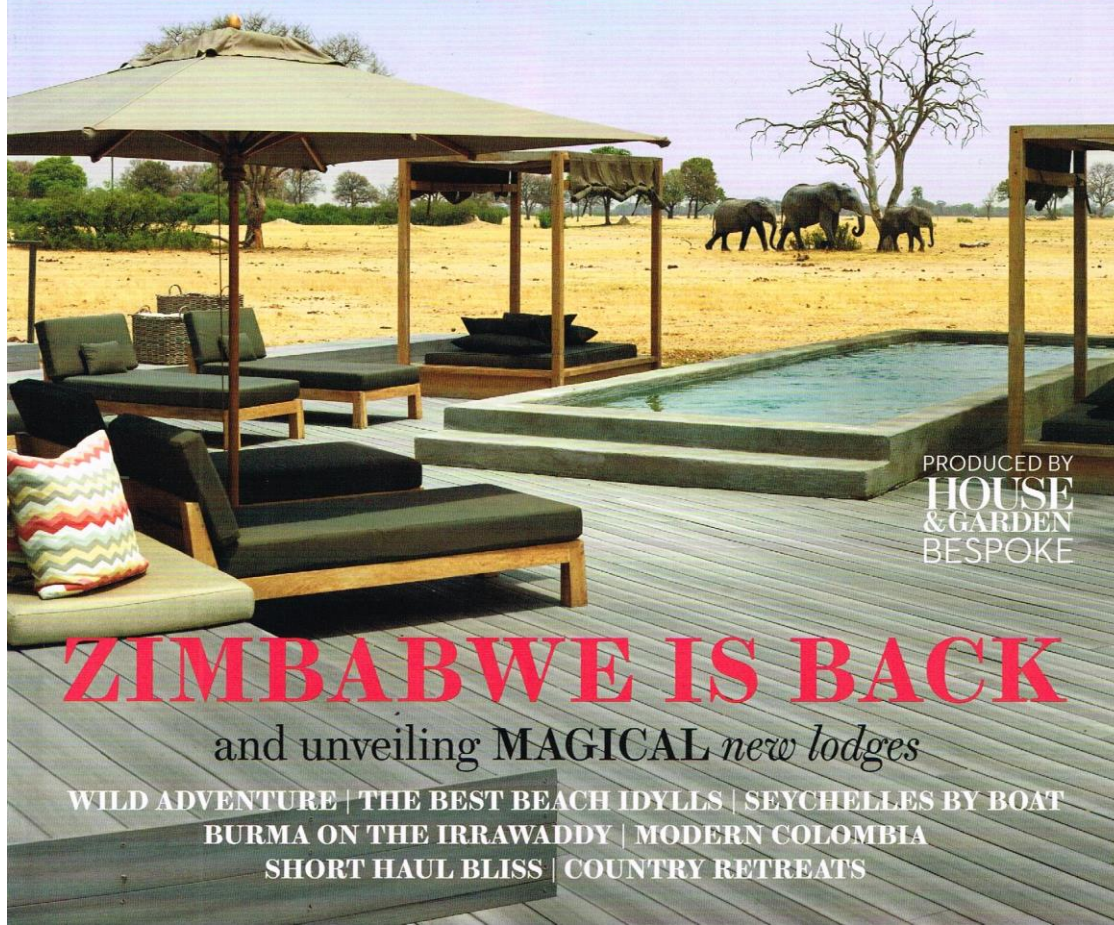


HOUSE & GARDEN DESTINATIONS

January
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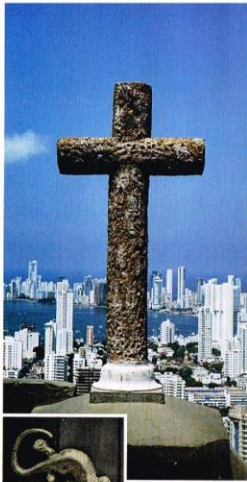


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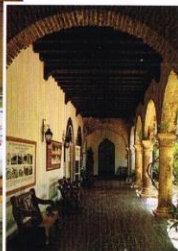
ZIMBABWE IS BACK

and unveiling *MAGICAL new lodges*

WILD ADVENTURE | THE BEST BEACH IDYLLS | SEYCHELLES BY BOAT
BURMA ON THE IRRAWADDY | MODERN COLOMBIA
SHORT HAUL BLISS | COUNTRY RETREATS



