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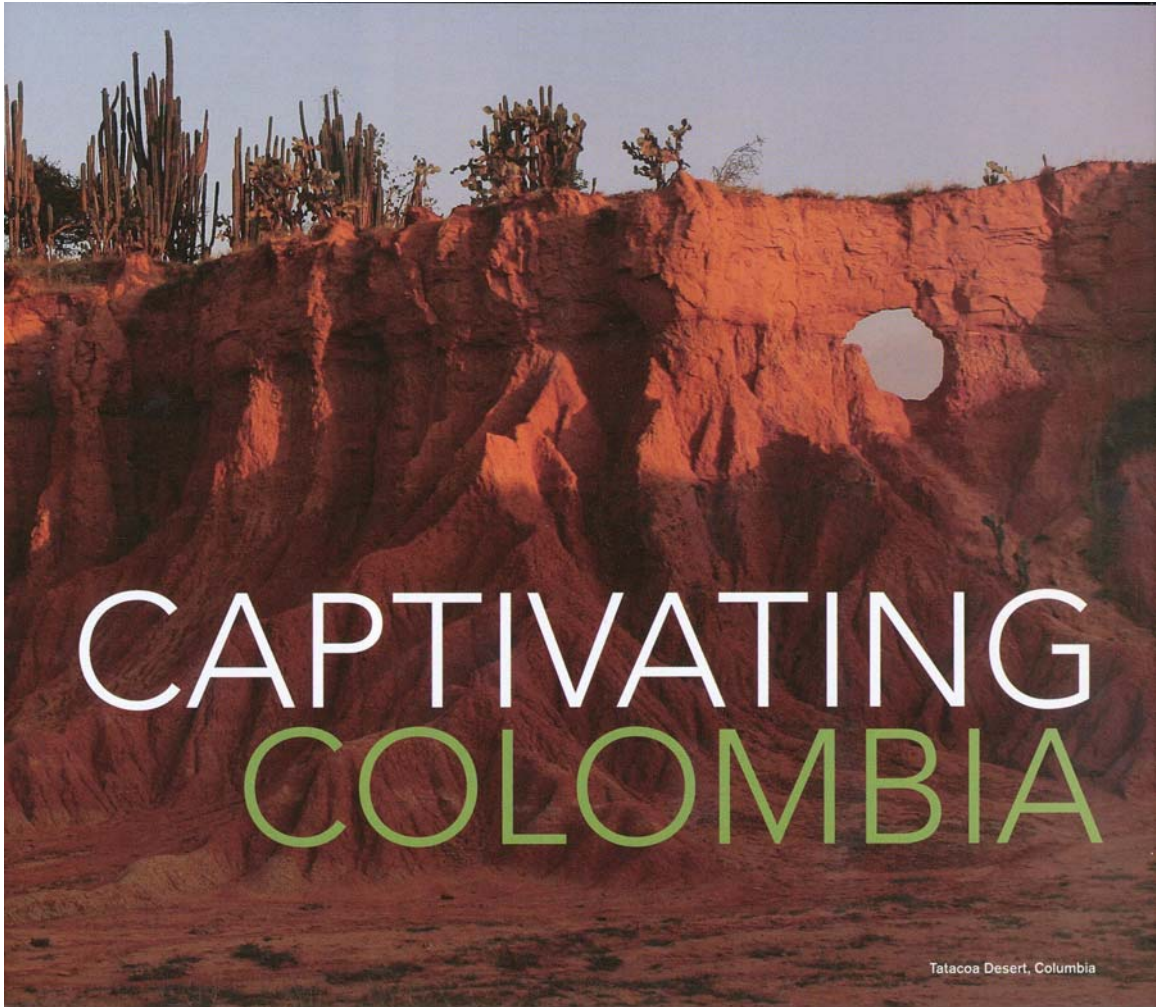
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With its dangerous reputation a thing of the past, this South American giant is just awakening to its tourism potential and, as Christopher P. Baker discovers, there's truth in the country's travel motto:

“Come to Colombia.
The only risk is
wanting to stay.”



Tatacoa Desert, Columbia

CAPTIVATING COLOMBIA

WHEN I SAW THE INVITATION, I did a double-take. Wasn't Colombia supposed to be one of the world's most dangerous places? Yet the Colombian Tourism Board was inviting me down for 10 days with a promise that kidnappings and guerrilla conflict are yesterday's news.

My research seemed to back it up. Most of the country is now safe thanks to a brass-knuckle crackdown initiated a decade ago. Word is getting out. Tourism is booming. The cruise ships have returned to swashbuckling **Cartagena**. And budget airlines JetBlue and Spirit recently expanded their service, adding to dozens of direct flights by major airlines from U.S. and Canadian gateways.

So, with some lingering doubts and trepidation, I flew down to Bogotá and... bingo! *I fell in love and wanted to stay.*

Geographically stunning, ecologically astounding and culturally vibrant sum it up. A cornucopia of natural wonders side by side with sleepy colonial villages and vibrant cosmopolitan cities, **Colombia** – a country the size of California and Texas combined – is a South American giant just awakening to its vast potential. To see it in barely more than a week, I decided to divide my time between **Bogotá**, **San Agustín** and **Cartagena**.

