

San Andrés & Providencia



The archipelago of San Andrés & Providencia is a case study in tropical multiple personality disorder. Geographically near Nicaragua, historically tied to England and politically part of Colombia, these pristine islands may lack an untainted pedigree, but their diverse history and picture-postcard setting are exactly what make them Colombia's most interesting paradise.

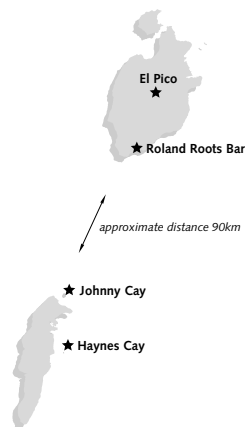
Here you'll find isolated beaches, unspoiled coral reefs and an alluring island flavor that on the surface seem conspicuously Colombian, but in time, the 300-year-old English/Creole-speaking Raizal culture, often pushed aside by Spanish influence, offers an even deeper cultural experience. Caught between two battling cultures, these islands offer a unique experience in South America.

San Andrés, the largest island in the archipelago and its commercial and administrative hub, offers the most tourism infrastructure and has been attracting tourists and mainland Colombians for several decades, most of whom flock to the island on duty-free shopping sprees bookended by a little sun and sand. The crowds, however, are not difficult to escape, and you could easily take up a Robinson Crusoe lifestyle on any of the isolated beaches.

Providencia, by contrast, offers the same turquoise sea, extensive coral reefs and rich underwater life that has made the entire archipelago a paradise for snorkelers and scuba divers – the second-largest barrier reef in the northern hemisphere is here – but none of the commercialism or crowds of its bigger brother to the south. Much of Providencia's colonial heritage is still alive and thriving in small hamlets of multihued wooden homes peppered about the island.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Groove to reggae rhythms over Old Milwaukee at **Roland Roots Bar** (p202)
- Dig your toes into the pristine sands of beautiful **Johnny Cay** (p193), part of the four-hectare Johnny Cay Natural Regional Park
- Trek through iguana country to **El Pico** (p200) for stunning views of Providencia
- Go into the blue on a **scuba dive** (p194) or in a **semisubmarino** (p194) and gawk at Colombia's prettiest coral reefs and marine life
- Swim with the sting rays at sunset off **Haynes Cay** (p194)



History

The first inhabitants of the islands were probably a group of Dutch colonists who made their home on Providencia toward the end of the 16th century. In 1631 they were expelled by the English who effectively colonized the islands, home to the Raizal people, an Afro-Caribbean ethnic group. The English brought in black slaves from Jamaica and began to cultivate tobacco and cotton. The Spanish, irate at the English success on the islands, unsuccessfully invaded the archipelago in 1635.

Because of their strategic location, the islands provided convenient shelter for pirates waiting to sack Spanish galleons bound for home laden with gold and riches. In 1670 legendary pirate Henry Morgan established his base on Providencia and from here he raided both Panama and Santa Marta. Legend has it that his treasures are still hidden on the island.

Shortly after Colombia achieved independence, it laid claim to the islands, although Nicaragua fiercely disputed its right to do so. The issue was eventually settled by a treaty in 1928, which confirmed Colombia's sovereignty over the islands.

Geographic isolation kept the islands' unique English character virtually intact, though things started to change when a flight service connected the islands to the mainland in the 1950s. In 1954 a government plan to make the islands a duty-free zone brought with it tourism, commerce, entrepreneurs and Colombian culture, which slowly began to upend the 300-year-old Raizal identity, pushing it aside in favor of big tourism bucks. Unprepared and unqualified to make a living on tourism, locals were caught off guard.

In the early 1990s, the local government introduced restrictions on migration to the islands in order to slow the rampant influx of people and preserve the local culture and identity. Yet, Colombian mainlanders account for two-thirds of San Andrés' population. English and Spanish have been the two official languages since 1991.

The tourist and commercial boom caused San Andrés to lose much of its original character; it's now a blend of Latin American and English-Caribbean culture, though there is a movement to restore Raizal roots in San Andrés. Providencia has preserved much more of its colonial culture, even though tourism is making inroads into the local lifestyle.

Although the political status of San Andrés and Providencia is unlikely to change, Nicaragua continues to press the issue of its sovereignty over the islands at the International Court of Justice in the Hague. The court reaffirmed Colombia's sovereignty over the main islands in 2007, but said it would rule on the maritime boundary and secondary islands at a later date undetermined at the time of research.

Climate

The climate is typical of the Caribbean islands, with average temperatures of 26°C to 29°C, but humidity can be uncomfortably high. The rainy period is September to December and (a less wet period) May to June. Tourist season peaks are from late December to late January, during the Easter week and from mid-June to mid-July.

Parks & Reserves

In 2005 the Seaflower Marine Protected Area (MPA) was established to strengthen protection of key ecosystems in the marine area of the Seaflower Biosphere Reserve. The MPA includes 65,000 sq km of crystalline waters that are zoned for a variety of uses ranging from complete protection to controlled fishing. The objective of this multiple-use MPA is to foster sustainable development in the archipelago by strengthening conservation of marine biodiversity and also promoting sustainable use. The Seaflower is Colombia's first MPA and is the largest in the Caribbean.

There are one national and three regional parks in the archipelago. These are Parque Nacional Old Providence McBean Lagoon (p198); Johnny Cay Natural Regional Park (p193), a small cay in San Andrés Bay that is the archipelago's most visited tourist site; Old Point Mangrove Regional Park, the largest mangrove forest in San Andrés; and El Pico Natural Regional Park (p200) in Providencia, the archipelago's highest point, known locally as the Peak.

SAN ANDRÉS

 8 / pop 66,000

Just 150km east of Nicaragua and some 800km northwest of Colombia, the seahorse-shaped island of San Andrés counts 27 sq km of cultural tug-of-war as both its asset and its handicap. Covered in coconut palms, San