

# Colombia

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Cartagena** (p538) Get infatuated with Colombia's most romantic and perfectly preserved colonial city.
- **Bogotá** (p510) Hit the great restaurants, clubs and art galleries in this kicking capital.
- **The Amazon** (p578) Paddle through flooded rainforests to Zacambú.
- **San Agustín** (p571) Gallop around glorious countryside peppered with ancient sites and statues.
- **Off the Beaten Track** Get horizontal at Capurganá (p548) and Sapzurro (p549), the ultra-chilled-out Caribbean hideaways.
- **Best Journey** (p536) Take the awesome six-day trek through jungle to the mysterious Ciudad Perdida.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 1.14 million sq km (the size of France, Spain and Portugal combined)
- **Budget:** US\$20 to US\$30 a day
- **Capital:** Bogotá
- **Costs:** double room in a budget hotel US\$10 to US\$20, set meal in a budget restaurant US\$2 to US\$3.50, 100km inter-city bus fare US\$5
- **Country code:** ☎ 57
- **Language:** Spanish
- **Money:** US\$1 = COP\$2000 (Colombian pesos)
- **Population:** 45 million
- **Seasons:** high season (Christmas and New Year, and the last weeks of July and August), rainy season (May to October)
- **Time:** GMT minus five hours (no daylight-saving time)



## TRAVEL HINTS

Tickets for long-distance buses are not fixed so always bargain for a better deal. Night-time travel is now safe, except between Popayán and Pasto on the border of Ecuador, where armed bandits, not guerrillas, roam.

## OVERLAND ROUTES

The main border crossings with Venezuela are at San Antonio del Táchira (near Cúcuta) and Paraguachón. From Ecuador, cross at Tulcán (near Ipiales).

Forget everything you've ever heard about Colombia – especially when the people telling you have never been here. For decades demonized, today Colombia is a safe, affordable, accessible and utterly thrilling destination.

Whatever you want, you'll find it here. Whether that's floating down Amazonian backwaters serenaded by scarlet macaws, wandering through perfectly preserved colonial towns saturated in tropical color and history, diving pristine Caribbean reefs patrolled by inquisitive eels, dancing till dawn in a throbbing nightclub or galloping on horseback along mountain ridges overlooking ancient indigenous burial sites, it's all in Colombia.

Not enough for you? Then go raft some of the fastest rapids on the continent, paraglide down vast canyons, hike through landscapes so perfect they seem like a Spielberg production, or wade through jungle rivers to mysterious abandoned cities.

Just to seal the deal, Colombians are friendly, welcoming and helpful people – and they receive tourists like long-lost brothers and sisters.

Security improvements have driven the continent's longest-running civil conflict into all but the most remote and inaccessible areas of the country, where travelers have no reason to visit. And best of all many Colombians, for years caged in their cities, can now enjoy their beautiful country, too.

And yet still some people think it's all just cocaine, coffee and kidnapping. They couldn't be more wrong. Spend some real time here, both on and off the gringo trail and there's a danger you might evangelize like this one day, too.

## CURRENT EVENTS

For the majority of Colombians, life is better, safer and more stable today than it has been for many years. However despite a rolling back of violence, kidnapping and urban assaults, the country's 40-year civil war is not over. Nor is it likely to end, definitively, any time soon.

## FARC on the Defensive

The spring and summer of 2008 was a disastrous period for Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC; Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). After never losing a single member of its ruling secretariat in 40 years, FARC lost three in the month of March.

First Colombia invaded Ecuadorian airspace in March 2008 and launched a deadly missile attack against a FARC encampment, and killed a key leader, Raul Reyes. A week later, another FARC leader, Ivan Rios, was murdered by his own bodyguard. He hacked off his leader's hand and delivered it to government forces as proof of his death. Two months later FARC founder, Manuel 'Sureshot' Marulanda, was reported dead of natural causes.

Then, rebels' chief bargaining pawn, French-Colombian presidential candidate, Ingrid Betancourt, kidnapped six years earlier, was snatched in an audacious and legally questionable jungle raid by Colombian soldiers. The BBC reported that one soldier was wearing a Red Cross logo; a breach of the

Geneva convention since it compromises the group's international impartiality.

Hard-line right-wing President Álvaro Uribe's popularity soared to 90% soon after these events.

## Non-Stick Scandals

Perhaps the biggest controversy to buffet the present government came in October 2008 when journalists discovered that the army was systematically killing civilians, dressing them in rebel uniforms and claiming them as combat kills in order to gain promotions or days off. The number of victims is believed to be in the thousands.

The story broke internationally when 19 young men from the poor Bogotá suburb of Soacha were offered high-paying work in the north of the country. They were presented as dead guerrillas, in full uniform, a few weeks later.

UN rapporteur on extrajudicial executions Philip Alston said in June 2009 the case was the 'tip of the iceberg.' He added that some of the Soacha victims were dressed in neatly pressed camouflage outfits, wearing clean jungle boots four sizes too big for them. While prosecutions were slow, the government had taken 'important steps to stop and respond to these killings,' he said.

There was a widespread purge of the army, including the dismissal of the country's top commander. However, criticism has been leveled at the government for its decision to pursue