FROM LEFT A decorative door handle in Cartagena. The view over the city from Convento de la Popa. Street art in Gethsemane. The Sofitel Legend Santa Clara hotel (also far right)



To admire the majesty encompassing Cartagena de Indias, Colombia's Caribbean prized jewel, it is advised to ascend to the vantage point of El Convento de la Popa, and so we do. Laid out like a carpet is the vast curve of the harbour, outlying islands, and the streak of Boca Grande peninsula, its modern chain hotels shining like jagged white teeth. We can see San Felipe, the largest fortification in South America, a school built by the singer Shakira, smoking refineries, the dots of cruise ships and the port from which flowers, coffee, textiles, plastics and pesticides voyage out into the world. The walls of the colonial city, built to defend Spanish South America from the rampant ambitions of colonial Britain, look miniature. But they cost the blood and sweat of over a million African slaves, who also cut the sugar cane and mined the gold.

hands in the air at Cartagena's raucous Café Havana). Cartagena is very humid, and at some point you will want to take to the beach. The city's offerings are far from idyllic, so locals head to small outlying islands, most with a bland resort feel. But private members' beach club Blue Apple Cartagena, the project of English émigré Portia Hart and her American business partner Mark Watson, has just opened on the island of Tierra Bomba. Well-to-do Cartagenos were initially dismissive of its position on this unbourgeois, obscure island, but now they are lining up to become members of the boutique retreat. They speed-boat us over in 25 minutes from Cartagena, plying us with Cartagena Mule cocktails (a spin on a Moscow Mule with watermelon and ginger infused) and upmarket Mediterranean-Colombian sharing plates. There's a wild private beach and an informal beach club, and six simple but chic rooms for overnight stays.

As we bounce back to town at sunset, over the waves, I am still happy to decamp back to the buzzing old town and Cartagena's grande dame, the Sofitel Legend Santa Clara. Hugging the old city walls, it is enchanting, from its coral-hued palette to the spooky banqueting hall and atmospheric Restaurant 1621. Last year, they renovated the suites in the original part of the building. Mine has a mezzanine bedroom and a grown-up, glamorous living room filled with beautiful furniture and books. The balcony overlooks the house of the late author Gabriel García Márquez.

From life-affirming Cartagena, we fly to the laid-back Caribbean island of Providencia, the less developed sibling of San Andrés. The nearest mainland neighbour is Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast, and if you fly north for half an hour you'll reach Jamaica. By an accident of history, these islands are Colombian, but islanders consider themselves to be simply Providencian. Even San Andrés, 50 miles across the water, is viewed with vague suspicion.

Stepping off the 20-seater propeller plane from San Andrés, we are picked up by a girl on a moped with lulling Caribbean tones. She escorts our taxi five minutes down the road to the hotel. We marvel at the hotel's proximity to the airport. We don't realize at this point just how close everything is to the airport. You could drive around Providencia in one morning, stopping for a lingering cocktail, before making it back to your starting point in time for an early lunch. Providencia's one road loops around its perimeter like a necklace.

Deep Blue, our hotel, is the project of an Englishman and his Colombian wife, a dinky lodging that tumbles down a hillside to the water with a breakfast bar and restaurant jutting out onto the water. The satellite Wi-Fi is patchy - this is a place to cast off the cares of the outside world. The rooms open onto balconies that look out to an endless glassy horizon of intense turquoise, crystalline and as smooth as a mill pond, protected on all sides but the west by the mountains. The tiny island is also home to a vast coral reef more than 20 miles long - wondrously, the third largest in the world.

