

welcome to Colombia



Diverse Landscapes

Colombia's equatorial position affords it a diversity of landscapes matched by few countries. A slight tinkering in altitude takes you from sun-toasted Caribbean sands to coffee-strewn, emerald-green hilltops in the Zona Cafetera. Continue to climb and there's Bogotá, the bustling cradle of Colombia and the third-highest capital city in the world. Throw in another few thousand meters and you'll find snow-capped peaks, high-altitude lakes and the eerie, unique vegetation of the *páramo* (high-mountain plains). Then the bottom drops out as the Andes give way to Los Llanos, a 550,000-sq-km swath of tropical grasslands shared with Venezuela and of-

ten called the Serengeti of South America. From the towering dune deserts of Punta Gallinas to the Amazon jungle, Colombia's kaleidoscopic range of color and landscape has few rivals.

Outdoor Adventures

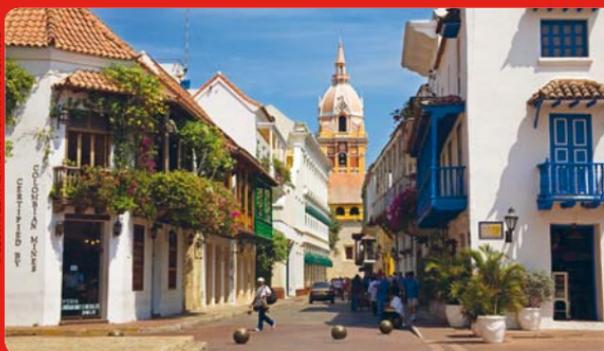
The country's varied terrain is fertile ground for outdoor adventure and Colombia dives, climbs, rafts, treks and soars with reckless abandon. The undisputed adventure capital is San Gil, but the country boasts alfresco pleasures in all corners. Two of the continent's iconic treks are here, both dramatically different: Ciudad Perdida is a five-/six-day jungle walk to the ancient ruins of the Tayrona civiliza-



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File under Colombia: soaring Andean summits, unspoiled Caribbean coast, enigmatic Amazon jungle, cryptic archaeological ruins, and cobbled colonial communities. Colombia boasts all of South America's allure and more.

(left) Waterfront and village, Taganga (p146)
 (below) Plaza San Pedro Claver (p123), Cartagena



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tion, while the weeklong Güicán–El Cocuy trek places intrepid hikers on the highest reaches of the country's Andean mountaintops. Providencia's world-class reef spells aquatic heaven for scuba divers, while whale-watchers journey to Colombia's Pacific coast to see majestic humpbacks in the wild.

Extraordinary Culture

A wealth of ancient civilizations left behind a fascinating spread of archaeological and cultural sites throughout Colombia. The one-time Tayrona capital, Ciudad Perdida, built between the 11th and 14th centuries, is one of the continent's most mysterious and lovingly preserved ancient cities, ar-

guably second only to Machu Picchu. Even more shrouded in mystery is San Agustín, where more than 500 life-sized, ancient, sculpted statues of enigmatic origin dot the surrounding countryside. And then there's Tierradentro, where elaborate underground tombs scooped out by an unknown people add even more mystique to Colombia's past. Mix in the influences of Spanish colonizers, African slaves, 20th-century European and Middle Eastern immigrants and large, intact indigenous groups like La Guajira Peninsula's Wayuu, and you get a rich recipe complex in both form and function. This intoxicating cocktail unravels in the food, music, architecture and lifestyles that shake and stir the melting pot of contemporary Colombia.