



La Candelaria, the lively centre of Colombia's capital Bogotá

# Colombia's colourful charm

Forget the clichéd boilerplate about narcos and cocaine: the South American nation is a much safer place these days and huge swathes of it are a feast for the eyes, writes **Sean Sheehan**

**L**a Candelaria, the photogenic heart of Colombia's capital city, is a neighbourhood in full-on tourist mode: striking graffiti, craft shops, colonial-era buildings, tree-lined squares and pedestrianised boulevards with sunny coffee shops. It's a perfect introduction to polychromatic Colom-

bia, free of touts and coachloads of tour parties, and home to at least one art gallery that should not be missed.

Museo Botero houses Fernando Botero's own work plus his collection of modern art, generously donated to the city by the sculptor/painter himself. Botero's oversized bronzes and his florid oil paintings of curvy women and rotund men are unforgettable –



Chicaque Park: a walking trail descends 2,000 metres through secondary forest to what remains of a primeval oak forest

sensuality with a sense of humour, amplitude with attitude – and they rise above escapist fantasy; look for his painting of bullet-riddled Pablo Escobar fleeing across rooftops.

Downtown Bogotá is a drab affair redeemed by a breathtaking excess of bling in Museo de Oro (Gold Museum), which has the largest collection of gold ornaments anywhere in the world. The lustrous artefacts bear testimony to what drove the predatory conquistadores to travel inland after their arrival on Colombia's northern coastline in 1509.

Sundays bring joie de vivre to the city. A flash mob of millennials might run onto a pedestrian crossing, dance a quick salsa while the lights are red before running back to the pavement. Other sections of major roads are closed to traffic and fill instead with families on bicycles alongside skateboarders and rollerbladers.

Eating out in Bogotá's award-winning Leo restaurant is an exciting experience. Large metal doors yawn open at 7pm, and you need to be on time for what follows: well over a dozen smallish courses that will have you clinging to the menu to work out what the little pots and plates are offering. Coca leaves, ponche

A nude by Fernando Botero at the Botero Museum in Bogotá GETTY



Left: salsa dancers in Cali



Traditional Spanish architecture in the coastal city of Cartagena



From top:

Leo, Bogotá's award-winning restaurant

At El Paraiso de los Colibríes (Hummingbirds' Paradise), a café built on a hillside in dense woodland, hummingbirds hover metres from your table

A new cable car system travels between the city of Medellín and the surrounding mountainside

## FACTFILE

**Where to stay:** in Bogotá, W Hotel ([marriott.com](http://marriott.com)) from €130; BOG Hotel ([designhotels.com/hotels/colombia/bogota/bog-hotel](http://designhotels.com/hotels/colombia/bogota/bog-hotel)) from €113; Radisson AR ([radisson.com/bogota-hotel](http://radisson.com/bogota-hotel)) from €71. In Cali: Hampton by Hilton ([hiltonhotels.com](http://hiltonhotels.com)) from €69. In Medellín: ultra-smart Apartahotel Loma Verde can be rented through Casacol ([en.casacol.co/en/loma-verde-medellin](http://en.casacol.co/en/loma-verde-medellin)); Habana Vieja ([hotellaha.banaviejamedellin.com](http://hotellaha.banaviejamedellin.com)) from €21; Four Points Sheraton ([marriott.co.uk](http://marriott.co.uk)) from €106. In Cartagena: Charleston Santa Maria ([hotelcharlestonsantatere.sa.com](http://hotelcharlestonsantatere.sa.com)) from £280.

**Tours and guides:** GetYourGuide ([getyourguide.co.uk](http://getyourguide.co.uk)) has a wide range of tours and transfers across the country. Colombian Buddy ([colombianbuddy.com](http://colombianbuddy.com)) is a lively company with a mission to make Colombia a fun place to explore. Colombia Birdwatch ([colombiabirdwatch.com](http://colombiabirdwatch.com)) specialises in birding tours from remote areas to the outskirts of Cali. Highly recommended, La Sierra Barrio Tour ([lasierreatours.com](http://lasierreatours.com)) takes four hours and costs €20. Riding Colombia ([ridingcolombia.com](http://ridingcolombia.com)) are the experts in horseback trips and treks in Chicaque Park outside Bogotá. Insight Guides Colombia gives a colourful overview of the country and Lonely Planet Colombia has the nuts and bolts for travelling on the ground. For birdwatching, the two-volume set of Birds of Northern South America (Helm Field Guides) is a must.