The next day is one of the most perfect and peaceful of my life. At Cayo Cangrejo, a pimple of a key ringed by coral, we swim through tiny shoals of green, parrot, doctor and goat fish, and past a massive barracuda, his jaw hanging open as he drifts motionless, a ducking green turtle and a manta ray. We motor around in our guide Arnold's perfect wooden boat drinking ice-box cold beers, admiring starfish on the seabed like cartoon cut-outs and the greened peak of

LATIN DAZZLER

ON AN ADVENTURE THAT TAKES IN CARIBBEAN OUTPOSTS AND ANDEAN LANDSCAPES, *LYDIA BELL* FINDS COLOMBIA AMAZINGLY DIVERSE - AND RAPIDLY GENTRIFYING

shot off like a bullet from a gun, its vibrant colonial facades and handsome cobblestone streets ripe for the picking. Boutique hoteliers, global businesses and conventions moved in. Foreign faces filled the streets, something that still brings the locals palpable joy - Cartagenos talk about growing up cut off from the rest of the world. Even the Hay Festival of Literature and Arts arrived in 2006, and now takes over the magical, palm-filled courtyard of the Sofitel Legend Convento Santa Clara each January. Beyond the city walls, the working-class district of Gethsemane has become a hive of hip restaurants, yoga centres and chic guesthouses. The city is the poster-girl for Colombia's optimistic swerve towards consumption and entrepreneurship. While we are here, Colombians voted 'No' in a referendum addressing a peace deal with the country's main guerrilla group, the FARC. Most felt the terms were simply too generous towards a group of people that plagued their country for decades. But this won't stand in the way of Colombia's upwardly mobile mood, and Colombians' collective wish to put the past behind them.

The aim in Cartagena is to wander and enjoy, indulging in gourmet restaurants, handsome architecture and perhaps dipping into the excellent gold and emerald museums. Come the night, you put on your dancing shoes, and take to the salsa clubs (even Hillary Clinton has danced with her

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT The turquoise waters surrounding Providencia Island. Practice for Sunday's two-horse race. Rock formation Morgan's Head, named after the pirate John Morgan. Lobster at El Divino Nino restaurant

ROSE O'NEILL



FROM TOP Blue Apple Beach Club in Cartagena, where a guest drinks coffee. Inside a restaurant in up and coming Gethsemane

ADVENTURE COLOMBIA

the lush interior, past houses of wealthy Medellín families. Sparse puffs of clouds hang low in the cornflower-blue sky.

Arnold tells me that his green-eyed great-grandmother was British. First settled by Puritans from Bermuda in 1630, Providencia fell into the hands of less godly types thereafter, mainly swashbucklers, including the infamous pirate Henry Morgan. It passed back and forth between the Spanish and the English for centuries like a snatched toy, being strategically placed off the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua between Cartagena and Havana. Islanders are a blend of Jamaican Creoles, English and Scottish settlers, pirates and West African slaves who had settled here. The lingua franca is broken English - Spanish comes a definite second. At the El Divino Nino restaurant on South West Beach we tuck into a giant tray of parrotfish, barracuda, conch, lobster, and bouillabaisse with plantain chips, then drink a perfect pina colada from a beach-shack bar as a local gallops along the beach bareback in preparation for Saturday's habitual two-horse race. That night, we visit Roland's Bar on the same beach, set in a small grove of palms hung with lanterns. From a hammock, we drink cocktails from the hollowed shell of a coconut while young Colombian soldiers play with a crab next to us. Roland himself has retired to a hammock strung behind the bar. The bartender has to tap the hammock and prize it open to get change off Roland and find out where particular ingredients are. 'Roland is sleepy tonight,' he explains.

At Providencia airport, waiting to leave, we read our books under palm trees until the pilot announces he is ready to leave, and fly south, swapping shorts for raincoats and the chillier climes of the Zona Cafetera, where the Arabica bean takes pride of place.

Key to Colombia's identity, the coffee-making region's Andean landscapes were populated by grand haciendas in the nineteenth century during the Colonización Antioqueña. In the Quindío region our lodge is the newly built, tranquil Hacienda Buenavista, the six-room creation of a charming Dutch-Scottish couple who zoned in on Colombia as a Latin-American haven of opportunity. They have created a modern, efficient idyll on an estate filled with orange and mango trees, bamboo groves and avocado plantations. From the infinity pool, honeymooners goggle at the mists creeping over the valley with the Rio La Vieja running below. From here one can visit Salento and Filandia, colourful local towns populated by gossiping farmers sporting sombreros, ponchos, moustaches and wellies. The latter was the location of various telenovelas, including one called *Café Con Aroma De Mujer* (Coffee That Smells of Woman).