From above, the salient physical feature was of towering mountains. Below, snow-capped Andean peaks were beaded with lakes sparkling like Colombian emeralds. In the distance, the **Amazon** jungle unfurled beyond the horizon in an endless carpet of velvety green. Then, our plane touched down and with swift efficiency I found myself caught up in the modern

maelstrom of Bogotá, Colombia's cosmopolitan capital.

Thank goodness I'd packed some warm clothing. Sure, I was in the tropics. But Bogotá basks in a deliciously temperate climate at an elevation of almost 8,700 feet.

Founded in 1538, the city became one of the main centres of Spanish colonial power. The timeworn **La Candelaria** district, still the seat of political power, proved chock-full of historic buildings, quaint plazas and eclectic museums. The old quarter's lingering dignity is enhanced by an earthy bohemian quality that I savoured while sipping hot chocolate and *aguardiente* (a popular anise-flavoured liquor) at sidewalk cafés.

Although Christopher Columbus never set eyes on the land that today bears his name, his arrival in the Americas in 1492



Museo de Arte Moderno, Cartagena



unleashed an army of conquistadores on a quest for a fabled city of gold. Colombia's Quimbaya people perfected goldsmithing to a degree that not even Peru's Incas could match. The proof is buried in the vaults of Bogotá's world-class Museo del Oro. The world's largest gold museum held me spellbound with its jaw-dropping pre-Columbian relics. Worth the price of admission alone, the *balsa muisca* (Muisca raft) gave evidence that El Dorado (the golden one) was real: the 10-inch-long raft of filigreed gold shows a *cacique* (chieftain) and 12 attendants performing an initiation ceremony that eventually gave rise to the legend.

My accommodation in Bogotá – the elegant old-world Hotel Casa Dann Carlton – gave a foretaste of another aspect I hadn't expected: Colombia has first-rate hotels and an exciting restaurant scene. I'd anticipated trendy nightclubs and midnight-to-dawn marathons of sizzling salsa. I didn't think, though, that my revels would take place aboard a *chiva rumbera* – a dolled-up old bus turned party-on-wheels. It was great fun and wholly Colombian, with free-flowing rum and live onboard music to which to dance infectious *champeta* and *vallenato*.

On day three I flew south to Neiva and headed for the Tatacoa desert. Go figure! Just five degrees north of the equator, I was staring up at 20-foot-tall cacti probing the sky. The eerie landscape was made more surreal by the proximity of the Nevado de Huila volcano, its peak glistening with snow, as a backdrop. Colombia's landscapes are kaleidoscopic. Soon I was clawing up into the Andean foothills. Armed soldiers were

posted along the highway every few miles. At first I found it unsettling but then realized such policing is what permits you to drive the length and breadth of this stunningly beautiful country while singing along to Shakira.

Come dusk I arrived in San Agustín, one of a thousand time-warp villages that dot Colombia's highways. Women sewing lacy *polleras* (skirts) and men wearing *sombreros vueltiaos* (straw hats) made the living past almost cinematic. Reason enough to visit. But I was here to view something altogether more ancient. After chilling out the previous night at a simple hacienda, I mounted a horse and set out with local guide Davido Pérez to visit ancient tombs guarded by sculptured stone statues: massive, solemn, big-eyed, with large scowling mouths. About



Street in Cartagena



Horse and carriage, Cartagena

500 monolithic statues and tombs have been discovered. Most are enshrined within the Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín, a UNESCO World Heritage Site covering 250 square miles. Amazingly, archaeologists know nothing about the culture that made them.

When it comes to mystery, sunwashed Cartagena – my final stop – supplies it in spades. Memories came streaming back from history books as I strolled the narrow streets once roamed by conquistadores. Enclosed within thick fortress walls, Colombia's centuries-old Caribbean crown jewel is a patchwork quilt of cobbled plazas lined with cathedrals and convents. Bougainvillea spills over ancient mansions painted in guava, papaya, tangerine and other soft tropical colours.

Steeped in sentimental, sultry allure, Cartagena seemed like something out of a fairy tale. Except it was so tangibly real, teeming with endearing characters, not the least of whom were the stately *palenqueras* – Afro-Caribbean women clad in traditional garb in Crayola colours. Balancing fruit baskets atop their heads, they were happy (for a fee) to ham it up for my camera.

Emerging onto Plaza Santo Domingo, I smiled at a voluptuous nude reclining in front of an imposing colonial church by celebrated Colombian artist Fernando Botero. The cheeky statue seemed to scream “Don’t touch me there!” So I did. As do thousands of Colombians daily. They believe that Botero’s sculptures bring good fortune. Thus, they’ve fondled her bronze breasts for good luck, love and sex so much that now her nipples shine. Alas, to no avail. I slept alone.

Zen-inspired urban minimalism sums up Cartagena’s exciting, newly evolved hotel scene. A dozen or more stylishly sophisticated boutique hotels, such as the Hotel LM and the Hotel Sofitel Santa Clara, deliver divinely contemporary comfort behind antique façades. And the über-chic dining scene left me slack-jawed. Together, the trendy hotels and restaurants reflect Colombia’s bright future while showcasing the best of its picturesque past. So believe me when I say that I really didn’t want to leave. And should you go, neither will you. ☐