthouse owners will probably have the freshest information.

For specific tips on how to travel safely in Colombia, see p223. For dedicated regional safety information see the 'Traveling Safely in...' boxed texts in the Bogotá (p51), North of Bogotá (p83), Caribbean Coast (p108), San Andrés & Providencia (p145), Northwest Colombia (p157), Southwest Colombia (p188) and Amazon Basin (p210) chapters.

### COSTS & MONEY

Colombia is a reasonably cheap country to travel in, provided you are traveling overland. Backpackers should be prepared to shell out US\$15 to US\$25 per day on average. If you want a more comfy trip, with midrange hotels, some better restaurants and a flight from time to time, you'll average somewhere between US\$25 and US\$45 daily. Some resort areas, especially along the Caribbean coast, have all-inclusive resort packages that cost US\$100 to US\$150 for two people, a good value anywhere. You can save money by going to free days at museums (often the last Sunday of the month), or using a student card when buying plane and museum tickets. Also remember that bus ticket fares are always negotiable. A little haggling can usually knock off around 20% to 30% of the cost, though you may need to shop around at the various bus company windows.

### TRAVEL LITERATURE

Most recent literature on Colombia consists of journalists' accounts of the Drug War, its causes and effects. One of the most controversial books on the subject, *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia* (2005) by Doug

### TOP TENS

#### CDs

Colombia is rich in music traditions and you'll hear plenty of music at all hours, blaring from cars, nightclubs or the juice stand outside your hotel. Prepare yourself by packing a few of the following CDs onto your MP3 player before hitting the road.

- *El Rock de Mi Pueblo*, Carlos Vives
- *Fijacion Oral*, Shakira
- *Los Más Grandes Éxitos de El Maestro*, Lucho Bermúdez
- *Putumayo Presents*, various artists
- *El Otro Lado de Mi*, Soraya
- *Romántico*, Carlos Vives
- *De Nuevo Con Mi Gente*, Diomedes Díaz
- *Latinismo Dance: Cumbias*, Linda Vera
- *Laundry Service*, Shakira
- *Un Día Normal*, Juanes

#### Chill-Out Places

Long bus rides, bad hotels and crowded streets can grind down your morale; once in a while you'll just want to kick back in a hammock and stare at the clouds. The following places are the best spots to snooze.

- Aguadulce (p153), Providencia
- Villa de Leyva (p86), Boyacá
- Taganga (p113), Magdalena
- Playa Blanca (p139), Bolívar
- Arrecifes (p115), Parque Nacional Tayrona
- El Rodadero (p111), Santa Marta
- San Luis (p148), San Andrés
- Río Claro (p162), Antioquia
- Ecotermales San Vicente (p180), Zona Cafetera
- Puerto Nariño (p216), Amazon Basin

#### Festivals & Events

Colombia can party with the best of 'em, and there is no shortage of festivals and events to get your party juices flowing. There are some 200 festivals annually; the following are the best of the best.

- Carnaval de Barranquilla (Carnival at Barranquilla; p119), Barranquilla, February or March
- Carnaval de Blancos y Negros (Carnival of Black and White; p204), Pasto, January
- Festival de la Leyenda Vallenata (p135), Valledupar, April
- Semana Santa (Holy Week; p142), Mompós, March or April
- Semana Santa (Holy Week; p198), Popayán, March or April
- Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro (Latin American Theater Festival; p63), Bogotá, March or April
- Feria de las Flores (Festival of Flowers; p163), Medellín, August
- Festival Latinoamericano de Teatro (Latin American Theater Festival; p173), Manizales, September
- Reinado Nacional de Belleza (National Beauty Pageant; p132), Cartagena, November
- Feria de Cali (Festival of Cali; p191), Cali, December to January

Stokes, is a critical account of US policy in Colombia that gets its message across by using declassified documents. The reading is a little dry and academic, and the tone is unmistakably anti-American (which may appeal to some travelers in this day and age).

