Tour Code
CM5

ADVENTURESABROAD

COLOMBIA & PANAMA

21 days

Created on: 16 Nov, 2026

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 Cartagena, Colombia - Panama City, Panama

Today we fly from Cartagena to Panama City.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Partial Canal Transit

Today delivers the experience this tour is named for: a partial transit of the Panama Canal. A short drive to Balboa port puts us aboard a ferry and into the canal itself.

At Miraflores Locks, our ship rises 16 m/52 ft through two gravity-fed chambers, no pumps, just water finding its own level, the same principle that has moved ships here since 1914. Pedro Miguel Locks lift us a further 26 m/85 ft, drawing on Gatun Lake's own reserves to do the work.

The original locks, opened in 1914, measure 33.5 m/110 ft wide, a limit that defined the maximum size of oceangoing ships for nearly a century until a wider set opened alongside them in 2016. Small, powerful locomotives called mules guide the ship through the narrow chambers, holding it steady while gravity handles the heavy lifting.

Beyond the locks we cross the Continental Divide and reach Gamboa, headquarters of the canal's dredging division, still clearing the same landslide-prone cut that defeated the original French effort in the 1880s.

Every drop of water raising us through these chambers fell as rain somewhere in the watershed we cross later this trip, proof that this entire system runs, quite literally, downhill.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 14 Panama City: Portobelo & Agua Clara Locks

We trace two very different ways of moving wealth across this isthmus, three centuries apart.

A bus first takes us to Portobelo, once the Caribbean terminus for Spain's entire Pacific trade. An annual fair here ran thirty to sixty days, moving ten to twelve million gold pesos at a stretch, before pirate raids grew persistent enough that Spain abandoned the route in 1738.

Fort San Geronimo and Fort Santiago still stand guard over a harbour long since gone quiet, though it once anchored more treasure than any other port in the Spanish Americas. Inside San Felipe Church, the Black Christ, a life-sized wooden Jesus found on the shore under circumstances nobody fully agrees on, draws pilgrims from across Central America each October.

NOTE: some monuments may be inaccessible due to ongoing renovations.

From Portobelo we continue to Agua Clara Locks, part of the canal's modern expansion, where overflow tanks recycle 60 per cent of the fresh water each transit uses, gravity doing now what it did for Spanish galleons then, just with better bookkeeping.

We finish the day boarding the Interoceanic Train at Colon for the run back to the capital. Completed in 1855, it was the world's first transcontinental railway, just 80 km/50 mi long, and it carried Gold Rush prospectors long before it carried canal freight.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Parque Metropolitano & Amerindian Village

A short drive from the skyscrapers, Parque Metropolitano protects a wedge of tropical forest inside the city limits. A trail climbs to a 150 m/490 ft mirador with views across the city, the bay and the canal reaching toward Miraflores.

In the afternoon we travel by boat to an Embera village on the Chagres watershed, one of the river systems the canal depends on for its water. The Chagres was dammed in 1935 to create Gatun Lake, flooding an entire river valley to build the canal's summit level.

The Embera and Choco peoples have adapted to this changed landscape while keeping much of their traditional life intact, still building homes on stilts above the seasonal floodline.

Guides walk us through basket weaving using natural fibres and explain the medicinal uses of local plants, knowledge passed down rather than written. Jagua dye, pressed from a local fruit, still marks ceremonial occasions, and dugout canoes tied along the riverbank are carved much as they would have been before Spanish ships first appeared offshore.

It is a useful corrective: the canal moves the world's cargo through this watershed, but people have been reading this same forest, on its own terms, for far longer than ships have needed it to cooperate.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Panama City Touring - Fly to David, Chiriqui Highlands

Panama City's morning belongs to its own layered history. Casco Viejo, the colonial quarter dating to the late 1600s, replaced the original settlement at Panama Viejo after Henry Morgan's pirates burned it to the ground.

Its streets mix Spanish colonial, French and early Republican architecture, layer on layer. Monuments here honour Ferdinand de Lesseps and the French canal attempt that failed a generation before the Americans succeeded where he could not.

Inside San Jose Church, the Altar de Oro survives from the city's first Pacific-coast settlement in 1519, reportedly saved from Morgan's raiders by nuns who painted it black to disguise its gold.

