

VANITY FAIR

and 13 more cities

On Travel

*"I have 7 hours to spend,
so it's on my list."
— NICKY KATZ*

SOUTH AMERICA

(As Travel talks Latin)

COLOMBIA, BRAZIL, BOLIVIA,
ECUADOR and ARGENTINA

By Anne B-R, Alex Co, Emma Stone, Kristin
Patt, Riccardo's and Nicholas Sussangkarn

ADVENTURES

in DELHI, LONDON
and VENICE

By William Baldwin, Victoria Mather
and Seth Meardon

— The Unexpected —
DELIGHTS
of
PUBLIC
TRANSPORT

(yes, really)

By Victoria Mather

Plus

EMMA FREUD on *MONTEVIA*; OLIVIA EDLE on *SEVILLE* and the *COSTA de la LUZ*;
VICTORIA MATHER on exciting *HOTEL* evenings; TEE TRYON on the *AMAZON*; and GABRIELLA LE BRETON
and ELIZABETH SALTZMAN on fun-and-SKI and SURF destinations (and still there's more...)



Could it be
MAGIC

From the shining seas of the north to the jungles of its southernmost tip, Colombia is in the throes of a fantastical rebirth—and ALICE B-B, for one, is bewitched by a country on the cusp of change.



On the runway, destruction Bogotá and my last chance to markedly swipe through results. There's a slew of "Colombia? WTF?" "But they're just voted against the peace treaty," "Are you mad? Do you need a bodyguard?"... And then it's school up. I flick to flight-suits and have a good look around the cabin. Oh God. They're right. Everyone looks like an extra from *Nurse*. Especially the chap beside me. Naafy dodgy. I'm reminded of the words of Mark Bowden: "Colombia is a land that breeds outlaws. It has always been ungovernable, a nation of wild unsoftened beauty, steeped in mystery."

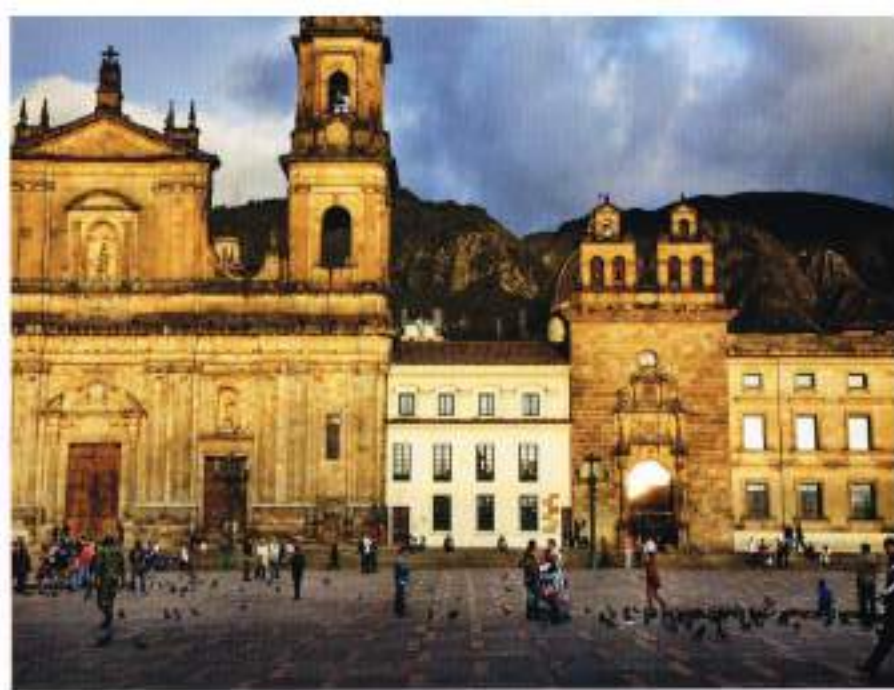
Eleven one-eye-open hours later, I land in Colombia's capital city. A thankfully uneventful flight, besides the Spanish-speaking air hostess who, writing up her flight report, asks me how to spell "cockroach" and "alleged sink". Nice. But then, at the baggage carousel, Mr. *Nurse*, my on-board neighbor, appears at my side. "First time in Colombia?" Here we go. I nod, stonily. "Well, if you need any help or advice on places to go, just call." He hands me a card. "Welcome to Colombia." Is that it? No hauling me into a car? Nope, just a big smile, and he's gone.

It's an auspicious start, and it sets the tone for my giant jaunt the length of Colombia. To try and understand this country, I've decided to top-and-tail it, from the northernmost point of Providencia to the Caribbean to the southernmost of Leticia in the Amazon. But first, a spin around Bogotá, with pop-punk and a headache. "It's the attitude," says my guide Cilve Lorenzoni, an art consultant. "Bogotá is at E.6000."