Along similar lines, but with a more personal angle, is *More Terrible Than Death: Violence, Drugs and America's War in Colombia* (2003) by Robin Kirk. Kirk spent a dozen years in Colombia working for Human

### HOW MUCH?

M&Ms: US\$1

Internet café (per hr):  
US\$0.80-2

Toilet paper roll: US\$0.40

Laundry (per kg):  
US\$1.60

Postage for a letter to  
USA: US\$2

See also Lonely Planet  
Index, inside front cover

**‘Pablo Escobar is still a very popular topic’**

Rights Watch and recounts some of the most brutal incidents of terror she witnessed during her field work. She does well in summarizing Colombia’s woes over the past 50 years and the role that the USA has played in propagating the violence.

A less-biased account can be found in Steven Dudley’s book *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia* (2004). Dudley, a reporter for National Public Radio in the USA, weaves many personal stories into the larger theme of death and war. It’s well written and one of the most up-to-date accounts of the war with FARC.

Although Colombians appear to be less than interested in reading about FARC, Pablo Escobar is still a very popular topic and *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World’s Greatest Outlaw* (2002) by Mark Bowden is a hot seller.

For a more light-hearted account of traveling in Colombia, try Charles Nicholl’s book *The Fruit Palace* (1998), a very funny diary of his wanderings through the country in the 1980s. It’s dated, but the personal stories are as relevant today as when they were written.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Colombia in Cyberspace** ([www.javier.net/colombia](http://www.javier.net/colombia)) A website filled with pictures and background information, plus a music page with audio files.

**El Tiempo** (<http://eltiempo.terra.com.co>) Spanish-language readers will want to browse the website of Colombia’s leading newspaper.

**Locombia** ([www.locombia.com](http://www.locombia.com)) News, comments and opinion on all things Colombian.

**LonelyPlanet.com** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Lonely Planet’s website includes a dedicated Colombia page with photos, travel tips and the ever useful Thorn Tree online forum.

**Poor But Happy** ([www.poorbuthappy.com/colombia](http://www.poorbuthappy.com/colombia)) An online forum used mostly by expats living in Colombia, the site is a good place to go for practical information.

**Third World Traveller** ([www.thirdworldtraveler.com](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com)) This good alternative source of news has a bank of articles about Colombia, mostly dealing with the American policy.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### ESSENTIAL COLOMBIA

Five to Eight Weeks / Bogotá to Bogotá

This itinerary takes in the major sites of the country.

From Bogotá, travel north to **Villa de Leyva** (p86). Explore for two days, then visit **San Gil** (p93) for some hiking and rafting, and make time for historic **Barichara** (p94). Passing through **Bucaramanga** (p97) and **Girón** (p99), continue to quaint **Mompós** (p140). Next is **Cartagena** (p125), the jewel of the Caribbean. You'll need at least a week to explore Cartagena, **Santa Marta** (p108) and other attractions on the Caribbean coast. It's also possible to take a side trip to the islands of **San Andrés** (p145) and **Providencia** (p151).

From the Caribbean, bus your way southwest to **Medellín** (p157), with a side trip to **Santa Fe de Antioquia** (p169). Next jump to **Cali** (p187), visiting regional highlights such as the spectacular 'coffee country' (**Zona Cafetera**, p171).

From Cali, travel south again to **Popayán** (p195), **Tierradentro** (p202) and **San Agustín** (p199). Return to Bogotá by plane or bus, or continue south to Quito in Ecuador. Do the route in reverse if you're heading for Venezuela.



This loop includes Colombia's best colonial cities, beaches and pre-Columbian sites. It encompasses a big area so be prepared for a few long-distance bus trips. You'll need five weeks to travel this route properly, more if you plan on trekking or diving.

**SUN, SAND & SEA**

**Two to Four Weeks / Santa Marta to Bogotá**

There's a lot to see and do along the Caribbean coast, which means less arduous travel. Start by flying to **Santa Marta** (p108), which makes a fine base to explore the surrounding area. If you want to do the **Ciudad Perdida trek** (p116) begin making inquiries early, as trips don't run all the time, or they may be booked out.

Once you've sorted out your dates for the trek, take some side trips to **Taganga** (p113), **Parque Nacional Tayrona** (p114) and **El Rodadero** (p111). You may also want to do a dive course – Taganga is one of the cheapest places around to get certified; it's well worth blocking out a week for this. Parque Nacional Tayrona is another place that can take time to see. Plan for at least two days there (although some travelers stay a week or even more).

