

The Magic of Colombia

By Lisa Loverro, JAXFAX, November 2011

Your client wants a trip to Colombia and you're not sure where to begin. What's safe and what's not? Well, the good news is most of Colombia is very safe and a viable option for those looking to have an authentic, cultural holiday.

Historic Cartagena

The newest jewel of the Caribbean, Cartagena, has finally landed Colombia on the map as a mainstream destination for American tourists. Sitting on the



northern coast of Colombia, Cartagena de Indias, as it is officially called, is a large seaport city with a population of approximately 1.2 million. In 1980, Cartagena was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The “old town” district of Cartagena is a beautiful Spanish Colonial walled city consisting of impressive fortresses, magnificent cathedrals, large plazas and quaint cobblestone streets lined with balconied homes. The more modern and wealthier district, Bocagrande, is adorned with high-rise condos, hotels and an abundance of shops and restaurants.

As in most cities, one should “hit the ground running” and walk as much as possible throughout the old city. The historic appeal of this city is what makes Cartagena uniquely different from other Caribbean destinations. If your client is looking to lounge on the beach with an umbrella drink, Cartagena is not for them. If however, they have a thirst for history, architecture, culture and good food, they will more than enjoy strolling through the many squares, cathedrals and fortresses within the walled city. Among the most formidable fortresses, the San Felipe de Barajas is a beautiful structure with massive walls rising some 135 feet above the sea and is considered the greatest and strongest ever built by the Spaniards in their colonies.



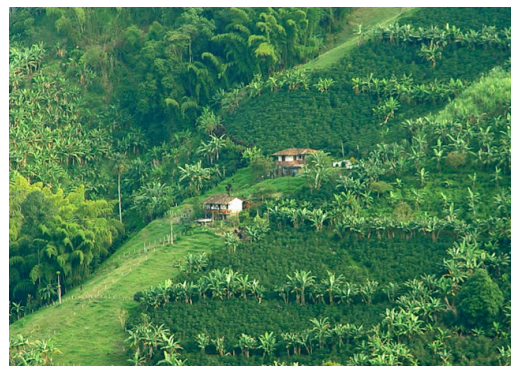
The Convento de La Popa, perched atop a hill, is the highest point of the city and offers scenic views. The Cathedral of Santo Domingo is one of the most popular churches, although all are uniquely beautiful and worth a visit. A trip to the areas of Bocagrande and El Laguito, located on an L-shaped peninsula facing the Caribbean, make for a nice afternoon activity. These two upscale areas can be accessed via a short cab ride from the old city.

At sunset, a popular happy hour destination, Café Del Mar www.cafedelmarcartagena.com an outdoor café perched high up on a fortress, attracts people for spectacular sunset views. In the late evening, a horse-drawn carriage ride around the old city is a beautiful and romantic experience, easily arranged through the hotels. A short boat ride from Cartagena to the Islas Del Rosario, an archipelago consisting of 27 small coral islands, makes for an ideal day trip. Cruises depart year-round from the Muelle Turistico in Cartagena and can be arranged directly through all of the hotels. Scuba diving, shopping, and a visit to an aquarium are all available on the islands. Playa Blanca is undoubtedly the nicest beach off Cartagena.

Lodging in the city varies from five-star to boutique hotels. Inside the walled city, the Sofitel Santa Clara www.sofitel.com is a five-star hotel located in the heart of the historic downtown district. This 17th century convent-turned-resort is comprised of 119 rooms, including 17 suites. It's sister property, the Charleston Santa Teresa www.hotelcharleston.com also a restored 17th century convent, features 52 standard deluxe rooms, 10 superior deluxe, 23 junior suites and 5 grand suites, with one presidential suite. For a boutique stay, the Hotel Delirio www.deliriohotel.com is a renovated Colonial building in the historic center of Cartagena. The hotel features 17 rooms decorated in a minimalist, modern style. Their top floors include a Terrace Bar with spectacular views of the city. Outside of the walled city, the Hilton Hotel www.hilton.com at the tip of El Laguito Peninsula is near some of Cartagena's more populated beaches. A popular tourist site and approximately 25 miles north of Cartagena, a mud volcano known as Volcan de Toturno gives a whole new meaning to the mud wrap treatment. Visitors can enter the crater and slip into a relaxing mud bath. The nearby lagoon serves as a natural bath for washing off the mud. The trip makes for a fun-filled day and is highly recommended. Non-stop flights from Miami and Ft. Lauderdale are offered to Cartagena via Avianca www.avianca.com and Spirit www.spiritair.com respectively.

The Coffee Triangle

With some of the best coffee in the world, a visit to the Coffee Triangle, or “Triangulo del Café” is a great option for clients looking to discover the undiscovered Colombia. It's safe and non-touristy, offering a wealth of culture and adventure. The cities comprising the triangle are Armenia, Manizales and Pereira; all three are unique and very different with outdoor adventure, nature exploration and coffee sipping. The city of Pereira is the most cosmopolitan with nightlife that rivals any of the big cities in this country. Your client can fly directly into the city of Armenia on Spirit Airlines from Ft. Lauderdale and with Avianca connecting through Bogota...



The Recuca Plantation www.recuca.com outside of Armenia should be one of their first stops for a behind-the-scenes tour of a lush and leafy coffee plantation. Next, a trip to the Cocora Valley National Park with rolling hillside offers horseback riding, hiking and mountain biking. For the thrill seeker, zip lining over the coffee fields is not only exhilarating, but one of the most scenic experiences in the world. A multitude of spots offer zip lining... A visit to El Mariposario (The Butterfly Vivarium) near the Botanical Garden in Calarca is a unique visit to view a butterfly sanctuary.



Accommodations in the region include the Hotel Pereira www.hoteldepereira.com located in the heart of the city of Pereira. It's a four-star property, clean and safe with a friendly staff. The rooms are spotless and the pulse of the city is at your fingertips as just up the road are numerous restaurants and nightclubs. The Hotel Sazagua www.sazagua.com is a luxury boutique hotel, ideal for a peaceful retreat away from the city. Set among palm trees and tropical plants, the hotel also houses the Prana Spa for soothing treatments after a day of touring. Their presidential suite is large and comfy and won't break the wallet.

For active travelers, a trip to the national park located in the Central Andes Mountains is highly recommended. Nevada del Ruiz, also known by the indigenous name Kumunday, is the highest peak and the easiest to climb. The mountain is accessible from Manizales and well worth a visit. It's a great day trip high above the clouds.

Flower Power in Medellin

An unlikely destination due to the legacy of Pablo Escobar, Medellin is a mountainous city sitting at 5000 feet. Known as the “city of eternal spring”, Medellin has perfect weather year-round and is home to one of the most beautiful festivals in the country, “La Feria de las Flores” or Festival of Flowers held during the month of August. It’s a perfect time to send a client looking to experience a beautiful and colorful festival. One of the nicer hotels, the Intercontinental Hotel



www.ichotelsgroup.com is located in one of the more revitalized areas of town. Must visits include the Botero Museum and Botanical Gardens. Non-stop service is offered on Avianca and American Airlines www.aa.com from Miami.

So whether it’s Cartagena, a historical treasure on the sea, Medellin, a metropolis of art and culture or the Coffee Triangle region, with the emphasis on nature and the outdoors, you can’t go wrong sending your clients to this hospitable and cultural country.