Tour Code
CM1

ADVENTURESABROAD

COLOMBIAN HEARTLANDS

Medellin, Cartagena & the Cafetera

12 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Bogota

We arrive in Bogota, Colombia, and make our way to our hotel.

Colombia's capital was once known as Santa Fe de Bogota, and Bogotanos still carry a reputation for civility good enough to have earned the city an old nickname, the Athens of the Americas.

Set at over 2600 m/8,530 ft in the eastern ranges of the Cordillera, this is where the country's art, academia, history, culture and government all converge, Colombia's working centre, not just its capital.

Over the days ahead, two versions of this country's story will keep surfacing, often on the same wall: the walls the Spanish built to keep people out, and the walls Colombians have since reclaimed to say who they are.

Bogota gives us the second kind first. Some of the most respected street art in the Americas is a short walk from tonight's hotel, and we go looking for it tomorrow.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Bogota: Paloquemao Market, Cerro Monserrate & Gold Museum

This morning we visit the Plaza de Mercado de Paloquemao, Bogota's best-known flower and food market and the point where produce from the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, the Andes and the tropical lowlands all meet under one roof.

The market runs in sections, flowers, then fruit and vegetables and herbs, then meat and fish, and gives us as good a read on daily Bogota life as any museum will.

A cable car then lifts us to Cerro Monserrate, crowned by a church built around the statue of Senor Caido, the fallen Christ, and a pilgrimage site since colonial times.

The afternoon belongs to the walls. Bogota draws some of the world's most respected graffiti artists to paint its streets, and we spend the next few hours in the old quarter of La Candelaria tracing their work, crossing Plaza de Bolivar and stopping at La Puerta Falsa, a 200-year-old restaurant, for the local sweets.

We then step from the street into the Botero Museum, built around the collection of Fernando Botero, Colombia's best-known painter and sculptor, whose more than 100 pieces here share wall space with Dali, Picasso, Monet and Matisse.

We close the day at the Gold Museum, whose collection of pre-Hispanic gold work is considered the finest anywhere, well laid out with English-language explanations throughout.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Bogota: Catedral de Sal & Paso Fino Horse Ranch

This morning we travel north to Zipaquira to visit the Salt Cathedral, a Roman Catholic church carved 200 m/660 ft underground inside the tunnels of a still-working salt mine.

The tunnels themselves date to the Muisca period, long before the church was cut into them; today curving passages lead past 14 small chapels representing the Stations of the Cross, each with its own cross and kneeling platform carved directly into the salt.

It is one more kind of wall put to work here, this one shaped by hand into a place of devotion rather than painted with one.

Miners themselves built the first chapel in 1954 for their own spiritual protection underground; safety concerns closed it in 1990, and the cathedral we visit today reopened in 1995 to current engineering standards. The mine is still active, salt extraction continuing alongside the pilgrims and visitors who come for the chapels.

From Zipaquira we continue to a traditional hacienda on the outskirts of Bogota for a taste of local gastronomy, starting with ajiaco, Colombia's classic chicken and potato soup, followed by a private exhibition of Colombia's paso fino horses, celebrated for their smooth gait.

Because of tomorrow's early departure, we return to our hotel this evening with dinner left open for you to arrange on your own.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 4 Bogota - Fly to Cafetera Region & Coffee Experience

Early this morning we fly from Bogota to Armenia (or Pereira, depending on schedule), gateway to Colombia's Coffee Triangle, inscribed by UNESCO in 2011 as a landscape of deep green hillsides shaped entirely by small-scale farming.

The isolation once imposed here by civil war and by the central Andes at its eastern edge has, in recent years, turned into an asset: this is now the heart of Colombia's rural tourism industry, built on history, ecology and a growing pride in knowing where things come from.

Once we land, a hands-on coffee experience walks us through the full process, from cultivation and harvesting to roasting and tasting, in soil and climate that make this region genuinely suited to growing quality coffee.

