

Medellín & Zona Cafetera



Welcome to *país paisa* – *paisa* country. Settled by Europeans attracted by the fertile soil and moderate mountain climate, it is a region of coffee plantations and flower farms, lush cloud forest and vibrant student towns, and the busy metropolis of Medellín. It is a jewel in the crown of Colombia, and not to be missed.

In Medellín, the country's second city, towers soar skyward, with ambition matched only by its inferiority complex – Chicago to Bogotá's New York. It is an attractive city that seduces most travelers instantly, with its just-perfect climate, green spaces, great restaurants, museums and public art work, and thumping discos.

The three main towns of the Zona Cafetera are Manizales, Pereira and Armenia. The principal business interests here are coffee, manufacturing and university students – there are a dozen universities between the three towns. It is a region of fantastic biodiversity, and the nature reserves are stunning. The *paisas* (people from the department of Antioquia) are sharp-eyed entrepreneurs, descendants of self-sufficient small farmers, not slave-owning plantation owners. They work hard and are proud of what they've achieved.

Parque Nacional Natural Los Nevados is a highlight of any visit here, a high-mountain refuge of mostly extinct volcanoes whose peaks soar above 5000m. You can visit the snow line from Manizales or spend the night on the *páramo* (high-mountain plains) in a tent or in the comfortable cabins of El Cisne. You can take a mountain-biking tour through the park, and there are mountaineering opportunities on the peaks for those suitably equipped.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the nature parks around Manizales – **Los Yarumos, Reserva Ecológica Río Blanco & Recinto del Pensamiento** (p223) – brimming with local orchids, hummingbirds and butterflies
- Bathe in the thermals springs at **Termales de Santa Rosa** (p230) as waterfalls crash nearby
- Sample the many fine restaurants and bars in **Medellín** (p210), and stroll along the bustling city's **Milla de Oro** (p205)
- Spend the night in **Río Claro** (p219), your hotel room open to the jungle, the river roaring below
- Crane your neck to see the tops of the majestic wax palms in the cloud forest of the **Valle de Cocora** (p237)