If it's Carnival time, make sure you have room in your itinerary for a trip to **Barranquilla** (p117), otherwise, bypass the city and head straight for **Cartagena** (p125). You'll need at least two days to explore its glorious backstreets, plus at least one full day for a trip around the wonderful **Islas del Rosario** (p137).

With more time on your hands, spend extra days in **Playa Blanca** (p139), **Volcán de Lodo El Totumo** (p139) or **Mompós** (p140).

From Cartagena, fly back to Bogotá. If you have more time for rest and relaxation, you could travel on to **San Andrés** (p145) and **Providencia** (p151), or join a sailboat tour to Panama via Archipiélago de San Blas.

This itinerary is ideal for travelers who want to laze on the beach and take in a bit of Colombian culture. You could easily see the main sites in two weeks, but you'll need more time if you plan to scuba dive or tackle some treks.



**ROADS LESS TRAVELED**

**CALI TO ECUADOR**

**Two Weeks / Cali to Ipiales**

Off-the-beaten-track travel in Colombia can mean rougher roads and possible contact with risky areas held by paramilitaries or Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). The following areas are regarded as 'safe' destinations, but it's still a good idea to ferret out the latest travel warnings wherever you go.

Start with a flight to Cali, the jumping-off point for **Isla Gorgona** (p194), a remote, lush island off the Pacific coast, definitely worth visiting, especially if you time it with the whale migration (November). Back on the mainland, make a trip to **San Cipriano** (p194), deep in the tropical forest and only accessible by a unique hand-propelled rail cart. After visiting **Popayán** (p195), spend a few days in **Silvia** (p199) and the Guambiano Indian region. The unique, remote and little-visited pre-Columbian site of **Tierradentro** (p202) is also in the region. The famed **San Agustín** (p199) archeological site, with its monumental statues, is better known but receives few visitors because of past guerrilla presence in the area. Keep your ear to the ground and be ready to alter your travel plans if fighting breaks out.

From Popayán, continue south towards **Pasto** (p204), where you can organize a trip up the still-active **Volcán Galeras** (p206). If you're heading towards Ecuador, visit **Santuario de Las Lajas** (p208), an architectural wonder hovering above the Río Guaitara, just a few kilometers from the border town of **Ipiales** (p206).

Southwest Colombia provides a safe cushion between you and the more touristy areas around central Colombia and the Caribbean coast. It's a culturally and geographically rich area and is still home to large numbers of indigenous peoples, mainly the Paez and Guambianos.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### NATIONAL PARKS & PROTECTED AREAS

Colombia has 34 national parks spread across the country, some easily accessible and others so remote that their number of yearly visitors can be counted on two hands.

One of the most frequently visited parks, **Parque Nacional Tayrona** (p114), is popular among aspiring beach bums who have a wide selection of hammocks in which to swing. Also well known on the Caribbean coast is the **Parque Nacional Corales del Rosario** (p137), just off the coast of Cartagena. Most visitors base themselves at Playa Blanca and take boat trips out to the cays and islets.



Travelers seeking fresh alpine air and glacier-wrapped peaks would do well to head for **Parque Nacional El Cocuy** (p92). Considered off-limits for security reasons a few years ago, the park is now safe for trekkers. Closer to Bogotá, the **Parque Nacional Santuario de Iguaque** (p91) is lower in elevation, but still offers some fine hikes to a group of alpine lakes. **Laguna de Guatavita** (p80) can be reached from the capital in a day trip and offers both beauty and spiritual significance.

Budding volcanologists will want to visit the **Parque Nacional Los Nevados** (p174), located southeast of Manizales. It contains several volcanic cones, some of them active. If the jungle

is more your thing, it's hard to beat the **Parque Nacional Amacayacu** (p216) in Colombia's Amazon Basin.

### HERITAGE SITES & ARCHITECTURAL DELIGHTS

Fans of Spanish colonial architecture may well overdose on the wealth on offer in Colombia. Travel anywhere and you'll find perfectly preserved town squares, churches and mansions.

