

# BAZAAR

ESCAPE

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## THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

From cloud forests to exotic birds  
and markets, discover Colombia's magical charms.  
Plus, luxury hotels with a fashionable flavour

*The bell tower  
at Cartagena  
cathedral  
in Colombia*



# REBIRTH OF A NATION

*Anna Murphy* explores the colourful cities and lush landscapes of Colombia, a country that is triumphantly bursting into life



*Above: the streets of Cartagena. Below: the pool and gardens at Casa San Agustín, a hotel in the city*



It's surely the ultimate sign of a fabulous holiday when you don't know quite where to begin with the retelling of it. Should I start with Colombia's beautiful coffee region, part-Switzerland, part-Derbyshire, part-Andean otherness, complete with cloud forests and Technicolor one-horse towns? Or what about the once-notorious but now inspirational city of Medellín? For years it was the GCHQ of the narco kingpin Pablo Escobar, with all the concomitant violence and poverty one might imagine. Now it is a remarkable beacon of urban regeneration, with – by way of just one example, for now – dozens of new libraries, each with an ensuite park. It also boasts one of my favourite city boutique hotels, the French-run Patio Del Mundo, set in a pocket-handkerchief of greenery with views of the urban jungle beyond.

Then there's the colourful jewel of Cartagena, the famous and much-visited Unesco World Heritage Site on the Caribbean coast. But what about the lesser-known yet similarly retro gem that is the all-white city of Popayán, south-west of Bogotá? Or even the capital itself, which – to my surprise, I must confess – was so much more than just a charmless Latin American sprawl? I fell in love with its pretty colonial district of

Candelaria, not to mention the up-and-coming artist-populated art deco timewarp of San Felipe, and the world-class Museo del Oro, one of the best mono-museums I have ever visited. I could happily have left wearing the modernist earrings-cum-mobiles from 3,000 years ago, which looked like they were new-season Céline.

Colombia's remarkable diversity is partly down to its geography, for this is where the Andes split into three separate ranges, providing such an array of different altitudes that every fruit and vegetable you can think of is in season somewhere in the country throughout the year, along with countless other delicious improbabilities of which you will never have heard. There are 370 edible fruits alone, many of which seem to have come from the pages of *Harry Potter*. At the Bazurto market in Cartagena, advised by my guide Kristy, I tried tomatoes that tasted like mangoes, figs that tasted like pears, mandarin-like limes, and grenade-shaped granadillas, a kind of sweet passion fruit that the local children, charmingly, seem to enjoy smashing open on each others' heads.

I loved my visit to a cloud forest, a peculiarly Andean phenomenon, with its palms so tall as to look like a tropical take on Jack's beanstalk, their tops disappearing into the silvagenitus. And I enjoyed my stay in the Tatacoa desert, with its red sands and vast candelabra cacti. But I didn't even make it to the Amazonian region, or to the vast grasslands of Los Llanos, home to Colombia's titfer-toting, lasso-wielding cowboys, and little else.

It's this multitude of landscapes that explains why the country has more bird species than any other in the world, just



*Left: a beach on San Andrés island. Right: Cartagena cathedral. Bottom left: a sitting-room at Casa San Agustín*



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ahead of Peru and Brazil, and why, even for a non-twitcher such as myself, you can't help starting to notice them. Indeed, you begin to suspect that this kaleidoscope of feathery life is going out of its way to wow you, even to woo you. There are birds shaking their birdy booty at you everywhere you look, and some sightings appeared impressive enough to be once-in-a-lifetime sightings, if only I knew what it was I was looking at.

What I had no doubt about whatsoever was that my afternoon spent with a family from the indigenous Misak tribe was a once-in-a-lifetime affair. The Misak live around the small southerly town of Silvia, which has one of the best-known local markets in the country, and you may see them out and about in traditional concertina straw boaters or Ecuadorian felt



PHOTOGRAPHS: JODEE DEBES PHOTOGRAPHY, CASA SAN AGUSTIN, GETTY IMAGES, PICFAIR





Right: the Tatacoa desert in Huila.  
Bottom right: a pool at Casa San Agustín



paralysing confluence of the Farc guerrillas and the narcos. The very fact of you being here, taking the time to visit their country, of which Colombians are rightly so proud, means that you will be met with nothing but friendliness, and a desire to share. Even the professional guides have none of the usual world-weariness. Instead they boast an enthusiasm, almost an evangelism, about their work, and go out of their way to make your time with them the

best it can be.

