

# Colombia

🌍 South America's rising star for travellers: natural highs, colonial gems & a frontier feel

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📅 Dec-Mar or Jul-Aug for dry weather





# LATIN QUARTER

Colonial towns, haunting deserts and mysterious pre-Inca sites –  
Colombia's south is a distinctive and surprising slice of Latin America

Words & Pictures **Graeme Green**







**Previous spread**  
The graceful plaza in Villa de Leyva is Colombia's largest

**This page**  
Sinuous terrain in the Paseo del Angel countryside

**A**

n explosion rang out. An injured man, hit in the foot, winced and limped away.

I looked around at the men's faces,

masks of grim concentration as they took aim. The stakes were high – the losers would have to pay for the beers.

The game of *tejo* is a Friday night ritual in the southern Colombian town of Villa Vieja. It's played by lobbing a heavy piece of metal – somewhere between a discus and shot put – at a target 18m away that's primed with explosives triggered by a direct hit. The games are serious, but the atmosphere is beery and friendly; Latin music blasts out of the speakers. When I score my first strike (on the rookie 9m course), the same man who'd been hit in the foot by a stray *tejo* hobbled over to shake my hand, joking that I'd be in the local paper the next day.

"Tejo is a game with easily 1,000 years of history," Alex, my guide and opponent, told me as we played. Colombia's indigenous people used to throw rocks at tomatoes; the conquering Spanish added the explosive element. It felt in keeping with Colombia's violent history to have a national game that is essentially boules with an added kick.



But despite 40 years of civil war, Colombia ranks, according to the Happy Planet Index\*, as South America's happiest country – and the sixth-happiest in the world. Indeed, the warmth and helpfulness I experienced on the *tejo* field were characteristic of the people I met across the country.

Colombia's problems aren't entirely over. Decades of conflict have led to huge levels of internal displacement, with the knock-on effect of poverty, homelessness and crime. There are still problems with illegal armed groups, guerillas and drug gangs. But the country is more stable than it's been in years and visitor numbers have more than doubled over the past decade. The majority of the country's roads, especially in tourist areas, are under the control of police and soldiers.

Cartagena and the Coffee Triangle, both in the north, are relatively well known. But the country's 'newly open' status means there are plenty more off-the-beaten-track places still to be discovered. I had ventured to the country's lesser-visited south to find them.

## Salt of the earth

My journey to the south actually began with a quick detour north of capital, Bogotá, driving to the Salt Cathedral of Zipaquirá. John, the hard-hat-wearing guide, led me and an enthusiastic group of young Catholic men down into the giant complex of caves, blasted mine-shafts and cool, dark tunnels with large crosses and kneeling places carved into the rock. The idea to build a cathedral here came from the miners. "When they started to use TNT, work here was very dangerous," John told me. "Many miners died. There were a lot of Catholics and they wanted a place to pray. They wanted to feel some sort of protection."

The first cathedral, dedicated in 1954, collapsed after 40 years. Version two, finished in 1995, is one of the most visited sites in the predominantly Catholic country. Our walk covered around 2.5km of the whole complex, which meant we saw "only 0.8% of the mine," John informed us. "The rest is industrial and off-limits." >