The Panama Canal Museum closes out the morning inside de Lesseps's own former canal company headquarters, an ironic address for the story of how his project failed and America's succeeded.

By afternoon we fly to David in Chiriqui Province, trading sea level for the cloud-wrapped highlands of the Cordillera Central: volcanic peaks, coffee estates and Guaymi communities living at an elevation the canal's engineers never needed to reach.

NOTE: a 12 kg/26 lb weight restriction applies to this flight; excess baggage can be stored in Panama City.

Overnight in Chiriqui Highlands.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Chiriqui Highlands

At Cerro Punta, above 2,000 m/6,560 ft, the air turns cool and thin, our first real sense of how much vertical relief this small country contains.

Quetzals and volcano hummingbirds work the cloud forest canopy, each species keyed to its own narrow band of altitude. Some of the world's most sought-after geisha coffee grows on these same slopes, its price shaped as much by altitude and cloud cover as by flavour, and we stop to taste a cup at the source.

We continue to La Amistad International Park, a binational reserve straddling the Costa Rican border and covering more protected forest, over 400,000 hectares in total, than any other site in Central America. We walk the El Retono Trail, a 3 km/1.9 mi loop through cloud forest thick with epiphytes and orchids.

NOTE: trails are steep, uneven and often muddy; sturdy waterproof footwear is essential.

We end at Haras Cerro Punta, a thoroughbred farm raising some 200 horses in a mountain valley that could pass for bluegrass country, if bluegrass country sat on the Continental Divide.

Overnight in Chiriqui Highlands.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Chiriqui Highlands - Bocas del Toro

Today we descend from cloud forest to coral reef in a single afternoon. The drive to Almirante, on Panama's Caribbean coast, passes Fortuna Dam at the Continental Divide, the exact ridgeline where rainfall decides whether it reaches the Pacific or the Caribbean.

We cross the Palo Seco Protected Area, a buffer zone for La Amistad park, watching the vegetation thicken and the architecture trade its Spanish colonial lines for Afro-Caribbean colour as the elevation drops.

Villages along the last stretch trade zinc roofs for wooden stilt houses raised above tidal creeks, the clearest sign yet that we have left the Pacific slope behind. By the time we reach the coast for our boat transfer, the transformation is complete.

Columbus anchored here five centuries ago and named the wider region Veraguas, a contraction of verdes aguas, green waters, and it is not hard to see why once the boat pushes off into water this clear.

Overnight in Bocas del Toro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 Bocas del Toro

The Bocas del Toro archipelago is still 92 per cent forest, and today we go looking for what lives in it. The chain runs to 68 islands and countless mangrove keys, home to roughly 93,000 people scattered along the coasts, surrounded by coral fields and marine life that punches well above the region's modest land area.

Hawksbill turtles still nest on several of these beaches between March and October, drawn back to the same stretches of sand where they hatched decades earlier.

A boat tour threads between islands, past Bastimentos and its protected marine park, before putting us ashore for swimming and a walk to Red Frog Beach, named for the tiny, thumbnail-sized poison dart frogs that turn up underfoot with startling regularity.

Their calls, a chirping chorus easy to mistake for insects, are one small example of a species found nowhere else on Earth.

It is easy, on an island this quiet, to forget that this same narrow country holds one of the busiest shipping corridors on the planet. That contrast, more than any single sight, is the point of Panama.

Overnight in Bocas del Toro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Bocas de Toro - Fly to Panama City: Panama City Touring

A final morning in Bocas del Toro is ours to spend as we like, one more swim or a walk along a favourite beach before our afternoon flight back to the capital.

That flight is its own kind of highlight: in under an hour we retrace, from the air, almost everything Panama has shown us, the Caribbean archipelago falling away below, the cloud forest ridgeline where the watershed splits, and finally the canal itself, ships queued at anchor waiting their turn through the locks.

From the window we can pick out Barro Colorado Island in Gatun Lake, a research station older than most of the countries whose flags we have seen on ships this week.

This evening's farewell dinner gives us a chance to compare notes on a country that turned out to be far less about a canal than we expected, and far more about everything that canal made possible.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Departure

We depart from a country defined, in the end, by the width of ground between two oceans -- narrow enough to cross in an hour by rail, wide enough to hold cloud forest, coral reef, colonial gold and the busiest lock system on Earth.

¡Buen viaje!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast