Caribbean Coast

Best Places to Eat

➤ Ouzo (p145)

➤ El Santíssimo (p134)

➤ El Fuerte (p164)

➤ La Cevicheria (p133)

➤ Josefina's (p168)

Best Places to Stay

➤ Hotel Casa San Agustin (p132)

➤ Dreamer (p153)

➤ Casa Marco Polo (p131)
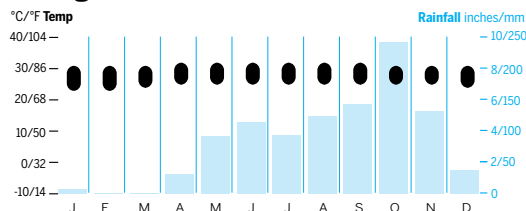
➤ Finca Barlovento (p152)

➤ Masaya (p144)

Why Go?

Sun-soaked and stewed in culture, Colombia's dramatic Caribbean coastline is its dazzling crown, capping the country with myriad ecosystems, from the dense jungles of the Darién Gap on the border with Panama to the barren desert of La Guajira near Venezuela.

The crown jewel along the coast is Cartagena, a colonial city with a beauty and romance that's unrivaled anywhere in Colombia, despite the enormous numbers of visitors it attracts. A yet undiscovered version can be enjoyed by journeying inland to find gorgeously isolated colonial Mompox, a sleepy hamlet lost in the jungle and whose star is truly in the ascendant. Other attractions are more natural: the Parque Nacional Natural (PNN) Tayrona, a wonderful stretch of perfect beach and virgin rainforest, and the thrilling and arduous Ciudad Perdida (Lost City) trek, which will satisfy adventurers wanting to discover the remnants of an ancient civilization against a stunning mountain backdrop.

When to Go
Cartagena

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

Feb Barranquilla's Carnaval is an insane four-day Mardi Gras celebration.

Sep & Oct Prices are at their lowest and you'll have many places to yourself.

CARTAGENA & AROUND

The capital of the Bolívar department, Cartagena has a raw beauty and historical significance. It's also a major port and the gateway to offshore destinations such as the northern section of Parque Nacional Natural (PNN) Corales del Rosario y San Bernardo and sleepy down-shore towns like Mompox.

Cartagena

📞 5 / POP 944,000 / ELEV 2M

Cartagena de Indias is the undisputed queen of the Caribbean coast, a fairy-tale city of romance, legends and superbly preserved beauty lying within an impressive 13km of centuries-old colonial stone walls. Cartagena's old town is a Unesco World Heritage Site, a maze of cobbled alleys, balconies covered in bougainvillea, and massive churches that cast their shadows across plazas.

But then there is the outer town, full of traffic, the working class, and a chaotic nature that can leave you dazed and confused in minutes. It is here that Cartagena becomes a typical workhorse South American city. To the south, the peninsula of Bocagrande – Cartagena's Miami Beach – is where fashionable *cartagenos* sip coffee in trendy cafes, dine in glossy restaurants and live in the upscale luxury condos that line the area like guardians to a New World.

Cartagena is a place to drop all sightseeing routines. Instead, just stroll through the old town day and night. Soak up the sensual atmosphere, pausing to ward off the brutal heat and humidity in one of the city's many open-air cafes.

Holding its own against Brazil's Ouro Preto and Peru's Cuzco for the continent's most enthralling and righteously preserved colonial destination, Cartagena is hard to walk away from – it seizes you in its aged clutches and refuses to let go.

History

Cartagena was founded in 1533 by Pedro de Heredia on the site of the Carib settlement of Calamari. It quickly grew into a rich town, but in 1552 an extensive fire destroyed a large number of its wooden buildings. Since that time, only stone, brick and tile have been permitted as building materials.

Within a short time the town blossomed into the main Spanish port on the Caribbean coast and the major northern gateway to South America. It came to be the storehouse for the treasure plundered from the local population until the galleons could ship it back to Spain. As such, it became a tempting target for all sorts of buccaneers operating on the Caribbean Sea.

In the 16th century alone, Cartagena suffered five sieges by pirates, the most famous (or infamous) of which was led by Sir Francis Drake. He sacked the port in 1586 and 'mercifully' agreed not to level the town once he was presented with a huge ransom of 10 million pesos, which he shipped back to England.

It was in response to pirate attacks that the Spaniards built up a series of forts around the town, saving it from subsequent sieges, particularly from the biggest attack of all, led by Edward Vernon in 1741. Blas de Lezo, a Spanish officer who had already lost an arm, a leg and an eye in previous battles, commanded the successful defense. With only 2500 poorly trained and ill-equipped men, don Blas managed to fend off 25,000 English soldiers and their fleet of 186 ships. The Spaniard lost his other leg in the fighting and died soon after, but he is now regarded as the savior of Cartagena. You can see his statue outside the Castillo de San Felipe.

In spite of the high price it had to pay for the pirate attacks, Cartagena continued to flourish. The Canal del Dique, constructed in 1650 to connect Cartagena Bay with the Río Magdalena, made the town the main gateway for ships heading to ports upriver, and a large part of the merchandise shipped inland passed through Cartagena. During the colonial period, Cartagena was the most important bastion of the Spanish overseas empire and influenced much of Colombia's history.

The indomitable spirit of the inhabitants was rekindled again at the time of the independence movement. Cartagena was one of the first towns to proclaim independence from Spain, early in 1810, which prompted Bogotá and other cities to do the same. The declaration was signed on November 11, 1811, but the city paid dearly for it. In 1815 Spanish forces under Pablo Morillo were sent to reconquer and 'pacify' the town and took it after a four-month siege. More than 6000 inhabitants died of starvation and disease.

In August 1819, Simón Bolívar's troops defeated the Spaniards at Boyacá, bringing freedom to Bogotá. However, Cartagena had to wait for liberation until October 1821, when the patriot forces eventually took the