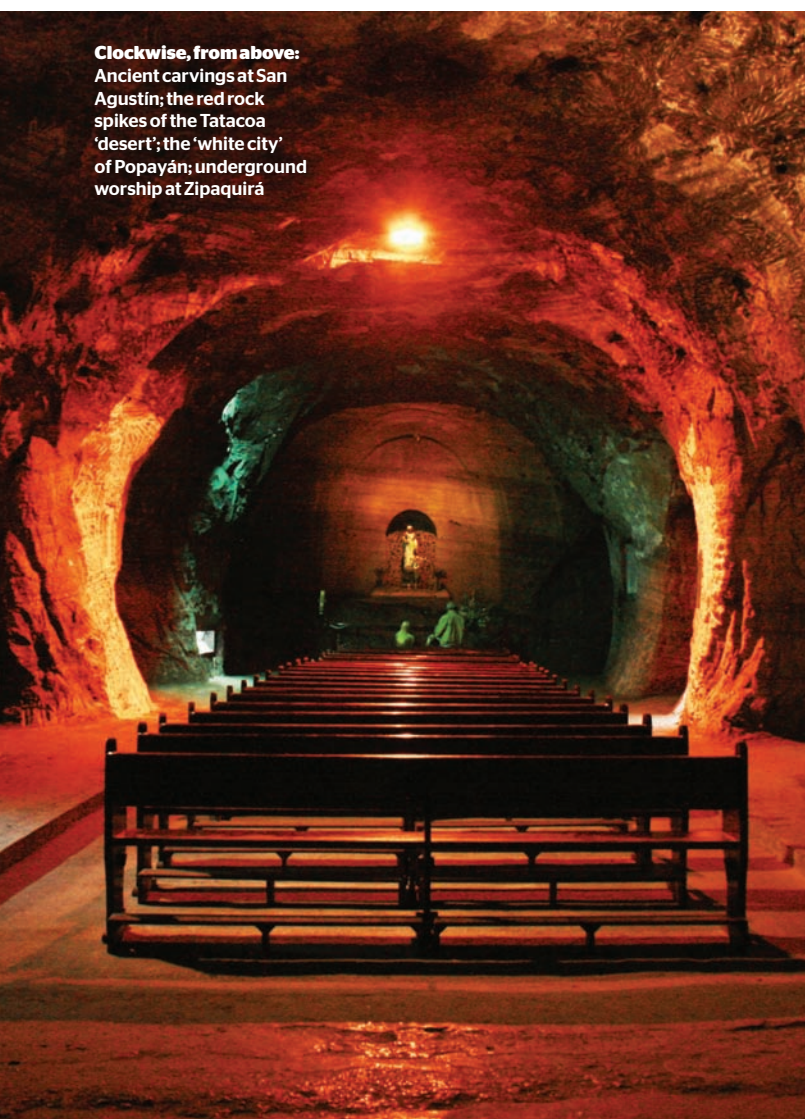
**National treasure**  
Traditional dress and  
colonial architecture  
make for great photo  
opportunities in  
Villa de Leyva

**‘The warmth  
I experienced was  
characteristic of  
the people I met  
in Colombia’**





**Clockwise, from above:**  
Ancient carvings at San Agustín; the red rock spikes of the Tatacoa 'desert'; the 'white city' of Popayán; underground worship at Zipaquirá







## 'This is the land of the mystery, of the enigma, the question mark'

◀ The chapel was bathed in warm, orange light with an image of the Virgin Mary at one end. The cavernous cathedral had a bluish luminosity while a recreation of Michelangelo's 'Creation' was ringed by a purple glow.

In front of a carved Nativity scene, the young Catholics started to whisper excitedly, hatching a plan. Then they broke into song, their voices echoing as they sang 'Los Peces En El Río' ('The Fish In The River'), a common Christmas song in Colombia. Afterwards, one man delivered a few lines of 'Silent Night' solo, in English. Festive cheer in May, 200m below Colombia's surface, wasn't something I'd been expecting.

I drove north from the cathedral through the Ubaté region, on the way to Villa de Leyva. The landscape was so crisp, vividly green and dotted with black-and-white cows (this is the milk capital of Colombia), it reminded me of Switzerland.

Villa de Leyva was a peaceful colonial town, a protected National Heritage Site free of modern constructions. I ambled the cobbled streets in the hot sun with Oscar, who owns a hostel and travel agency in town. The lengthily titled Catedral de Nuestra Señora del Rosario de Villa de Leyva, at the top of the plaza, took 40 years to construct, he told me. "It was partly a slow build

because the priests could use it to get money from the people. They could say, 'We need more money to finish the church'. A lot of churches took a long time to build..." Oscar added wryly.

We drove out of town to hike in the Moniquirá Valley, walking along paths broken by fallen trees and mud slides from the recent floods. We headed to a waterfall, a sacred site for the indigenous Muisca who lived in this area. "See the rock shaped like a table?" Oscar pointed. "It was probably used for sacrifices." From there we headed to Paso del Angel (Angel's Step), a path that – at its thinnest – measures 40cm, with a 170m drop down to the river below.

Oscar showed me another pre-Columbian site, El Infiernito ('Little Hell'), with monoliths up to 6m in height, each with a different thickness. They were arranged, Oscar informed me, according to the angle of the sun on the solstices and the positions of the stars. The heavy rocks, each weighing up to ten tonnes, were brought here with great difficulty from the valley in the distance, then carved into penis-shaped columns – not just approximate phallic shapes, but sculpted shafts each with a clearly defined 'head'. If proof were needed that humankind is strange, and that religion in particular drives people to do peculiar

things, it would have to be the decision to haul giant chunks of rock 80km across mountains and streams to fashion them into giant manhoods and point them at the stars.