After a sweet-sour *ajobizajo* for breakfast at the pretty Five Seasons Hotel Bogotá, built around a courtyard, we head to La Candelaria, the oldest part of the city. I'm glad I've taken note of the sign in my room, suggesting it might be wise to not wear a fancy watch on the streets while Cilve recommends only using certain ATMs. A few *aremas* still no-go. This is a strange and exciting time to be here. In a year of global unexpected voting results, Colombia is right up there. This is a country that has suffered unimaginable horrors since La Violencia in 1948, when populist political leader Jorge Gaitán was assassinated, followed by a civil war since the mid-1960s, with leftist guerrilla factions including the ELN and the FARC causing over 200,000 deaths and the displacement of over five million people. So it seemed unthinkable that on October 2, 2016, the country voted No in a referendum to ratify a peace treaty already publicly signed by President Santos and Timofchenko, leader of the Farc. And a little instead, considering the odds before, President Santos was given the Nobel Peace Prize, and had also received a massive white marble dose on behalf of the country from Colombia's most famous living artist, Fernando Botero.

But Colombia's muddled politics are mainly complicated. Not only because of the guerrillas, but largely because in the 1980s the government wasn't really in charge. Until his death in 1993, power was ultimately in the hands of the country's biggest "businessman", Pablo Escobar, head of the Medellín cocaine cartel, who in 1987 took *Playboy* magazine's five-over-billionaire list. The result: for the last 40 years the government has been playing catch-up due to the corruption brought about by the cocaine industry—and prior to that, Colombia's other notorious raw materials, including gold, emeralds, quinine, tobacco and rubber. Ten days after the no vote, it feels ironic to stand beneath the statue of Simón Bolívar, who battled in 1810 for Colombia's independence, when today the square is filled with peace protesters. And just a couple of nights ago, artist Doris Salcedo covered the entire Plaza Bolívar in white sheets covered in the names of the victims of the civil conflict. It looks as if a peace agreement will be reached, but in the meantime, if there's one silver lining to political regression, it's that art has to become powerful again.

Nearside art, there's no better way to understand a country than via its grub. So I head to Patoquepasa, the city's food market, accompanied by one of Bogotá's top chefs, Felipe Arévalo. The market's a massive maze, selling everything from cheap colorful bustles (which look very similar to the ones fashion label Marni sells for a fortune), to pizza soup (I bottle it, figuratively speaking) to *chicharrón*—an entire pig stuffed with rice, peas and spices and cooked in a brick oven for 12 hours (delicious). I stick to Felipe like glue as he navigates the stalls greeting friends and suppliers. We reach a fruit-and-veg stand, where, eyes wide, I spy at least 20 different types of fruit I've never seen, let alone tasted. I nibble on a rose that leaves my teeth stained yellow like an old hag, and try a *chirimoya*, the fruit Mark Twain described as "the most



delicious fruit known to man". Next stop, a herb stall selling both remedies and potent alibis, including henbane, the plant that was said to have killed Socrates. There's also stacks of fresh coca leaf, legal and much chewed in this, in basic, unprocessed form. Yet right now, across the country, it's being cooked up in jungle laboratories to create something much more pernicious. I'm told cocaine production is still as big as ever, because while the world continues

to consume, Colombia continues to produce. Why wouldn't they? But since Escobar's death in 1993, the industry has apparently gone deep underground, with the new norm keeping a low profile, having learnt from Escobar's ultimately fatal desire to be a public figure and politician. But the funny thing is, on the whole Colombians aren't coke consumers. Having lived with the bloodshed, terror and pain that goes into producing each gram of snorting powder they don't want to be on the receiving end of it.

Leaving the capital, I head to Providencia, a tiny Caribbean island closer to Nicaragua than Colombia, home to a 700-year-old English Creole-speaking Rastaf culture and said to be stuffed with pirates' gold. Part of what makes this island special is that it's kind of a pain to get to. Fly to the island of San Andrés, then hop on one of just two rickety 70-seater flights a day, scattering berries as you land on a grassy runway between lush peaks.

It's important to know that, outside of the major cities, Colombia is way behind in terms of high-end hotels, probably because of the war, the country's precarious reputation and the fact that there are

other, seemingly safer, South American countries to visit. Until very recently, tourists visiting Colombia have been told backpackers on the hippie trail or folk staying with chic friends. It won't be behind for long. But for now, the key is to find either small, family-run hotels or private homes to stay. Be warned: some of the supposed luxury hotels aren't up to the mark. So on Providencia, it's about renting *Monasterio del Valle*, which comes with its own chef and overwater terraces decorated with fairy lights, glowing moonballs and intricate mosaics, looking out to the tiny, perfect island of Grib Cay.

