

## Tourist information

With dramatically beautiful rainforests, mountains and beaches, lovely cities and enchanting people, Colombia should be among the world's most attractive and intoxicating destinations. Unfortunately, the current guerrilla war, combined with ongoing activities of cocaine cartels, has made much of Colombia - dubbed 'Locombia' (the mad country) by the press - off limits to all but the most foolhardy travelers. The good news is that it's still possible to enjoy Colombia's colorful swirl of myth and mysticism. As long as you avoid all overland travel and stick to major cities and touristed areas, pay attention to the news, and keep your wits about you at all times, you'll get a safe and healthy dose of what is arguably the most underrated travel destination on the continent.

## Where to go

The Colombian calendar is awash with festivals, carnivals, fairs and beauty pageants. Some of the biggest events include: Carnaval de Blancos y Negros (Pasto; January); Semana Santa (Holy Week) (most prominent celebrations are in Popayán and Mompós; March or April); Feria de las Flores (Medellín; August); and Reinado del Coco (San Andrés; November).



**Bogotá:** Bogotá, the country's capital, is the quintessence of all things Colombian: a city of futuristic architecture, a vibrant and diverse cultural and intellectual life, splendid colonial churches and brilliant museums. It is also a city of Dickensian waifs, beggars, shantytowns, drug dealers and traffic jams. This amazing mixture of prosperity and poverty, Maseratis and mules, makes it one of the world's most chaotic, fascinating and aggressive metropolises. Sights to look out for include: Museo del Oro, which contains many relics of pre-Colombian history and is perhaps the most important museum of its kind in the world; Museo Nacional, which contains a wealth of exhibits ranging from pre-Columbian to contemporary art; Iglesia de Santa Clara, with its fresco-lined interior, images and altarpieces; Iglesia de San Ignacio, one of the most richly decorated churches in the country; the colonial barrio of La Candelaria, the oldest quarter in the city; Cerro de Monserrate, a peak flanking the city which is famous as a site of many miracles; and Jardín Botánico José Celestino Mutis, a lovely botanical garden featuring a variety of national flora.

Walking the city's streets and observing the mad to-ing and fro-ing, the avalanches of busetas, the extravagant stores and roadside stalls, is as fascinating as contemplating the serene atmosphere of the city's colonial churches and museums, so give yourself plenty of time for this sort of exploration. It's worth hanging out and watching the buskers at the Plaza de Santander, browsing at the Sunday flea market at Mercado de las Pulgas and looking (but not buying) at the street emerald market at the southwestern corner of Avenida Jiménez and Carrera 7. There is also a lively arts and entertainment scene that features theater and classical musical, discos amplifying sinuous Cuban rhythms in the trendy Zona Rosa, around Carrera 15, plus plenty of venues for watching soccer and bullfighting. Most budget travelers gravitate to La Candelaria, which has cheap accommodation and food. Fifty kilometers (31mi) northeast of Bogotá is the colonial town of Guatavita and the famous Laguna de Guatavita, the ritual center and sacred lake of the Musica Indians, and the cradle of the El Dorado myth. scuba divers.