### Sex, drugs and rock sculptures

There were more mysterious statues down south. After catching a plane from Bogotá to Popayán, the 'White City', I took a bumpy six-hour drive south on a policed road that used to be controlled by guerrillas and drug gangs, heading to San Agustín, the archaeological capital of Colombia. Just outside the town, there's a 2,000 sq km Unesco World Heritage site filled with hundreds of statues; many more are scattered across the surrounding countryside. There's talk, too, that there might be a pyramid buried somewhere in the area.

Alex and I met Marino, a local expert. The people who created the massive, well-preserved sculptures are thought to have come originally from Amazonas, he told us. Their Classic Period was between AD100 and AD900, but they were in this area from 3,300BC, before the Incas, Aztecs and Maya, and contemporaries of the ancient Egyptians.

Despite much research and comparisons with other cultures, the statues remain a mystery. "There's much here that is unknown, simply guesswork," Marino >



# Colombia

◀ admitted. “This is the land of the mystery, the enigma, the question mark.”

Each sculpture is unique, but there are recurring characteristics: large heads, no necks, short or no legs. In their details are clues to the culture. A chief has a skull around his neck, possibly a war trophy. Some have visibly swollen cheeks from chewing coca leaves. The sculptors frequently combined human with animal or bird features; many of the mouths are filled with jaguar teeth. Together, the statues make a pretty freaky bunch. Some archaeologists believe they were created under the influence of coca, ayahuasca or other narcotics.

We walked past statues of monkeys and snakes copulating. There are more phallic shapes here too, and male figures with erect penises tied to their waists. “Sex and death are two universals. All cultures cover these themes,” Marino said.

Our gang of three rode out the next morning on horseback, through coffee and sugarcane farms, to explore other sites on the hillsides. Several statues showed signs of their original colours: red, yellow, white and black. Marino pointed out the plants and trees in the vicinity that produced the dyes and paints. Later, we tied the horses and climbed down a mountainside to see Chaquira, a figure carved into the rock, facing east to where the sun rises.

## Meeting the desert princess

From San Agustín, Alex and I headed for the Tatacoa Desert. Approaching the town of Villa Vieja, the scenery became hillier, with strange reddish rock formations, spires and mounds, and 6m-high candelabra cacti. “Everyone calls Tatacoa a desert, but actually it’s a dry forest,” Alex told me. Cows and goats grazed freely across the open ground. From a ridge, we looked out at the Tower, one of the desert’s most striking features, then hiked down into the Cusco Labyrinth, a range of ‘dunes’ similar to Death Valley.

Tatacoa’s not quite a match for the red-rock formations of the south-west USA, but it’s peaceful and there are interesting



## ‘As the sun rose over the Tatacoa Desert, we ate fruit from the top of a cacti’

characters living here. I’d hoped to meet the ‘Queen of the Desert’, a local legend who helped create and populate the villages of Tatacoa, but we discovered that she’d died last year, aged 97. Many of her 13 children and 50 grandchildren still live in the area.

I tracked down Paula, the Queen’s 15-year-old granddaughter, who was tending goats on her family’s farm. She described her grandmother as “really honest – she’d look people in the eye and tell them the truth. She was very famous. People came from all over the world to talk to her.”

Paula shares her grandmother’s affinity with the desert. “I love the tranquility,” she told me.

If her grandmother was Queen, Paula must be a Princess of the Desert. “Yes,” she said, “definitely.” And a future Queen? “It would be good to be Queen. I’d be able to meet people from all over the world too.”

After dark, when the last of the goats had been called in, we headed to the observatory. Tatacoa’s known for its night skies. “There are other observatories in Colombia with bigger telescopes, but they don’t have the location,” local astronomer Javier told me, as we climbed to the observation platform. “There’s no light contamination here. Also, we are close to the equator and we can see the whole sky, both hemispheres.”

We stood on the observatory roof, the desert peaceful except for the hum of cicadas, the corners of the landscape flashing with lightning. Through the telescope, I studied a remarkably clear

image of Saturn and the crispest image of the moon I’ve ever seen, despite being about 384,000km away. Javier looked at his watch and told us to concentrate on the horizon as the International Space Station flew across the sky.

Breakfast the next morning out in the desert was one of my strangest. As the sun rose we ate fruit – small, lurid-pink and shaped like chilli peppers – straight from the top of cacti. They had a crisp, sweet taste, like strawberry. We washed them down with milk, frothy, warm and squeezed fresh from a goat on the Gonzalez family’s farm.