We spend the night in Salento, one of the oldest and smallest towns in Quindio department. Remarkably well preserved, it survives on coffee, trout farming and a growing number of visitors drawn to its quiet streets, paisa architecture and closeness to the Valle de Cocora.

NOTE: hotels here are small and simple, with limited luggage help and a 15 to 20 minute walk to dinner; pack a flashlight and sturdy, well-treaded shoes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Salento: Barbas Bremen Nature Reserve & Cocora Valley

We begin the day at the Barbas Bremen reserve, an easy 2 km/1.2 mi walk through river and forest habitat that is home to howler monkeys, butterflies and a long list of birds; your Tour Leader will brief you on specifics the night before.

From there we stop in Filandia, a gentler counterpoint to Salento's dramatic peaks, set instead amid rolling coffee hills. Founded in 1878 and nicknamed La Colina Iluminada, the Illuminated Hill, its name translates as Daughter of the Andes.

Tile-roofed houses here are painted in blues, greens and oranges, not murals with a message, just two centuries of a town keeping its own colour scheme, and a blue-and-white colonial church anchors the square, its beams original to the town's founding.

Daily life still runs on coffee and craft rather than tourism: look for bejuco wickerwork, baskets and furniture woven from vine-like fibres in a tradition tied to the coffee harvest, and shops selling hand-knit ponchos, sweaters and scarves.

Quindio's bimodal rainfall gives farmers here two harvests a year rather than one, part of why this small department produces such a disproportionate share of the country's coffee.

If time allows, we finish at the mirador that gives Filandia its nickname, with views across the Quindio valleys and coffee-planted hills.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Salento - Cocora Valley - Fly to Medellin

This morning we walk in the Valle de Cocora, just east of Salento, among towering wax palms, Colombia's national tree and, at up to 60 m/197

ft, the tallest palm species on Earth.

The valley has been a protected sanctuary since the 1980s for the endemic yellow-eared parrot that nests among the palms.

NOTE: reaching the palms means walking some distance on unpaved, occasionally slippery terrain; raise any mobility concerns with your Tour Leader beforehand.

This evening we fly to Medellin and settle into El Poblado, a modern neighbourhood that gives little hint of the city's history. Medellin is Colombia's second city and the capital of Antioquia department, set in the Aburra Valley and ringed by the Andes.

In the 1980s and 90s its name was synonymous with cartel violence; since then it has carried out one of the more striking urban turnarounds in Latin America, rebuilding itself around inclusion rather than division.

Cable cars now link hillside barrios once cut off from downtown to the metro system below, transit infrastructure built as much for social repair as for transportation.

Glass towers, colonial-era streets, serious museums and street art that tells the city's own story of reinvention all sit within a few blocks of each other, Medellin's version of a wall reclaimed, this time at city scale.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Medellin: City & Area Touring

Today's walking tour traces Medellin's transformation directly, block by block. We start in the historic centre, where the difficult decades of the 1980s and 90s gave way to a deliberate, city-wide effort to make Medellin an inclusive place, one where every neighbourhood, not just the wealthy ones, gets a say in how the city looks and functions.

We see the result first as art: the street murals of Comuna San Javier, painted largely by residents rather than commissioned from outside, and the massive bronze figures of Fernando Botero filling the plaza at the city centre.

Nearby, the Medellin Memorial Center lays out the harder history behind that art, the cartel and gang violence that once defined the city's reputation, without softening it.

After lunch, the metro carries us to San Javier station, where we board a cable car built to connect hillside comunas to downtown, transit as social policy, and our own aerial view of the Aburra Valley and the steep terrain that once kept these neighbourhoods isolated.

We close the day at Medellin's Botanical Garden, a green space set in the middle of the city, where we stroll the paths at an easy pace and take in the plantings, including the orchid collection, time permitting.

Overnight in Medellin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Medellin & Guatape

Today we leave the city for Guatape, a village in the hills of Antioquia relocated to its present site in the 1970s, when the Guatape hydroelectric dam flooded its original location.