In Comuna 13, once a no-go shanty town high in the hills surrounding Medellín, the locals will come up to you to tell you how their neighbourhood has been transformed. They will show you the covered escalators that speed people's way to the city proper, and so enable them to hold down jobs. They will proudly point out – as if it needs pointing out – the flora and fauna of graffiti that has helped to change the look and feel of their higgledy-piggledy hillside streets. Never before have I seen such an egalitarian

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hats, blue and black ponchos and skirts. The colours are reversed depending on whether the wearer is male or female; the women's black skirts signify that they are 'of the earth' and, like it, fertile.

In town the Misak keep themselves to themselves. Yet thanks to the efforts of another excellent guide, Franko, I was invited into the home of one family in the nearby hills. And so I found myself sitting in a mud kitchen with three generations of women and one 'lucky bird', who lives in a cardboard box next to the open stove in order, they told me, with Franko as our translator, 'to keep away the evil spirits'.

We ate chicken-and-corn soup together, as the bird kept its beady eye on me (perhaps not sure just what kind of spirit I was) and the women told me about their lives: about how, for example, on her marriage day the bride must dance with 12 kilograms of jewellery around her neck, and last longer than the musicians, in order to prove what a good, strong wife she will make. 'How long does that normally take?' I asked them. 'Until five in the morning,' they exclaimed with a kind grimace, half laughing. Before I left they showed me their proudest possession, a lump of obsidian they call their 'rain stone', found by one of the daughters high up in the ever-present Andes. They passed it from one set of work-worn hands to the next, each stroking it reverently, until it came to me, and they watched me approvingly as I did the same, their eyes twinkling from under their hats.

Very few tourists visited Colombia for years, thanks to the



manifestation of the truly transformative power of art.

In the countryside outside the city, yet another brilliant guide took us to meet Pablo Escobar's former gardener. A 66-year-old eccentric living in a house reminiscent of an art installation full of *objets trouvés*, Hernán was just waiting for his audience. He talked us delightedly through the flotsam and jetsam of rural life hanging on his walls, and proudly showed us everything from the pistol in his *paisa* cowhide manbag (beat that, Loewe!) to the faded photographs of his former lady friends trapped for ever after under glass in a series of miniature tableaux. And what of Escobar, we asked? The ultimate narco used to give balloons to poor children, we were told. 'He was a good man spoilt by the government', apparently. Our guide rolled his eyes.

Aside from the definitely on-the-map Cartagena, you will find yourself having the kinds of encounters and experiences that, in other more frequented parts of the world, disappeared a couple of decades ago. The downside is that on occasion, particularly in the recently opened-up south, you may find yourself in the accommodation to match. But there are plenty of special lodgings, too, such as Casa San Agustín in Cartagena, which has been created out of three colonial houses, with a swimming pool set within a picturesquely crumbling courtyard. Or Hacienda Buenavista in coffee country, which offers, as its name suggests, a spectacular view over the valley below; a vista that was sometimes further adorned, during my stay at least, with a double rainbow. It was a panorama so mesmerising as to make it difficult to leave. Rather like Colombia itself. □

*Amakuna Travel* (020 7193 7582; [www.amakuna.com](http://www.amakuna.com)) offers a 14-night itinerary, from £3,750 a person, including accommodation at *Patio Del Mundo*, *Casa San Agustín* and *Hacienda Buenavista*, internal transfers and domestic flights. Direct flights from London to Bogotá with Avianca start from £600 a person return. For more information on Colombia, visit [www.colombia.travel](http://www.colombia.travel).



Right: the lobby at Casa San Agustín.  
Below right: Salento, declared a Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia by Unesco



In the country near Medellín, we met Pablo Escobar's former gardener, who was just waiting for his audience



The Plaza de los Cocheros in Cartagena



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