Brother and sister Miguel and Lilia are the fourth generation of Gonzalezes to live on the farm. With them was a small boy called John Jailer, the son of their sister. After Lilia squeezed several tankards of milk from a goat’s udders, John started to help his uncle and aunt separate the animals, lifting the smaller ones into a pen. “Sometimes,” Miguel smiled, “the goats see he’s small and try to take him on, but he’s strong and wins. He’s very helpful. He already knows everything about the farm.”

John stepped forward to demonstrate his abilities. He missed with his first lasso shot, laughing and chasing to collect the rope. Once retrieved, he tried again and successfully snared a little goat.

Miguel looked satisfied, happy even – perhaps those surveys have it right. “We love to live here,” Miguel confirmed. “We feel rich – not with money, but with tranquility, the sound of birds, the calm of the desert.” ■





# Colombia Footnotes

From Unesco-listed Cartagena to the highland *fincas* of the Coffee Triangle - how to reach, travel around and stay safe in this rapidly emerging destination

## VITAL STATISTICS

**Capital:** Bogotá  
**Population:** 45 million  
**Languages:** Spanish, plus indigenous languages  
**Time:** GMT-5  
**International dialling code:** +57  
**Visas:** Not required by UK nationals  
**Money:** Colombian peso (COP), currently around COP3,000 to the UK£.

## When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

■ Dec-Mar & Jul-Aug: The dry *verano* (summer) season runs December to March, with a second dry spell July-August. These are the **best times for hiking**; most festivals happen at this time.

■ Apr-Jun & Sep-Nov: Being close to the equator, **temperatures are fairly constant** year round, varying with altitude more than season; however, most rain falls during the two wet seasons. Travel can be damp, but the countryside is lush and green.

## Health & safety

Travellers visiting jungle regions should be vaccinated against yellow fever and tetanus. Malaria prophylaxis is necessary; check [www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk](http://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk) for details of high-risk areas. Colombia's big cities and beachside resorts have no-go areas - exercise caution. For safety updates, see [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk).

## Further reading & information

**Colombia** (Michelin Green Guides, 2011)  
**Colombia Handbook** (Footprint, 2011)  
**Colombia** (Bradt, 2008 - New ed out Dec 2011)  
[www.colombia.travel](http://www.colombia.travel) - Official tourist info  
[www.lata.org](http://www.lata.org) - The Latin American Travel Association

## More online

Visit [www.wanderlust.co.uk/124](http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/124) for links to more useful info:

### Photo gallery

See more of Graeme's photos from this feature online



### Archive articles

**Colombia Travel Blueprint** - issue 110, Mar 10  
**Coffee & culture, Colombia** - issue 84, Dec/Jan 07

**Planning guides**  
**Colombia Travel Guide**

## The trip

The author travelled with **Travel The Unknown** (020 8823 0705, [www.traveltheunknown.com](http://www.traveltheunknown.com)) on a tailor-made itinerary that included visits to Villa de Leyva, Popayán, San Agustín and the Tatacoa Desert. Travel The Unknown's 14-day **Southern Colombia Explorer** trip takes in these places as well as Bogotá and **a visit to the coffee region**; this costs £2,295pp, based on two sharing, including domestic but not international flights.

## Getting there & around

**British Airways** (0844 493 0787, [www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com)) flies to Colombia, usually via Miami. Fares from Heathrow to Bogotá start from £876 return including taxes. **Iberia** (0870 609 0500, [www.iberia.com](http://www.iberia.com)) flies daily from London to Bogotá via Madrid from around £715. Flight time is around 12 hours, plus connection times.

Colombia's bus network is reliable. There are several companies to choose from and **buses are comfortable and cheap**; they're also a great way to see the countryside, but be prepared for a bumpy ride at times. A one-way ticket from Bogotá to Cartagena costs around COP108,000 (£36); the journey takes around 20 hours. If time is tight, consider domestic flights. Local airlines include Avianca, AeroRepública, Aires and EasyFly. **There are no trains in Colombia.**

## Cost of travel

In the years when Colombia was still considered a risky prospect, it was the preserve of backpackers, and there are still **lots of cheap hostels** and budget options across the country. Dorm beds start from £7; a private room in a hostel around £20.

Colombia is also opening boutique and chain hotels for the more upmarket traveller, especially in destinations such as Bogotá, Medellín and Cartagena. Average cost per night for a double in a good boutique hotel in Cartagena is £190 (low season).

## Accommodation

In Bogotá, **Hotel Casa de la Botica** ([www.hotelcasadelabotica.com](http://www.hotelcasadelabotica.com)) is steps away from Plaza Bolívar in the heart of Le Candelaria district, with doubles from COP165,000 (£55) plus taxes. Backpackers

can head to the safe, friendly **Anandamayi Hostel** ([www.anandamayihotel.com](http://www.anandamayihotel.com)), also in Le Candelaria, with beds from COP30,000 (£10) and doubles from COP120,000 (£40).

Although a bit of a trek out of Villa de Leyva, **Guesthouse Renacer** ([www.colombianhighlands.com/lodging.html](http://www.colombianhighlands.com/lodging.html)) is a friendly, comfortable budget hotel, with dorms and private rooms. Its knowledgeable owner, Oscar, also arranges tours of the surrounding area. Singles from £25.

Choice is limited in **Neiva** (the access town for Tatacoa). **La Casona**, on the main plaza - once stayed in by independence hero Simón Bolívar - is now quite run down and basic (57 312 377 32 79); rooms from £10. An alternative is the slightly more modern **Hotel Neiva Plaza** ([www.hotelneivaplaza.com](http://www.hotelneivaplaza.com)); doubles from COP206,000 (£69).

## Food & drink

Like most Latin American countries, **Colombia is a meat treat**. Restaurants serve substantial plates of beef, pork and chicken, sometimes all together on one plate as a mixed grill. Try **mamona** - a traditional dish from the Los Llanos region but found all over the country, it is marinated beef barbecued over open flames. Seafood and fish is good, not only in Cartagena and along the Caribbean coast, but in places such as San Agustín where the **trout** and other regional specialities are worth seeking out. **Vegetarians will be fine in bigger cities** and tourist areas, but in more remote rural areas, options can be a bit limited.

## Political situation & safety

Colombia is more stable and secure now than it has been in 50 years. Murders have almost halved since 2002, and **kidnappings reduced from 2,882 to 253** between 2002 and 2010. However, conflict between the government and guerrilla and paramilitary groups isn't fully over, and there are still significant parts of the country which are off-limits to travellers.

Sadly, at time of going to press, the FCO was again advising people "**against all but essential travel to the archaeological park at San Agustín.**" Check the FCO website for the latest update. Unless you seek out trouble, only petty crime is likely to have any potential impact on visitors. ■



## Colombian highlights

### 1. Cartagena

The walled colonial city of Cartagena on the Caribbean coast is a Unesco World Heritage site and an architectural gem. Famous for its party scene and lively cultural festivals, there are also plenty of more sedate options along the coast - from white-sand beaches to jungle and fishing villages; close-by San Andres Island has the country's best diving.

### 2. Bogotá

It doesn't feel like the world's safest capital, but there's plenty to enjoy: restaurants, nightlife, shops and culture. Visit the Museo del Oro (Gold Museum) and Museo Histórico Policia, which tells the history of Colombia's crime-busters. Or explore the touristy Le Candelaria area.

### 3. Zipaquirá

The Salt Cathedral of Zipaquirá is one of the country's most-visited sites. Walk deep underground via mine shafts and tunnels into the inventively lit chapel and cathedral. A short 3D film takes you through the ages of the mine.

### 4. Villade Leyva

Walk the cobbled stones of this quiet, safe, relaxing colonial town. The Saturday market is flooded by local people in traditional dress - as the farmers'

day off, it can be quite a beery affair. Hike in the surrounding Iguaque National Park, visit the vertiginous Angel's Step pass and search out indigenous archaeological sites.

### 5. San Agustín

The country's archaeological capital is home to a large collection of well-preserved statues, with many more in the surrounding hills, best reached on horseback. **Security update: see FCO safety advice (left).**

### 6. Coffee Triangle

This region of the Andean highlands, taking in the cities of Manizales, Armenia and Pereira, is the place to try Colombia's most famous legal export. Many of the farms, or *fincas*, in the region have been converted into accommodation.

### 7. Tatacoa Desert

Remote and off-the-beaten-track, the reddish landscapes of the Tatacoa Desert are home to fascinating local cultures and characters. A very peaceful place for hiking and biking.

### 8. Cali

Cali claims to be the salsa capital of the world, the streets filled with Latin beats and the country's (if not the planet's) most beautiful women.



**Don't be fooled**  
Behind the genteel colonial facade, Cartagena is a party town



- Absorb the colonial beauty of Villa de Leyva
- Explore vibrant Bogotá & Popayán
- Visit the exotic coffee region
- Discover the ancient mysteries of San Agustín
- Marvel at the bizarre & stunning Tatacoa Desert

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