In a Second World War-era American 'Willys' jeep, we visit a local coffee finca. The organic compost piled in the shed, along with other practices, ensures Rainforest Alliance Certified status. They collect, wash, ferment and dry and then select beans by hand. In the small town of Salento, the café of Jesus Martin is trying to encourage a boutique Colombian coffee-drinking culture. Ironically, second-class beans often get palmed off on Colombians, as quality beans are exported. In the mysterious mist-filled Valle de Cocora, spiked with endangered wax palms, there is local trout to eat and *canelazo* to drink - warm sugar cane juice infused with cinnamon and passion fruit. We hike in a lichen and moss-filled forest - from here you can walk four days on the same path to 5,300-metre glaciers - and plant a

66 Key to Colombia's IDENTITY, the coffee-making region's ANDEAN LANDSCAPES were populated by GRAND HACIENDAS in the nineteenth century during the COLONIZACION ANTIOQUEÑA

small Cocora palm with the help of a local ecologist.

Then it's on to Bogotá, our final reconnaissance. The capital blends Europeanised restaurants, modern universities, expensive boutiques and well-heeled residential areas that emulate the suburbs of Madrid with the scuffed, studenty quarter of La Candelaria, and the poverty of its satellite reaches. At Paloquemao Market we are offered tamales in a banana leaf (the ubiquitous Latin dish of corn dough mixed with chicken, pork, vegetables and spices), lechona - the rice-stuffed pig - and a cornucopia of fruits from granadilla (a sweet passion fruit) to the giant, spiky guanabana. We are shown the city's profuse graffiti, once the decoration of gang warfare, now sanctioned by the mayor to make underpasses more beautiful. Artists weave social and political narratives - Toxicómano tackles homelessness and violence, and Wache uncomfortable indigenous truths.

On the chilly heights of Monserrat Mountain, the crowds gaze over this mega-city poured into its Andean plateau. In La Candelaria, pouring my fermented maize *chicha* drink discreetly into the gutter, I can't help but notice the constant presence of giant muzzled security dogs led around by their handlers. Colombia may be enjoying a new dawn, but it cannot quite let go of the insecurities caused by a violent past. In the grey grandeur of Bolívar Square stands the Palace of Justice. In 1985 it was sieged by guerrillas from the M19 group under the orders of drug baron Pablo Escobar. They killed 25 Justices and burned criminal records.

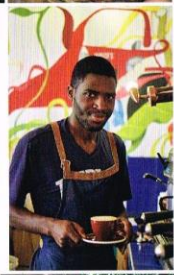
From rain-licked, traffic-choked streets, we retreat to the Four Seasons Casa Medina. New to Bogotá, it's in the heart of the gourmet zone, with another sister hotel in the city, and it is a cosy haven of flickering fires and welcoming staff with a small subterranean spa and a sophisticated Spanish restaurant and bar from Lucas Curcio. For a Four Seasons, it is tiny, with 62 rooms and suites carved out of a 1946-built architect's family home. It is instantly loveable with its reworked parquet, grille work, stained glass, pretty paintings, hand-worked panelling and nostalgic references to old-world travel in the supremely comfortable rooms. Architect Milena Vargas has done a impressive job in retaining its family-home feel. But it is just one more head-turner in the constant barrage of surprise and intrigue that is this new Colombia. ☺

ESSENTIALS

HOW Colombia specialist Amakuna (020-7193 7582; amakuna.com) offers an 11-night trip from £3,360pp including domestic flights, transfers, guides, excursions, stays at Sofitel Legend Santa Clara in Cartagena, Deep Blue on Providencia Island, Hacienda Buenavista in Zona Cafetera and Four Seasons Casa Medina in Bogotá. Direct international flights from London, Heathrow to Bogotá from £600. For more on Colombia, visit colombia.travel/en



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT A plantation at Hacienda Buenavista in Zona Cafetera. Local flora in a coffee plantation. Harvested coffee beans. Café Jesus Martin in Salento



FROM TOP Street scenes in the town of Salento in the Zona Cafetera. The view from Hacienda Buenavista. 'Willys' Jeep. A churrasco steak



FROM LEFT Bolívar Square, in Bogotá. Inside a vintage shop in the capital. Four Seasons Casa Medina