But after a morning spent diving the world's third-longest barrier reef, followed by lunch at El Dinosaurio Niko, bare feet in powder-soft sand, sipping palming and a nice plate of lobster, crab and conch, this is the moment to question what luxury means. If the answer is gold taps, welcome drinks, cold towels and a hovering butler, then don't go to Providencia. But if morning coffee in a Mini Moka, sipping up to Meditation Rock or knocking amongst the mangroves before having supper in a sherbet-colored chateau house called Caribbean Place, where the Bogotá-trained chef Martín Quintana makes his famous crab chow in a cream-and-beansy sauce, before ending the night with a *Coco Loco* cocktail in *pilsa criolla* in a fresh coconut at *Rebana's* Rooftop bar on *Mazarrillo* Bay, is your speed, then go to Providencia quick.

Three flights later, I've swapped the turquoise water of the Caribbean for the caramel fief of the Amazon, arriving at the frontier town of Leticia. I meet Diego Saenz, an artist whose father

TALKING ABOUT A REVOLUTION

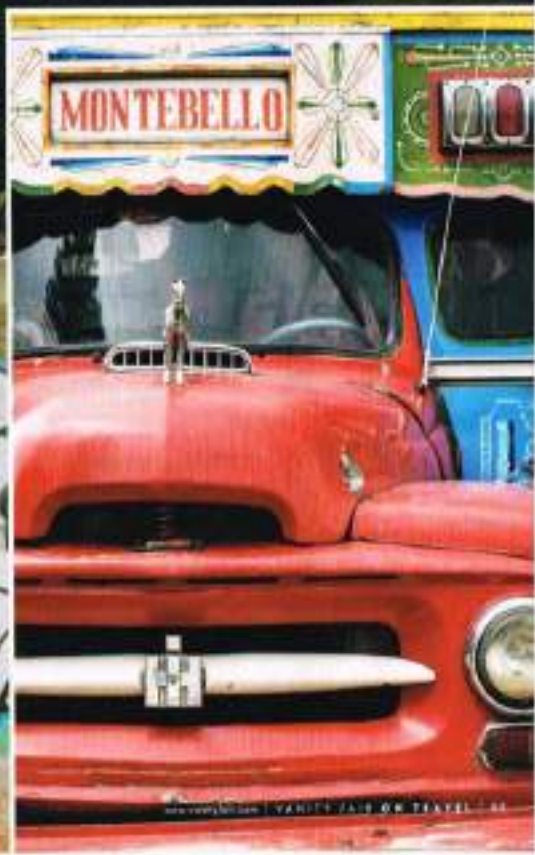
Outdoor dining at *The Five Seasons Bogotá*. Despite the Plaza Bolívar, Bogotá: the city's very unimpressive main square, viewed for its historical value.





THE EMERALD FOREST

Click here from my App. This page will fall in line. Carragony a string shop on Pindarock, one of Colombia's Caribbean islands, the one in the Tarraha National Natural Park, on the Caribbean coast. In a rare nearby forest in the Amazon region, south of Cauca, Leticia, Colombia contains. It is one of the world's butterfly species, especially. Cauca's Leticia, a colorful town on the main waterway, still Bogotá.





DO NOT ADJUST YOUR SET

The eye-popping colors of Colombia at El Dorado restaurant in the coffee region of Armenia, above; and, below, a boat enroute off the coast of Providencia



Germana Sampaer is one of the leading lights of modern architecture in Colombia, having worked with Le Corbusier in Paris and built Bogotá's Gold Museum. We spend our way through the steamy chaos of Leticia, between cars, ferries and motorbikes, all jostling for position. Then hop into a little speedboat and head upriver, faces turned to the welcome breeze.

With Brazil behind me, Peru to my left and Colombia to my right, the full impact hits hard. I'm in the Amazon basin, which makes up two per cent of the world's landmass and contains 50 per cent of the world's species. The cruise-dial is cranked up further as pink dolphins leap above the boat—a bit of Gabriel García Márquez's magic realism, right there rising up before me.

After a couple of hours watching river life float by—fishermen tending their lines, women washing on the banks, kids playing football on a spit of sand—we arrive at Sampaer's home. The tide is low, so reaching Calzon Lodge is a skillful walk-the-plank over a sea of butterflies (Colombia has 88 per cent of the world's butterfly species). The jungle is overwhelming, and the Lodge—comprising four houses, an artist's studio, a nice tent and kitchen—all beautifully built by Sampaer; the bones of the buildings made of wood, the sky-like walls made of mosquito netting. The result is, ethereal structures that, once you're inside, protect you from bugs but mean that you're right in the jungle; from the howling dawn at sunset to the strange howls and whoops at night to the dawn alarm-clock of working weaver birds.

While Calzon Lodge is incredibly comfortable, the rainforest is not. The gear doesn't help. Forget Kery-style safari elegance. It's about Do-It-Yourself and trousers tucked into socks (the ants here bite like dogs, tucked into Wellington boots). Not my first choice of outfit for 30-degree heat and 90 per cent humidity. But protection is key when you're in the jungle. I take five cold showers a day but the lovely cool feeling only lasts a few seconds and it's back to sweaty, itchy and stinky. I'm in total awe of my guide Jorge, in thick jeans, thick polo shirt, waffles, and not a bead of sweat upon his brow. Jorge is a literal posse-hunter-turned-gamekeeper. When once upon a time he hunted big game (probably jaguars), he now imparts his knowledge and love of the forest to rangers. We walk for hours as he machetes a path through the jungle, pointing out emerald-green beetles, jaguarsacks and the marks of a snake on a tree. After sunset we head out on night safari, and it's as if Jorge is wearing military-grade night-vision goggles, spotting woodpeckers in their holes and huge, hairy toucans guarding their homes in the ground.

Yes, tarantulas. Being a mild arachnophobic, my usually behaviour on spotting a sodding great hairy-legged tarantula on the mosquito net above my head on a 1-up on cactus wrapped in banana leaves is not my finest hour. But I man up, because a curious spider is a small price to pay after a day spent visiting the local village of San Martín, listening to tales of uncontacted tribes before cruising back down the river at sunset alongside plinking kingfishers. Back at Calzon, I sip on a cool caipirinha while being serenaded by chattering monkeys and watching fireflies compete with lightning above the river water—better than any fireworks. I'm already plotting my return visit.

As I head for home, I realize that despite all the warnings, the biggest threat for the entire trip was from a spider. I glance at my phone before take-off and, on cue, there's a texted from my original Mr Nones: "I hope you had a great time in my country. Maybe you could meet my wife." It turns out we live a few streets apart in London. Gracias, Colombia. For the warmth of non-welcome-drink welcomes. And for your refreshing lack of cold towels. Bye, do you deserve prize. ☺

COLOMBIA



Armenia (armenia.com) specialises exclusively in bespoke luxury travel to Colombia, offering tailor-made itineraries throughout the country, expert-led guiding and on-the-ground concierges. A 10-day personalised holiday starts from £2,995 per person. Direct international flights from London to Bogotá with Avianca start from £600 per person return. For more information on Colombia, visit colombia.travel/en.

BESTING YOU'RE IN THE HOLIDAYMOOD...

It would be criminal to go to Colombia and not visit Cartagena. Driving into the city for the first time, you're instantly robbed, but only of your breath; bourgeoisie birdsies from balconied colonial houses the colour of sunset along carved streets. If like Porters, New Orleans and Havana have all been shown in the Virgin. The Casa San Agustín, which is built around Cartagena's oldest aqueduct and runs showers-like above a courtyard pool, delivers oasis-like refuge from the steamy city. But only briefly, as out on the street the love of dancers in the Plaza de San Diego, restaurants (such as the modern Colombian, Carmes), and busy boutiques selling gems by Johanna Ortiz and the best of Colombia's burgeoning fashion industry is too strong to keep you passive for long. Cartagena has a down-the-rabbit-hole vibe; it's a handle too far.

Head for the hills—the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains, to be precise, where a helicopter will drop you at Casa Galvanita, a wooden lodge in the lush rainforest that looks down to the Caribbean below. It's a twitcher's delight, with over 20 endemic bird species to be spotted. At sea level, visit Girasol del Mar for a down dog, a massage in a treehouse and delicious fusion food on a wild beach.

After the sticky Amazon, where you sometimes wonder if you'll ever feel dry again, a refreshing antidote is a few days in the coffee region of Armenia; a hot shower and sleeping beneath a snugly duvet is an unexpected delight. Stay at Hacienda Barbosa, a working farm owned by Fernando I racing driver Juan Pablo Montoya and his family. The Hacienda is surrounded by zesty gardens and a coffee farm with views over the dramatic Quindío mountains. Equally magical is Helena, a restaurant in the town of Filandia. Not only is the farm-to-table food delicious but the space is also a coloured-balloon-filled fantasy that inspires forever.

And for a final hit of magic realism, visit Bar Enano in Bogotá. Like a Russian doll, it's a bar within a bar. First, go through Beto el Bandido (for a great co-ca-u-va), and at the back of the garden, enter a tiny wood-paneled room hung with old Playboy covers. Like a spookhouse, it feels wondrously naughty—helped along by French 75 and Sugar Constellation cocktails.