(a jungle rodent), mojoyoy (a forest caterpillar), ants and caiman sit alongside more recognisable helpings like duck and heart of palm. What seems avant-garde is based on indigenous sources and traditional Colombian ingredients.

On more familiar territory Cucina Pimiento is a safe bet for quality, pizza-free Italian food while Armadillo, a restaurant under the same management and owners for more than 20 years, is hard to beat for reliable steaks and seafood in a setting.

One of Bogotá's strengths are its superb hotels, like the ever-reliable Radisson near the airport; the smaller BOG Hotel where the breakfast table is piled with fruits that look extra-terrestrial; and the stylish W, with a pub serving local craft beers with fish and chips. Home comforts in Latin America.

Chicaque Park, a former cattle ranch set in cloud forest, is a short drive away from the city and its walking trail descends 2,000 metres through secondary forest to what remains of a primeval oak forest. But to properly experience the Colombian countryside and its dazzling birdlife (nearly 2,000 species), a trip to Cali, a modest city to the south-west and close to the Pacific coast, opens new windows on the country's diversity.

Cali, where children learn to dance as soon as they can walk, is world-famous for its salsa mania and there are countless clubs where you can join in, take lessons or just watch. One in five Cali people are of African-Colombian descent – the Spanish imported large numbers of slaves to work the sugar plantations – and salsa's origins have African roots somewhere.

Colombia Birdwatch is based in Cali, and has its own lodge set amid placid scenery outside the city. Nearby is El Paraiso de los Colibríes (Hummingbirds' Paradise), an informal café built on a hillside in dense woodland, where iridescent hummingbirds hover metres from your table. In town, the Hilton by Hampton has affordable accommodation and there are city restaurants to suit most tastes, from inexpensive faux-meat burgers at El Buen Alimento to sophisticated Colombian cuisine at Platillos Voladores.

It's a short flight from Cali to Medellín, a city that fills a steep valley with misty mountains looking

down on it. For a convincing and affecting show of how much has changed since the days when narco-gangsters controlled the valley, take the La Sierra tour run by locals. Created in the 1970s, this mountainside community was formerly a dangerous and impoverished no-go area. A new cable car system has brought access for its residents and their self-help ethos has created a healthy place to live, complete with a small park, street art, vegetable plots and a school. La Sierra Tours donate a part of each person's fee to a kitchen providing hot meals for children and elders.

Medellín is an easy city to spend time in, blessed as it is with a superb public transport system, good restaurants and a range of places to stay. Habana Vieja is a centrally located guesthouse, a tad funky but inexpensive, while nearby is Four Points Sheraton with all-day free refreshments and a sedate restaurant above the lobby. Ultra-modern self-catering apartments are available at Loma Verde Aparthotels and can be rented for short periods; its rooftop pool is a bonus.

On Colombia's Caribbean coastline, daily temperatures won't drop below 30C and the place to head for is Cartagena. Founded by the Spanish, the city has a turbulent history of gold hunters, piracy, slavery, repeated attacks by the English who wanted the gold, the Inquisition, and, finally in 1800, independence from Spain.

The walled city built by the colonists is largely intact and its cobbled streets, ramparts and fine old buildings are the stuff of Instagram. For fine food, Don Juan restaurant is one of the best in the country (main courses are €16) and ex-convent Hotel Charleston Santa Theresa, with a rooftop pool and romantic views of the skyline, exudes old-school colonial luxury.

Colombia is a goodie-bag of new places to experience, and there is a refreshing lack of cynicism towards visitors that will fire up your synapses and make you feel that tourism can be something positive. This high-spirited country has been off the traveller's radar for too long, making visitors from Europe especially welcome – even someone like me with a Spanish vocabulary of fewer than ten words. ■