**Bogotá** (p60) has the most stunning collection of churches, including the monumental Catedral Primada and the incredibly elaborate Iglesia de San Francisco. In terms of overall beauty, it's hard to beat the walled center of **Cartagena** (p125). It's one of the best preserved historical centers, a Unesco World Heritage site and is particularly noted for its captivating balconies. Another Unesco site, the town of **Mompós** (p140) has a particular style of architecture all its own – *arquitectura momposina*. Other protected towns in northern Colombia include **Villa de Leyva** (p86), **Barichara** (p94) and **Girón** (p99).



All contain fine central squares bordered by whitewashed buildings and a church. In particular, Barichara's church, when illuminated at night, is a sight to behold. The oldest town in western Colombia is **Santa Fe de Antioquia** (p169), a quaint and tidy town with narrow streets and

four churches. Finally, don't miss **Popayán** (p195), whose architectural wonders include the spectacular Iglesia de San Francisco.

## Snapshot

You can love him or hate him, but you can't deny that Colombia's President Álvaro Uribe has created a new environment in Colombia at the start of the 21st century. The statistics tell half the tale. Since Uribe took office in August 2002, homicides are down by more than 40%, acts of terror by 66% and extortive kidnappings by 79%. These are stunning numbers, and they are just a short list of figures that the government hopes will alter Colombia's long-suffering image problem.

Indeed, Colombia does appear to be turning a corner and the proof is in the pudding – the job market is widening and international investment was up by 70% in 2004. For mainstream Colombians living in big cities such as Bogotá, all this means a freer existence where going outside after dark is no longer a high-risk activity.

Equally important, Uribe has sent the rebel Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) running deeper into the jungles. The war continues but the FARC retreat has meant improved security along main roads and population centers.

Uribe has also struck a blow to the illicit drug trade and managed to wrest guns from some paramilitary groups, with hundreds of the right-wing groups laying down their arms in exchange for immunity against prosecution.

While all this may sound wonderful, it is only half the story. Colombia's woes resemble a B-movie monster – cut off one of its heads and a new one grows back. So while the Cali and Medellín drug cartels have been dismantled, and the guerrillas are on the run, the government now finds itself embroiled in new battles.

The biggest threat must be growing paramilitary strength, which has woven a tight web over many urban areas, including Ciudad Bolívar in southern Bogotá. Paramilitaries have infiltrated this district of two million people, organized their own chain of command and carried out a brutal campaign of social cleansing – killing or disappearing thousands of people whose only 'crime' was poverty. Human-rights abuses that rival the Balkans for their barbarity are being carried out with impunity.

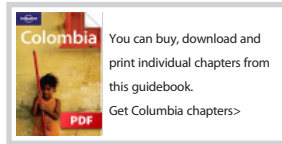
In rural areas it is also the paramilitaries who have filled in the void of cocaine production vacated by retreating rebels. The spraying of crops has only forced farmers to look for new land, including national parks where the land (and their crops) is protected.

As for FARC, its retreat has been hailed by the government as progress in its own 'war on terror,' but the 40-year fight still has no foreseeable end. Large swaths of the country still suffer the horror of war and unspeakable violence; in 2005 the southern province of Putumayo saw a surge in guerrilla attacks that forced tens of thousands to flee to Ecuador. Colombia now has three million internally displaced people, second in the world after Sudan.

Uribe, an ultranationalistic right-winger and ally to the Bush regime, now has the chance to upgrade his controversial, hardline campaigns. In October 2005, Colombia's Constitutional Court ruled that presidents could seek a second term in office, allowing Uribe to stand for reelection in 2006.

### FAST FACTS

Population: 43 million  
 GDP growth: 4.5% per capita (US\$6600 in 2004)  
 Leading sectors for foreign investment: mining (US\$488 million) and oil (US\$188 million)  
 Unemployment rate: 11.8%  
 'Plan Colombia' costs American taxpayers US\$740 million per year  
 During Uribe's first three years in office, over 450,000 hectares of coca crops were sprayed and 5000 drug labs destroyed  
 Oil represents 20% of Colombian exports



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