



Caribbean Coast

Includes »

Cartagena	117
Fuerte de San Fernando & Bateria de San José	133
Barranquilla	136
Santa Marta	139
Minca	145
Taganga	146
Palomino	149
Parque Nacional Natural (PNN) Tayrona	150
Ciudad Perdida	153
Riohacha	156
Cabo de la Vela	158
Punta Gallinas	159
Valledupar	160

Why Go?

Sun-soaked and stewed in culture, Colombia's 1760km of Caribbean coastline has long been its tourism mainstay, drawing more domestic and international visitors than any other part of the country.

The lengthy coast covers a range of ecosystems, from the dense jungles of Darién Gap on the border with Panama in the southwest, to the barren desert of La Guajira near Venezuela in the northeast.

The crown jewel along the coast is Cartagena, a colonial city with a beauty and romance unrivaled anywhere in Colombia. Santa Marta, where legendary liberator Simón Bolívar breathed his last, also offers a sense of history. But the main attraction of this area is the Parque Nacional Natural (PNN) Tayrona, a wonderful stretch of preserved beach and virgin rainforest. If sunbathing and historic sightseeing don't appeal, the arduous Ciudad Perdida (Lost City) trek will satisfy adventurers and adrenaline junkies, and has become a rite of passage for many travelers.

Best Places to Eat

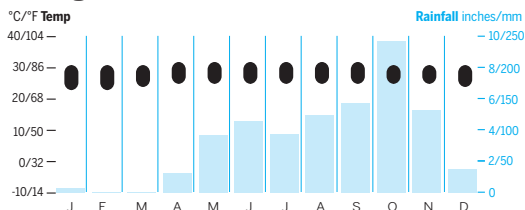
- » Josefina's (p166)
- » Ouzo (p143)
- » Punta Gallinas (p159)
- » Pachamama (p148)
- » La Cevicheria (p129)

Best Places to Stay

- » Reserva Natural El Matuy (p150)
- » Gypsy Residence (p146)
- » Barlovento (p151)
- » Hotel Casa Lola (p127)
- » Punta Gallinas (p159)

When to Go

Cartagena



Dec & Jan The beaches are at their best at Christmas as the humidity drops.

Feb Barranquilla Carnaval – four-day Mardi Gras celebrations.

Apr Book early for the Festival de la Leyenda Vallenata, full of accordion-loving whiskey-drinkers.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

- » Cartagena: Rafael Nuñez International Airport
- » Barranquilla: Ernesto Cortissoz International Airport
- » Santa Marta: Simón Bolívar International Airport
- » Maicao: Buses from Venezuela terminate here

Fast Facts

- » Population: 9,750,000
- » Area: 1760km of coast
- » Telephone area code: 5

Top Tip

All of the airports on this stretch of coast are tiny – you'll likely be offered a luggage-carrying service for a fee, but you really don't need it.

Resources

- » Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com/colombia/caribbean-coast) Portal on destination information, traveller forum and more.
- » Cartagena Caribe (www.cartagenacaribe.com) News and listings.
- » Colombia Reports (www.colombiareports.com/travel-in-colombia/cartagena.html) Regular news updates.
- » Turismo Colombiano (www.buritaca2000.com) Information on Ciudad Perdida.
- » Parques Nacionales (www.parquesnacionales.gov.co) General information on national parks.

Caribbean Cuisine

Seafood-lovers – your boat just came in. Snapper, grouper, oysters, shrimp, lobster, prawn, ceviche – you'll find it all here, and it's likely to be fresher than you've ever tasted. But there's more to life than mollusks and crustaceans, and Cartagena and Santa Marta both have great, atmospheric restaurants to suit all budgets. Creative cookery abounds, and if pennies are tight there's plenty of simple, delicious street food: the papa rellena – a battered and deep-fried potato ball filled with spiced ground meat – is delicious, and the juice stands will blow your mind. The fruit here is so exotic that most don't even have names in English.

DON'T MISS

Barranquilla, an hour northeast of Cartagena, hosts the continent's biggest Mardi Gras (Carnaval) celebrations after Rio. For most of the year, the town is a hardworking, busy port town of over a million inhabitants. But come February, for four days the city descends into a rum-soaked bacchanal of masquerade, massive floats with sound systems, public dancing, carnival floats and musical madness (see p139). It can be chaotic, irreverent and edgy, but it's always massive fun. Wallflowers need not apply.

Best Beaches

- » Capurganá and Sapzurro (p164) are ramshackle towns on the border of Panama with a chilled-out Caribbean vibe. Being off the beaten track makes them quieter than other resort towns.
- » Islas de San Bernardo (p163) and Tolú (p162) are popular with Colombian families.
- » Taganga (p146) is a dive resort and magnet for travelers seeking cheap and cheerful PADI scuba certification by day and parties by night.
- » Parque Nacional Natural (PNN) Tayrona (p150) has a collection of wonderful windswept beaches, strewn with giant boulders and fringed with virgin rainforest.
- » La Guajira Peninsula (p156) in Colombia's badlands has very few tourist facilities, but the beaches here (eg Playa Taroa) reward the determined traveler with 60m-high sand dunes and gigantic, mind-dwarfing views that will humble even cynics into silence.
- » Palomino (p149) is a perfect beach and is the best-kept secret on the coast. Shhhh!