Rather than let that history disappear, the community turned to its house fronts: nearly every building in town now carries a mural recording a family trade, a memory or a piece of local history in colour. It is the same instinct we saw in Medellin's comunas, applied here on a much smaller and more personal scale.

We start with an hour-long cruise on Lake Guatape, the reservoir the dam created, its shoreline now dotted with weekend homes for Medellin's wealthier residents, before wandering the murals themselves on foot.

From the village we climb El Penol, a granite monolith rising straight out of the water nearby. A staircase of more than 700 steps leads to the top, where the reward is a 360-degree view over the lake, its islands and the green countryside beyond, among the more memorable vantage

points on this trip.

We return to Medellin for dinner and the night.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Medellin - Fly to Cartagena: Old Town Walking Tour

This morning we fly to Cartagena, on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Founded in 1533 by the Spaniard Pedro de Heredia and named for the port of Cartagena in Spain's Murcia region, it became one of the major centres of early Spanish settlement in the Americas.

In time it also became one of the most heavily defended cities in the Americas, and one of the main ports through which enslaved Africans were brought into Spanish South America. Its colonial core is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This afternoon we walk that core: Plaza de Bolivar, the Cathedral of Cartagena, San Pedro Claver Square and San Pedro Church, then the narrow, balcony-shaded streets of the walled Old City itself, where flowers spill from wooden railings and tiled patios hide behind unmarked doorways.

The walls that give the district its name are not decorative, they run nearly the full circumference of the old town, standing 4 m/13 ft tall and, in places, 18 m/59 ft thick, built by the Spanish to keep out exactly the kind of visitors we are today.

The historic centre is flat, compact and made for walking, with a photograph waiting at nearly every corner.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Cartagena: San Fernando Fortress & La Popa Monastery

Cartagena's geography is as defensive as its walls. The city sits on a cluster of islands at the mouth of a bay, its original marshland filled in to connect it to the mainland, with bridges linking the districts and lagoons still separating the suburbs from the old walled centre.

Today we see how far that defensive instinct went. San Fernando Fortress, on the island of Tierra Bomba, once guarded the harbour approach against corsairs; nearby, the well-preserved Fortress of San Rafael tells the same story from a different angle.

In the old city itself, the Fortress of San Felipe stands as one of the most complete pieces of Spanish military engineering anywhere in the Americas.

Its defences held in 1741 against a British fleet of more than 180 ships under Admiral Vernon, one of the largest amphibious assaults before the 20th century, turned back by a badly outnumbered Spanish garrison.

We finish at La Popa Monastery, on Cartagena's highest ground, where the view finally turns from defense to result: modern high-rises and the old walled city laid out together, 360 degrees of a place that spent three centuries planning for attacks that, mostly, never came.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Cartagena: Palenque & Leisure Time

This morning we travel two hours to San Basilio de Palenque, founded by Benkos Bioho and other escaped slaves, and registered as the first free town for enslaved people anywhere in the Americas, over a century before abolition reached the rest of the country.

There were no walls here, defensive or otherwise, just a community that walked out from under the ones the Spanish had built and made its own rules.

With a local guide we step into homes, share food and drink, hear traditional music and learn about a language and culture recognized by UNESCO, still spoken and taught nowhere else on Earth. After roughly 90 minutes we head back to Cartagena by way of Bocagrande and

Manga.

Palenque's population today numbers under four thousand, small enough that the language and customs UNESCO recognized have survived mostly through direct teaching from one generation to the next.

The rest of the day is yours, with lunch and exploration on your own. If you would like a suggestion, Cartagena's Gold Museum is worth the visit: a small but rich collection built around the Zenu people, who lived across what are now the departments of Bolivar, Cordoba, Sucre and northern Antioquia long before the Spanish arrived.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Departure

We depart from Cartagena, having traced Colombia's story in three kinds of wall: the ramparts and fortresses the Spanish raised to keep people out, the murals and street art Colombians have since claimed to say who they are, and San Basilio de Palenque, which simply refused to build one at all. Buen viaje!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast